MODERN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Now published by St. James Press

Volume I • A–G
Fifth Edition

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ST. JAMES PRESS
AN IMPRINT OF GALE

DETROIT • LONDON

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Modern American Literature.—5th ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Contents: v. 1. A-G — v. 2. H-O — v. 3. P-Z
ISBN 1-55862-379-5 (set). — ISBN 1-55862-380-9 (v. 1). —
ISBN 1-55862-381-7 (v. 2). — ISBN 1-55862-382-5 (v. 3).
1. American literature—20th century—History and criticism.
PS221.M53 1998
810.9′005—dc21 98-38952
CIP

Printed in the United States of America

St. James Press is an imprint of Gale

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

FOREWORD TO THE FIFTH EDITION

This new edition of *Modern American Literature* represents a significant advancement in the series. These volumes collate all entries from the original three volumes of the fourth edition, published in 1960, with entries from the three supplements published in 1976, 1985, and 1997, so that all excerpts on a given author now appear in one place. Seventy new entries have been added, bringing the total number of authors discussed to 489, and bibliographies for all authors have been updated. In addition, the format has been simplified. Citations for journal articles now include the full source title, eliminating the need for the abbreviation key used in previous editions, and bibliographies now immediately follow author entries, rather than appearing in a separate section at the back of the book.

The compilers of this edition have built upon the notable efforts of previous editors, each of whom made significant contributions and additions. As in the past, entrants in the series, as well as the sources chosen for excerpting, have been carefully selected to provide broad and instructive overviews of the most significant authors of the modern period in American literature. New authors for this edition have been selected not only on the basis of their prominence but also on their presence in the contemporary curriculum. The richly diverse nature of American letters is reflected in the wide variety of genres represented, from the humorous contemporary tales of Andrei Codrescu to the contemplative nature essays of Annie Dillard to the literary and philosophical speculations of George Steiner. In addition, a concerted effort was made to broaden the cultural scope of the series by presenting discussion of the works of black, Hispanic, and Native American authors, including a number from earlier in this century whose works have until recently been undervalued or ignored, figures such as William Stanley Braithwaite, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, and Alain Locke. As in previous editions, every effort has been made to cull from brief reviews as well as lengthy critical evaluations, and from a wide variety of critical perspectives, showing wherever possible the evolution of an author's reputation and stature.

The function of this work continues to be the illumination of the works of American authors through the presentation of significant analyses. With its greater focus on multicultural authors and its streamlined format, this new edition will be even more useful to students and other researchers seeking critical perspectives on the most significant American writers of the twentieth century.

The editors would like to thank the many individuals and publishers who have generously granted permission to reprint their materials here.

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Herman Wouk
James Wright
Richard Wright
Elinor Wylie

Stark Young
Ray Young Bear
Sol Yurick

Louis Zukofsky

GENRE ABBREVIATIONS

Below are the abbreviations and terms used to indicate genres in author bibliographies. Bibliographies include all major works and collections, but are not intended to be exhaustive.

a	autobiography
	adaptation
anthol	anthology
art c	art criticism
b	biography
c	criticism
coll	collection
d	drama/play
e	essay
ed	editor, edition
h	history
	interview
j	journalism
juv	juvenile, children's literature
l	letters
	lecture(s)
m	memoir
misc	miscellany
n	novel, novella
nf	nonfiction
	opera libretto
p	poetry
	pamphlet
	photographs
pd	poetic drama, verse play
r	reminiscence
rd	radio drama
s	story, stories
scrp	screenplay
sk	sketches
t	travel writing
tr	translation
tv	television play, television drama

A

ABISH, Walter (1931–)

[Walter] Abish, born in Vienna, does not consider himself an exile writer since he left Austria when he was six years old. He received his first schooling in France and studied in private English schools in Shanghai, to which his Jewish family had fled with the fall of France. He became an American citizen in 1960.

Abish believes English is his native tongue since he has written only in English. His work, however, bears the mark of exilic experience both in its experimentation of authorial distancing from narrative material and in its subject content of isolated protagonists and weary world travelers. His best-known work, the novel *How German It Is* (1980), explores the anxiety of modern postwar Germany in its splintered geographic and spiritual states.

Martin Tucker. *Literary Exile in the Twentieth Century* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1991), pp. 47–48

For most of his career, Walter Abish has been one of those purposely irritating writers who welcome the label ''experimental.'' His books declared, in everything from design to content, their expectation of a small, rigorously select audience. Rejecting the term ''story'' (which implies that most suspect of middlebrow elements, a plot), Abish instead called his shorter works ''fictions.'' He favored arbitrary and noticeably literary devices, as in one of his early ''novels,'' *Alphabetical Africa* (1974), which consists of fifty-one chapters titled from A to Z and back to A, each chapter relying heavily on words containing the designated letter. ''X stands for experimental,'' one such chapter begins, ''and for excretion, that is for plain shit on the trail.'' The critic is tempted to add: EXACTLY.

And then, in 1980, came a breakthrough, a sudden transformation. *How German It Is* was Abish's gesture in the direction of a wider readership. In contrast to the fragmented and alienated word clusters that he previously produced, it contained distinct characters, several plots, and a protagonist that you could practically identify with. Set in contemporary Germany, the novel reflected persuasively and intelligently on the postwar German mood of denial, with its superficial emphasis on material success and its underbelly of revolutionary politics. . . .

Now, thirteen years later, comes *Eclipse Fever*, another readable novel, if perhaps a less permanently valuable one. It marks Abish's belated departure from the avant-garde ghetto, his sudden eligibility for reviews in mainstream periodicals. It can also be read as a straightforward corporate-conspiracy thriller. To the readers of the highly convoluted *Alphabetical Africa*, this turn of events would have been inconceivable. It's as if James Joyce had followed up *Ulysses* not with *Finnegans Wake*, but with *The Ministry of Fear* and *Our Man in Havana*.

Wendy Lesser. *New Republic*. June 21, 1993. p. 44

Abish is a moralist masquerading as a formalist. If *Eclipse Fever* lacks the bite of *How German It Is*, it is perhaps because the distant crimes of the Toltecs are less painful than our sharper memory of recent events in Germany, and our own lives are closer to German. And for all the elegance of the later novel, there is almost something faintly dated about the target of its satire. We are familiar with the premise of a predatory American culture victimizing other cultures and imposing our values but the suspicion seems inescapable that now the terms may be reversing; now it is Mexico with Chevrolet factories and a burgeoning GNP, and it is ourselves we see in Abish's Mexicans, depressed and eclipsed. Or perhaps this has been Abish's intention all along?

Diane Johnson, *New York Review of Books*. September 23, 1993, pp. 39–40

Abish has been a most important voice to those who make new fiction, starring in ground-breaking treatments like those of Jerome Klinkowitz, lurking in the conversations of writers at lunch, cited or parodied (or both) frequently for the oulipolian experiment of *Alphabetical Africa*, for the postmodern subtleties of *In the Future Perfect*, and for ''his avant-garde masterpiece'' (as even the book jacket knows), *How German It Is*.

But who wrote *Eclipse Fever*? Blessed with Guggenheim and MacArthur foundation support, mightn't Abish have written just about *anything*? And perhaps he did. *EF* has everything going for it, including local color (Mexican), murder, an ingenue's journey into the world the rest of us know, literariness (the father writes, a Mexican critic awaits his visit, publishers and patrons and deals get prime space), glitter (the millionaire and his sex-starved wife), relevance (Mexican resentment at yankee domination, the trade in pre-Columbian artifacts, torture and corruption Out There). In fact, the book has all the elements you'd need for a Bestseller Construction Kit; it's a slick prospect for a film.

Maybe, finally, it is unreasonable to expect every novel a great writer gives us to be a breakthrough, for us, for him (or her, or them). *EF* is not an ''F'' because it's not as Abish as his most interesting (to me) work, nor is it an ''A'' because of its stylistic deftness and the wry shrewdness of its literary play; it is, like my alphabetical review, halfway ''there,'' *EF* is also a course in best sellers that (should) ruin them for writers and readers. And, maybe, the lesson is that there aren't further surprises to be found in desublimating the conventions of culture and society—that we already know enough about them to change them, just not enough about ourselves to know why we don't. Alejandro ends the novel by entering the ''sea of pale Spanish faces'' with his own mestizo darkness itching him across (of course) his groin, the genesis of his ''new'' self a rash of social disease as he joins ''his new family'' rather than the mythic potency of the individual-as-phallus. ''It must be nerves, he decided,'' overlooking like Francisco whatever is injurious to the function of the self, ''and looked to the left and to the right to determine where he was to sit.'' *That* line is the future perfect of a thoroughly Abish ending.

Robert Siegle. *American Book Review*. February–March, 1994, pp. 17, 27

Alien, uncanny, half-concealed: the art of Abish is ecliptic. (''I needed a society in which what I described wouldn't become self-evident,'' he writes in a yet unpublished interview. . .). Abish, I have said, defamiliarizes, de-creates, only to lure us into a space of lucid negativity. He does not offer us an exotic Mexico, that of D.H. Lawrence or Malcolm Lowry, say, nor a cathartic or redeeming landscape. He offers us an imaginary (that is, both essential and infinitely contestable) country. Thus, with Daedalian *hubris*, Abish permitted himself to visit Germany and Mexico only after he had written ''about'' them.

Ihab Hassan. *Southern Review*. Summer 1994, pp. 628–29

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ACKER, Kathy (1948–1997)

During the 1980s the younger readers and writers . . . and those others who had remained largely alienated from mainstream publishing were to be involved in considerable changes. The readers from the original baby-boom generation had by now become middle-aged and they remained largely responsible for supporting a plethora of small, independent publishing houses including the feminist, gay, and left-wing presses. The literary underground of experimentation and small presses had never quite gone away, even in Britain. (As Paul Valery had put it, ''Everything changes but the avant-garde''.) After William Burroughs, Kathy Acker was the only real inheritor of this bohemian tradition to cross over fully into the big-time publishing world. Acker, who lived for a long time in London, has commented on the lack of a literary ''underground'' in Britain: ''I came out of a poetry tradition—the Black Mountain poets, the Language Poets. No such traditions exist over here. The underground just isn't known here. I mean, a huge network that's been there for years and years . . . there's no such thing here.'' This is, of course, one of the reasons why English critics are so ill-equipped to deal with much of contemporary fiction, why English writing remains so mired in a parochial backwater. Acker suffered from a degree of misunderstanding from the British press that, she said, amounted to ''slander'' and that similarly stemmed from the lack of a strong British counterculture in writing. During the eighties the enormously diverse elements that comprised the American counterculture seemed to gather strength and show some indications of producing new writers. This American underground, which, as Acker points out, had never gone away over there, could be glimpsed by English readers in books and magazines like the Re/Search publications and Amok's Fourth Despatch catalogue. . . .

By the time the generation born in the postwar years grew up there were certainly immeasurably more opportunities for women to leave home and participate in experiments of every kind, artistic and sexual. In literature Patti Smith and Kathy Acker are obvious prototypes. . . . From the sixties onward. . . women's lives tended to go through a series of dizzyingly swift changes. Much art was of necessity preoccupied with the seismic changes wrought by feminism and it is only relatively recently that strong images of urban bohemian women—who cannot easily be dismissed as just ''feminists''—have started to emerge in fiction.

Elizabeth Young. In E. Young and Graham Caveney, eds. *Shopping for Space: Essays on America's Blank Generation Fiction* (New York: Grove Press–Serpent's Tail, 1992), pp. 6–7, 169–70

Acker's quest novels obsessively depict the search for individuality, for selfhood, in the context of the cultural construction of identity. For this search to proceed, Acker's protagonists must move beyond the border of culture to conceive of themselves as individuals, as other than complaint products of their culture. This quest, like the one Borges depicts, is unreasonable; it cannot be completed, for even in Acker's delirious narratives, it is impossible to step outside culture and thus to shed the culturally constructed self.

During a moment of revelation in the abortion scene that begins Acker's *Don Quixote*, the protagonist resolves to embark on such a quest for selfhood. Dressed in green paper and positioned on the operating table with knees raised as masked medical figures prepare to invade her body, she is struck with the sudden knowledge that her identity is not her own. This understanding moves her to adopt subversive strategies to disengage from the forces that have compelled her identity: ''When a doctor sticks a steel catheter into you while you're lying on your back and you do exactly what he and the nurses tell you to. . . you let go of your mind. . . .'' Once she can conceive of surrendering the constructed self, she can also formulate the quest to acquire her own ''name'': ''She needed a new life. She had to be named'' (9–10).

The quest for a new life and a name structures several of Acker's works. Yet unlike male quest novels, such as *The Magic Mountain* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Acker's texts locate the means of acquisition outside culture, since they are unavailable in the context of patriarchy. To constitute the self differently, the quester must find an alternative site for such constitution. Acker moves her protagonists toward this site through the appropriation of male texts, a strategy she explains in the epigraph to part 2: ''Being born into and part of a male world, she had no speech of her own. All she could do was read male texts which weren't hers.'' The male texts represent the limits of language and culture within which the female quester attempts to acquire identify. Once inside the male text, the quester, by her very posture, subverts it: ''By repeating the past, I'm molding and transforming it.'' In the Borges story, replication is the issue. For Acker the appropriation of *Don Quixote* is a strategy of subversion. Her description of the textual appropriation used by Arabs applies to herself: ''They write by cutting chunks out of all-ready written texts and in other ways defacing traditions: changing important names into silly ones, making dirty jokes out of matters that should be of the utmost importance to us'' (39, 48, 25).

Acker's purpose in appropriating well-known texts is profoundly political. Through plagiarism, Acker proposes an alternative to the classical Marxist explanation of the sources of power. With Jean Baudrillard she believes that those who control the means of

representation are more powerful than those who control the means of production. Plagiarism undermines the assumptions governing representation. . . . In plagiarizing, Acker does not deny the masterwork itself, but she does interrogate its sources in paternal authority and male desire. By placing the search for modes of representing female desire inside male texts, Acker and others clearly delineate the constraints under which this search proceeds. She also suggests that the alternative nature of, and location for, the missing contents in women's texts is in the not yet presented.

Ellen G. Friedman. ''Where Are the Missing Contents? (Post) Modernism, Gender, and the Canon''. *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*. March, 1993, pp. 243–44

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ADAMS, Henry (1838–1918)

The Education of Henry Adams, conceived as a study of the philosophy of history, turns out in fact to be an *apologia pro vita sua*, one of the most self-centered and self-revealing books in the language.

The revelation is not indeed of the direct sort that springs from frank and insouciant spontaneity. Since the revelation was not intended, the process is tortuous in the extreme. It is a revelation that comes by the way, made manifest in the effort to conceal it, overlaid by all sorts of cryptic sentences and self-deprecatory phrases, half hidden by the protective coloring taken on by a sensitive mind commonly employing paradox and delighting in perverse and teasing mystification. . . . The *Education* is in fact the record, tragic and pathetic underneath its genial irony, of the defeat of fine aspirations and laudable ambitions. It is the story of a life which the man himself, in his old age, looked back upon as a broken arch.

Carl Becker. *American Historical Review*. April, 1919. pp. 4245–6

In a manner he was a microcosm of American history, for what of history his family had not actually made, he had written or had watched. America knew him not, but he had known America; and his autobiography stands in a class with that of Benjamin Franklin. He described it as ''the education of Henry Adams,'' a process he seems to have abandoned in despair; but the reading of the book will give an American a European education, and a European an American one.

Shane Leslie. *Dublin Review*. June, 1919. p. 218

This gentleman from the House of Adams is preeminently a modern American scholar. He had a singular capacity for original research and polished presentation. He was both a student of history and a literary artist and in all his work he combined his abilities in the one with his powers in the other. To match his breadth and depth of knowledge he had a keen critical sense and a clear judicial mind. He had creative imagination, a sensitive appreciation of significant form, and a remarkable skill in removing the clutter of details and depicting essentials. He was a master of facts, pursuing his ideas with minute research and solid reasoning. He was a superb maker of phrases, but he sketched with accuracy and precision, coloring his narrative with his own personality and toning his portraits with insight and understanding.

Marian D. Irish. *American Scholar*. March, 1932. pp. 223–4

Henry Adams, very early, became too pessimistic and cynical to go on being a participant. He chose, instead, a place on the sidelines, and from there set about recording the minutes of all the unsavory transactions of America's public life. The picture of such proceedings which Adams drew, or at least suggested, in the *Education* is a final one. For not only were its revelations damning, but its sources were unimpeachable. It was the indictment of a supremely placed worldling who had listened at the most private keyholes, who had been told—or allowed to guess—the secrets of those who worked behind the scenes. Scarcely anyone else who did so little knew so much. Adams's indictment stands: the great documentary merit of the *Education* is its demonstration of what nineteenth-century America had become, and by what process, and on what terms.

Louis Kronenberger. *New Republic*. March 15, 1939. p. 156

Henry Adams recapitulated on American soil the romantic tradition of Europe. This tradition included aesthetic pessimism, in which framework he built up a personality-image which he came to enjoy artistically. The image was that of the failure, the heroic failure. He came to enjoy the spectacle doubly: on the stage as an actor, from the wings as an onlooker who revels in the gaping audiences. . . . Adams's failure was only a pen and paper failure. He wrote ''a terribly ironic estimate of himself'' because it pleased his artistic fancy to do so.

Max I. Baym. *American Scholar*. Winter, 1945. pp. 87–8

Pessimism was both a pose and a habit of mind with Henry Adams. Only fools and great statesmen were paid to be optimists. Furthermore, as Adams remarked, ''no one can afford to pose as an

optimist, short of an income of a hundred thousand a year.'' Adams had about twenty-five thousand and considered himself to be neither a great statesman nor a fool; thus, pessimism was for him the only dignified pose. And dignity was important, as well as required. However, something of his pessimism was genuine because his scientific and metaphysical speculations had convinced him that the cherished assumptions of his culture and tradition were totally wrong, and worse than useless; because by stubbornly defending the old notions of order, unity, the unique value of the individual, freedom of the will, one would only hasten the acceleration towards the inevitable catastrophe of all civilization.

Gerrit H. Roelofs. *English Literary History*. Sept., 1950. p. 231

It is dangerously easy to overstress the near-tragic quality of the aging scholar, caught as never before in the impingement of beauty but knowing, too, the final ineffectuality of its comfort for one whose mind insisted on discovering monstrosity and chaos on every side. He still was one to relish good food and drink, to enjoy the company of handsome women and vigorous men and stimulate them by questions and banter. He was by no means the bitter, broken prophet that many critics, gullibly misreading his own account, have pronounced him to be. . . . One comprehends Adams most clearly as a man who to the last felt and not quite successfully defied the personal and universal disorder encroaching upon a sensitive dweller in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His dilemma was at once individual and typical.

Robert A. Hume. *Runaway Star* (Cornell). 1951. pp. 35–6

He was very shy of self-revelation. Some of it came out, disguised, in the novels, biographies, and *History*. He could be more naked, for instance in *Esther* than in the first-person books, *Mont-St.-Michel* and *The Education*. *Democracy* is his political ordeal; *Esther*, his own, as well as his wife's religious plight. And where one might least expect to find it, in the heavily documented, nine-volume *History of the United States*, there are passages of lyrical intensity which tell us as much about the subjective Henry Adams as any of (his) letters.

Elizabeth Stevenson. *The Nation*. Jan. 26, 1952. p. 87

Adams was not a likeable man; he was an important man. Like the intellectuals who would model themselves on his legend, he cultivated his snobbism too lovingly; he was something of what the Germans call *ein Besserwisser*; and his attitudes always seem a bit disassociated from his individual experience. In his own life he suffered the destructive split between literary and political vocations which has since become so prevalent. . . . But it was greatly to his credit that even as he submitted to this split, he did not approve of it; he knew that for the intellectual, health is possible only through a unity of the two parts, even if a unity in tension.

Irving Howe. *New Republic*. Sept. 22, 1952. p. 26

The greatness of the mind of Adams himself is in the imaginative reach of the effort to solve the problem of the meaning, the use, or the value of its own energy. The greatness is in the effort itself, in variety of response deliberately made to every possible level of experience. It is in the acceptance, with all piety, of ignorance as the humbled form of knowledge; in the pursuit of divers shapes of knowledge—the scientific, the religious, the political, the social and trivial—to the point where they add to ignorance, when the best response is silence itself. That is the greatness of Adams as a type of mind. As it is a condition of life to die, it is a condition of thought, in the end, to fail. Death is the expense of life and failure is the expense of greatness.

R.P. Blackmur. *The Lion and the Honeycomb* (Harcourt). 1955. p. 95

Henry Adams had a rich and sensitive mind and was, behind his misanthropic exterior, a deeply humane individual. He had been formed rather rigidly in the heavy heritage of his Presidential ancestry and of New England dogma; and by the most subtle and delicate process he achieved, within his sensibility, a system of feathery balances, so that the discharge of his emotions might be propped by flying buttresses and filtered through his stained-glass windows. His mind was like the cathedrals he came to study; it was no accident that he turned to them.

Leon Edel. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 10, 1955. p. 15

To agree that after his wife's death Adams devoted his talent to indicting the universe that had produced her and destroyed her is, of course, to over-simplify. Yet, once the *History* is finished, everything else of import seems to turn upon the theme of conflict between tranquillity and force. . . . This gifted man was in some sense the child of Byron and Voltaire. There was something in him elementary as well as ironical. A hostile critic might plausibly demonstrate that, because it was outrageous of the universe to deal with Mr. and Mrs. Henry Adams as the universe had done, the scholar would condemn the universe. The rebelliousness, the self-incrimination, the irony of the mature Byron are paralleled by Adams, the principal difference being that in the American these qualities were held in restraint as judgments, not hurled at the target as weapons.

Howard Mumford Jones. *The Nation*. Dec. 24, 1955. pp. 558–9

Scenery, psychology, history, literature, poetry, art—all these are materials for the story he relates. But the controlling purpose of the narrative is to show, in its own form as in its subject, how vast a world can be found by the senses and how great a work the intellect may do when it serves the highest vision of the imagination and defies, knowingly, the terrors of fact which always beset that vision. Because the pilgrim-artist has discovered the realm of tragedy, the tourist-historian of *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* works in a realm beyond that which can be marked out by any particular theory of history. The naïvete of the Romanesque, the refinement of the Transition, the scientific modernity of the Gothic all had their appeal to him because he saw them as phases of life which he had experienced in his role of human being as well as in his capacity as scholar. His aspiration expressed itself in the very

shape of his composition, but the anguish of his doubt was also there, almost buried out of sight, in the continual presence of time that foreshadowed the end of love.

J.C. Levenson. *The Mind and Art of Henry Adams* (Houghton). 1957. p. 288

Yet Adams's quest had led beyond the limits of either intellectual curiosity or the hope of fame (for he could satisfy neither) to bring him at last to that vantage point where the world of past and present took on that comprehensible form which gave him emotional and intellectual peace. If the journey from nineteenth-century Boston to twelfth-century Chartres had any meaning, it was expressed in the last subjective works, in the acceptance of the relativity of all historical interpretation, the tentativeness of all understanding. It was a conclusion, he must have known, no more valid than any other, a point of view for the time being useful and necessary. It made sense of what for Henry Adams was otherwise chaos. It explained, if it did not justify. One might wonder whether a study of history could ever do more than that.

John C. Cairns. *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Spring, 1958. pp. 192–3

. . . he stands alone among all the thinkers of his generation, in having made a timely effort to understand the forces of science, technology, and politics that have brought us to the verge of a gigantic and irretrievable disaster. His eminence as a historian only emphasizes his loneliness as a social diagnostician. Adams' contemporaries, in the words of John Bigelow in 1899, regarded Adams as either ''an inspired prophet or crazy,'' but they were no more disposed to heed his inspiration than to believe that his madness would, fifty years later, become the very criterion of sanity.

Lewis Mumford. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Spring, 1962. p. 197

For [Adams], value or meaning is only conceivable as originating in final, impersonal ends. He cannot think of life as having meaning apart from a goal that is outside of and larger than the individual. This is the most fundamental and omnipresent manifestation of his Puritanism; it is a mental habit shaped by an obsessive need of his conscience to relate every event, every moral act, and every individual self to some ultimate and all-embracing unity. . . . [I]n reaching the end of his quest, he arrived at a colossal irony. For what Adams discovered was that life had no meaning; . . . Always pressing for certainty, for nothing less than an absolute certainty, he found it in universal death, an event no less meaningless than certain.

George Hochfield. *Henry Adams: An Introduction and Interpretation* (Barnes and Noble). 1962. pp. 32, 139

Read as a novel of spiritual quest, an initiation romance of Adams's alter ego, the *Education* exhibits a structure of extraordinary complexity, moving simultaneously on many levels of meaning. The ''Henry Adams'' of the narrative is as protean as Whitman's ''I'' and contains its own multitudes. . . . The ''air of reality'' with which Adams invested the tragic hero of his autobiographical-philosophical romance is the product of a masterfully sustained illusion. Not that the author really undervalued his manikin; no theme is more often reiterated than that if he was wrong his fellows were even more mistaken. . . . Within his exacting inner world his pose of ignorance was no affectation, but in the world of his miserable fellow insects it was little more than the ironic condescension of the resolute schoolmaster setting traps for the complacent.

Ernest Samuels. *Henry Adams: The Major Phase* (Harvard). 1964. pp. 353, 359

Only temperamentally and, in the narrow sense, biographically, did Adams seek out those avenues of silence where he could imagine the medieval world unified. But he knew more and better than this. He was not going to deny either the enthusiasm with which he and his friends had begun life in a ''race for power'' or the fact that they had miserably lost. . . . He knew he had had his historical neck broken. He grasped multiplicity not just as a term defining the inevitable movement of gold-bug capitalism to socialism and communism, not just as something scientists were beginning to define, not just as an antonym to twelfth century unity brought about by society's obedience to the laws of acceleration, not just as the chaos that would transform democracy into a form of totalitarianism, but as a master that simultaneously rendered impossible his personal scene of education and forced upon him definitions of education broader than himself or the teachings of his heritage. . . . The accelerated speed of forces has guaranteed that only ideas of education as subtle and flexible as Adams' can survive for as long as two generations; the problem now is not, as it once might have been, one of choosing the pot in which to be melted, but of learning how to swim in the big pot that is the only one large enough to contain all the forces at work.

Roger Sale. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1965. pp. 430–2

I believe that Adams always misconceived his principal talent. He wanted the recognition of scientists for his theories in a field where he was not equipped to make any serious contribution. The picture of Adams, the descendant of presidents, a kind of early American ''Everyman,'' a survival from the Civil War in the day of the automobile, traveling from one end of the globe to the other in quest of the absolute, pausing before Buddhas and dynamos, has so caught the imagination of the academic community that his biography, which he wrote as well as lived, has become, so to speak, one of his works, and his most fantastic speculations the subjects of serious theses. Yet to me his primary contributions to our literature were aesthetic. He is far closer to Whitman and Melville than to Bancroft or Prescott, and he is not at all close to Einstein.

Louis Auchincloss. *Henry Adams* (Minnesota). 1971. p. 39

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ADAMS, Léonie (1899–1988)

Hers is an accent which is as sensitive as it is strange, a register that seems to tremble with certain Elizabethan echoes but which vibrates with a lyric passion that proceeds from no other century but our own. Miss Adams is, as even the simplest of her poems reveals, a metaphysical poet; her most candidly declared descriptions blossom suddenly in an unearthly and intensified air. . . . One waits, with something greater than curiosity, for the successor to *Those Not Elect*. Meanwhile, it is almost enough to say that even where Miss Adams is least successful, she fails on a high plane and that, among the ''emerging'' lyricists none lead us to expect—and demand—more.

Louis Untermeyer. *New Republic*. Nov. 25, 1925. p. 23

Leonie Adams takes us palpably into a world of her own. . . . All the poems in her book have the stillness, the faint lighting, the introspection and retrospection of an awakening at dawn when our labor is yet a dream and our dream has the burthen of labor. . . . But perhaps *High Falcon* is lacking in a quality that would fill up the measure of our admiration for a fine book of poetry. That quality is fulness. The moods that the poems come out of are real and poignant, but again and again we wish they had been given a fuller body. Too often, the poet gives us the trees stripped bare. We want her sometimes to give us the tree with its leaves and fruits and a bird singing in the leaves. . . .

These poems do not clamorously tell us an emotional history; they are in undertones; they are for those who prefer cold airs and bare lands to noontide brilliancy and crowds and colors. They are not poems that can be taken in by a quick perusal; the reading of them must be accompanied by a certain meditation. They are poems of tragic life.

Padraic Colum. *New Republic*. Dec. 18, 1929. p. 113

Those Not Elect, 1925, is an unusual first volume, though it owes a bit of its inspiration to classic metaphysicians. The Brooklyn mystic is a comparatively difficult poet by virtue of her devotion to the reflections of the mind over matter. Her exquisite psyche, aware of the inconsequence of man in eternity, ventures among problems abstruse to the average mind; but she molds her thought into concrete images. She rarely relaxes the high tension of her inquiry; there are no banal, and few colloquial lines along the way.

Alfred Kreymborg. *Our Singing Strength* (Coward-McCann). 1929. p. 554

Her observations are on the whole free from remote astronomical and supernatural references, adhering instead to the city, the countryside of farms, the intimate landscape with many of its conventional properties retained, or of the pages of books. . . .

Natural sympathy has given Miss Adams' observations a rare opulence. She has explored the details of rural landscape and weather almost to the point of specialty. . . . The world is static, as the metaphysical observer requires it to be. In no poem may be found the impulsive capture of impression (together with the accompanying swell in phrase). . . . Miss Adams' virtue is of another order. She displays the persistent curiosity which pushes an analysis forward until it has achieved a perfect distillation of the essence of a perception. This is a clue to her spiritual bravery. It may be delayed by physical reticence, but it attains to freedom in the end.

Morton Dauwen Zabel. *Poetry*. Feb., 1930. pp. 334–6

. . .certainly, Leonie Adams' re-creation of her world had a closer kinship to the revivals of a Gothic imagination in the poetry of the early and late nineteenth century than it had to metaphysical poetry. . . . The frequent use of the word ''sweet,'' the ''so sweet pain,'' and the adjective ''cold,'' even the sound of her ''airy shell'' spoke of her mingled debt to and careful, attentive readings in the poetry of [Walter] de la Mare and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska. *A History of American Poetry* (Harcourt). 1946. pp. 297–8

Miss Adams's poetry is a difficult labor. Intensely compact, intensely intellectualized, and rigorously ascetic, it comes true, but it does not come easy. The matter, as she writes in ''Sundown,'' is sanctified, ''dipped in a gold stain.'' It seems doubtful that there can be a wide audience for Miss Adams's gold stain, but that there

will always be a group of discerning and enthusiastic readers seems certain.

John Ciardi. *The Nation*. May 22, 1954. p. 445

The world of Leonie Adams is one of forms and pure relationships. Her gaze. . . is never intercepted by dreams, never blurred by mistiness. It is clairvoyant. She sees the formal rigor of all the things she looks at. And the emotion which these things generate, no matter how subtle or delicate it is, finds the exact word with which to express itself. Her poems . . . testify to a very real world of nature, and at the same time to a willful abstraction which isolates all the objects considered. . . . She is a watcher at the extreme edge of love and gentleness. . . . But she should be called the poet who has undertaken a metaphysical reintegration in a century when many poets, the surrealists especially, have been engaged in just the opposite process, that of disintegrating the cosmos.

Wallace Fowlie. *Commonweal*. Nov. 26, 1954. pp. 224–6

The present volume [*Poems: A Selection*] opens with 24 poems written since [1929], continues by reprinting nearly the whole of *High Falcon* (37 poems), and concludes by selecting 24 poems out of nearly 40 in her first volume, *Those Not Elect* (1925). The proportion is right: *High Falcon* shows her work consistently at its best, as in the famous ''Country Summer''; though a few of her later poems, chiefly the shorter ones, display the same mysterious evocation of moods from piled-up images of green, sun, wind, and light. . . . Some of the longer pieces in the first section seem to suffer from incoherence and turgidity: they are too ''poetic,'' too full of terms like ''else-wending,'' ''rime-bedabbled,'' ''empery,'' ''enduskings,'' and ''ambient.''

Louis Martz. *The Yale Review*. Winter, 1955. p. 305

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AGEE, James (1909–1955)

Mr. Agee does a good deal to antagonize the reader. There are too many tongues, too many attitudes, too many awarenesses on the subjective side (perhaps defenses would be more precise); even the sincerity is too much, is too prostrate. And yet, visible through all this, are some unmistakable virtues: Mr. Agee, at times, writes brilliantly . . . ; he is extraordinarily sensitive and aware and, above all, concerned with that deeper honesty that assembles before itself all those minute rationalizations and nuances of feeling that are always a kind of havoc inside ourselves.

Harvey Breit. *New Republic*. Sept. 15, 1941. p. 348

James Agee was born in the South and retains the pride and piety and love of language of the Southern writer. . . . Genius he surely had; the trouble perhaps lay in his trying to read that genius into things not of his own making. In a vague way his instinct resembled that of Proust, whose genius was of a kind that could only portray genius, nothing but genius, whether in painters, duchesses, or elevator boys. Yet where Proust actually recreated his powers, Agee was content to delegate his.

F. W. Dupee. *The Nation*. April 28, 1951. p. 400

James Agee . . . was a writer who gave all of himself . . . to every medium that he worked in—poetry, fiction, reportage, criticism, movies, television. He was not only one of the most gifted writers in the United States, but such a natural as a writer that he found a creative opportunity in every place where drearier people pitied themselves for pot-boiling. . . . Agee was a writer who actually did better in popular and journalistic media—where certain objective technical requirements gave him a chance to create something out of his immense tenderness and his high sense of comedy than when he let himself go in purely speculative lyricism. He was a natural literary craftsman, not a literary intellectual, and it was only *avant-garde* associations that ever misled him. His most beautiful poems—like the title poem of his first book, *Permit Me Voyage*—are those which are most traditional in form.

Alfred Kazin. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 17, 1957. p. 5

Agee was a very gifted and versatile writer; his best-known work is *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, an account of sharecroppers in the depression, with photographs by Walker Evans. He wrote for motion pictures and was the finest critic of films this country has produced. . . . The most remarkable thing about Agee's new book—*A Death in the Family*—is that it is exactly the kind of novel that a great many people have tried to write and have not been able to bring off, at least not the way Agee does. The subject is extremely simple: a man dies. There is no plot or story, just an account of the reactions of his relatives and one friend. But the writing is brilliant, because it manages to be so sensitive to every nuance of emotion without ever going soft.

Paul Pickrel. *Harper's Magazine*. Dec., 1957. p. 88

The posthumously published *A Death in the Family* is Agee's final item of his career in letters, a novel on which he had been at work for eight years. It does not give him any new importance as an American writer, but it does bring to a delicate and satisfactory flowering his very great ability to create the qualities and nuances of private feeling. . . . There are moments of grief and loss in everyone's life which one cannot live with, but can only recover from. And they are, oddly, the moments when one recognizes one's feelings to have been most alive. The success of *A Death in the Family* is that it brings to the surface of the reader's consciousness these forgotten, rejected moments—his own tender, unusable anguish.

David L. Stevenson. *The Nation*. Dec. 14, 1957. pp. 460–1

The sternest criticism that can be made of these collected articles [*Agee on Film*] is that, from them, emerges not so much a critical

intelligence or a Promethean appreciator of an art as a lovable and admirable man. Sometimes his lines soar; sometimes they merely gush. Sometimes his rhapsodic stabs penetrate to the heart; sometimes they flounder. He is given to meaningless distinctions. . . . But he had what is missing from most criticism today—of films and all arts: fierce intensity. The bitter image he leaves is not of a facile, corrosive cynic but of a blazing pessimist.

Stanley Kauffmann. *New Republic*. Dec. 1, 1958. p. 19

Throughout [*Agee on Film*], in which the best criticism by the late James Agee has been collected, there runs the assumption that the film is an art as well as a business—without, fortunately, any of the coterie cuteness about ''art cinema''. This assumption is apparent in the casual, unself-conscious way he uses the word ''poem'' to describe a film in which realism is lifted beyond itself into the aesthetic, in his use of other arts—music most often—in comparing effects, not means, and in his persistent discussion of superior films in terms of content *and* form, avoiding the ordinary preoccupation with content alone. . . . His descriptions of the photographic texture of films and his recognition of the ways the textures were used or misused are easily the most perceptive accounts of pure ''seeing'' that film criticism offers. . . . On the whole, *Agee on Film* is a long, literate, loving collection of one intelligent, sharp-eyed critic's very personal comments; it is also America's most important contribution to film criticism.

Gerald Weales. *The Reporter*. Dec. 25, 1958. pp. 38–9

[*A Death in the Family*] shows that Agee had the technical, intellectual, and moral equipment to do major writing. By ''moral'' which has a terribly old-fashioned ring, I mean that he believed in and—what is rarer—was interested in good and evil. Lots of writers are fascinated by evil and write copiously about it, but they are bored by virtue; this not only limits their scope but also prevents them from giving a satisfactory account of evil. In the novel, Jay Follett is a good husband and father, Mary is a good wife and mother, and their goodness is expressed in concrete actions. . . . The theme is the confrontation of love, that is carried to its highest possible reach, and death, as the negation of life and yet a necessary part of it. Only a major writer could rise to such a theme.

Dwight Macdonald. *Encounter*. Dec., 1962. p. 75

Agee in the rootlessness and disorder of Northern urban life sought always for order, definition, discipline, but he found there no firm tradition, no community of writers or intellectuals with whom he could ally himself. Though his career was lived during the Depression and World War II and the immediate postwar years, a time of strident political movements and intense ideological argument, he refused to assume an ideological ''position''. . . .

To all of his writing, whether journalism, movie scripts, or fiction, he brought the same sort of moral earnestness and what one critic has called ''an almost religious sense of commitment to the truth''. These qualities, it is clear enough, were stimulated and nurtured at that small church school in rural Tennessee and by the wise moral and spiritual guidance of a dedicated Episcopal priest, ''my oldest and dearest friend,'' as Agee calls him in his letters. It is the moral and religious aspect of the Southern story that forever haunted Agee, that he was forever telling, no matter what the subject.

Nash K. Burger. *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Winter, 1964. pp. 36–7

In the two novels [*A Morning Watch* and *A Death in the Family*] we see the essential quality of Agee's art. The novels are lyric—like the camera he understood so well, they focus on static scenes to portray universal reactions to human sorrow: guilt, courage, awakening, love. Such scenes work well. But the saddest thing about them, and about Agee's fiction in general, is his inability to believe in the present reality of his celebrations. They are of a certain time and place, protected, nurtured, and embalmed by memory. Agee's ideal world is a lost world, out of touch with present living. Even stylistically, none of Agee's abundant personal charm and vitality enters these books. In large measure, Agee's penchant for innocence is a death wish.

Richard H. Rupp. *Celebration in Postwar American Fiction* (Miami). 1970. p. 110

An intense desire to know himself marked Agee's work in the three great pieces of sustained prose that lie at the heart of his achievement. In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* Agee describes the process by which he came to a new and deep understanding of himself and his world. In *The Morning Watch* he looked back at himself as at the age of twelve he had come to an earlier appreciation of his own identity and importance. In *A Death in the Family* he looks even farther back and exposes the roots from which that twelve-year-old character had grown. And of the three works perhaps the frankest and most revealing is *A Death in the Family*. The young boy who is the central character in this novel is named Rufus, Agee's middle name which was the name he used almost exclusively in signing the letters to Father Flye.

Erling Larsen. *James Agee* (Minnesota). 1971. pp. 36–7

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AIKEN, Conrad (1889–1973)

He was master of a smooth limpid flow of verse narrative from the beginning. He did not have to learn and unlearn his technique. It was an authentic gift. Such a poet is rare enough even in England,

still rarer in America. . . . Now it seems to me that, apart from his incontestable gifts as a prosodist and word-controller, Conrad Aiken's mind has up to the present worked on somewhat too narrow a basis. His poems, in short, are variations of but one idea—the idea of sexual disillusionment.

John Gould Fletcher. *Dial.* March 28, 1918. pp. 291–2

Apparently he believes in poetry as a craft, a sport, a profession—like boxing or magic—which must be thoroughly studied before it can be improved. He examines other poets accordingly, not to imitate them, but to learn their tricks. He never echoes. Sometimes he uses the devices of other poets as a vehicle for his own expression, but in any case he mingles them with devices of his own discovery so that he does not merely live in a tradition; he aids with his proper hands in building it.

Malcolm Cowley. *Dial*. Nov., 1922. p. 564

His has been a stubborn and, in many ways, heroic journey inward, following the Freudian stream. The political and social forces of our time have failed to touch him at his creative centers, though I do not doubt his intellectual awareness of them. What needs to be kept in mind is that the seemingly inexhaustible fertility of his imagination would seem to indicate that the course he has chosen may be, for him, the proper course. . . . His vision is of the shadows in the cave, and the cave itself impalpable as fog, of the swirling of phantoms, the dance of atoms, the blind gusts of desire. . . . What holds the dissolving cloudrack together is memory, the persistence of mind.

Stanley J. Kunitz. *Poetry*. May, 1937. pp. 103–4

Probably no poet has been more concerned with music than Conrad Aiken, or has used it more fruitfully. The interest is visible even in the titles of his poems, where we find nocturnes, tone-poems, variations, dissonants, and symphonies. . . . The formal arrangement of a good deal of his poetry is based on musical principles rather than on the more widely accepted poetic ones. His symbols are developed and combined in ways analogous to the composer's handling of themes. He has given us, here and there, enough information about the theoretical basis of his work to make it clear that the musical analogues are deliberately and skilfully cultivated. And, finally, this poetry based on music is alive with musical references which reinforce both the implications of its structure and a philosophy in which music is that epitome of the individual and the universe which it was to Schopenhauer.

Calvin S. Brown. *Music and Literature* (Georgia). 1948. p. 195

A story by Conrad Aiken is a horror wrapped in actuality, a fantasy all rooted and real, all rooted in a real detail. . . . Just as the structure of these stories characteristically develops in the effort of the material to assert a reality beyond or below its mundane shape, so their drama struggles to break over the edge of its own limitations. . . . We have, I think, no other body of contemporary fiction like this—so centrally coherent, its very coherence derived from a contemplation of the intransigence of that incoherence that lies scattered on all sides of us, and above and below.

Mark Schorer. *New Republic*. March 31, 1952. pp. 19–20

As long ago as the First World War, Conrad Aiken was writing of the poet as being ''a curious blending of the psychoanalyst and patient.'' In novels, short stories, and a prolific poetry, all Aiken's work has exemplified the doctrine. He very early grafted upon traditional romanticism the golden bough of Freud. And somehow the undeviating process has made him one of the most distinguished unassessed writers of our era—perhaps the most distinguished.

Winfield Townley Scott. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 11, 1952. p. 26

Where other modern poets take the modern image of the cosmos as, at most, a point of departure, or a background irrelevant to human concerns and values, in Aiken's work it is always present as an inevitable awareness, as a kind of cold night which surrounds all things, like the sky itself. . . . But no matter how great the darkness, one cannot live by darkness. One must confront the darkness of existence—the silence of the stars, the depths of the atom, the gulf between each conscious being with all the attitudes which the imagination makes possible. This is the essential center of Aiken's poetry.

Delmore Schwartz. *New Republic*. Nov. 2, 1953. pp. 24–5

Aiken has sought his style in many directions, his experiments ranging from the diffuse allusiveness of Senlin to the archaic slambang theatrics of John Deth. Through every change, however, his devotion has been to the idea of the symphonic tone-poem, to a dissolving watery music, to a rain-swept and fog-abstracted landscape of the psyche. He has sought, in his own phrase, an ''absolute poetry.''

The weakness of that poetry seems to have centered from the beginning in its excess of melody and in the indefinitiveness of tone. . . . There is not much of the ''real world''—whatever that is—in Aiken, but certainly one is persuaded that he had found music for everything that dreams.

John Ciardi. *The Nation*. Nov. 14, 1953. p. 410

How does the bard sing? In the easiest external forms of any modern poet of stature. He sings by nature and training out of the general body of poetry in English. He writes from the cumulus of cliché in the language, always, for him, freshly felt, as if the existing language were the only reality outside himself there were. There is hardly ever in his work the stinging twist of new idiom, and the sometimes high polish of his phrasing comes only from the pressure and friction of his mind upon his metres. . . . Aiken depends on the force of his own mind and the force of metrical form to refresh his language. The cumulus upon which he really works is the cumulus of repetition, modulation by arrangement, pattern, and

overtone. He writes as if the words were spoken to let the mind under the words sing. He writes as if it were the song of the mind that puts meaning in the words.

R.P. Blackmur. *Atlantic Monthly*. Dec., 1953. p. 82

He is in the tradition of Romantic poets from Shelley to Swinburne but with the manners and sensibility of one who knows London's twentieth-century Bloomsbury as well as Boston Common. If one thinks or speaks of such a thing as ''poetic talent,'' there is more of that almost indefinable quality in a half dozen pages of Mr. Aiken's book (*Collected Poems*) than can be unearthed in whole volumes written by hundreds of his younger contemporaries. . . . As poet Mr. Aiken's gifts are rich and obvious, but the flaw among his gifts is not a superficial one. His deep lapses into flabby diction indicate that somewhere below the surface of his poems a flabby moral attitude exists.

Horace Gregory. *New York Times Book Section*. Dec. 20, 1953. p. 5

Whatever stature the work of Conrad Aiken may ultimately assume in the long run of criticism, we can affirm now, that he is one of the supreme technicians of modern English poetry. There are few writers, either in prose or in verse, who can challenge his mastery of language, who give us anything comparable to his assurance in controlling the most powerful and varied and nervous resources of expression. His writing has the inevitability of the highest art; it is, rhetorically, definitive.

Dudley Fitts. *New Republic*. Dec. 26, 1955. p. 19

Aiken is a kind of Midas: everything he touches turns to verse. Reading his poems is like listening to Delius—one is experiencing an unending undifferentiating wash of fairly beautiful sounds—or like watching a fairly boring, because almost entirely predictable kaleidoscope; a kaleidoscope all of whose transmutations are veiled, misty, watered-down. These are the metamorphoses of a world where everything *blurs* into everything else, where the easy, automatic, lyric, elegiac, nostalgic tone of the verse turns everything into itself, as the diffused. Salon photography of the first part of this century turned everything into Salon photographs.

Randall Jarrell. *The Yale Review*. Spring, 1956. pp. 479–80

. . . I want to show very briefly that . . . Aiken's fiction often issues from his own experience. I should first make it clear that Aiken drew details from his own life not as an easy way to fill in his narrative, but that he might relive (and so understand) the inner experience associated with those details. . . . Aiken would enrich not simply his awareness of himself, but also his ability to articulate that understanding with greater intensity. What experience he would use had, for the most part, been already stored up. He had now to explore and perfect by art what he would call in *Ushant* this ''gold-mine of consciousness.'' He would make a myth out of himself. . . . Such novels as *Blue Voyage* and *Conversation*, and stories like ''The Last Visit'' and ''The Night Before Prohibition''—indeed nearly all of his fiction—explore the ego to reveal failures of honesty, kindness, and integrity.

Jay Martin. *Conrad Aiken: A Life of His Art* (Princeton). 1962. pp. 80–1, 86

Conrad Aiken has always had the nebulous quality of the admitted, congratulated poet who has never written Poems; that is, the poems do not *stick*, as poems; a general impression of excellence remains, of competence and skill. Lines come out and fix themselves, but can you fasten upon a poem of his, put it in your mind, and keep it there? It all flows away, beyond the margins; it ebbs, it is lost there. You look back again in the memory, and you have nothing left. . . .

There has always been about Aiken more of the literary figure, more of the distinguished man of letters of brilliant intellect, than of the poet. He is wordy and diffuse; the words and ideas spill on and on: . . . There is no drama, no story: the endless buzz, buzz, buzz of an Aiken poem. Yet suddenly we come up against the brilliance of an image so sharp, that we fall back breathless from contact with it; so fine, so enormous a mind, so dynamic and bitter an *intelligence*: . . .

Joseph Bennett. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1963–4. p. 630

Blue Voyage seems to me the best of the novels, but that may be because I remember so well my first reading of it. At any rate it has considerable historical importance, for in it Aiken combined techniques that had been influenced by Joyce with insights that had been fostered by Freud. Countless novels have appeared in the past three decades that are indebted in one way or another to *Blue Voyage*. . . . The best parts of the novels are very much like the poems, but, as I have tried to point out, Aiken has many of the specific attributes of a writer of fiction—skill in dialogue, narrative force, a way of making his people recognizable even when they are mysterious. It is good to have his novels in print.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 11, 1964. pp. 53–4

It is because Aiken has been so versatile and protean, has tried so many forms, and created so many verbal palaces, that he has lagged behind his sometimes less-endowed contemporaries. They were more single-minded. Aiken's houses are houses of words but also of cards, and somehow the internal monologues, in their endless clutter, do not give shape to people, only shadowy personages who talk too much. The conversations pyramid; they are often brilliant; but there are limitations even to good talk and Aiken errs by excess.

His novels therefore remain distinguished failures; they are object-lessons in the shortcomings of the internal monologue, and in the danger of using psychological theory to replace the lived experience—from which theory derives. Within the saturated literary qualities of Aiken's discipline there is the flaw of ''everything''—there is the failure to capture the ''epiphany'' as Joyce did, or ''the moment'' as Virginia Woolf did.

Leon Edel. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Jan. 19, 1964. p. 8

Not that he ever tried to kill his own active, generous and excitable conscience—who more scornful of the conscience-killers than

he?—but rather that this thin mentalistic word ''consciousness,'' for better or for worse, was to be his sign of everything generous, adventurous, dramatically, vigorously, and cleansingly outrageous. I think you must admit this to ''get'' Aiken, the man who successfully crossed the abyss between Santayana and Freud. . . . The younger novelists are catching up to Aiken and acting a lot more solemnly about it. Aiken is deeply, soul-stirringly *amusing*. . . . His ''vaudeville of the psyche'' enlists, in spurts and flashes, every kind of gusto that fiction has known.

R.W. Flint. *New York Review of Books*. Feb. 6, 1964. p. 13

The five novels that Conrad Aiken wrote between 1925 and 1940 were not much noticed at the time and one of them, [*A Heart for the Gods of Mexico*], was not even published in the United States, although in many respects it stands as his best. Now that they are available in one volume, we see not only that Aiken was one of the best American novelists of the period between the two World Wars, but that he still, a quarter of a century later, speaks to us with charm, vivacity and great acuity. . . . [The novels] have practically no plots, either in the conventional sense of a story or in the more highly developed sense of a structure of interacting moods, ideas and images. Nevertheless, they give the impression of being complete and integrated; the reader is never left with a feeling that the novels have failed to fulfill their inner necessity. . . . Aiken has confined himself to the simplest possible ''verity'': the conflict between the urgency and the obscenity of sex.

Hayden Carruth. *The Nation*. Feb. 17, 1964. pp. 171–2

A poet unconcerned with changing fashions, at the beginning playing vast iambic symphonies, and at the end, suites of lyrics, rarely varying the tone, [Aiken] isn't easy to take in a great dose like this one [*Collected Poems*]. . . . The mind sometimes wanders away, or it is mesmerized by the music, of star, water, leaf, web, tree, sleep, hill, needing more meat than beautiful sound or lovely repetition for its teeth to chew on.

He moves me most and keeps me riveted when he inserts characters in dramatic situations into his poems. . . . But sometimes the poetry is like a tone poem, or program music; we only get hints from the notes of what it is all about; themes recur, words and images do; but the composer himself has finished suffering elsewhere. The cry is evoked but we don't touch the man. This tendency to the abstract, when poetry was becoming more and more concrete and specific, put Aiken out of the running for popularity. He wrote for the ear (and many of these poems might benefit by reading aloud) when the eye had become the organ of the poem.

Harold Witt. *Prairie Schooner*. Fall, 1971. p. 267

It is in *Time in the Rock* that the concept of God as a projection of the many facets of the self is most fully developed. Here Aiken is even more explicit than in *Preludes for Memnon* in demanding that man give up what he regards as the delusions and false comforts of fantasy and live with a continual awareness of the beauty and power of the ephemeral in nature and man; he asks, moreover, that man recognize the symbolic nature of the ''angels'' and ''churches'' that have for so long served to distract him from the reality of chaos and death, and he demands a way of life that reflects man's consciousness of his own symbolic constructions. . . . Aiken expresses neither despair nor anger at this revelation of essential human narcissism; in fact, he seems to exult in his increasing awareness of the unconscious feelings expressed in traditional myths and to expose their nature and meaning with a kind of ruthless love for man, his ''mad order,'' and the very symbols he uses to disguise its terrors. . . .

Recognizing that it is fundamentally man's ''hunger'' for security and grandeur that ''shapes itself as gods and rainbows'' (*Time in the Rock*, XVII), Aiken creates a new mythical concept: God is finally the symbolic expression of man's capacity for full consciousness of the anxieties, conflicts, and longings, the terror of his own limitations, and especially of death, which he has for so long repressed or acknowledged only in distorted and misleading forms; God is at the same time man's consciousness of all that he can achieve and enjoy in the face of the monstrous within himself and nature. The god in man functions in the poet when he employs the chaos of the unconscious mind as the material of creation, imposing order and beauty on its apparent formlessness.

Lillian Feder. *Ancient Myth in Modern Poetry* (Princeton). 1971. pp. 391–2

Ushant is the artistic reflexion of a life truly and fully and with difficulty lived, of a mind and conscience examined. Even its working out at 365 pages has a mythological appropriateness in this writer whose pious awareness of the cosmos is present even in domestic and daily doings; the Great Circle which he chose as the title of one of his novels being not only the path followed by Atlantic liners but also the circle of the year.

One more thing, a somewhat surprising result on reading *Ushant* again. For several days since, I've found that most any narrative I've picked up, by anyone at all, began to get itself woven into the fabric and symbolism of this one—an unexpected result of the echoing, musical method of composition, whereby Aiken may yet become the hidden author of a large part of our literature. All authors try to write the world, but only a very few succeed in teaching us how to read it.

Howard Nemerov. *Reflexions on Poetry & Poetics* (Rutgers). 1972. p. 96

As a prose poem—for in fact ''essay'' often *means* poem within this lightly encoded account of Aiken's life, just as ''play'' means novel and ''novel'' means this reflexive writing—*Ushant* joins the company of modernist works-in-progress, descendants of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, in which precariously narcissist voices move toward epic comprehensiveness as they try to name their own vocations. But unlike *The Cantos* or *Paterson, The Anathemata* or *The Maximus Poems*, this poem presents its ''exfoliation'' or ''passacaglia'' or ''onomasticon'' of metaphors through a lucid narrative and discursive style, focuses its evolutionary whirl in a long meditative moment (suspending more than five decades of a full life within a 365-page Joycean day of swirling shipboard introspection), and includes not only the matrix of experience from which it seems in the act of emerging but also its own critical explication. Rendering

in public terms Aiken's private drama of ''language extending consciousness and then consciousness extending language,'' *Ushant* aims to share in what D. [the protagonist] calls ''the great becoming *fiat* in the poetic of the great poem of life.'' And surely no other modern American writing gives us with greater sympathy and wit the iridescent texture of that process. . . .

When Aiken allows cosmic rhyme to inform the particulars of his personal experience, the result is a serio-comic richness of tone, an intellectual complexity, and a vividness of detail that had never entered his verse.

Thomas R. Whitaker. *Parnassus*. Fall-Winter, 1972. pp. 60, 65

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ALBEE, Edward (1928–)

. . . Edward Albee . . . comes into the category of the Theatre of the Absurd precisely because his work attacks the very foundations of American optimism. . . . Albee has produced a play that clearly takes up the style and subject matter of the Theatre of the Absurd and translates it into a genuine American idiom. *The American Dream* . . . fairly and squarely attacks the ideals of progress, optimism, and faith in the national mission, and pours scorn on the sentimental ideals of family life, togetherness, and physical fitness; the euphemistic language and unwillingness to face the ultimate facts of the human condition that in America, even more than in Europe, represents the essence of bourgeois assumptions and attitudes.

Martin Esslin. *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Doubleday Anchor). 1961. pp. 225-6

Strangely enough, though there is no question of his sincerity, it is Albee's skill which at this point most troubles me. It is as if his already practiced hand had learned too soon to make an artful package of venom. For the overriding passion of the play is venomous. There is no reason why anger should not be dramatized. I do not object to Albee's being ''morbid,'' for as the conspicuously healthy William James once said, ''morbid-mindedness ranges over a wider scale of experience than healthy-mindedness.'' What I do object to in his play is that its disease has become something of a brilliant formula, as slick and automatic as a happy entertainment for the trade. The right to pessimism has to be earned within the artistic terms one sets up; the pessimism and rage of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are immature. Immaturity coupled with a commanding deftness is dangerous. . . . Vividly as each personage is drawn, they all nevertheless remain flat—caricatures rather than people. Each stroke of dazzling color is super-imposed on another, but no further substance accumulates. We do not actually identify with anyone, except editorially. Even the non-naturalistic figures of Beckett's plays have more extension and therefore more stature and meaning. The characters in Albee's *The Zoo Story* and *Bessie Smith* are more particularized.

Harold Clurman. *The Nation*. Oct. 27, 1962. p. 274

Albee has a sense of character and drama that isn't ordinary. He can put two people on the stage and make them immediately lifelike: they respond to each other at once, which is exciting, especially since the response is usually revulsion. He handles demotic and clichéd speech in such a way that it seems fresh. He has a sense of humor which, though it is practically always exerted at the expense of his characters, can often make you laugh out loud. And best of all, he isn't afraid of corny theatricalism—in this of course he has the blessings and the precedent of contemporary French playwrights—and possesses an energy that never seems to flag.

Alfred Chester. *Commentary*. April, 1963. p. 297

As a maker of plots, Albee hardly exists. Both *The Zoo Story*, his first play performed in New York, and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, his most successful, are built upon an unbelievable situation—namely, that a sane, average-type person would be a passive spectator in the presence of behavior obviously headed toward destructive violence. . . . Whatever may be said against Albee . . . one must also say that his best is wholly theatrical. All his mistakes are theatrical mistakes. . . . I expect this instinct for the theatrical is what people really have in mind when they refer to Albee's talent. ''Talent'' is the wrong word, for the nature of a talent is to grow, and Albee shows no signs of that. He does show a theatrical

instinct. . . . In his badly written plays he jabs away at life with blunt instruments. If his jabbing hit the mark, that would be another matter. But it doesn't, no more than does a child in the nursery when he tears up his toys. That is why Albee is the pet of the audience, this little man who looks as if he dreamed of evil but is actually mild as a dove and wants to be loved. In him America has found its very own playwright. He's a dream.

Tom F. Driver. *The Reporter*. Jan. 2, 1964. pp. 38-9

His first play, indeed, is not only within its limits a good and effective play; it is virtually an epitome, for good and for ill, of all his later original drama. . . . Since *The Zoo Story* does argue—not only through Jerry but through the action the play presents—that in mid-twentieth-century America the possibility of genuine intellectual understanding is lost beyond recall, consistency compels Albee to take great care that the events of his play be no more intellectually understandable to his audience than they are to Jerry and Peter; and I believe that his care has on the whole been rewarded; many of Albee's admirers have seemed to feel deeply for Jerry and Peter, but no one has claimed to know them. . . . Albee's comprehensive denial of intellect establishes a theatre incapable of resolution—a theatre suitable to fantasy, perhaps, but a theatre in which Albee's realism cannot help being inconclusive.

Melvin L. Plotinsky. *Drama Survey*. Winter, 1965. pp. 220-3

Probably the only way to save the play [*A Delicate Balance*] would be to dump all the harangues, and explanations, and most of the ideas, and to replace them with scenes. But scenes take longer to write. Those two people who are afraid of their own house are worth a play, and for the few minutes that they are treated comically (a la his own *American Dream*) Albee shows us what he might have done.

But he seems to have lost faith, or patience, in his own gift. Treated comically, these people are terrifying; treated seriously, they are nothing. Enough scraps and bits of bone can be found in the play to form the nucleus of a good surreal comedy: but they are kept rigidly apart by leadweights of preachment and unearned poetry.

Wilfred Sheed. *Commonweal*. Oct. 14, 1966. p. 56

Albee is progressing. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was about the emptiness that surrounds and threatens to swallow our relationships; *Tiny Alice* was about the void lurking behind our deepest beliefs; now, *A Delicate Balance* is about the nothingness, the bare nothingness of it all—it is a play about nothing. . . . What, one wonders, was the real motive behind *A Delicate Balance?* I, for one, still believe in Albee's perceptiveness and even in his talent (he did, after all, write *The Zoo Story* and *Virginia Woolf*); why would he hurtle into such utter pointlessness? It occurs to me that at least since *Virginia Woolf*, Albee's plays and adaptations have been viewed by many as dealing overtly or covertly with homosexual matters; Albee may have resolved here to write a play reeking with heterosexuality.

John Simon. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1966–1967. pp. 627-9

This is probably going to be a difficult review to write and to read, so let me clear the decks with a deliberately unclear statement. Edward Albee's *Everything in the Garden* . . . is both extraordinarily flawed and extraordinarily engrossing. The latter remark the producers will doubtless quote, and the former will be remembered in my favor by at least my friends.

Mr. Albee is not merely our most hopeful playwright, our most promising playwright, our most interesting playwright—he is, quite simply, our best playwright. This is a position he won by virtue of *A Zoo Story* and *The Death of Bessie Smith*. Since then everything he has done has had to be regarded with seriousness and respect. . . .

Yet, in the final account this is a monstrously heavy handed account by Mr. Albee of a stealthily subtle play. If Mr. Albee wishes to sing us a song of social significance he should not choose such a shrill and hysterical falsetto.

Clive Barnes. *New York Times (daily)*. Nov. 30, 1967. p. 60

Albee's version of *Everything in the Garden*, in short, is without interest, and I'm not concealing very well my reluctance to write about it. What continues to remain somewhat interesting, because unresolved, is the author's ambiguous relationship to his audience. As I have had occasion to remark somewhat too often, Albee's identity as a dramatist is highly uncertain. Lacking his own vision, he turns to adaptation; lacking his own voice, he borrows the voice of others. What has remained constant through his every change of style—through the progression of his influences from Genet to Strindberg to Pirandello to Williams to Ionesco to Eliot—is his peculiar love-hatred for those who attend his plays. Albee's desire to undermine the audience and be applauded for it is now leading him into the most extraordinary strategems and subterfuges, just as his desire to be simultaneously successful and significant has managed by now to freeze his artistic imagination. He has two choices, I think, if he is ever to create interesting work again: either to resolve this conflict, or to write about it. But both alternatives oblige him to become a great deal less masked, a great deal more daring, a great deal more open than he now chooses to be.

Robert Brustein. *New Republic*. Dec. 16, 1967. p. 27

In his one-act plays Albee often reaches into the vitals of American attitudes to strike at what he thinks sham and superficiality. In *The Zoo Story* he reveals the complacent businessman to be a vegetable incapable of experiencing any kind of real feeling; in *The American Dream* he presents our idealization of physical beauty and sexual power in all its vacuity. The validity of the satire in these plays rests on the exposure of the veneer that disguises fear, ruthlessness, savagery and self-interest without any attempt to solve the problems. There is always an implicit recognition of the depth of the problem. It cannot be solved by any quick panacea. . . . The conclusion of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, however, advocates a simple standard: no salvation from without, a reliance on ''truth'' and the resources of the personality. Though Albee sounds the ''maybe'' of caution with regard to the final situation of George and Martha, he also holds out a ''romantic'' hope that ''it will be better.'' But the ironist of the first two-and-a-half acts has left his

imprint on the play. There seems no reason why the old cycle of games should not begin again.

Thomas E. Porter. *Myth and Modern American Drama* (Wayne State). 1969. pp. 246-7

There are such strong surface dissimilarities among the Albee plays that it is easier and in some ways more rewarding to think of *The Zoo Story* in relation to Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter and *A Delicate Balance* in terms of T.S. Eliot and Enid Bagnold than it is to compare the two plays, even though both start from the same dramatic situation: the invasion . . . of private territory. . . . Yet the comparison is obvious once it is made. Each new Albee play seems to be an experiment in form, in style (even if it is someone else's style), and yet there is unity in his work as a whole. . . .

Separateness is the operative word for Albee characters, for, even though his zoo provides suites for two people (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*) or for more (*A Delicate Balance*), they are furnished with separate cages.

Gerald Weales. *The Jumping-Off Place* (Macmillan—N.Y.). 1969. pp. 28–30

Suspicion is born of Albee's very brilliance. His plays are too well crafted, his characters too modishly ambiguous, his dialogue too carefully cadenced. This is not to say that he writes perfect plays—whatever that may be—but his surface polish seems to deny subsurface search, much less risk. . . . Albee's plays are not devoid of suffering, and in any case one cannot measure the quality of a play by some putative pain of the playwright. Nevertheless, Albee's craftsmanship recalls the meditation of the disembodied voice of *Box*: ''arts which have gone down to craft.'' And it is particularly ungrateful to turn his own finely modulated words against Albee. But just because his verbal craft *is* so fine, one longs for the clumsy upward groping toward art.

Ruby Cohn. *Dialogue in American Drama* (Indiana). 1971. pp. 168-9

All Over provides reason for being rather more sanguine about Albee's future than we have had the right to be for some years. His only two previous attempts at a fusion between his off-Broadway experimentalism and his Broadway naturalism were *Tiny Alice* and *A Delicate Balance*: the new play is a more honest piece of writing than the former and more original than the latter. He is still one of the most powerful influences in the American theatre, although he has not yet equalled the success of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and his three adaptations seriously damaged his reputation. The rival pulls of Beckett and Broadway have brought his talent dangerously near to disintegrating but there is still hope that it will recover.

Ronald Hayman. *Edward Albee* (Ungar). 1973. p. 138

Edward Albee's play *Seascape* . . . is fundamentally a play about life and resolution. It is that currently rare thing, a comedy rather than a farce, and it is a curiously compelling exploration into the basic tenets of life. It is asking in a light-hearted but heavy-minded fashion whether life is worth living. It decides that there is no alternative.

As Mr. Albee has matured as a playwright, his work has become leaner, sparer and simpler. He depends on strong theatrical strokes to attract the attention of the audience, but the tone of the writing is always thoughtful, even careful, even philosophic. . . . Mr. Albee is suggesting that one of the purposes of an individual human existence is quite simply evolution—that we all play a part in this oddly questionable historic process. So that the purpose of life is life itself—it is a self-fulfilling destiny. We have to come out of the water and get onto the beach, we have to live and we have to die, simply because life is about life.

Clive Barnes. *New York Times (daily)*. Jan. 27, 1975. p. 20

Unlike some other eminent playwrights, Mr. Albee has never been content merely to rework his old successes in new guises and present them as new plays. He has sometimes been accused of rewriting the old successes of others—*All Over*, for instance, sounded uncannily like a newly-unearthed late play by T.S. Eliot—but with *Seascape* he is certainly free of that accusation. The new play is short (less than two hours, with intermission), bizarre, and curious, and its strange premise is fraught with all sorts of implications and possibilities. But it seems unfinished, as if Albee had not quite known how to work out his intriguing premise.

Like *All Over*, his play, and *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*, the double bill before that, *Seascape* is very spare, very cerebral, very distanced, very uninvolved in the immediate intensities of experience. This is not necessarily a bad way to write plays, but none of these recent works of Mr. Albee have really been very satisfactory; perhaps he needs to get back into closer touch with himself.

Julius Novick. *The Village Voice*. Feb. 3, 1975. p. 84

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?—song and play—conceals fear beneath a party surface. Far from a mere *dolce vita* of offensive couples, however, the drama of four characters terminates in an act of exorcism. Though Martha claims that George no longer knows the difference between truth and illusion, he finally kills their child of illusion in the last darkly comic scene of the play. When first heard, the Latin service for the dead sounds like camp parody, but it prepares for George's outrageous tale of the death telegram, corroborated by Honey. Unlike his namesake, Albee's George can tell a lie, but he implies that lies act in the service of truth. Possibly the dawn ending signals the birth of truth in marriage, and yet Martha's final words express fear rather than hope. Finally ambiguous, Albee's drama is comic not in its conclusion but in its verbal cruelties, lively colloquialisms, and such camp effects as Martha imitating Bette Davis, George imitating President Kennedy, a Latin burial service for an imaginary death, and a familiar tune with semi-nonsensical words—''who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?''

After *Virginia Woolf*, Albee's humor drains away. Like *Zoo Story*, *Tiny Alice* ends in death, but Julian, the would-be apostate, lacks the self-irony of Jerry, a prophet with a nickname. The

opening scene seems to continue the three comic C's of *Virginia Woolf*—as Cardinal and Lawyer fence verbally; as they lapse into such slang as diddle, pig, loot; as they seem to play at law and church, rather than belonging to these professions. With the entrance of humorless Julian, however, comedy sputters into martyrdom (Albee apparently takes the martyrdom as seriously as does Julian, since he threatened to sue ACT for shrinking Julian's dying monologue). In *Virginia Woolf*, Martha says: ''I have a fine sense of the ridiculous, but no sense of humor.'' Unfortunately, both senses have deserted Albee in his plays of the 1970's.

Ruby Cohn. In *Comic Relief: Humor in Contemporary American Literature*, ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen (Univ. of Illinois Pr., 1978), pp. 284–85

Albee is far from affirming illusion as a way of life. The fact that there is a discernible—and recoverable—real self, when the layers of game play and fantasy are stripped from George and Martha, supports Albee's commitment to man's need to confront reality on its terms. Yet Albee does not without qualification decry the evils of illusion. Although ostensibly a realistic drama, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is supremely aware of itself as a play and manifests this awareness throughout. Where the illusion of George and Martha is dismissed as an unsatisfactory confrontation of reality, the illusion of their creator, Albee himself—i.e., the play—is upheld as a meaningful creation, for the play, unlike the escapist illusion of its central characters, leads toward truth rather than away from it.

That Albee is concerned not only with the relationship between reality and illusion with respect to patterns of life, but with the artistic process as well, is confirmed by an examination of the relationship between George and Martha on the one hand and Nick and Honey, their youthful guests, on the other, for this relationship is a microcosm of the relationship between play and audience and a statement of the positive function of art. . . .

Albee's metafictional characters, then, simultaneously deny the validity of illusion as a way of life and affirm the validity of illusion as art. Albee asks his audience to enter a world of illusion only as a means of discovery, because for Albee, the function of fiction, whether private or public, is to illuminate, not replace, reality.

June Schlueter. *Metafictional Characters in Modern Drama* (Columbia Univ. Pr., 1979), pp. 83, 87

Despite the heaviness and seriousness of Albee's concern, it is the catholicity of his vision and technique that really distinguishes this play. Albee shows himself open and sensitive to all facets of the human condition: the serious, the funny, the physical, the metaphysical, the actual, and the illusionary. All of his devices deserve commendation: his wit; the purity of his style, so magnificent in its captivation and alteration of normal speech; and his lizard fantasy, through which he reveals the human reality. . . .

Seascape is not only a remarkable aesthetic achievement, but it is also a highly affirmative statement on the human condition. Albee, an American writer, seems to have employed the techniques of the European playwrights Pinter and Beckett, and transformed them so that he could make a highly personal statement, one almost antithetical to their own. He seems to be saying that human life is worth living and that it is desirable to climb the evolutionary ladder in order to experience love, art, and the complexities of human interaction. It is desirable even if that means a certain loss of freedom, natural beauty, and the security possessed by the creatures of the sea. Albee has never made so affirmative a statement in his career; it is significant that *Seascape* should follow *All Over*, which dealt so heavily with death. With *Seascape*, Albee has, as if in a Lazarus-like rebirth of mind and spirit, magnificently affirmed life.

Samuel J. Bernstein. *The Strands Entwined: A New Direction in American Drama* (Northeastern Univ. Pr., 1980), pp. 130, 134

The last great gift a parent gives to a child is his or her own death, and the energy underneath *Three Tall Women* is the exhilaration of a writer calling it quits with the past—specifically, the rueful standoff between Albee and his mother, the late Frances Cotter Albee, who adopted him only to kick him out of the family home, at eighteen, for his homosexual shenanigans and later to cut him out of her sizeable will. The play has earned Albee, who is sixty-six, his third (and most deserved) Pulitzer Prize, but the writer's real victory is a psychological one—honoring the ambiguity of ''the long unpleasant life she led'' while keeping her memory vividly alive. Far from being an act of revenge or special pleading, the play is a wary act of reconciliation, whose pathos and poetry are a testament to the bond, however attenuated, between child and parent. *Three Tall Women* bears witness to the son's sad wish to be loved, but with this liberating difference: the child is now finally in control of the parent's destiny, instead of the parent's being in control of the child's. . . .

In Act II, by an ingenious coup de théâtre, *Three Tall Women* expands from a parental cameo to a vista of decline. At curtain rise, A [one of three characters representing different ages of the mother figure] is still collapsed in bed but now has an oxygen mask over her face. B and C [the other two ''stages'' of the character] seem to have dressed up for their bedside vigil in period high fashion—B in pearls and an elegant gray frock with a full, pleated fifties skirt, and C in a layered ankle-length cream chiffon dress that evokes the twenties. Then, as B and C bicker about death, and the conversation drifts to the absence of a living will and why A didn't write one, A herself, in an elegant lavender dress, walks in from the wings. . . . The moment is electrifying. The body in the bed turns out to be a mannequin. In this theatrical filip, Albee goes from a familiar external reality to a bold interior one. B and C are now projects of A, who speaks rationally for the duration of the play, responding to different stages of her life. Albee's wonderful invention allows him both to incarnate A's narcissism and to lift the play from characterization to meditation. What we get is a kind of Cubist stage picture, where the characters are fragments of a single self. The device is at its most eloquent when the son appears, in preppy clothes and clasping freesias, to sit by his comatose mother in a dumb show of devotion.

John Lahr. *New Yorker*. May 16, 1994, pp. 102, 103–4

One would think that 30 years of dismissive critical reviews and dwindling audiences might have been more than humbling enough

for the one-time celebrated Bad Boy of Broadway. After all, Albee's not really had a solid commercial success since *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the marital slugfest which electrified audiences first on the Broadway stage in 1962 and later on the screen with Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor (who won the Best Actress Oscar for her role). And although this is Albee's third Pulitzer (the first, in 1967, was for *A Delicate Balance*, the second for 1975's *Seascape*), his distinctive voice has largely been absent from New York theater since 1983, after his play, *The Man Who Had Three Arms* failed on Broadway.

All that has swiftly changed for Albee through the unqualified success of *Three Tall Women*. . . .

While Albee is clearly pleased with the reception for *Three Tall Women*, he can't help but chide the idea that this somehow represents a comeback of sorts for him. After all, he's been writing plays all along, often directing productions of his own work at regional and university theaters and abroad. He's also been busy teaching young writers and supporting them and visual artists through his own private foundation based at his Montauk retreat. . . .

Albee says that he wrote the play over a four-month period in 1991, though it really took ''55 years''—a reference to the long and tempestuous relationship which he had with his [foster] mother. . . .

Although Albee insists that he isn't the type of writer who usually draws on his own life for subject matter, he admitted that writing *Three Tall Women* was a form of exorcism for him. Speaking of his [foster] mother, he says, ''She was destructive and contemptible, but there were reasons for her behavior, as there always are. Writing the play allowed me to understand her better, though I'm not sure I liked her any more or less than I already did.

''I just tried to get it all down,'' he adds. ''It's the theme: What is worse than coming to the end of your life filled with regret? I was interested in the facts, man, just the facts: the good stuff, the bad, the misplaced pride. The facts carry implications with them.''

Patrick Pacheco. *Playbill*. July 1994, pp. 33–34, 37

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ALFRED, William (1923–)

William Alfred's purpose in writing this verse play in four acts [*Agamemnon*] is not to make an adaptation of Aeschylus; he wishes to penetrate the myth itself, that ''ambush of reality,'' that familiar place (he goes on to say in his preface) we might find in no matter how foreign a city. Thus he would work where Aeschylus worked, and where the imaginations of his ''private'' readers work, whether consciously or not; and he would make his play directly from—or in?—the life of that myth, and not from its literature. . . . What is sure is that he has done a fine play, with a few moments of really high distinction.

Henry Rago. *Commonweal*. Dec. 3, 1954. p. 259

The prime virtue of William Alfred's verse-drama, *Hogan's Goat*, is its absolute lack of shrewdness. It embodies none of the fashionable attitudes of the contemporary stage, whether commercial or avant-garde, and it is written with an ingratiating naïveté, as if the author had just emerged, play in hand, from a time capsule entered many decades before. . . . and while the blank verse is a little excessive in its use of simile, and a little unfamiliar in the mouths of Irish wardheelers, it is generally a serviceable dramatic instrument, especially as a source of invective.

For all its charm, however, the play is decidedly minor, mainly because it fails its own intentions. In the conflict between a young ambitious insurgent who wants to be mayor and the cynical, corrupt old incumbent who will use any device to keep his cherished office, Mr. Alfred has the opportunity to examine what has recently become an extremely important subject in America—the rise of Irish political power; but the author unfortunately gets sidetracked into writing pseudo-tragedy about his hubristic hero, concluding not with social-political insights but rather with a moral lesson about pride and selfishness. . . .

Robert Brustein. *New Republic*. Nov. 27, 1965. p. 46

To begin with, the . . . intention [of *Hogan's Goat*] is implied in such lines as ''There are some things in life you can't take back''—the plot consequence of which is that not only the sinner but also the innocent are destroyed. Concomitant with this thought is the idea that in the quest for power lie the seeds of crime.

Further, the author wished to recreate the Irish Brooklyn of old with its mixture of religiosity, ignorance, provincial charm, fecklessness and brutality—the sweetly rancid festering of our ghettos in their growth and in their dissolution. Finally there is the purely literary striving . . . to envelop and elevate all this material through the use of modern verse forms, language which makes poetic patterns of the vernacular.

Harold Clurman. *The Nation*. Nov. 29, 1965. p. 427

I remember William Alfred reading, some dozen years ago in Harvard's Sanders Theatre, from his verse play, *Hogan's Goat*. I recall being impressed by his reading and unimpressed by his writing. The American Place Theatre has now given *Hogan's Goat* a compact and tidy production, but the play continues to be sprawling, sentimental melodrama decked out with verse that smacks of a Christopher Fry hopped up on Sean O'Casey. Oh, the heart is in the right place in this tale of an 1890 scandal that cost an eagerly aspiring immigrant-Irish publican the mayoralty of Brooklyn; and his passionate young spouse, her life. But plays do not live

by heart and vaulting metaphors alone. . . . Nevertheless, this is not really an offensive play, merely a benighted one. It does, in any case, attempt to create plot and characters, and even if these Irish priests, politicos, ward-heelers, floozies, biddies, and bibbers have worn their garments of lovable local color hopelessly threadbare, and even if the romantic and political intrigues, clashes, and lightning revelations are smudged with the thumbprints of countless popular dramatists, there is here an old-fashioned love of old-fashioned theatre for which one may heave a sympathetic sigh.

John Simon. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1966. pp. 114–5

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ALGREN, Nelson (1909–1981)

It is a novel about depressed people by a depressed man, and it is most convincing in its complete unity of action, mood, and form. . . . The whole narrative is pervaded by a feeling of loss rather than of bitterness or horror. And Algren's realism is so paced as to avoid the tedium of the naturalistic stereotype, of the literal copying of surfaces. He knows how to select, how to employ factual details without letting himself be swamped by them, and finally, how to put the slang his characters speak to creative uses so that it ceases to be an element of mere documentation and turns into an element of style.

Philip Rahv. *The Nation*. April 18, 1942. pp. 466-7

The scene in *Never Come Morning* that most people will remember is the rape of Bruno's girl in the cellar. . . . There are other scenes as brutal. . . . But the really good scenes are quieter; they are still lifes and genre pictures instead of being sensational films—the girls sitting around the juke box in Mama Topak's flat, the boys playing under the El, the look of Chicago streets in the rain, the tall corn growing between the slag heaps down by the river. It is this poetry of familiar things that is missing in the other Chicago novels and that shows the direction of Algren's talent. In spite of the violent story he tells—and tells convincingly—he is not by instinct a novelist. He is a poet of the Chicago slums, and he might well be Sandburg's successor.

Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*. May 4, 1942. pp. 613-4

The point is that Algren's topical figures are failures even at vice. They are the underdogs of sin, the small souls of corruption, the fools of poverty, not of wealth and power. Even the murders they commit, out of blind rage or through sheer accident—or through another ironic twist of their impoverished destiny—are not important. . . . Thus Algren's work represents an extreme phase of the native American realism which opened in the 1900's. . . . And there are obvious limitations and aesthetic dangers in the social area and the kind of human material that Algren has made his own.

Maxwell Geismar. *English Journal*. March, 1953. pp. 124-5

A Walk on the Wild Side is in an American tradition of emotional giantism: its comedy is farce, its joys are orgies, the feats of its characters Bunyanesque, the sexuality is prodigious, their sorrow a wild keening almost too high for ordinary ears. Dove Linkhorn is pioneer stock gone bad, grown up and gone to seed, caught in a neon-lit jungle in a time of break-down. The picture of Dove burning out his dammed up, useless energies in a bonfire of lust and violence is one of the most extraordinary in contemporary fiction.

Milton Rugoff. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. May 20, 1956. p. 4

Algren's narrative . . . flickers to life only intermittently among the lay sermons and the miscellaneous information about jails and whorehouses. *A Walk on the Wild Side* is . . . documented, out of the same sense, I suppose, which compels popular magazine fiction, the notion that ''truth'' resides in avoiding inaccuracies; in knowing, for instance, exactly what equipment a New Orleans prostitute of the '30's would have had on her table. It is all part of the long retreat of the imagination before science, or our surrender to information.

Leslie A. Fiedler. *Partisan Review*. June, 1956. p. 361

The Man with the Golden Arm . . . seems to declare that admirable human qualities have little—or perhaps a negative bearing on social status and that the poetry of human relationships appears most richly where people are stripped down to the core of survival and have not strength or use for complicated emotions. Living on the barest edge of physical survival, his people simply have no use for vanity, sanctimoniousness, or prestige; being free and pure, their loves and affections are beautiful. . . . Society has become a jungle of viciousness and injustice beyond reclamation; only the waifs and strays merit attention because only they are capable of tender and beautiful feelings. One may be deeply moved by *The Man with the Golden Arm* but must, I believe, finally regard it as irresponsible and inaccurate—a sentimental contrivance that has little to do with reality but rather explores a cul-de-sac in the author's imagination.

Charles Child Walcutt. *American Literary Naturalism* (Minnesota). 1956. pp. 298-9

The notion that prostitutes have hearts of gold is of course a literary cliché, and you will find it in much of the slumming fiction of the past, but nowhere in Algren's books is there any prostitute with a heart of gold. *Time*'s reviewer would find himself hard put to find a single line in *A Walk on the Wild Side*, or *Never Come Morning*, where prostitution is part of Algren's theme, that could be quoted or twisted to support the notion. Algren's prostitutes are people, good, bad, and indifferent, like any other women. If they perform a good deed or an unselfish act their motives are as mixed as those of any wife or sweetheart—or any businessman on the make for a buck. As for the bums, the charge of idleness is itself a cliché. It was always leveled against itinerant workers, ''tramps,'' ''hoboes,'' who followed the harvest or preferred pick-up jobs to punching a time-clock. For Dove Linkhorn in *Wild Side* it is work or starve

from start to finish, and he is seldom idle. Far from being a bum in the *Time* reviewer's sense of the word (as distinguished from ''people who work''), Dove is clearly intended to be a parody of the young man on the make for money and success. . . .

Lawrence Lipton. *Chicago Review*. Winter, 1957. pp. 6–7

Nelson Algren . . . has been fretfully silent, the fret manifested by occasional reviews, interviews, magazine pieces, comments, groans and gripes. A born writer, for one reason or another stalled in his vocation, may back and fill in this way. *Who Lost an American?* is the distillation of this fret, a collection of memories, notes, burlesques and prejudices in a book that is part fact, part fiction. . . .

The best thing in the book is Algren's personal rhythm—irreverent, funny, surreal, as if he has blended the lyricism of his early writing, ''within a rain that light rains regret,'' with a tough meander and wail like that of funky jazz. Algren is a writer, the authentic poetic article; a fresh haircut strikes his eye as vividly as the murder of a Chicago poker player on a backstairs. It would be fine to discover him working once again on people whom he could feel in his blood and within an action that might carry his special melody.

Herbert Gold. *New York Times Book Section*. June 2, 1963. p. 23

There is something fundamentally dispiriting about *Who Lost an American?*, not because its inner feeling is irrelevant to life today—I do not believe it is—but because Algren, who is after all an accomplished writer, is so utterly helpless to turn this feeling into anything but a commonplace buffoonery. Caught between his own past, in which a deep identification with the social outcast and the working class was all but inseparable from his sense of literary vocation, and the present, in which money seems to brutalize equally those who have too much and those who have too little, Algren seems to have lost all sense of what useful literary tasks might remain open to him. His detestation of the prevailing moral atmosphere, not only of society at large but of the literary pretensions to which it has given rise, seems to have deprived him of his own seriousness as a writer.

Hilton Kramer. *The Reporter*. June 30, 1963. p. 47

No writer has been more relentlessly faithful to his scene and cast of characters than Nelson Algren. His scene is the ''wild side,'' the ''neon wilderness,'' the seamier sprawls of Chicago and its spiritual extensions across this broad land—America as Chicago. And his characters are the drifters and grifters, clowns and carnies, pimps and pushers, hustlers and hookers, gamblers and touts, junkies and lushes, marks and victims, conmen and shills, freaks and grotesques—the born losers who constitute a half-world, an antisociety to the society that never appears, not even as a sensed or felt presence, in Algren's work. Over the four decades of his life as a writer, scene and characters have never changed. Atmosphere, obsessions, talk, ways of putting in the time—all are fixed, held in suspension, dreamed and long after hazily recalled, caught not as they once were but as they are remembered, just as they are about to dissolve and become ballads. The mythical time, whatever the calendar reads, is always the '30s, somewhere around the longest year of 1935.

Saul Maloff. *New Republic*. Jan. 19, 1974. p. 23

Nelson Algren hasn't written any novels for going on 20 years now—which is sad in a way. But it's not like he's been exactly idle in the years between: *The Last Carousel* is the third collection of short pieces he has published since his last novel. Unlike the other two (*Who Lost an American?* and *Notes from a Sea Diary*), this one contains a lot of short fiction. . . .

Algren's journalism is a little hard to tell from his fiction. They look a lot alike. Algren puts himself right in the middle of his nonfiction, too, sets scenes beautifully, and tells it all with dialogue and colorful details interwoven through the narrative. In other words, to give it a recently-stylish label, it's New Journalism—and Nelson Algren was writing it this way when Tom Wolfe was still at Yale working on his PhD in American Studies. This being the case and with journalism being exalted today in some quarters high above fiction as a mode of serious expression, I can't for the life of me figure out why he hasn't retained greater eminence.

Bruce Cook. *Commonweal*. Feb. 8, 1974. p. 469

The Man with the Golden Arm is an estimable novel which occupies an important position in Algren's development as a novelist. Though not so neatly constructed as *Never Come Morning*, it is more densely packed, more intense, and in some ways more mature. The humorous scenes lead straight to Algren's last major work, the uniquely comic *A Walk on the Wild Side*, which Algren and many of his critics consider to be his best novel. . . .

The Man with the Golden Arm is Algren's most comprehensive expression of his conviction that America's great middle class should be made to recognize the personal worth and dignity of the socially disinherited who do not live the spurious lives of the ''business cats'' and the country-club set, neither of whom has been willing to recognize ''the world underneath.'' In writing such novels as *The Man with the Golden Arm*, Algren has blended Naturalistic Determinism ''with a sympathy for his people that nevertheless cannot deter him from sending them to their miserable fates.'' In a style and language that are drawn directly from the world he depicts, he has ''managed to impart a dignity to material which would be merely sordid in the hands of a lesser writer.'' He regularly insists that the ''poetry'' which characterizes his Realism is a natural poetry, one taken from the people themselves: ''When I heard a convict who had just finished a stretch say, 'I made my time from bell to bell, now the rest of the way is by the stars,' if somebody was fusing poetry with realism it was the con, not me. My most successful poetry, the lines people threw back at me years after they were written, were lines I never wrote. They were lines I heard, and repeated, usually by someone who never read and couldn't write.''

For this reason, despite the concreteness and authoritative detail of his prose, Algren is ''more a singer than an explainer,'' one whose prose in *The Man with the Golden Arm* can become almost a ''kind of incantation, like the chanting of ritual itself.'' In such a

form, the curb and tenement and half-shadow world of Frankie and Sophie and Molly with its unforgettable smoke-colored rain, its musk-colored murmuring, and its calamitous light have brought the world underneath a bit closer to the middle-class American consciousness and conscience.

Martha Heasley Cox and Wayne Chatterton. *Nelson Algren* (Twayne, 1975), pp. 132–33

I have never quite met Nelson Algren—we talked on the phone once—but he has been a continuing influence in my life. He is the poet of the sad metropolis that underlies our North American cities; I was among those millions who caught an early chill there. Reading Algren didn't dispel the chill, but it did teach us to live with it and to look around us with deepened feelings and thoughts.

Algren's Chicago and the people who live in its shadows are still there. Algren is their tragic poet, enabling those who can read him to feel pain. And nearly everyone can read him. He writes with a master's clarity about the complex troubles of simple people, and not so simple people. Bruno Bicek and Frankie Machine and Steffi ''with the new city light on her old world face'' appear to be simple because Algren presents them with such understanding.

Algren came into the full use of his talent in the early years of the Second World War, which promised to open the way for a reassessment of our society. In full knowledge of the lower depths which had to be redeemed, Algren asserted the value of the people who lived in those depths. The intensity of his feeling, the accuracy of his thought, make me wonder if any other writer of our time has shown us more exactly the human basis of our democracy. Though Algren often defines his positive values by showing us what happens in their absence, his hell burns with passion for heaven.

Ross Macdonald. *New York Times Book Section*. Dec. 4, 1977, p. 62

A Depression-era naturalist who still pops up in surrealist anthologies, [Algren] never stopped believing that the human actions and emotions which make literature are inherently unclassifiable. He blew being a convincing muckraker by noticing that ''people without alternatives are forced to feel life all the way,'' which sounded better to him than what everybody else was doing; trading not feeling for not being forced. But then he botched being a good black humorist by missing the point that an awareness of the absurd is supposed to distance feelings and not heighten them. It's no accident that he was one of the few '30s writers to greet existentialism as reinforcement instead of deviation, and it's not surprising that he was drawn to the movement by liking the people first and their ideas later. . . . But throughout the '50s, whenever it dawned on critics that Algren didn't think of his characters as social ills to be cured, he was routinely attacked, by such people as Edmund Fuller, who also disliked *From Here to Eternity* because the hero was a ''slob.''

This bias must account for the comparative lack of reputation accorded *A Walk on the Wild Side*—which is Algren's best novel, an astonishing suspension of tragi-comedy within endlessly meshing webs of folklore, poetry, and dread. The closest analogy would be a blend of *Huckleberry Finn* with *The Threepenny Opera*, but that's only an approximation; offhand, I can't think of any previous American book that's much like it, although dozens of writers, from Thomas Berger to Charles Bukowski, have been ransacking it for years. . . . *Wild Side* is a Depression novel in which the Depression isn't an economic situation or even a definable period, but a phantasmagoria that lifts the lid off the American character. Or, as Algren later put it, back then people couldn't *afford* inhibitions. . . .

But it's misleading to approach the book schematically. *A Walk on the Wild Side* confounds genres—its emotional effects are as various, caroming, and unmediated, as humanly scrambled, as emotion itself. And yet they're worked to such a dense, lucid level of magnification that they seem, at the same time, hallucinatory. The result is a slapstick disorientation that feels, against all reason, unquestionable. Stylistically, Wild Side is a kind of ultimate. Algren doesn't lend himself to being excerpted; his verbal devices, which conflate atmosphere, character, and meaning into one and the same thing, are seldom discrete. They're designed to stoke and build on themselves, and they reverberate through the whole length of the best *Neon Wilderness* stories, or, later, whole sections of *The Man with the Golden Arm*. In *Walk on the Wild Side*, Algren sustains the equivalent of a single jazz solo through an entire book. . . .

What makes Algren's work ambiguous, or disturbing, or simply puzzling to many people, I think, is that he doesn't feel any obligation to adopt a depersonalized solemnity toward his material. Yet his sardonicism, whimsicality, eccentric irony, and refractory high spirits never add up to displays of intellectual superiority. He's all there for his characters, opening himself and expressing the full range of his personality as a writer in order to be in touch with the full range of their lives as people. He asserts his own identity on their level, makes himself one of them by maintaining his individuality, which forces us to see them as individuals too, in a way that precludes simply having an intellectual attitude toward them: for Algren, do-gooding concern is as emotionally inadequate as disdain.

Tom Carson. *[The Village] Voice Literary Supplement*, Nov., 1983, pp. 16–17

In February [1980] he learned that he had been voted, however belatedly, into the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, nominated by Donald Barthelme and seconded by Malcolm Cowley and Jacques Barzun. At first, when he told Canio [Pavone] about it, he seemed bitter about having been locked out for so long—should he even answer, could he hock the membership pin? Canio also remembered that Saul Bellow was mentioned, as if [Nelson] Algren believed that Bellow, who was rumored to have dismissed him as a tavern writer, had kept him out. But Pavone encouraged him to accept the nomination because he deserved it. In 1974, when he'd received the Award of Merit, he'd been cynical, but now Algren was happy, flattered, deeply satisfied. Heretofore he'd felt he was on some kind of American blacklist: his books sold abroad, and it was only in his own country that he was treated so badly. Suddenly he was being welcomed back into the literary world. It was *community* and being included that Algren craved, and that was what he found in Sag Harbor after all those lonely years in New Jersey and Chicago. . . .

More than a year after Algren's death, an American publisher for *The Devil's Stocking* had still not been found, and when Herbert

Mitgang mentioned this in *The New York Times Book Review*, Donald Fine renewed his offer to publish the last Nelson Algren novel, paying about half what he had originally offered. The novel appeared in 1983.

Algren's tombstone arrived with his name misspelled and had to be recut. And when the City of Chicago changed West Evergreen Street to West Algren Street, residents complained that the new address caused too much trouble. So the city changed it back again.

Bettina Drew. *Nelson Algren: A Life on the Wild Side* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1989), pp. 377, 380

Algren once was hailed as ''the poet of the Chicago slums'' and was considered by Ernest Hemingway to ''rank among our best American novelists.'' An impressive collection of his Texas stories has just been published [*The Texas Stories of Nelson Algren*, ed. Bettina Drew]. . . . Influenced by a loving and cultivated sister, he formed an early interest in books, music, ballet, and the arts. In spite of his blue collar, uneducated background, Algren was determined to go to college. And so he did, graduating from the University of Illinois in 1931 with a degree in journalism. . . .

Making a decision to head south in search of work, Algren hitchhiked down to Texas, to New Orleans and back to Texas by box car. He took any available job: shilling for a crooked carnival, picking fruit, sorting peas and beans. This journey ended with a nightmare jail sentence for borrowing a typewriter from a deserted classroom. . . . Algren used many of his own experiences in writing these eleven powerful and tormented stories.

Anne Geismar. *Anton Community Newspapers: Boulevard*. February 1996, p. 48

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AMMONS, A.R. (1926–)

These poems [in *Expression of Sea Level*] take place on the frontier between what the poet knows and what he doesn't; perhaps that explains their peculiar life and sensitivity. They open to accommodate surprises and accidents. The poet's interest is extended generously toward what he didn't expect, and his poems move by their nature in that direction.

The poems are worked out, not by the application of set forms to their materials, but in an effort to achieve form—in accordance with a constant attentiveness to, a hope for, the possibility of form—the need of anything, once begun, to complete itself, meaningfully.

Wendell Berry. *The Nation*. March 23, 1964. p. 304

Now, in the 1960s, poets are beginning to work towards an expansion of subject matter and a synthesis of style between the traditional forms and the open forms fostered by William Carlos Williams and others. The talented young poet A. R. Ammons . . . reveals some interesting aspects of that search. Ammons uses a variety of cadenced open forms to concentrate the kind of knowledge out of which he makes his images. He extends the subject of the poem by using a range of interesting facts, often scientific in character. At first some of his poems seem too prosaic, but reading them carefully one perceives that his facts build to a startling perception. . . . His rhythms do not sing; they separate and define. His tone is essentially philosophic, not dramatic, yet there is a distinctly individual quality to his diction.

James Schevill. *Saturday Review*. July 4, 1964. pp. 30–1

The publication of A. R. Ammons' *Selected Poems* should bring him wider recognition than has come on the basis of his three previously published volumes. At forty-two Ammons is one of the most accomplished writers of his generation in America. His work, both in subject matter and execution, has certainty and assurance, and he possesses a creative intelligence perfectly aware of what it can do and what it ought not to try, and happily at ease within its recognized and accepted boundaries. Within those boundaries Ammons' poems speak with settled authority, and are not afraid of repeating themselves, which they often do with conviction and without monotony. In this respect he resembles Wallace Stevens a little, although in most other ways the minds of the two poets come through very differently. But as with Stevens, so with Ammons: when one begins to read him, the best way to understand one poem is to read a great many. This is usual with poets obsessed with one or two central themes in their work to which they return on every creative occasion. Once the clue to Ammons' master pattern is seized (and it is not at all difficult) his poems are unusually easy to read. Nevertheless, a reader wholly unacquainted with Ammons' poetry and coming across one or two of his poems for the first time—especially if they were from his earlier work—might understandably be a little puzzled.

Marius Bewley. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1968–9. p. 713

[Ammons] is decidedly his own man and possesses his own vision, his own accents, and even his own solicitude about the sheer sculptured *appearance* of each poem against its whitenesses and silences (once having examined a late and characteristic Ammons poem, you could never confuse his patterns with the patterns of anybody else). . . . Mr. Ammons just might be our finest contemporary ''nature poet,'' always excepting the incomparable case of James Dickey. Sometimes he employs nature—landscapes and waterscapes, the being and grave motions of creatures—as a source for metaphors by which to trace out subtle generalizations about crucial human experiences, about the perplexities and mysteries of consciousness. On other occasions, he deliberately halts short after displaying for us—no negligible feat—the bright and resonant *thingness* of things. . . .

Mr. Ammons's best poetry will not heal us perfectly, of course. What could? Yet now and then it can return to us significant parts of

our world and of ourselves, parts that we had always gazed at but had never before studied with loving closeness.

Robert Stilwell. *Michigan Quarterly Review*. Fall, 1969. p. 278

I am writing of Ammons as though he had rounded his first circle in the eye of his readers, and there is no other way to write about him, even if my essay actually introduces him to some of its readers. The fundamental postulates for reading Ammons have been set down well before me, by Richard Howard and Marius Bewley in particular, but every critic of a still emergent poet has his own obsessions to work through, and makes his own confession of the radiance. Ammons's poetry does for me what Stevens's did earlier, and the High Romantics before that: it helps me to live my life. If Ammons is, as I think, the central poet of my generation, because he alone has made a heterocosm, a second nature in his poetry, I deprecate no other poet by this naming. It is, surprisingly, a rich generation, with ten or a dozen poets who seem at least capable of making a major canon, granting fortune and persistence. Ammons, much more than the others, has made such a canon already. A solitary artist, nurtured by the strength available for him only in extreme isolation, carrying on the Emersonian tradition with a quietness directly contrary to nearly all its other current avatars, he has emerged in his most recent poems as an extraordinary master, comparable to the Stevens of *Ideas of Order* and *The Man with the Blue Guitar*. To track him persistently, from his origins in *Ommateum* through his maturing in *Corson's Inlet* and its companion volumes on to his new phase in *Uplands* and *Briefings* is to be found by not only a complete possibility of imaginative experience, but by a renewed sense of the whole line of Emerson, the vitalizing and much maligned tradition that has accounted for most that matters in American poetry. [1970]

Harold Bloom. *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition* (Chicago). 1971. p. 261

Corson's Inlet . . . opens with a poem that nicely illustrates the perfected diction Ammons has now achieved, a rhythmical certainty which does not depend on syllable-counting or even accentual measure, but on the speed and retard of words as they move together in the mind, on the shape of the stanzas as they follow the intention of the discourse, and on the *rests* which not so much imitate as create the soft action of speech itself. There is a formality in these gentle lines which is new to American poetry, as we say that there is a draughtsmanship in the ''drip-drawings'' of Pollack which is new to American painting: each must be approached with a modulated set of expectations if we are to realize what the poet, the painter is about. . . . It is characteristic that so many of these poems . . . take up their burden from the shore, the place where it is most clearly seen that ''every living thing is in siege: the demand is life, to keep life.'' . . . Ammons rehearses a marginal, a transitional experience, he is a littoralist of the imagination because the shore, the beach, or the coastal creek is not a *place* but an *event*, a transaction where land and water create and destroy each other, where life and death are exchanged, where shape and chaos are won or lost. It is here . . . that Ammons finds his rhythms.

Richard Howard. *Alone with America* (Atheneum). 1971. pp. 11–4

The latest volume of A. R. Ammons, *Uplands*, is a better book than Stafford's [*Allegiances*], partly perhaps because it is slim. As usual, Ammons has treated himself with great critical rigor. These poems, like his earlier works, are primarily about the nature of human perception. Some readers might be tempted to say of him what is sometimes said of his mentor, Wallace Stevens, that his subject is poetry. This is true but only in the largest possible meaning of the word ''poetry,'' for to both writers ''poetry'' is a way of describing the essence of human perception. In the poetry of Ammons one is constantly finding passages in which nature itself seems to be writing poems, that is, making creations that we see as having the kind of fluent form that Ammons seeks in poetry. . . . Nature itself falls into forms as the rockslide reveals ''streaks and scores of knowledge.'' Thus the rocks, the streams, the mountains, the pines, move through lines that only the human imagination can express. . . . In its discipline and toughness of mind this volume would provide a good antidote for the loose and flimsy writing being done today by poets who feel that Whitman is now a license for any kind of verbal meandering.

Louis L. Martz. *The Yale Review*. Spring, 1971. pp. 413–4

At first sight A. R. Ammons seems a nature poet, and perhaps, with a difference, this is what he really is. He has the essential characteristic of the nature poet, which is to use observed pieces of nature as the reality of an organic order defending him against the reality of human disorder. . . .

But, like Robert Frost, he is aware too of the evil within the natural order. . . .

He passes the test of nature poets by doing very precise and beautiful things and by occasionally producing a line which has the effect of an explosion on the page. . . . The new note in his observation is his sense of the impermanence of the permanent-seeming things. At their best, his poems give the feeling of the opaque being rayed through to make it transparent, the most solid being hollowed with tunnels through which winds blow, time undermining timelessness.

Stephen Spender. *New York Review of Books*. July 22, 1971. p. 4

Many of Ammons' poems are metaphysically framed sketches from nature. Some are realistic, some a kind of animated cubism, and some abstractly patterned. The ''metaphysical'' aspect is rather like that in Wallace Stevens: the same issue of reality and illusion. It almost seems obvious that Ammons' opening poem, ''Snow Log,'' is a conscious allusion to Stevens' ''The Snow Man,'' as a starting point from which *Uplands* goes on to explore possible directions of form and phrasing on a wider range than Stevens engaged himself with. Ammons does have certain advantages over Stevens: his knowledge of geological phenomena (an *experienced* knowledge) and his ability to use language informally and to create open rhythms. Everything he writes has the authority of his intelligence, of his humor, and of his plastic control of materials. What he lacks, as compared to Stevens, is a certain passionate confrontation of the implicit issues such as makes Stevens' music a richer, deeper force. There *is* a great deal of

feeling in Ammons; but in the interest of ironic self-control he seems afraid of letting the feeling have its way, in the sense that Stevens lets his bitterness flood through ''The Emperor of Ice-Cream.'' Stevens was certainly self-ironic, and hardly an emotional screamer, yet he *hated* the illusoriness of human ideals and understanding that the fact of death forced him to face. What Ammons presents is a certain delight or dismay at the imponderable, while at the same time he refuses to strike for effects of power we yearn for in a poet with such a mind and such an ear.

M.L. Rosenthal. *Shenandoah*. Fall, 1972. p. 88

In . . . extravagant and beautiful poems—verse essays really—Ammons maintains a virtuoso current of phrasing that embraces all types of vocabulary, all motions of thought, and leads us back now to Whitman and now to the accumulative (if hopefully cumulative) strain of Pound's *Cantos* or Williams's *Paterson*. Building on a non-narrative base, that is, on a will-to-words almost sexual in persistence, he changes all ''flesh-body'' to ''wordbody'' and dazzles us with what he calls ''interpenetration''—a massively playful nature-thinking, a poetic incarnation of smallest as well as largest thoughts. . . .

No one in his generation has put ''earth's materials'' to better use, or done more to raise pastoral to the status of major art.

Geoffrey H. Hartman. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 19, 1972. pp. 39–40

Ammons' poetry is a poetry which is profoundly American, without being in any way limited by this characteristic. His use of language, his vocabulary and phrasing are utterly and flexibly American. The universal terms of science emerge accurately and naturally from the poems' roots.

The poetry can now be read in its bulk and ripeness. It is science-minded, passionately absorbed with the processes around the poet, the constant, complex, fascinating processes of water, wind, season and genus. But if Ammons' poetry is in the tradition of ''nature poets,'' its essence is far different from the lyric, limpid joy of John Clare, or the *paysage moralisé* of Wordsworth, or the somber farmer-wisdom of Robert Frost, or the myth-ridden marvels of D.H. Lawrence's tortoises, serpents and gentians. Ammons sees the datum of nature as *evidence*; intricate, interlocking fragments of a whole which cannot be totally understood, but which draws him deeper and deeper into its identity. No poet now writing in English has so thoroughly created on the page the huge suggestion of the whole through its most minute components.

Josephine Jacobsen. *Diacritics*. Winter, 1973. p. 34

The fascination of [Ammons's] poetry is not the transcendental but his struggle with it, which tends to turn each poem into a battleground strewn with scattered testimony to the history of its making in the teeth of its creator's reluctance and distrust of ''all this fiddle.''

Reading the poems in sequence one soon absorbs the rhythm of making-unmaking, of speech facing up to the improbability of speech. . . . The movement is the same, from the visible if only half-real flotsam of daily living to the uncertainties beyond, but one forgets this from one poem to the next; each is as different as a wave is from the one that follows and obliterates it. . . .

Much has been written about the relation of the so-called ''New York School'' of poets to the painting of men like Pollack, but in a curious way Ammons's poetry seems a much closer and more successful approximation of ''Action Painting'' or art as process. (''The problem is how to keep shape and flow.'')

John Ashbery. *New York Review of Books*. Feb. 22, 1973. p. 4

What [Ammons] does is remarkable both in its sparseness and in its variety. One can't say ''richness'' because there is no sensual ''give'' in this poetry—but it does attempt an imitative re-creation, no less, of the whole variety of the natural world, if not, regrettably, of what Stevens calls its ''affluence.'' But if, as Ammons seems to think, affluence is brought rather by the perceiving and receptive mind, as a quality, rather than inhering in nature itself (nature, who perceives herself singly, we may say, as an acorn here, a brook there, rather than corporately congratulating herself on all her brooks), then a poem attempting this ascetic unattributiveness must refrain from celebrating the multiplicity of the world in human terms. Why it should be so wrong to let in human gestalt-making is another question; Ammons permits himself entry when the poem is about himself, but he won't have any of those interfering adjectival subjectivities when he's occupied with morning-glories or caterpillars or redwoods. This discipline of perfect notation is almost monklike, and, monklike, it takes what comes each day as the day's revelation of, so to speak, the will of God.

Helen Vendler. *The Yale Review*. Spring, 1973. p. 420

Having sacrificed the dramatic, having dieted and professored his Romanticism, having drained off all but a wetting of the implicit, Ammons has left almost everything to his intelligence, the crispness of his language, the geniality of his tone, and the greatness of his subject, his *reasonable* approach to Romantic ''spirituality.'' If the result is the ''open'' American counterpart of the closed Augustan verse essay—equally an *essay*—still in this reader's palm, at first weighing, it feels major. Though it has nothing of the feat about it it has scope, is original and blandly imposing. And to his linear discourse Ammons gives just enough ''jangling dance'' to shock ''us to attend the moods of lips.'' Although almost nothing in the poem [*Sphere*] moves or ravishes, almost everything interests and holds—holds not least because it tests, and finds thin, the spiritual satisfactions available in being a conscious part of a universe afloat in nothingness. The talk is not desperate but, by and large, is just talk. The subject is not really in Ammons as the kind of happiness that threatens to swell into a yelp or surf onto silence. But Romanticism has always been in trouble; dissatisfaction is its nature; Ammons is doing what he can.

Calvin Bedient. *New York Times Book Section*. Dec. 22, 1974. pp. 2–3

To recognize . . . Ammons's affinities with Emerson, Dickinson, and Frost is not to reduce the pleasures of his poems but to heighten

them. It is also to acknowledge that beyond these direct literary influences there are powerful currents of indirection that play perhaps a more major role still, sources of a more ancient and primal kind that inform the intellectual and emotional life of poetry at its deepest. . . .

For those who have a taste for this sort of thing—for poetry as an unravelling of meaning, a coming-apart or depletion of language—''Pray without Ceasing'' may sustain interest, but more often than not the poem will have a hard time of it winning the fascination or affection of readers. At its core is a painful and bewildering renunciation of all significant sense—''it's/indifferent what I say''—the whole point being, one supposes, to reach bottom in order to know, and if possible still to praise, the ache of life in total descent. This plunge downward, into a ''breakdown of pure forms,'' is announced in the poem's opening lines, which serve as a kind of program, or statement of intent, of what is to come:

done is to be undone: call me down from the high places

Yet after pondering the poems of this book [*Diversifications*]—and a very good book it nevertheless remains—it seems clear that ''the high places'' constitute Ammons's most proper place, that at his best he is a poet of the solitary and singular moment, that his truest translation of himself puts him, after all, on to the heights, at the farthest remove from the lowlands of communal grief.

> Alvin Rosenfeld. *American Poetry Review*. July/Aug., 1976, pp. 40–41

Ammons impresses me as the best American poet now writing. He is the most versatile, his range is greatest, his excellence in the subsidiary arts included in poetry is the most distinguished, he is funny, and he has been wonderfully abundant. His published work now runs to almost a thousand pages, and he is nowhere near retirement. . . .

In his best poems, Ammons chips away at the oldest obstacle confronting American writers: the thing itself. Remotely in Eliot and Pound, indirectly in Stevens and Frost, and directly in William Carlos Williams, American-born writers have sought, sometimes with a desperation approaching hysteria, to escape the fictions of language and art so as to come as close as possible to the actual physical concrete things of the earth. . . . As purely as can be, Ammons belongs to the American tradition of using language and culture to reach ends that language and culture do not seem designed to reach. . . .

Ammons has emerged as the ideal heir to the strongest fortune of American poetry, and his work synthesizes the best experiments of all of his precursors, especially the ones who stayed at home—Whitman, Sandburg, Williams, Jeffers, Stevens, and Frost. With a southerner's innate skepticism and peculiarly efficient sense of irony, Ammons is at once the flattest of writers and the fanciest.

> William Harmon. In *The American South: Portrait of a Culture*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1980), pp. 342, 345

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ANAYA, Rudolfo (1937–)

In the novel [*Bless me, Ultima*], Antonio, symbolically both Christ and Odysseus, moves from the security and from the sweet-smelling warmth of his mother's bosom and kitchen out into life and experience. As he weighs his options—priesthood and the confinement represented by the farms of the Lunas', or the Marezes' freedom on the pagan seas of the llano—and as he grows from innocence to knowledge and experience, the *la llorona* motif figures both on a literal mythological level and as an integral part of Antonio's life.

As ''literal'' myth, *la llorona* is the wailing woman of the river. Hers is the ''tormented cry of a lovely goddess'' that fills the valley in one of Antonio's dreams. *La llorona* is ''the old witch who cries along the river banks and seeks the blood of boys and men to drink.'' . . .

Antonio . . . elude[s] the death call of *la llorona*, and as he buries the owl, Ultima's spirit, he takes on the responsibility of the future in which he knows he must ''buil[d] his own dream out of those things which were so much a part of [his] childhood'' (p. 248). Antonio has avoided annihilation on the sheer cliffs of the Wandering Rocks—the fate of his brothers—and he has moved through the narrow strait and evaded the menace of Scylla and Charybdis as he comes to face the reality of his manhood.

> Jane Rogers. ''The Function of the La Llorona Motif in Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*.'' In Vernon E. Lattin, ed. *Contemporary Chicano Fiction* (Binghamton: Bilingual Pr., 1986), pp. 200, 205

[Rudolfo] Anaya, professor of English at the University of New Mexico, published in 1972 what may be the largest-selling Chicano novel to date. *Bless Me, Ultima* . . . is set in a small northeastern New Mexico town in the 1940s and is concerned with the maturation of a young boy, Antonio Marez, and his relationship with his spiritual guide, the Ultima of the title. She is a *curandera*, a wise woman, a dispenser of curing herbs and potions who also heals with spiritual advice and some ''magic.'' She is present from the boy's earliest experiences of growing up—family conflict, school, religion, evil, and death. The novel is narrated in the first person by Antonio, but the perspective is from a later time, when the narrator is older and more experienced. It takes place in the span of one year, during which Antonio loses his faith in traditional religion but enters into a new, more profound spiritualism. . . .

There is much good in this novel: the beauty and magic of a wonderful New Mexico landscape, the legend of the Golden Carp (a god who becomes a fish in order to help his doomed people), and dream sequences as presentations of other dimensions of reality or as a means of foretelling the future. Anaya is adept at incorporating the rich folklore of his region, an element that is particularly important in the development of Chicano literature. . . .

Anaya's subsequent novels have not fared as well critically as his first, but this perhaps is because of the excellence of *Bless Me, Ultima*, and not so much because his other works are not sound. His second work, *Heart of Aztlan* (1976), is the story of Clemente and Adelita Chavez, who move to Albuquerque from the rural community of Guadalupe, a move they must make out of fiscal necessity. They settle in the downtown *barrio* of Barelas, where life is in stark contrast to their previous quiet and bountiful rural existence. . . .

With its grim portrayal of the disastrous results of rural Chicano migration to the big city, *Heart of Aztlan* is frequently classified as a work of social protest. The problem with the novel, according to many critics, is not so much a question of theme as one of craftsmanship.

Tortuga (Turtle, 1970) has fared better with the critics. The title refers to the protagonist, a sixteen-year-old paralyzed boy, so named because his body is encased in a hard, shell-like cast. The novel is a first-person narrative of his long recovery from a near-fatal accident. During the course of his hospital journey from illness to good health. Tortuga encounters many other crippled children, and an Ultima-like figure, Salomon, a mute who communicates with the boy through a telepathy process. . . . *Tortuga* is a novel rich with poetry, symbolism, dreams, and magical, mysterious characters.

Carl R. Shirley and Paula W. Shirley. *Understanding Chicano Literature* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Pr., 1988), pp. 104–7

After twenty-two years as the most important and influential Chicano novel ever written, although available only from a small press, Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* has been reprinted in hardcover and mass-market editions by Warner Books. A timeless work of youth and rites of passage, Tonatiuh-Quinto Sol's edition sold more than 300,000 copies in two decades of classroom use and word-of-mouth readership. Despite Anaya's impact as a storyteller and mentor for many Chicano writers and the fact that he is one of the best fiction writers in the United States, it has taken all this time for his work to reach a mass audience. Up to now, his books have appeared through small and university presses, which meant consistent publication but limited distribution. This was the norm for the majority of Chicano writers until recently. With the boom in Latino writers—I'm thinking of Cristina Garcia, Julia Alvarez, Dagoberto Gilb, and Denise Chavez, for example—will not have to ''pay dues'' for the length of time Anaya has. . . .

After all these years, *Bless Me, Ultima* endures because Anaya had the vision to see and capture the past, the present and the future of his people in one work of art. It is a difficult task to accomplish in fiction, yet Anaya did it with the same rare magnitude Gabriel Garcia Marquez effected in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. *Bless Me, Ultima* is our Latin American classic because of its dual impact—it clearly defines Chicano culture as founded on family, tradition and the power of myth. Through Antonio and Ultima, we learn how to identify these values in the midst of the dark clouds of change and maturity. *Bless Me, Ultima* also shows that, like Garcia Marquez, Anaya recognizes that the Latino world is fluid and mysterious and can only be recreated by playing with time and the unpredictable environment that surreal religious forces create in the lives of all, the young and the elderly, the isolated and the social, the powerful and the weak.

Ray Gonzalez. *The Nation*. July 18, 1994, pp. 98, 100

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ANDERSON, Maxwell (1888–1959)

Mr. Anderson's uncommon virtues and regrettable shortcomings are once more visible (in *The Wingless Victory* and *High Tor*). Both contain much lovely song. Both . . . disclose a mind and a point of view infinitely superior to the playwrighting general. And the second combines with its other qualities a sound originality and a small measure of that precious after-image, a small measure of the day-after recollective warmth, which in its full is the stamp and mark of important drama. But both the superior second as well as the inferior first, lack the strong, taut, purple cords to tie up and bind closely into a whole their isolatedly commendable elements and their periodic stirring notes of dramatic music.

George Jean Nathan. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 30, 1937. p. 19

Mr. Anderson, it seems to me, in his own plays has given the most striking confirmation of the obsolescence of verse technique. He is capable of writing well—in prose, and when he is close to real American speech. But in these recent plays he writes badly. I do not mean that he is technically incompetent; but he writes badly because English blank verse no longer has any relation whatsoever to the language or tempo of our lives, and because, as soon as he tries to use it, he has no resources but a flavorless imagery which was growing trite in our grandfathers' time.

Edmund Wilson. *New Republic*. June 23, 1937. p. 194

Maxwell Anderson has been at his best, in recent years, when he was angry. But because his language lacks any basis for hope, for a constructive point of view towards what disgusts him, it must in the end turn back upon itself, and render him peevish and despairing.

Fine words and despair are not enough on which to nurture a dramatic talent; Anderson's latest plays show a marked decline. Yet his great gift is apparent whenever he permits himself to write immediately and simply about human beings.

Eleanor Flexner. *American Playwrights* (Simon). 1938. pp. 128-9

In eleven plays ''poetic'' from beginning to end, Maxwell Anderson, America's chief verse writer for the theatre, has produced very little poetry. . . . Consciously or otherwise, Mr. Anderson seems more interested in arguing for his philosophy of life than in any particular happening, past or present. Each of the full-length plays turns upon a love story, essentially the same in all. A potentially perfect romance is frustrated by another need, political (the crown in *Elizabeth*, *Mary*, etc.), social (*Wingless Victory*, *Winterset*), or private (*High Tor*, *Key Largo*). While an assortment of contemporary topics are touched upon—the decay of aristocracy, race prejudice, class injustice, revolution, and absolution—the mechanism of the play is always the love affair, and the issue always a certain omnipresent danger of ''dying within.''

Harold Rosenberg. *Poetry*. Jan. 1941. pp. 258–60

Maxwell Anderson's independence set him apart from his time. Not only as a literary craftsman—since he alone was writing poetic and romantic tragedies—but in other respects, he was an alien voice. In an age of increasing collectivism this voice could be heard praising individualism, independence, and the frontier spirit. In an age of increasing governmentalism he could still maintain that the best government was that which governed least. As the last champion of what almost amounts to a laissez-faire and rugged individualism, he is an isolated figure, almost an anachronism.

Vincent Wall. *Sewanee Review*. July, 1941. p. 339

I am sure of this: the Anderson plays are declining in theatrical effectiveness but rising steadily in intellectual significance. If he is not an original thinker, Mr. Anderson has at least dug his teeth into a great subject; he has gradually moved beyond the crudely American conception of freedom as license to buy and sell anything at a profit to an Emersonian vision of the ''infinitude of the private man.'' And always one feels—here is the peculiar appeal of the dramas—that he has achieved insight by staring hard at facts. Only Sean O'Casey among his contemporaries can hammer as much of the crude stuff of living into poetry for the stage.

Edward Foster. *Sewanee Review*. Jan., 1942. p. 100

As Mr. Anderson's art matured . . . he evolved at the end of the first decade a working group of principles which were later stated as explicit theory. . . . This theory conceives of drama as having a high destiny, not only in its obligation to reflect a moral universe, but also in its function as inspirer of man's faith and as prophet of his future. The dramas Mr. Anderson wrote during his first decade did not fulfill these high purposes; nor did some of those he wrote during the second decade. But there are half a dozen plays from the later period which come close to his ideal and three or four which realize it fully; among the latter are *Mary of Scotland*, *Winterset*, and *Key Largo*.

Allan H. Halline. *American Literature*. May, 1944. p. 81

Mr. Anderson really discovered himself, I think, in the historical plays. Here he developed his characteristic verse-form—a rather rough blank verse with a sort of tumbling, hurrying rhythm, like that of a tossing sea—a verse that can be used in colloquial realistic scenes, but that is capable of rising to high levels of imaginative beauty. Here also, through the study of historical figures and the attempt to recreate and interpret them, he gained a firmer grasp on character than he had shown in his earlier plays—a more penetrating insight, and greater skill in revealing character through speech. And here, too, I think he learned to simplify and clarify his story, just because the material with which he was dealing was so complex that severe simplification was necessary.

Homer E. Woodbridge. *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Jan., 1945. p. 60

Many persons who do not count themselves among his most enthusiastic admirers would probably be willing to admit that he has succeeded more fully than any of our other dramatists in persuading a large popular audience to follow him gladly beyond the rather narrow circle of subjects, attitudes, and methods within which it has grown accustomed to remain confined. . . . Something of the same sort may be said of his verse which found ready comprehension in part because it did not, like so much modern poetry, require for its comprehension a familiarity with a modern tradition of which four-fifths of the theater-going public is completely ignorant. It has at least the primary virtue of dramatic verse inasmuch as it is easily speakable and easily understood when spoken.

Joseph Wood Krutch. *American Drama since 1918* (Braziller). 1957. p. 305

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ANDERSON, Robert (1917–)

The main theme . . . [of *Tea and Sympathy*] is a defense of the special person in a society which tends to look askance at the ''odd'' individual, even the unpremeditated nonconformist. If the play has a message, it is to the effect that a boy like its protagonist may be more truly a man than those falsely rugged folk who oppress him.

The play also cautions us against prejudice, slander and false accusation—in a word, is a plea for tolerance. Naturally, we are all for it: every contribution in this direction is more than welcome. Yet in this regard I cannot help thinking that we have arrived today at a peculiar brand of tolerance. We tolerate the innocent! . . . Though now easily acceptable, a play like *Tea and Sympathy* is probably still regarded by many as adventurous and advanced, though it is actually primitive in its theme, characterization, and story development. It is, in fact, a very young play.

This is no adverse comment on it. It is the work of a young playwright, Robert Anderson, whose approach is honorably craftsmanlike and humane.

Harold Clurman. *The Nation*. Oct. 17, 1953. p. 318

Tea and Sympathy is a highly superior specimen of the theatre of ''realist'' escape. Superior in craftsmanship, superior in its isolation, combination, and manipulation of the relevant impulses and motifs. Its organization of the folklore of current fashion is so skillful, it brings us to the frontier where this sort of theatre ends. But not beyond it. So that one does not ask the questions one would ask of a wholly serious play. . . . Instead, one drinks the tea of sentiment and eats the opium of sympathy. . . . At every moment in the evening, one can say: this *has* to be a hit, or men are not feckless dreamers, the theatre is not a fantasy factory, and this is not the age of anxiety. . . . Anyway, it is a play for everyone in the family. The script is far better than most; folklore and daydream are not less interesting than drama. . . .

Eric Bentley. *New Republic*. Oct. 19, 1953. pp. 20–1

Among the season's most interesting offerings is Robert Anderson's *Tea and Sympathy*. Though Mr. Anderson (no relation of Maxwell Anderson) has had three plays produced, this study of a boy unjustly accused of homosexuality is his first hit. I can't pretend to believe completely in Mr. Anderson's play. I doubt if any boy of eighteen in these post-Kinsey days would reach his final year at boarding school without knowing the facts of life. I am confident that masters, worthy of being employed by such a school, would not accept the flimsy charge brought by a filthy-minded student or behave as these masters do after the charge is brought. And I am well aware that, if it were not a matter of saving a change of scenery, the final episode in all likelihood would not take place in the boy's dormitory room. I do know, however, that Mr. Anderson has a genuine flair for the theatre, that he can write fine individual scenes, and that he can hold an audience as I have seldom seen an audience held.

John Mason Brown. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 12, 1953. p. 45

Robert Anderson has not had a real success on Broadway since *Tea and Sympathy*. In *You Know I Can't Hear You When the Water's Running*, he deliberately set out to lower his insights and write something brightly commercial, something that people would like to see on Saturday nights. On their own terms—as lightweight sex plays—the four one-acts that comprise the package are successful at least half of the time.

Mel Gussow. *Newsweek*. March 27, 1967. p. 110

. . . Robert Anderson's *You Know I Can't Hear You When the Water's Running* begins with a very funny idea. . . . [O]ne is delightfully surprised to discover the sober author of *Tea and Sympathy* and a number of other anguished plays, has a flair for comedy.

However, the three playlets that follow are less pure comedy than the opening one. For while Anderson continues his comic invention, he permits it to become adulterated with his serious concern for problems of marital adjustment. . . . The playwright refuses to write a pure comic exercise and mixes in a certain naturalistic pathos.

It is probably inevitable that Mr. Anderson's work express his responsible recognition of the American scene. And if it strikes us as less entertaining than his free-swinging fun, it at least gives the evening character.

Henry Hewes. *Saturday Review*. April 1, 1967. p. 42

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ANDERSON, Sherwood (1876–1941)

Winesburg, Ohio is a primer of the heart and mind, the emotions and the method of Sherwood Anderson. It is the most compact, the most unified, the most revealing of all his books. It is his most successful effort technically, for in it he has told the story of one community in terms of isolated short stories. . . . The author presents the impression that he is discovering for the first time the situations that he reveals to the reader, consequently he leads up to them as haltingly, as slowly as a child opening a door and entering an old, unused room. In the end the effect is cumulative and powerful.

Harry Hansen. *Midwest Portraits* (Harcourt). 1923. pp. 147–8

The thing which captures me and will not let me go is the profound sincerity, the note of serious, baffled, tragic questioning which I hear above its laughter and tears. It is, all through, an asking of the

question which American literature has hardly as yet begun to ask. ''What for?'' . . . It is that spirit of profound and unresisting questioning which has made Russian literature what it is, ''Why? why? why?'' echoes insistently through all their pages. . . . It echoes, too, in this book, like a great bell pealing its tremendous question to an unanswering sky, and awakening dangerously within one's self something that one has carefully laid to sleep—perhaps one's soul, who knows?

Floyd Dell. *Looking at Life* (Knopf). 1924. pp. 83–4

Winesburg, Ohio is a psychological document of the first importance; no matter that it is an incomplete picture of modern American life, it is an honest and penetrating one done with bold and simple strokes. These pictures represent the finest combination Anderson has yet achieved of imagination, intuition and observation welded into a dramatic unity by painstaking craftsmanship. They are one of the important products of the American literary renascence and have probably influenced writing in America more than any other book published within the last decade. They made and they sustain Anderson's reputation as an author worthy of comparison with the great short story writers.

Cleveland B. Chase. *Sherwood Anderson* (McBride). 1927. pp. 51–2

To the student of human nature under the conditions of provincial neo-Puritanism there must always belong a high interest to these documents with their toneless murmur as of one who has exhausted eloquence and passion and found them of no avail, with their tortured sense of life as a thing immitigably ugly and mean, with their delineation of dull misery so ground into the bone that it no longer knows itself for what it is. Nowhere in all these pages of Anderson will this student find a breath of freedom or of joy—never the record of an hour of either passion or serenity. Life is walled in; it is imprisoned from itself, from the sources without which it withers and dies. Who will knock down the walls? There is no one, least of all the author himself.

Ludwig Lewisohn. *Expression in America* (Harper). 1932. p. 484

(Hemingway and Gertrude Stein) disagreed about Sherwood Anderson. Gertrude Stein contended that Sherwood Anderson had a genius for using the sentence to convey a direct emotion, this was in the great American tradition, and that really except Sherwood there was no one in America who could write a clear and passionate sentence. Hemingway did not believe this, he did not like Sherwood's taste. Taste has nothing to do with sentences, contended Gertrude Stein.

Gertrude Stein. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (Harcourt). 1933. p. 268

Anderson turned fiction into a substitute for poetry and religion, and never ceased to wonder at what he had wrought. He had more intensity than a revival meeting and more tenderness than God; he wept, he chanted, he loved indescribably. There was freedom in the air, and he would summon all Americans to share it; there was confusion and mystery on the earth, and he would summon all Americans to wonder at it. He was clumsy and sentimental; he could even write at times as if he were finger-painting; but at the moment it seemed as if he had sounded the depths of common American experience as no one else could.

There was always an image in Anderson's books—an image of life as a house of doors, of human beings knocking at them and stealing through one door only to be stopped short before another as if in a dream. Life was a dream to him, and he and his characters seemed always to be walking along its corridors. Who owned the house of life? How did one escape after all? No one in his books ever knew, Anderson least of all. Yet slowly and fumblingly he tried to make others believe, as he thought he had learned for himself, that it was possible to escape if only one laughed at necessity.

Alfred Kazin. *On Native Grounds* (Reynal). 1942. pp. 210–1

Poor White belongs among the few books that have restored with memorable vitality the life of an era, its hopes and despairs, its conflicts between material prosperity and ethics, and its disillusionments, in a manner that stimulates the historical imagination. . . . No novel of the American small town in the Middle West evokes in the minds of its readers so much of the cultural heritage of its milieu as does *Poor White*; nor does Anderson in his later novels ever recapture the same richness of association, the ability to make memorable each scene in the transition from an agrarian way of living to a twentieth-century spectacle of industrial conflict with its outward display of physical comfort and wealth.

Horace Gregory. Introduction to *The Portable Sherwood Anderson* (Viking). 1949. pp. 16, 22

Read for moral explication as a guide to life, his work must seem unsatisfactory; it simply does not tell us enough. But there is another, more fruitful way of reading his work: as an expression of a sensitive witness to the national experience and as the achievement of a story teller who created a small body of fiction unique in American writing for the lyrical purity of its feeling. So regarded his best work becomes a durable part of the American literary structure. . . . While Steinbeck and Saroyan could enlarge on his occasional sentimentalism and Hemingway could tighten and rigidify his style, no American writer has yet been able to realize that strain of lyrical and nostalgic feeling which in Anderson's best work reminds one of another and greater poet of tenderness, Turgenev. At his best Anderson creates a world of authentic sentiment, and while part of the meaning of his career is that sentiment is not enough for a writer, the careers of those that follow him—those who swerve to Steinbeck's sentimentalism or Hemingway's toughness—illustrate how rare a genius sentiment still is in our literature.

Irving Howe. *Sherwood Anderson* (Sloane). 1951. pp. 249, 255

We must enter the realm of myth if we are to penetrate deeply into the form of *Winesburg*. . . . The myth of *Winesburg* concerns the legendary American small town, the town represented in the popular tradition as the lazy, gentle village of the Christian virtues. . . . The author's intention is to replace the myth of the small

town Christian virtues with the myth of the ''grotesques''. It is important to remember that the ''grotesques'' are not merely small town characters. They are universal people, defeated by their false ideas and dreams. . . . The ''grotesque'' is neither misshapen nor abnormal. He is an unintegrated personality, cut off from society and adrift in his own mind.

James Schevill. *Sherwood Anderson* (Denver). 1951. pp. 100–103

The exactitude of purity, or the purity of exactitude: whichever you like. He was a sentimentalist in his attitude toward people, and quite often incorrect about them. He believed in people, but it was as though only in theory. He expected the worst from them, even while each time he was prepared again to be disappointed or even hurt, as if it had never happened before, as though the only people he could really trust, let himself go with, were the ones of his own invention, the figments and symbols of his own fumbling dream. And he was sometimes a sentimentalist in his writing (so was Shakespeare sometimes) but he was never impure in it. He never scanted it, cheapened it, took the easy way; never failed to approach writing except with humility and an almost religious, almost abject faith and patience and willingness to surrender, relinquish himself to and into it. He hated glibness; if it were quick, he believed it was false too.

William Faulkner. *Atlantic Monthly*. June, 1953. p. 28

Anderson's new approach to the Midwest drew its strength from humility and love. There was also the unabashed lyricism which, though it was to be transmuted in the later work by sympathy, here cut loose from the clogs of realistic convention. But particularly, the *[Mid-American] Chants* revealed a concentrated effort to make poetry out of Anderson's own language. This was simple and limited, frequently not sufficient to the demands he put upon it. In the *Chants*, for the first time, he came down upon his language, not to prune and order, but to let come from it whatever was, in nature, there. This was a part of his acceptance. He had felt in Gertrude Stein the achievement of poetry in the aggressively simple. And that, in a literary way, was where his own work must begin and end.

Bernard Duffey. *The Chicago Renaissance in American Letters* (Michigan State). 1954. p. 205

What Anderson did for younger writers was to open vistas by finding new depths or breadths of feeling in everyday American life. Again with Whitman he might have boasted that he led each of them to a knoll, from which he pointed to ''landscapes of continents, and a plain public road.'' He gave them each a moment of vision, and then the younger writer trudged off toward his separate destiny, often without looking back. Re-reading Anderson's work after many years, one is happy to find that its moments of vision are as fresh and moving as ever. They are what James Joyce called ''epiphanies''; that is, they are moments at which a character, a landscape, or a personal relation stands forth in its essential nature or ''whatness,'' with its past and future revealed as if by a flash of lightning. For Anderson each of the moments was a story in itself. The problem he almost never solved was how to link one moment to another in a pattern of casuality, or how to indicate the passage of time.

Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*. Feb. 15, 1960. p. 16

If we approach the novel from the direction of George Willard, the young reporter presumably on the threshold of his career as a writer, instead of from that of the *subjects* of the sketches, *Winesburg* composes as a *Bildungsroman* of a rather familiar type the ''portrait of the artist as a young man'' in the period immediately preceding his final discovery of *métier*. In order to arrive at the rare excellence of *Winesburg*, we must first see that it is a book of this kind; and then we must go on to see in what ways it is not typical of the *genre*, for it is in the differences that Anderson's merits are revealed. An initial formulation of this difference would mainly call attention to Anderson's almost faultless holding of the balances between his two terms, artist and society, a delicacy that was perhaps made easier for him by the genuine uncertainty of his feelings. To put it bluntly, there are few works of modern fiction in which the artist's relations with ordinary men are seen with such a happy blend of acuity and charity, few works of any age in which the artist and ordinary men are seen so well *as fitting together* in a complementary union that permits us to make distinctions of relative value while at the same time retaining a universally diffused sense of equal dignity. We need look no further for the cause of the remarkable serenity of tone of *Winesburg*.

Edwin Fussell. *Modern Fiction Studies*. Summer, 1960. pp. 108–9

Anderson's attitudes after 1912 remained basically unchanged. His heart lay in the rural simplicity of his youth, but it was the ideals rather than the facts, the feelings and the sentient newness of his Midwestern youth, that he wanted all his life to recapture. Armed with little more than a deep nostalgia for a way of life that could never be called back into being, he found in writing the sense of communion and sentient vitality he believed had been lost with the disappearance of the yeoman farmer and the tradesman. But his own regeneration could scarcely serve as a universal model; and, when he tried to prescribe sex and collectivism as workable popular alternatives to art, he invariably oversimplified both the nature and the problems of urban industrial society.

His thesis, to the end of his life, was that only a spiritual rebirth could save modern men from the machine; but he was never able to present his primitivistic modes of regeneration in convincing narrative terms. . . .

But Anderson's discouragingly long list of failures by no means diminishes the brilliance of his successes. If he failed as a sophisticated novelist, this failure was at least partly because he himself was not sophisticated, because he was a deeply involved purveyor of impressions and a man who suffered with his hurt and puzzled grotesques, and because he was not an intellectual or a detached observer and recorder of manners.

Rex Burbank. *Sherwood Anderson* (Twayne). 1964. pp. 139, 141

As for the writing itself in *Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs*—I refer to the whole work, not just the somewhat difficult-to-identify new

writing—there is much that is strong and free and good and that helps to extend one's view of Anderson's originality or to see better his relationship to some of his contemporaries (for example, William Carlos Williams and Dreiser) as well as to Whitman and Twain. There is added evidence here for the range of Anderson as a comic writer. His affinity with Twain in the ''high and delicate art of how to tell a story'' comes out more strongly when one can see in the narrative of the soldier boys in Cuba the same quiet, subversive humor of Twain's ''The Private History of a Campaign that Failed''; and the new version of the story of Jacques Copeau's shirts touches the wild hilarity of Faulkner's humor. The narrative of Stella, the sister who took on the family after the mother's death, shows something in Anderson that has not, I think, been sufficiently remarked upon, an insight into human experience that goes far deeper than any cliché of buried lives.

Susan J. Turner. *American Scholar*. Winter, 1969–70. p. 158

Anderson's novelty lay in his appropriating to ordinary and subordinary Americans a sensibility conventionally attributed to gorgeous young aesthetes or to Stephen Daedalus–like intellectuals. But the gestures of Anderson's passionate young woman stripping off her clothes and running out onto the street in the rain (''Adventure''), of his race track swipe who sees in the barroom mirror not his own face but a girl's, and of the same swipe becoming entangled in a horse's skeleton in the moonlight as he is pursued by Negroes intending rape (''The Man Who Became a Woman'') are the gestures of Oscar Wilde, or more ludicrously, of Lautréamount rather than of Mark Twain. Anderson took from Twain a character and a tone. His boys and men are first Sherwood Anderson, and second Huck Finn. The tone, however, is violated by the persistent brooding, the search for the pastoral past, and the foggy, half-baked philosophizing that characterizes Anderson's indifferent average in fiction.

John McCormick. *The Middle Distance* (Free). 1971. pp. 22–3

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ANGELOU, Maya (1928–)

''What are you looking at me for? I didn't come to stay . . .'' With these words—from a poem that she stumbled over during a church recital—Maya Angelou opens her autobiography [*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*] and conveys the diminished sense of herself that pervaded much of her childhood. The words were painfully appropriate. She and her brother were shuttled back and forth between their mother in the North and grandmother in the small town of Stamps, Ark. When she was 8, she was raped. She appeared in court, failed to tell the whole truth and, after her assailant was found dead, concluded that her words could kill. She retreated to silence. ''Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people . . . I had to stop talking.''

Yet, her few years of almost complete silence—she continued to speak to her brother Bailey—actually served her well; Miss Angelou—a former dancer, director and television scriptwriter who is now at work on her second novel—clearly heard, saw, smelled, tasted and seized hold of all the sounds and sights around her. Her autobiography regularly throws out rich, dazzling images which delight and surprise with their simplicity. . . .

But Miss Angelou's book is more than a tour de force of language or the story of childhood suffering: it quietly and gracefully portrays and pays tribute to the courage, dignity and endurance of the small, rural Southern black community in which she spent most of her early years in the 1930s.

Robert A. Gross. *Newsweek*. March 2, 1970, pp. 90, 90B

In [the] primal scene of childhood which opens Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the black girl child testifies to her imprisonment in her bodily prison. She is a black ugly reality, not a whitened dream. And the attendant self-consciousness and diminished self-image throb through her bodily prison until the bladder can do nothing but explode in a parody of release (freedom).

In good autobiography the opening, whether a statement of fact such as the circumstance of birth or ancestry or the recreation of a primal incident such as Maya Angelou's, defines the strategy of the narrative. The strategy itself is a function of the autobiographer's

self-image at the moment of writing, for the nature of that self-image determines the nature of the pattern of self-actualization he discovers while attempting to shape his past experiences. Such a pattern must culminate in some sense of an ending, and it is this sense of an ending that informs certain earlier moments with significance and determines the choice of what experience he recreates, what he discards. In fact the earlier moments are fully understood only after that sense of an ending has imposed itself upon the material of the autobiographer's life. Ultimately, then, the opening moment assumes the end, the end the opening moment. Its centrality derives from its distillation of the environment of the self which generated the pattern of the writer's quest after self-actualization. . . . Her genius as a writer is her ability to recapture the texture of the way of life in the texture of its idioms, its idiosyncratic vocabulary and especially in its process of image-making. The imagery holds the reality, giving it immediacy. That she chooses to recreate the past in its own sounds suggests to the reader that she accepts the past and recognizes its beauty and its ugliness, its assets and its liabilities, its strength and its weakness. Here we witness a return to and final acceptance of the past in the return to and full acceptance of its language, the language a symbolic construct of a way of life. Ultimately Maya Angelou's style testifies to her reaffirmation of self-acceptance, the self-acceptance she achieves within the pattern of the autobiography.

Sidonie A. Smith. *Southern Humanities Review*. Fall, 1973, pp. 366–67, 375

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings creates a unique place within black autobiographical tradition, not by being ''better'' than the formidable autobiographical landmarks described, but by its special stance toward the self, the community, and the universe, and by a form exploiting the full measure of imagination necessary to acknowledge both beauty and absurdity.

The emerging self, equipped with imagination, resourcefulness, and a sense of the tenuousness of childhood innocence, attempts to foster itself by crediting the adult world with its own estimate of its god-like status and managing retreats into the autonomy of the childhood world when conflicts develop. Given the black adult's necessity to compromise with prevailing institutions and to develop limited codes through which nobility, strength, and beauty can be registered, the areas where a child's requirements are absolute—love, security, and consistency—quickly reveal the protean character of adult support and a barely concealed, aggressive chaos. . . .

A good deal of the book's universality derives from black life's traditions seeming to mirror, with extraordinary intensity, the root uncertainty in the universe. The conflict with whites, of course, dramatizes uncertainty and absurdity with immediate headline graphicness. What intensifies the universalism still more is the conflict between the sensitive imagination and reality, and the imagination's ability sometimes to overcome. Maya and her brother have their reservoir of absurd miming and laughter, but sometimes the imagination is caught in pathos and chaos, although its values are frequently superior. . . .

The major function of the imagination, however, is to retain a vigorous dialectic between self and society, between the intransigent world and the aspiring self. Through the dialectic, the egos maintain themselves, even where tragic incident triumphs. In a sense, the triumph of circumstance for Maya becomes a temporary halt in a process which is constantly renewed, a fact evident in the poetic language and in the mellowness of the book's confessional form. . . .

The uniqueness of *I Know Why* arises then from a full imaginative occupation of the rhythms flowing from the primal self in conflict with things as they are, but balanced by the knowledge that the self must find its own order and create its own coherence.

George E. Kent. *Kansas Quarterly*. Summer, 1975, pp. 75, 78

When Maya Angelou speaks of ''survival with style'' and attributes survival to the work of artists, she is talking about a function of art similar to that described by Ralph Ellison. . . .

Such an affirmation of life, a humanizing of reality, is Maya Angelou's answer to the question of how a Black girl can grow up in a repressive system without being maimed by it. Art protects the human values of compassion, love, and innocence, and makes the freedom for the self-realization necessary for real survival. Her answer, like Ellison's, skirts the reformer's question: is ''the cost of that style'' too high? In this sense she and Ellison are religious writers rather than social ones, for their ultimate concern is self-transcendence. It is unlikely that either would deny the practical value of the past twenty years' progress toward attainment of Negroes' full citizenship in America. But ultimately, as artists, their concern is with the humanity which must survive, and even assimilate into its own creative potential, such restrictions as these writers have encountered. For if this humanity cannot survive restriction, then it will itself become assimilated to the roles imposed upon it.

Myra K. McMurry. *South Atlantic Bulletin*. 41, 2, 1976, pp. 110–11

Maya Angelou . . . has achieved a kind of literary breakthrough which few writers of any time, place, or race achieve. Moreover, since writing *The Caged Bird Sings*, she has done so with stunning regularity, in *Gather Together in My Name*, in *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*. Now comes her uproarious, passionate, and beautifully written *The Heart of a Woman*, equal in every respect to *Gather Together in My Name* and only a shade off the perfection of her luminous first volume. As with any corpus of high creativity, exactly what makes Angelou's writing unique is more readily appreciated than analyzed and stated. It is, I think, a melding of unconcerned honesty, consummate craft, and perfect descriptive pitch, yielding a rare compound of great emotional force and authenticity, undiluted by polemic. . . .

Her ability to shatter the opaque prisms of race and class between reader and subject is her special gift.

David Levering Lewis. *Book World*. Oct. 4, 1981, p. 1

A journey that began in Stamps, Arkansas, has taken her to strange places in search of her self and a place that she can call home. It ends in Africa with the recognition that a person is not complete until she locates herself fully in her time (history) and her place (geography). The recognition of a self and the acceptance of one's place, no matter how grievous or repulsive its legacy, is the ultimate refuge of life—hence the celebration we encounter at the

end of the text and the reason that God's children need traveling shoes. . . .

In 1970, when Angelou and Toni Morrison produced their first books, they were concerned with what it meant to be black and female in America. By 1986, they had enlarged their concerns to ask what it meant to be a black person in America, given the social, political, and economic constraints which mitigate against such development. Morrison's *Tar Baby* suggests that the black presence in America functions to prick America's unconscious (a 1981 ''Benito Cereno'' updated) and, like Maya Angelou, really begins to attack the ideological structures that keep these inhuman relations in place. The relationship that takes place between Jadine and son in the novel moves toward a recovery of the equilibrium between the Afro-American male and female that seem to be scuttled in most of the works of the 1970s and early 1980s.

There is a clarity, truth, and beauty that inform the autobiographical statement of Angelou and the particularity of her experiences that are collapsed back into the general experiences of her people. Her search for roots, her involvement with the politics of her people in the United States and Africa, give her work a depth that is absent in many other such works. For Angelou, as for Morrison, the pain and suffering of black women flow like tributaries into the rivers of their general pain, with the poignant demand that the black male be cognizant of their special pains. Theirs is a pain that possesses its own particularities.

> Selwyn R. Cudjoe, ''The Autobiographical Self Updated.'' In Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* (New York: Meridian, 1990), pp. 301, 303–4

The promise of Africa, the part it plays in the construction of the Afro-American self, and the attempt to determine where the Afro-American belongs are the central concerns of *All God's Children*. To be sure, there is the recognition that ''years of bondage, brutalities, the mixture of other bloods, customs and language had transformed us into an unrecognizable tribe'' or that ''an airline ticket to Africa would [not] erase the past and open wide the gates to a perfect future.'' Yet there is the major dilemma that many Afro-Americans faced in the 1960s: the recognition that they were cut off from the continuity of their past and hence were compelled to search for roots to supplement that loss. Angelou acknowledges her envy of those Africans who had remained on the continent and retained their culture intact. Even though they had been exploited by European colonialism they could still ''reflect through their priests and chiefs on centuries of continuity.'' . . .

To the Afro-American, Africa remains a double-edged symbol, signifying the ancestral home and a sense of continuity, while America remains home, the site of a million humiliations. . . .

The five volumes of the autobiography offer numerous excellent examples of Angelou's skillful use of comic irony in describing her relationships with people. A sympathetic irony in dealing with other Blacks has characterized some of the most outstanding work in the Black American literary tradition from Douglass's *Narrative*, to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and the work of more recent Black writers like William Melvin Kelley, Ishmael Reed, Toni Cade Bambara, and Toni Morrison.

However, Angelou's effective use of self-parody is something new in Black autobiography and, thus, creates a unique place in Black autobiographical tradition. Through numerous excellent examples of self-parody, in the first four volumes particularly, Angelou reveals her youthful silliness, her loneliness, her pretensions, her aspirations, and her instability. While most people encounter life, learn from experiences, and assume a more or less fixed set of postures toward reality, Angelou is unable to settle into security—not merely because life forces her to assume various roles, not merely because life whirls her along, but because, like the picaresque heroine, she is simply unable to keep to a set course. Angelou constantly lets go of the outer stability she sometimes finds because of the need for a vital tension between stability and instability. From the perspective of adulthood, she is able to parody this quality in her younger self for the purpose of analyzing that self. . . .

Yet nothing in Angelou's prose—not even the parody of self—is merely humorous for the sake of laughter. Behind the laughter is a vision of human weakness, an empathy for people's foibles and their efforts to retain some semblance of dignity in the midst of the ridiculous. One of the values of Angelou's autobiography is to be found in the fact that from *Caged Bird* to *Traveling Shoes*, through all of the experiences recreated and the observations recorded, the work remains both sensitive and poised, humorous and empathetic, realistic and unembittered.

> Dolly A. McPherson. *Order Out of Chaos: The Autobiographical Works of Maya Angelou* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), pp. 124–125

Perhaps it is fitting that we know so little about Maya's recent personal life. Certainly, after revealing, sometimes in painful detail, forty years of her life, she deserves some privacy. But more importantly, this lack of information makes us focus on her working life, on what she has accomplished as an artist—it is a breathtaking view of the talents of a creative and prodigious woman.

Maya's early lectures in the late 1960s and early 1970s were part of the black consciousness movement that was sweeping the nation. With the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968, blacks needed people who could speak about black cultural contributions to American society. Maya, along with many others, was able to translate black experience and reveal its richness. At the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), she articulated the blacks' contributions to American culture. . . .

These lectures, however, were not Maya's main endeavor. Play and screenwriting were taking up most of her creative energies. One of Maya's earliest and most successful writing projects was the screenplay *Georgia, Georgia* (1972). The story is about a black singer who tours Sweden and becomes fascinated by the white culture. Her companion, another black woman, angrily counters her friend's attraction to white society. Maya wrote the play as an attempt to portray black woman as they really are.

She has also spread her writing talents into television. In 1968, National Educational Television in San Francisco produced a ten-show series she wrote called *Black, Blues, Black*, which shows how African cultural traditions have influenced American life. Maya combined music, dance, drama, and narrative to show viewers how strongly African culture has permeated our daily lives.

Sister, Sister was a major television program Maya did for NBC in 1978. The two-hour program was a milestone for blacks in television because it was drama. There were comedy programs that featured blacks, but there was no serious drama at the time. . . .

With the success of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya was able to begin publishing her poetry. Since 1971, she has published six volumes of her poems. Her latest book, *I Shall Not Be Moved*, was published in 1990. Many people feel that Maya's greatest strength as a writer lies in her prose, not her poetry. Her best poems use the speech patterns and rhythms of the black culture and contain the same energy and liveliness that her prose does. . . . Many critics feel that Maya's poetry can only be truly appreciated when it is read aloud by the poet herself. Her dramatic talents bring out the tension and sharp cadences in the poems, which the silent printed words cannot begin to convey.

Nancy Shuker. *Maya Angelou* (New York: Silver Burdett, 1990), pp. 108–10, 113–14

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ASHBERY, John (1927–)

John Ashbery is one of the most original of contemporary poets. His four books of poems . . . are full of startling metaphors and fresh juxtapositions of words and perceptions. He keeps pushing the limits of language; he lives on the most thinly held, the most dangerous, frontiers. His impatience with the merely remembered phrase is evident in every line, though he occasionally uses a cliché to evoke a standard response which he then swamps with irony. He is not without antecedents and influences, however. He has gone to school to Wallace Stevens, from whom he gets both elegance and a furious concentration; to the French Surrealist poets, who have taught him to find fresh images in immersions in the subconscious; and to the ''action'' painters of the New York School of the 1950s, who have taught him to work with abandon at his canvas and to pray for happy accidents. But his voice is unmistakably his own; it is a voice that does not falter in a world of discontinuities.

Stephen Stepanchev. *American Poetry since 1945* (Harper), 1965. pp. 188–9

I assume that Mr. Ashbery's concern is to give the process of the mind as it moves through reflections, not merely the results of reflection. It is an extreme version of the common distinction between ''a mind speaking'' and ''what is being said''. But it is a dangerous aesthetic, an inescapable temptation to bad work. When the dark is light enough, Mr. Ashbery writes with remarkable delicacy and ease, the meditation a lovely ''wooing both ways'' between landscape and mind. . . But the price is high, the subjective mode exorbitant.

Denis Donoghue. *New York Review of Books*. April 14, 1966. p. 19

John Ashbery is the Sphinx of the generation [of 1962]. Not only are all of his poems enigmas or simply impossible to understand but they appear to promise esoteric wisdom one finds nowhere else in American poetry. Fellow poets, critics and students admit to despair at ever discovering the key (if one exists) to the riddle of the poems in *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962) and *Rivers and Mountains* (1966). . . .

One quality most of Ashbery's poems share, on the other hand, is something like the peculiar excitement one feels when stepping with Alice behind the Looking Glass into a reality bizarre yet familiar in which the ''marvelous'' is as near as one's breakfast coffee cup or one's shoes being shined by an angel in the barbershop. In an Ashbery poem the marvelous is, in fact, the cup and the shoes—and the angel. His gift is to release everyday objects, experiences and fragments of dream or hallucination from stereotypes imposed on them by habit or preconception or belief: he presents the world as if seen for the first time. But the problem is: each poem is the first time in its own way unlike any past or future Ashbery poem. One way to read an Ashbery poem, it seems to me, might be to remember all one has felt or learned about poetry, including his poems—and then forget it and let the poem at hand do its own work.

Paul Carroll. *The Poem in Its Skin* (Follett). 1968. pp. 207–8

Like many folk tales, the idylls of Theocritus, the ''Alice'' books, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the novels of Firbank and P. G. Wodehouse, *A Nest of Ninnies* is a pastoral; the world it depicts is an imaginary Garden of Eden, a place of innocence from which all serious needs and desires have been excluded.

It is possible, I think, that in our time pastoral is the genre best suited to pure fiction. . . .

A young novelist who is attracted by the pastoral should be warned, however, that it is extremely difficult to do well. I am not surprised to learn that, though *A Nest of Ninnies* is only 191 pages long, it took Messrs. Ashbery and Schuyler several years to write. Their patience and artistry has been well rewarded. I am convinced that their book is destined to become a minor classic.

W. H. Auden. *New York Times Book Section*. May 4, 1969. p. 20

Some Trees is made up of poems which display a great deal of irresponsible yet often engaging imagination. With one half of the mind feeling like a mystified but somehow willing accomplice, and the other half becoming more and more skeptical, one follows the bright, faddish jargon Ashbery talks with considerable obscure brightness, trying patiently, with some engagement, to decide which of several possible meanings each poem intends. The poems

have over them a kind of idling arbitrariness, offering their elements as a profound conjunction of secrecies one can't quite define or evaluate. One doesn't feel, however, that Mr. Ashbery has been at great pains to fabricate these puzzles; on the contrary, this manner of writing seems perfectly natural to him, which must, I suppose, qualify him as an original of some sort. . . .

Though Mr. Ashbery enjoys a real facility with language, and is able to handle difficult forms, like the pantoum and the sestina, with remarkable ease, his poems amount to nothing more than rather cute and momentarily interesting games, like those of a gifted and very childish child who, during ''creative play period,'' wrote a book of poems instead of making finger paintings. [1957]

James Dickey. *Babel to Byzantium* (Grosset). 1971. pp. 58–60

Ashbery's impressive talents, serving so brilliant and skeptical a mind, make for a difficult poetry; and it would be condescending to his accomplishment, as well as disingenuous, to ignore the difficulty. In his intense explorations into the fictions not only of an essential self but also of an essential art, Ashbery's discontinuous meditations often become intensely private, and at times inaccessible. As with earlier ''visionary'' poets like Blake and of course the later Stevens, with whom Ashbery is often linked and from whom he happily steals in a poem like ''Chateau Hardware,'' it sometimes happens that the world of familiar objects and relations recedes. ''You'' designates a somewhat solipsistic ''I,'' and everyone and everything else becomes a dimly-perceived ''them'' and ''it.'' On these occasions. Ashbery's poetry runs the risk of vanishing into the imagined world of its own favorite dream, the risk of consulting only with its own motions, as its ideas and tones constantly dissolve into and out of one another like a beautiful drift of clouds. It's as if, sometimes, the poetry were so private and self-sufficient that it could dispense with the irksome necessity of an audience. . . .

It's exhilarating to watch Mr. Ashbery maintain his precarious balance on an ''esthetic ideal'' which seems to be raised higher with each new book. The latest, *Three Poems* (three extended meditations in prose), will excite aficionados of his work, but it probably won't, as an introduction, win him new converts.

Alan Helms. *Partisan Review*. Fall, 1972. pp. 624–5

Of the American poets now in mid-career, those born in the decade 1925–1935, John Ashbery and A. R. Ammons seem to me the strongest. . . . Ashbery goes back through Stevens to Whitman, even as Ammons is a more direct descendant of American Romanticism in its major formulation, which remains Emerson's. Otherwise, these two superb poets have nothing in common except their authentic difficulty. Ammons belongs to no school, while Ashbery can be regarded either as the best poet by far of the ''New York School'' or—as I would argue—so unique a figure that only confusion is engendered by associating him with Koch, O'Hara, Schuyler and their friends and disciples. . . .

The Coda of ''The Recital'' [in *Three Poems*] is a wholly personal apologia, with many Whitmanian and Stevensian echoes, some of them involuntary. . . . Against the enemy, who is an amalgam of time and selfishness, Ashbery struggles to get beyond his own solipsism, and the limits of his art. On the final page, an Emersonian-Stevensian image of saving transparence serves to amalgamate the new changes Ashbery meets and welcomes. This transparence movingly is provided by a Whitmanian vision of an audience for Ashbery's art: ''There were new people watching and waiting, conjugating in this way the distance and emptiness, transforming the scarcely noticeable bleakness into something both intimate and noble.'' So they have and will, judging by the response of my students and other friends, with whom I've discussed Ashbery's work. By more than 15 years of high vision and persistence he has clarified the initial prophecy of his work, until peering into it we can say: ''We see us as we truly behave'' and, as we can see, we can think: ''These accents seem their own defense.''

Harold Bloom. *Salmagundi*. Spring-Summer, 1973. pp. 103, 131

The first few books by John Ashbery contained a large proportion of a poetry of inconsequence. Borrowing freely from the traditions of French surrealism, and from his friends Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch, Ashbery tried out a fairly narrow range of voices and subjects. Subject matter, or rather the absence of it, helped form the core of his aesthetic, an aesthetic that refused to maintain a consistent attitude toward any fixed phenomena. The poems tumbled out of a whimsical, detached amusement that mixed with a quizzical melancholy. This aesthetic reached an extreme with *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), a book in which no poem makes even the slightest attempt to marshal a rational context or an identifiable argument. Line follows line without the sheerest hint of order or apparent plan; this studied inconsequence delighted some readers at the time. But this is not a book to reread; seeing it outside the context of rebellion against the too-conscious aesthetic then fostered by academic poetry, it is difficult to understand why the book was published. . . . But reading the first four books together, one is struck by how precious are those poems that do make poetic sense, surrounded as they are by the incessant chatter of the poems of inconsequence. Slowly, however, it appears as if Ashbery was gaining confidence for his true project, and, as his work unfolds, an indulgent reader can see how it needed those aggressively banal ''experiments'' in nonsense to protect its frailty. Ashbery's later poetry often uses the traditions of prose discourse, but instead of a poetry of ''statement'' he has evolved a most tenuous, unassertive language. The first four books, one feels, would have turned out insufferably banal, or perhaps would have remained altogether unwritten, if Ashbery had faced his subject directly or made too various or rigorous demands on his limited language. . . .

What stands behind Ashbery's rather sudden succès d'estime is the triumph of a poetic mode. A mode demands less aesthetic energy than a truly individual style but usually offers more gratification than the average school or ''movement.'' Ashbery's mode has what most modes have, a distinctive blend of sensibility, verbal texture, and thematic concerns. In each of these categories, or elements, a mode must not become too rigid; its sensibility cannot turn into a set of static attitudes, its verbal texture cannot be reducible to simple matters of vocabulary and verse forms, and its thematic concerns must allow for a range of subjects. Successful modes, then, thrive on their distinctiveness, their ability to be set off against a larger, more public set of expectations. But the moment this distinctiveness becomes too rigid, the mode slips into self-parody, consciously or unconsciously. Just when and how a mode calcifies (or what is less likely, fails to achieve a distinctive

feel) is hard for literary historians to measure precisely, especially in contemporary literature.

> Charles Molesworth. *The Fierce Embrace: A Study of Contemporary American Poetry* (Univ. of Missouri Pr., 1979), pp. 163, 181

Ashbery's best work, like the paintings of Jasper Johns, seems an intelligent if dark confrontation with the forces of the given. For Johns, the given may be an alphabet, target, flag, or map. For Ashbery, it is the world of degraded and charming cliché, doggerel, bad taste, Hollywood convention, newspaper prose, literary pietism, and metaphysical jargon. The central metaphysical-moral component in Ashbery's verse is its deadly withdrawal of the transcendental term and insistence on individual liberty. His image of the world does not lead to a hedonism pursued along the lines of an American pragmatic, though his ideas are as clear as a pragmatist's. . . . Ashbery's poetry, moreover, leads, as we have seen, through an excruciating evaluation of the possible consolations, cognitive and sensual, that are available. The poem is a difficulty, a resistance, and a critique. The final consolation for the poet may be, as with Stevens, the imagination. An imagination not of fragrance or of stippled sensibility nor of a late, bare, philosophical, and perhaps deluded penetration to *realia*, as in early and late Stevens. The imagination in Ashbery speaks of a constantly agitated *agon*. . . .

Man is locked in the unintelligible or barely intelligible labyrinth of language; one's art is forced to remain repetitive and solipsistic, and yet somehow adventurous. In discontinuous streams, in mistranslations, in suburban resentments and urban uncertainties, in action poetry, Ashbery leads ambiguity to the verge of nonsense and keeps it satisfactorily unredeemed.

> David Shapiro. *John Ashbery: An Introduction to the Poetry* (Columbia Univ. Pr., 1979), pp. 12–13

No volume of Ashbery's is more crucially transitional than *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970). There are some poems in *Rivers and Mountains* (1966) that could have found a place in the later book: ''These Lacustrine Cities'' and ''A Blessing in Disguise,'' to name two. But *The Double Dream of Spring* as a whole inaugurates a style, a mode of discourse—meditative, less harshly elliptical—that sets it off from the earlier volumes and creates a rhetoric for the subsequent poems to continue, but also to violate. (The poems of *Houseboat Days* [1977] seem to indicate an intention on Ashbery's part to complicate the style in the direction of a return to the elliptical mode.) More important, *The Double Dream of Spring* assumes a stance that Ashbery's later books have not repudiated—that of the poet of high imagination, the visionary. The stance is crossed with obliquity, no doubt: but its presence is undeniable and still astonishing to witness. We can say that in the densely charged lyrics of *The Double Dream*, and especially in its magnificent long poem ''Fragment,'' Ashbery comes into his own and into his inheritance. . . .

Much of the difficulty readers have with Ashbery stems from problems in gauging his tone. The difficulty intensifies when it becomes a question of determining whether or not he is parodying a traditional literary *topos*. This way of posing the reader's alternatives sets up the question in a misleading way, although I think that many readers do pose these terms in oppositional fashion. I think that seasoned readers of Ashbery learn not to demand of his poems that they move in a univocal direction: he can both parody and mean ''seriously'' at the same time, he both sees and revises simultaneously. At times he appears to war against the very idea of received tradition, even while acknowledging, by his refusal to give them up, that the old tropes embody a storehouse of poetic wisdom still alive for us today.

> Charles Berger. In *Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery*, ed. David Lehman (Cornell Univ. Pr., 1980), pp. 164–65

Ashbery delivers a universality attained primarily by chastening his English by placing it at one remove, trusting in its skeletal communicativeness. There is a kind of homeliness to the landscape of the poem, an assumption that elements of landscape are self-evident and self-evidently connected to the ways. . . ''we live our lives'' (a listing without further syntactical qualification suffices in both languages). Human history, despite our current urbanity, retains an anational quality: we recognize human archetypes and can concede to be part of the ''we'' that cannot help but read human import into landscape irrespective of the language used to represent it. Waves, wheat fields, forests, paths, stone towers, great urban centers are elemental icons in a sense, ''things which translate without ambiguity,'' things whose aura of cultural particularity, if it exists at all, is a distant second to more important affinities across cultures and across languages.

> Sara L. Lunquist. *Contemporary Literature*. Fall, 1991, pp. 410–11, 414

Flow Chart will rank as the culmination of Ashbery's obsession with the vital mechanics of literary tradition, the mysterious processes whereby poems and poets get saved, carried across time, repeated in different climates. He has always had explicit designs upon the canon, as Harold Bloom put it in his reading of ''Wet Casements'' and ''Tapestry,'' an explicitness plaited in lines of the quirkiest subtlety. For many volumes now, Ashbery has displayed a startling copiousness in his ways of describing those transactions between past and future, between precursor and reader/poet, performed by any poet intent on ''stellification.'' This last word comes at the end of ''Syringa,'' an Orphic ode on the subject of the singer's own survival. Its unforgettable conclusion lays out the forces at work in what is weakly called ''canonization,'' a process Ashbery sees as both monumental and haphazard, willed and fortuitous. The great originals must be repeated with a difference in order to last. . . .

Flow Chart is almost maniacally self-allusive, which may be its truest form of autobiography. And whether or not it images the end as a resolution, it is a hauntingly valedictory poem. Nor does Ashbery seem to regard the end open-endedly. The poem is studded with words such as judgment, verdict, account, reckoning, award, terms for the posthumous brokering of reputations that we might call literary survival—a stronger word than tradition. Ashbery seems to be following [Wallace] Stevens (hardly a surprise) by inventing figures to describe, and perhaps control, that invisible process.

> Charles Berger. *Raritan*. Spring, 1992, pp. 130–31

In the case of Ashbery's haibuns, most American readers will recognize neither traditional or vestigial form. At a loss for clear antecedent, readers could accurately describe each of Ashbery's haibuns as a prose poem plus cryptic one-liners without end punctuation. They might guess that Ashbery is doing something with a form he adopted or adapted, and they would be correct. The haibun is a Japanese form mixing prose and haiku. The most famed practitioner of the form was Basho, whose *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, a travel diary in the form of haibun, is readily available in English. . . .

One effect of Ashbery's use of the haibun is potentially educative. As in certain allusions of Eliot or reworkings of non-Western traditions in Pound, we are invited to become better informed readers as we ponder the relations between a contemporary text and its possible antecedents.

Paul Munn. *New Orleans Review*. Spring, 1992, pp. 19, 21–22

At a time when all the big themes—the gods, the hero, the artist-hero, truth, the imagination, the past redeemed, the utopian dream—are definitely lowercase, it would seem to require a certain hubris to write a very long poem. Yet John Ashbery's new book-length poem, *Flow Chart*, fills its 216 pages unabashed. Innocent of themes and unencumbered by the mandates of coherence and unity, this poem can be accused, at most, of the quantitative hubris of a journal kept for decades. It is, in fact, characterized by a qualitative humility, if the Ashberyan refusal to ''mean'' can be described as such.

Perhaps, as suggested by its title, *Flow Chart* is less a long poem than a diagram or chart, a grid laid down over an endless flow of disrupted ruminations, literary fragments, pseudoconversations, pieces of argument, and other language objects, inviting us to look for patterns but not guaranteeing that there are any. This grid could have been laid down over any segment of the flow, since its boundaries and center are arbitrary. It marks out big squares of language only provisionally for the purposes of observation. . . .

It is, of course, this collagist's taste for discontinuity, exacerbated by the presence of false syntactical connectives, such as the ''as'' and ''unless''. . . that makes for the famous ''difficulty'' of Ashbery (about whose brilliance *and* sanity I have no doubts). And it is interesting how different it is to negotiate this difficulty in a very long poem than in the shorter ones. For while it might be possible to explicate the shorter poems in some conventional way if one were perversely impelled to do so, the reader of *Flow Chart* really has no choice but to give up the struggle for comprehension as we know it and let the flow of language take over. This induces a kind of reading more like drifting than swimming.

Such a shift in poetic initiative from ''ideas'' in the poet's mind to something generated by the very nature of ''language'' itself has been one goal of an avant-garde project for poetry traceable at least back to Mallarmé, carried forward by the Dadaists, and embraced today by the language poets as well as by French-influenced academic literary criticism. This shift is also implicit, if less radically demanded, in definitions of poetry that emphasize its density, compression, and thus ''opaqueness,'' relative to the ''transparency'' of expository prose. In other words, expository prose disappears as you read it, whereas the material presence of poetry and poetic prose cannot (or should not) be escaped. From this point of view, *Flow Chart* is exemplary. Scrupulously maintaining its hard, impenetrable surface of language, it provides few openings for a fall into mere comprehension.

Indeed, this extraordinary surface itself becomes the central experience of the poem. The discontinuities that loom so large in Ashbery's shorter poems, each asking for comprehension, each foiling comprehension in its unique way, in *Flow Chart* almost disappear, becoming only a small repeating pattern within a larger seamlessness.

Evelyn Reilly. *Parnassus*. vols. 17, no. 2; 18, no. 1, (1993), pp. 40, 43

Every age adores a few poets in whose work posterity maintains no interest. James Henry Leigh Hunt in his own time enjoyed much greater popularity (and better connections) than did Keats. Longfellow, Whittier, Holmes, and Lowell were much more popular than their almost exact contemporaries Whitman and Dickinson. Already the sun is setting on Sandburg, Cummings, MacLeish, and others of our century's passing fancies. Like sycophants who rise and fall with the political leaders they serve, such poets rise and fall with the Zeitgeist they feed. John Ashbery is such a poet, adored by the age because he says what it wants to hear, but destined for obscurity when the times change. His latest book, *And the Stars Were Shining*, shows why.

The first poem in the collection typifies the book as a whole. Its title, ''Token Resistance,'' resembles many of the others in being formulaic and empty. Some are clichés (''The Favor of a Reply''), some the names of banal objects (''Gummed Reinforcements''), some imitations of famous title (''On First Listening to Schreker's *Der Schatzgraber*''), and some are common phrases (''Well, Yes, Actually''). Ironically it is the closest Ashbery comes in this book to a successful poem, because its long list of titles (each as silly as those used in the rest of the book) ends with an abrupt change of tone. The simple title, ''The Father,'' opens the possibility of emotional or intellectual connections all the other titles, in the poem and in the book, avoid. Ashbery tries to make the title a distinctive element of his style (as it is in Wallace Stevens, for instance), but by falling into formulae he only makes it a *flaw* of his style. . . .

I do not mean to exaggerate the case. *And The Stars Were Shining* is not without its musical passages, its well-conceived images and turns of phrases. . . . Still, a best-case assessment of this book would make Ashbery a garrulous, minor Eliot who never found the Pound to prune his *Waste Land* or an affected Thomas Wolfe minus the Maxwell Perkins who could make his homeward-looking angel melt with truth. Ashbery has succumbed to the ''creation without toil'' that Yeats called ''the chief temptation of the artist.''

H.L. Hix. *New Letters*. Spring, 1994, pp. 6, 14

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ASIMOV, Isaac (1920–1992)

Four changes in [Isaac] Asimov's future worlds have been traced to changes in the political and social culture. First, the growing awareness of diversity within worldwide communism and the decline of the cold war tensions produced a change in Asimov's vision of future galactic politics. . . . The later novels allowed for the possibility of detente.

Second, the increased politicization of the 1960s seems to have led to a greater emphasis on domestic politics . . . with greater detail.

Third, the counterculture cry for increased participatory democracy is echoed in a discussion of democratic political systems in the later books, replacing the corrupt empires and theocratic, plutocratic, and oligarchic governments of the early works. In addition to discussions of legislatures and elected executives, democracy: a vision of a universe in which all matter is intelligent and participates in decisions which affect its future.

Finally, the enormous changes in the role of women over the past thirty years are reflected in the greater role given to women in the later novels. Women in the early Asimov novels are principally daughters or wives of important actors; in the later novels they are central characters—and often are important political or scientific figures. In the early novels they are naive, frivolous, and often simpleminded, but in the later novels they are ambitious, intelligent, and strong. Indeed, the progressive liberation of Gladia in the later Robot novels seems to mirror the progress of feminist organizations in American politics.

Clyde Wilcox. *Extrapolation*. Spring, 1990. pp. 61–62

[*Asimov's Chronology of Science & Discovery*] In his inimitable style, in which authoritativeness is balanced by a light and humorous touch. Asimov gives the reader a vivid feel for history and demonstrates how science has shaped the world. His book brilliantly conveys the excitement of science and its importance through the years. The accelerating pace of scientific progress is reflected in the increasing number of entries provided for every year beginning with 1793. The book makes us realize how recent are many of the scientific and technological developments that seem to have always been with us.

George B. Kauffman. *Science Teacher*. February, 1991. p. 72

The underlying message in all of Asimov's writings is one of thoroughgoing humanism. . . . In his view, the universe can have meaning only insofar as its magnificent interconnections can be sensed, interpreted, and analyzed by human intelligence.

He confronted the issue of supernaturally based religious claims in his typically direct fashion, noting that no evidence has been uncovered by science that in any way points to divine guidance in the workings of the universe. Nor is there evidence of the existence of a soul or any other immaterial essence that sets humans apart from other animals and departs at death. While admitting that this does not amount to proof that such entities do not exist, he reminded us that the same applies to the case of Zeus, Marduk, Thoth, and a myriad other supernatural beings. . . .

Asimov sounded a stark warning concerning the need for a this-world focus. He argued that humanity can no longer afford to seek refuge in the false security of supernatural fantasy, for continued reliance on heavenly solutions could kill us all. Just as it is human beings alone who are destroying the world, he said, so it must be we alone who save it.

Pat Duffy Hutcheon. *Humanist*. March, 1993. pp. 4–5

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ATTAWAY, William (1911–1986)

William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* was reissued in 1969, the same year that saw the renascence of Jean Toomer's *Cane*, as well as the publication of several significant novels by contemporary Afro-American writers, such as Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* and Ishmael Reed's *Yellow Back Radio Broke—Down*. Attaway's important but ignored book about the three Moss brothers, who leave the depleted farmland of Kentucky for the steel mills of Pennsylvania, poignantly but realistically tells

the story of one facet of the Great Black Migration on during the first World War.

Blood on the Forge was originally published in 1941, only one year after *Native Son*, but Attaway does not deal with whiteness in character and symbol in the same terms that Richard Wright used. Attaway eschews the stereotypical; his white characters, with the exception of the sheriff and ''Boss'' Johnston, are essentially complex and well-rounded figures. Nor is whiteness his central symbol. The steel mill is. Big Mat, Melody and Chinatown are seduced North by the promise of jobs and decent wages, but are gradually beaten down and stripped of their manhood by the uncompromising and brutal, man-eating monster, the steel mill. Behind the faceless monster is the white power structure, manipulating the lives of white immigrants and black unskilled workers—who are shipped in by cattle car, a disgusting and dehumanizing experience—for the sake of feeding the mill and filling their coffers. The bosses are never seen; their power is felt mainly through their undertaking to set white worker against black, deputize strikebreakers and generally control through fear or famine.

Racism as an omnipotent factor does not exist in the lives of the three brothers after they leave Kentucky. At least for a time. They are accepted by the Slavs, the Irish and the Italians with whom they work in the mill; they drink, gamble and whore together. As a friend, old Zanski warns that they'll never be happy until they send for their families—a man needs children in his home and a wife to put up curtains—he admonishes. In a word, stability. But few black workers move out of the bunkhouse. Their separation from their past—rootedness in the soil, the folk, religion, family—is almost as complete as that of their ancestors who traveled to a new and ugly life in the dark bellies of slave ships instead of airless boxcars. When Mat does finally set up ''housekeeping,'' it is with Anna, the Mexican prostitute, who wants an ''Americano'' because she is tired of ''peons.'' (Anna suffers from the delusion that all ''Americanos'' are rich, regardless of color.) The three brothers are systematically unmanned by the dehumanizing process of forging steel. Chinatown is blinded in an accident which eats up the lives of fourteen men; Melody's hand is smashed so that he is no longer able to play his guitar; Big Mat is killed during the strike in which he has become an unwitting tool the bosses wield against the white workers. Earlier his skill and strength earned him the approbation of his fellow workers and the title ''Black Irish''; later he comes to be ''hated by his fellow workers. He was a threat over their heads. The women covered their faces at the sight of him, the men spat; the children threw rocks. Always within him was that instinctive knowledge that he was being turned to white men's uses. So always with him was a basic distrust of a white. But now he was a boss. He was the law. After all, what did right or wrong matter in the case? Those thrilling new words were too much to resist. He was a boss, a boss over whites.''

There is very little about the unionizing process that the black workers, including the Moss brothers, understand or identify with. The backbreaking hazardous work in the mill has been a kind of salvation for them. Having sharecropped all of their lives, always on the verge of starvation, they are neither shocked nor dismayed by the twelve-hour day in the mill. At least they get paid. They have not begun to think about the possibility of better working conditions—an eight-hour day, better wages, unions—a fact that the Northern industrialists well knew and used to their advantage in controlling the ''socialist'' oriented, organizing aspirations of the white immigrants: ''Big Mat was not thinking about the labor trouble. Yet he knew he would not join the union. For a man who had so lately worked from dawn to dark in the fields twelve hours and the long shift were not killing. For a man who had known no personal liberties even the iron hand of the mills was an advancement.''

One of the things that drives the Moss brothers North is the impossibility of paying of a $40 debt to Mr. Johnston, the landowner to whom they are perpetually in debt. Fear of the control the white boss has over their very ability to stay alive is a given with the black sharecropper. It inspires Mat's hate: ''Deep inside him was the familiar hatred of the white boss.'' There are only a few stereotypical characters in *Blood on the Forge*. Mr. Johnston, the Kentucky landowner, is a classic bigot, indigenous to the South, but interestingly enough, he uses the black sharecroppers against the white just as the bosses in the northern mill use the black workers against the immigrants. Johnston explains to Mat why he doesn't have white sharecroppers work his land: ''well, they's three reasons: niggers ain't bothered with the itch; they knows how to make it the best way they kin and they don't kick none.'' They don't ''kick'' because they have no recourse. If their anger gets out of control, the resultant violence always turns against them. When Mat explodes in anger and fury, killing the mule that killed their mother in the fields, he puts them all in Johnston's debt to the point of starvation. They don't run because they have no place to go, and Johnston thinks he can keep them from getting the ''itch'' by manipulation and innuendo, an ''old Master'' tactic, in the plantation tradition: ''My ridin' boss tells me there some jacklegs around, lyin' to the niggers about how much work they is up North. Jest you remember how I treat you and don't be took in by no lies.''

They don't get taken in by northern lies; they leave because they know southern truths. One of these truths is never to look at or touch a white woman. Melody knows that Mat has ''more sense than to talk to a white lady''; Chinatown agrees: ''It's dangerous. . . .' member young Charley from over in the next county got lynched jest cause he stumble into one in the broad daylight.'' Another of those old-fashioned southern truths is never strike a white man a semi-lethal blow. When the riding boss refuses to give Big Mat the mule Johnston has promised him (''If Mr. Johnston got good sense you won't never git another mule. . . . You'd be run off the land if I had my say. Killin' a animal worth forty dollars,' cause a nigger woman got dragged over the rocks—''), Mat in a blind rage strikes him down. Realizing that the man will live ''to lead the lynch mob against him,'' Mat and his brothers reluctantly leave the land they have worked so lovingly yet for so little reward.

The white line drawn about their lives in the South is straight, clear, immovable. The Moss brothers are powerless to effect change, to shift that boundary in any direction, but they understand their role in the schema and derive some satisfaction from a sense of belonging to the land. Big Mat is a powerful man who seems to draw strength from the soil's blackness which is like his own. When he goes North he becomes unmoored, confused by the change in the pattern, but he adapts to the work better than his brothers, better even than the whites. What he doesn't understand is that hate can be generated to meet the needs of new situations. When the white workers become politicized enough to strike, more blacks are shipped in, in boxcars, and the brothers remember, identify with those men—''bewildered and afraid in the dark, coming from hate into a new kind of hate.'' Bo, the only black foreman, knows the pattern—they only send for black men when there's trouble.

Big Mat is a tragic figure, reminiscent of the one slave on every plantation who refused to be whipped by the soul driver, a man of tremendous physical power and courage who could never be submissive. As developed by the early black fictionists, he becomes the black hero or the ''bad nigger,'' feared by everyone. Big Mat has some of these characteristics, but in *Blood on the Forge* he is also an Othello-like figure, proud, jealous, and formidable. And his blackness is played off against a white Iago, a sneaky little boss-sheriff who manipulates him by appealing to his new-found sense of manhood. ''Deputize this man,'' the sheriff says, ''assign him his hours. He won't need a club. Just give him a couple of boulders. He'll earn his four dollars Monday.'' Actually the bosses save the four dollars. Mat destroys and is destroyed, as so many are in the struggle for steel. Most of Attaway's characters—black, white, all shades of ethnic groupings—are handled well. Many have real nuances of complexity, including the two brothers, Chinatown and Melody, who are left derelict at the end; Anna, the grasping but pathetic Mexican girl; Zanski's granddaughter Rosie, a union sympathizer who turns prostitute for the scabs in order to support the starving strikers in her family; and Smothers, the black prophet of doom, who understands that all men will have to pay for ravaging the earth: *''It's a sin to melt up the ground*, is what steel say. *It's a sin*. Sicel bound to git everybody 'cause o' that sin. They say I crazy, but mills gone crazy 'cause men bringin' trainloads of ground in here and meltin' it up.''

One of the tragic outcomes in the novel is the loss of continuity in the lives of the men who are almost human sacrifices to the industrial Moloch created by an unseen hand grasping for profits. And that hand is white. If we used to think that free enterprise meant freedom to exploit all the resources of our country—both human and natural—to destroy the land and leave it in waste, we have since been forced to change our minds. There is something very timely in Attaway's implicit warning, as Edward Margolies suggests in his introduction to the 1969 edition of *Blood on the Forge:* ''Possibly he [Attaway] saw his worst fears realized in the rapid spread of industrial wastelands and the consequent plight of urban Negroes. From one point of view his feelings about the sanctity of nature now seem almost quaint in an age of cybernetics. Yet given what we are told is the dangerous pollution of our environment, who can tell but that Attaway may not have been right?''

What is most interesting about the ''rediscovery'' of such novels as *Blood on the Forge* is their contemporaneity. We have now, some twenty-eight years later, reached the point of no return in our violation of the environment and of each other. Yet we are as unseeing as Chinatown and the soldier at the end of the novel—''blind men facing one another, not knowing.''

Phyllis R. Klotman. *CLA Journal*. June 1972, pp. 459–64

Undoubtedly, Mississippi's best known native-born black writer is Richard Wright. Wright's reputation, which has grown steadily since the publication of his *Native Son* in 1940, is justly deserved. Yet over the years, Wright's achievement has tended to overshadow and obscure the work of other Mississippi-born black writers. One of them whose work deserves to be better known is William Attaway. His *Blood on the Forge* (1941) is an excellent novel which stands up well when compared with any other fiction dealing with blacks written during the past three decades. . . .

Attaway's first novel, *Let Me Breathe Thunder*, appeared in 1939. It is the tough and tender story of two young box car wanderers and their love for a little Mexican waif. The major characters, Ed and Step, are rootless white men faced by [a] hard, precarious reality, yet still capable of dreaming and caring. They represent the large numbers of young people who drifted about America during the difficult depression years of the 1930's. They live from day to day, waiting for nothing in particular. Ed and Step are not professional hoboes given to pointing out the ''romance of the road''; their single object is to stay alive and keep moving. They support themselves through brief stretches of farm work.

During a stop in New Mexico, Ed and Step meet an inarticulate Mexican boy named Hi-Boy. His wistful and trusting way soon breaks through their casual, seemingly tough veneer. Ed and Step appoint themselves the boy's guardian and take him on the road as they continue their roaming. Hi-Boy becomes an outlet for their affection and for the tenderness missing from their rootless lives. For Ed and Step, Hi-Boy's welfare comes to take precedence over all else. Quite naturally, when a Yakima Valley rancher wants to take Hi-Boy permanently into his family, Ed and Step are torn between their own need for the boy and their concern for his future.

Attaway's *Let Me Breathe Thunder* has some of the emotional force and equality of the relationship between George and Lennie in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937). Less ably written, the book would be melodramatic and overly sentimental. But the characterizations are sure, the dialogue is crisp and natural, and careful attention is given to physical detail. All told, *Let Me Breathe Thunder* is a solid first novel and makes the point that a black writer can deal successfully with a work made up primarily of white characters.

Published in 1941, Attaway's second and best novel, *Blood on the Forge*, is set for the most part in an Allegheny Valley steel-mill community during World War One. During and for several months after the end of the war, a manpower shortage existed in the West Virginia and Pennsylvania steel industry. Attracted by wages of four dollars a day, many Southern farm blacks moved north to work in the mills. To these black tenant farmers living in a state of near peonage, the low wages of steel workers seemed like true riches. The prospect of enjoying greater social freedom provided an additional inducement for deserting the land.

This northward migration of blacks looking for a better life in the mill towns created problems for northern employers and labor leaders. At the time, unions were engaged in initial efforts to organize the steel industry on a closed shop basis. When strikes resulted, the employers relied increasingly on black strike breakers. The unions consequently watched the black influx with growing anxiety. Many white workers came to fear that they might be permanently displaced by blacks who were willing to accept lower wages and poorer working conditions.

Set against this background, *Blood on the Forge* is the story of three black brothers—Mat, Chinatown and Melody Moss—who abandon their worn-out tenant farm in Kentucky's red clay hills to work in an Allegheny Valley . The novel thus has a double theme: blacks coming with whites in an abnormal condition of the labor alike and men of the soil attempting to adjust to modern industrial life.

Mat, the eldest brother, at first appears to be making an adjustment to his new environment better than his brothers. Heretofore, he had stoically coped with life through his own understanding of the Bible. In the mill, his tremendous physical strength gains

him a respect he had never gotten in the South. But Mat's new-found self-confidence proves to be an illusion. Discarding his Bible, be finds that his virility is not enough to sustain him. It counts for little with Anna, his Mexican mistress, who dreams of becoming the mistress of a wealthy mill owner. Playing on Mat's false sense of himself, the owners easily turn him against his fellow workers as they attempt to organize.

Chinatown, the hedonist, fares worse than Mat. Delighting in the sense, he spends his pay on corn whiskey, dice, and women. He is utterly dependent on his brothers. Of the three, he is hit the hardest physically by the harsh life of the mill worker. Eventually, he is left blind by an explosion in the mill.

The third brother, Melody, survives best. A musician in the South, he is still something of a poet after his move northward. But his new environment renders him impotent. His old songs don't seem to have any meaning any more; he is unable to play his guitar. Yet even though he appears at best indifferent to the manipulation of his fellow blacks by both the owners and white workers, he does manage to come through his Northern experience, unlike his two brothers, in one piece, physically and mentally.

Throughout the novel, Attaway reveals that the blacks' dream of greater social freedom in the mill towns is largely delusive. Many of their fellow white workers—especially the Slav and Irish immigrants—hate them and see them as a threat. When the union organizers appear, the employers easily manipulate the black workers into their camp. The blacks, being convinced that they are the lowest group in the racial pecking order, see their only chance of continuing on the job as bending to the desire of the owners.

Yet Attaway does not simply single out the blacks as the sole victim of the unjust conditions which he vividly portrays. He shows the European immigrants and native whites working under and being exploited by the same system of low pay, long hours, and unnecessary hazards to life and limb. He compassionately shows the blighted dream of the immigrants for a new life in America.

In *Blood on the Forge*, Attaway has mined a rich vein of human experience. His outlook is not very optimistic in this work, but he writes about his people knowingly and with warm appreciation. At once, his main characters are likable, humorous, bewildered, and stout-hearted. The dialogue sounds completely authentic.

Unfortunately, Attaway has published only the two novels considered above. The best of these, *Blood on the Forge*, has only recently begun to receive the critical recognition it merits. Edward Margolies has noted [in the introduction to the Collier Books' edition of *Blood on the Forge*] one of the reasons why Attaway's novel was largely ignored when it was first published: ''Appearing one year after Richard Wright's sensational *Native Son*, Attaway's book may have looked tame to an America preparing for another war and whose reading public had already found its Negro 'spokesman' in the virile Wright.'' In any event, a careful reading of *Blood on the Forge* leads one to believe that, excepting Wright's *Native Son*, it is the strongest of black novels dealing with the plight of blacks and racial violence written during the inter-war period.

L. Moody Simms. *Notes on Mississippi Writers*. Spring, 1975, pp. 13–18.

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AUCHINCLOSS, Louis (1917–)

In this novel (*Sybil*), his first, Mr. Auchincloss shows many faults. His style is rather flat, and at times even clumsy; he has a sharp eye, but seldom describes what he observes with quite enough flair or wit. His heroine, furthermore, is a little too sensitive to ring true, a little too much the faithful recorder of her creator's feelings and ideas.

In spite of its limitations, however, *Sybil* is one of the most promising American novels in a long time. This is because Mr. Auchincloss succeeds in giving us vivid portraits of nearly every one of the people in his story. . . . Mr. Auchincloss shows them no mercy, spares them none of their faults, and yet manages to give a little twist of tenderness, an unexpectedly sympathetic turn, to each of them.

James Yaffe. *The Yale Review*. Spring, 1952. p. vi

Apart from his knowledge of the law, Mr. Auchincloss probably knows more about traditional New York City society than any other good novelist now working. Furthermore, he seems to believe in the continuing importance of what is left of such society, and the values it attempts to preserve and hand down. It is precisely the background of such belief that makes his satirical jibes so entertaining, and makes the rather neat, foursquare world of his books so comfortable to read about. *The Great World and Timothy Colt* appeals in part, perhaps unintentionally, to the escapist impulse; but it also shows how traditional writing methods and social attitudes can throw a refreshing light on parts of the contemporary scene.

John Brooks. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 21, 1956. p. 50

Louis Auchincloss . . . has a direct acquaintance with investment banking and . . . has made himself a skilful craftsman. In several novels and a couple of collections of short stories he has written authoritatively and persuasively about a small but important segment of American business. . . . Auchincloss is a deft prober, and he shows us how a sense of inadequacy and guilt can be created and how it can shape a life. To me the psychological problem to which he addresses himself in *Venus in Sparta* is less interesting than the ethical problem with which he was concerned in his preceding novel, *The Great World and Timothy Colt*. In its portrayal of a particular milieu, however, of a world in which there not only is money but has been money for several generations, the novel demonstrates that Auchincloss knows his stuff and knows how to use it to literary advantage.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 20, 1958. p. 18

It is obviously high time someone pointed out that he is one of our very best young novelists. This is far more than a matter of his knowledge of ''the highest stratum of American society'' or his alleged resemblance to Edith Wharton. It is true that Mr. Auchincloss knows a good deal about the successful and indifferent children of the earth . . . these people he represents with such complete and quiet understanding that it is easy to overlook their horror and their ultimate pathos.

What moves Mr. Auchincloss is the miracle of the developing heart flourishing incongruously in the great world. . . . Their honesty is his comedy.

Arthur Mizener. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 21, 1958. p. 4

Auchincloss has tried less for dramatic effect in this [*The House of Five Talents*] than in some of his books. His choice of an old lady as narrator is a happy one, because there is something old-fashioned in his writing, some sympathy with the past, that makes him more at ease in looking at the world through the eyes of an older character. Then too he is at his best not so much when he is trying for the big scenes as when his work is more essayistic—a brooding description of a family portrait by Sargent or the list of an old aunt's favorite topics of conversation. In some of his novels his presentation of characters is so much better than their actions that a reader who believes in them hardly believes in what they do, but in *The House of the Five Talents* they do not have to do very much.

Auchincloss has wit and intelligence and good taste, not necessary attributes of a novelist but nevertheless helpful. He is not overimpressed by the rich; I would guess that he knows people who have money and how they behave a good deal better than most writers who tackle the subject.

Paul Pickrel. *Harper's Magazine*. Oct., 1960. p. 102

It should be pointed out, I think, that when Louis Auchincloss calls attention to the novelist's duty to entertain he is not offering comfort to those who say, with their own little air of superiority, that they read to be amused but who really mean that they read to be put to sleep. Like the master himself [Henry James], Auchincloss asks these things of a good reader; a scrupulous attention to the page, a ready responsiveness to passion and to effects of power, an awareness of design, an appreciation of subtle wit, and, above all, a cooperative resourcefulness in using fiction to expand the panorama of society into one more stimulating than meets the sluggish eye. It is to this level of entertainment that he invites an audience and to it I hope that his witty and satisfying book [*Reflections of a Jacobite*] may guide many.

James Gray. *Saturday Review*. June 3, 1961. p. 38

As for *Portrait in Brownstone*, one may say that this is good standard Auchincloss. It moves in that well-heeled world of New York lawyers and financiers which is his particular hunting-ground—the world of Edith Wharton, I suppose, two or three generations later—and part of the satisfaction which it gives comes from the confidence it instils. This writer, you feel, really *knows* the people he writes about. Knows them, gets on well with them, but is quite independent enough to judge them: indeed, the picture he draws of intricate networks of selfishness and domination, deceptions and self-deceptions, is rather horrifying. It reminds me of early Galsworthy—not a comparison which will be taken nowadays as a compliment, but in fact Galsworthy before he went soggy, the Galsworthy of *The Man of Property* and *In Chancery*, was a much better novelist than his present obscurity would suggest.

Patrick Cruttwell. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1962–63. p. 594

Though Auchincloss indicts fashionable society harshly (perhaps a bit too harshly), still his acid description of the social aquarium provides amusing as well as sober moments for the reader, for he, like so many novelists of manners, wields the weapon of satire most skillfully. Striking in an urbanely lethal way, he makes his ''fish'' wiggle before our eyes. . . . Fortunately, Auchincloss has the style—a fastidious and polished one—to complement his generally derisive attitude toward the aristocratic set. In the first place, his figures of speech, particularly the similes, possess sparkle and wit as well as appropriateness to the context. His description of the process of handling the closing papers—checks, bonds, mortgages, assignments, affidavits, guarantees, etc.—in a legal deal captures the ritualistic and elaborate nature of the performance by likening the shuffling of the papers across the long table to the ''labored solemnity of a Japanese dance.''

W. Gordon Milne. *University of Kansas City Review*. Spring, 1963. p. 183

Mr. Auchincloss always writes with urbanity. He knows the moods of New England and depicts them well; he knows the rivalries and pettiness of faculty life and the resentment and loneliness of boys who cannot be pushed. I think the older women in the book [*The Rector of Justin*], notably Mrs. Prescott, are more believable than the younger, such as Eliza Dean. But my deeper misgivings have to do with the form of the narration; the story begins in Brian's journal, then we have excerpts from a book by Horace Havistock, Dr. Prescott's oldest friend, who has come down to the school expressly to tell him that he must resign. Then we have a series of notes by David Griscam, followed by the memoir of Jules Griscam, his grandson and a black sheep of Justin. This shift from writer to writer is not contrived with enough individual divergence. I am not convinced that they would all take to paper this way; nor when they come to writing dialogue, that they would do it with the skill of an experienced novelist.

Edward Weeks. *Atlantic Monthly*. 1964. p. 133

Mr. Auchincloss loves novels, to read as well as to write. He becomes involved with plot, takes a personal interest in character, indulges a curiosity (and displays an expertise) about the subject of manners that place him in the company of such unabashedly Philistine critics (fellow novelists) as E. M. Forster and Mary McCarthy herself. His tone, even when critical, oscillates between the admiring and the deferential. . . . Mr. Auchincloss's slender study [*Pioneers and Caretakers*] opens up a more interesting question than that of the presumed limitations of women as writers of fiction: what have been their special gifts and strengths? What have women brought to fiction from their own unquestionably other, female experience, what have they done well that men have not? Mr. Auchincloss suggests—it is a very Victorian idea—that they have shown a persistent if not uncritical attachment to a regional homeland ennobled by childhood and ancestral associations. Against the dominant (in America) masculine fiction of rootlessness and rejection, he implies, women's fiction has provided a saving, a ''more affirmative note'' of conservatism.

Ellen Moers. *New York Times Book Section*. July 25, 1965. p. 1

The immediate setting of *The Embezzler* is as familiar as the story. It is Auchincloss' endlessly revisited Eastern urban, almost exclusively WASPish, upper-middle-class society, from about 1900 onward. . . . It is a world . . . of well-conducted adulteries and a slow drying-up of moral resolve, a world that has its troubles and tremors, but is by no means on the brink of disaster—no apocalyptics here. It is solid, recognizable and something to be reckoned with, and has at least as valid a claim on our interest as the Brooklyn waterfront or a pad in California. If it is not deep enough to be explored in great depth, Auchincloss has been exploring it to the depth and width it possesses. . . . He does not dispute literary traditions; he revels in them, is nourished by them and seeks to perpetuate them. He has as fruitful a consciousness as Trollope about the particular tradition he is himself working in: the now darkening comedy of manners, with its established conventions and rhythms of action—and especially as practiced by a series of gifted Americans.

R.W.B. Lewis. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Feb. 20, 1966. p.1

Yet American literature—as defined by the academic elite—seldom offers sympathetic reflections of home-grown aristocracies. The books of Henry James and Edith Wharton are prominent exceptions, though these writers spent most of their lives abroad. While the public enjoys upstairs-downstairs capers, most critics view money and manners as intellectually *déclassé*. Members of the top crust do not match the nation's heroic ideal: the rebellious romantic who spurns corrupting society to hunt his singular salvation in wild nature.

There are no such heroes in the fiction of Louis Auchincloss, and his romantics almost always pay for succumbing to egoism and stepping out of line. Auchincloss's novels and story collections (nearly one a year for 20 years) deal almost exclusively with New York City's white Anglo-Saxon Protestant haven of old name and old money, whose corridor of power runs from the brownstones and duplexes of the Upper East Side to the paneled offices of Wall Street. It is an influential, publicity-shy world where the rules of the game are hardened by tradition. The costs, and sometimes the rewards, of breaking these rules are the author's principal subject. . . .

Auchincloss steers confidently through the world he knows so well. He telescopes time with delightfully gossipy character sketches and crisp vignettes. His prose is clear and judiciously cool, though his attempts to pump drama into drawing-room confrontations may lead to such awkwardness as ''But Ivy's words were still written like the smoke letters of an airplane announcing a public event across the pale sky of Clara's calm. . . .''

Auchincloss's true dramatic moments are in exchanges of dialogue that he expertly stages to define his characters. It is this quality of closet theater that makes his work consistently entertaining—even when his sphere of wealth and privilege may seem hopelessly remote to most readers.

R. Z. Sheppard. *Time*. July 11, 1977, p. 76

Louis Auchincloss sees a lot. What he catches most suggestively, I think, are the dynamics of pride (and of vanity, arrogance, snobbishness and related failings). His work offers other pleasures, to be sure—a gallery of strikingly animated and intelligent women, a beautifully unaffected responsiveness to the claims of those who were here before us. (The portraits of the author's mother and father in *A Writer's Capital* are exceptionally loving.) And it's important not to give the impression, to readers who don't know his books, that some sort of moral hectoring or casuistry lies in wait for those who try them. In his novels Auchincloss usually offers a carefully constructed story, as well as much incidental observation, unsolemnly phrased, about social attitudes—for example, precisely how men of affairs look upon academics. This concern about entertaining is equally evident in his essays, which proceed not as sermons, but, frequently, as unpretentiously developed comparisons of one artist with another. I'm merely saying that, in my view, his writing is subtlest when it inquires into the moment-to-moment complications of self-regard—especially self-regard under pressure. . . .

Gently he leads his readers toward comprehension of the nearly universal human helplessness before the passion that preoccupies him. With that comprehension come intuitions of the fundamental innocence of pride, even in lofty quarters. And the result is the banishment, unportentously managed, of the possibility—on this front at least—of moral condemnation or satiric putdown. . . .

But literature also exists to help the powerless penetrate their own simplicity and corruption, to show forth the respects in which turbulence itself is another style of pride, and to alert people to the truth that any of us—the very rich not excluded—can be ruined by the temptation to be too hard on ourselves. Humorously, unobtrusively, the best of Louis Auchincloss's books nudge the reader toward such knowledge, which is why they will remain valuable.

Benjamin DeMott. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 23, 1979, pp. 7, 35

Watchfires works out its theme of liberation with such single-minded success that it carries Auchincloss out on the other side of what seems to have been a personal and artistic obsession that has consumed him ever since he started writing as a child. . . . Auchincloss writes about the rich the way Updike writes about the middle class, though without the stylistic flourishes. His own social and professional positions have given him an insight that makes his work unique in contemporary literature. . . .

Watchfires . . . is so strong, and in significant ways so different from his earlier work, that it is no longer possible to misperceive his achievement. *Watchfires* is warmer, more intense, more intimate than any book he has written previously. As a writer, Auchincloss seems newly open and vulnerable. Moreover, his characters all find some sort of liberation. . . .

It is true that he is not a master stylist. He is capable of using a prefabricated phrase: describing someone who knows society ''like a book.'' And he can produce a rat's nest of a sentence: ''For if the old Puritanism of the Handys and Howlands had been diluted in her to the point of excluding the sin that existed only in the mind, or at least of ranking it as less culpable than its robuster brethren, the ancient sense of guilt had been replaced by an equally sharp horror of seeming ridiculous.'' But he is equally capable of a phrase that is both accurate and surprising. . . .

The world Auchincloss writes about, the world of America's ruling class, is no smaller—and is, in fact, probably larger—than Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County or Hardy's Wessex. And its influence is vast. . . .

How good, finally, is *Watchfires*? How good is Auchincloss? Adding up his assets (complex characters; a persuasive, insider's

vision of a rarefied but powerful world; an entertaining sense of narrative) and his debits (occasional stylistic infelicities) Auchincloss proves to be a sound, no-risk blue-chip, with reliable dividends.

David Black. *Saturday Review*. April, 1982, pp. 24, 28

[Louis] Auchincloss's great strength as a novelist is not invention. He does not create strange new worlds but remains, as Henry James once advised Edith Wharton to, ''tethered in native pastures.'' He writes about the worlds he knows best. Though not all his characters are White Anglo-Saxon Protestants and not all his novels take place in New York City and environs, Auchincloss is usually concerned with upper-class characters or members of the bourgeoisie. As a reading of his autobiography *A Writer's Capital* will reveal, much of Auchincloss's fiction grows directly out of his own life and experiences. The autobiographical aspects of his work are often ignored; indeed, his career may be seen as a series of creative reinvestments of the capital of his early experiences. Despite the particular choices he has made, however, it is unfair to overemphasize the limitations of Auchincloss's world. Within an apparently small compass, there is great variety of character and situation. . . .

In addition to the large quality of his fiction—twenty novels and eight collections of stories—Auchincloss has also made significant contributions as a critic and popular historian. Perhaps his finest work of nonfiction is *A Writer's Capital*, a memoir of considerable charm and grace. As a practicing novelist, he writes authoritatively on James and Wharton. His knowledge of, and sympathy for, the tradition of the novel of manners, make his essays on O'Hara and Marquand, Proust, and Edith Wharton permanent contributions of scholarship. Yet, as his popular histories as well as most of his literary essays reveal, Auchincloss is essentially a generalist addressing a nonscholarly audience. At its best his criticism and historical writing introduces the average reader to the pleasures of the past while providing shrewd insights into characters and events. Auchincloss's achievements in nonfiction mark him as a true man of letters for our times.

Despite these achievements, Auchincloss will ultimately be judged by his fiction. Here the sheer body of his work is impressive, a sustained examination of which might be called the Auchincloss world: men in Wall Street law firms and investment houses, shy heroines and powerful matrons who must come to terms with the values of the tribe, insecure young men who must come to terms with familial expectations, and the terrors of success. Yet the quality of Auchincloss's individual novels and stories varies widely. His finest novels, however are all historical in some significant sense. . . . For Auchincloss's most acute commentaries on contemporary life, one must turn to his short stories. . . .

Throughout his work Auchincloss is also a moralist. . . . At points, too, especially in *The Rector of Justin* and the flawed but significant *I Come as a Thief*, his moral analysis includes religious themes.

Christopher C. Dahl. *Louis Auchincloss* (New York: Ungar Publishing, 1986), pp. 244–46

Few have more assiduously delineated the Eastern Seaboard aristocracy and business gentry than Louis Auchincloss, a lawyer-writer literally born on the inside track. In more than thirty volumes of fiction, he has cast an intimate, custodial eye over its caste habits and turnings, occasionally, as in *The Rector of Justin*, producing a tale of considerable distinction. The latest novel [*Fellow Passengers*] continues the run. Dryishly ironic, Jamesian in allegiance if not flair, with touches of period Fitzgerald, it is craftsmanlike from start to finish.

Fellow Passengers weaves its ten ''portraits'' around the evolving life of Danny Ruggles, another scion of Old New York, another Auchincloss double—the lawyer who writes fiction. . . .

Auchincloss offers no Lambert Strether in Ruggles, no observing consciousness as interesting as the life under observation. But *Fellow Passengers* does duty enough, the nuance of American class behavior given by one who truly can be said to know.

Robert Lee. *The Listener*. Aug. 16, 1990, p. 33

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AUDEN, W.H. (1907–1973)

Mr. W. H. Auden is a courageous poet. He is trying to find some way of living and expressing himself that is not cluttered with stale conventions and that is at once intellectually valid and emotionally satisfying. In order to do so he is obliged to hack his way in zigzag fashion through a stifling jungle of outworn notions which obstruct progress. . . . The only difficulty in following him is that he seems to be perpetually mixing up two levels of experience, private and

public. Publicly he tries to persuade us that the world is a farce, privately we feel that he regards it largely as a tragedy.

John Gould Fletcher. *Poetry*. May, 1933. pp. 110–1

Auden is a stylist of great resourcefulness. He has undoubtedly drawn heavily on the experimenters of the past decade, Eliot, Pound, Graves, and Riding in verse, and Joyce and Woolf (especially *The Waves*) in prose. But he is not an imitator, for very rarely has he failed to assimilate completely what the model had to give. He is not a writer of one style.

The lyrics written in short lines display an aptitude for economy of statement that is almost ultimate; he has sometimes paid for this by an insoluble crabbedness or a grammatical perversity in the unsuccessful pieces, but a few of this type are among his best poems. On the whole, he is most effective in the poems using a long line, poems where the difficulty his verse offers is more often legitimate, that is, derives from an actual subtlety of thought and effect rather than from a failure in technical mastery.

Robert Penn Warren. *Antioch Review*. May, 1934. p. 226

As a technical virtuoso, W. H. Auden has no equal in contemporary English or American poetry; and no equal in French, if we except Louis Aragon. There has been no one since Swinburne or Hugo who rhymed and chanted with the same workmanlike delight in his own skill. . . . He combines a maximum of virtuosity with . . . you could hardly say a maximum, but still a considerable density of meaning. . . . Whether you approach his work through his theology or his virtuosity, he is one of the most important living poets.

Malcolm Cowley. *Poetry*. Jan., 1945. pp. 202–9

In the poems written since Auden came to America the effects are clarified, the ambiguities have all but disappeared. The music hall improvisations which he favors—the purposeful blend of casual horror and baleful doggerel—sometimes make him seem the Freudian's Noel Coward; but the combination of acridity and banality is unsurpassably his own. No living poet has succeeded so notably in the fashioning of metropolitan eclogues. . . . The virtuoso has extended his range, and cleverness is no longer the dominant note. Versatile but no longer special, elaborate without being finicky. Auden has become not only the most eloquent and influential but the most impressive poet of his generation.

Louis Untermeyer. *Saturday Review*. Apr. 28, 1945. p. 10

The best poet of the Auden generation is Auden. His *Poems* (1930) reveal a new social consciousness in original rhymes, conversational or jazz techniques, and unlimited sensitivity. By these rhymes, and by suitable images of deserted factories, frontiers, invalid chairs, glaciers, and schoolboy games, Auden suggests the death of his class. Ideas for improvement, resembling those of D. H. Lawrence, stop short of Marx, who had little use for the individual change of heart that Auden prescribes.

William York Tindall. *Forces in Modern British Literature* (Knopf). 1947. pp. 56–7

We may sometimes feel that his view is distorted, that, for example, he thinks more are frustrated today than are in fact frustrated, or that he does not give sufficient weight, especially at present, to the surrounding evidence of human goodness as against the evidence of human sin. . . . Nevertheless, he is a significant figure, and in nothing more than in his sensitivity to the tensions of the age . . . Auden is at one of the frontiers of this anxiety-torn world; he is one of those who play out in themselves, with unusual and revealing clarity, struggles to which, whether we recognize it or not, we are all committed.

Richard Hoggart. *Auden* (Chatto and Windus). 1951. pp. 218–9

Auden's ideas have changed as strikingly as his way of life has remained the same. There is a dualistic idea running through all his work which encloses it like the sides of a box. This idea is Symptom and Cure. . . . The symptoms have to be diagnosed, brought into the open, made to weep and confess. . . . They may be related to the central need of love. . . . It is his conception of the Cure which has changed. At one time Love, in the sense of Freudian release from inhibition; at another time a vaguer and more exalted idea of loving; at still another the Social Revolution; and at yet a later stage, Christianity. Essentially the direction of Auden's poetry has been towards the defining of the concept of Love.

Stephen Spender. *Atlantic Monthly*. July, 1953. p. 75

Perhaps Auden has always made such impossibly exacting moral demands on himself and everybody else partly because it kept him from having to worry about more ordinary, moderate demands; perhaps he had preached so loudly, made such extraordinary sweeping gestures, in order to hide himself from himself in the commotion. But he seems, finally, to have got tired of the whole affair, to have become willing to look at himself *without doing anything about it*, not even shutting his eyes or turning his head away. In some of the best of his later poems he accepts himself for whatever he is, the world for whatever it is, with experienced calm; much in these poems is accurate just as observed, relevant, inescapable fact, not as the journalistic, local-color, in-the-know substitute that used to tempt Auden almost as it did Kipling. The poet is a man of the world, and his religion is of so high an order, his mortality so decidedly a meta-morality, that they are more a way of understanding everybody than of making specific demands on anybody.

Randall Jarrell. *The Yale Review*. Summer, 1955. p. 607

As our undoubted master of poetic resources, Auden has experimented with every device that would flat the poem into a true statement of the human position as he sees it. Meter, diction, imagery—every device of Auden's great skill (even his flippancy) is a speaking way of refusing to belie the truth with false compare. . . . In the native motion of his genius . . . Auden implicitly warns us away from the stereotyped affirmation of the good, the true, and the beautiful. He is not against the good, the true, and the beautiful, as some foolish critics have argued. Rather, he asks us to weigh these values in mortal fear of smudging them with prettiness,

and with an instinctive recognition of the fact that, being human, our feelings are subtle, various, and often conflicting.

John Ciardi. *Saturday Review*. Feb. 18, 1956. p. 48

In a work of art, as in a man, we are best satisfied when we are confidently aware of a wholeness, or integrality, that underlies all the diverse and even conflicting elements. And we are most satisfied when there is a consistent thread running through the whole course of a man's life or the whole body of an artist's work.

In the case of Auden, it is our doubt on this point that makes us hesitant to class him with writers in whom we have this sense of wholeness or integrity. We do not take in his work the confident satisfaction that we do in the work of a Voltaire, a Swift, a Molière, a Wordsworth, a Keats, or a Browning. Or to take examples from the poets of our own time, we do not feel in his work the integrity that we feel in poets of lesser gifts—in Spender, or Marianne Moore, or in Robinson Jeffers; or in poets of comparable or greater gifts—Wallace Stevens, or Dylan Thomas, or Frost, or Eliot. Through a man's work we are reaching out to the man. And if it is true that the style is the man, we feel with these that we are making contact with at least as much of the man as shows in his work, and that we know sufficiently with whom we are dealing. With Auden we are not sure of this.

We know that he is a very gifted actor and mimic; and he has beguiled many an hour with his impersonations. But we cannot give ourselves up to him without certain reservations.

Joseph Warren Beach. *The Making of the Auden Canon* (Minnesota). 1957. p. 253

He can almost never do without this third element: the impersonal point of reference to which he directs the reader. It does not much matter whether this is society, literature, mythology or politics, or whether it is the subtle and elaborate game of serious light verse. Once he has an impersonal framework his real gifts come into action: his technical inventiveness, his striking but scrappy ideas, his great range of reading, his wit and, above all, his superb command of language.

These are rare gifts, stimulating and admirable. Yet somehow I can't, in the real sense, *agree* with Auden as I agree with Lawrence and Yeats. What he has positively to offer does not seem to matter much. I cannot, that is, get much from his work beyond the extraordinary ability and cleverness. He has caught one tone of his period, but it is a cocktail party tone, as though most of his work were written off the cuff for the amusement of his friends.

A. Alvarez. *Stewards of Excellence* (Scribner). 1958. pp. 104–5

It is remarkable that in *The Dyer's Hand* Auden is constantly able to do two things at once: to develop an argument about a literary subject which casts light on it and on literature in general, and simultaneously to develop a general moral or religious argument, with a particular relevance to the contemporary world. This is plainest in the section on Shakespeare, but I hope that my inadequate summary has indicated that it is characteristic of the whole book. In addition to their intrinsic interest and value, these larger themes and moral arguments supply the context within which various of Auden's aphorisms and statements that have been puzzling or curious in some earlier form now are thoroughly intelligible. It becomes clear that he does not divorce poetry from truth and seriousness, as he has sometimes been accused of doing, and his emphasis on play, frivolity, the comic, and the fantastic takes on its full significance. The book offers a magnificent example of a mature and powerful intelligence, aware of its nature and limitations, casting fresh light upon individual works and writers, upon the perennial problems of criticism, and upon the nature of man. . . .

He is more like Dryden . . . than like most modern poets: he is a kind of maverick and extremely unofficial Anglo-American laureate, and, appropriately, writes much occasional verse. Like Dryden, he was much reproached for changes of faith and allegiance, and like him outmoded such reproaches by the tenacity and obvious sincerity of his convictions. Auden, too, has genuine modesty with regard to his own gifts, developing them with conscious craftsmanship but employing them prodigally and hence unevenly, so that high-minded critics accuse him of insufficient respect for his art.

Monroe K. Spears. *The Poetry of W. H. Auden: The Disenchanted Island* (Oxford). 1963. pp. 308, 337–8

Auden is pre-eminently the poet of civilization. He loves landscapes, to be sure, and confesses that his favorite is the rather austere landscape of the north of England, but over and over he has told us that the prime task of our time is to rebuild the *city*, to restore community, to help re-establish the just society. Even a cursory glance over his poetry confirms this view. Who else would have written on Voltaire, E.M. Forster, Matthew Arnold, Pascal, Montaigne, Henry James, Melville, and Sigmund Freud? On any one of them, yes, any poet might. But only a poet of civilization would write poems about them all. If one looks through the reviews and the criticism that he has published during the last thirty years, the case for calling Auden the poet of civilization becomes abundantly clear.

A great deal of this criticism is non-literary or only partially literary. Characteristically, it has to do with the problems of modern man seen in an economic or sociological or psychological context. Auden is everywhere interested in the relation of the individual to society, of the metaphysical assumptions implied by the various societies that have existed in history, and of the claims of history and of nature as they exert themselves upon the human being.

Cleanth Brooks. *Kenyon Review*. Winter, 1964. p. 173

He wants to try out what every poetic resource and every possible combination of poetic resources can mold out of the life of the present. As a deeply traditional poet, he can never be satisfied with a single style or a single kind of poem. Auden wants to compose every kind of poem, and he very nearly has. Even among the relatively few works this study has singled out for special consideration, his range of poetic strategy is imposing. A truer sense of his scope can be gained by reading seriatim through *The Collected Poetry*, limited though it is to works written by 1945. Auden's has been a sustained examination of our world through a complex series of prisms drawn from past poetries. As a result, not only can we now appreciate unsuspected beauties that he has drawn from

familiar poetic elements, but we can measure our surroundings against a broader perspective that is as directly artistic as it is philosophic or religious. Auden has been the more effective for having long ago ceased to worry about stating profound or final truths in poetry. Instead he has concentrated on the ultimately more fruitful goal of perfecting each new amalgamation of poetic resources with experience.

John G. Blair. *The Poetic Art of W.H. Auden* (Princeton). 1965. pp. 186–7

I think I am the third poet the editor of this magazine has tried to get to review *The Dyer's Hand*, a major poet's assay of literary criticism, and it has taken me a year and a half to muster the bad judgment to try it. The gates of the book are defended by gargoyles of the superfluous critic. It is a work intended to reprove unnecessary criticism, and it does this both explicitly and by the performance of feats of insight and sensibility that I have come to feel (and the book has been around for almost three years now) are in fact *necessary* to modern thinking and feeling. . . . The last and highest opportunity a critic has to serve, Auden says, is to ''Throw light upon the relation of art to life, to science, economics, ethics, religion, etc.'' The book does this, I feel, in the way only a complete and unique human personality can do.

William Meredith. *Poetry*. Nov., 1965. pp. 118, 120

The persona of [Auden's] early poems was an intense and interesting man. Central to his character was the need to know and, once he felt he had gained knowledge, the need to teach. The resultant effect of this ''needing to'' is a feeling of movement in the poems. We hear the voice of the persona admonishing us, as he moves from uncertainty to certainty and back to uncertainty, to look on ourselves and our world with hard, questioning eyes, accepting nothing as final, except death. . . .

If one were to give the above description of Auden's persona and verse to a prospective reader and then were to have him read the poems in *About the House* without telling him they were Auden's, his response would probably be, ''What do these poems have to do with W. H. Auden?'' The answer would be ''Nothing,'' for although there are technical similarities between the work of the early Auden and that of the Auden of the sixties, the poems are written by what amounts to two different men and they show it; comparing them is like comparing the poems of Byron and Tennyson, or those of Pope and Blake.

The most important fact about the poetry of the ''new'' Auden, which one encounters for the first time in *Nones*, is the lack of tension between the poet and his experience. Both man and world simply are; no more, no less. The only problem, a nonmetaphysical one, is recognizing, accepting, and praising the existence of both.

Gerald Nelson. *Changes of Heart: A Study of the Poetry of W.H. Auden* (California). 1969. pp. 144–5

Auden's writing offers us a vision of the nature of personal being and becoming which is fully consistent with and an important contribution to an intellectual position underlying a significant body of twentieth-century literature. At the center of his thought and art in the later period is a vision of the nature of individual action which is related to a dilemma central to the contemporary world, the fragmentation in belief of a whole civilization. If he is committed to one solution of that dilemma, it is not without an awareness of the difficulties and responsibilities of that commitment, nor is it without sympathy for those who do not wish to or cannot take upon themselves the problems of what Kierkegaard has called ''the religious sphere.'' In man's weakness Auden sees his potentialities, and his art continues to be didactic in the best sense: it directed man toward knowledge of himself.

George W. Bahlke. *The Later Auden* (Rutgers). 1970. pp. 83–4

So many, so various, so handsome and so insinuating are the by-products of Auden's career among us that our indolence as well as our thirsty media risk persuading us that it is all one: one utterance altered, merely, according to the various circumstances of its occasion. This is not so. There is the poet Auden, who in this newest book [*City without Walls*] has added another dozen to the great poems in his canon, as well as a number of ''pieces he has nothing against except their lack of importance''; and there is the witty, generous, rather bromidic public man we must not condescend to by allowing his good humor and his eccentricities . . . to obscure his greatness. Which is abundantly here and clear in this latest book so much under the sign of a consented-to mortality; from the title poem to the ''Ode to Terminus,'' the book is concerned with boundaries, limitations, precarious identifications which make our life possible: that naming which was Adam's first task and Auden's to the last. Hence the famous and extraordinary vocabulary, and the wonderful meters, the alliterative spells and charms. . . .

Richard Howard. *Poetry*. Oct., 1971. p. 38

I think there is a sense in which Auden put himself on a shelf a good many years ago when his verse came reiteratively to proclaim man's incapacities, his inability to take charge, direct his fate; and indeed he has perhaps become our greatest poet of the shelf. But in the new volume [*Epistle to a Godson*] the shelf is even higher in the closet, and on it he sits meditating—with himself, or imaginatively with a few old friends. . . . His verse centers have usually been large and obvious like a statue in a park, with the poet's game one of sitting down in front of the statue and letting the sight of it develop in the mind a series of themes, projections, fancies. Thus it is a contemplative art, an art for a lonely and unbugged visionary on a park bench. Or shelf.

Reed Whittemore. *New Republic*. Sept. 23, 1972. p. 26

It is a common opinion among the English *literati* that Auden's later work is a collapse. I am so far from taking this view that I think an appreciation of Auden's later work is the only sure test for an appreciation of Auden, just as an appreciation of Yeats's earlier work is the only sure test for an appreciation of Yeats. You must know and admire the austerity which Auden achieved before you can take the full force of his early longing for that austerity—before you can measure the portent of his early brilliance. There is no question that the earlier work is more enjoyable. The question is about whether you think enjoyability was the full extent of his aim. . . . In his later work we see not so much the ebbing of desire as

its transference to the created world, until plains and hills begin explaining the men who live on them. Auden's unrecriminating generosity toward a world which had served him ill was a moral triumph.

Clive James. *Commentary*. Dec., 1973. p. 58

His poetry alternated between socio-political and psychological modes of analysis, and he was likely to think that psychological ills are basic, political and social wrong derived from them. The process of diagnosis and healing, with which Auden was always so much concerned, had to start not with social institutions but with the human heart. Primarily he was a moralist, and the chief importance for him of psychological and sociological modes of thought was that they provided criteria of the good. . . .

Hawthorne has a story called ''P's Correspondence'' (*Mosses from an Old Manse*) in which an amiable madman gives an account of his meeting with the elderly Lord Byron. The letter is headed ''London, February 29, 1845,'' and Byron, though fat and dull—a ''mortal heap,'' in fact—is much improved morally. . . .

Byron, it emerges, is preparing a new collected edition, which is to be corrected, expurgated, and amended ''in accordance with his present creed of taste, morals, politics and religion.'' None of the passages commended by the visitor would find a place in this new edition. P. concludes that Byron, having lost his passions, ''no longer understands his own poetry.''. . .

The application is plain enough, I believe; Auden came close to a point where he no longer understood his own poetry. I do not say that he exactly follows the pattern of development detected by Mr. P. in Byron and other writers; but something happened that made him close his mind, not to the earliest poetry so much as to that of the middle 'thirties. . . .

There is a genuine and sad perversity in this failure of Auden to understand himself. It is as if he came to find himself boring, or became unable to connect with himself, as in life he grew less and less able to connect with others. All those schemes and formulas he invented to systematize his views on everything from history to ethics—it was a habit early formed, as we see from some of the prose selections in this new book—served to fence him in, to prevent any real conversation with others, or with his former self. His earlier rhetoric failed later ethical tests, and in acquiring a poetic personality that could live with these faintly schoolboyish standards of truth-telling he lost all sense of the valuable strangeness of the personality it supplanted. . . .

And we old men who still think of the poems of the 'thirties as part of an almost incomparably good time for modern poetry—when you picked up the literary journals and read a late poem of Yeats, or *East Coker*, or a new Auden—are not going to sit idly by and allow it to be said that he was really in a bad patch of pretending, but eventually got it right; and that people will come to see that he did, abandoning their allegiance to the older texts and the banned poems. At least *The English Auden* will do nothing to strengthen that kind of propaganda.

Frank Kermode. *The Yale Review*. Summer, 1978, pp. 609, 612, 614

One cannot easily distinguish the poet from the poetry because Auden's life enters into his poetry and because the making of poetry was at the center of that life. Furthermore, the plays, often in verse form and containing lyrics that have been separately published, are not detachable from any other part of the man's work. Finally, the prose criticism alternates with poetic passages, while its objects are, in large part, poetry and poetic theory. There are no watertight compartments in Auden's career; there is no way to isolate the forms and elements because he believed that intelligence and emotion, artfulness and honesty, game playing and moral clarity all had to be members of one community.

Among the last collections that he edited is the ''commonplace book'' entitled *A Certain World*. He said that it was the nearest thing to an autobiography that he would attempt. It amounts to excerpts, a sizable number of his favorite passages in both poetry and prose, all from other writers, but with some brief paragraphs he provided as introductions. This literary world is his own certain one, and the reader who wanders through it discovers not only a great deal about his critical taste but also how coherent this whole world is, even though it seems so various and comprehensive. The headings include Acronyms, Aging, Algebra, the Alps, Anesthesia, Brass Bands, Birds, Book Reviews, Calvin, Cats, Chiasmus, Choirboys, Christmas, Death, Dejection, Dogs, Dreams, Easter, Eating, Elegies, Eskimos, Forgiveness, God, Hands, Homer, Humility, Icebergs, Journalism, Kilns, Liturgy, Logic, Madness, Money, Numbers, Owls, Plants, Puns, the Renaissance, Roads, Saints, Spoonerisms, Tyranny, Voyages, and War. The last head of all is Writing. These are all matters of which Auden read with interest, and on which he could write. . . .

For all his recognizable idiosyncracy, Auden is an artist whose work is intended to be public, not romantically or cryptically personal; as Edward Mendelson has observed, he was determined to be a civic, not a vatic, poet. The integrity of his written work derives from its being at once the expression of a consistently recognizable mind but also its being devoted consistently to public purpose, seeking to cultivate the ordinary soil and in some small part, even, to redeem the time. Wisecracking, naughty, even self-indulgent at moments, he is, in the final analysis, a religious and moral artist.

Wendell Stacy Johnson. *W.H. Auden* (New York: Continuum, 1990), pp. 151–53

Auden called opera ''the last refuge of the High style'' among the arts that use words, the only one in which the grand manner had survived the ironic levelings of modernity. Unlike poetry, which always stops to reflect on the emotions that gave rise to it, the verse of an opera libretto, he said, gives immediate expression to willful feeling. For Auden, the unique combination of artifice and intensity in opera made it the ideal dramatic medium for both archetypal comedy and tragic myth. His libretti, most of them written in collaboration with Chester Kallman, present their mythical actions with a directness unlike anything in even his greatest poems. In their use of the simplest language of song to dramatize the most complex issues of history, psychology, and religion they surpass everything written for the musical theater in English and have few equals in the richer operatic traditions of Italian, German, and French.

Opera gave Auden the solution to a problem of dramatic poetry that he had been unable to solve in his early poetic plays, the problem of the proper voice for a poet who wants to write a public and heroic art as well as a private and intimate one. Poetry, he wrote

in 1961, ''cannot appear in public without becoming false to itself''; this was the conviction Auden had reached after his attempts to write public poetry in the 1930s. . . .

When Auden renounced as dishonest the grand style he had used in his public poems of the 1930s, he renounced only his use of that style in lyric and personal poetry, not the grand style itself. He still hoped to use it if he could find the proper vehicle. Around 1950 in ''We, too, had known golden hours.'' the dedicatory poem to his book *Nones*, he wrote that ''we'' (the poem implicitly speaks for all who value the private realm) had known all the feelings that the grand style is best suited to express, ''And would in the old grand manner / Have sung from a resonant heart.'' But the modern era had transformed the public realm from one of personal choice and action to one of mass necessity, where the grand manner now could do nothing more than endorse popular sentiment and political lies. The only authentic tones of voice that remained for poetry were private and quiet ones. . . .

The unstated answer, for Auden as poet, was in the grand style still possible in opera, and in libretti of the kind he had begun to write a few years before.

Edward Mendelson, ed. Introduction. In W.H. Auden and Chester Kallman. *Libretti, 1939–1973* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Pr., 1993), pp. xi–xvii

This [Anthony Hecht. *The Hidden Law: The Poetry of W.H. Auden*] is almost the examination of Auden's poetry we've been waiting for. If that seems like damning with faint praise, it isn't. The deluge of books about Auden since his death has been strangely unsatisfying, as if the pleasure his work gives were felt by its exegetes as some sort of indulgence to be deplored. If one thinks sometimes of two Audens, the magician and the Censor, then the Censor seems to stand beside the desks of those who set out to criticize his work. The best books to date have been John Fuller's *Reader's Guide* and Justin Replogle's *Auden's Poetry*. Monroe K. Spears and Joseph Warren Beach have appeared as defending and prosecuting counsel, and Osborne's and Carpenter's biographies have both illuminated and darkened our view of his life. They should be read with more gossipy books to hand, especially Charles H. Miller's *Auden: An American Friendship* and Dorothy J. Farnon's *Auden in Love*, plus the tribute edited by Spender soon after Auden's death. I have hardly touched on the whole canon, much of it the grist of American academic mills. Edward Mendelson is our only safe guide through the chaos of Auden's texts, and as we make our way past the changes and suppressions, to say nothing of the poor proofreading and typesetting, we may feel like the theologians coping with early Church Fathers or musicologists deciding which score of Bruckner's is the urtext. Poor Bruckner was mutilated by others: Auden performed his own acts of butchery.

None of Auden's previous commentators except John Fuller and the early and hostile Francis Scarfe has been a professional poet. Anthony Hecht is not only that but also one of the finest creative artists in the second half of this century. He has no need to deck his commentary in those curatorial smartnesses which turns common sense on its head, or shroud it in the reductive jargons of theories. . . . He knows how odd Auden was in many ways but he knows something much more important—that Auden's poetic *oeuvre* is central to an understanding of twentieth century poetry, and that his unrepresentativeness as a man does not interfere with his encyclopedic knowledge of human nature. As Hecht recognizes, Auden is wider in scope, more rounded in interest, more various in form than any of the rival figures writing in English in this century. . . . Auden alone mustered all the Muses' horses and roamed freely through our unpoetic century.

Peter Porter. *Poetry R*. Winter, 1993–94, p. 4

Auden's obsession with Eliot, like his obsession with Hardy, lasted about a year. During this period, he drew not only on Eliot, but also on the work of other modernists, such as Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound, and especially Edith Sitwell, whose influence on his work during 1926 is not easy to distinguish from that of Eliot. . . . Then in the late spring of 1927 he read, apparently at the suggestion of his friend Cecil Day-Lewis, some of the recent work of Yeats. He wrote to Isherwood that of the modern poets he was reading that summer term, ''the later Yeats alone seems to me to be *at*.'' . . .

Auden passionately admired Yeats's mastery of language, but this mastery was married in his view to an eccentric vision. He felt profoundly ambivalent toward the vision which seemed to him far more subjective and esoteric than Wordsworth's. He was skeptical of its truth, but longed to share its power. Only after Yeats's death was Auden able to articulate this ambivalence. In ''The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats'' (1939), he put Yeats on trial with the accusation: ''In 1900 he believed in fairies; that was bad enough; but in 1930 we are confronted with the pitiful, the deplorable spectacle of a grown man occupied with the mumbo-jumbo of magic and the nonsense of India. . . . The plain fact remains that he made it the center of his work.'' Yet by offering in his essay the cases both for the prosecution and for the defense, Auden embodied his own equivocal attitude. In the end, the argument for the defense sets aside Yeats's beliefs on the ground that poets should not be judged for their ability to solve the problems of their generation, ''for art is a product of history, not a cause.'' . . .

Auden's 1939 defense of Yeats underpins the all-important turn from political to private poet that he was then about to make in his own career. He was again using Yeats as a model, a poetical father of sorts; now it was by identifying Yeats's inadequacies, as he had once as a schoolboy identified Hardy's quite different inadequacies, that Auden at last prepared to set Yeats aside. . . .

Only a few days after his return from Yugoslavia in 1927, Auden wrote the now famous poem beginning ''Who stands, the crux left of the watershed,'' in which Edward Mendelson has suggested he first discovered his own poetic voice. The journey abroad and the prolonged contact with his father triggered an important change in his writing; other, more important changes were to come after he left Oxford for good. . . . It was not until after Auden arrived in Berlin that he began steadily to produce mature, publishable work. Visiting home briefly in February 1929, he sent a copy of *Poems* [his first volume, 1928] to E.R. Dodds (he apparently gave copies to a number of friends at this time) with a letter saying that the second poem in the volume, the one beginning 'I choose this lean country,' is now completely rewritten as it is far too Yeatsian at present.'' He meant that he had already reworked it into a different poem beginning ''From scars where kestrels hover.'' He had expunged the most obvious echoes of Yeats and added in his manuscript notebook ''Berlin. Jan 1929'' at the foot. He had also revised and redated several other contemporary pieces.

Fully aware that he had still been in the grip of his youthful obsession with Yeats when he composed ''I choose this lean country,'' he was determined to progress toward something new. Alone in Berlin, cut off from family, friends, and familiar institutions, he had started to come to terms with the gift of his own weakness. The student began to transform himself into a master.

> Katherine Bucknell, ed. Introduction. *W.H. Auden: Juvenilia, Poems* 1922–1928 (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Pr., 1994), pp. xlv–xlviii

Probably no work of Auden's has so consistently fascinated and troubled its readers as *The Orators*. For while it is easy to identify this book's major themes—social crisis and revolution, fascism, leadership, group movements—deciding what Auden is saying about such issues is another matter. Does he really mean it when he says, ''All of the women and most of the men / shall work with their hands and not think again?'' Or is he satirizing this Lawrentian ideal? Auden's comments about *The Orators* clarify little. In a 1932 letter he called it ''a stage in my conversion to communism,'' but in 1966 he remarked: ''My name on the title-page seems a pseudonym for someone else, someone talented but near the border of sanity, who might well, in a year or two, become a Nazi.'' Like another from the same essay, such comments are as coy as they are suggestive: ''My guess today is that my unconscious motive in writing it was therapeutic, to exorcise certain tendencies in myself by allowing them to run riot in phantasy.'' Thus, the issue of the political valence of *The Orators*—which has been seen as fascist, antifascist, and simply confused—is also the issue of Auden's ''seriousness.'' F.R. Leavis was responding to this quality of *The Orators* when he said that Auden ''does not know just how serious he is.''

In fact, these uncertainties—Auden's seriousness (or lack of it), his ambiguous politics, the question of the book's coherence—recall moments within *The Orators* itself. The anxiety about whether or not Auden is promoting fascism, for instance, recalls the Airman's concern over complicity with the enemy. Moreover, the weird messianic ''He'' of ''The Initiates'' has a ''fondness for verbal puzzles,'' and the Airman of Book II fights the enemy with practical jokes. We might do well to hesitate before invoking criteria of aesthetic seriousness and ideological coherence in judging *The Orators*, because Auden is apparently flouting these readerly values. But if so, then what are the aesthetic and political rationales behind this book?

In this essay I shall argue that we can understand how and why *The Orators* troubles the standards by which it has been assessed only by exploring its treatment of homosexuality. Some studies of *The Orators* do refer to this subject—noting, for example, that the Airman is apparently homosexual—but same-sex desire has far more to do with why *The Orators* is a difficult, contradictory work than critics have realized. For the political implications of homosexuality in *The Orators* are themselves contradictory. Same-sex desire at once preserves the political order and makes the homosexual a criminal according to that order and this is the governing contradiction of Auden's ''English Study.''

> Richard Bozorth. '''Whatever You Do Don't Go to the Wood': Joking, Rhetoric, and Homosexuality in *The Orators*.'' In Katherine Bucknell and Nicholas Jenkins, eds. *Auden Studies* 2 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), pp. 113–14

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AUSTER, Paul (1947–)

Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, one of the three remarkable novellas that make up his *New York Trilogy*, pushes the connotative significance of names in literary texts to an absurdist extreme. These three stories subject the clichés and stereotypes of the gumshoe detective story to a postmodernist skepticism about identity, causality, and meaning. Quinn himself [the protagonist] writes detective stories under the name of William Wilson, which happens to be the name of the eponymous hero of Poe's famous tale about a man in pursuit of his doppelgänger. Misidentified as ''Paul Auster of the Auster Detective Agency,'' Quinn is seduced into acting the part, tailing a former professor called Stillman who has recently been released from prison and is feared by the client of Quinn, alias Wilson, alias Auster. . . . As if to demonstrate the point, Stillman deconstructs

Quinn's name, when they eventually meet, with a flow of whimsical free association. The connotations of Quinn stop nowhere, and therefore become useless to the reader as an interpretative key.

In the second story, ''Ghosts,'' all the characters have the names of colors. . . . By this manifestly artificial naming system, Auster again affirms the arbitrariness of language, introducing it (arbitrariness) where it doesn't usually belong (fictional names). In the third story, ''The Locked Room,'' the narrator confesses how he faked government censor returns, parodying the activity of a novelist. . . . In all three stories, the impossibility of pinning the signifier to the signified, of recovering that mythical, prelapsarian state of innocence in which a thing and its name were interchangeable, is replicated on the level of plot by the futility of the routines of detection. Each narrative ends with the death of despair of the detective-figure, faced with an insoluble mystery, lost in a labyrinth of names.

David Lodge. *The Art of Fiction* (New York: Viking, 1992), pp. 38–39, 40

With thick, dark hair, smoky eyes, and brooding sensuality, forty-five-year-old New Yorker Paul Auster looks like a Tony Curtis upgrade. Since his dramatic 1982 memoir *The Invention of Solitude*, a reflection on the death of his joyless father (''a man without appetites . . . a tourist in his own life'') that unintentionally exposed hidden horrors in his family's past, Auster has rapidly evolved from a shadowy experimental stylist into one of America's premier (but least known) living writers. He is, says *The New Republic*, ''a man poised to write something momentous about our times.''

His latest, *The Music of Chance* (1991), is vintage Auster—an eerie, captivating novel the plot of which turns on questions of identity and reality, often wandering haphazardly. On the surface, it reads like a potboiler, but hangs around in the mind like an unsettling dream you can't shake. . . .

Leaving his readers more questions than answers is an Auster trademark, one tattooed on his first universally praised work, *The New York Trilogy*, three novellas that form a brooding variation on the gumshoe genre. Each features detectives of sorts, a search of some kind, missing persons, and mistaken identities—but these are metaphysical whodunits where ''What is real?'' is as burning a question as ''What's the scam?''. . .

Because Auster's work is plutonium-dense with ambiguity, it will never float in the best-seller mainstream. But he's in good company.

Doug Rennie. *Plant's Review of Books*. Winter, 1994, p. 15

Following his well-received *New York Trilogy*, Paul Auster broke free from the suffocating urban story with the help of that particularly demotic American genre, the road novel. In succeeding books, men drove out across the continent toward the newer version of the New World on the other coast. In *Mr. Vertigo*, he confines his characters to the spaces that lie in between. Despite determined efforts, they never make it either to New York or Los Angeles. Instead, they are caught in the ambiguities of small-town life in the Midwest.

Auster's New York City may have been claustrophobic, peopled by aspiring, doomed, and failed writers who spend more time at the window, watching and being watched, than they do before a sheet of paper, but he offers no contrasting rural idyll here. His is a profoundly agoraphobic Midwest—''A flatter, more desolate place you've never seen in your life.''. . . This landscape provides the background to some curious travelers. In the 1920s of the novel. America is waiting to be shaped, though not, in all likelihood by ''the Master,'' a Hungarian Jew living in Kansas, creating his own melting pot with stray characters found in circuses and won in poker games. The people are no less inscrutable than in Auster's New York. . . .

[His] theme, intriguing and at first well developed, is played out in a coda which brings the novel down to earth with [the protagonist] Walt. Grounded by puberty (only castration would allow him to fly on), Walt meets Dizzy Dean, a baseball hero of the 1930s who continued to play long after his skills had deserted him. The fictional Walt tries to preserve for posterity an unblemished career. This episode unfortunately helps draw attention to the difficulty Auster always has in getting out of stories. Several of his novels end, as this one does, with characters self-consciously writing the book which we are reading. These endings betray a curious uncertainty in writing which is otherwise so driven by confidence. Having put on a mesmerizing show, Auster hasn't quite learned Walt's routine, whereby you ''bow—just once—and the curtain comes down.''

Peter Blake. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. April 8, 1994, p. 20

Auster's postmodern self-fashioning odes do not end in aimless purposelessness or in a do-your-own-thing individualism. While he does not refuse to forsake the premodern notion of the individual so that a vestige of renaissance humanism can remain, he does examine in all of his fiction the consequences of actions taken in one's self-fashioning. Marco Stanley Fogg—MS—may be a life as work-in-progress, but his actions have impact on others, nonetheless. Auggie Wren instantaneously decided to be Ethel's grandson. ''Don't ask me why I did it. I don't have any idea,'' he says. But once he takes an action, certain consequences follow. ''Anything can happen'': this phrase occurs in all of Auster's books and these books are examinations of struggles to find one's way, to make sense of this fact. This is why Auster is a major novelist: he has synthesized interrogations of postmodern subjectivities, explanations of moral causalities, and a sufficient realism.

Dennis Barone. In *Beyond the Red Notebook* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Pr.) 1995, pp. 5–6

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AXELROD, George (1922–)

The Seven Year Itch is funny, somewhat erotic, and in English. The sum of these virtues seems to be a smash hit, and a safe play to recommend to almost anyone who is looking for a pleasant evening's entertainment. What George Axelrod's romantic comedy amounts to is a series of *New Yorker* jokes attached to what (I am told) is a very true and rather ordinary situation—namely the lighthearted adultery of a happily married man while his wife and child are out of town for the summer. . . .

Henry Hewes. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 13, 1952. p. 25

. . .*The Seven Year Itch* . . . is an ingenious, knowing, and very amusing sketch of a husband whose wife has gone to the country and has left him wide open to summer temptations in the city. The model upstairs comes down, the husband succumbs, and is thereupon beset by rosy daydreams in which the model throws herself at his feet, by counter nightmares in which his wife throws him out of the house, and by another set of fantasies in which his wife leaves him for another man who is paying her attentions in the country. It all ends happily as he rushes off for a connubial weekend. The piece is cleverly written. . . .

Margaret Marshall. *The Nation*. Dec. 13, 1952. p. 563.

Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter? by George Axelrod . . . is a fantasy disguised as an ordinary farce. All farces are essentially fantastic, but in this case there is almost no pretense that the story is even fictitiously real: the central character is the Devil in the familiar form of a movie agent.

I believe I should have liked the play more if it had been presented as a fantasy—an entertainment which took even greater liberties with reality than farce permits. . . .

Some of the jokes are funny and there is . . . a bit of rancid ribaldry about many of them. I am a poor audience for these jokes because I consider most of the quips about Hollywood to be based on a lie. The joke about Hollywood's stupidity, madness, and immorality was effective as long as we believed that the people who made the joke had values which were not those of Hollywood—but this is no longer true. Motion pictures are a great industry at which many able people are hard at work, and the product of which most of us patronize. We now realize—if we never did before—that the majority of the people who scoff at Hollywood are extremely eager to become and remain part of its corruption, madness, etc.

Harold Clurman. *The Nation*. Nov. 5, 1955. p. 405

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B

BABBITT, Irving (1865–1933)

The distinction of Professor Irving Babbitt is that he endeavours to acquire the now unfashionable but not outworn Socratic virtues: he works for an attitude toward letters and the life of which letters are symptomatic that shall be comprehensive, cohesive and based upon perceptions of wholes.

This direction and this effort enables him to outrank almost all his colleagues in American literary criticism. . . . It is Professor Babbitt's Socratic merit that he has succeeded in charting the contemporary chaos and in construcing for himself a unifying attitude.

Gorham B. Munson. *Criterion*. June, 1926. pp. 494–6

It is an unpleasant task to profess skepticism about the value of a group of writers who are aiming at the betterment of conduct. The philosophical difficulties that may inhere in Mr. Babbitt's particular defense of sane conduct, I do not feel myself competent to discuss. . . . The ethical code of the Humanists is probably sound enough, but, however sound these abstractions may be, they are of no use to the Humanists or to us so long as they retain the status of pure abstractions; the abstractions remain what Mr. Tate has called wisdom in a vacuum. The arbitrary and mechanical application of these principles to organic experience, whether the experience be literary or non-literary, does not constitute a discipline but rather a pedantic habit.

Yvor Winters. *The Critique of Humanism*, edited by C. Hartley Grattan (Brewer). 1930. pp. 329–32

Professor Babbitt's doctrine is a compound of snobbery of the kind I find most irritating. Yet it has some elements in it of sense, even if these elements happen to be platitudes which my iceman, cigar dealer, grocer, butcher, bootlegger, garbage man and dentist already know; i.e., that it is best to keep temperate and thrifty, not to let your temper run away with you, not to make a nuisance of yourself, not to get up in the air over trifles, to see that your family gets properly fed and clothed, to pay your bills and not violate the laws. But what is new or Humanistic about that? Not a single person among my personal acquaintance has ever abandoned a child, although quite a few of them have read Rousseau.

Burton Rascoe. *The Critique of Humanism*, edited by C. Hartley Grattan (Brewer). 1930. p. 123

There is no doubt that his aim is the same as that of Brunetière. He attacks the same multiform manifestations of naturalistic relativity. He agrees with him that ''there is needed a principle of restraint in human nature (*un principe refrénant*),'' that something must be opposed to ''the mobility of our impressions, the unruliness of our individual sense, and the vagrancy of our thought.'' Brunetière, however, finally came to seek this principle of restraint in revealed religion. Babbitt does not deny that it may be found there, but the conversion of Brunetière, is for him an occasion for insisting that the immediate data of consciousness reveal such a principle of restraint at work within the individual, whether or not he believes in revealed religion. Thus Babbitt finds a way to ground his humanism purely on individualism.

Louis J.A. Mercier. *The Challenge of Humanism* (Oxford). 1933. pp. 60–1

How perfectly he knew each of those great, queer but powerful beasts, the modernist ideas, how convincingly he set forth the origin, growth, and present shape of each. How admirably he described their skill in concealing themselves, or in appearing innocent while stalking their prey. And how he dissected them all, showing their powerful muscles, their great fangs, and their sacks of poison. . . . To hear him was to understand the modern world.

In his astonishing power of understanding and analysing his enemy, his skill in diagnosing the modernist disease, lies his unique importance.

Hoffman Nickerson. *Criterion*. Jan., 1934. p. 194

The astonishing fact, as I look back over the years, is that he seems to have sprung up, like Minerva, fully grown and armed. No doubt he made vast additions to his knowledge and acquired by practice a deadly dexterity in wielding it, but there is something almost inhuman in the immobility of his central ideas. He has been criticized for this and ridiculed for harping everlastingly on the same thoughts, as if he lacked the faculty of assimilation and growth. On the contrary, I am inclined to believe that the weight of his influence can be attributed in large measure to just this tenacity of mind. In a world visibly shifting from opinion to opinion and, as it were, rocking on its foundation, here was one who never changed or faltered in his grasp of principles, whose latest words can be set beside his earliest with no apology for inconsistency, who could always be depended on.

Paul Elmer More. *University of Toronto Quarterly*. Jan., 1934. pp. 132–3

His own manner of speech was of the substantial order, straight forward, unadorned, unimaged, owing its flashes of color either to quotations artfully interwoven or to the antics of a playful humor, which in lighter vein regaled itself by caricaturing and distorting any illogical statement or any lapse from good sense in one's hurried interjections. He had, in dialoguing, a mischievous fondness for playing out the game of argument to a finish and inflicting a sudden and disastrous checkmate on any unwary advances of his opponent—a process not always relished by those whose sense of humor was less active than his own.

William F. Giese. *Antioch Review*. Nov., 1935. p. 78

Though Babbitt became identified in the public mind with one cause, that which bore the never fully elucidated name humanism,

it was recognized in the academic world that he was also the proponent of a cause in one sense larger and more catholic—the cause of the humane study and teaching of literature. At Harvard he fought, in behalf of every American professor who believes that his function comprehends interpretation and criticism, against all who would restrict the academic office to fact-finding, fact-compilation, fact-reporting. Frequently viewed as a reactionary, he defended an academic freedom precious and perishable—the freedom to judge.

Austin Warren. *Commonweal*. June 26, 1936. p. 236

In exposing an idea he would often use a peculiar and significant gesture. His right hand, rising beside its shoulder with spread fingers and outward palm, would make short lateral pushes in the air. There was not the slightest volitant or undulatory motion of the arm—no concession to flying, no fluent gracefulness. Those shoves of the open hand into space—into the spaces of thought—were rigid and impersonal. They insisted that the principle on which he talked was patently universal, belonging to everyone and no one. As for wrong opposing notions, his fingers would sweep them down and away, one after another, while his tongue attacked them.

G.R. Elliott. *Antioch Review*. Nov., 1936. p. 41

His opinions were hard-set, his statements clean-cut and definitive. There was no budging him from his positions. This is what made him a precious friend for me, though I did not share in all his principles or judgments. He was the touchstone on which to assay your own thoughts, when you wanted the stimulus of contradiction—always based on deep reflection, fortified by vast learning, ordered by nimble didacticism. His militant spirit (equal to his athletic strength), and his dogmatic preemptoriness (marked on his deep-set features), displeased some. I felt always attracted to his decided personality. . . . The geniality of his smile and wink took away the sharp edge of his obstinacy.

C. Cestre. *Irving Babbitt*, edited by Frederick Manchester (Putnam). 1941. p. 55

The humanistic point of view is auxiliary to and dependent upon the religious point of view. For us, religion is Christianity; and Christianity implies, I think, the conception of the Church. It would be not only interesting but invaluable if Professor Babbitt, with his learning, his great ability, his influence, and his interest in the most important questions of the time, could reach this point. . . . Such a consummation is impossible. Professor Babbitt knows too much; and by that I do not mean erudition or information or scholarship. I mean that he knows too many religions and philosophies, has assimilated their spirit too thoroughly (there is probably no one in England or America who understands early Buddhism better than he) to be able to give himself to any.

T.S. Eliot. *Selected Essays* (Harcourt). 1950. pp. 427–8

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BACA, Jimmy Santiago (1952–)

Martin & Meditations on the South Valley is . . . strikingly like other Chicano works in concept, theme, and motivation. Like them, it configures America in thoroughly Chicano/a (Latino/a) terms to reach, in this case, a poetic subjectivity that can only, ultimately, be private and self-revealing. In being so, however, it makes itself accessible to the reader outside. Just as we encounter, say, [Allen] Ginsberg or [Sylvia] Plath through the stark subjectivity of their words, so too do we apprehend [Jimmy Santiago] Baca through the directness of his persona, raw, inside his culture. . . .

Baca refus[es] to treat gender thoughtlessly as a category of received meanings and known terms. Intelligent in his approach, he understands gender as a condition that requires fresh contemplation and painstaking treatment if its rendering of men and women is to be as authentic and full as possible. He tries to comprehend the ''misery'' that made his parents abandon him, leaving him vulnerable as ''field prey,'' and he succeeds in capturing the abject pathos of their self-destructions. In imagining experience from inside their skins and inside those of Caspar the Ghost, *la curandera Feliz*, Grandma Lucero, the *cholos* and *vatos locos* who are his peers, and all the other ''real lives in the South Valley,'' Baca seeks a compelling honesty that means he cannot rely on conventional norms of sex and gender for his language and metaphor. He mostly succeeds, and often brilliantly. Where he doesn't, it is usually in a momentary lapse of diction, not at the profounder level of conceptualization. For example, the word *afterglow* is absolutely wrong to use in the description of a girl's sexual molestation, and in the crucial ''Quarai'' epiphany scene, it struck me as incomplete for Martin not to explicitly express his desire to love others, only his need to be loved, although his desire is implicit in the scene.

All in all, *Martin & Meditations on the South Valley* works superbly.

Cordelia Candelaria. *American Book Review*. January–February, 1990, pp. 15, 25

BACA: Yes. I'm currently finishing a novel and working on a book of poetry, but all of those things have been done on my terms, not out of pride or arrogance but mostly because I am so interested in the journey of self-discovery that I'm on. Despite the demands I encounter, I still find myself pretty much out here on this farm alone, and I can devise my own journeys, pick the tools I need, and go after things other people wouldn't go after. So I guess what I'm trying to say is that what has occurred over these past few years hasn't changed me much. What it's really reaffirmed is that the work I was doing before is the work I should be doing and I'm doing it now.

KEENE: So many people would love to be able to say what you are saying and mean it.

BACA: You know, it's a very hard way to go and it's not heroic in any sense of the word, but it is fulfilling. You do get up in the morning and feel a real power sense of the tree and the yard and the grass growing and the sun coming up, and you feel yourself very

much a part of that whole, tenuous existence in the world, and it's not structured around a paycheck or insurance or tenure or grades or a new car. It's really sustained by a sense of appreciation for one's breathing and getting up and saying, ''Hi, how are you?'' and ''Let's have a cup of coffee'': the real small, simple pleasures in life.

KEENE: These small, simple pleasures run like motifs throughout all your poems, all your writings.

BACA: Yeah, the real, small pleasures in life. The idea of just seeing a man in prison who's condemned to die: I come out of the shower and it's nine o'clock and I see him napping and I look at his face, and there's a look on this man's face, on the face of a man who's going to die, that I think is more important for me than to go to work in a prison system and get brownie points. I would much rather go back to the cell and write about what I saw on the man's face. You know?

John Keene. Interview. In *Callaloo*. Winter, 1994, p. 49

One of the most talented voices in the contemporary scene of Chicano poetry, Jimmy Santiago Baca writes poetry that . . . offers a vision of Chicano identity that has a great deal to do with the terrible interplay between historical and contemporary political oppression. Baca brings to us images of violence and violation on a personal level. . . . While voicing an outrage characteristic of much Movimiento poetry, Baca's poetry moves beyond simply casting blame on ''America'' or ''the system.'' The forms of oppression scrutinized by his poetry result from specific historical regimes in which indigenous values and peoples are erased through violence and malevolent neglect. Aztlan, within the logic of Baca's poetry, becomes a terrain inscribed by history, a terrain that marks but is also marked by the speaker and the subject of his poems. . . . In quick strokes, his poetry fills out the multiplicitous dramas, conflicts, and tensions evident in the lives of its subjects. The history that emerges is one in which the answers to cultural decimation do not descend from the heavens with the blast of trumpet. Salvation, where it exists, occurs on a personal level whereby individual rather than mass empowerment becomes the small response to the detribalization Baca's poetry addresses.

The collection *Black Mesa Poems* offers a series of poems written between 1986 and 1989 that reflect on the relations between humans, history, and land—the three concerns marking Aztlan in its various avatars. The poems construct a sense of history, not, as in [Rodolpho] Gonzales's poem [*I am Joaquin: an epic poem*], as an inertia-driven inevitability. History in Baca's poetry is dynamic and developing. It represents several currents within which Chicanos move and function. Rather than a singular trajectory leading directly from pre-Cortesian civilization through Mexican nationalism to contemporary struggle, history in *Black Mesa Poems* is a varied terrain marked by heterogeneity, a mosaic of violence and beauty that crystallizes in the land of the Black Mesa, a contemporary realm of Aztlan. . . .

Baca's poetry takes up and transforms a number of issues established by earlier poets of Aztlan: history, land, cultural reclamation, hope, advancement, the future. Renouncing apocalyptic or utopian visions of Aztlan, the land for Baca is the Black Mesa of New Mexico. It stands as a terrain that has been marked and crossed by the forces of history, by the players of that history, by the dreams and pains of those players. There is a great deal of interpenetration and fluidity in Baca's vision of history and its relation to people and communities. History is constructed and reconstructed by humans through the poetry. In this imaginative reconstruction, the connection to the past and the claims to the present are reaffirmed. These claims are based less on the right of previous ownership and ancestry, though elements of this view are evident in Baca's poetry too. Rather, the claims rest on the simple fact that the land has marked and been marked by previous nomads and settlers. This interaction, played out through time and reconstructed through history, connects persons to place, present to past. Aztlan in Baca's poetry represents this rough terrain from which the past has been forged and into which, with resolve and with doubt, the Chicano is fated to proceed.

Rafael Perez-Torres. *Movements in Chicano Poetry: Against Myths, against Margins* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1995), pp. 77–78, 84

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BALDWIN, James (1924–1987)

Go Tell It on the Mountain's beauty is the beauty of sincerity and of the courageous facing of hard, subjective truth. This is not to say that there is nothing derivative—of what first novel can this be said?—but James Baldwin's critical judgments are perspicacious and his esthetic instincts sound, and he has read Faulkner and Richard Wright and, very possibly, Dostoevski to advantage. A little of each is here—Faulkner in the style, Wright in the narrative, and the Russian in the theme. And yet style, story, and theme are Baldwin's own, made so by the operation of the strange chemistry of talent which no one fully understands.

J. Saunders Redding. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. May 17, 1953. p. 5

Few American writers handle words more effectively in the essay form than James Baldwin. To my way of thinking, he is much better at provoking thought in an essay than he is at arousing emotion in fiction. I much prefer *Notes of a Native Son* to his novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, where the surface excellence and poetry of his writing did not seem to me to suit the earthiness of his subject matter. In his essays, words and material suit each other. The thought becomes poetry, and the poetry illuminates the thought.

Langston Hughes. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 26, 1956. p. 26

His most conspicuous gift is his ability to find words that astonish the reader with their boldness even as they overwhelm him with their rightness.

The theme of *Giovanni's Room* is delicate enough to make strong demands on all of Mr. Baldwin's resourcefulness and subtlety. . . . Much of the novel is laid in scenes of squalor, with a

background of characters as grotesque and repulsive as any that can be found in Proust's *Cities of the Plain*, but even as one is dismayed by Mr. Baldwin's materials, one rejoices in the skill with which he renders them. . . . Mr. Baldwin's subject (is) the rareness and difficulty of love, and, in his rather startling way, he does a great deal with it.

Granville Hicks. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 14, 1956. p. 5

Giovanni's Room is the best American novel dealing with homosexuality I have read. . . . James Baldwin successfully avoids the cliché literary attitudes: over-emphasis on the grotesque and the use of homosexuality as a facile symbol for the estrangement which makes possible otherwise unavailable insights into the workings of ''normal'' society. . . . Baldwin insists on the painful, baffling complexity of things. . . . The complexities are of course most numerous in the treatment of the relationship between David and Giovanni. The void of mutual lovelessness . . . is the central pain of homosexual relationships.

William Esty. *New Republic*. Dec. 17, 1956, p. 26

I'm sure that Baldwin doesn't like to hear his essays praised at the expense (seemingly) of his fiction. And I'm equally sure that if Baldwin were not so talented a novelist he would not be so remarkable an essayist. But the great thing about his essays is that the form allows him to work out from all the conflicts raging in *him*, so that finally the ''I,'' the ''James Baldwin'' who is so sassy and despairing and bright, manages, without losing his authority as the central speaker, to show us all the different people hidden in him, all the voices for whom the ''I'' alone can speak. . . . To be James Baldwin is to touch on so many hidden places in Europe, America, the Negro, the white man—to be forced to understand so much.

Alfred Kazin. *Contemporaries* (Little). 1962. pp. 255–6

While any evaluation of Baldwin as writer must consider both his essays and his novels, it is, hopefully, for the latter that he will be remembered. Since the essays, for the most part, deal with contemporary problems, they will become historical; that is, again hopefully, they will cease to apply to current situations. Yet it is partly on the basis of the essays that one has faith in his value as a novelist, for some of the resources on which he must draw are revealed most sharply in the essays. What seems to be the case is that Baldwin has yet to find the artistic form that will reveal the mystery, that will uncover the truth he knows is there. If he does, if his intention and accomplishment become one, if his intellectual grasp is matched by his imaginative, he will be a writer whose measure it will be difficult to take.

James Finn. *Commonweal*. Oct. 26, 1962. p. 116

James Baldwin has written, in *Another Country*, the big novel everyone has thought for years he had in him. It is a work of great integrity and great occasional power; but I am afraid I can do no more than the damned compact liberal majority has done, and pronounce it an impressive failure. Spiritually, it's a pure and noble novel; though it's largely populated by perverts, bums, queers, and tramps, with only an occasional contemptible square interspersed, I wasn't much distressed by their comings, couplings, and goings. They are looking for love in some fairly unlikely ways and places, but the commodity is a rare one, and we can't afford to overlook possibilities. No, the book's faults are mainly technical. One of them has to do with the difficult question of dialect. Most of Mr. Baldwin's characters are of the hipster persuasion, or at least on the near fringe of hipsterism, and the patois he makes them talk has most of the faults of artifice and few of the merits of originality. In effect, their argot is dull and uninventive. We are supposed to feel about many of these characters that they're proud, sensitive, suffering souls; it is thoroughly depressing to find, when they open their lips flecked with anguish, that, man, they talk like trite. They're always mouthing about ''making it'' and if they could break the shackles of their degenerate dialect, it's indeed conceivable that they might make a phrase or an image or something.

Robert M. Adams. *Partisan Review*. Spring, 1963. pp. 131–2

When Baldwin records, with finest notation, his exacerbated sense of what it is like to be a Negro; when he renders, with furious conviction, the indignities and humiliations which attend his every step, the stiffening and perpetual pressure which closes in upon a Negro simply because he is one; when he conveys his sense of the social climate by which the Negro comes despairingly to know, from earliest childhood, the atmosphere in which desperation is bred, that he is a pariah, a little more than animal, but less than human—then, I have no doubt, there can scarcely be a Negro who does not listen to him with full assent. But when we listen to any of Baldwin's voices—his passionately exhoratory warning or his pleading—it is not the voice, nor is it the tone of reason we are hearing, for Baldwin is not a ''reasonable'' man; it is a lamentation and a curse and a prayer.

Saul Maloff. *The Nation*. March 2, 1963. p. 181

The largeness of purpose and gentleness of intention which Baldwin voices have brought a new climate, a new element, a new season, to our country in our time. That season, that climate, that element which are James Baldwin, they are now in the foreground of America's awareness. There is no way now that anyone can fail to recognize them, and to endure them, and to contend with them. They cannot be dismissed. It may even be that crops will have to be planted differently out of a consideration of this new season, or that quite new crops will have to be found which will flourish in the new climate, and that all the old fences and defences will be levelled by the fury of that new element. In his essays, his novels, his short stories, Baldwin has levelled the ground so that we may start anew.

Kay Boyle in *Contemporary American Novelists*, ed. Harry T. Moore (Southern Illinois). 1964. p. 156

We should note that the title ''Another Country'' is lively with irony, for the novel presents a world as we know it but as it has not before been put in fiction to be seen, ''other'' by its ominous distance from what it ought to be and from real human needs, and then ''other'' as some private land where a handful of people have honored and renewed themselves. This tension epitomizes the book's role in Baldwin's vision. It does not cry out with the so bold

and explicit warnings of ''Letter from a Region in My Mind,'' but the prophet's tones there are really based in *Another Country*. An analogy is the way the self-reliance of ''Civil Disobedience'' is founded on the renewal and independence of vision Thoreau established at Walden. Baldwin had to discover his ''distant land''—to use Thoreau's term—from which to see the essential unreality of New York. In this respect this third novel might be called the greatest of his liberal educations, just as it is the most informative for his audience. It is only from the distant land of *Another Country* that he can criticize the false land both toughly and compassionately, and the simultaneous violent content and delicate style in other work depends on this distance.

Robert F. Sayre in *Contemporary American Novelists*, ed. Harry T. Moore (Southern Illinois). 1964 p. 167

To solve our national problem of racial tensions we must think clearly and plan soundly because we are in a delicate moment, when the anger of many Negroes is naked and the sorrows and guilts of whites more exposed. For Mr. Baldwin, regardless of *what* we say or try to do, Western civilization seems suspect and faltering. He allows the Negro scant susceptibility to the many problems which afflict whites—of identity, of religion, of survival, of intimacy and sexuality. The Negro is an outcast, plundered so long that his fate becomes an almost total historical judgment upon the white, Western world, a world which, according to Mr. Baldwin, knows very little about itself, because as he points out, it cannot understand the Negro. Yet, apparently the Negro can understand the white man, and can save him from his impending doom. The Negro, having given love to inadequate whites, is the crucial factor in finally enabling the white man to solve his problems of identity. There is a cynical medical and psychiatric core in me which must reject such an argument. The problems of ''identity'' and sexuality are simply too complicated for rhetoric of Baldwin's kind.

Robert Coles. *Partisan Review*. Summer, 1964. p. 414

A ''protest play,'' unfortunately, always has a hard time of it artistically, and even more so if, like Baldwin, the playwright doth protest too much. And not only too much but too much, too soon. Right at the outset [of *Blues for Mister Charlie*] we are clobbered with a tirade which is an inflammatory inventory of all the injustices toward the Negro, and, justified as these grievances are, they strike a false note: you do not paint a picture that is to be a work of art with air brush and poster paint—unless, that is, you are a pop artist—and Baldwin would shudder at the thought of having written a pop-art play. But that is what it is: agit-prop art.

Baldwin is undoubtedly one of our ablest essayists and literary journalists—terms I use with respect—but as a novelist he has always struck me as a failure, and a progressively worse one, at that. Somewhere hedged in by fact and opinion lies the domain of fiction, which is neither brute reality nor the spinning out of speculation, however profound or piercing. In fiction—and in drama, too—certain moods, experiences, states of being and insights achieve a solidity of texture through psychological exactness, tasteful selection of detail, architectural structuring, and (most important, though least definable) a poetic sensitivity to words. In these things, Baldwin is more or less deficient, and his assumption of the mantle of embattled prophethood and the consequent thickening of his voice have made matters worse.

John Simon. *Hudson Review*. Autumn. 1964. p. 421

Baldwin's writing, depending so much on the straightforward humane statement rather than on irony, wit, or the savage comic imagination of a Ralph Ellison, occasionally falls into platitude; but Baldwin is intuitive and courageous enough to know that this is where his chief strength lies—common experience uncommonly probed—so that while he occasionally expects the flat statement to do more literary work than it humanly can, I am still impressed by his maturity and understanding as a man. He knows life in a way that I can only call enlightened by Negro wisdom; it is the same older, deeper, seamier, finally larger grasp of suffering and reality that I have heard in the great Negro singers and have observed in certain subtly seasoned Negro acquaintances.

Seymour Krim. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Nov. 7, 1965. p. 5

The lives of the characters in these stories seem to possess an extra dimension of emptiness, because he sees them against the possibility of a very different kind of life: a life of ceremonies and mysteries touching the absolute. He is searching for another city and another country. Like the great moralizing novelists, he is a preacher; he writes to bear witness. It would be ridiculous, as well as rude, to tell him he should take another tack. My complaint is simply that the total hunger aching inside him has driven him on to invest certain aspects of secular life—notably sex—with a blasphemous grace, and, alas, the grace is artistically unconvincing. The beauty of the language in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* brought the hero's experience of salvation to life; and, faithful to the spirit of the blues, Baldwin left much of the book's anguish unresolved. But in recent works he has made larger and larger claims for his various instruments of salvation, while the instruments themselves have become less and less convincing. When, in *Another Country*, Baldwin gives us the word about the redeeming majesty of the orgasm—multiracial, heterosexual, or homosexual—you sense a lack of artistic control, to say nothing of a loss of common sense.

Joseph Featherstone. *New Republic*. Nov. 27, 1965. pp. 34–5

When he is not playing the role of the militant Negro intellectual or proving his social relevance, and especially when he is not writing about the United States, James Baldwin is willing to recognize the importance of status and place and of a reasonable degree of hierarchy in an orderly and civilized society. He remarks approvingly that Europeans have lived with the idea of status for a long time. . . . But when he speaks of America, he insists that the past has no relevance, that the heritage of Western civilization is of questionable value, that what we have in this country must be unrelated to any past scheme of social order. . . . He is, as we might expect, suspicious or even resentful of Faulkner's identification with the place Mississippi—which makes it all the more interesting and ironic that Mr. Baldwin's own best work is the result of his marked (if unwilling) identification with Harlem.

M.E. Bradford. *Georgia Review*. Winter, 1966. p. 439

In *Blues for Mr. Charlie*, Baldwin translates his apocalypse into concrete social terms. The race war is not yet quite upon us, but the play ends with preparation for a Negro protest march in a small Southern town in which its leader-minister keeps a gun in readiness concealed under his Bible. The alternatives are clear: love or violence, the Negro can wait no longer. Baldwin's theater resembles nothing so much—in form and fervor, at least—as the protest dramas of the radical left in the thirties. But the play is effective, for the emotions it arouses are specifically vindictive and personally embarrassing to his white audiences, which partly explains, no doubt, its failure on the Broadway stage. For Baldwin, the preacher, not only thunders at his audience's failure of social and human responsibility, but, far worse, he impugns their sexuality and depicts them as more terrified of the possibilities of life than the Negroes they persecute.

Edward Margolies. *Native Sons* (Lippincott). 1968. p. 124

I do not take back what I said about Baldwin's having become a great writer—I've said it enough. But no matter how great he is, he does not seem to have anything new or different or progressive to say anymore. This could very well mean that, among other things, Baldwin has unwittingly or wittingly written himself into the very species personage that he has seemingly been trying to destroy, the species personage of The Father. Whether this is true or not, or whether it is true for a certain period, it is clear that he has necessitated if not nurtured into being a radically different set of black writers from himself and, alas, has been eclipsed by them.

Let me make one thing absolutely clear. These writers are not in competition with James Baldwin, nor are they in conflict with him. Nor can anyone take Baldwin's ''place'' as a writer, and certainly not as a black writer. Baldwin is an individual writer in his own right.

Calvin C. Hernton in *Amistad I*, ed. John A. Williams and Charles F. Harris (Random). 1970. p. 213

Baldwin is saying in effect in this novel [*Another Country*] that we Americans have failed to live up to our professed moral commitments and that the innocence and puritanism of the country are largely at fault. This novel is like the essays insofar as Baldwin's stance is moral indignation. He is simply furious that America possesses the character it has. But what about more pertinent issues such as jobs, housing, health, education, etc.? What of the issues beyond the personal and the private? Baldwin is not so much concerned about these as about the moral issues. Hence his novel is about love, and only a moralist who does not grant the role of politics in determining the quality of life could believe that love is so central. . . . His most recent novel, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, reveals the same position. There Baldwin expresses sympathetic understanding of the political perspective, but clearly enough it is not his own.

Donald B. Gibson in *The Politics of Twentieth-Century Novelists*, ed. George A. Panichas (Hawthorn). 1971. pp. 318–9

Baldwin certainly risked a great deal [in *If Beale Street Could Talk*] by putting his complex narrative, which involves a number of important characters, into the mouth of a young girl. Yet Tish's voice comes to seem absolutely natural and we learn to know her from the inside out. Even her flights of poetic fancy—involving rather subtle speculations upon the nature of male-female relationships, or black-white relationships, as well as her articulation of what it feels like to be pregnant—are convincing. Also convincing is Baldwin's insistence upon the primacy of emotions like love, hate, or terror: it is not sentimentality, but basic psychology, to acknowledge the fact that one person will die, and another survive simply because one has not the guarantee of a fundamental human bond, like love, while the other has. . . .

The novel progresses swiftly and suspensefully, but its dynamic movement is interior. Baldwin constantly understates the horror of his characters' situation in order to present them as human beings whom disaster has struck, rather than as blacks who have, typically, been victimized by whites and are therefore likely subjects for a novel.

Joyce Carol Oates. *New York Times Book Section*. May 19, 1974. pp. 1–2

To read *If Beale Street Could Talk* as accurate social drama seems to me virtually impossible. I can't care as much as I want to about Fonny and Tish unless the system that victimizes them is described in a way that I can recognize. No one can doubt that terrible things are done to good and innocent black people. But Baldwin writes so flatly and schematically that he drives one to imagining ways in which his story might be more ''believable.''. . .

So one must try to read this novel allegorically, taking Tish and Fonny as Romeo and Juliet (as they're in fact teasingly called by some of their friends), cop-crossed lovers victimized by a repressive order whose exact workings don't really matter. They are credible and often affecting as lovers, but the fantasy on which Baldwin's allegory relies may disturb some of Baldwin's readers, particularly black ones: blackness in a white system becomes here a condition of helpless passivity, of getting screwed by the man; persecution and violation are emphasized so insistently and despairingly that enduring them becomes a kind of acceptance.

In fairness, I should say that Fonny is allowed to keep what manhood is possible for him by surviving confinement and escaping the homosexual rape he deeply fears that prison has in store for him. . . . But if Baldwin's political meanings carry an essentially sexual message, the frustrated rage in this novel needs a clearer relation to its inner subject. As it is, I unhappily suggest that an important and honorable writer has failed to make us believe in his vision of horrors that surely do exist, but outside his book.

Thomas R. Edwards. *New York Review of Books*. June 13, 1974. p. 37

Without Wright's rage, or Ellison's intellectual distance, Baldwin is particularly exposed to hurt. He is tormented by the way he is treated, and he faces us with a chronicle of pain that is intensely personal. But his self- absorption, his intimate insights into his own anguish seem to be the sign of a final break-away from the old prison in which just such self-absorption was prohibited. In some ways, Baldwin's very personalism, with all its idiosyncrasies and neurotic ticks, comes closest of all to embodying the force that powers the liveliest thrusts in the Movement. For Baldwin is the

first black writer to give real poetic depth to the polemics of black pride.

Sadly enough, his poetic powers have seemed to decline since his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. But he gives us in that work an imaginative expression of the black struggle for self-awareness and the ascent toward self-affirmation that is both deeper and more explicit than that in either *Native Son or Invisible Man*. . . .

In the novels that he writes after *Go Tell It on the Mountain*—*Giovanni's Room* (1956), *Another Country* (1962), *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), and *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974)—Baldwin seems to become more and more a spokesman for blackness and homosexuality. He moves toward the need for solutions, for a victory of darkness or light. He struggles increasingly against his early willingness to accept the mystery of his condition, and his fiction diminishes in quality accordingly. But no one can take from him his greatest achievement, the poetic interpretation of a new black consciousness and the expression of its complexities and paradoxes. Because it formulates so expressively the forces at work in the black culture during the early 1950s, because it engages social issues at a personal and emotional depth, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* will outlive most of Baldwin's essays, which have brought him, and quite justly, so much current attention.

Jerry H. Bryant. *Phylon*. June, 1976, pp. 184, 186–87

In his dramas, James Baldwin has followed both paths of contemporary black playwrights—most consciously writing for white spectators when he seems to be denouncing them (*Blues for Mister Charlie*), most effectively creating for black audiences when he seems unaware of any audience (*The Amen Corner*). Yet the varying reactions to the two plays clearly illustrate the problem of the black playwright. Sensational, melodramatic, and written for whites, *Blues for Mister Charlie* provoked controversy that increased the attention accorded to it. The more thoughtful, more realistic, more credible *The Amen Corner* waited a decade for professional production, then appeared almost without comment. The question that arises is, Can a black be respected simultaneously as an artist and as a faithful portrayer of black life if his reputation depends upon an audience that neither knows nor cares about the world depicted by that black, but is concerned only with the effect of that world on the lives of white Americans?. . .

Baldwin's theme in *The Amen Corner* is not restricted to black people. The need for love and understanding is propounded as emphatically in *Another Country*, where Baldwin shows that white, middle-class people must learn to love each other. This theme, in fact, dominates Baldwin's work: human beings must learn to give themselves totally to other human beings if humankind is to survive. Nevertheless, he seems to develop this recurrent thesis more credibly within the traditionally religious context and church setting of *The Amen Corner* than in the topical, political situation of *Blues for Mister Charlie*.

In short, in *The Amen Corner* Baldwin achieved a success in theme and characterization surpassing his effort in *Blues for Mister Charlie*.

Darwin T. Turner. In *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Thermon B. O'Daniel (Howard Univ. Pr., 1977), pp. 190, 193–94

James Baldwin has asked the most urgent and penetrating questions any modern novelist has asked about certain key patterns of human relationships. Deeply thinking and deeply feeling, he explores the possibilities of love, the inevitabilities of hate, and the bloody angles of race relations. And these fearsome interrogations are carried out in the harsh, tangible realities of urban America. Further, Baldwin treats all these confrontations as the substance of the artist's essential task—to dig into himself and into others for truths about the human condition and to report the truths accurately and unflinchingly. He has much to tell us about the social roles and the psychological and sexual identities of men and women; he reveals the meanings of blackness and whiteness, and of their commingling, in the United States. His mastery of style renders his many sad truths not palatable but palpable; we feel them on the nerve. It also colors his few joyous truths with a luminous intensity, with a thrilling energy of awareness. . . .

Baldwin's great merit, the artist's merit, as a chronicler of race relations in America is that he makes us see and feel the subjective realities of the national torment. Behind the tracts and statistics, the histories and sociologies and psychologies, there are breathing people; Baldwin takes us into their minds and hearts and forces upon us realizations that horrify and depress—but that may ultimately heal. Particularly in his two best novels, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Another Country*, he examines the interior sense of race and class, driving home the implications of these blunt facts of existence. . . .

Baldwin makes vivid the consequences of racial subordination for individual behavior and for the contours of black personality. His art might be almost a dramatization of the analysis of black psychological functioning set forth by the psychiatrists Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey in their provocative study *The Mark of Oppression*. They argue that the ''mark'' imposed by the long history of discrimination and enforced inequality contains the central elements of low self-esteem and aggression. Attempts to deal with these elements are a series of largely futile maneuvers, self-defeating in the main, as long as the social structure of injustice remains in place. Although the years since Kardiner and Ovesey's research and since the first publication of Baldwin's novels have been distinguished by some very important charges in educational and occupational opportunity and by the abolition of legal segregation, the damage and rage are still with us in significant quantities. Baldwin captures them as no other writer, black or white, has ever done.

Robert N. Wilson. *The Writer as Social Seer* (Univ. of North Carolina Pr., 1979), pp. 89–91

What can one say after summarizing, sampling, analyzing and interpreting the work of James Baldwin and reactions to that work, except that here is a writer of exceptional range and power. What is sometimes lacking in aesthetic control over long art forms such as the novel is more than adequately made up for by concisely constructed scenes, descriptions, sentences. Some of Baldwin's habits are bound to be irritating to some readers—his use of profanity, his explicit and sentimental sex scenes, his castigation of white America, his seeming inability to rid himself of early religious training he finds bothersome but ingrained, his repetition of some ideas, phrases, scenes. But what emerges, nevertheless,

from the whole of his work, is a kind of absolute conviction and passion and honesty that is nothing less than courageous.

When his work is joined with his life, the picture of courage grows. As we see Baldwin now victorious against the odds of poverty, race, stature, looks, homosexuality, publishing realities for black authors, it is needful to remind ourselves of the struggle that victory represents. We must remind ourselves because Baldwin has shared his struggle with his readers for a purpose—to demonstrate that our suffering is our bridge to one another. For an introduction to his life and work to do less than state that ultimate purpose behind everything Baldwin has written would be, I think, to do him a disservice.

Carolyn Wedin Sylvander. *James Baldwin* (Ungar, 1980), pp. 148–49

In truth, the way of life reconstructed in most of [James] Baldwin's novels is informed by a biblical imagination that is almost as bleak as that in *Native Son*. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) the Grimes family has only a tenuous grip on reality due to the religiosity of the storefront Pentecostal church. In *Giovanni's Room* (1956) the subject of black culture is displaced by the moral and social problems of white homosexuals in Europe. In *Another Country* (1962) a tortuous series of racial and sexual encounters—white vs. black, homosexual vs. heterosexual, North vs. South, European vs. American—drives jazz musician Rufus Scott to suicide but becomes the rite of passage to self-understanding for his jazz-singing sister Ida and the social rebels of modern America who affirm bisexuality as the highest form of love. In *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968) Leo Proudhammer contends with his private and public demons—heart condition, white mistress, black militant lover, racism, and the stultifying influence of his family—as he claws his way to salvation as a black actor. In *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) Tish and Fonny, the blues protagonists, are able to endure and transcend the agony of harassment in the ghetto and prison through love (personal and familial) and art (black music and sculpture). And in *Just above My Head*, Hall Montana, the first-person narrator-witness and older brother of the gospel-singing protagonist, testifies about the agonizing realities of human suffering and the ecstatic possibilities of love in the lives of those touched by his brother's journey on the gospel road.

As fascinating and ambitious as these novels are, only *Go Tell It on the Mountain. If Beale Street Could Talk*, and *Just above My Head* illuminate the matrix of shared experience of black Americans. But like [Richard] Wright, Baldwin focuses sharply on a single dimension of black culture. His emphasis, however, is not political but spiritual and sexual, not the terrifying possibilities of hatred, but the terrifying possibilities of love. In contrast to Wright's unrelenting narrative drive. Baldwin's short stories and novels are memorable for the soul-stirring eloquence and resonance of their pulpit oratory and black music as they plumb the depths of our suffering and the possibilities of our salvation. His use of the rhetoric, lore, and music of the black church show to their best advantage in his four collections of essays and in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. But they are also organically significant in *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Just above My Head*.

Bernard W. Bell. *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Pr., 1987), p. 219

Far from being licentious and orgiastic—charges flung at him in the 1960s, especially after *Another Country*—Baldwin's sexual ethics are puritanical, in that he stresses the place of love and self-knowledge in every sexual event. . . .

Baldwin said many times, and repeated near the end of his life, that he was not ''a believer.'' ''If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him.'' These words were written in 1962, and his position had scarcely altered since.

But while he was not a believer in the sense of subscribing to a particular faith, or belonging to a specific church, his life was based on a faith that can only be called religious, just as his thought was infused with religious belief. His scripture was the old black gospel music.

James Campbell. *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (New York: Viking, 1991), pp. 273, 281

Two of Baldwin's novels, *Another Country* and *Giovanni's Room*, deal centrally with gay relationships and issues of sexuality. The first-named of these is one of the great novels of our century. . . . The earlier work is interesting in its own right, but especially worth examining because it shows the author in the toils of certain prejudices from which, by the time of the later book, he had largely emancipated himself. Studying the two novels together is thus particularly interesting as it provides, among other things, a kind of chart of the author's intellectual, moral, and aesthetic development. . . .

Like Genet and [Tennessee] Williams, Baldwin always insists on love's fragility and transience. The novel's title has some relevance here, for ''the room'' in its cramped awkwardness is a symbol of the sexual panic and claustrophobia suffered by David. Its being far from the center, at [Place de] Nation [in Paris], signals what appears to David the peripheral experience of gay love. Giovanni has painted out the ground floor window and sits quite still next to it, in tension, when there are people to be heard on the other side of the window whom he cannot see—all of which is suggestive of gay closetry and secrecy. Giovanni's attempts literally to demolish part of the walls and build an alcove (that is, an extension) for books, is yet another (admittedly rather labored) symbol of the need to break out of the relationship.

The second aspect of *Giovanni's Room* which anticipates *Another Country* is the skillful presentation of character, in which the idea of people being fixed in any set of dispositions or traits is eschewed. . . .

This shifting of perspectives in relation to characters is mirrored by the nature of the episodes themselves. Rarely staying in the same emotional key, they move from gaiety to melancholy, from celebration to the funereal. . . .

Giovanni's Room is too embarrassed by the full implications of its subject matter. It enters bravely, but then shrinks away. It is, most significantly, informed by a collaborator's shame. But it is the beginning of the road which leads to one of the finest novels of our time.

Mark Lilly. *Gay Men's Literature in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York Univ. Pr., 1993), pp. 144, 167

More than any other writer of his generation, white or black, gay or straight, man or woman, it would not be an exaggeration to say, James Baldwin exerted a moral hold on the American imagination nonpareil in the annals of this country's literature and its public debate for nearly four decades, a status clearly in league with that of Emerson and Thoreau and Douglass. (Though it must be noted that Baldwin never won any of the awards consonant with such distinction—the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, the Nobel Prize.) Nonetheless, this author of six novels, several books of essays, three plays, and a number of short stories, this unusual looking, frail, high-strung, black, gay man did battle with the intractable American chimeras—racism, capitalism, brutality—with only a pen and a message, most simply, of love and redemption.

In one of his earliest published essays, ''The Harlem Ghetto,'' he adjudges:

> In America, though, life seems to move faster than anywhere else on the globe and each generation is promised more than what it will get: which creates, in each generation, a furious, bewildered rage, the rage of people who cannot find solid ground beneath their feet.

That essay, written in 1948, has an uncanny relevance forty-six years later, especially in light of the Los Angeles riots of 1992, the rise of violent crime, the problems of the American penal system, escalating unemployment and the so-called Generation X and its dismal future prospects. From the beginning James Baldwin had a language and a style of delivery informed by his youthful training as a Pentecostal minister and by his intimate knowledge of the King James Bible and its voices in the wilderness of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In a great many ways he became an America Jeremiah warning us of impending doom, a Jonah in exile in the belly of France, a courageous Isaiah on the march in Selma, Alabama, a fiery Hosea on the television screen, from the radio, atop the speaker's platform. . . .

Clearly Baldwin's was a life and mind made for legend. And in our current age of MTV and personal computers and Scud missiles and virtual reality, it is difficult to remember exactly how much of a legend in his own time was the author of *The Fire Next Time*—that fiercely eloquent investigation into the Nation of Islam and exploration of religion and race and the American dilemma. Upon its publication in 1963, Baldwin was on the cover of *Time*, in *Life*, saturating the airwaves, a guest at the White House. Nor is it easy to comprehend the inexplicable daring and courage it took for a thirty-two-year-old black man to publish a novel about a love affair between two white men, *Giovanni's Room*, in 1956. America was about to lose her hateful illusion of innocence, and James Baldwin was undoubtedly one of her most passionate and looked-to Native Sons.

Randall Kenan. *The Nation*. May 2, 1994, p. 596

Baldwin was a writer who could combine the cadence of the King James Bible and Henry James in what he liked to call the ''beat'' of African-American culture. His audience was the whole ''nation,'' and he incorporated the whole nation into his voice. His was the ''voice in the wilderness'' that preached the necessity of touching. In his personal life and his work, he took the side of those who were made into exiles and outcasts by barriers of race, sex, and class or who turned away from safety and chose the honorable path of tearing down such barriers. But he mourned for those who had created the barriers and had unwittingly allowed themselves to be destroyed by them.

David Leeming. *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1994), p. xiii

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BAMBARA, Toni Cade (1939–1995)

A title with a religious allusion may seem inappropriate for an essay on the works of Toni Cade Bambara since religion, i.e., Christianity, as it is often depicted in the works of Black writers with their depictions of hair straightening, signifying in church, and preacher men—sometimes more physically passionate than spiritually—is conspicuously absent here. In fact, many of the usual concerns, about color and class, frequently found in the writings of other Black women prosaists, are absent. Bambara appears less concerned with mirroring the Black existence in America than in chronicling ''the movement'' intended to improve and change that existence. Like a griot, who preserves the history of his or her people by reciting it, Bambara perpetuates the struggle of her people by literally recording it in their own voices.

Her three major works of fiction, *Gorilla, My Love* (1972), *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* (1977), and *The Salt Eaters* (1980), trace the civil rights movement in America from its inception, through its most powerful expression, to its loss of momentum. Each uses language to particularize and individualize the voices of the people wherever they are—on a New York City street, crossing the waters of the Pacific, amid the red salt clay of the Louisiana earth—and to celebrate their progress as they think, feel, and act in their struggle to be free.

But, paradoxically, while Bambara uses language to capture the speech patterns of the characters she idiomatically places in their time and space, Bambara eschews language, words, rhetoric, as the modus operandi for the people to attain their freedom. For Bambara, an innate spirituality, almost mystical in nature, must be endemic to the people if they are to have success. Her works juxtapose the

inadequacy of language and the powers of the spirit, which needs no words to spread its light among the masses.

> Ruth Elizabeth Burks. ''From Baptism to Resurrection: Toni Cade Bambara and the Incongruity of Language.'' In Mari Evans, ed. *Black Women Writers* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1984), pp. 48–49

Ultimately the genuinely modern writer ''assumes a culture and supports the weight of a civilization.'' That assumption connects the present moment both to an immediate and to a remote past. From such a writer, we learn that whoever is able to live completely in the present, sustained by the lesson of the past, commands the future. The vitality of the jazz musician, by analogy, is precisely this ability to compose, in vigorous images of the most recent musical language, the contingencies of time in an examined present moment. The jam session, the ultimate formal expression of the jazz musician, is, on one hand, a presentation of all the various ways, past and present, that a tune may be heard; on the other, it is a revision of the past history of a tune, or of its presentation by other masters, ensuring what is lasting and valuable and useful in the tune's present moment and discarding what is not. Constructing rapid contrasts of curiously mingled disparities, the jam session is both a summing up and a part-by-part examination by various instruments of an integrity called melody. Now a melody is nothing more or less than the musical rendition of what a poet or a historian calls theme. And a theme is no other thing than a noticeable pattern occurring through time as time assumes its rhythmic cycle: past, present, and future. *The Salt Eaters* of Toni Cade Bambara is a modern myth of creation told in the jazz mode.

A narrative which opens with a direct question—''Are you, sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?''—evokes from us an immediate response. In a time of ubiquitous pollution, unless we are head-buried geese, we answer: Yeah! By leave of our spontaneous response to an irresistible call (the mode of the jazz composer), we enter the improvising, stylizing, re-creative, fecund, and not-so-make-believe world of *The Salt Eaters*. That world, called Claybourne, Georgia, is in a state of definition and transition: ''Claybourne hadn't settled on its identity yet. . . . Its history put it neither on this nor that side of the Mason Dixon. And its present seemed to be a cross between a little Atlanta, a big Mount Bayou and Trenton, New Jersey, in winter.'' But we enter Claybourne during its preparation for spring festival, and there we discover what resembles a splendid community marketplace: ''Tables, tents, awnings, rides, fortunetellers, candy booths, gymnasts with mats, nets, trampolines, oil drums from the islands, congos from who knew where, flat trucks, platforms, pushcarts and stalls of leather crafts, carved cooking spoons, jewelry . . . flower carts, incense peddlers . . . kids racing by with streamers and balloons. . . Folks readying up for the festival'' scheduled to begin when ''Hoo Doo Man broke out of the projects with a horned helmet . . . and led the procession through the district to the Mother Earth floats by the old railroad yard.'' We discover that during festival, ''People were supposed to write down all the things they wanted out of their lives—bad habits, bad debts, bad dreams—and throw them on the fire.'' Claybourne is in preparation for the rites of spring renewal. Yet in the midst of ''the fugue-like interweaving of voices'' resonant in the streets, we hear the voice of a street-corner preacher admonishing:

> History is calling us to rule again and you lost dead souls are standing around doing the freakie dickie . . . never recognizing the teachers come among you to prepare you for the transformation, never recognizing the synthesizers come to forge the new alliances, or the guides who throw open the new footpaths, or the messengers come to end all excuses. Dreamer? The dream is real, my friends. The failure to make it work is the unreality.

The ominous cry of the street preacher, urging the community to recall its history, manifest its destiny, and heed its laws, intones the themes of its spring celebration: transformation, synthesis, and renewal.

As the community must engage its history in order to decipher the meaning of its own rituals—the rhythmic movement toward its destiny—so the individual self must engage its history in order to be well (whole); for if it does not, it hazards the loss of all that makes it whole. That loss is unaffordable and dread; it abates the power of regeneration.

The voice of the street preacher merges with the voice which has opened the narrative. That voice, its music ''running its own course up under the words'' is the Ebonic, mythopoeic voice of Minnie Ransom, ''fabulous healer'' of Claybourne, directly addressing Velma Henry, her patient, the celebrant, who enacts the meaning of the ritual that the entire community prepares to celebrate. It is through Velma's consciousness that we hear and observe everything that we know of Claybourne; it is Velma's personal transformation that we experience and that figures in the possibility of the community's renewal; it is through Velma's negation and acceptance of the actual and her pursuit of the possible that we learn the identity and enormous re-creative powers of those who have eaten salt together and who have learned to reconcile both the brine and the savor of life. . . .

Modernity, a jam session constructing rapid contrasts of curiously mingled disparities, is at once an extension of the past and a conduit of some future balancing of the best and worst of human possibilities. Thus, the child, also a passenger on the boat of refugees, snuggling close beside her mother as they grope their way topside to the deck searching a seat, is directed: ''the passengers along the way grabbing the small hand and leading the child to the next hand outstretched.'' This child, like lil' Hazel and baby Jason and Raymond and Ollie and Manny and Patsy and Sylvia and Rae Anne and Horace and all the little girls becoming women and boys becoming men and the communities of the stories in *Gorilla, My Love* and *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, lives amid the scheme of oppositions played out in the great conjugation of past and present time mediating future possibilities.

It is this conjugation of time along with its referent—the salient features of a journey into experience conducted by a people who wrenched from a coherent past cast refugee upon a sea of circumstance confront incoherence and give it form—the Afro-American paradigm of creation—which *The Salt Eaters* evokes. Its cast of characters so far consummate the Bambara canon. Velma and Obie of the cast of *The Salt Eaters* are the energy of our possibilities while Campbell, Ruby, Jan, and company are the resources of our strength. Fred Holt, the bus driver of *The Salt Eaters*, is our worst choices able to be redeemed, while Dr. Meadows represents our ability to choose. The entire community of all of them is sufficient to defy the agents of destruction aligned around the malign power plant which seems to tower in their world. The valiant and gorgeous people of *The Salt Eaters* portray the strength of our past, available in the present, able to move our future.

As story, *The Salt Eaters* is less moving tale than brilliant total recall of tale. It is no blues narrative plucking the deep chords of the harp of our soul; no tale of anguish, struggle, lust, and love inspiring and conducting us toward mastery of the spirit and therefore mastery of the demon blues (and whites). It is not a declaration; rather it is an interrogation. It is not indicative in mood; rather it is subjunctive in mood. The novel, which is less novel than rite, begins with a question. It moves around a central word, *if*. *If* we wish to live, *if* we wish to be healthy, then we must *will* it so. *If* we *will* it so, then we must be willing to endure the act of transformation. *The Salt Eaters* is a rite of transformation quite like a jam session. The familiar tune is played, reviewed, and then restated in a new form.

In the tradition of fiction from which she works, Toni Cade Bambara's first novel faces fabulous first novels. Some among that rich opulence are William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, Du Bois's *Quest of the Silver Fleece*, James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Langston Hughes' *Not without Laughter*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Ann Petry's *The Street*, James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha*, Paul Marshall's *Brown Girl*, *Brownstone*, Ishmael Reed's *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and Charles S. Johnson's *Faith and the Good Thing*. All of these she knows and knows well. *The Salt Eaters* gestures to these and more. Many of these books belong to the company of the best ever written; all are global in their implications. More in the style of the zany brilliance of a Reed and the cultural ecology of a Johnson, *The Salt Eaters* does not pretend toward the simple splendor of the high elegant blues tradition. Though the work matches the encyclical inclusiveness of single works within that tradition, it dares a wrench. It subdues story, eschews fiction, not for fact but for act. It challenges us to renew and reform our sensibilities so that the high mode—the conquering healing power of main-line Afro-American fiction—can reemerge and become again our equipment for living—for life.

> Eleanor W. Traylor. In Mari Evans, ed. *Black Women Writers* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1984), pp. 58–60, 68–69

Although everyone knows instinctively that Toni Cade Bambara's first novel, *The Salt Eaters*, is a book that he or she must read, many people have difficulty with it. They get stuck on page ninety-seven or give up after muddling through the first sixty-five pages twice with little comprehension. Some cannot get past chapter one. Lost and bewildered, students decide that it is ''over their heads'' and wonder what made their teacher assign it in the first place.

There are compelling reasons for studying the novel. It is a daringly brilliant work that accomplishes even better for the 1980s what *Native Son* did for the 1940s, *Invisible Man* for the 1950s, or *Song of Solomon* for the 1970s: It fixes our present and challenges the way to the future. Reading it deeply should result in personal transformation; teaching it well can be a political act. However, Toni Cade Bambara has not made our job easy. *Salt* is long, intricately written, trickily structured, full of learning, heavy with wisdom—is, altogether, what critics mean by a ''large'' book.

At its literal-metaphoric center, Velma Henry and Minnie Ransom sit on round white stools in the middle of the Southwest Community Infirmary. ''The good woman Ransom,'' ''fabled healer of the district,'' is taxing her formidable powers with Velma, who has lost her balance and attempted suicide. The novel radiates outward in ever-widening circles—to the Master's Mind, the ring of twelve who hum and pray with Minnie; to the music room cluttered with staff, visitors, and assorted onlookers; to the city of Claybourne surrounding the Infirmary walls—a community which itself is composed of clusters (The Academy of the Seven Arts, the cafe with its two round tables of patrons, La Salle Street, the park); to the overarching sky above and the earth beneath steadily spinning on its axis. From the center, the threads web out, holding a place and weaving links between everything and everybody. At the same time, this center is a nexus which pulls the outside in—setting up the dialectic of connectedness which is both meaning and structure of the book.

Of the huge cast, certain characters stand out. There is M'Dear Sophie Heywood, Velma's godmother, who caught her at birth and has protected and praised her ever since. Now, she is so incensed with Velma's selfish nihilism that she has imposed silence upon herself and exited the circle/room, thinking back on her godchild as well as her deceased mate, Daddy Dolphy; on her son and Velma's almost-husband, Smitty, who was turned into an invalid by the police in a violent anti-war demonstration; and on her own bitter memories of being brutally beaten in jail by her neighbor, Portland Edgers, who had been forced to do so by guns and clubs. There is Fred Holt, the bus driver, ''brimming over with rage and pain and loss'' (and sour chili). Married as a youth to Wanda, who deserted him for the Nation of Islam, he now has a white wife Margie, who gives him nothing but her back. His misery is completed by the death of his best friend, Porter, a well-read conversationalist who was the only bright spot in Fred's days: Other important characters are Velma's husband Obie, whose ''image of himself [is] coming apart''; Dr. Meadows, a conscientious young M.D. who is pulling together his ''city'' versus ''country,'' his white westernized and ancient black selves; and a traveling troupe of Third World political performers called the Seven Sisters.

The rich cross section of variegated folks also includes less prominent characters such as Butch and Nadeen, two teenage parents-to-be; Jan and Ruby, activist women sharing a salad and organizing strategy; Donaldson, the inept FBI-CIA informant; and the list goes on. Some of these people appear onstage *in propria persona;* others are offstage fragments of memory. Some are quietly dead; others are roaming spirits. In many ways, these distinctions are false and immaterial, for everyone we meet takes up essential space, and there is no meaningful difference between their various states of corporeality/being/presence (a fact which confuses readers trying to keep the characters ''straight''). Old Wife, Minnie's ''Spirit Guide,'' is as ''real'' as Cora Rider grumbling in the music room. When Obie muses about his younger brother Roland, incarcerated in Rikers Island prison for raping a forty-six-year-old black woman, mother of four, Roland's voice and the woman's mopping up her own blood are as clear as Palma and Marcus hugging in the rain. And, like Velma, all of the major figures who need it undergo a healing change. . . .

Two versions of the future are given. One is an in-process sketch of a humanitarian society newly evolving from the death of ''the authoritarian age.'' The other is a nightmarish glimpse of ''everyone not white, male and of wealth'' fighting for burial grounds, of radioactively mutant kids roaming the stockaded streets killing ''for the prize of . . . gum boots, mask and bubble suit'' needed to breathe the contaminated air. Yes, there are

''choices to be noted. Decisions to be made.'' This ultimatum is the burden of the question that Minnie repeatedly puts to Velma: ''Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?''—for health entails taking responsibility for the self and the world we live in. Years after her healing, Velma ''would laugh remembering she'd thought *that* was an ordeal. She didn't know the half of it. Of what awaited her in years to come.''

Concern for a viable future explains the emphasis which Bambara places upon children, the succeeding generations. Unfortunately, they, too, are suffering from the vacuity of the age:

> there was no charge, no tension, no stuff in these young people's passage. They walked by you and there was no breeze of merit, no vibes. Open them up and you might find a skate key, or a peach pit, or a Mary Jane wrapper, or a slinky, but that would be about all.

They want a sweet, easy life, and they fight each other. Like their elders, they, too, have to be saved from and for themselves, for, as Old Wife declares, ''The chirren are our glory.''

As a self-described ''Pan-Africanist-socialist-feminist,'' Bambara not only cares about children, but manifests a political consciousness which makes her a socially committed writer. It was quite some time, she says, before she ''began to realize that this [writing] was a perfectly legitimate way to participate in struggle.'' Now she fulfills what Kalamu ya Salaam defines as the ''responsibility of *revolutionary* Third World writers'': ''to cut through this [mass media] crap, to expose the cover-ups and ideological/material interests inherent in these presentations, and . . . to offer analysis, inspiration, information and ideas which . . . work in the best interest of Third World defense and development.''

> Gloria T. Hull. In Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers, eds. *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 216–19, 228–29

The question of identity—of personal definition within the context of community—emerges as a central motif for Toni Cade Bambara's writing. Her female characters become as strong as they do, not because of some inherent ''eternal feminine'' quality granted at conception, but rather because of the lessons women learn from communal interaction. Identity is achieved, not bestowed. Bambara's short stories focus on such learning. Very careful to present situations in a highly orchestrated manner, Bambara describes the difficulties that her characters must overcome.

Contemporary literature teems with male characters in coming-of-age stories or even female characters coming of age on male typewriters. Additional stories, sometimes written by black authors, indeed portray such concerns but narrowly defined within crushing contexts of city ghettos or rural poverty. Bambara's writing breaks such molds as she branches out, delineating various settings, various economic levels, various characters—both male and female.

Bambara's stories present a decided emphasis on the centrality of community. Many writers concentrate so specifically on character development or plot line that community seems merely a foil against which the characters react. For Bambara the community becomes essential as a locus for growth, not simply as a source of narrative tension. Thus, her characters and community do a circle dance around and within each other as learning and growth occur.

Bambara's women learn how to handle themselves within the divergent, often conflicting, strata that compose their communities. Such learning does not come easily, hard lessons result from hard knocks. Nevertheless, the women do not merely endure; they prevail, emerging from these situations more aware of their personal identities and of their potential for further self-actualization. More important, they guide others to achieve such awareness.

Bambara posits learning as purposeful, geared toward personal and societal change. Consequently, the identities into which her characters grow envision change as both necessary and possible, understanding that they themselves play a major part in bringing about that change. The ideal approximates the nature of learning described in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which he decries the ''banking concept,'' wherein education becomes ''an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor.'' Oppressive situations define the learner as profoundly ignorant, not possessing valuable insights for communal sharing.

Although many of Bambara's stories converge on the school setting as the place of learning in formal patterns, she liberates such settings to admit and encourage community involvement and ownership. Learning then influences societal liberation and self-detérmination. These stories describe learning as the process of problem solving, which induces a deepening sense of self, Freire's ''intentionality.''

For Bambara the community benefits as both ''teacher'' and ''student'' confront the same problem—that of survival and prospering in hostile settings, without guaranteed outcomes. The commonality of problems, then, encourages a mutual sharing of wisdom and respect for individual difference that transcends age, all too uncommon in a more traditional education context. Bambara's characters encounter learning within situations similar to the older, tribal milieus. The stages of identity formation, vis-à-vis the knowledge base to be mastered, have five segments: (1) beginner, (2) apprentice, (3) journeyman, (4) artisan, and (5) expert.

Traditional societies employed these stages to pass on to their youth that information necessary to ensure the survival of the tribe, such as farming techniques, and that information needed to inculcate tribal mores, such as songs and stories. Because of Bambara's interest in cultural transmission of values, her characters experience these stages in their maturational quest. In her stories these levels do not correlate with age but rather connote degrees of experience in community. . . .

Toni Cade Bambara's stories do more than paint a picture of black life in contemporary black settings. Many writers have done that, more or less successfully. Her stories portray women who struggle with issues and learn from them. Sometimes the lessons taste bitter and the women must accumulate more experience in order to gain perspective. By centering community in her stories, Bambara displays both the supportive and the destructive aspects of communal interaction. Her stories do not describe a predictable, linear plot line; rather, the cyclic enfolding of characters and community produces the kind of tension missing in stories with a more episodic emphasis.

Her characters achieve a personal identity as a result of their participation in the human quest for knowledge, which brings power. Bambara's skill as a writer saves her characters from being stereotypic cutouts. Although her themes are universal, communities that Bambara describes rise above the generic. More fully delineated than her male characters, the women come across as

specific people living in specific places. Bambara's best stories show her characters interacting within a political framework wherein the personal becomes political.

> Martha M. Vertreace. In Mickey Pearlman, ed. *American Women Writing Fiction* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), pp. 155–57, 165–69

The nationalist-feminist ideology in *Seabirds* is not solely generated by depictions of characters. It is reinforced by narrative texture and form. As a body of race-and gender-specific narratives, these stories draw on various Afro-American cultural practices—the oral storytelling tradition, the use of folklore, and the reinscription of Afro-American music forms. The incorporation of these practices is evident in the narrative structure, point of view, and semiotic texture of the stories.

Bambara has spoken and written extensively on the influence of Afro-American music on her work. What is most striking about her appropriation of jazz in *Seabirds*, however, is its role in emphasizing and reinforcing the ideology of the text. Jazz performances generally begin with a statement of theme, are followed by improvisations or extreme variations, and conclude with reiteration and resolution. An analogous pattern structures each of the stories in this collection. In ''The Apprentice,'' for example, the narrative begins with the narrator's anxiety about her mission, moves to an encounter between a young Black man and a white policeman, then moves to a senior citizen's complex, and finally to a Black restaurant. It then refocuses on the narrator's concerns and reveals her resolution to remain committed to political engagement. In ''Witchbird,'' each fleeting reflection of Honey's extended blues solo constitutes a comment on some aspect of her life—her career, her past relationships with men, and her overall perception of herself. And in ''Christmas Eve at Johnson's Drugs N Goods,'' Candy begins by reflecting on Christmas and a possible visit from her father, moves on to individual episodes largely focused on characterizations of the store's customers, and concludes with accepting Obatale's invitation to a Kwanza celebration.

This mode of narration serves a significant ideological function. In its highlighting and summarizing, as well as its glossing over certain episodes, the text produces its ideological content largely through clusters of events. Hence, in ''Broken Field Running,'' the renaming process by which Black children discard their ''slave names'' and appropriate African names to define themselves with the context of Black culture, the police harassment symbolized by the police car cruising in the Black community, and the destructive effect of ghetto life depicted in the criminal activities of Black males form a montage, a cluster of images each one of which might be said to encode a particular aspect of ideology.

The narrative perspective, particularly as it reveals the narrator's relationship to the text's ideology, also contributes to the ideological construct. In *Seabirds*, as in *Gorilla*, the dominant narrative strategy is the apparently unmediated response of characters to the world around them. . . .

Gorilla and *Seabirds*, . . .while produced at historically different moments, are both structured by the desire to synthesize contending ideologies of Black cultural nationalism and feminism. With its submerged text, its positioning of girls and women as primary narrators, its eruption of women-defined issues and strategies of marginalizing Black males, *Gorilla* disrupts the apparent unity of the world it seems to represent: an idyllic inner world of the Black community in which intraracial strife is minimal or nonexistent.

Seabirds identifies itself with the emergent feminist movement even in its dedication. The women in these stories possess a keen political awareness; the young girls have expanded their political consciousness; and Black male figures are even farther on the margins than they were in the earlier work. Tensions between nationalists and feminists are concretely presented in *Seabirds*, and the indeterminancy of the text is in the foreground.

The Salt Eaters, a work that bears all the traces of postmodern textual production, radically rewrites and displaces these earlier works. . . . [Its] central representations of madness and disillusionment, the increased antagonism between the sexes, and the triumph of an alternative culture displace the ambivalence of the earlier works and project a vision that is both dystopian and utopian.

> Elliot Butler-Evans. *Race, Gender and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), pp. 119–20, 122

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BANKS, Russell (1940–)

In Russell Banks's previous novel *Continental Drift*, there occurred the summing-up sentence: ''This is how a good man loses his goodness.'' The question as to how it happens is posed again in *Affliction*. Where *Continental Drift* framed the pressures on individuals and families in terms of the inexorable working out of the economic laws of supply and demand and accumulation, in the new novel the loss of goodness is placed in a longer perspective, one that begins to approach anthropology rather than history. . . .

Banks's statement about the cause of male inability to achieve a ''decent,'' a ''good'' relationship to other people, and especially to women, is simplistic. Nevertheless, *Affliction* is a compelling depiction of a man unable to turn his best feelings and responses into words and behavior and who ends by repeating the violence done to himself as a child and adolescent. . . .

One cannot miss the note of mourning in *Affliction*. First of all, it's there for the wasted lives that make up history, but find no place in history. But in Banks's sympathy for his character there's also a sense of elegiac regret for the loss of the image, the model, of justness and strength portrayed, say, by John Wayne in *The Searchers*. Melancholy, but sufficient; able to live with his isolation as he returns to the desert; rejecting the settled life and ties of the homestead. The cinematic parallel to Wade Whitehouse [Banks's protagonist] would lie somewhere in the haunted amnesia of Harry Dean Stanton (coming out of the desert in *Paris, Texas*) and the confused, perverted honesty of Harvey Keitel in *Blue Collar*.

> Martin Chalmers. *The Listener*. Sept. 13, 1990. p. 34

Rule of the Bone invites comparison not only with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* but also, somewhat unflatteringly, with *The Catcher in the Rye*. Bone is more generic and less funny than Holden Caulfield, and unlike Holden, he displays an odd immunity to pop culture. It's as if J. D. Salinger registered forty years in advance a commercialized teenage reality that Mr. Banks himself shies away from. Mr. Banks also falls short of Mr. Salinger's artistry in filtering acute psychological observation through vernacular distortion. But the comparison is not entirely fair. In his social and economic privilege, Holden Caulfield is so familiar to educated readers that Mr. Salinger can afford the luxury of subtlety. Bone, on the other hand, has had as little exposure to ''sivilization'' as Huck Finn did, and in order to rescue him from muteness Mr. Banks is compelled, a la Twain, to place him in fantastic situations. If the resulting story seems unrealistically bleak and its hero incompletely lovable—if you balk at the unrelenting depiction of white adults as selfish, cruel, and criminal—it's worth remembering that for kids like Bone the state of innocence to which Holden longs to return has never been an option: they would be happy to meet adults whose worst sin is phoniness. Intoxicating and unsparing, *Rule of the Bone* is a romance for a world fast running out of room for childhood.

Jonathan Franzen. *New York Times Book Review*. May 7, 1995, p. 13

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BARAKA, Amiri (LeRoi Jones, 1934–)

LeRoi Jones's *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* is close to the spirit of modern jazz. Like Allen Ginsberg, he improvises form and structure, but the principle is different. He tries something out, expands on it, repeats effects, drifts dreamily along wispy spirals of suggestion, grows tedious, pulls himself up short and does a beautiful solo for a minute or two. He has a natural gift for quick, vivid imagery and spontaneous humor, and his poems are filled with sardonic or sensuous or slangily knowledgeable passages set down on the run. If he can take his cleverness and facility in making momentarily vivacious effects a little in hand, he may acquire some of the character and incisiveness he now lacks. Meanwhile he represents an attractive current of youthful poetry that makes good use of the sparkling chatter and directness of his generation.

M.L. Rosenthal. *The Reporter*. Jan. 3, 1963. p. 49

Blues People is a book of large ambitions. LeRoi Jones, poet, essayist, story writer and jazz critic, will not confine himself to the history of the development of the blues as music. He will not simply talk about blues people, how they felt in their double exile—as Negroes and as artists—from a country they never left. He subtitles his book ''Negro Music in White America'' and from the first page we are informed of his larger sociological and anthropological interests and of his intention to show us the roots of blues in a people and their fate. . . . It is ironic that this gifted young poet, bent on fighting middle-class American culture in all its shabby superficiality, yields so willingly to that very culture's most vulgar jargon, its narrowest, pseudo-sociological mode of thinking. . . .

The book is most effective in its simple, direct information about blues music and its people, and its willingness to relate the suffering of generations of Negroes to the tenaciously redemptive power of their music. What was one kind of Hell, the author says, now turns into another as Negroes succumb to the blandishments of the white middle-class world. The blues and their successors in the several forms of jazz are thereby threatened. No less so, however, than the writer—living in that same world—who tries to do them justice.

Robert Coles. *Partisan Review*. Winter, 1964. pp. 131–3

Read as a record of an earnest young man's attempt to come to grips with his predicament as Negro American during a most turbulent period of our history, *Blues People* may be worth the reader's time. Taken as a theory of American Negro culture, it can only contribute more confusion than clarity. For Jones has stumbled over that ironic obstacle which lies in the path of any who would fashion a theory of American Negro culture while ignoring the intricate network of connection which binds Negroes to the larger society. To do so is to attempt a delicate brain surgery with a switch-blade.

Ralph Ellison. *Shadow and Act* (Random). 1964. p. 253. [*New York Review of Books*. Feb. 6, 1964]

His is a turbulent talent. While turbulence is not always a sign of power or of valuable meaning, I have a hunch that LeRoi Jones's fire will burn ever higher and clearer if our theatre can furnish an adequate vessel to harbor his flame. We need it.

He is very angry. Anger alone may merely make a loud noise, confuse, sputter and die. For anger to burn to useful effect, it must be guided by an idea. . . . With LeRoi Jones it is easy to say that the plight of the Negro ignited the initial rage—justification enough—and that the rage will not be appeased until there is no more black and white, no more color except as differences in hue and accent are part of the world's splendid spectacle. But there is more to his ferocity than a protest against the horrors of racism.

What we must not overlook [in *Dutchman*] is that, while this explosion of fury is its rhetorical and emotional climax, the crux of its significance resides in the depiction of the white girl whose relevance to the play's situation does not lie in her whiteness, but in her representative value as a token of our civilization. She is our neurosis. Not a neurosis in regard to the Negro, but the absolute neurosis of American society.

Harold Clurman. *The Nation*. April 13, 1964. p. 383

That the play is preposterous on the literal level is obvious enough. Yet allegory or symbolism, to be effective, must first function properly on the literal level. But does *Dutchman* work even figuratively? Does the white society woo the Negro with a mixture

of promises and rebuffs only to destroy him utterly when he shows his just resentment? Perhaps. But it looks to me as if resentment were finally beginning to pay off. Whites, moreover, have been treating Negroes with a simpler, though no less damnable, cruelty. They have been neither so Machiavellian, nor so psychotic, as *Dutchman* implies. Add to this Jones's often consciously arty language and the vacuity of his symbols: the girl plies her victims with apples, an assembly-line Eve; the title presumably refers to the Flying Dutchman, but whether this describes the girl, fatally traveling up and down the subway line, or the boy, needing to be redeemed by the true love of a white girl, is unclear and, in either case, unhelpful.

John Simon. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1964. p. 424

The revitalization of language is not simply a matter of *forcing* words to have meaning. How would we go about trying to resurrect lovely, individual, colossal? Not, surely, by involving them in compounds or extraordinary juxtapositions. But these forcing tactics are the ones Mr. Jones most easily employs; his effort is to wrench the word into a context where it must shudder, repent of its sins, and then take up wholesomely and whole-heartedly the New Life. The problem with such a technique is that it cannot be economical; so much of its effort must be spent on establishing the word in its new surroundings that there is little time left in which to use the word with skill, ease, and a belief in its rightness. It is like the renaming of the months in the French Revolution. The new names are naked and violent; they have no familiars, no body of accepted connotation which mediates between them and us. Because his poetry lacks such mediations, Mr. Jones must say things at length, must repeat them several times, in order that within the poem he can establish that familiarity which the previous convention could automatically depend upon.

William Dickey. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1964–65. p. 592

. . .these two karate blows by LeRoi Jones display no talent at all—they are inspired primarily by race hatred. Larry Rivers' set for *The Toilet* consists of seven urinals; the scene is the boy's john of a predominantly Negro high school. There students congregate, during pauses in the educational process, to exchange insults and obscenities, and to gang up on unprotected students, usually ''whiteys.'' The major victim of *The Toilet* is a Puerto Rican homosexual who, having sent a love letter to one of the Negroes, is brutally beaten, and then tossed, bleeding and unconscious, into one of the urinals. The Negro he loves—and who helped to mug him—returns surreptitiously at the end to cradle the victim's head in his lap and to sob over his prostrate form. This maudlin conclusion reveals a soft chink in the author's spikey armor, but still the play is not a drama but a psychodrama, designed for the acting out of sado-masochistic racial fantasies.

The Slave projects these fantasies into a Genet-like war between White and Black, which the Negroes are on the verge of winning.

Robert Brustein. *New Republic*. Jan. 23, 1965. pp. 32–3

LeRoi Jones is already familiar to New Yorkers as the author of some sensational little plays, and to readers of poetry as the author of some sensational little poems, and if his book on ''Negro music in white America'' fails to be sensational, it is not because he has tried to keep it from being so, but because his accommodation of his subject has been couched—bedded down, in fact—in that language of all languages most refractory to sensationalism: the latest jargon of the social sciences. . . . Yet this fancy-talk of the social sciences is not used to describe or even to analyze, but to condemn and to despise. There are times when the belief in original virtue, a concept Mr. Jones has invented to oppose the original sin of being Black in White America, sounds either histrionic or professional, and in *Blues People*, for all its clever discussions of Armstrong and Beiderbecke, Bebop and Swing, Cecil Taylor and Ornette Coleman. . . , Mr. Jones does little more than attempt to create a system or dogma of evil and innocence by sheer classroom oratory.

Richard Howard. *Poetry*. March, 1965. pp. 403–4

Somewhere dimly beneath the surface [of *The System of Dante's Hell*], emerging it would seem only when Jones for whatever reason stops being arty and portentous, is a straightforward, rather moving description of what it meant for him to be Negro in his years of putting on flesh and ideas. . . . If these things derive from Ralph Ellison, they are not invalidated by that, and they have the virtue of being simply stated.

Richard Gilman. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Dec. 26, 1965. p. 9

LeRoi Jones writes in the mood of the Prodigal Son who has returned at last to his blackness. He celebrates his homecoming in some 20 essays [*Home: Social Essays*], written between 1960 and 1965. . . . The early pieces, written between 1960 and 1963, are often arresting and sometimes persuasive. Thereafter Jones enters the fantasyland of black nationalism. . . .

About a third of the collection is devoted to literary subjects, and here Jones is distinctly at his best. . . . In his emphatic rejection of formal art, of tradition and of classical restraint, Jones betrays his affinity for that neo-Romantic permissiveness, that unbridled self-indulgence, which links him to the poets of the Beat generation.

We have finally to deal with five or six pieces which are not so much essays as fulminations. Ostensibly they announce the author's conversion to black nationalism; in reality they signal an esthetic breakdown, a fatal loss of artistic control. The prose disintegrates, the tone becomes hysterical, and all pretense of logical argument is abandoned. The style, shall we say, is severely disturbed.

Robert Bone. *New York Times Book Section*. May 8, 1966. p. 3

LeRoi Jones's *The System of Dante's Hell* (after two books of poems) is the traditional first-novel autobiography, but it plays with the form of fiction and the sentence structure of prose. The front of the book provides a kind of do-it-yourself structure for the whole novel, which we may impose, if we wish, on ''chapters'' of association-linked clauses and phrases. This outline is of the divisions and circles of Hell, and the novelist appears to be holding up against himself, like a costume, each type and sub-type of sin, seeing himself for a few pages as *that* sinner. . . . In its final pages

the associational jumps narrow, the mind focuses on one action within one sequence of time, and a story appears like an island in the stream-of-consciousness. Powerful enough to reward any admirer of conventional fiction, it concerns a Negro soldier's attempt to sustain, for a little while, an illusion that society has opened at last to take him in, that he, the estranged, is wrapped in its warm cliches. . . .

What Mr. Jones, now that his plays have made him a public figure, is making here is a peace-offering to the hell of his own past and to the people who lived in it with him.

Mona Van Duyn. *Poetry*. Feb., 1967. pp. 338–9

Since all [Jones's] work is heavily autobiographical, his poetry and his fiction (particularly *The System of Dante's Hell*) show his attempt to escape the middle-class background which makes him feel like an oppressor of his own kind. It is in *Home*, however, that his journey can be seen most clearly. A collection of essays written at random over a five-year period, the book is given a shape of its own by the chronological arrangement of the pieces. They move from ''Cuba Libre'' (1960), in which he can still use the pronoun ''we'' meaning ''we Americans,'' to the essays of 1964 and 1965 where his identification is purely black and the prospect is destruction.

Gerald Weales. *The Jumping-Off Place* (Macmillan—N.Y.). 1969. p. 137

LeRoi Jones's *The System of Dante's Hell* . . . ostensibly consists of disconnected scenes and random thoughts or observations. Some early reviewers asserted that Jones used a pretentious title as an appeal to intellectuals. Yet, with meticulous precision, with broken but somehow poetic sentences, Jones does expose a Hell, a black ghetto thriving on incontinence, violence, and fraud, surrounded by ''white monsters'' who add to the torment of the Inferno and prevent escape. . . .

Yet in a very real sense Jones believes that he belongs in the Inferno which he himself has helped to build. He has witnessed and participated in the basest evil: ''heresy against one's own sources, running in terror from one's deepest responses and insights . . . the denial of feeling.''. . . In this urban Inferno the victims are not only tormented by their environment and their monsters but by each other, thereby removing the last trace of humanity. It is a city dominated by the Gorgon of Despair.

Olga W. Vickery in *The Shaken Realist*, ed. Melvin J. Friedman and John B. Vickery (Louisiana State). 1970. p. 157

In [Jones's] poetry, fiction, drama, criticism and scholarly works there is but one constant hammering—to be BLACK in America is to be REVOLUTIONARY. In *Dutchman*, *The Toilet*, and *The Slave*, three plays by LeRoi Jones, there is all the hatred, venom, brutality, profanity and downright insanity that whites have traditionally heaped upon the Negro; but now turned back upon whites. Whitman once said, ''A poet enlisted in a people's cause can make every word he writes draw blood.'' Jones, and those gathered about him, are not begging white society to love them. No. They are out to take their freedom and dignity as black men and to harass the white world while, at the same time, inspiring the masses of big-city Negroes to the affirmation of their inherent beauty and worth, not as middle-class-oriented integrated Negroes, but as Black People.

Calvin C. Hernton in *Amistad I*, ed. John A. Williams and Charles F. Harris (Random). 1970. pp. 214–5

The prose tracts Jones has written in recent years, since the publication of *Black Magic Poetry*, have consistently urged a firm moral position for the black man, one which unites him with his Black brothers and one that turns its back on white corruption. The logic of this position was begun in the earliest poetry and developed through the struggles with [T.S.] Eliot's conception of God, and through the ultimate creation of an alternative to Eliot's moral view.

It may be said that one of Jones' solutions to the dilemma of what to do about Eliot's God, and what to do about the existential heroes of his comic book youth, is to supplant them both in his own person. . . . It may not be realistic to see Jones imagining himself as a kind of God, though he has seen black men as gods; but there is a curious passage near the end of *Black Magic Poetry* that suggests the temptation may be present. . . .

Perhaps it is merely a vatic pose Jones adopts in these poems, and he does not apotheosize himself at all. But there is a curiosity that lingers in the imagination regarding the name he has assumed since the publication of his poems, the Islamic name which appears in the ''Explanation'' to *Black Magic Poetry*. One wonders if God and the comic book heroes are dead forever, or if they have been absorbed into Jones' poetic unconscious wanting to poke out again. His name, Baraka, like Lorca's Duende, means many things. Its root is Hebrew: Brk, and it means a number of things: lightning, the blessed of God, virtue, inspiration, the muse.

Lee A. Jacobus in *Modern Black Poets*, ed. Donald B. Gibson (Prentice-Hall). 1973. pp. 125–6

There are enough brilliant poems of such variety in *Black Magic Poetry* and *In Our Terribleness* to establish the unique identity and claim for respect of several poets. But it is beside the point that Baraka is probably the finest poet, black or white, writing in this country these days. The question still has to be asked whether he has fulfilled the vocation set for him by his own moves and examples. He has called himself a ''seer'' (one familiar with evil is the way he defined it) and holy man, but hesitates to claim (while vying for it) the fateful name of prophet.

The prophet differs from the poet and other word-men in his role of awaking and sustaining among his people a vision of their destiny set beside the criteria of their deepest values in the most fundamental though significant language. A poet's obligation, by contrast, is to the integrity of his verbal rendering of his individual sensibility. The problem is whether Baraka's creative impulse, which is essentially underground, hip, urban, and avant-garde, can be made to speak for a nation of black people rather than for a set of black nationalists. Can he transcend the inclination to ad-lib on the changes of black consciousness . . . toward redefining that consciousness in the light of enduring values and in major works of sustained thought and imagination?

Clyde Taylor in *Modern Black Poets*, ed. Donald B. Gibson (Prentice-Hall). 1973. pp. 132–3

The Jones play [*A Recent Killing*] is uncouth in texture and performance, but it is nonetheless a play of considerable scope, power and, despite its harshness, sensibility. . . .

It seethes with passionate anger, with bursts of wild humor, with a consuming desire for expression. It explodes all over the place and, as usual with such hectic efforts, there is a quantity of debris—some of it ugly. But ugliness may also serve art's purposes: what is more important in this case is that the play teems with life. . . .

Most of the twenty-five scenes in this long play depict the world which creates the inevitability of its conclusion. Obviously cutting is required and loose ends should be tied up, and there are other things which may be argued against the play. Still, the faults are less significant than that the play is an American drama wrought from the bitter blood struggle of a man who can write, and writes not only about himself and his race but about the immediate environment in which we all dwell.

Harold Clurman. *The Nation*. Feb. 12, 1973. p. 218

A good many poets and critics don't like what's happened to the old LeRoi Jones, promising young Negro poet of *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*. Baraka, obviously, is not interested in their opinions. Nevertheless, it is a mistake to dismiss him as an angry propagandist, as so many have done, because he appears to run against the literary grain. The old art of LeRoi Jones was written to be read. The new writing of Baraka is calculated to be heard—*how we sound*, he would say now—and his audience must have some sense of the Afro-American perspective from which his new writing issues. The black aesthetic which shapes his writing is neither lacking in artistic taste (strident, anti-poetic, uncontrolled, say the critics) nor in itself startlingly new. It only appears that way from a literary point of view, one that is in many respects incongruous to the cultural context upon which his stylistic rationale is based. What is remarkable, from a literary standpoint, is the range of innovation his political ideology and altered cultural consciousness have required of him as a writer. For Baraka, though, it is not remarkable at all, but only the result of an inevitable artistic transformation, the sure spelling out of his specific placement in the world as a black writer.

William C. Fischer. *Massachusetts Review*. Spring, 1973. p. 305

At the core of Baraka's art is the insistence upon the formlessness of life-giving energy and the energetic or fluid nature of all form. It is no wonder that events in his work are violent, his images often alarmingly brutal. The only fruition or finality honored is that of death, which produces a sudden enlargement of vision—the realization that personality, or the ''deadweight'' of any fixed idea or being, is inevitably annihilated by history's progress: ''The only constant is change.''. . .

Yet as the revelation and exorcism of self have given way to a communal orientation, Baraka has not abandoned his theatrical sensibility. On the contrary, he has sought an increasingly expansive theatre—the stage of world politics. His shifts—often perplexing and contradictory—leading from uncompromisingly separatist black nationalism to a more inclusive Pan-Africanism, and most recently to the embrace of international socialism, may be taken partly as an attempt to gain a broader world forum, and partly as reflecting the need to fabricate new ideological roles for each change wrought by contemporary history.

Baraka has shown at every instant of his public career an intense commitment to those ideas and ideals he felt were integral to his motivating vision of life. Like James Brown, he has always been ''an actor that is now.'' And it is by way of this ethos, with its equation of passion and significance, that Imamu Amiri Baraka creatively identifies himself with the evolving spirit of his people. . . .

Kimberly W. Benston. *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask* (Yale Univ. Pr., 1976), pp. 261, 263

Perhaps more so than any other writer, Baraka captures the idiom and style of modern urban black life. The uniqueness and authenticity of his work is largely attributable to his thorough knowledge of the speech and music of urban blacks. In his best work, he exploits these two powerful and rich possessions of an otherwise weak and impoverished people. He shows, especially in his later works, an understanding of the full range of black speech patterns, an element which invigorates and renders dramatic even his short stories and poems. Baraka's flawless ear retained also the sounds of modern jazz, the most important artistic creation of black America. Along with the frequent evidence of the traditional jazz framework, we see also in the poems the following characteristics of modern jazz: spontaneity of line, moving by sheer suggestiveness of impetus; elliptical phrasing; polyrhythmic thrust. Although similar musical qualities have been attributed to the work of other modern American poets, the conscious and effective employment of these qualities cannot be questioned in Baraka's case, for his musical insights are not only integrated into the artistic methods of his plays, poems, and stories. They have been articulated in a number of perceptive essays, as well as the extremely important study *Blues People*. Throughout his literary career, Baraka has been concerned greatly with the sounds of black life. During the latter 1960's and early 1970's, this concern took on even more importance in his attempts to reach a largely non-reading audience. . . .

As we inspect the corpus of Baraka's writing, we are unavoidably aware of his faults—extreme privacy of reference, frequent experimental failure, and racist dogma, to name only a few. Nevertheless, we are also mindful of his merits—daring and frequently successful verbal approximations of jazz music, vibrant recreation of black speech, and a consummate portrayal of the black middle-class psyche. In spite of some obvious shortcomings, Baraka, in the brief span of ten years, presented us with work of considerable promise. It is at least this writer's hope that the artist's increasingly myopic vision does not confirm the once-premature contention that ''it is now necessary to inter him as a writer, young and kicking.'' However, at this point in his career, Baraka seems to be doing everything in his power to prove that grim prophecy sagacious.

Henry C. Lacey. *To Raise, Destroy, and Create: The Poetry, Drama, and Fiction of Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)* (Whitston, 1981). pp. viii, 195–96

Since the early 1960s, the figure to be reckoned with in Black political life and art has been Amiri Baraka. Controversial, responsive to changing social ambience, he has articulated the riotous ''language of the unheard'' (to invoke Martin Luther King's

definition) within a vernacular and a new idiom of radical solutions. A founder of the Black Arts Movement of the sixties, he propounded a view that was, as the late Larry Neal put it, ''radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. . . . The Black Arts Movement believes that your ethics and your aesthetics are one.'' Baraka's impact has been such that as early as 1973, Donald B. Gibson placed him among ''major influences on Black poetry: (1) the Harlem Renaissance of the twenties; (2) the protest writing of the thirties as reflected in the work of Richard Wright; (3) the beat movement of the fifties; (4) the life and work of a single poet: Amiri Baraka.''. . .

As an artist, Baraka wants ''more than anything, to chart . . . change within myself.'' This constant mutability in the face of the changing world'' (*Autobiography*, 18). And yet it is the reality of his changeless core that generates his vision. William J. Harris views him as a Manichaean and a vatic poet in the line of Whitman, Pound, [Kenneth] Patchen, and Ginsberg. In quest of philosophical truth, Baraka has turned to a variety of religious and political faiths. A serious artist, he has absorbed classical and modern literature, and contributes uniquely to art that is experimentally alive to its social and political content. He uses music and multimedia to further the accessibility and impact of his works, in order to convey to the people his messages of strength, resistance, and political instruction. Like a great dancer (or skater), he risks all with bold leaps and turns as evidenced by his plays *The Motion of History* and *Money: A Jazz Opera*, neither of which quite comes off theatrically, and *The Sidney Poet Heroical*, which does. His work has moved from concern with self and schools of white poetry to placement of that Black self in a national and world community, at the same time developing an experimental Black art rooted in traditions of language, music, and religious and secular rhetoric. . . .

Baraka's new book, *The Music*, clearly locates in its title his focus for present and future. It is Black music that has provided the lens, the cohesion, and the communication he has been pursuing as he ''investigates the sun.'' This anthology of recent work, of [his wife] Amina's poetry and his own poetry, essays, and ''anti-nuclear jazz musical,'' reveals a second and relatively new emphasis: Baraka as a poet/musician of praise—a lover of ''The Music'' (by which Black music is understood) and the family of Black musicians who create and interpret it, and a lover of his own family, itself consanguine within it.

D.H. Melhem. *Heroism in the New Black Poetry* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1990), pp. 215, 217–18, 221

In the essay ''Expressive Language,'' Baraka articulates the need for a new speech to undermine hierarchies of Western meaning; and he searches for this voice in African rhythms. Baraka feels that the twisting of meanings by dominant language forms has been a cause of great confusion and ignorance, both on the part of the dominated and the dominator, the latter having convinced himself that his distortions are justified and are, in effect, solid reasoning and no distortion at all. The Slave Trade was blessed by the religious and political leaders in Europe because, to them, the African was a heathen whose enslavement was therefore a natural punishment by God for his sinful nature. Projective verse as used by Baraka and other Third World writers attempts to tear down the hierarchical language structures which have consolidated that illusory view of Western superiority by overesteeming and inflating Western importance.

Like his Caribbean counterparts, Baraka also recognizes the need for creolization in poetic expression. He realizes that the black man is, after all, a product of mixed origins—African and European. Baraka notes, therefore, that socialization ''which is rooted in culture depends for its impetus for the most part on the multiplicity of influences.'' This means that projective verse as a mode of articulating this ethnical reality is of paramount importance since, in order for a society and hence for a poem which mirrors that society to go in ''many strange directions,'' the society or poem must contain a form of raison d'etre which harmonizes with the many-sidedness and which is creolized and open. Conventional, static forms are at best artificial for a people of plural background when they seek to reflect that plural world. Baraka realizes this when, in the essay ''Hunting is not for Those Heads on the Wall,'' he points out that formal ''artifacts made to cohere to preconceived forms are almost devoid of . . . verb value'' (379).

Anthony Kellman. *Ariel*. April, 1990, pp. 55–56

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BARNES, Djuna (1900–1982)

In the details of Djuna Barnes's stories there is a great deal of fine observation, clearly as well as beautifully phrased. It is the larger outlines of her stories that are obscure. This is perhaps because she sees in detail what the rest of us see, but feels about life as a whole differently from the rest of us. . . . The whole book (*A Book*), when one has ceased to ponder its unintelligibilities, leaves a sense of the writer's deep temperamental sympathy with the simple and mindless lives of the beasts: it is in dealing with their lives, and with the

lives of men and women in moods which approach such simplicity and mindlessness, that she attains a momentary but genuine power.

Floyd Dell. *The Nation*. Jan. 2, 1924. pp. 14–15

If genius is perfection wrought out of anguish and pain and intellectual flagellation, then Djuna Barnes's novel *Nightwood* is a book of genius. In language, in philosophy, in the story it unfolds, she has woven a dark tapestry of spiritual and emotional disintegration whose threads never outrage each other in clashing disharmony. No gayety and no lights fall upon her pattern, which is not to say that her pages are devoid of laughter or humor. For humor she has in abundance but it runs deep in hidden places and the laughter it evokes is tragic. If she has been ruthless and cruel to herself in writing this book out of the rich essence of her knowledge and her thinking and her experience, she has the compensating reward of compelling the thoughtful reader into attention to what she has to say and her manner of saying it. Her prose is lyrical to a degree where it seems of another age and another world but at the same time it does not lose kinship with the earthiness of humans.

Rose C. Feld. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. March 7, 1937. p. 4

In her novel (*Nightwood*) poetry is the bloodstream of the universal organism, a poetry that derives its coherence from the meeting of kindred spirits. The ''alien and external'' are, more than ever, props; they form the hard rock on which Miss Barnes's metaphysically minded characters stand and let their words soar. The story of the novel is like the biological routine of the body; it is the pattern of life, something that cannot be avoided, but it has the function of a spring, and nothing more. It is in their release from mere sensation, or rather the expression of such an attempted release, that Miss Barnes's characters have their being.

Alfred Kazin. *New York Times Book Section*. March 7, 1937. p. 6

In *Nightwood*, as in the work of Braque and the later abstract painters, the naturalistic principle is totally abandoned: no attempt is made to convince us that the characters are actual flesh-and-blood human beings. We are asked only to accept their world as we accept an abstract painting. . . as an autonomous pattern giving us an individual vision of reality, rather than what we might consider its exact reflection. . . . The eight chapters of *Nightwood* are like searchlights, probing the darkness each from a different direction, yet ultimately focusing on and illuminating the same entanglement of the human spirit. . . . (*Nightwood*) combines the simple majesty of a medieval morality play with the verbal subtlety and refinement of a symbolist poem.

Joseph Frank, *Sewanee Review*. Summer, 1945. pp. 435, 438, 455–6

The Antiphon is unmistakably the work of a mind of distinction and stature. I was not so much moved as shaken by the spectres it raises. But is it, as a work of art, successful? Is it really comparable with Webster, or is the style a sham Jacobean, or a sham Eliot-Jacobean make. . . . The speeches of the characters are never, in the true sense, dramatic, shaped by a living emotion. For all the sombre violence of imagery, they are aggregates of fancy, not imaginative expression proceeding from an inner unity of condition and thought.

Kathleen Raine. *New Statesman and Nation.* Feb. 8, 1958. p. 174

In *Nightwood*, published in 1936, Djuna Barnes gave us a novel of extraordinary and appalling force, a study of moral degeneration recited in a rhetoric so intensely wrought, so violent and so artificial, that it discouraged all but the hardiest readers and became a kind of symbol of sinister magnificence. *The Antiphon*, a verse play in three acts, repeats the oratorical modes of the novel, though with less obscurity and with some reduction of queerness. It is still difficult, perversely wayward; but it does make concessions to ordinary humanity, and there are in it moments of poetry and true excitement. It is scarcely a play: one cannot imagine it on any stage this side of Chaos and Old Night; but it is dramatic poetry of a curious and sometimes high order.

Dudley Fitts. *New York Times Book Section*. April 20, 1958. p. 22

In *Nightwood* the sentences are as heavy and intricate, as finely sewn as an old brocade, but their very grandeur serves only to muffle and disguise the human events they ostensibly depict. The whole tone and atmosphere of the novel are redolent of scandal, sin, and wayward confidence; everything about its language and setting promises extravagant revelations of the soul. Yet it remains curiously reticent and evasive, its characters fixed in a kind of verbal frieze. Reading it through again in this collection [*Selected Works*], I am reminded of how much more its author owes to Mr. Eliot than just a preface. The bogus aristocrats, the half-world of ambiguous sexuality, the self-conscious symbolism and mythic allusions as well as its fragmented shape, plainly remind us of the world of *The Waste Land*.

Hilton Kramer. *The Reporter*. July 5, 1962. p. 39

[Barnes's] world is a world of displaced persons—of an Armenian country boy on the lower east side of Manhattan, of Russian emigrés in Paris, Berlin, Spain, or New York, of Scandinavians or English in American farmland. They have abandoned national, racial, and ethical traditions; their human contacts are laceration. They lack even the integrity in isolation that comforts the characters of Hemingway or the early Faulkner, for they are estranged against themselves. Their aborted and ineffectual attempts to find meaning, order, or love are the subjects of the stories. Technique, as well as subject, marks the stories as extraordinary.

Readers who find the verbal pyrotechnics of *Nightwood*, or of the 1927 novel, *Ryder*, or of *The Antiphon* too often merely talky and falsely rhetorical will discover in most of the stories a fusing of experience and idea. Economy is especially characteristic of the revised versions collected in the *Selected Works*, where verbal fat has been pared away, and objects, persons, and actions flash out with chilling precision. This is not to say, of course, that the stories are easy to read; on the contrary, like those of Katherine Mansfield and Katherine Anne Porter—which technically many of them resemble—they retain their meaning in a very dense texture, where

each detail is significant and essential to the whole. And in spite of *Nightwood*'s relatively wide circulation they are generally unknown today.

Suzanne C. Ferguson. *Southern Review*. Winter, 1969. p. 27

Miss Barnes's themes have consistently taken the modern world to task, but her techniques reflect her careful study of the past. She has been influenced in diction and vocabulary by the Bible, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Fielding; by the literature of Manners, Sterne, and Joyce. With some justice, we may state that she has also admired these writers and their works for structural reasons. From the start of her longer work, she became an experimenter with fictional forms which tend to fragment, superimpose, juxtapose, or intertwine her thematic and plot lines. The episodic character of both her early and later models appears in the ''spatial'' quality or unorthodox arrangement of her material into forms which resist the linear-as-chronological schema typical of fictional narratives. . . .

I am not entirely persuaded as to the novelty of her structure. The picaresque novel, a very old form, is both episodic and susceptible to rearrangements of time; and certain chapters recount events occurring during the same time as other events described in previous chapters. A clearer sense of Barnes's purpose is obtained by considering time thematically rather than structurally. As interested in time rearrangements as she may be, Miss Barnes is much more interested in time as it relates to the degenerating patterns of Western society. She does not write, at the expense of theme, for the sake of creating poetic language; for both theme and style are important for her creation of her desired effect.

In turn, later writers, particularly those noted less for their popularity than for their craftsmanship, appear to have been influenced in varying degrees by Barnes's writings. For example, Faulkner showed evidence that we have indicated of having been influenced by Barnes as he sought to achieve the ideal of feminine beauty in his later novels, such as *The Hamlet*, *The Town* and *The Mansion*. Barnes is cited in the introduction to John Hawkes' novel *The Cannibal* as having influenced that writer stylistically, and Anais Nin's novels have been said to reflect such an influence.

As such conventions of the nineteenth century novel as its linear plot and its ''realistic'' characters are increasingly displaced by the challenges of our frighteningly changing times and people, we can anticipate that discerning readers as well as writers hopeful of improving their craftsmanship will turn in growing numbers to Miss Barnes's works for instruction.

James B. Scott. *Djuna Barnes* (Twayne, 1976), pp. 141–42

Djuna Barnes's middle vision comes to its fullest expression in *Nightwood*; that . . . immaculate novel is indeed a masterpiece. To let it stand alone as representative of a full career, however, is to deprive the novel of a good share of its merit. *Spillway* and *The Antiphon*, rather than being blind thrusts in new directions, follow from *Nightwood* in a precise and logical way. It may even be argued that *The Antiphon* is a work of comparable value insofar as it gives final shape to Miss Barnes's central themes. Certainly both companion volumes to *Nightwood* in *The Selected Works* greatly amplify the themes and stylistic attainments of their predecessor. Likewise, the uneven and sometimes flawed work before *Nightwood*, if seen with attention to the emergence of qualities that finally cohere in the novel, may reveal merits that have been overlooked. Even the early popular journalism, seeming hardly to bear upon a cryptic and subjective novel of 1936, may suggest something of what was to follow. . . .

In all, *Nightwood* is Djuna Barnes's central work, if not her only achievement of distinction. The book's trans-generic mode enables Miss Barnes to focus the themes and stylistic techniques that had been forming for years into a cohesive whole. It is completely consistent with the earlier work in form and themes, only more concentrated and intricately worked within its selective range. It brings the aims of the novel perhaps as close as possible to those of poetry, particularly with respect to the poetic image. It remains to be seen whether or not *The Antiphon*, a similar attempt in the genre of verse drama, is as successful. But *Nightwood* is a masterful work architecturally and linguistically, comparable to the works of Joyce and Eliot among the moderns, and to those earlier writers quoted or echoed in the novel itself. Like Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* and William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*, equally neglected works of similar merit, nearly every phrase in it is distinctive and functional, essential to the whole.

Louis F. Kannenstine. *The Art of Djuna Barnes: Duality and Damnation* (New York Univ. Pr., 1977), pp. xviii, 126

Barnes's reputation rests essentially on *Nightwood* (1936). A powerful novel of marriage, adultery, and betrayal, it should not be mistaken for a domestic narrative in the Updike manner, where failures can be comprehended and new beginnings achieved. Focusing on bogus aristocrats and American expatriates in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s, this is a nightmarish world, off kilter and surreal. Its inhabitants lose the object of their love, Robin Vote, and are unable to find an outlet or spillway for their anguish. Almost like puppets, they are set into frenetic motion and new behavioral patterns by forces from within their unconscious. These include sudden transvestism and bisexuality, metamorphoses of personality, and schizophrenia, all placed against juxtaposed times and swift changes in setting. Complex techniques such as these, along with eccentric characters, have led critics to associate Barnes with experimental forms and especially with anti-realism. But she is not a one-book author, and therefore she should be examined in the larger context of other important works. Though more traditional, they still reveal characters and conflicts that are the foundation of *Nightwood*, as well as her dexterity in using vastly differing styles. *A Book* (1923) and *A Night among the Horses* (1928) consist of short stories, poems, and one-act plays that, unlike *Nightwood*, are concise and even traditionally narrated. But it is here that themes such as the severed self and the atomized self are introduced. . . .

Whatever the techniques—traditional or experimental—Barnes's work is concerned with ways of being reconciled to life's random misfortunes. In the stories of *Spillway* there is often an emotional ''spillway'' that rechannelizes feelings of helplessness and isolation. Its specific form may not be pleasurable, yet still it exists as an alternative to the completely isolated personality. For some characters who are whirled about by stimuli they never quite understand, the spillway is passivity or acquiescence, while for others it is a private fantasy, endless travel, or psychological regression. Whatever the case, the suffering begins with detachment from origins.

Miriam Fuchs. *Hollins Critic*. June, 1981, pp. 2–3

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BARRY, Philip (1896–1949)

Mr. Barry has had the best preparation that America can give. He has been educated by our professors and theorists and has built upon the foundation thus attained with experience in the hard school of Broadway. If he allows nothing to turn him aside from it, he may yet write a great play. . . . His knowledge of the technique, his ability to write sincere and moving dialogue, his poetic sensitivity, the acting quality of his work, his varied experience, all forecast an achievement of which America may be proud.

Carl Carmer. *Theatre Arts*. Nov., 1929. p. 826

The characteristic cleverness and brightness of Philip Barry's dialogue have tended to obscure the similarity of pattern of his plays. He deals for the most part with the individual's revolt against conventional pressure for social conformity and attempts to force him into a pattern of behavior to which he is inimical. Most frequently his antagonist is ''business'' and everything it stands for: its goal, way of life, its hostility to originality and individuality. To Barry ''big business'' represents everything he abhors in modern life.

Eleanor Flexner. *American Playwrights* (Simon). 1938. p. 249

Before the emergence of S.N. Behrman, Mr. Barry was our best writer of polite comedy. The true gift was his, but he valued it so little that he was said to have only contempt for *Paris Bound*, one of the earliest as well as one of the best of his pieces, and he gradually sacrificed success to two tendencies incompatible not only with the spirit of comedy but also, it would seem, with each other. Increasingly Mr. Barry became a snob and a mystic. His later plays were full of yearning elegants who seemed equally concerned with the meaning of the universe and with what the well-dressed man will wear—in his head as well as on it.

Joseph Wood Krutch. *The Nation*. Dec. 24, 1938. p. 700

I carefully reread what Mr. John Anderson, Mr. John Mason Brown, and Mr. Brooks Atkinson had in their various columns seen fit to record (about *Here Come the Clowns*). . . . I was compelled to admire the diffused and sociable precision with which they expressed their respect for the playwright's intentions, past achievements, forward-looking subject matter and approach, and the equally exact conveyance of the tedium they felt at his present effort. Each of these reviews of theirs conveyed also the sense we get of fine intervals as such, of genuine and thrilling inventions now and then. . . . That the critics wished the author well was clear, and wished his play well, and clearly too they could not find their way in it. Which . . . is pretty much the way I feel about it.

Stark Young. *New Republic*. Dec. 28, 1938. p. 230

On the whole Mr. Barry has written an interesting play (*The Philadelphia Story*), with shrewd touches of character, and much humour. Moreover, Mr. Barry's heart and brain are both on the side of the angels, which is something in this day of inverted values in the theatre. . . . Also Mr. Barry can write admirable dialogue, though at times his tendency to preciosity is evident. In fact this latter tendency is his greatest artistic sin. But despite this fault Mr. Barry has written his best comedy since *Holiday*, though not his finest play—that is *Here Come the Clowns*.

Grenville Vernon. *Commonweal*. April 14, 1939. p. 692

Phil was as serious at heart as he was gay on the surface. He was at once a conformist and a non-conformist, a sophisticate and a romantic. He was a good American from Rochester who never ceased to be Irish. The accent of his spirit, regardless of the accent of his speech, remained Gaelic. The fey quality was there, the ability to see the moon at midday. He had the Irish gift for both anger and sweetness, and the Irish ferment in his soul. He was a Catholic whose thinking was unorthodox and restless. Even in his comedies, when apparently he was being audacious, he employed the means of Congreve to preach sermons against divorce which would have won a Cardinal's approval.

John Mason Brown. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 24, 1949. p. 26

Barry was essentially a writer of comedy, and repartee was his stock in trade. He did however aspire to a greater seriousness, and there are passages in *Hotel Universe* and *Here Come the Clowns* which indicate ability in that direction. The difficulty, whenever he attempted heavier fare, was that he seemed to walk on tiptoe, perhaps in fear that he would be laughed at, and his work always seems to be trying to anticipate that possibility by getting in the first laugh. It moves gingerly among the more disturbing moral problems, darting and feinting, always ready to withdraw into the security of a smart remark, as though to indicate that the author has not lost his sense of humor or got himself out of his depth.

Walter Kerr. *Commonweal*. Jan. 26, 1951. p. 398

Barry's was a healing art at a time when dramatic art was mostly dissonance. Perhaps Barry felt the need for healing too greatly himself to add to the dissonance and to widen the rifts in the topography of the modern, specifically contemporary American, scene. Whatever the reason, and regardless of the risk of indecisiveness, Barry sought balm in Gilead, found it somehow, and dispensed it liberally—and with gentlemanly tact. . . . It was not the least of Barry's merits, a mark of both his breeding and manliness, that his manner was generally bright and brisk and that

the hand he stretched out to others, as if to himself, was as firm as it was open.

John Gassner. *Theatre Arts*. Dec., 1951. p. 89

Certainly it falls far short to dismiss Barry as a witty writer of high comedy of manners, bantering, facile, and superficial. He was that and more. Beneath his flippancy and ''chit-chat'' was a sensitive and deeply spiritual writer coming to grips with the psychology of his times and expressing a yearning for maturity and emotional wholeness. No other American playwright was able to transmute the raw elements of unconscious life into a work of art so delicate, so subtly ingratiating, and so fresh in form, as did Philip Barry. If these are the criteria of greatness, *Hotel Universe* belongs among the great plays.

W. David Sievers. *Freud on Broadway* (Heritage). 1955. p. 211

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BARTH, John (1930–1990)

The recent monstrous novel of John Barth, . . . *The Sot-Weed Factor*, could scarcely have been written by a European, because it involves a *new* concept rather than a variation on an existing one. . . . It presents itself as a ''historical novel,'' or again, as a ''joke on historical novels,'' and each guise is strong enough that the work may be, and is, read as either. It is also, like *Finnegans Wake*, a proof of what cannot be done, or else the reason for no longer doing it; theoretically at least, the existence of *The Sot-Weed Factor* precludes any further possibility for the ''historical novel.'' This does not mean that the book is one to be especially recommended; readers familiar with the extraordinary art of Mr. Barth's earlier novel, *The End of the Road*, will probably find *The Sot-Weed Factor* prolix and overwhelmingly tedious. This is, of course, an integral part of the book's destructive function. . . ; Mr. Barth's sense of humor, in short, is an extremely advanced one.

Terry Southern. *The Nation*. Nov. 19, 1960. p. 381

The mark of style in [*The Sot-Weed Factor*] is untiring exuberance, limitless fertility of imagination (fancy, if you prefer), a breathless pace of narrative that never lets the reader rest or want to rest. Superficially one might say that our author ''imitates'' seventeenth century style, but he doesn't really; he only makes us think he does. He thereby avoids the stiffness of pedantry and at the same time gets a flavor of the antique. The aim . . . is burlesque—even the apparently inordinate size of the book is a joke. It was a dangerous joke, but he gets away with it. He burlesques the aged conventions of fiction—mistaken identity, ''the search for a father,'' true love, and all the rest—with merciless ingenuity. No moral purpose is discoverable, no arcane ''significance,'' simply fun.

Denham Sutcliffe. *Kenyon Review*. Winter, 1961. p. 184

Primarily, John Barth is a novelist of ideas. The situations in his comic works are always directed toward establishing his twin themes of the individual's quests for value and identity in a world of gratuitous events. Clearly aligned with existentialist conceptions, Barth, nevertheless, denies a formal knowledge of philosophy and prefers to describe himself as ''reinventing'' ideas to cope with his view of the modern world. . . .

The Sot-Weed Factor is Barth's most complete and satisfactory treatment of his themes of value and identity. Here his approach is primarily a negative one. Through the destruction of a false ideal of innocence, Barth establishes his picture of man as a complex, emotional and sexual being and stresses the value of sympathetic ties between men.

Part of Barth's success in *The Sot-Weed Factor* comes from the book's form. As opposed to his first two novels which are realistic treatments of bizarre situations, the third novel is purposely artificial.

John C. Stubbs. *Critique*. Winter, 1965–66. pp. 101, 108

If we can measure literary achievement at all, we can measure the value of a novel by the extent to which it succeeds in the impossible task of getting the sloppy richness of life into the satisfying neatness of artistic shape.

By any such standard, *Giles Goat-Boy* is a great novel. Its greatness is most readily apparent in its striking originality of structure and language, an originality that depends upon a superb command of literary and linguistic tradition rather than an eccentric manipulation of the ''modern.'' . .Barth employs the traditional patterns of myth, epic and romance to generate a narrative of extraordinary vigor and drive. At the same time, he freights this narrative with ideas and attitudes in combinations so varied and striking that the reader is torn between stopping to explore the book's philosophical riches and abandoning himself to the pleasure of immersion in a story. . . .

Robert Scholes. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 7, 1966. pp. 1, 22

I got into a kind of rage of disappointment when the genius who wrote *The End of the Road* took up the fad for self-imprisonment in funny language. *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy* are unreadable, and I can swear to this because I read them through. So when John Barth's new collection of short pieces, *Lost in the Funhouse*, arrived my heart sank, and I left it on the shelf for a long time. . . . And now I've read *Lost in the Funhouse* with great pleasure and hardly know where to look. Because of my needless fears, I haven't given the book the attention it deserves, so I can only hazard first impressions. There may be a more significant relation than I have grasped between the folksy short stories about

boyhood on the Eastern Shore and the deliberately bizarre excursions into the style of Borges, Beckett, Kafka and mock-epic, but I have a hunch that the structural pretensions are pure put-on. In any case, most of Barth's language has come back to genuine, and very funny, life. The spoofs of ''fiction about fiction about fiction'' manage, in a way I couldn't have predicted from the laborious imitations of the two previous novels, to be funny on this familiar subject and seriously interesting too, and both in new ways.

Robert Garis. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1969. pp. 163–4

Since neither *Giles Goat-Boy* nor *The Sot-Weed Factor* is a ''proper'' novel but ''imitations-of-novels,'' they do not offer representations of reality at all but representations of representations of reality, removing them at least twice from the world of ''objective reality'' and further emphasizing their artificiality in the process. Thus Barth uses artificiality to expose artificiality. By presenting a farcical and exaggerated version of the world, not as the world is, but as it is erroneously conceived to be, Barth mocks the false conception and suggests cosmic absurdity by inversion.

Charles B. Harris. *Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd* (College and University). 1971. p. 116

Barth's early narrators demonstrate an independence of mind from the omnipotence of environment which in one sense is a state much to be desired. On the other hand they are presented as suffering from a nihilism which excludes them from confident participation in life, and which is to be seen as a curse or a blight. At the same time that equivocal mental and verbal freedom which they ''enjoy,'' and which allows them to be completely arbitrary in the patterns they choose, is the freedom increasingly exercised by Barth himself. His tendency to sport on lexical playfields increases in his following books. In these ''floating operas'' signs tend to become more important than their referrents, and the impresario of fictions, John Barth, plays with them in such a way that any established notions of the relationship between word and world are lost or called in doubt. Barth is indeed one of the great sportsmen of contemporary fiction.

Tony Tanner. *City of Words* (Harper and Row). 1971. p. 240

In his last three works of fiction, Barth systematically debunks the idea of progress by showing that life is existentially absurd, by showing that the individual, society, and cosmos are all inherently chaotic. He then demonstrates the foolishness of acting on notions about transcendental correspondence, for such idealism will quickly destroy both man and his society. As an alternate to such notions of idealism and progress, Barth stresses the actuality of cyclical correspondence. According to the cyclical pattern, man and his society must pass from innocent notions about the goodness of life and about the individual's role as a saviour-hero to a more mature, tempered, and somewhat cynical view necessary in order to formulate an appropriate way to create meaning for the individual and harmony for a society. Finally, however, Barth does not demonstrate any permanence or absolute merit in such maturity, for senility, death, and decay are the ultimate rewards for the individual and his civilization. Even so, life will probably continue in correspondingly similar cycles for generations, centuries, millenniums, and substantially longer periods of time.

Gordon E. Slethaug. *Critique*. 13, 3, 1972. pp. 27–8

I had always thought that Barth's mind was more interesting than any of his books so far—it was perceived, through the books, of course, but it could be perceived as being let down. *Chimera* makes me think that this is precisely the impression the books have all set out to create. The texts suggest an author who, for all his narrative meddling and jugglery, is aloof from them, better than they are, and the clumsy gags and the frequent silliness only confirm this feeling. All intentional, an aristocracy of bad taste, a disdain for the world's terms. . . .

Barth is not obscure or difficult, and he can be very funny . . . and the moral dimensions by no means disappear in the trickiness. He is suggesting in *Chimera*, for example, that love is a terrible risk, an almost certain loss, given our own and others' experience in the matter, but that the risk can be redeemed by the quality of spirit with which it is taken. . . .

But Barth won't take this kind of risk with his writing: won't free it and master it, won't let it loose from the safe zones of pastiche. It is as if he would rather not know where the limits of his talent lie, were happier with the thought of being a brilliant man repeatedly betrayed by his books.

Michael Wood. *New York Review of Books*. Oct. 19, 1972. pp. 34–5

In *Lost in the Funhouse* [Barth] transcends the agonizing efforts at self-definition of Ebenezer, Burlingame, and George Goat-Boy, and the equally traumatic biographies of the Maryland tales, and comes to rest in the serene Borgian acceptance of an identity that has no confirmatory existence apart from its fictional entity. Indeed, the mark of Borges's ''The Immortal'' is everywhere impressed in Barth's paradigmatic renderings of the myths of Narcissus, Menelaus, and the archetypal poet anonymous. His skeptical acceptance of the permanence of multiplicity, of even the possibility that one's self is but the dream of another insubstantial being, becomes the only viable strategy for confronting the Great Labyrinth, both human and cosmic. In parody alone may the artist hope to find a successive form that dissemblingly confirms continuation in time. To retell the old myths, to come paradigmatically ever closer to a great contemporary like Borges (as these stories so patently do), and to lampoon the anti-Gutenberg cries of McLuhan and company (as these stories also do) is to maintain the fiction of continuity and the reality of person in the limited persistence of the word, is finally, if nothing else, to give aesthetic validity to life.

Max F. Schulz. *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties* (Ohio Univ. Pr.). 1973. p. 40

The irony of the novel [*The Sot-Weed Factor*] consists in the fact that it is based on the model of *Tom Jones*, and on all the assumptions the world of *Tom Jones* makes, but that its hero, Ebenezer Cooke, achieves disillusionment, not identity, at the end. The very concept of ''identity'' is called into question by the novel. No one in the novel is what he appears to be; Bertrand, Ebenezer's

valet, poses as Ebenezer aboard ship; Burlingame poses as Lord Baltimore, Colonel Peter Sayer, Timothy Mitchell, and Nicholas Lowe. The overwhelming complexity and richness of the novel derive partly from this substitution of illusion for identity. All of the complicated, shifting interconnections of the plot and the political intrigues it involves are brought a step beyond *Tom Jones*: the threads of the plot never are tied up neatly in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, and facts never do dovetail. The maze of the plot, from the overview of the reader, verges on the condition of a labyrinth, the condition in which the consistent identity of the world exists in a shattered state. The space of *The Sot-Weed Factor* is apparently the same kind of map space as in *Tom Jones*, but cracks in this space are always opening up, and they open into voids.

John Vernon. *The Garden and the Map* (Illinois). 1973. pp. 63–4

Barth's solution to his distaste for necessity is to create imaginative alternatives to reality—*The Sot-Weed Factor*, *Giles Goat-Boy*—with characters whose fictionalizing approach to life he shares. With their own arbitrariness and finality, these alternatives dramatize the irresponsibility of fiction to any man's factual and reasonable truth. They and their heroes, who make their lives into fanciful floating operas, are amoral. The only limiting provision of this value—the fictionalization of experience—is that it work: psychologically to protect, aesthetically to interest. The floating-opera man does not want to give himself away but does want to interest others. For Barth's characters it is a way of living in the world while retreating from it. For Barth as a novelist it is a way of writing a book without the curse of sincerity, a way of having protean secrets protected by protean disguises.

Barth's parody of aesthetic form is one of these disguises. What seems to be an attack on fiction itself is actually a critique of the solidification or rationalization of the aesthetic process into an abstract construct. The aesthetic or fictionalizing process is fluid and willful; it breaks up or ignores traditional values and conventions, which may seem to have a rational basis, to control one's experience.

Thomas Le Clair. *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. Winter, 1973. p. 722

The typical Barth character . . . embarks upon a voyage of thought and passion whose goal is to discover the ''real'' self, the ''real'' experience, underlying the fictions in which he is imprisoned. For Barth, the novel begins when a character becomes conscious of himself as an actor, puppet, and perhaps inventor of his own life-drama. Therefore, the plot of Barth's novels is largely the plot of discovering the underlying myths, the archfictions which will allow us to live with the smaller, less satisfying fictions of everyday life and still to believe in ourselves as conscious, creative agents. . . .

Barth's career, indeed, is a progression toward precisely such a mythic vision of the inauthentic condition of modern man: an evolution of style, theme, and subject which ends—for the present—in a severe, allegorical approach that describes the modern dilemma of writer and reader most efficiently by a retelling and inversion of the most ancient and ''irrelevant'' of legends. There is a surprising corollary to this evolution—as Barth's fictions become more and more obsessively ''mythic,'' they also become lighter, more truly comic, more open to the possibilities of life and to the chances of escaping the infinite vortices of self-consciousness.

Frank D. McConnell. *Four Postwar American Novelists* (Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1977), pp. 115–16

Make no mistake: [*Letters*] is a daunting book. Amid the fabulist fictions which have, in the past twenty years, sprouted at every hand, it rises like a monument—a monument being, of course, a construction that demands attention but is not itself alive. Patience, Shakespeare tells us, sat on a monument, and that is one of the things the reader can do with *Letters*, but whatever he does with it, he had better bring Patience along for company. Again, make no mistake: this longest and most complex of John Barth's novels is really an awesome performance. Like Nabokov's *Ada*, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and Gaddis's *J.R.*—the only contemporary novels other than Barth's own to which it may be fairly compared—*Letters* is brilliant, witty, at times erudite, and damn near unreadable as well. The reader's jaw drops in amazement, then remains locked in the yawn position. . . .

Put briefly, Barth's intention here is to write a novel which will serve as a sequel to all five of the books he had written prior to embarking on this one, and to do so in the form of an epistolary novel, a genre he well knows was exhausted nearly two centuries ago but which he will revivify by means of all manner of alphabetical, anagrammatical and numerological games. . . .

Barth cannot write a dull page and there is much here that is delightful, but by writing a great many very similar pages, and drawing so heavily on material he has exhausted before, he becomes very quickly dull. . . .

And yet: it is impossible to dislike the book. Perhaps, given the perspective a reviewer can never immediately enjoy, I'll look upon it with more affection. Barth is as inventive and as muscular a writer as we have just now. Faint-headed readers may not finish *Letters*, but no one who cares for fiction can ignore it altogether.

Peter S. Prescott. *Newsweek*. Oct. 1, 1979, pp. 74, 76

John Barth's fictions have always used male-female relationships to explore questions of identity. Barth's characterizations have escaped criticism, however, because his fictions have gradually abandoned the pretense of realism, in favor of parodic and self-conscious techniques. The ''self-reflexive'' approach allows Barth to explore the deeply traditional structures—the myths—that he finds at the heart of fiction, of experience, and of perception. This pursuit of fundamental form has led him to a mythic definition of male and female identities, one that underlies all the work but becomes most explicit in *Chimera*. The notions of gender identity revealed in Barth's work are important first because they *are* traditional; they reflect the assumptions inherent in a male-centered mythology. But Barth extends the myth, employing it as metaphor for the condition of the artist/perceiver. That ''new'' myth contains more than the dangers of the old male-female dichotomy; it is a fascinating example of the ways that contemporary subjective relativism can support a myth even more deadening to women. Thus Barth's ideas of gender identity are important not only in illuminating his own fictional views, but also in tracing the emergence of old sex roles in new disguises. . . .

Barth wants to show the paradoxical nature of life, but keeps coming down on one side of the paradox, unable to resolve the polar tensions without surrender of one pole. A perspective so heavily weighted in favor of the ''masculine,'' conceptual, creative pole can hardly celebrate ''feminine'' principles, particularly when the narrative itself displays the triumph of idea over fact, scheme over ambiguous life. Barth's preference for the ''male'' side eliminates even the power suggested by the mythic dichotomy, reducing the potent innerness of the Earth Mother to the ''vacuum'' of the not-self, and reducing the energy of the Muse to the mimicry of the mirror-self. The result is female characters who are always seen from outside, who are reduced to symbols, symbols moreover of the non-human aspects of life, and who are denied power even in that area by narrative insistence on the creative male perceiver.

Cynthia Davis. *Centennial Review*. Summer, 1980, pp. 309, 321

There is so much that is appealing, even wise, in *Sabbatical*, that if I finally found it irritatingly cute, I hope the shortcoming is mine, not the author's. John Barth certainly has the right stuff. He can, as Saul Bellow once prescribed, put a spin on words, but it seems to me that in *Sabbatical* he has not so much hammered out a novel as proffered a long and convoluted academic write. Seductive here, touching there, but ultimately confusing. Unsatisfying. Undone, perhaps, by its own cleverness, a highly refined propensity for literary games and riddles. . . .

For all its self-consciousness, plentiful footnotes pedantic or ponderous, and showy literary references, *Sabbatical* has been built on a frame of very stale convention. Which is to say, at the novel's end—well, no, it doesn't end, it stops—the author and his black-eyed Susan are (wait for it) about to sit down and write the novel we have just read with, as the blurb writer coyly puts it (wink, wink), a little help from the author.

Mordecai Richler. *Saturday Review*. June, 1982, p. 67

Letters, with its central image and metaphor of the Tower of Truth rising over a university campus but inexorably sinking into the marshland even as it was built, was an extended and general discussion of the state and status of American culture and literature which, of necessity, concluded inconclusively. Even its one (apparently) definite death, that of Todd Andrews as he stood atop the tower at the moment of its explosive destruction, has been withdrawn and he is to be found sailing through the pages of *The Tidewater Tales*.

Sabbatical, taking its start from the final page of *Letters*, is a study of a retired CIA operative writing his memoirs as a revenge on the Company's more heinous deeds. Along the way, the Vietnam War, abortion, the role of US secret service in South America, the pollution of the James River, the state of contemporary fiction and criticism are all discussed within the frame of a preambulatory narrative. All these discussions contribute obliquely to the central question of the book: whether, in the face of the present direction the world is taking, the two central characters of the novel should reproduce themselves biologically as well as literally.

The Tidewater Tales replays and reworks that ground situation, . . . and pays homage to the fictional character whom Barth sees as the goddess of the art of narrative by introducing her into the text as a player in the game.

Richard Bradbury. *Critical Quarterly*. Spring, 1990, pp. 66–67

At the probable risk of some arbitrariness, one can distinguish four major functions of myth in *Chimera*. The first may be labeled the demystification of myth as spiritual, cultural, or historical heritage. Next, and contradictory so far as reader expectancy is concerned, is the defamiliarization of myth as received tale. The third function is what might be called the radicalization of myth as self-parody. This activity is not only characteristically Barthian but also involves a doubling of paradigms or schemas and a perceived referentiality to either or both of the first two functions. The final function—although, as we shall see, there is also a function of the functions—is the restoration of myth as unbounded narrativity. This activity bears closely on the nature of Barth's work since *Chimera*, most notably *Letters* and *The Tidewater Tales* with their virtually inexhaustible inventiveness compounded with replication.

John Vickery. *Modern Fiction Studies*. Summer, 1992, p. 429

The conceit of John Barth's new novel [*Once upon a Time: A Floating Opera*] (if novel it is; it's as much a memoir) concerns a fountain pen. ''Nothing fancy about it,'' Barth says. ''It's a no-nonsense, British-made Parker, burgundy plastic barrel, brushed steel cap with arrow-shaped clip and some sort of polished gray stone let into the top, point neatly cowled by the lower barrel in a clean modernist style, nib alloyed of platinum and iridium for hardness and corrosion resistance. But I was impressed by the manufacturer's recommendation that the pen be used exclusively by its owner, since over time the rub shapes itself to its user's penmanship and thus writes evermore smoothly.''

This precise description of a *modernist* pen occurs, within a longer passage in which Barth describes in loving detail his working methods—how he must write in an old binder he bought in his undergraduate days, how he must place plugs in his ears to shut out all sound, etc. Throughout, Barth comments on his novels, their sources, their critical reception. But what little story he offers concerns his pen, his mourning over its loss, and its eventual replacement—all tricked out in ''arias,'' ''acts,'' ''duets,'' and the like, although any resemblances to an opera are purely mechanical.

Somewhere near page 100, Barth and his wife begin their voyage. It's much the same voyage undertaken in *Sabbatical* (1982) and *The Tidewater Tales* (1987), twin books telling the same story from different premises, but, in any case, featuring a voyage around Chesapeake Bay by a man and woman. There's more trouble with the plot than usual in *Once upon a Time*, however. . . .

Perhaps Barth is pretending; with his immense talents, he could write a great story if he chose. He'd rather speculate on what sort of story he'd have if he had one. . . .

Once upon a Time is the most postmodern of all of Barth's novels. No character with an interesting or sympathetic internal life is presented; Barth seems incapable of such a creation. No major theme is undertaken—not even, with any thoroughness, Barth's own aging. There is nothing here, in the end, but writing.

John Mort. *New L.* Spring, 1994, p. 6, 7

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BARTHELME, Donald (1931–1989)

Come Back, Dr. Caligari by Donald Barthelme is a hard wild controlled collection of poker-faced perversities, working a kind of drollery which automatically precludes the intimate effects but pinwheels and sky-rockets spectacularly across its own landscape. Occasionally Mr. Barthelme falls into a mode which can best be described as that of a pop artist in prose; these stories are studded with solemn absurdities from ads, comic-books, mail-order catalogs, record-blurbs, and instruction-leaflets. . . .

The characters rise like automata to their formal speeches and jerky actions, then subside; it makes not only for the cruel funny, but, oddly, for a desolate landscape littered with pathetic fragments of useless speech-patterns. It is a book written as if with verbal components from a used-car graveyard; its most striking effects come from disparity, inconsequence, and incongruity.

> Robert M. Adams. *New York Review of Books*. April 30, 1964. p. 10

On its most available level *Snow White* is a parodic contemporary retelling of the fairy tale. More accurately, the tale is here refracted through the prism of a contemporary sensibility so that it emerges broken up into fragments, shards of its original identity, of its historical career in our consciousness *Disney's cartoon film is almost as much in evidence as the Grimm story* and of its recorded or potential uses for sociology and psychology—all the Freudian undertones and implications, for example. Placed like widely separated tesserae in an abstract mosaic construction, the fragments serve to give a skeletal unity to the mostly verbal events that surround them, as well as a locus for the book's main imaginative thrust.

The only thing resembling a narrative is that the book does move on to fulfill in its own very special way the basic situation of the fairy tale. But Barthelme continually breaks up the progression of events, switching horses in midstream, turning lyricism abruptly into parody, exposition into incantation, inserting pure irrelevancies, pure indigestible fragments like bits of stucco on a smooth wall, allowing nothing to *follow* or link up in any kind of logical development. . . .

Fiction, Barthelme is saying, has lost its power to transform and convince and substitute, just as reality has lost, perhaps only temporarily (but that is not the concern of the imagination), its need and capacity to sustain fictions of this kind. [1967]

> Richard Gilman. *The Confusion of Realms* (Random). 1969. pp. 45, 47

Barthelme's stories are . . . unnatural acts. They are attempts—mocking attempts—at narrative in a time that is shapeless and that affords no principle of selection. Like William Burroughs, Barthelme creates a new kind of fiction by frustrating, spoofing, or aggressively ignoring the expectations—of situation, development, denouement—raised by the old. He is light-minded with a vengeance; or, if light-mindedness is indeed an illness, militant mockery is its slightly feverish principle. Hence these stories [*Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*], though so much like play, are not quite free. They mock contemporary life, they mock the art of fiction itself, not in simple exuberance, and certainly not in full comic gaiety but in a somewhat painful merriment and with ever so slightly a feeling of having to vomit.

> Calvin Bedient. *The Nation*. May 27, 1968. p. 703

Barthelme's only novel to date, *Snow White*, is an extended parody, an ingenious ''put-on'' that is perhaps the purest example of Camp yet published. Barthelme, however, does not emphasize artifice at the expense of meaning, as Sontag's definition of Camp would lead one to expect. On the contrary, *Snow White* demonstrates as few novels can the indissolubility of form and content in the novel. To be sure, the form of Barthelme's Camp masterpiece—the ways he manages and arranges character and incident and the use he makes of language—does obscure all coherent meaning or ''content'' in the novel, but this is precisely Barthelme's point. In writing a novel devoid of ''meaning'' in the traditional sense of that term, Barthelme denies the possibility of meaning in an absurd world. The form of his novel thus becomes an analogue to the absurd human condition.

> Charles B. Harris. *Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd* (College and University). 1971. pp. 124–5

Barthelme's importance as a writer lies not only in the exciting, experimental form, but in the exploration of the full impact of mass media pop culture on the consciousness of the individual who is so bombarded by canned happenings, sensations, reactions, and general noise that he can no longer distinguish the self from the surroundings. Barthelme's metropolis is rapidly reaching the state where the media are the man. As refuge the individual finds only unquestioning acceptance of contradictory states on the one hand, or specialized and meaningless abstractions on the other. Though wisdom and insight may exist here, the mass media have reduced everything to the same level of slightly shrill importance, and thus, paradoxically, to the same level of trivia. In the constant barrage of equally accentuated ''nownesses,'' the individual loses all sense of priorities, and thus, caught between undifferentiated fact and equally meaningless abstractions, his world is that horror envisioned by one of E. M. Forster's characters in *A Passage to India* where every thing exists and nothing has value.

As a writer, Barthelme also asks about the arts in such a city and finds the artist too is trapped. Striving to achieve aesthetic distance,

to get above the level of mere phenomenon, the artist finds that his works aren't accepted by a world bent on ''fact'' or that his efforts at perspective have produced only the borrowed, traditional or trivial and are thus unrelated to the world they should represent.

Francis Gillen. *Twentieth Century Literature*. Jan., 1972. pp. 37–8

Barthelme's stories are normally made up of fragments seemingly associated at random; the closer they come to narrative development, character portrayal or any other conventional purpose, the more overtly they signal their fragmentation. Barthelme may separate the parts of a story with numbers or blank space, or interpose graphic divisions. Earlier writers have drawn similar attention to the formal arbitrariness of fiction—one thinks of Sterne, who also favored graphic intrusions and blank space, or Thackeray, who said in *Vanity Fair* that his characters were puppets—but not even contemporary meta-fictionists like Borges go so far in insisting that the reader take the story as a made object, not a window on life.

Although Barthelme's strategies vary in significance from story to story, they all spring from a common impulse. He is very conscious that formulas achieve familiarity and that familiarity breeds inattention. Though he wishes that literature could still provide insight and inspiration as it did in the great, mercifully unselfconscious days of a writer like Tolstoy . . . he is also aware that modern readers have experienced too much literature to respond freely to the old modes, so he free associates to ''make it new.'' While less theoretical contemporaries resort to marginal subject matter, idiosyncratic viewpoints or shocking language, Barthelme uses formal dislocation to achieve this goal.

Charles Thomas Samuels. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 5, 1972. p. 27

Donald Barthelme either takes pills, does dope, drinks an awful lot, or has one of the unique literary imaginations of the present age. I think it's the latter. . . .

Calling Donald Barthelme's work fiction doesn't do the job. They're writings . . . in search of their own definition, fiction essays on themes that are secret or haven't been announced. They usually have no plots, no characters we can identify from life, no formal beginnings or endings. They're all event, condition, attitude expressed from the viewpoint of a bright and detached stone-head. Some sentences run on for 200 words in quest of a subject. Like poems, his tales seem to plead for reading aloud. They're for feeling and effect, not narration. . . .

While other writers struggle with identity problems and questions or reality, Barthelme has found the magic. Reality doesn't exist. Identity is a costume. . . . His fairy tales . . . should be viewed as you would modern painting. Enjoy the color. Feast on the textures, shapes, patterns. Muse over the combinations.

Yet like contemporary art and music, Barthelme's writing rides on the back of its social source. The pointless talk and intense self-consciousness of his characters, the barbaric juxtapositions of the sacred and the profane, the expensive junk, laminated vocabularies and suspended judgments of his tales—all point to a cultural cellar in which Barthelme sits thinking. So much so a Skinnerian psychologist could make a case for Barthelme as delivery boy for the dreams of the body neurotic of the U.S.A.

Webster Schott. *Book World*. Nov. 5, 1972. p. 3

Sadness is a collection of Barthelme's recent stories, his dreams, his toys. Perhaps because he has illustrated one of them with literal montage, it is the art of collage that Barthelme's technique evokes for me—the scissoring and pasting of borrowed images, bringing them into new contexts and thus forming a new reality, but a reality taking half its meaning from the old contexts. Barthelme cites Leninist-Marxist thought knowledgeably, and what we are talking about (not necessarily as a consequence) is a dialectical art, which is to say a revolutionary art. Which is not to say a political art, one that services a revolution, but an art that stages its own strictly apolitical upheaval.

Barthelme is no political man. Mementos abound of Borges and Beckett, who belong also to the grand toymaker tradition of Klee and Calder. The world inhabited by these men is the echo chamber, the hall of mirrors, the palace of art, the House of Usher. Theirs is a closet, a palace revolution. Theirs is a highly objective, even cerebral world, yet these artists make themselves felt nonetheless. We are aware of Barthelme's presence in these stories, whether as an unhappy husband, a man on an operating table, or a mysterious, modern incarnation of St. Anthony. The landscape is bleak, evoking the unpleasant, flat horizons of surrealistic paintings; yet we also detect the familiar features of Barthelme's native East Texas.

John Seelye. *Saturday Review*. Dec., 1972. p. 66

In the past few years, half masquerading as Thurber's ghost, Donald Barthelme has slipped into the preconscious of contemporary fiction through the pages of *The New Yorker*. Both Thurber and Barthelme draw on a self-indulgent yet acidly ironic fantasy life in which they triumph over their enemies and find innocent pleasures they prefer to call guilty. . . .

In five collections of stories and one novel, he has established not so much a milieu of places and characters, nor a recognizable style, as an elusive tone. . . . For several years now Barthelme has been sprinkling his texts with modishly doctored engravings and old prints that reinforce his mood [between the fantastic and the comic]. Even without them his most characteristic passages recall Max Ernst's pre-surrealist collages, and also the stunning slow-motion farce-epics of the Bread and Puppet Theater. . . .

For those who prefer to use the handrail of plot when they step off onto the dark stairs of fiction, *The Dead Father* offers more to hold onto than Barthelme's earlier fiction. Even so, he snatches away our security after only a few steps.

Roger Shattuck. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 9, 1975. pp. 1–2

To turn . . . to Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father* may induce culture shock. This cold short narrative is written at an extreme distance from life, out of literary models and the author's idea of a defunct avant-garde. *The Dead Father* is God, we are told at one point, but the tyrannic authority of the past will do. It seems clear only that Barthelme finds clarity simplistic and is enchanted with

the attenuated jokes of modernity. Here may be found his Lucky speech, his *Watt* palaver, his Joycean flourishes, his Kafkaesque dream, etc. It's all very cynical and chic, like Woody Allen's posture of the twirp taking on the big guys once again. Here the novel itself is a *shtick*. Barthelme is adroit and must know the dangers he runs in his use of the literary forebears he fears and admires. The awe is still in him and he cannot bring himself to real parody. The book is boring and difficult to no purpose. The little snigger we get from recognizing the Beckett line is like that Model T in *Ragtime*. Real freedom, if that is what Barthelme is seeking in laying the image of the father to rest, will come in a release of his comic talent from the merely fashionable. He is ingenious in dealing with the madness of sophisticated urban life but he is not yet angry enough to dig out from under the clods of pastiche that muffle his own voice.

Maureen Howard. *The Yale Review*. Spring, 1976, pp. 408–9

As though to offer an alternative to our immersion in fixed roles and clichés, and our inevitable imprisonment in the fixed structures of language, he subjects the written and spoken forms of language to endless experimentation and parody. Most typically, he literalizes metaphor, which shocks the reader into an awareness of both his own uncreative use of language and its rich possibilities. Barthelme evokes through his verbal arrangements, in fact, a universe—unborn until then, untapped in his reader's consciousness. He creates, especially up through *The Dead Father*, a unique form of comedy, with language as its subject, the emblem of man's relationship to other men and to the universe. It is a comedy, moreover, that is wildly funny, as it is liberating and educative. In some of his more recent work—with either its literalizations of metaphysical issues (which create a unique form of fable) or with its new dialogue forms—he creates an even more poetic and diffuse style. One may associate the brilliant verbal collage with the earlier and main body of his writing, and the more ineffable, infinitely suggestive and polyphonic techniques of poetry and musical composition with some of the more recent material. . . .

Barthelme is wonderfully interesting and funny: more important, he is remarkably liberating. Our pleasure comes not in figuring out how his people use words, or the sources of his parody, but rather we revel in his dazzling and endlessly provocative verbal textures. He may be aware that language constricts and that the mind tends to operate in structures, but he is unique in creating for us through his wonderful elegance the great and abundant world. He demands a sophisticated reader, for the better read and more sensitive to language and style one is, the more fun he will have, since Barthelme seems to have read everything. Unlike Eliot, however, whose literariness was didactic and in many ways, an end in itself—because it pointed back to a time of former value—Barthelme's vast information is but his means of stimulating us to a recognition of the limitations as well as the meanings of past formulations. Ultimately, Barthelme wishes us to break free and take pleasure in the world his thick textures evoke.

Lois Gordon. *Donald Barthelme* (Twayne, 1981), pp. xi–xii, 33

Barthelme can probably write any way he wants to. He has chosen to remain a comic writer whose subject matter is disorder. (This phrase will fit Voltaire, Twain, and Beckett.) He has given no hint of a predilected order, and I can't think of one that wouldn't depress him. He accepts the absurdity of everything with the clarity of a saint or the absoluteness of a nihilist. He does not bereave us of our intelligence, our wit, our material comforts. He lets us keep every advantage we have against an absurd and futile existence, and proceeds to show us the absurdity and futility of our best and brightest, especially these.

His method is simplicity itself. There are no more contexts. Every attempt at ceremony parodies itself. Barthelme relocates our world back in Eden, apple in hand, wiseacre snake hissing psychiatry, advertising, marketing, personality tips, economics, weight watching, art appreciation, group therapy, our lovely brassy swinging culture from Philosophy 700 (Kierkegaard to Sartre) to bongo drums in the subway. But we feel suddenly naked, embarrassed, and unwelcome in the garden. Barthelme doesn't know why we feel this way either, but he can focus our feeling into a bright point that can raise a blister.

Guy Davenport. *Book World*. Oct. 25, 1981, p. 5

In a tale like ''The Educational Experience'' [Donald] Barthelme enlarges the perspective of his art. This story becomes nothing less than a work of conceptual art, a three-dimensional art event depicting the origins of the disillusionment and sense of failure that the personal acknowledges in ''See the Moon.'' As in stories like ''Me and Miss Mandible,'' ''The Sergeant,'' and ''The School,'' the tale blames its narrator's educational experience for misleading and brutalizing him. It transforms a four-year college curriculum into an intellectual gymnasium in which students exercise to quotations from history and literature and hurdle over new discoveries in solid-state physics like athletes in a track event. This education rewards speed and efficiency in its students but totally fails to suggest the ways human knowledge might develop their imaginations. Consequently, the students are processed from this assembly line with great cynicism about learning, thinking, and feeling. ''The Educational Experience'' functions as a story about the dubious process of contemporary education and the confusions it causes in those who manage to survive it. Moving from descriptions of the strenuous obstacles these students encounter to the trivial fragments of information they are made to assimilate, the tale emerges as both a piece of conceptual art and an action painting that uses words from strikingly different vocabularies to instruct, admonish, and direct its students into regimented lives.

Wayne B. Stengel. *The Shape of Art in the Short Stories of Donald Barthelme* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1985), p. 204

In *The Dead Father*, the rejection of the past comes about through a journey no one is anxious to make and which will leave matters in much the same condition as when they began. Barthelme thus reduces the conflict from one of heroic enactment to that of repetitive statement, allowing neither, as in comedy, the triumphant celebration of youth over age nor, as in tragedy, the transcendence of necessity through understanding. Nurturing and destructive, omnipotent and ineffectual, tyrannical as well as bewildered,

vulnerable no less than vindictive, the Dead Father is a figure of undiminished sexual appetites and vague unfulfilled longings, whose farcical attempt to perpetuate his own myth invites an ambivalent response. Almost from the start, it undercuts its own resonance by substituting for the ritual gesture or expression an uncertain questioning about how effectual such gestures or expressions have been. . . .

The discontinuity of the elements suggests that the narrative principle is more onomastic, or naming, than visual. Neither the objects named nor the relationships between them are arranged in any necessary order by combining the parts to afford some perspective or by widening the view of landscape. Nor is order determined by the evolving character of one or another of the actors as a consequence of what happens to them. They are, rather, allowed simply to remain side by side. In Barthelme's fiction, then, juxtaposition proves to be regressive rather than developmental. The Dead Father's acquiescence in his burial punctuates the loss of the symbols of his authority; it is not caused by that loss or even illuminated by it.

Stanley Trachtenberg. *Understanding Donald Barthelme* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Pr., 1990), pp. 188–89, 199–200

Barthelme's new novel, *The King*, finished three months before his death last year, is an Arthurian fable of human poses and pretensions. Set in a land and time in which Arthur, Guinevere, knights, tournaments, jesters, and tents mingle with Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Lord HeeHaw, submarines, bombs, and ubiquitous radio waves, the fabulistic stream of Barthelme consciousness wanders into plots of ripe fruits of satire. Barthelme's barbs and witty touches of parallelism in all ages of human history abound in this short fiction: what he is after is a knowing of human foibles, a compassionate forgiveness of them, and ultimately the unknowing of human contradiction by acceptance of its nature. All remains the same at the end of Barthelme's fiction: Arthur and Guinevere in separate tents of activity, the knights on various legs of journeys round the table of discontents, the world during its Second Great War in a cataclysm that already has passed a first phase. Yet just as much as the remains are the beginnings that Barthelme's fiction poses: awareness of human need to move forward into constructs of understanding without forgoing old clubs of association.

Martin Tucker. *Confrontation*. Fall, 1990–Winter, 1991, p. 216

In Barthelme . . . postmodern must also mean post-Freudian; identifiable ''thought structures,'' ''phantasies,'' ''wish-creations,'' and typical patterns, as they are isolated and defined in the classical psychoanalytic literature, guide Barthelme to the kind of personal and intertextual material with which he works, influence his modes of wit and humor, and frame the narrative problems that generate that remarkable variety of experimental solutions to which the critics have rightly pointed. Appreciating Barthelme's revisionary project opens the way to seeing his fragmentary discourse as less a refraction of postmodern disarray than as an effect of a more or less disguised and intensely polemical dialogue with modernism's foremost ''cartographers of the mind'' and theorists of the father-son relation—fathers and sons are Barthelme's flood subject, after all.

Michael Zeitlin. *Contemporary Lterature*. Summer, 1993, pp. 185–86

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BAUSCH, Richard (1940–)

In Bausch's latest novel, *Violence* (1992), the ghost of his abusive father is awakened in Charles Connally when he narrowly escapes death in a convenience-store holdup. The discovery of his own capacity for violence, and his cowardice, unhinges Connally so that he *almost* follows his father's path of violence. But some mysterious exorcising spirit, centered in his ability to forgive his mother for her past failings and in the love of his pregnant wife Carol, saves him. Baush counterbalances the paralyzing dark forces with small, inexplicable gestures of healing that enable his characters to carry on.

Bausch's fictional subject is the American middle class, with its complicated relationships between young couples, parents and children, and relatives. These relationships are continually tested to the breaking point. . . . Bausch deftly shows the quirky, mysterious eruptions of grace that testify to the resilience of the human spirit.

John F. Desmond. *America*. May 14, 1994, p. 11

For the most part, the United States, as depicted by Richard Bausch in *Aren't You Happy for Me?* remains a civilian society. Its problems are personal and familial. Racial and religious conflict, and the ownership of the nation, tend not to arise. If some of Bausch's characters are touched by the economy in the form of unemployment, and thus are aware of class, they are inclined to interpret this in terms of personal realities. Politics, in the longest piece, ''Spirits,'' is what a lecherous drunken professor at a small private college used to be involved in and famous for, back in the Kennedy era.

Richard Ford's introduction to this first British collection aligns Bausch's work with a tradition of realism reaching back to ''that old Midwesterner, Chekhov,'' and it is true that Bausch's direction of the reader's interest is so discreetly persuasive that it takes a while for the stories' real peculiarity to emerge—namely the combination of highly articulate characters and their characteristic lack of curiosity about anything beyond their immediate orbit. . . .

The weariness and frequently inexplicable sense of loss which unify the population of *Aren't You Happy for Me?* have lessons to offer, one of them being not to expect to derive much happiness from the growth of understanding. Yet the effect is far from wearisome. The unfussy polish and economy of Bausch's stories could seem like mere accomplishment of a not unfamiliar sort, but phrases and scenes resurface in the mind, demanding that the whole collection be reread, its lines of kinship seen afresh. Bausch's novels should now be made available in Britain, too.

Sean O'Brien. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. July 21, 1995, p. 21

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BAXTER, Charles (1947–)

Although *Through the Safety Net* is only his second collection of stories and he has yet to publish in the large circulation ''name'' magazines, Charles Baxter must be counted among one of our best short fiction writers. The author of these eleven stories is a mature, accomplished writer, as evident in ''Winter Journey'' and ''Surprised by Joy.'' The suggestive title of the collection unites the stories and has many referents, including the title story and the Reaganomic notion that beneath society stretches a safety net, really. The most telling referent, however, appears in ''A Late Sunday Afternoon at the Huron.''. . .

Baxter's characters, though falling through a spiritual abyss, have known a mild happiness. As they fall, they can still remember a happiness, or at least they can conjure one. Some even land safely.

Baxter celebrates in his falling characters that ability to acknowledge the life in those who still balance upon the tightrope. In ''The Eleventh Floor,'' an alcoholic commercial writer, Mr. Bradbury, is shrouded in a cynical indifference to the world, and not until Mr. Bradbury recognizes the deep, sexual love between his son and his son's lover does life affect him. . . .

Having spent the latter part of his life in an alcoholic blur, blindly falling, Mr. Bradbury may not be redeemed by his understanding, for he has merely drawn open his own frailty. Yet for someone who is falling, parting the curtains to see the world is a worthy act. Baxter does not gratuitously play with his subjects. Rather, he proffers the hope and possibility that another net will gather beneath the falling, provided that those who fall are humane enough to recognize their own vulnerability.

Through the Safety Net is not a collection of Carverean stories of good, inarticulate people living bad lives; neither do these stories wallow in modern malaise; neither are they simple regional tales. Baxter's Michigan is inhabited by cars, half-employed workers, burned-out graduate students, half-sane school teachers, would-be painters, dogs, young boys, and angels—a Michigan meriting forgiveness and blessing. Life is affirmed, even when living is grievous or bitter. In a time in which many short stories are written either as thinly veiled autobiography or as *l'art pour l'art* exercises, these stories are profound in how Baxter brings back authority to the teller of the tale. In short, he has something to say *for* us, and he takes on that moral responsibility with humor, wisdom, and compassion.

James Brock. *Studies in Short Fiction*. Fall, 1986, pp. 459–60.

''Life can only be understood backwards,'' Kierkegaard once observed, ''but it must be lived forwards.'' Backward into memory and childhood—that is the direction taken by Charles Baxter's highly accomplished first novel [*First Light*]. Like the Broadway shows *Merrily We Roll Along* and *Betrayal*, *First Light* consists of a series of episodes that recede further and further into the past, and with each backward step, the reader is granted further insight into the characters' lives. The process is not unlike the one used by psychiatrists: as ancient family history is sifted, clues are yielded that shed new light on the present. In one's beginnings are found seeds of what is yet to come.

As he has already demonstrated in two impressive collections of short stories, *Harmony of the World* and *Through the Safety Net*, Mr. Baxter possesses an intuitive understanding of the hazards and rewards of domestic life—especially as practiced by survivors of the 60's. In *First Light*, he trains his gifts of sympathy and observation on a single family, the Welches of Five Oaks, Mich. More specifically, his focus is on Hugh Welch, a Buick salesman, and his brilliant sister, Dorsey, who left home to become a famous astrophysicist.

When we first meet Dorsey, she's just returned for a Fourth of July visit to her hometown, with her new husband and her deaf son, Noah, in tow. Hugh, it seems, has been dreading the visit for days: though he's spent his life ''watching over'' his kid sister, he's recently begun to doubt that she needs his help at all. To make matters worse, he's already taken a decided dislike to her husband, Simon, a glib, self-conscious actor who seems to be constantly putting him down. Indeed, the initial impressions that Simon and Dorsey make on the reader is less than positive: Dorsey comes across as a snobbish academic who patronizes her working-class brother, and Simon strikes us as a self-absorbed fool, a small-town cad who not only cheats on Dorsey all the time but also likes to boast about it.

''All I ever wanted,'' Hugh tells Dorsey, ''was to make sure . . . that you were all right. You know: safe.''

''That's sweet,'' she replies, echoing a sentiment expressed by many of the characters in *Through the Safety Net*. ''But it won't ever work. Not for me. It hasn't ever worked. Besides, there's no safety in safety. So I might as well live with Simon. You and I, Hugh—we've been divorced, haven't we? Can brothers and sisters get divorces from each other? I think they can, and I think we got one.''

From this nervous, nearly adversarial exchange, Mr. Baxter slowly draws us into Dorsey's and Hugh's past; we begin to understand just how this ''divorce'' has occurred. Over the years, after all, Dorsey and Hugh have drifted into different worlds. As their paths have diverged, their memories of each other have become uncomfortable reminders of what they once were—and might have been.

Having elected to stay in Five Oaks and marry a girl he dated in school, Hugh now leads a simple, tactile life: though his marriage has devolved into a passionless routine, punctuated with occasional motel room liaisons, he still derives a blunt, unaccommodated pleasure from selling Buicks, and he enjoys renovating the house he inherited from his parents. ''To record the passage of time through his life,'' writes Mr. Baxter, ''Hugh alters his house room by room. He surrounds himself with the work of his hands.''

Dorsey, in contrast, has gone on to study the cold, starry skies. She has made a life for herself in the cerebral spheres of academia, fulfilling all the brave, high expectations of her parents and teachers. She has worked for her doctorate, had a disturbing affair with her mentor, a brooding physicist named Carlo Pavorese, and borne his child, Noah. In the wake of those events, she has abruptly married Simon, a willful, self-absorbed man, in whose adolescent pranks she delights.

The men in Dorsey's life are drawn, by Mr. Baxter, in uncharacteristically broad strokes; they tend to feel more like generic types than individuals. Carlo is a caricature of the mad genius—tormented, brilliant and domineering—while Simon seems like a shallow alter ego of Hugh. Where Hugh is adept with his hands, Simon is inept; where Hugh is earnest and sincere, Simon is posturing and phony, etc.

Happily enough, the two-dimensionality of these fellows doesn't really bother us, so wrapped up are we in the story of Dorsey and Hugh. As the novel progresses, the retreat into their past accelerates; we see their youth and childhoods revealed, like rapidly turned pages in a snapshot album. Dorsey's appeal to Hugh for help, as she lies alone in a hospital room with her newborn baby; Dorsey's delivery of the valedictory speech at the Five Oaks high school; Hugh's growing reputation as a ladies' man in Five Oaks; Dorsey's difficulty finding a date for the school dance, her sense of being a social outcast; Hugh's dazzling performance as a hockey player, in front of his adoring sister's eyes; Dorsey's fascination, as a child, with the stars and planets of the nighttime sky.

In reading of these events, we see why Dorsey and Hugh each made the choices that they did, how their childhood dreams were translated into adult decisions. We see how Hugh looked for Dorsey in his wife, Laurie; how Dorsey's hero worship of her brother led her to pick men so different in temperament and talents. In fact, by orchestrating tiny details of observation and larger emotional patterns, Mr. Baxter makes us understand both the shifting balance of power that has occurred between Dorsey and Hugh over the years, and the bonds of affection and shared experience that unite them. The result is a remarkably supple novel that gleams with the smoky chiaroscuro of familial love recalled through time.

> Michiko Kakutani. *New York Times*. August 24, 1987, p. C13.

The 13 stories in *A Relative Stranger*, all quietly accomplished, suggest a mysterious yet fundamental marriage of despair and joy. Though in one way or another each story ends in disillusionment, the road that leads us to that dismal state is so richly peopled, so finely drawn, that the effect is oddly reassuring.

The much-praised author, Charles Baxter, has published a novel, *First Light*, as well as two previous collections of stories *Harmony of the World* and *Through the Safety Net*.

Many of the male protagonists in this new collection are confused and timid souls in search of something to believe in; they are all intelligent and sensitive, yet somehow unexceptional. By contrast, the women around them tend to be strong and colorful people who accept life easily—and whose impatience with the men is manifest.

In ''Prowlers,'' Pastor Robinson manages to tolerate a visit by his wife Angie's lover, an abrasive person named Benjamin; when the visit is over, Angie muses to her husband that she and Benjamin know all each other's secrets. Robinson gently protests: ''You know my secrets.'' Angie: ''Sweetheart, you don't have any secrets. You've never wanted a single bad thing in your life.''

Characters like Robinson have the fatal transparency of goodness, a passive blamelessness that may in itself be a tragic flaw. This hapless virtue has a parallel in Cooper, the hero of a story called ''Shelter.'' Cooper is a generous soul who becomes so involved with the homeless—entirely out of brotherly love, a quality he refuses to recognize in himself—that he puts the autonomy of his own family in danger.

Anders, a Swedish businessman in ''The Disappeared,'' finds his childish expectations of America are crippled by his relationship with a stranger in Detroit. Fenstad is a teacher whose pallid devotion to logic is no match for his mother's irrational vitalities (significantly, the story's title is not ''Fenstad'' but ''Fenstad's Mother''). Warren, in ''Westland,'' is hanging around the zoo one day when he meets a teen-age girl who announces that she wants to shoot a lion. She doesn't do it, but in a bizarre echo of the girl's words, Warren later fires shots at the local nuclear reactor to protest the fouling of the environment. It's another portrait of impulsive, undirected goodness, and again its medium is a heartbreaking ineffectuality.

One story that stands out from all the others, in both style and theme, is ''The Old Fascist in Retirement,'' an elegant fictional imagination of Ezra Pound's latter days in Italy. The bitterness of the title contrasts with the rather sympathetic portrait the story contains; the underlying message (so familiar) may be that Pound was not really evil, only deeply confused. If so, then the old poet begins to look like a version—augmented, to be sure, by his peculiar genius—of Fenstad or Cooper or Robinson: a good, articulate man who tragically failed to understand something fundamental about the social contract.

In the powerful title story, ''A Relative Stranger,'' a man discovers late in life that he has a brother. Both men, as infants, were given up for adoption. It appears that two lost souls are headed for a joyful reunion. Yet fraternity turns out to be a burden, another of nature's unpardonable hoaxes; the two brothers are wholly incompatible. One of the brothers says: ''I was always homesick for the rest of the world. My brother does not understand that. He thinks home is where he is now.''

Few of the protagonists in this collection would make the brother's mistake (if it is one). They are the temperamentally homeless, the ones who look off in amazement as other people accept the conditions of the everyday world without even the murmur of an existential question. If these stories have a common theme, it may be this abiding failure, in leading characters, to imagine what is most real. By contrast, Charles Baxter's chronicling of such human debilities represents a continuing triumph of the imaginative will.

> William Ferguson. *New York Times Book Review*, October 21, 1990, p. 18.

[You'd] hurt nothing at all by introducing yourself to Charles Baxter's *A Relative Stranger*. Straight out, let's announce this reviewer is a fan, and in these pages reviewed an earlier work, *Harmony of the World*. Baxter just gets better. Where Rick Hillis dazzles the eye and Daniel Stern makes mind play, Charles Baxter writes straight for the heart. His style is unassuming. Metaphors are rare. There are no pyrotechnical displays of language. All proceeds via understatement, a style that leaves unadorned sadness and passion in stark relief against the page. This prose is glass.

In ''Westland,'' in circumstances that have nothing to do with his job, when a social worker becomes involved with a dysfunctional family he gains possession of a small pistol. He fires it four times at the blank wall of a nuclear reactor. Driving home he finds himself behind a car with a green bumpersticker that reads: ''CAUTION: THIS VEHICLE EXPLODES UPON IMPACT!'' and the social worker thinks, ''That's me. . . . I am that vehicle.'' Many lesser writers, having achieved such a moment, would have quit, but Baxter always works his material completely, squeezing every final nuance from his characters and plot. . . .

''The Disappeared'' is the story of a Swedish engineer, Anders, summoned to Detroit by General Motors to discuss his work in metal alloys. He is fascinated by America, ''especially its colorful disorderliness.'' His ambition is ''to sleep with an American woman in an American bed,'' and once his business is completed, he has three days in ''a wide-open American city, not quite in the wild West, but close enough to suit him.'' Now, most American readers will know that Anders would have been safer in Wichita, Dodge City, or even Tombstone in 1880 than on the streets of contemporary Detroit. Doormen and cab drivers give him warning, but Ander's ignorance makes him fearless. He meets a woman, of course, and being unsure of racial identifications he is mystified by what race she may be. She is one of the Last Ones, a member of the Church of the Millenium, ''where they preach the Gospel of Last Things.''

Detroit eventually turns on him, of course. Anders comes to feel ''that he must get home to Sweden quickly, before he becomes a very different person, unrecognizable even to himself,'' and he steps out of a building into air ''which smelled as it always had, of powerful combustible materials and their traces, fire and ash.'' A very American landscape.

As an author, Charles Baxter is a rare representative of an endangered species—the American writer obsessed with defining the American character. That's a theme that to many seems so presumptuous, so vast and overdone, that they have retreated to neo-regionalism, taking refuge from the Whitmanesque impulses that have shaped so much of our literature, hiding in the more manageable landscape of a specific time and place. But Charles Baxter returns to the bigger theme again and again, and thank goodness. As we change, we need new voices that will redefine us anew.

In other stories, Baxter exquisitely explores relationships between two people, relationships that are always uneven.

In the title story, a man who was an adopted child meets another man who informs him they are brothers. ''Fenstad's Mother'' describes an elderly woman who is, because of her humanistic Old Left Politics, more dynamic, more at ease, more compassionate, and more alive than her son, a teacher, can ever hope to be. And each of ''Three Parabolic Tales'' explores how men and women need and abuse each other. The first story is about a young couple, the second about middle age, the third about an older man and wife. The stories make a lovely trio.

A Relative Stranger is a rich display of Charles Baxter's talents. The intelligence behind the prose is so quiet and so muted, that the reader is never aware of the contrivance of Art. The stories just seem to *be*, sprung fully grown and fully armored, just as they are, and imagining alternatives—that they might have once been something else that the writer judged, revised and refinished—seems impossible.

Introduce yourself to Charles Baxter if you don't already know him. You can never tell what might come of it. Give yourself a reward.

> Perry Glasser. *North American Review*. December, 1990, pp. 60–4.

Often when short-story writers go to write novels they get jaunty. They take deep breaths and become brazen—the way shy people do on wine. Donald Barthelme becomes mythic and parodic, Alice Munro boldly seamsterly (stitching novels from stories). Andre Dubus asks us to reconsider the novella (as an equivalent form). Perhaps Grace Paley has shown the greatest bravado of all in simply not bothering.

Charles Baxter, whose three brilliant collections of short stories (*Harmony of the World, Through the Safety Net* and *A Relative Stranger*) may place him in the same rank as the above writers, constructed his first novel in reverse chronology. *First Light* (1987), the hauntingly detailed story of a brother and sister from Five Oaks, Mich., is an intricate unknotting, a narrative progression backward in time toward the moment when the boy, Hugh, first touches his infant sister's hand. It is a strategy intended, no doubt, to make the form Mr. Baxter's own, as well as to show the inextricability of sibling ties. Now, in his second novel, *Shadow Play* the novel is no longer a form to be seized and remade, but a capacious place in which to move around. Mr. Baxter is looser, less strict. The narrative has not been trained; Mr. Baxter indulges it, affectionately musses its hair, lets it go where it may. The result is, paradoxically, both a more conventionally constructed novel and a more surprising and suspenseful book.

Shadow Play is primarily the story of Wyatt Palmer, a fiercely bright and artistic boy who grows up to find himself stuck in the most pedestrian of existences, by day a bored government bureaucrat, by night a tired-husband, father and homeowner. When a chemical company called WaldChem sets itself up in town and pressures the city management (for the sake of the local economy, of course) to look the other way as health regulations are violated, Wyatt is suddenly and precariously placed at the center of a drama involving ethical behavior in ''postethical'' times.

In a contracting economy, too many citizens of Five Oaks appear willing to make a devil's pact: health for cash; lives for jobs. As assistant city manager, Wyatt would like to ''notify the state that the on-site waste management guidelines and regulations and licensing restrictions are being violated.''

But the head of WaldChem is a high school buddy; Wyatt plays golf with him; he has given Wyatt's wayward foster brother, Cyril, a job in the plant. And, as the city manager tells Wyatt, ''the times are against you.'' By remaining quiet and polite and helpful to those around him, Wyatt strikes a most unholy bargain—with himself as well as with the world. He is no longer his troubled brother's troubled keeper; he is a member of the audience. As Mr.

Baxter wrote in *First Light*, ''No one knows how to do that in this country, how to be a brother.''

Not unlike Shirley Jackson's story ''The Lottery,'' Mr. Baxter's *Shadow Play* takes large themes of good and evil and primitive deal making, and situates them in municipal terms and local ritual. He is interested in those shadowy corners of civilization in which barbarity manages to nestle and thrive. The America of this book has become a kind of hell. ''The houses gave off a dingy little light, the light of I'm-not-sorry-for-anything, the light of Listen-to-me. . . . That way you didn't even need eternal fire.''

Shadow Play is also an examination of how the Midwestern values of niceness, passivity, helpfulness and just-going-along can contribute to the rot and demise of a community. When Wyatt's foster brother develops lung cancer while holding down his custodial job at the plant, Wyatt is impassive. ''They didn't have to make WaldChem so dangerous, those bastards,'' rages the dying Cyril. ''They could have made it safer.''

''You smoked, Cyril,'' Wyatt replies quietly. ''You smoked cigarettes all your life.'' It is a response so wicked in its neutrality that later ''he stood in his own living room, repressing the impulse to scream.'' ''The verdict on him, he now knew, was that he was obliging and careless, an accessory.'' When Wyatt agrees to help Cyril commit suicide (one is reminded here of a fellow Michigander, Dr. Jack Kevorkian) he has not only enacted the central metaphor of the book but effectively set himself up for a nervous breakdown, one replete with tattoo, adultery, arson and a move to Brooklyn!

This last is no amusing little fillip; in the geographical paradigm of Mr. Baxter's book, New York City is Eden as anti-Eden. Here the fruit of the tree of knowledge is not rotting in anyone's driveway. There are no driveways; the trees were cut down years ago. The good fight has long since been waged and lost, and here one can live in something akin to aftermath if not to peace. As a boy Wyatt had memorized a map of the New York subway system, and as a young man he lived there as an artist, a painter of shadow portraits; now, in New York with his family, he can resume where he left off before the heart and hinterland so rudely interrupted him. He can attempt something *un*-Midwestern, something unthwarted, adventurous, something like a coda, a twilight sequel; in unecological times, an ecology of hope and loss.

One of Mr. Baxter's great strengths as a writer has always been his ability to capture the stranded inner lives of the Middle West's repressed eccentrics. And here, in his second novel, he is a full throttle. The character of Wyatt's mother is a figure of alleged madness, but (whether it speaks to Mr. Baxter's talent or should because for this reader's concern) the passages that give voice to her insanity are lucid, lovely, sympathetic: ''She knew that birds sometimes agreed or disagreed with their names but she kept that information to herself.'' ''Angels,'' she thinks, ''were so vain, so pretty. They wore coral earrings and distressfully unassembled hats.'' When Wyatt brings his mother to New York, and, she finds the life of a bag lady a congenial one, Mr. Baxter treats this with a certain heartening dignity rather than a forlorn condescension.

He also gives much of the book over to the voice and point of view of Wyatt's bright, quirky Aunt Ellen, who functions as a sapient observer of the world of the novel. She believes not in a benevolent God but in a God of pure curiosity; moreover, she believes she is writing the Bible of that God. ''There is absolutely no love coming to us from that realm,'' she says of the more traditional deity. ''None at all. You might as well pray to a telephone pole.''

Aunt Ellen, even more than Wyatt, is the moral center of the book—hers is the most trenchant of the solitudes fashioned and recorded here. That Mr. Baxter can traverse gender and offer such a deep and authentic rendition of a woman's voice and thoughts should not in itself be remarkable in contemporary fiction, yet still it is.

Because his work doesn't offer itself up in gaudy ways for popular consumption or intellectual play (theorists and critics have failed to descend en masse with their scissors and forks), Mr. Baxter has acquired the reputation of being that rare and pleasurable thing: a writer's writer. He has steadily taken beautiful and precise language and gone into the ordinary and secret places of people—their moral and emotional quandaries, their typically American circumstances, their burning intelligence, their negotiations with what is trapped, stunted, violent, sustaining, decent or miraculous in their lives. In writing about ordinary people he derives narrative authority from having imagined farther and more profoundly than we have, making his literary presence a necessary and important one, and making *Shadow Play* a novel that is big, moving, rich with life and story—something so much more than a writer's anxious vacation from shorter forms.

Lorrie Moore *New York Times Book Review*. February 14, 1993, pp. 7–8.

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BEATTIE, Ann (1947–)

Something of Updike's attentiveness to ordinary human encounters distinguishes Ann Beattie's *Chilly Scenes of Winter*, a fine first novel which records the reluctant passage into adulthood of a twenty-seven-year-old survivor of the Woodstock generation. The novel incorporates characters and situations Beattie had treated earlier in her *New Yorker* stories, nineteen of which have been gathered under the title *Distortions* and released as a companion to the novel. But the novel is a more interesting and significant performance, richer in psychological nuance and in documentary power. Though there are many isolated passages in *Distortions* that exhibit Beattie's descriptive care and her talent for truthful dialogue, only one of the stories, ''Snake's Shoes,'' has the sustained authority of the novel. One reason for the novel's superiority is that it is less tendentious than the stories, less confined by neo-absurdist attitudes toward contemporary experience. The novel is thus less somber than the stories and registers on every page a lively, generous alertness to the antic or comic in human relations. The characters in *Chilly Scenes* are respected more consistently than their counterparts in the stories, and although their vivid idiosyncrasies are always comically before us, what is odd or distinctive in their behavior belongs to their personalities, is rooted in Beattie's powers of observation and dramatic representation. Too often in the stories, in contrast, one feels the pressure of a surrealist

program, the influence of Barthelme and Pynchon, behind the author's choice of details or in the often schematic resolution of her plots.

Chilly Scenes is written in the present tense and relies heavily on dialogue and on a purified declarative prose not unlike good Hemingway, but much funnier. This disciplined young novelist takes care to differentiate even her minor characters, and one of her most memorable cameo players declares herself only as a voice through the telephone—a nervous, guilty mother trying to trace her wayfaring daughter in two brief conversations that momentarily distract the protagonist during this final winter of his prolonged adolescence. The hero himself is wonderfully alive: a gentle bewildered man, extravagantly loyal to old friends and to the songs of the 'sixties, drifting through a final nostalgia for the mythologies of adversary selfhood he absorbed in college and toward an embarrassed recognition of his hunger for such ordinary adventures as marriage and fatherhood. The unillusioned tenderness that informs Beattie's portrait of her central character is a rare act of intelligence and mimetic art.

David Thorburn. *The Yale Review*. Summer, 1977, pp. 585–86

I can think of no other American writer save Thomas Pynchon who has found so wide and respectful an audience so early in her career. No one who has a serious interest in contemporary fiction can fail to be aware of Beattie's abrupt and alarming stories. Their publication in book form [*Distortions*] marks, I believe, a genuine event in the national life.

I suppose that one first feels struck by Beattie's consummate technical virtuosity. Her frigid prose, the shocking inexorableness of her humor and narrative designs, the macabre and spare efficiency of her thought, conspire to project her tales as actual—if rather awful—occurrences of modernist existence. I have called Beattie's prose cold: but one must read this most wicked and witty writer very closely indeed. It is true that she assembles as subjects a grotesque community of dwarfs, fats, gargoyles, and sluts, a bizarre collection of the lonely, the disoriented, and the dispossessed. Never, though, does she permit her figures to seem merely apathetic or aimlessly malcontent. Nor does she ever dismiss them as freaks. Beattie constructs her stories from within a soft and subtle sensibility of sympathy, participation, and hopefulness. She understands that, however capricious or queer, her characters' pains have their origin less in the morasses of individual neurosis than in the insipidity of the culture at large, the withering vapidity of the historical processes which envelop one and with which one must manage to coexist in some sort of emotional relation. It is the sign of her extraordinary intelligence and gentleness that Beattie considers her fictionalized people to be as human as their author; that she regards her own suffering as conterminous with that of her roughly satirized characters.

Beattie comprehends, this is to say, that we are driven into our misery and peculiarity because, appropriately, we cannot accommodate the abstraction and absurdity which surround us. Her characters fervently want to feel; especially they long to love. But the rapidity and monstrousness of contemporary history, the dearth of external supports for even the minimal impulses of human life, seem to the stories' people to invalidate the very possibility of achieving affective experience.

Peter Glassman. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1977. p. 447

The characters who populate [*Secrets and Surprises*] came of age during the 1960's. They are, on the whole, a nice-looking bunch of people who have never suffered from any of the basic wants. Most of them, for reasons often unexplained, share a mistrust of passion and conversation. . . . They exist mainly in a stateless realm of indecision and—all too often—rather smug despair. . . .

Frequently, in these stories, things are substitutes for the chancier commitment to people; things people buy or live with or give one another are asked to bear the responsibility of objective correlatives, but too often they become a mere catalogue of trends. The reader is left holding an armful of objects and wondering what emotional responses they were meant to connect him with.

Perhaps the best level on which to enjoy these stories is as a narrative form of social history. Miss Beattie has a coolly accurate eye for the *moeurs* of her generation. . . . But a sharp eye for *moeurs* doesn't add up to a full fiction any more than the attitude of irony can be said to represent a full human response.

Gail Godwin. *New York Times Book Section*. Jan. 14, 1979. p. 14

In the six years since her work first began to appear in *The New Yorker*, Ann Beattie has become for many readers the representative young American novelist and short-story writer. Her two collections of stories—*Distortions* (1976) and *Secrets and Surprises* (1979)—and her novel *Chilly Scenes of Winter* (1976) won the praise of critics and reviewers and of older and established writers as diverse as John Updike and Mary Lee Settle. But her cultural significance lies as much, if not more, in the devotion and self-recognition she inspires among younger readers: people in their twenties and early thirties who graduated from college as the Sturm und Drang of the 60's faded into the anxious laid-back narcissism of the late 70's.

Her new novel at once confirms her status and marks a considerable advance on her previous work: *Falling in Place* is stronger, more accomplished, larger in every way than anything she's done, and its publication is a fitting occasion for a look at both her work and her curious celebrity.

Her fiction has none of the usual gimmicks and attractions that create a cult: it's not conspicuously witty or bizarre or sexy or politically defiant or eventful; in fact, it offers so colorless and cool a surface, so quiet a voice, that it's sometimes hard to imagine readers staying with it. Her subject matter, too, is deliberately banal: she chronicles the random comings and goings of disaffected young people who work in dull jobs or drop out, and spend a lot of time doing and feeling practically nothing except that low-grade depression Christopher Lasch has called the characteristic malaise of our time. This tepid nihilism or defeated shopping-mall consumerism is depicted in a deadpan, superrealistic style: I am not a camera but a videotape machine.

Of course, banality has many literary uses. But Ann Beattie's gray subaqueous world has none of the existential terror of Samuel Beckett's seemingly banal subject matter, or the hidden menace of Harold Pinter's social banality; there's none of the esthetic delight and wit of Donald Barthelme's intentionally banal, pop-art verbal collages, or of the apocalyptic and fully orchestrated angst, the doomed banality of Joan Didion's novels and essays. Ann Beattie's sad, bleak books are a far cry from the zany, black-humored flights of such earlier cult writers as Kurt Vonnegut or Richard Brautigan. The characters who populate the works of such recent ''younger''

novelists as Robert Stone, John Irving, Mary Gordon or Leslie Epstein seem in comparison as brightly colored and energetic as the characters in a Verdi opera. . . .

Inevitably these studies in domestic sorrow recall the stories of J.D. Salinger or John Cheever or John Updike: Ann Beattie's world, like theirs, is a miserable suburban purgatory inhabited by grieving wraiths. But the extraordinary literary color, shape and motion that animate the work of those older New Yorker writers are qualities Ann Beattie turns away from. Her stories are defiantly underplayed and random, trailing off into inconsequentiality, ending with a whimper or, at best, an embarrassed grin. And unlike her predecessors, she has no grand conservative vision buried deep in the background of her books. . . .

Her books exhibit a kind of Quaalude schizzy artistry; they're held together by an angry adolescent's sharp-eyed, deadpan delivery—less is more, right?—by an irony so uniformly spread around the imagined world that nearly all color and feeling are leached away, an irony that becomes a kind of self-defensive verbal tic, an irony without reference to any higher, deeper, unironically embraced standards, not even esthetic standards. . . .

Yet nothing Ann Beattie has written could quite prepare us for her new novel, *Falling in Place*. It's like going from gray television to full-color movies. Not that her themes or settings have changed that much, but there's a new urgency to the characters' feelings and a much greater range and number of characters and points of view. . . .

Richard Locke. *New York Times Book Section*. May 11, 1980. pp. 1, 38

Compared to the earlier stories, these [in *The Burning House*] are less grotesque, more narrowly and intensely focused, more accomplished; they are also less outrageous and less outraged and more sympathetic to their characters. The mood is not bloody-minded; rather it is sorrowful. Most of the stories are about the process of separating, but there are no causes proposed, only effects, and thus no one is seen as responsible for the pain. The result is a certain moral attenuation. This is not hell but limbo, which some writers have located on the moon: That's where the space cadets end up.

No one is better at the plangent detail, at evoking the floating, unreal ambiance of grief. I would say Ann Beattie is at her best here, except that I think she can do even better. One admires, while becoming nonetheless slightly impatient at the sheer passivity of these remarkably sensitive instruments. When that formidable technique is used on a subject large enough for it, the results will be extraordinary indeed. Still, that's like caviling because Wayne Gretsky misses one shot. If Miss Beattie were a ballerina you could sell tickets to the warm-ups.

Margaret Atwood. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 26, 1982, p. 34

Although her celebrated short stories depend on the conventions of episode and implication, Ann Beattie's novelistic imagination sends its spirals out from carefully elaborated structural premises. In her last novel, *Picturing Will*, she studied the dynamics of family life by using a five-year-old boy as a reference point and occasional focus for what were, finally, less chapters than adjacent panels, each rendered with a somewhat different scale, perspective, and point of view.

Her new novel, *Another You*, has a more ambitious blueprint. We could simplify it by imagining a narrowing cone laid on its side, with another widening cone superimposed on it. The first represents the dominant narrative, which tracks the fraying relationship of Marshall and Sonja Lockard, a childless couple living in a small New England college town. The other is the epistolary unfolding of a tale from the past. . . .

Another You is a novel of the present that is somehow written out of the sensibility of the 1970s, the decade so deftly portrayed in Ms. Beattie's earlier work. Marshall in particular comes across as locked in period amber. . . .

But there is a larger problem. While Ms. Beattie's structural conception is enticing enough to ponder, the narrative feels skewed. The basic plot of Marshall and Sonja's story is, finally, not very interesting; its characters and events smack too much of the myriad campus adultery novels of an earlier time. Meanwhile, the other material, the tale slowly divulged by the letters, has far greater potential. *Another You* has its moments, since Ms. Beattie is ever vigilant about the feints and ruses by which we live. But here she has not done full justice to her premise of causes and their late-blooming effects.

Sven Birkerts. *New York Times Book Review*. Sept. 24, 1995, p. 12

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BEHRMAN, S. N. (1893–1973)

In this American play (*The Second Man*) the talk is fresh, the epigrams are not machine made but seem spontaneous and in keeping with the character, and there is a merry note of satirical burlesque in the melodramatic episodes introduced into the story. . . . This play may owe much to *The Importance of Being Earnest* (as it owes something, also, to *Man and Superman*), but it is no mere rehash of ancient styles. It is much more ironic Yankee burlesque-comedy of Hoyt and Cohan touched with literary distinction and a hint—just a pleasant hint—of thoughtfulness.

Walter Prichard Eaton. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. June 26, 1927. p. 12

Mr. Behrman . . . remains one of the few playwrights that we have ever had in America who does not cause embarrassment to dramatist, actors, and audience, when he indulges in brains or sophisticated statement. . . . He is one of those rare authors in the theatre who do not mistrust civilized society and do not think that Times Square must understand or no tickets will be sold. He has sensed the fact that in our theatre there is a genuine opening for such dramatists as might leave the mass of theatre-goers confounded or displeased; for him the French proverb, ''Pour les sots acteurs Dieu créa les

sots spectateurs,'' extends to audiences and plays, and he has taken the bold risk of failing in his own way instead of failing in somebody else's.

Stark Young. *New Republic*. Dec. 28, 1932. p. 188

The remarkable thing about Mr. Behrman is. . . the clarity with which he realizes that we must ultimately make our choice between judging men by their heroism or judging them by their intelligence, and the unfailing articulateness with which he defends his determination to choose the second alternative. . . . Mr. Behrman's plays are obviously ''artificial''—both in the sense that they deal with an artificial and privileged section of society and in the sense that the characters themselves are less real persons than idealized embodiments of intelligence and wit. . . . No drawing room ever existed in which people talked so well or acted so sensibly at last, but this idealization is the final business of comedy.

Joseph Wood Krutch. *The Nation*. July 19, 1933. pp. 74–6

You must grant S.N. Behrman the privilege of writing plays on his own terms, if you want to enjoy them in the theatre. His dramas have little plot and less action. People come and go as often as they do in other men's plays; they meet and part and meet again, but they do so because the conversation—which is the alpha and omega of Behrman's playwriting—needs a shift in emphasis or in attack, rather than because of any change in the aspect of the situation. You cannot fairly say that his plays are ''not about anything,'' for they fairly bristle with the contemporary, social, economic, controversial things they are about. But his drama is in his talk, and it would be well for people who think they do not like ''talky'' plays to consider carefully what Behrman can do with talk, before they decide too definitely that many words never made a play.

Edith J.R. Isaacs. *Theatre Arts*. April, 1936. p. 258

Behrman is a man of rather emotional, almost lyrical and, if you will, sentimental nature, embarrassed by a sense that this nature is not quite smart enough for the society in which he finds himself and in which he would like to occupy a favored place. Thinking of himself—and he is preoccupied with the subject—he is ready to weep, but society, he believes, would consider such behavior unseemly. Looking at the world, he is almost ready to cry out or at least to heave so profound a sigh that the sound might be construed as a protest, so he suppresses his impulse and flicks our consciousness with a soft with that contains as much self-depreciation as mockery. He tries to chide his world with a voice that might be thought to belong to someone else—a person far more brittle, debonair, urbane than he knows himself to be.

Harold Clurman. *New Republic*. Feb. 18, 1952. pp. 22–3

Something deeper than style alone distinguishes him from our many purveyors of light entertainment, including those who have at one time or another made a specialty of skepticism and debunking. That something is his habit of balancing the score. It makes him not merely a judicious but an acute playwright rather than a merely congenial one. He always remains *two* men; one man makes the positive observations, the second proposes the negative ones. . . . Berhman's art of comedy, including his so-called comic detachment, consists of an ambivalence of attitudes that has its sources in the simultaneous possession of a nimble mind and a mellow temperament.

John Gassner. *Theatre Arts*. May, 1952. pp. 96–7

Providence Street, the background for most of (*The Worcester Account*), is the scene of Mr. Behrman's early life. . . To one who comes, as I do, from a similar place, the half-ghetto of the American city, these people are immediately familiar. I recognize them in Mr. Behrman's skillful reproduction and wonder why they often appear shortened, flattened, and lacking in vigor and primitive idiosyncrasy. They have been written of with charm and in the process have emerged somewhat tamed and weakened. Somehow the charm does not seem to belong to them; it is not their native charm but one which the author has lent them, returning to them after long separation. The air of nostalgia which pervades the book is often appealing but many times emphasizes the quaintness of Providence Street rather than its difficulty and poverty.

Saul Bellow. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 20, 1954. p. 41

. . .Behrman has never been seriously considered as a comedian of ideas. One reason may be that he sets his plays in drawing rooms. His drama moves in that international half-world in which art and intellect meet money, in which celebrity, notoriety, or wealth is a necessary entree. Invariably, the dramatic situation against which the conflict of ideas is played is one that involves the discovery or dissolution of love, and there is always a central female character, who could be and often was played by Ina Claire. When an elegantly dressed play, with articulate and often amusing lines, is centered on a character who is played by an extremely sophisticated actress, it is not surprising that substance is ignored for surface.

There is another, and probably more important, reason why the ideas in Behrman's plays have been passed over. The bulk of his plays were written in the 30's and his objectivity, if taken seriously, would have been completely unacceptable in that decade. Basically conservative, Behrman stood on middle ground, trying to hold on to the area, once staked out by humanists, in which tolerance of ideas and of human weakness could flourish. His plays show a fascination and a distaste for the man who becomes completely absorbed in himself or his beliefs—the complete egoist or the convinced idealist.

Gerald Weales. *Commentary*. March, 1959. p. 256

Here, then, is Mr. Behrman, during the last three years of Max's life, assiduously visiting Rapallo, armed with what I take to have been an invisible notebook. He has constructed his portrait [of Max Beerbohm] round these visits, and with the cleverness of a superlative photographer he has timed his shots so that he can, at will, step into the picture himself. The final chapter is headed ''The Last Civilized Voice.'' But Max's voice was not the last. Mr. Behrman has a voice of his own, and its pitch is exactly right for the matter in hand. He catches Max's inflexions to the life, and he adds his own very personal wit. Nothing in the world is harder than to be both

amusing and affectionate throughout 300 pages; but that is precisely what Mr. Behrman has accomplished.

Alan Pryce-Jones. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Oct. 2, 1960, p. 1

S.N. Behrman's *Lord Pengo*, based loosely on Mr. Behrman's study of Duveen, is based equally loosely on the requirements of the stage. . . .

The true picaresque hero is a psychologist as well as a rascal: Lazarillo de Tormes, as a mere child, realizes that ''there are many people in the world who run away from other folks only because they don't know themselves.'' It is on similar psychological perceptions that Pengo operates, but the trouble is that suave, persistent, slow-working wiles are not the stuff dramas are made on. Epics and novels, yes; but not plays, which need conflict. So Mr. Behrman drags it in the shape of a rebellious son complete with appropriate platitudes (''I don't seem to get a chance to talk to you, Father!''). Out of love for Pengo, Mr. Behrman, moreover, neglects the other characters, and clients, in any case, are not ideal dramatic fare. Devoted but tough female secretaries, for that matter, have long since had their day.

Despite urbane dialogue and some bubbles of iridescent fun, *Lord Pengo* is weighed down with *longueurs* and fillers and a general feeling of fatigue.

John Simon. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1963. pp. 83–4

Already famed as a dramatist and author of the highly successful *Portrait of Max*, Mr. Behrman here [*The Suspended Drawing Room*] brings together a collection of short pieces originally done for the *New Yorker*. Included are two essay-impressions of London during, and just following, the last war. The remainder of the volume is devoted to seven character sketches. . . . Mr. Behrman, through deft skills, removes the reader from shackling reality and introduces him to other times and unforgettable characters. . . . The really satisfying feature is the clever selection of the perfect detail. Finding London during the war too large a vista for his small canvas, he chooses to describe only the bomb shelters and in doing so, he captures the horror and senselessness of the bombings, while also clearly revealing the indomitable spirit of the English.

Richard K. Burns. *Library Journal*. Aug., 1965. p. 3290

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BELASCO, David (1859–1931)

Belasco's contribution to the American drama is that of a producer and stage director rather than that of an author. His plays—mostly melodramas—have little permanent value, but as a creator of stage-effects, in elaboration of detail, in arrangement of action and stage pictures, he is recognized to be without a master in the modern theatre.

Arthur Hornblow. *A History of the Theatre in America* (Lippincott). 1919. p. 340

David Belasco, with his passion for thoroughness, was particularly instrumental in giving a certain substantial illusion to the box-set interior, and eliminating the most grossly artificial features from exteriors. But this revolt was solely in the direction of naturalism. It did not start with the desire to bring the setting into closer harmony with the spirit of the play, but only with the object of making the scene more natural. It removed the worst absurdities of Nineteenth Century staging; but in its later elaboration it provided distractions quite as foreign to the substance of the drama. In the pursuit of the natural, Belasco and others began to build scenes so finely imitative, so true to the surface appearances of life, that the audience often forgot the play in wonder at the photographic perfection of the setting.

Sheldon Cheney. *The Art Theatre* (Knopf). 1925. pp. 189–90

Beginning in 1893 with his first great success, *The Girl I Left Behind Me* (by Belasco and Franklin Fyles), he won a national reputation for colorful plays produced with meticulous Naturalism. . . . It is impossible not to see in Belasco the return of that cycle which would bring back Naturalism to the bathos of Romanticism from which it had once emerged. . . . Belasco's melodramas had an admixture of sweetness and light in a blend to which, it is likely, he had a unique claim. If any social criticism remained, it was reduced to a whisper. . . .

Belasco used an idiom newer than that of his Romantic predecessors. The acting was believable in comparison with nature; the settings were infinitely more lifelike than in the past. But underneath both the Romantic stereotype was there for any alert observer to see. By the time Naturalism received its American expression at the hands of Belasco, it was no longer a life-storming technique.

Mordecai Gorelik. *New Theatres for Old* (Samuel French). 1941. pp. 160–3

The [Henry C.] De Mille-Belasco collaborations were playwrought before they were playwritten. Except for experimental snatches, dialogue was held in abeyance until character had been conceived and developed and situations devised and arranged in elaborate detail. Most of the actual writing was done by De Mille, most of the planning and dramatic construction by Belasco. The preliminary discussions over and the development of the action clear in their

minds, the two men repaired to the theater and staged the play. De Mille sat at a table in the front row of the orchestra; Belasco on the stage impersonated all the characters in the situations which had been plotted. Such dialogue as had been written down was primarily a point of departure, a means by which the situations were set in motion. The dialogue which emerged in final form sprang less from the preliminary speeches than from the situations in action; the determining factor was stage effectiveness. De Mille would read a few lines; Belasco would set them in motion, suggest alterations, omissions, and enlargements to fit stage business.

Robert H. Ball. Introduction to *America's Lost Plays*, vol. 17 (Princeton). 1941. p. xii

As a playwright Belasco had his training in a rough-and-ready school, where action and strong, simple motives were dominant. Although in the course of his life he passed through many phases, and although he adapted himself somewhat to changing styles and points of view, he never relinquished his fundamental belief in simplicity of motive and strength of situation as the basic factors in drama. A direct approach to the human heart was his chosen path, and from that path he never strayed. Many of his plays disclosed a love of the morbid, but his morbidity was natural, not decadent. Even his sensuousness escaped the charge of perversion.

Realistic effect was his forte. Knowing that, he could indulge his fancy, for to a showman like Belasco the theater is primarily a place where the implausible is made plausible. In print many of his plays seem today too implausible, but plausibility in the theater is a variable thing, and in their day, presented by the hand of the master, they were plausible. History is consistent on that point.

Glenn Hughes and George Savage. Introduction to *America's Lost Plays*, vol. 18 (Princeton). 1941. pp. x–xi

A consideration of the plays written, rewritten, adapted, arranged and produced by David Belasco . . . might lead one to believe that the work of this extraordinary man was more closely related to the development of modern American drama than it actually was, but it is impossible to determine the precise extent of his cooperation with other writers in all the plays to which his name is attached, either as sole author or collaborator; and even where his share as playwright is relatively clear, what he added as director and stage manager rather obscures his role as writer. . . . Even such picturesque and more or less ''original'' plays as *The Girl of the Golden West* . . . and *The Return of Peter Grimm*. . . , are little more than local-color pastiches written largely to exhibit his own virtuosity as director and the special talents of his actors.

Barrett H. Clark. *A History of Modern Drama* (Appleton-Century). 1947. p. 652

Working with highly theatrical, sentimental plays (mostly of his own authorship), he directed and set them with consummate ''naturalism.'' He exactly reproduced a Child's restaurant down to a cook flapping pancakes in the window; he cluttered the setting of *The Return of Peter Grimm* with hundreds of theatrically extraneous properties ''because that was the way the room would be''. . . he erected complete rooms beyond the entrances of a setting in order to help the actors acquire a strong sense of illusion as they traversed these extra rooms on their way to the stage; he expected actors to ''engross themselves in their parts''; and he kept his electricians busy developing lighting equipment that would more nearly reproduce natural light.

Like the painted actuality of Romanticism, this extreme Naturalism defeated its purpose because it drew attention to the setting instead of providing an environment that strengthened the believability of the dramatic action.

H.D. Albright, William P. Halstead, Lee Mitchell. *Principles of Theatre Art* (Houghton). 1955. p. 162

For this Belasco was a clever man—the cleverest, and by all odds, in the native theatre—and, doubtless chuckling up his sleeve, for it is impossible to imagine him deceived by his own tin-pantaloonery, he witnessed the canonization of his simple humbug and through that simple humbug the canonization of himself by the absorbent rhapsodists. But this was yesterday. . . . Mr. Belasco has contributed one—only one—thing for judicious praise to the American theatre. He has brought to that theatre a standard of tidiness in production and maturation of manuscript, a standard that has discouraged to no little extent that theatre's erstwhile not uncommon frowsy hustle and slipshod manner of presentation.

George Jean Nathan. *The Magic Mirror* (Knopf). 1960. pp. 59, 62

In the days of Belasco realism, every effort was made to produce the effect of reality on the stage. For this the late David Belasco should be praised rather than condemned, for he came into the theatre as an innovator at the turn of this century, and at a time when lighting and scenery were in the age of innocence. However, he ultimately made realism an end in itself, which defeated his original purpose.

Lawrence Langner. *The Play's the Thing* (Putnam). 1960. p. 160

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BELL, Marvin (1937–)

[Bell] often deploys barrages of surrealistic humor, somewhat in the manner of Mark Strand or James Tate. . . .

[Any] use of humor in an essentially serious poem requires a kind of intelligence which is rare among poets, though poets often praise it: . . . Bell not only [sees himself and his] surroundings clearly but [renders] them without overinflation. [He has] the ability to make sense, rather than gratuitous use, of more or less subjective imagery. . . .

Bell's range—the variety of themes, tones and line lengths which he has mastered—is quite wide. The inclusion of the sixteen earlier poems [in *A Probable Volume of Dreams*] shows how far Bell has extended his range since they first appeared. His voice is sometimes evasive, often idiosyncratic, so that the reader is simultaneously engaged and kept, for a time, at a distance. This effect is sometimes achieved by means of a device which Strand and Tate also use; I mean the use of an addressed ''you'' who is more like a translated ''I''. The style of those poems is lean, with short lines and sentences which carry an economy of emotion which would constrict if it were not for Bell's control over the placement of ironies. . . . The conscientious wit which keeps the earlier poems from going flat has also directed the development of Bell's style toward the more discursive poems which are collected for the first time in this book. The economy remains, but the range of emotion and the depth of exploration are increased; the resulting poems are characterized by longer lines and a more inclusive vision. Even the surrealistic humor has been extended to include such verbal exuberance as [a poem] . . . spoken by a poet who is ''locked in / the English Department''. . . .

Bell's poems move out from a great variety of departure points; in this limited space, I cannot give a fair indication of his versatility. He is concerned with war, love and the kinds of mental life in which a poet and teacher is caught up. He approaches these subjects as a man remembering, thinking and believing. If his music is low key, it is almost always appropriate to his themes.

''Toward Certain Divorce,'' which is among the best poems in the volume, is a narrative meditation spoken by a visitor in the home of a man and a woman who are planning to separate. The last few lines are typical of the later, more discursive style; they show that a poet, if he is strong enough, can handle the problem of sentimentality, not by avoiding it but by facing it squarely and earning his use of it.

Henry Taylor. *The Nation*. February 2, 1970.

[From *A Probable Volume of Dreams* through *The Escape into You* and *Residue of Song*]—the three most important books of Marvin Bell which have been published so far—we discover the poet crafting his poems in structures which keep reminding us just how much artifice is involved, and how much wit is needed to keep the poem afloat and the reader at once near and at bay. What proves telling is seeing which poems from Bell's limited edition of *Things We Dreamt We Died For* . . . get left out of *A Probable Volume of Dreams*: the poems tend not merely to be the weaker ones, but the less distanced ones in which there is insufficient strategy to manage where the poet-father must walk, ''foot by foot,'' both on earth and in heaven.

If the most recent poems of Bell, those still uncollected in book form, have begun to indicate changes in both the life and the art, there are lines of continuity as well as lines of departure. Some of Bell's preferences are ingrained and resonant enough for his best poems, whatever the vintage, for us to know that if they shout back and forth at one another there will be response and commerce. . . .

Stanza by stanza, sequence by sequence, and book by book, Bell reminds us that he is intent on exploring the relationships among love, art, and some public, moral realm which demands faces and postures of another kind. . . .

The latest work of Bell shows a predilection, still, for using a poetry of wit in order to address concerns of morality and aesthetics. But what is changed is Bell's ability to join that kind of poem to a poem that is more lyrical, sometimes more lyrically elegiac than he had wished or managed to be before. . . .

The poetic strategies are still elaborate, even when the poet seems to walk most lightly or softly. But ''license'' now seems in the service of greater good: the ''exclusive calculations,'' ''sensational airwaves'' and ''interchangeable frequencies'' of some of the past work have settled into Bell's celebration of the fact that the self has held together, that the wife and sons have not been lost in order to allow the poet to satisfy some false, wilful Romanticism in his own time.

Nor is sadness, or Bell's corner on sadness, gone. But he has begun to see sadness more in terms of joy. If happiness is an unfashionable contemporary American poetics, Bell is unafraid to start writing a new lyric which tells us we had better ascertain ''who is doing the crying,'' and just how happy we are.

Arthur Oberg. *American Poetry Review*. May-June, 1976, pp. 4–8.

Marvin Bell does love poetry. He loves the very idea of it. And in *Old Snow Just Melting*, his new collection of essays and interviews, he loves writing and talking about poetry and does so with a joy and an obvious commitment that are contagious. . . .

Old Snow Just Melting . . . brings together twenty-one essays with such titles as ''I Was a Boston (Marathon) Bandit (On Assignment)'' and ''Learning from Translations'' and four interviews including ''The University Is Something Else You Do'' and ''Self Is a Very Iffy Word for Me.'' All were, he points out, done on assignment, including eleven essays written from 1974 to 1978 for

The American Poetry Review, published here under the title ''*Homage to the Runner*.'' Even the titles indicate the range of subjects in these pieces, from teaching to Hugo to pain, and the range of attitudes, playfulness-going-to-seriousness (as he might say). . . .

I do think you will be disappointed if you expect, in *Old Snow Just Melting*, a book of criticism. And you will be disappointed if you expect a fully drawn, straightforward statement of poetics; this is more a poetics-in-the-making. If you can give Bell a little room, though, as you do that old friend who takes so long to tell a ''simple'' story, the one who winds around and forgets and gestures wildly and maybe even invents a little, you will be doubly rewarded. After all, when your friend finally finishes his story, haven't you learned more than the story itself? Haven't you learned something about your friend?

Now a couple of years old, *These Green-Going-to-Yellow* is to my mind one of Marvin Bell's best books of poetry. . . . In a day of hermit-poets, watered-down confessional poets, self-absorbed poets, diary-poets and poets-of-the-private-language, Bell's richly populated poems are a welcome return back to the world of people. By my count, in fact, all but two of the thirty-one poems in *These Green-Going-to-Yellow* include characters other than the speaker. . . .

What the people in Bell's poems have to contend with is indicated in the title. *These Green-Going-to-Yellow* identifies the natural and inevitable decay of the world: trees die here, and birds, and pigs; the seasons change; people pass away and are missed; wars claim lives faster than ever. Maybe it is only a coincidence, but many of Bell's best poems here are those in which the speaker both admits to loss (or meanness or decay) and then tries to give back something to fill the void. In the beautiful ''The Hedgeapple,'' the speaker and his friends have nearly taken a hedgeapple from a woman's tree. . . . The poem ends in a gesture of unabashed guilt-going-to-generosity, since he cannot bear to have almost stolen ''someone else's treasure.''. . .

Bell's form is relaxed, even rambling at times. His voice is casual, but is capable of the beauty that clear language can bring. Only infrequently in these poems do I sense Bell allowing his form too much leisure or his voice too much ease. [''To an Adolescent Weeping Willow''], though, typifies such temptation. . . . The poem ends with the speaker's realization of the fallacy of his own metaphor—that the easy-moving tree and his hard-working father aren't alike. But Bell's language is a touch too easy too. I think Bell is less effective . . . when he depends too much on the momentum and character (even charm) of his style to make up for looseness. In fact, hasn't this been identified as a problem of many poets from the generation just prior to Bell's: that, having struggled to develop recognizable and convincing styles, they sometimes seem satisfied, simply and almost always ineffectively, to imitate themselves? I certainly don't think it's a problem for Bell generally. But I don't want it to become one either. He has come far already, and his poems, at their best, are among our current best.

David Baker, *New England Review and Bread Loaf Quarterly*, Winter, 1983, pp. 332–36.

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BELLOW, Saul (1915–)

The Victim. . . is hard to match in recent fiction, for brilliance, skill, and originality. . . . *The Victim* is solidly built of fine, important ideas; it also generates fine and important, if uncomfortable, emotions.

Diana Trilling. *The Nation*. Jan. 3, 1948. pp. 24–5

Reading *The Adventures of Augie March* in 1953 must be a good deal like reading *Ulysses* in 1920. . . . Tentatively: Saul Bellow is perhaps a great novelist, *The Adventures of Augie March* perhaps a great novel. If *The Adventures of Augie March* is great, it is great because of its comprehensive, non-naturalistic survey of the modern world, its wisely inconclusive presentation of its problems; because its author dares to let go (as so many very good and very neat modern writers do not); because the style of its telling makes the sequence of events seem real even when one knows they couldn't be; because the novel is intelligently and ambitiously conceived as a whole that esthetically comprehends its parts; because it is an achievement in and a promise of the development of a novelist who deserves comparison only with the best, even at this early stage of his development.

Harvey Curtis Webster. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 19, 1953. pp. 13–4

If such a novel is to be fully effective the sense of dramatic improvisation must be a dramatic illusion, the last sophistication of the writer, and . . . the improvisation is really a pseudo-improvisation, and . . . the random scene or casual character that imitates the accidental quality of life must really have a relevance, and . . . the discovery, usually belated, of this relevance, is the characteristic excitement of the genre. That is, in this genre the relevance is deeper and more obscure and there is, in the finest examples of the genre, a greater tension between the random life force of the materials and the shaping intuition of the writer.

It is the final distinction, I think, of *The Adventures of Augie March* that we do feel this tension, and that it is a meaningful fact.

Robert Penn Warren. *New Republic*. Nov. 2, 1953. p. 22

Saul Bellow's new novel is a new kind of book. The only other American novels to which it can be compared with any profit are *Huckleberry Finn* and *U.S.A.*, and it is superior to the first by virtue of the complexity of its subject matter and to the second by virtue of a realized unity of composition. In all three books, the real theme is

America, a fact which is not as clear in this new book as it is in its predecessors, perhaps because of its very newness. . . . *The Adventures of Augie March* is a new kind of book first of all because Augie March possesses a new attitude toward experience in America: instead of the blindness of affirmation and the poverty of rejection, Augie March rises from the streets of the modern city to encounter the reality of experience with an attitude of satirical acceptance, ironic affirmation, and comic transcendence of affirmation and rejection.

Delmore Schwartz. *Partisan Review*. Jan., 1954. pp. 112–3

Henderson the Rain King differs from *Augie March* in many interesting ways. In the earlier novel Bellow uses a loose structure to illustrate, through a long series of essentially realistic episodes, the vast possibilities of contemporary life. Beginning in poverty and illegitimacy, Augie ranges far, horizontally and vertically, to end in uncertainty. Henderson, on the other hand, born to every advantage, has lived fifty-one years of unquiet desperation. Of Augie's kind of patient pilgrimage he has never been capable. He is driven by the voice that cries, ''I want, I want,'' and the story of his search is both romantic and dramatic. I cannot say that *Henderson the Rain King* is a better book than *Augie March* the denseness of the experience in the earlier novel is something almost unparalleled in contemporary literature. But it is a wonderful book for Bellow to have written after writing *Augie March*. It is a book that should be read again and again, and each reading, I believe, will yield further evidence of Bellow's wisdom and power.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. Feb. 21, 1959. p. 20

Anyone unfamiliar with Mr. Bellow's earlier work would, I think, immediately recognize from a reading of *Henderson* why so many of our best critics consider him the most important American novelist of the postwar period. For one thing, it contains a wealth of comic passages that bear comparison with the wild, grotesque humor we find in some of Faulkner's stories, and for another it is endlessly fertile in invention and idea. Beyond that, however, this is by all odds the most brilliantly written novel to have come along in years. Mr. Bellow has finally been able to discipline the virtuosity that ran away with *Augie March*, and the result is a prose charged with all the vigor and vitality of colloquial speech and yet capable of the range, precision, and delicacy of a heightened, formal rhetoric.

Norman Podhoretz. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Feb. 22, 1959. p. 3

Seize the Day is Bellow's one exercise in pure naturalism. He takes a character ill-equipped for life, whose mistakes become more and more unredeemable as he grows older, and lets him sink under their weight. But is this really the end for Tommy? . . . Is the consummation referred to in the last sentence some kind of new beginning spiritually? What is the ''heart's ultimate need'' referred to so cryptically?

Robert Gorham Davis in *The Creative Process*, ed. Nona Balakian and Charles Simmons (Doubleday). 1963. pp. 126–7

For some time now the critical consensus has been, expressed not so much formally in writing as in the talk of literary circles, that *Seize the Day*, published some eight years ago, was his best single performance. *Herzog* is superior to it, I think, even if not so tightly organized and in fact a bit loose on the structural side. For one thing, it is a much longer and fuller narrative than *Seize the Day*, which is hardly more than a novella. For another, it is richer in content, in the effective disposition of tone and language, as well as in intellectual resonance and insight of a high order into the make-up of modern life—insight into what is really new and perhaps all too hazardous about it in its strange, almost inconceivable, mixture of greater freedom and maddening constriction.

Above all, this novel positively radiates intelligence—not mere brightness or shrewdness or that kind of sensitiveness which sometimes passes for mind among us. It is a coherent, securely founded intelligence—a real endowment—of genuine intellectual quality which, marvelously escaping the perils of abstraction, is neither recondite nor esoteric. It is directed towards imaginative ends by a true and sharp sense of the pain that rends the human world of its ills, both curable and incurable, and equally by a bracing, unfailing sense of irony and humor serving to counteract such chronic vulnerabilities of intelligence as over-solemnity of mind on the one hand and perversity of sensibility on the other.

Philip Rahv. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Sept. 20, 1964. p. 1

Willy nilly, then, all these later heroes of Bellow are gluttons for suffering—for what suffers is still alive and still has the possibility of renewal. They are all also trying to reach the deeper sources of grief and impulse, to reconstitute the past in order to shed it, to clear away the cultural conditioning that has deflected them from a simple understanding of their desires. Herzog's case, however, is a much more complicated one. He has so many roles and images and is so divided among them that simplicity is impossible. A child of the immigrant ghetto, to which his heart is still tied, he has written his first and only book on *Romanticism and Christianity*. A bookish, urban type, he has tried to turn himself into a New England country squire. A scholar, a foot-loose intellectual, a lover of fancy women, he is also a dutiful man around the house and a patient caretaker of his wife's neurosis. No wonder he has problems of identity. He is a Romantic who sets great store by ''the heart''—a term that is constantly on his mind—but he is also a Rationalist who has more principles of ethics than Spinoza.

Theodore Solotaroff. *Commentary*. Dec., 1964. p. 63

In both *Augie March* and *Henderson* Bellow has run down well before the end: Augie, after the trip to Mexico, only sits around and has others tell him who Augie March is; Henderson, save for the great scene with the frogs, barely survives the trip to Africa. Technically Bellow has solved this problem by cheating, for in *Herzog* he does not really begin his story until half way through. Herzog's life is slowly gathered, then he has it snapped in a terrifying courtroom scene, and this propels him from New York to Chicago and enables Bellow to march home to a stunning triumph in the last third of the book. But this solution is not just a technical one and is not really cheating at all. For Augie and Henderson the only way to see right side up is via primitivism, and Bellow seems

to have realized or discovered that primitivism was for him more theoretically than actually valid. The answer in *Herzog* is quite different: a novel of ideas and a hero who feels his having come to the end of the line so well that the touters of the Void can be sneered at if only because they cannot reckon with Herzog's narcissism and buoyancy.

The result is the first or at least the largest step taken beyond Lawrence and the romanticism that is bought at the terrifying expense of fear and loathing of human kind. Dignity must go and without any accompanying comic reassurance—Herzog must scurry like a rat from his will and need to be kept in shelter, and he must end in silence. But the gains are great: a repeated and convincing insistence that the equation of reality with evil is sentimental and a demonstration that existentialism is only the most recent attempt of the romantic to be respectable and aristocratic.

Roger Sale. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1964–65. pp. 617–18

If there is one thing the American theatre cannot afford to throw away, it is a play. And yet after twenty-eight painfully eked-out performances, Saul Bellow's *The Last Analysis* had to close, as though it were another confection, another soufflé that did not quite rise to the occasion. The truth is that the production was frightful, but no amount of superimposed opacity could obscure the underlying translucence and purity; what was here being rejected was rarer than a pearl in an oyster; a play in a Broadway playhouse.

I am not saying that Bellow's farcical fantasy about a once hugely successful comedian restaging his life as a closed-circuit TV show for an audience of psychiatrists at the Waldorf-Astoria, in order to shed light on the terrible disease Success, is a flawless dramatic creation. But there are things in it that we must hold dear. There is, first of all, the intense rhetoric that makes the word become flesh before our very ears and eyes: such throbbing flesh that it scarcely matters if the personages uttering it are somewhat less than people. Nor does it matter all that much (though it does matter) that this galaxy of galvanic words does not compose itself into a well-shaped entity; this, at least, is a case where the sum of the parts is greater than most other wholes.

John Simon. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1964–65. p. 556

To a considerable degree the novel [*Herzog*] does work as a rather conventional drama of alienation, though this is precisely what Bellow doesn't want it to be. It is about the failure of all available terms for interpretation and summary, about the intellectual junk heap of language by which Herzog-Bellow propose dignities to the hero's life and then as quickly watch these proposals dissolve into cliché. A similar process goes on in *Augie*, against the competition of an anxious and often phony exuberance, and it was there that Bellow began to fashion a comic prose which could bear the simultaneous weight of cultural, historical, mythological evocations and also sustain the exposure of their irrelevance. His comedy always has in it the penultimate question before the final one, faced in *Seize the Day*, of life or death—the question of what can be taken seriously and how seriously it can possibly be taken. The result, however, is a kind of stalemate achieved simply by not looking beyond the play of humor into its constituents, at the person from whom it issues, at the psychological implications both of anyone's asking such questions and of the *way* in which he asks them. It seems to me that Bellow cannot break the stalemate with alienation implicit in his comedy without surrendering to the Waste Land outlook and foregoing the mostly unconvincing rhetoric which he offers as an alternative. That is why his comic style in *Herzog*, even more than in *Henderson* or *Augie*, is less like Nathanael West's than like that of West's brother-in-law, S.J. Perelman.

Richard Poirier. *Partisan Review*. Spring, 1965. pp. 270–1

Let me, then, put down what I will not discuss: a few rejected theses which may find themselves the center of despair in an otherwise capable Master's Essay. Let me reject: (a) that Bellow probes the meaningful questions of our times; (b) that his Jewishness is crucial to his success as a writer; (c) that his heroes help us see ourselves as we really are; (d) that his imagination and inventiveness give pleasure by themselves; and (e) that he is to be identified closely with his own heroes. Any of these propositions is capable of being maintained; any is perhaps true. The only difficulty is that they are irrelevant to discussing Bellow *as a novelist*. They can change our feeling or commitment to the novels, but they cannot change our judgment of the novels. *Herzog* is not a vehicle for philosophical speculations nor an embodiment of the mores of particular subcultures nor an attempt toward mass therapy in the guise of education nor an object of entertainment and titillation nor a wheelbarrow for the burden of autobiography. Or, of course, it may be all these things; but what makes *Herzog* a novel is, simply, that its form gives it a unique significance.

James Dean Young. *Critique*. Spring-Summer, 1965. p. 8

If [the Bellow hero] is a victimized figure, he is a victim of his own moral sense of right and wrong—his own accepted obligation to evaluate himself by standards that will inevitably find him lacking . . . Bellow's heroes suffer intensely and rehearse their agonies at operatic volume for all to hear. ''I am to suffering what Gary is to smoke,'' says Henderson. ''One of the world's biggest operations.'' But it would be a serious mistake to confuse this characteristic reaction of the Bellow hero with one of passive lamentation or self-pitying surrender. Even in his partly sincere and partly mock self-revilings, he is determined to believe that ''human'' means ''accountable in spite of many weaknesses—at the last moment, tough enough to hold.'' And in final effect, none of Bellow's heroes actually resigns himself to his suffering. Painfully they climb again and again out of ''the craters of the spirit,'' ridiculing their defeats with a merciless irony, resolved to be prepared with a stronger defense against the next assault that is sure to come.

Perhaps this aspect of Bellow's work has been the least appreciated by contemporary critics. Some have interpreted his thematic preoccupation with the sufferer as a device of compromise, a ''making do,'' or accommodation—an argument which implies that Bellow is gratuitously surrendering the heroic ideal of a fully instinctual life to the expediency of flabby survival within the status quo. But this, it seems to me, is precisely to miss the moral point and to misread Bellow's deliberate irony. Trained in anthropology, Bellow is quite willing to regard the species *man* as merely one of the evolutionary products of nature and natural processes. But Bellow is determined to insist on the qualitative difference between *man* and the other sentient species that nature has produced.

Earl Rovit. *Saul Bellow* (Minnesota). 1967. pp. 12–3

The last four novels of Saul Bellow are devoted to a single theme: the effort of a perplexed man to discover enough of himself and reality to continue living in a time of personal and public crisis. Introspection, or the nervous exercise of a contemporary consciousness, is the means of discovery for the disturbed hero and forms the substance of the novels. To supply a narrative ground for the intellectualization and verbalization of his introverted characters, Bellow uses the metaphor of the journey of the man of many troubles, Odysseus. Each of his heroes finds himself alienated from father, wife, and children and undertakes a journey of return in the course of which he experiences death and learns important philosophical lessons. . . . It is the development of different kinds of introspection and the astonishing variety of the journey devised for each new wanderer that is the measure of Bellow's genius and the constant delight of his readers.

Leonard Lutwack. *Heroic Fiction* (Southern Illinois). 1971. pp. 88–9

It is difficult to imagine where Bellow will go from here. The development that is clearly recognizable throughout his work concerns not only language and characterization but also the approach to the form of the novel. As the characters grow older, more mature, and more ''human''—a term that means to Bellow an increasing awareness and appreciation of the qualities that enable the individual as well as mankind to ''survive''—the language becomes more controlled, more concise, more elegant, with greater emphasis being placed on the subliminal emotional content of each single word. As is natural in this context, the joyfulness and exuberance, the undauntable love of life that characterized *The Adventures of Augie March* and *Henderson the Rain King*, gradually diminish.

This is also the result of the growing importance of ideas in Bellow's later work. Remembering, evaluating, imagining, and reinterpreting become the protagonists' main ''business'' in life, a development that clearly indicates Bellow's changing attitude toward the novel. Artistic self-expression has become of secondary importance compared to the unending stream-of-thought processes contained in *Herzog* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. These novels are not only the comprehensive records that ''compulsive witnesses'' of their own lives have taken down, they also represent Bellow's effort to turn the novel into a medium of inquiry.

Brigitte Scheer-Schäzler, *Saul Bellow* (Ungar). 1972. p. 127

In a lecture given in London in 1971 Richard Poirier attacked Saul Bellow for being ''unmodified by reality and unable to admit radical alienation.'' It is perhaps possible to see something of this rejection of reality in those sections on sex and youth from *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. In the novel not one young person has anything really lasting or positive to offer; they are all flawed for Mr. Sammler by their dirt, their smell, or their slogans. It is at least partly true that in his admiration for the old liberal Bloomsbury values (not so far, perhaps, from some radical ideals) personified in Artur Sammler ''the old fashioned, sitting sage'' Bellow is unconsciously withdrawing to a safer, more civilized and more reassuring age. There is no doubt that many young Americans do identify Bellow with a Jewish intellectual élite which is just as dedicated to sustaining social inequalities as, say, General Motors. The radical view—implied by Poirier—says that intellectuals like Bellow are cut off from what is going on around them with the consequence that their writing is more or less irrelevant. They are exercising in a void.

The danger in this extreme view of the writer's purpose—the kind of view that Sartre has come to hold—is that the novel must be a social tract keeping up with events of the times and not imaginatively leaping ahead. This can be just as stultifying as leaving important things out. And to ask the novelist to include everything radical groups regard as ''significant'' would be absurd. Even so, it does seem odd that in a novel that so carefully sets out to describe recent events Bellow makes no mention of the Vietnam War, something which has, by any standard, made an enormous difference to the way Americans feel about themselves.

D.P.M. Salter. *The Critical Quarterly*. Spring, 1972. p. 64

It may be because Bellow cannot bring into single dramatic focus his optimism about man and his pessimism about the conditions of life that his characters so often seem schizophrenic and the endings of his novels disappointingly equivocal. His protagonists are men of goodwill and high hopes who make their way through a hellish wasteland in which they are forced to suffer every imaginable kind of humiliation and injustice. Yet at the end, in spite of everything, they are still seekers and believers. . . .

In *Humboldt's Gift* Bellow has still not found a way of successfully reconciling these contradictory attitudes and the two kinds of material in which they are expressed. But he does manage to cope with them more effectively than he has been able to do in any of his previous novels. The protagonist, Charles Citrine, confirms one's impression that Bellow's views of the nature of human existence are becoming increasingly mystical and may eventually find a formally religious framework. Citrine is a student of anthroposophy, a doctrine which maintains that through self-discipline cognitional experience of the spiritual world can be achieved, and his meditations on such a possibility become a significant yet unobtrusive leitmotiv of the world. But the critical point is that Bellow treats them throughout as meditations only. They are not required to bear a major thematic weight as are the speculative materials in the earlier novels. Therefore, Bellow's inability to reconcile them with his secular materials does not become problematical, since Citrine merely retreats from time to time into his meditations and at best only holds out hope that they may eventually lead him to a perception of spiritual truth.

John W. Aldridge. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 6, 1975. p. 24

Most critics, I think, would agree that Saul Bellow's greatest difficulty lies in his plots. He rewrote *Herzog* thirteen times, he tells us, turning it like ''a prayer wheel''; and in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* and *Humboldt's Gift*, he seems to have thrown up his hands: contrivance and improbability in these novels will do. Why? Why does the man who so brilliantly crafted *Seize the Day* now accept something rough, unsymmetrical, and even corny?

One answer is obvious: Bellow has always flirted with the loose or episodic. *The Adventures of Augie March* was a smash hit, and *Humboldt* is in many ways a return to the earlier ''fantasy holiday,'' as Bellow called it in the 1950s. Bellow has two modes: intense, closely textured, moral; and light, energetic, open. *The*

Victim, *Seize the Day*, and, yes, *Herzog* represent the former while *Augie March*, *Sammler*, and *Humboldt* represents the latter. Bellow clearly finds great pain in his plots and is tempted for good or ill to cut loose, to stop worrying about his novel's shape. Fiction should be *interesting*, he believes, and even fun, like the old Chicago cornball humor he loved in Vaudeville and gave a try at in his play *The Last Analysis*. Simply put, Bellow fears the dangers of constriction, of polishing the life out of a work. . . .

Bellow's most obvious obstacle to plot lies in the fact that he is a realist—perhaps the reason that he wants a plot in the first place. A novel such as *Herzog* reflects Bellow's need for distance from his material, which is usually autobiographical, we're told, and embodies Bellow's struggle to control what amounts to a superabundance of material, a realistic world so weighty with detail that it's most oppressive. Plot in Bellow's work is hard won, wrested from a confusing density and multiplicity of people, ideas, events, and sensation. It's so hard won that we might well claim that the struggle *is* the plot, as all the protagonists seek to move from the overwhelming richness of experience to some kind of peace and clarity.

Here Bellow's very strength creates the obstacle, for no one catches the specifics of face and light and city as well as he. His texture is so intense, so vivid, that he must be tempted continually to write for the page. At the same time, such intensity must threaten to overthrow his plot—surely he struggles to control it. And much the same might be said of his characters. . . .

So Bellow loves energetic, driven characters who have a size and vitality that make them hard to control—so hard to control that the protagonist finds himself bullied by them, shoved about, as each tries to pull him *his* way.

And then the characters are inseparable from their ideas, which also fill Bellow's pages with a confusing abundance. Bellow often has sought a plot that would contain a number of ideologies and has imagined a quest that is mental, as he seeks to dramatize nothing less than the act of thinking. And yet there are too many thoughts finally for the plot line to be easy, since it is an *idea* after all which provides the shape of a novel. . . . In a way, Bellow is a victim not only of our present distrust of any plot, but of our incredibly high demands for the ones we do accept. The New Critics have taught us to demand that a conclusion end a novel in a memorable way, summarizing all that went before and illuminating it, crystallizing the whole book in a single glowing image or scene. Never mind that such a scene near the end of a long traditional novel might well break the tone. We're perfectionists when we talk about structure and accept only an inspired unity. It's fitting, in view of such conflicts and inconsistencies, that Bellow forge his successful plots from the very obstacles that have plagued him.

Keith Opdahl. *Modern Fiction Studies*. Spring, 1979. pp. 15, 17, 28

In his exploration of stereotypes in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, Bellow turned away from the Jewish milieu that dominated his earlier fiction and American Jewish writing generally—Jewish immigrant life in the ghettos of America's large cities or the second and third generation move to the suburbs and assimilation. Instead, he chose a painful ''other'' for the Americanized Jewish community—the life of a survivor of Nazi atrocity, a man returned from the dead and the madness of the Holocaust and deposited in the insane landscape of urban America in the '60s. If the flight to the suburbs is in part a flight away from the visibility of human failure and suffering in cities, then a novel about a survivor of genocide living on the deteriorating upper West Side of New York City is bound to be disturbing to many Jewish readers, seeking more obvious images from their own lives. But more importantly, a novel about several Jewish survivors of Nazi persecution that does not present suffering as ennobling, but rather as crippling, undercuts any sentimental myths about hard won moral lessons or the spiritual rewards of tragedy. Instead, Bellow does present a vision of human community and moral accountability, but *despite* suffering, not because of it.

Mr. Sammler's Planet is Bellow's most Jewish novel because it deals directly with the most important events of Jewish history in this century—the Holocaust, the state of Israel, and American Jewry's relation to both. Moreover, the major values embodied in the novel are basic tenets of Jewish life, although they are not exclusively Jewish: a reverence for life and an unwavering belief in human survival under any circumstances; an emphasis on reason and human intellect, part of a long tradition of interpretation and commentary on scripture; a preference for good deed and actions over contemplation, the concept of *mitzvoth*. These values—which constitute a rejection of despair, irrationalism, or madness as illuminating and consciousness for its own sake—are the components of Saul Bellow's humanistic vision of the world and run counter to what he has defined as literary modernism.

Hana Wirth-Nesher and Andrea Cohen Malamut. *Modern Fiction Studies*. Spring, 1979, p. 61

Bellow's resistance to alienation has for the most part taken the form of an individual's struggle to define those qualities which identify him as human, qualities which, for Bellow, emerge sometimes in opposition to, sometimes as a function of, the belief that goodness can be achieved only in the company of other men. In exploring these alternatives, Bellow has demonstrated an overriding concern for the ordinary circumstances of daily reality. ''While our need for meanings is certainly great,'' he has written, ''our need for concreteness, for particulars, is even greater.'' In approaching the reality of individuals who actually live and actually die, however, Bellow has evidenced a good deal of anxiety about a facticity that smothers the imagination. ''The facts begin to crowd me,'' Henderson complains, ''and soon I get a pressure in the chest.'' Bellow has responded to the same pressure. American fiction, he complained not long after the publication of *Henderson* [*the Rain King*], had become characterized by a concern for documentation animated neither by the theoretical structure that informed Zola's naturalism nor the feeling or the view of fate that described Dreiser's social novels. More recently, he has objected to the accountability to fact which the society holds the demands of the artist no less than of the scientist or the technical expert in any field. Writing of the difficulty of the artist in a modern, technological society, Bellow has remarked that ''the artist has less power to resist the facts than other men. He is obliged to note the particulars. One may even say that he is condemned to see them.'' In this shift from the artist's need to the social demand for fact as a compelling principle of composition, Bellow anticipated a tendency which, as Pearl K. Bell has recently noted, has come to extend even to the popular novel—Bell cites as representative examples Arthur Hailey's *Wheels*, James Michener's *Centennial*, James Clavell's *Shogun*, and prominently, Herman Wouk's *War and Remembrance*—which formerly defined itself by a concern for narrative movement.

Though Bellow continues to insist on the importance of giving weight to the particular, such weight, he argues, need not be in quantifiable terms any more than art should fulfill a compensatory function in restoring the alienated modern individual to psychic health. Rather, factual authority proceeds from an imaginative faculty that, with Henry James, Bellow insists must maintain its regard for the story as story and must express man's ''intuition that his own existence is peculiarly significant.''. . .

Accordingly, despite his concern for social conditions, Bellow has shown little interest in specific social movements or political issues. Environment has functioned less as an influence on events and characters than as a projection of their inner conflict, a symbol as well as an agent of inhuman darkness. Bellow's protagonists are thus placed in a social environment but oppressed by personal and natural forces that obscure the resulting tensions by developing them in oblique relation to their framing situations. . . .

There is, then, in Bellow's fiction a fundamental division between a moral concern for the way things look and feel and an insistence on a more meaningful ideality, antecedent to such everyday striving and projected by characters indistinguishable from the authorial voice, whose narrow consciousness of a world displaces its portrayal through an independent perspective.

Stanley Trachtenberg. In *Critical Essays on Saul Bellow*, ed. Stanley Trachtenberg (G.K. Hall, 1979), pp. xiii–xiv

The good thing about *The Dean's December* . . . is that it is by Saul Bellow, and therefore possesses wit, vividness, tenderness, brave thought, earthy mysticism, and a most generous, searching, humorous humanity; the bad thing about it, or at least not so good, is that it also is *about* Saul Bellow, in an uncomfortable, indirect, but unignorable way. . . .

Bellow believes in the soul; this is one of his links with the ancients, with the great books. At the same time, like those great books, he feels and conveys the authentic heaviness in which our spirits are entangled; he has displayed for thirty years an unsurpassedly active and pungent awareness of the corporeal, of the mortal, of human creatureliness in all its sexual and assertive variety. He is not just a very good writer, he is one of the rare writers who when we read them feel to be taking mimesis a layer or two deeper than it has gone before. His lavish, rippling notations of persons, furniture, habiliments, and vistas awaken us to what is truly there. Such a gift for the actual is not unnaturally bound in with a yen toward the theoretical; for how do we see but by setting ourselves to see? From *Augie March* on, a sense of intellectual quest moves Bellow's heroes and is expected to move his readers. The quest in *The Dean's December* is narrow enough to meet concentrated resistance. . . .

Bellow has it in him, great poet and fearless mental venturer that he is, to write one of those unclassifiable American masterpieces like ''Walden.'' But such a book must ramify from a firm, simple center, and this *The Dean's December* does not possess.

John Updike. *New Yorker*. Feb. 22, 1982, pp. 120, 127–28

By general critical agreement, Saul Bellow is the strongest American novelist of his generation, presumably with Norman Mailer as his nearest rival. What makes this canonical judgment a touch problematic is that the indisputable achievement does not appear to reside in any single book. Bellow's principal works are: *The Adventures of Augie March*, *Herzog*, *Humboldt's Gift*, and in a briefer compass, *Seize the Day*. The earlier novels, *Dangling Man* and *The Victim*, seem now to be period pieces, while *Henderson the Rain King* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* share the curious quality of not being quite worthy of two figures so memorable as Henderson and Mr. Sammler. *The Dean's December* is a drab book, its dreariness unredeemed by Bellow's nearly absent comic genius.

Herzog, still possessing the exuberance of *Augie March*, while anticipating the tragicomic sophistication of *Humboldt's Gift*, as of now seems to be Bellow's best and most representative novel. And yet its central figure remains a wavering representation, compared to some of the subsidiary male characters, and its women seem the wish-fulfillments, negative as well as positive, of Herzog and his creator. This seems true of almost all of Bellow's fiction: A Dickensian gusto animates a fabulous array of secondary and minor personalities, while at the center a colorful but shadowy consciousness is hedged in by women who do not persuade us, though evidently once they persuaded him.

In some sense, the canonical status of Bellow is already assured, even if the indubitable book is still to come. Bellow's strengths may not have come together to form a masterwork, but he is hardly the first novelist of real eminence whose books may be weaker as aggregates than in their component parts or aspects. His stylistic achievement is beyond dispute, as are his humor, his narrative inventiveness, and his astonishing inner ear, whether for monologue or dialogue. Perhaps his greatest gift is for creating subsidiary and minor characters of grotesque splendor, sublime in their vivacity, intensity, and capacity to surprise. They may be caricatures, yet their vitality seems permanent. . . . This helps compound the aesthetic mystery of Bellow's achievement. His heroes are superb observers, worthy of their Whitmanian heritage. What they lack is Whitman's Real Me or Me Myself, or else they are blocked from expressing it.

Harold Bloom. Introduction in Harold Bloom, ed. *Saul Bellow* (New York: Chelsea House, 1986). pp. 1–2

Bellow is in some ways the least fashionable of contemporary novelists. While modern and postmodern writers have been shaping the novel into something enclosed, labyrinthine, and narcissistic, he has adhered generally to the more open stylistics of nineteenth-century realism. While Jewish novelists have been chronicling their American experience and becoming a group presence in the bookstalls, he has rejected the label of Jewish writer and insisted upon the label *American*. While masters of the novel have been plumbing the minds of the insane, the disaffected, and the neurotic, he has given us thoughtful fictions about the urban intellectual. Thought itself is really both the subject and the strategy of Bellow's fiction. . . .

This commitment to thought establishes Bellow as America's most obviously intellectual novelist. No writer now living has explored with greater subtlety and intensity than he the terrain where overburdened consciousness, intellectual fervidness, and moral anxiety come together. No writer has caught more tellingly the intellectual temper of the age—its sense of material disorder, its shrinking from mental excess, its fear of final reckonings. Yet Bellow's novels are not in any sense philosophical disquisitions tricked out in story form. The life of the mind moves dramatically

toward catharsis rather than toward some ultimate QED in his novels, his focus always the lived through experience of ideas. Nor is Bellow insensitive to the shadows that hang over commitment to thought in our culture. His most cerebral characters suffer from intellectual shell shock, and so great is their suffering that Bellow might almost be thought to warn us off the territory. . . .

More than any living American writer, Bellow commands our respect for his stubborn attempt to reconcile the human mind with a nature that ill accommodates it and an experience that surfeits it. We are richer that he engages us in the endeavor.

Robert F. Kiernan. *Saul Bellow* (New York: Continuum, 1989), pp. 233, 235

In consequence of which, one is obliged to put a riddle: if you found this book of stories (*Him with His Foot in His Mouth*) at the foot of your bed one morning, with the title page torn way and the author's name concealed, would you know it, after all, to be Bellow?. . . Omitting, then, extraterritorial interests not subject to the tractable laws of fiction . . . would you recognize Bellow's muscle, his swift and glorious eye?

Yes, absolutely; a thousand times yes. It is Bellow's Chicago, Bellow's portraiture—these faces, these heads!—above all, Bellow's motor. . . .

To this thickness of community and these passions of mind Bellow has added a distinctive ingredient, not new on any landscape, but shamelessly daring just now in American imaginative prose. Let the narrator of ''Cousins'' reveal it: ''We enter the world without prior notice, we are manifested before we can be aware of manifestation. An original self exists, or, if you prefer, an original soul.'' Bellow, it seems, has risked mentioning . . . the Eye of God. . . .

This metaphysical radar (suspiciously akin to the Eye of God) ''decodes'' Saul Bellow, and these five ravishing stories honor and augment his genius.

Cynthia Ozick. *Metaphor and Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), pp. 50–57

The first female to serve as the protagonist of a Bellow novel, Clara [in *A Theft*] has endured the marital disappointments and failures that befall most of her male predecessors; she is however, neither bitter nor scornful of the possibilities for love. As restless and troubled (she has twice attempted suicide) as any of Bellow's heroes, she has this singular advantage. Like Henderson's wife Lily, Clara regards love as the fundamental fact of being. . . .

As the central figure and intelligence in *A Theft* Clara Velde radiates energy and warmth. . . . Further contributing to the sanguine atmosphere of Bellow's latest work are the passages of high-spirited comedy, and sexual parody, that recall his earlier fiction. Once more, the absurdities of twentieth-century life prove laughable as well as grotesque. . . .

As the creator of all these seekers after ''real being,'' Bellow still honors the novel's incapacity to deliver ''absolutes.'' Affirmation of soul's ''natural knowledge'' is always dramatic and personal, the protagonist (and his author) making no claims for ''objective truth.'' In the earlier novels, especially, Bellow's protagonists scarcely understand their struggle for awareness. And in the later novels—whether the protagonist begins his search, like Sammler, in a state of intense inner conflict, or, like Corde, already has an inkling of his tie to creation—the internal harmony he achieves is always precarious, besieged unrelentingly by the chaotic forces of twentieth-century life. As acutely aware as a Corde, a Herzog, or a Sammler of the sheer mass of ''objective'' evidence bearing down, with crushing force, on the fragile ''internal facts'' of human attachment, Saul Bellow continues, nonetheless, to articulate the ''shamelessly daring'' language of connection. In each successive novel, and with increasing boldness from *Mr. Sammler's Planet* on, he has pitted the art of his fiction against the grain of contemporary ''head culture''—defying the leaden authority of its reigning idols.

Ellen Pifer. *Saul Bellow: Against the Grain*. (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Pr., 1990), pp. 179–80, 184–85

Saul Bellow presents this collection of occasional works of nonfiction [*It All Adds Up: From the Dim Past to the Uncertain Future*] modestly—he calls it ''not a reliquary but a gathering of some of the more readable essays''—but most readers are likely to receive it otherwise. Though it is for his fiction that we most honor Bellow, the voice in which he speaks is always distinctively his own no matter what the genre that he chooses to use. A new book by Bellow is always to be valued, even if it is not a novel and not, technically, ''new'': thus it is with *It All Adds Up*, the only nonfiction collection he has published in a career that now embraces a half-century.

Few readers need to be told that Bellow is a person of pronounced and prickly views. In the decades since *Herzog* made its rather startling appearance, he has not been reluctant to use his fiction to cast a gloomy light upon the modern world. In a few instances this has produced novels more notable for their crankiness than for their art, perhaps most self-evidently *The Dean's December*, but it also has charged them with a fierce and insistent energy. Reading them, one is much aware of the author's powerful, commanding presence, a presence entirely unlike any other in contemporary American literature.

Certainly it pervades the two and half dozen pieces herein collected. To call them essays is a bit of a stretch since they include several lectures and a couple of transcribed interviews, but they are indisputably Bellow. They are the work of a man who says, ''I come of a generation, now largely vanished, that was passionate about literature,'' and who has spent much of his adult life trying to figure out ''the place of poets and novelists'' in ''American society as it is now and the mixture of mind and crudity it offers.'' That, in one form or another, is the question he explores in the meatiest of these pieces. . . .

On no subject does Bellow write more passionately than this. Clearly he has been sustained by his conviction that there is something more to American life than what we see and that it is the responsibility of the artist to search for it. Knowing that, we can understand all the more clearly the . . . fierce energy and insistent energy of his fiction; it derives from his determination, no less strong in his eighth decade than it was in his third, to track down that elusive but ever alluring truth.

All of which serves as a useful reminder of the implacable seriousness that is at the heart of Bellow's artistry, but it should not

distract us from the great humor that reverberates throughout his work.

Jonathan Yardley. *San Francisco Examiner*. March 30, 1994, p. C–5

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BENCHLEY, Robert (1889–1945)

Mr. Benchley has a genuine sense of the ridiculous; he passes through the semi-intelligent world of the business office, the city room, the theatre, with an amused appreciation of its vanities; he takes an absurd pleasure in his grimaces and horseplay not so much because they make others laugh but because they are required of him by the pompous stupidities of civilized existence. Unhappily he has had to fill two hundred and fifty pages with this sort of thing. In half that number he could have published all of his parodies, including the ''Christmas Afternoon,'' which is very good, ''From Nine to Five,'' ''Football,'' a few of his little farces, and all of the pages between the flyleaf and the contents page. He would have succeeded in omitting all of the distressing bits quoted by his friends as the best things in the book.

Gilbert Seldes. *Dial*. Jan., 1922. p. 95

Here . . . is Robert C. Benchley, perhaps the most finished master of the technique of literary fun in America. Benchley's work is pure humor, one might almost say sheer nonsense. There is no moral teaching, no reflection of life, no tears. What Benchley pursues is the higher art of nonsense and he has shown in it a quite exceptional power for tricks of word and phrase.

Stephen Leacock. *The Greatest Pages of American Humor* (Doubleday). 1936. p. 233

Along comes Robert Benchley like those hardy perennials, [P.G.] Wodehouse and [E. Phillips] Oppenheim. When I was still in college in 1921 . . . I read *Of All Things*, which I still consider his best and freshest book. . . . He is popular now, and I believe that he syndicates his articles. At any rate, they are seriously the work of the serious humorist; still funny, but too much of the same thing to make one laugh anew. Yet those who do not know Mr. Benchley and his illuminator, Mr. Gluyas Williams (never better than in this role), have missed something unduplicated in American humor. He can write on anything, and does. Falling flat, Mr. Benchley is sharper than all his imitators. . . . He is a rare and natural wit who . . . writes too much and too often.

David McCord. *The Yale Review*. Autumn, 1936. p. 81

The man seems to be a humorist, and yet the Pagliacci undertones are seldom absent. . . . Generalizations about Benchley are dangerous. . . . But surely spontaneity is the key to his particular form of mental disorder. The man is spontaneously cuckoo. . . . Still, he says some pretty acute things. . . . I have said that Benchley seems to be a humorist, and right now, in order to give Bob a break, I want to retract that ''seems.'' Maybe ''humorist'' isn't the right word either. All I know is, he makes you laugh.

William Rose Benét. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 8, 1938. p. 7

''Is Robert Benchley a solar myth?'' That is the question little knots of curious people, as well as curious knots of little people, have been asking ever since Mr. Benchley traded in his quill for an Actor's Equity card and abandoned the craft of writing. It has often been said—and it is being said again right at this minute—that the Ice Age of American humor began the moment he stopped practicing letters. For the sad fact is that when Benchley went out of business he forgot to appoint a successor. He just locked up the store and threw away the key. . . .

In this, his latest garland [*Benchley Beside Himself*], Mr. Benchley proves again what needs no confirmation, that for sheer guile and sprightliness he leaves his competitors, imitators and apostles tied to a tree. Whether you begin with ''Polyp With a Past,'' or the masterly inquiry into Negro folksong . . . or any one of twenty others, it is a dead cert you will wind up clawing at your collar and emitting a series of strangled little yelps.

S.J. Perelman. *New York Times Book Section*. June 13, 1943. p. 2

. . .in past years I was probably afraid to read him for fear of finding out how many of my own humorous bits had already been written by the Master. I think that most humorists today must humbly admit to the same indebtedness.

Benchley *was* humor. His writings were only one of the outward and visible evidences of the inner grace, the divine essence. . . . Benchley *did* give out a radiant glow; his friends and his millions of readers *did* warm themselves and feel better because of his presence. But he was not one to be operated by a switch; he was a flame, capable of leaping out of the fireplace and bitterly searching the hypocrite, the pretentious, the inhuman.

Donald Ogden Stewart. *The Nation*. Oct. 16, 1954. p. 343

To read *The Benchley Roundup* . . . is to reread some of the most laughable prose of the past thirty years and to be reminded of how much we still miss Bob Benchley. He had the most ingenious way of submitting himself to exasperation. The causes of his annoyance he would describe with wonderful accuracy, and with a slow burn. . . . [But] the worm always turns, in a Benchley essay; the

moment comes when the gentle sufferer can stand no more, and this is the fun of the thing—to see him rise in his wrath and impale the nuisance with the deftest of phrases.

Edward Weeks. *Atlantic Monthly*. Nov., 1954. p. 88

Benchley was a highly subjective writer, and most of what he wrote was conditioned by his feelings about himself. Among his gifts was the ability to set these feelings down neatly and precisely. . . . He was willing, even eager, to make fun of himself, provided he was reasonably sure that others would know what he was talking about, but he was reluctant to do anything that appeared to be straining to make the point.

Nathaniel Benchley. *Robert Benchley* (McGrawHill). 1955. p.2

It's pretty hard to find anything dated in his gallery of cheerful incompetents failing calamitously to adapt themselves to modern man's living habits, and his genial, bumbling authorities lecturing on how to figure income-taxes, raise babies, sub-let apartments, control crime, take vacations, vote, train dogs, and other subjects susceptible to hilarious exploitation. . . . Very properly ''kindliness'' has been used more than any other word to describe the basic quality of Benchley fun-making. . . . He could also express a cold, virtuous anger in his writing. A lot of unscrupulous reporters and editors felt the bite of Robert Benchley's contempt in the acid comments on current journalism which *The New Yorker* frequently published above the sobriquet of Guy Fawkes.

Marc Connelly. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Nov. 13, 1955. pp. 1, 13

Benchley's Little Man has an integrity that can be strained but never quite broken; it gleams sullenly through his foggiest notions. In *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*, Karen Horney says that one refuge of the intellectual sort of neurotic is a detachment in which he refuses to take anything seriously, including himself. The self-mockery of Benchley's fictive double is never carried to the point where he loses his wholesome awareness that man's environment was made for man, not he for it, and if things don't seem that way (here the reformer speaks)—well, things had better be changed. Miss Horney also states that the neurotic feels a compulsion to be liked. Benchley's double is less concerned with being liked than with preserving his integrity and his ethical vision.

Norris W. Yates. *The American Humorist* (Iowa State). 1964. p. 246

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BENÉT, Stephen Vincent (1898–1943)

John Brown's Body . . . is as good as knowledge, sincere personal feeling, and Mr. Benét's particular literary expertness, could make it. To argue that it is more than this, would be quite specially unjust. It is a popular patriotic epic of essentially the same order as Noyes's Elizabethan Odyssey; regarded as a grand historical poem like *The Dynasts*, it would be a heavy disappointment. All the virtues of readability, romantic charm, reminiscent pathos, it has in abundance; the higher virtues that one might expect of such a performance, it very definitely lacks. It lacks these partly because it is not organized and controlled, as such a poem would be, by a clear and sweeping philosophic vision; partly because it is not directed for all its competence, by a rigorous and corrective artistic purpose.

Newton Arvin. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Aug. 12, 1928. p. 2

John Brown's Body has been called among other things an epic and it has been compared, not unfavorably, to the *Iliad*. Mr. Benét himself has no such pretensions. . . . The poem is not in any sense an epic; neither is it a philosophical vision of the Civil War; it is a loose episodic narrative which unfolds a number of unrelated themes in motion picture flashes. In spite of some literary incompetence in the author and the lack of a controlling imagination, the story gathers suspense as it goes and often attains to power.

Allen Tate. *The Nation*. Sept. 19, 1928. p. 274

Epic is too heroic a word, no doubt, to stand alone as descriptive of this poem (*John Brown's Body*); a word associated too loftily with Homer and Virgil, with Dante and Milton; suggestive of masterpieces of the past, whose royal rhythms carry mythical gods and heroes through magical exploits. Mr. Benét's poem is a kind of cinema epic, brilliantly flashing a hundred different aspects of American character and history on the silver screen of an unobstrusively fluent and responsive style.

Harriet Monroe. *Poetry*. Nov., 1928. p. 91

Stephen Benét has the true gift of poetry, and he has a scope and energy of ambition that is rare among poets in this practical age. . . . Even where Benét's poetry is not so fine, it is sustained by a fine sincerity—by the poet's own heart honestly feeling all that is felt—and it is adorned with interruptions of excellent lyrical song. All these virtues compel one to judge *John Brown's Body* by the standards of great art. And as a great work of art, I think the book fails. . . . It is a sophisticated book, an intellectual book, full of complicated, diverse and extremely up-to-date ideas. Only as a whole it lacks idea. It lacks attitude. It lacks the unity that is imparted by an intention.

Max Eastman. *Bookman*. Nov., 1928. p. 362

Mr. Benét keeps to the middle of the road in his verse as in his thinking. Neither an innovator nor an imitator, he is an able craftsman who draws upon sources both old and recent. With some lapses his poetry is interesting, perceptive, and in good taste. . . . He is the critical historian who shrinks from the half-truths and savageries of prophecy and partisanship; lacking the evidence for a final judgement, he is content to chronicle. As such he has his place and a not undistinguished one; for an honest chronicler who is also a skilful poet is better than a score of false prophets without art.

Philip Blair Rice. *The Nation*. July 18, 1936. pp. 81–2

His verse is a survival of an abundant native line; it has become a virtual guide-book of native myth and folklore, their place-names, heroes, humours, and reverences. . . . Mr. Benét derived, through Lindsay, from the bardic romantics who held sway in American poetry for over a century. . . .In America this tradition, in its homeliest form, was the living authority of text-books and family anthologies all the way from Neihardt, Riley, and Markham, back through Hay, Harte, and Miller, to the bearded dynasties of Longfellow and Bryant—a succession hostile to eccentric talent or refined taste, scornful of modernity or exotic influence, once the pride of the burgeoning Republic, and now chiefly a source of cheerful embarrassment to teachers and blushing incredulity to their students. Mr. Benét has aspired from his school-days to a place in this old American line.

Morton Dauwen Zabel. *Poetry*. Aug., 1936. pp. 276

Mr. Benét, when not writing hundreds of pages of flat free verse, can be a poet, and can tell a first-rate story when not wrestling with attitudes towards history. I think posterity will treat him much like Stevenson. Some will ignore him; the young will treasure his adventure tales, especially *Spanish Bayonet*; and most people will like his ballads, love poems, and prose fantasies. At his unpretentious best he is a writer of sure skill and simple charm. But his efforts as interpreter of the American scene and the world crisis will be tactfully forgotten. No matter how fertile their imagination, little of worth results when writers who do not feel *prophetically* the power of ideas attempt to express social and historical truths.

Frank Jones. *The Nation*. Sept. 12, 1942. p. 218

He was in sheer fact the poet so urgently called for by our last national poet, the first to chant songs for and of all America, Walt Whitman. And unlike Walt Whitman, whose prophetic symbolism could be read by the people only in single poems and passages, he broke through the ivory wall and was read (as Whitman prophesied some American would be) by the population at large. It seems probable that no writer of poetry in English has ever been read by so many in his lifetime—not even Longfellow—as was Stephen Benét. And while he was popular, he never wrote down to his public. He gave them his best, and it was good.

Henry Seidel Canby. *Saturday Review*. March 27, 1943. p. 14

His life was a model, I think, of what a poet's life should be—a model upon which young men of later generations might well form themselves. He was altogether without envy or vanity. He never considered appearance, or tried to present himself as anything but what he was, or paid the least attention to the prevalent notions of what a poet ought to be. Also, and more important, he was truly generous. . .Moreover, his generosity was not a moral quality alone. It was an intellectual quality as well. . . . It was this warm and human concern with things seen, things felt beyond himself, which gave him his quality as a poet.

Archibald MacLeish. *Saturday Review*. March 27, 1943. p. 7

Stephen Vincent Benét's death was a particular loss because he added to the variety of American poetry. His contribution of the historical narrative was unique, since few practiced it and no other approached his success. It is important to define his effort. He was not interested in mouthing the word ''America.''. . . Benét's deep regard for the United States of America was based not on a feeling of blood and earth, but on an honest belief in this country as remarkably permitting human freedom. He knew the misery and corruption, and you'll find them in his books. But, stronger than any other motive, you will find Benét's fascination with the effort of these states to be a place where that reckless and distorted word ''liberty'' actually means individual right and intellectual exemption.

Paul Engle. *Poetry*. Dec., 1943. p. 160

Whatever may be the eventual position of Benét's work in the ranks of American letters, one suspects that it will persist, in a quiet way, pretty far forward, despite the cyclical clamor as advance guards change. . . . Stephen Vincent Benét had a faith and a delight in people and a belief that they could come to good ends. And it is precisely this faith and delight and belief that distinguish his work from that of most of his noisier contemporaries, that make his storied people stand out. . . . Benét's people exist in an older context . . . a context of accomplishment; of reaffirmation of the ancient and necessary faith that man not only can defeat his devils but can act with decency toward his fellows.

Robeson Bailey. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 4, 1947. p. 16

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BERGER, Thomas (1924–)

[*Crazy in Berlin* is] a first novel of exceptional merit. . . . Indeed, I know of no book by an American that searches more earnestly the meaning of the Nazi convulsion and its aftermath in order to discover their wider applications. . . . Mr. Berger gives us a wealth of characterization, but more of the basis of character read deeply and truly. . . . Behind this work, there is a fine intelligence; this is a book written from the vantage of maturity. The quality of the writing itself is varied. Mr. Berger has a sure sense of the ludicrous; seriousness lights up with mockery; ideas can take the shape of sensual images. Berlin itself, its cellars, streets, and ruins stand before us. If the movement of the book is slow, that, too, may become part of our pleasure in it. But sometimes the writing is unclear or, to put it more accurately, is congested with meaning. Nor has Mr. Berger always organized his materials to best effect; we are threatened with a surfeit of valuable matter. Still, this book is in most ways a solid achievement, an original novel of unquestionable power.

Gene Baro. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Oct. 26, 1958. p. 12

Two novels [*Crazy in Berlin* and *Reinhart in Love*] hardly provide an adequate basis for judgment on an author like Thomas Berger. Criticism must make allowances for its own errors just as it must allow for the unexpected turns in a writer's craft. But two novels also amount to a kind of self-declaration. The declaration, I think, is of a double import: it reveals something about Berger's singular talent, and it illuminates a new trend of American fiction.

Berger's primary concern is the individual in a world of cunning appearances and uncertified realities. Power and Fraud rule that world, distorting appearances and realities, pressing man to the limits of his sanity, and pressing on him the guilt-ridden role of victim or aggressor. But threats also contain their own answer, and shields may be fashioned of weapons. Man's response, therefore, is to adopt a stance of knowing craziness, resilient simplicity, or defensive defenselessness. These are the qualities Reinhart possesses. Nor is it an accident that his patron's day, so Berger says, is April First, Fool's Day.

Ihab Hassan. *Critique*. 5, 2, 1962. pp. 14–5

However late or early in the day it may be for the Western novel, Thomas Berger has just written a really noble one [*Little Big Man*], something really new. . . . In about the same way that Faulkner delivers the old South to the ken of a jaded but renewable imagination, Berger delivers the West. He took on an apparently impossible task and made the dead bones live, not by stringing them together and jerking the strings to make them dance, but by showing how we dream ''anonymously and communally'' as Mann once put it, finding, by a prophetic leap, the common ingredients our regressive dream of the West shared with the dreams of those vanished Indians and a boy kidnapped from a wagon train. And oh, that Wild West dream is funny, magically and marvelously funny as Berger recreates it, like an embarrassment and a rapture we never knew quite how to confess.

R.V. Cassill. *Book Week*. Oct. 25, 1964. p. 2

Sometimes . . . the new Western anti-heroes shrink in size until they move through the vastness of the West more like the dwarfed Julius Rodman of Edgar Allan Poe than any movie version of the Cowboy Hero. . . . Thomas Berger's Little Big Man is precisely what his name declares: a shrimp with sharp wits and an enormous spirit—though in a showdown he prefers to depend more on those wits than that spirit, as, for instance, in encounters with the sort of large, icy killer he knows he cannot outdraw. . . . Indeed, all of the ''historical'' characters in *Little Big Man* are undercut and debunked by a kind of merciless geniality that is likely to mislead the unwary reader about the real nature of the novel.

One reviewer, for example, quite inappropriately described *Little Big Man*, just after it appeared, as ''exciting, violent, and ribald . . . ranks with *The Big Sky* and *The Oxbow Incident*.'' But it has neither the moral earnestness of the latter nor the easy realism of the former, only a desire to demonstrate how, for all its pathos and danger, the West was and remains essentially *funny*. . . . Berger is not so brutal and extreme in this regard, so totally nihilistic as David Markson, or even John Barth: but he, too, cannot resist drawing almost anything he happens to know into the circle of his ridicule.

Leslie A. Fiedler. *The Return of the Vanishing American* (Stein and Day). 1968. pp. 160–1

Berger's *Killing Time* is (need I say it?) a picaresque, bleakly comic account of the world's malevolent absurdity, with a Holy Fool at the centre, much bizarre violence and sex, philosophic dialogues, and a style that is mannered and glittering. . . .

The effects Mr. Berger achieves are lurid, yet economical and intelligent. His situations are presented in a bright, harsh light, with a related blackness that you can feel. His tone is sardonic and reflective, aloof, yet without any of the onanistic snickerings of a James Purdy. His characters are all too subtly, even elaborately analysed to be simple grotesques. And yet the effect of the whole book is of a distant and somewhat cerebral brilliance. Our interest is in texture and the to-and-fro of argument rather than in a felt predicament. Even the violence and the misery are appreciated almost as exciting colours, not as human experiences. And the persons and events are so extreme, so spasmodic, that we cease to take even the ideas—the Quest for Being—very seriously. So much novelty and so much inconclusive cleverness defeat their purpose of making us question our lives, and come close to providing a very superior kind of science fiction.

Kenneth Graham. *The Listener*. May 16, 1968. pp. 639–40

Little Big Man is a great novel because it portrays western ''society'' in the nineteenth century as it really was—violent, yes, but also absurd, melodramatic, incongruous. Its author never sacrifices his imagination to realism. At the same time it is scrupulously accurate as to places, dates and events, the results of

the ''60 or 70 accounts of Western reality'' which Berger says he read ''to reinforce my feeling for the myth.'' It is also ''the Western to end all Westerns'' which Berger intended it to be, because it splendorizes the West with love and imagination. Far from discarding any of the choice western properties, Berger has turned them inside out, revealing one by one the possibilities of a western literary art.

Jay Gurian. *Western American Literature*. Winter, 1969. p. 296

Vital Parts confirms Berger's rank as a major American novelist, one whose stylistic fecundity, psychological insight, and social knowledge are seemingly inexhaustible. Reinhart continues to move, clownlike, through his familiar world of ''asymmetrical impulses, like a laughter hopelessly mad, hopelessly free,'' large in physique, generosity, honesty, gullibility, optimism, and capacity for enduring psychosocial wounds. . . .

A comic allegorist of the worthwhile Middle American, skillfully wielding a colloquial diction and rhythm of extraordinary expressiveness, Thomas Berger is one of the most successful satiric observers of the ebb and flow of American life after World War II. His prolificacy promises a continued development of the tragicomic mode of vision, something American literature badly needs to compensate for the over-extended silence of such formerly active writers as Ralph Ellison, Joseph Heller, and Thomas Pynchon.

Brom Weber. *Saturday Review*. March 21, 1970. p. 42

In the shifting landscape of Thomas Berger, man is constant, that is to say, hopelessly the prisoner of himself and his pathetically limited vision. All ideology, all hope of genuine change is false since, alas, ''The 'public' is a collection of individuals though politicians pretend otherwise.'' That is the heart of his irony, and that is why his comedy is too bitter for general popularity, though not, in my opinion, too bitter to be called great (despite occasional lapses into archness, occasional strain in the purely slapstick passages). Under the cold, correct surface of his prose—which, employed to render absurdity, creates the fundamental tension of his work—lies one of the most genuinely radical sensibilities now writing novels in this country. Next to the devastation he wreaks in his quiet way, a public anarchist like Reinhart's fellow Cincinnatian, Jerry Rubin, seems pip-squeak indeed. *He* thinks there is hope; Carlo Reinhart and Thomas Berger know there is only the possibility of replacing present delusions with new ones.

Richard Schickel. *Commentary*. July, 1970. p. 80

Berger's settings and characters in all his novels are plausible rather than apocalyptic. His satire refuses to make an alliance between reader and author against an oppressive, ugly ''them.'' Paul Krassner once wrote that ''the ultimate object of satire is its own audience,'' and Berger's integrity arranges that no reader—male chauvinist, militant feminist or in between—can emerge from *Regiment of Women* unscathed. All of Berger's main characters—Georgie Cornell here, Jack Crabb in *Little Big Man*, Carlo Reinhart in *Crazy in Berlin, Reinhart in Love* and *Vital Parts*—are moved more by circumstances than by some passionate belief or lack of belief. Berger's clearest outrage is reserved for anyone who presumes to sit in moral judgment on another, and his central characters are all slammed about by beings more certain than they about the location of truth. . . .

Berger's own style, with its tendency to absorb the speech rhythms of his characters and its unwillingness to stand apart from them, is especially suited for such themes. Since *Little Big Man*, especially, he has concentrated on exploring the possibilities and revealing the secrets of everyday language with a deep wit and feeling that transforms our awareness of the language we really use much more than does the flamboyance of a writer bent on asserting his personal style. *Killing Time* may be Berger's most brilliant effort to engage in this truly poetic task of renovating the language we speak. But *Regiment of Women* is a brilliant flame from the same sources of energy.

Leo Braudy. *New York Times Book Section*. May 13, 1973. pp. 6–7

Thomas Berger understands one of the cardinal principles of silent-film comedy, the excruciating approach to an anticipated collision averted by a hair-breadth swerve at the last moment into a fresh kettle of fish. His timing and control are impeccable.

Sneaky People is a book full of secrets and surprises. . . . Each melodramatic twist is short-circuited by an unlooked-for response. . . . Over all this shines the sun of a dusty Midwestern city at the end of the Depression: daily life is lovingly remembered and recreated in exact detail. On a first reading, *Sneaky People* is exhilaratingly bawdy and tricky. A second reading arouses a different feeling: this is Thomas Berger's tenderest, most touching work.

Walter Clemons. *Newsweek*. April 28, 1975. p. 79

Thomas Berger's fifth novel [*Who Is Teddy Villanova?*] is mainly a parody of detective thrillers; his well-known *Little Big Man* was a parody of Westerns. According to the jacket copy, in *Who Is Teddy Villanova?* we will recognize the familiar ''seedy office,'' ''down-at-the-heels shamus,'' ''procession of sinister, chicane, or merely brutal men and scheming, vicious, but lovely women'' and a ''sequence of savage beatings.'' All this is true. The novel contains much that is conventional in detective thrillers. Still, one needn't know the books of Dashiell Hammett or Raymond Chandler in order to appreciate Berger's witty burlesque of their characters and situations.

Berger's style, which is one of the great pleasures of the book, is something like S.J. Perelman's—educated, complicated, graceful, silly, destructive in spirit, and brilliant—and it is also something like Mad Comics—densely, sensuously detailed, unpredictable, packed with gags. Beyond all this, it makes an impression of scholarship—that is, Berger seems really to know what he jokes about. This includes not only Hammett and Chandler, but also Racine, Goethe, Ruskin, Elias Canetti, New York and the way its residents behave. Essentially, then, Berger's style is like itself insofar as it is like other styles. And his whole novel—in its wide ranging reference to cultural forms both high and pop—is like a huge verbal mirror. Its reflections are similar to what we see in much contemporary literature—hilarious and serious at once.

Leonard Michaels. *New York Times Book Section*. March 20, 1977, p. 1

Thomas Berger belongs, with Mark Twain and Mencken and Philip Roth, among our first-rate literary wiseguys. Savvy and skeptical, equipped with a natural eloquence and a knack for parody, he has been expertly flinging mud at the more solemn and self-important national myths for 20 years. In *Little Big Man*, the best-known of his books—for, alas, the usual reason—he brilliantly savaged the legendary American West. *Who Is Teddy Villanova?*, perhaps the funniest 300 pages of 1977, took on the world of the tough-guy detective novel. For all its clowning, it performed a serious service in deflating the bloody and rather vainglorious cult of Bogart-out-of-Philip Marlowe. Mr. Berger's method, with these and the other mythical landscapes he has explored in his nine novels, is to set them down in his droll, relentlessly straight-faced prose, so as to empty them of romance, and let the brutal/crummy facts stare out. His pages swarm with bawdy puns and slapstick and bookish in-jokes; but even at his most absurd, his intrinsic tone is that of a hard-nosed realist who won't let the myths distort his essentially grouchy idea of the way things really are.

Grouchy, emphatically, is the word. In a review of Mr. Berger's Reinhart books—*Crazy in Berlin*, *Reinhart in Love*, and *Vital Parts*—Richard Schickel pointed out what is distinctive about Mr. Berger as a satirist. It is that he is more piqued by Good than by Bad. Doing good in a world that is mostly bad can have bizarre or disastrous consequences. This wry paradox is at the heart of Mr. Berger's interest in Good King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, and in their incorrigibly noble chivalric code. *Arthur Rex*, Mr. Berger's newest novel, is his splendid, satiric retelling of the legend of Camelot. . . .

Mr. Berger's revisions are most authentic, most profound, when the admixture of parody is strongest. At those times—a good three-fourths of the book—he is never merely a parodist after all, but also a compelling yarn-spinner in his own right; a Tolkien for the worldly indeed, stripped of their 19th-century sentiment by the author's deeply anti-Romantic ways, the stories have a leaner, more strident look than they have had in a long time. Not T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, nor John Steinbeck's mostly antiquarian version, but Thomas Berger's *Arthur Rex* is the Arthur book for our time.

John Romano. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 12, 1978, pp. 3, 62

It is a mystery of literary criticism that Thomas Berger, one of the most ambitious, versatile, and entertaining of contemporary novelists, is hardly ever mentioned in the company of America's major writers. He is a wit, a fine caricaturist, and his prose crackles with Rabelaisian vitality. His phenomenal ear for oddnesses of speech appropriates as readily the grey malapropisms of the silent majority in *Reinhart in Love* . . . as the winning tall-tale garrulousness of *Little Big Man*, a savory reminiscence of the Cheyenne Indians in frontier days. . . .

Moreover, it cannot be said that he ever writes from a universal, or even an ordinary eye-level perspective. He is a magic realist; . . . Berger's focus, his grasp of detail, is sharper and smaller than life. He will allow something infinitesimal to catch his eye and brood upon it, even as he overlooks a larger emotion or design. In the past the disturbing effect of this was somewhat offset by the sheer cascade into his bulky novels of tangy physical images, raunchy episodes, and eccentric wayside characters with an extravagant gift of gab. In his new book, *Neighbors*, there are no such fringe benefits. This strange exasperating little story has been pared down to the taunting colloquy among four characters on a dead-end street in an unnamed suburb. We see them through a pane that is blindingly clear and yet so distorting as to make them seem demented. . . .

He is in fact terrifyingly methodical and consciously satanic in this psychological chiller whose hero is victimized mainly by his own weakness and ambivalence. The plot dramatizes a conviction Berger has held for a long time. In the fictional foreword to *Little Big Man*, the narrator observes: ''Each of us, no matter how humble, from day to day finds himself in situations in which he has the choice of acting either heroically or craven.'' Is Berger telling us in *Neighbors* that cravenness, uncertainty about our own feelings, breeds aggression in others? That obsequiousness is really distrust, and once suspected will be returned in kind? *Neighbors* is a cool study in taking advantage, a chess game in which each move is followed inexorably by the countermove the player leaves himself open for. The victim is at the mercy of some force not larger than himself as happens in Kafka's *The Trial* but, far more grueling, exactly equal to himself. That is to say, everyone gets his just psychological deserts.

Isa Kapp. *New Republic*. April 26, 1980, pp. 34–35

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BERRYMAN, John (1914–1972)

In terms of what he is doing he has considerably more control than [Randall] Jarrell, but it is possible that the control is premature. For example, too many of his poems go off into the fixed direction of the meditative convention of Yeats: at his comparatively early age he seems to have got set in the tone of pronouncement and prophecy, with the result that his powers of observation are used chiefly for incidental shock. Yet his line has more firmness and structure than Jarrell's, and there is a sense in which he is more mature: he is not afraid to commit himself to systematic and even solemn elaborations of metaphor.

Allen Tate. *Partisan Review*. May–June, 1941. p. 243

John Berryman . . . is a complicated, nervous, and intelligent writer whose poetry has steadily improved. At first he was possessed by a slavishly Yeatsish grandiloquence which at its best resulted in a sort of posed, planetary melodrama, and which at its worst resulted

in monumental bathos. . . . [His] latest poetry, in spite of its occasional echoes, is as determinedly individual as one could wish. Doing things in a style all its own sometimes seems the primary object of the poem, and its subject gets a rather spasmodic and fragmentary treatment. The style—conscious, dissonant, darting; allusive, always over-or under-satisfying the expectations which it is intelligently exploiting—seems to fit Mr. Berryman's knowledge and sensibility surprisingly well, and ought in the end to produce poetry better than the best of the poems he has so far written in it, which have raw or overdone lines side by side with imaginative and satisfying ones.

Randall Jarrell. *The Nation*. July 17, 1948. pp. 80–1

John Berryman has at least in a limited degree the gift for language . . . , but it is frustrated by his inability to define his theme and his disinclination to understand and discipline his emotions. Most of his poems appear to deal with a single all-inclusive topic: the desperate chaos, social, religious, philosophical, and psychological, of modern life, and the corresponding chaos and desperation of John Berryman. No matter what the ostensible subject, this is commonly what emerges, and most of the poems are merely random assortments of half-realized images illustrating this theme.

Yvor Winters. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1948. p. 404

Homage to Mistress Bradstreet is a long poem written in fifty-seven stanzas—except for two they are of eight lines each—on the subject of Anne Bradstreet, 1612–1672, wife to Simon Bradstreet (colonial governor of Massachusetts after her death), and perhaps America's—almost surely Massachusetts'—first poet. . . . Its triumph, what makes it so very interesting, is the curious diction employed, a truly personal speech which without seeming archaic neither seems quite contemporary: it is a strange, and touching, going-out from oneself, a feeling-back into our common past. The tensions of the present poem exist in the unfolding of a double mystery: that of life and death, of the past and present. . . . The poem is somewhat uneven. But at its best the mystery is embodied in lines that (if one might presume a little) ought to have pleased George Herbert.

Ambrose Gordon, Jr. *The Yale Review*. Winter, 1957. pp. 299–300

The poems [in *77 Dream Songs*] that strike me as being best . . . I read as marvelous play by a passionate, despairing, cracked, erudite, utterly poetic genius. Moreover, though they are called dream songs, and though they are apparently supposed to be the dreams of a character ''Henry'' (who, in 17 of the poems, is joined by ''Mr. Bones''), I do not read the poems as songs, nor can I read many of them as dreams; and I read Henry and Mr. Bones as being no more than playful half-masks for John Berryman, Halloween masks covering only the eyes and part of the cheeks. In a strange way, the poems do not mean anything much; that is, their value comes not from any ideas or emotions or experiences or things they refer to and derive from; it comes from the virtuosity of the poet. They are pure poets' poems: even one with few devices and disguises is still so contrived (in the best sense) that the anguish which the poem may be about affects the reader less than the poet's artifice.

George P. Elliott. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1964. p. 458

Basically both *Mistress Bradstreet* and *Dream Songs* are memory pieces, historical complements. In the first Berryman simultaneously affirms and denies the faith of our fathers; in the second he stumbles about the shards. *Mistress Bradstreet* is the old America, the puritan symmetry, ritual, and worldly disgust, reset with the Songs of Solomon. *Dream Songs* is where we are now: a finky sophistication, unexpiated guilt, those collision-course thrills the American dream assumes. The dream itself is a tyrannical cliché, a vaudeville for Fort Knox. Again and again, interpreting the American scene, past or present, Berryman, even with all his highly individualized tics, takes on its contrary pulls, its mocking lawlessness and hidebound creeds. There is throughout all of Berryman a double movement, a wrenched, wistful backing away and sticking close: Berryman, the artful dodger, in love with the enemy, the pop world's loony pursuits; and Berryman, the shut-in scholar, accumulating the saving remnants. . . .

Robert Mazzocco. *New York Review of Books*. June 29, 1967. p. 14

A case could be made, I think, for the thesis that sexual curiosity and the writer's need to find a self outside his own skin are the driving force behind this poem [*Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*]. It rises to its highest points when his imagination is entirely released toward the satisfaction of his curiosity—that is, when he not only envisions Anne's physical experience but identifies with it and, as it were, finds her language for her. The passionate climax at the center of the poem, in which the two poets are imagined in a transport of discovery of each other, through speech and through love, creates Anne as in a frenzy of desire and guilt. The naive fantasy in which the poem begins has now become a vision of the torment of religious conscience in conflict with sexual need. . . . The physical ardor and stormy melancholy of Anne, and her death-horror that makes itself felt more and more forcibly, are a means for Berryman to objectify his feelings more simply than he does through the several voices of the *Dream Songs*—which are, after all, only private voices despite his attempt to keep them distinct.

M.L. Rosenthal. *The New Poets: American and British Poetry since World War II* (Oxford). 1967. pp. 129–30

Despite career-long unevenness in the quality of his work, John Berryman has become a major American poet, has achieved a permanency that places him in a group with Theodore Roethke and Randall Jarrell. Berryman, it seems to me, has taken on the whole modern world and has come to poetic terms with it. At the same time he has taken on himself, and has come to poetic terms with that too. He has seen the wreck of the modern world (or, better, the modern world insofar as it is a wreck) and the wreck of his personal self in that world. He is not a pessimist but has, rather, what we would have to call a tragic view of human life—with good reason for holding it. Yet, not surprisingly, the tragic view finds its complement in a comic view, his wild and so often devastatingly

effective sense of humor. He is preeminently a poet of suffering and laughter.

William J. Martz. *John Berryman* (Minnesota). 1969. p. 5

The minstrel show was both a genuine kind of folk art and popular entertainment in nineteenth-century America, and a crowning symbol of the oppression of the Negro because it reduced him to the role of comic sycophant. Berryman's use of it is effective because it brings up automatically both the American past and contemporary issues of race, civil rights, and the like; perhaps more important, it also represents the poet as exploited entertainer (though with multiple ironies, romantic and other), making jokes out of his gruesome and harrowing experiences.

The *Dream Songs* are very varied and attractive, often dramatic, with much humor and a vivid awareness of the surfaces (as well as the depths) of contemporary life. There is a ''Lay of Ike'' and a ''Strut for Roethke'' and other satiric and nostalgic ones; and there are confessional poems about breakdowns, fears of nuclear war, and the like. . . . But, as the title confesses, there is no unifying structure. In most of them, the method is essentially the same as that of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, a double point of view in which the poet is partially identified with the dramatic character in the past but also retains his focus on the present. But while with *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* there was the external narrative of Anne Bradstreet's life to serve as framework, with built-in aesthetic and larger relevances in the facts of her being the first American poet and a Puritan, there are no such points of reference in *The Dream Songs*.

Monroe K. Spears. *Dionysus and the City* (Oxford—N.Y.). 1970. pp. 248–9

I always thought his earlier poems, with their surface jumpiness, had no metric at all, or scarcely any; they move, not with the basic, consistent cadence of essential poetry but only with their own meretricious push and thrust of hyperbolic and unexpected phrasing. They move, stiltlike, on Berryman's peculiar rhetoric. Now in the new poems [*Love & Fame*], where the language is simpler, I see my feeling confirmed, for with a modified rhetoric the lack of meter is more than ever obvious. . . .

As for diction, we have on the one hand Berryman's well-known colloquial cuteness . . . and on the other his deliberate archaisms, inversions, the use of fusty words like ''moot'' and ''plaint.'' Archness, what we used to call the sophomoric: in parts of *The Dream Songs* he almost brought it to a pitch intense enough to make an honest effect. . . . Yet must ''fresh idiom'' mean ''twisted and posed''? And does language ever add to ''available reality''? We know the danger of that old fatuity; and doubly dangerous it was for Berryman, I think, because it led him, in its arrogance and his own, to infer, by transversion or contraction or mere muleheadedness, that *poetry* as well as verse might be manufactured if only one could invent a fresh idiom in language twisted and posed. This is an oversimplification, more would need to be said in any comprehensive discussion of Berryman's work, but it is still very close to the heart of the matter; and the proof, I believe, lies on every page of his books.

The time has come, surely, to say that Berryman's poetry is usually interesting and sometimes witty but almost never moving, and that in spite of its scope and magnitude it lacks the importance that has been ascribed to it in recent years by many critics, editors and readers.

Hayden Carruth. *The Nation*. Nov. 2, 1970. pp. 437–8

Delusions, Etc. was already in proof when John Berryman jumped off a bridge in Minneapolis onto the frozen Mississippi last January. So there is no question of its being a ragbag of uncollected work hastily gathered up as a memorial. The book is as he wanted it, the order of its poems and the emotional emphasis all his. Which seems to point to the fact that, up to the end, he was fighting against the way of dying he finally chose. For the emphasis is on the faith he had regained after 43 years away from the Roman Catholic Church. So *Delusions, Etc*. begins and ends on a religious note, as though to defend himself against his own depression.

In all truth, it is not the religious note of a genuinely religious man. Berryman's poems to God are his least convincing performances: nervous, insubstantial, mannered to a degree and intensely argumentative. It is as though he had continually to reassure himself of his belief, or to reassure the Deity if He happened to be listening. There is, of course, a distinguished tradition for this kind of verse: John Donne and Hopkins, Berryman's great hero, were continually arguing with God in the tone of voice of men who knew that there was a lot to be said on both sides. But Berryman had a quirkier sensibility, less rigorous and logical than associative, diffuse, at times a bit scatterbrained. . . .

As the middle sections of *Delusions, Etc*. show, his real gift was different, less armored, less comforting and emerging only slowly in his maturity. Essentially, it was a gift for grief. He had always been a poet of profound unease, touchy and irritable, as if his nerve ends were too close to the surface.

A. Alvarez. *New York Times Book Section*. June 25, 1972. p. 1

No other poem in the twentieth century possesses the scope, the complexity, the grief and joy of life, in quite the marvelous and meaningful way that Berryman's *Dream Songs* does.

For all its wonder, *The Dream* Songs took its toll on Berryman. Not only was the composition of it long and painful, but also its completion signaled for him, I think, the end of his most ambitious poetic work. There was no way at fifty-four that he would ever write another long poem, and despite the fact that he published two collections of poems after *The Dream Songs—Love & Fame* (1970) and the recent, posthumous *Delusions, Etc*.—he was, at his death in January 1972, engaged in writing a novel, collecting a group of his literary essays for publication, and preparing to launch into his long-in-progress critical biography of Shakespeare—all worthy literary endeavors yet none requiring the talents of the poet.

If *Love & Fame and Delusions, Etc*. do not add significantly to Berryman's stature as a poet, they do provide some excellent individual lyrics and, more importantly, further perspectives on the themes Berryman developed in his major works.

Larry Vonalt. *Parnassus*. Fall–Winter, 1972. p. 182

[Berryman] was a full professor now, and a celebrity. *Life* interviewed him. The *Life* photographer took 10,000 shots of him in

Dublin. But John's human setting was oddly thin. He had, instead of a society, the ruined drunken poet's God to whom he prayed over his shoulder. Out of affection and goodwill he made gestures of normalcy. He was a husband, a citizen, father, a householder, he went on the wagon, he fell off, he joined A.A. He knocked himself out to be like everybody else—he liked, he loved, he cared, but he was aware that there was something peculiarly comical in all this. And at last it must have seemed that he had used up all his resources. Faith against despair, love versus nihilism had been the themes of his struggles and his poems. What he needed for his art had been supplied by his own person, by his mind, his wit. He drew it out of his vital organs, out of his very skin. At last there was no more. Reinforcements failed to arrive. Forces were not joined. The cycle of resolution, reform and relapse had become a bad joke which could not continue.

Saul Bellow, Foreword to *Recovery* by John Berryman (Farrar). 1973. p. xiv

There was nothing to keep Berryman from going on with *The Dream Songs*. Two appeared in his posthumous volume; and a thousand more might have come out in his lifetime. Henry might have grown into a public figure like Mr. Dooley, airing his moods and opinions from day to day before an audience that had learnt what to expect. In the way of general ideas and moral insights Berryman has little that is fresh to offer. Neither is he a phrase-maker, nor a magician with words. It is emblematic that a childhood disease should have weakened his hearing, because his ear for rhythm is undistinguished. For all his talent and learning. Berryman could not come near the intellectual style of Auden or the middle-aged Lowell. Once he had circulated the most sensational facts of his private life, his richest treasure was the ironic drama of Henry's diary.

So it strikes one as a hero's mistake that Berryman should have turned his back on this invention and chosen a simpler exploitation of auto-analysis for his last two books. . . .

The coherence of the last books cannot replace the pleasures of *The Dream Songs*: their deliberate humour and indirection; viewpoints that never stand still; a tone that hops from aspiration to bathos. In the last poems, the strongest humour seems unintentional; it would be cruel to deal seriously with their serious argument; their inarticulateness is painfully artless. Having discovered that his sensibility could bewitch us, Berryman made the error of growing solemn about it; and the reader's attention must move back from the poet's attitude to his mind.

It is somehow fitting that his final book should find its noblest moments in a tribute to Beethoven since Berryman took seriously the idea of ''the mysterious late excellence which is the crown/of our trials & our last bride'' (*Dream Song*), an excellence that he admired in Yeats, Williams, and Goya, as well as in Beethoven. That his own last books are not among his most impressive is, of course, distressing, and we are left with the inevitable speculations about where his art would have taken him had he chosen to live—he was, after all, only fifty-seven when he died. Whether he would have gained ''the crown of our trials'' is impossible to say, though *Delusions, Etc*., which seems to be the product of a mind at the end of its tether, suggests that this is unlikely. The only thing we can be certain of, however, is that he would have surprised us with an altogether unexpected mode—he never repeated himself, each of his books being as different from the one that precedes it as that book, in turn, is from its immediate predecessor. Who would have predicted that *Delusions, Etc*., would follow *Love & Fame*, that *Love & Fame* would emerge from the *Songs*, that the songs themselves would be the next step after *Mistress Bradstreet*? Anyone willing to speculate on the sort of work Berryman might have written in his sixties (or seventies!) is either clairvoyant or reckless.

What we do know, of course, is that his final books, whatever their virtues (and these, particularly in the case of *Love & Fame*, are considerable), represent a falling off from his strongest work. We should not regret their existence, however, disappointed as we may be that they are not more consistently fine. Nor should we, in our haste to evaluate Berryman's overall achievement, attach undue importance to these rather desperate works. To do so would be to lose sight of the fact that this man, whatever his personal and aesthetic crises, gave us the *Sonnets* and *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*.

Joel Connaroe. *Hollins Critic*. Oct., 1976, pp. 11–12

The ''typical'' Berryman poem presents a character radically at odds with his environment who, through a process of suffering and self-examination, comes to a realization of the importance of either love or work or both. In both cases it is the character's responsibility to the culture which is rescued from the threats of irresponsibility (on the personal level, usually sex, drink, aggression or the desire for death; on the cultural level, aggression in any number of forms). Stated in other terms, Berryman's characters go through a process of rebellion and submission, finding, however, in that submission a means of triumph. The world doesn't change (or changes in only relatively minor ways), but the character finds a satisfactory means of adapting to it. Mistress Bradstreet, Henry, and the Berryman of the late poems submit to the needs (and joys) of the family and the will of God.

This is grossly oversimplified, of course, and stated so simply leaves out much of what makes Berryman's poetry valuable. For such simple solutions are not and cannot be arrived at simply, and it is the presentation of the enormous and complex difficulties, caused by both internal and external factors, that distinguishes Berryman's work. . . .

Gary Q. Arpin. *The Poetry of John Berryman* (Kennikat, 1978), pp. 10–11

Almost from the beginning of his work on *The Dream Songs*, Berryman felt urged to confer a structure upon the poem. He succeeded best in commending certain models to the interest of its unfolding. Provoked by what he took to be the conventional exigencies of the long poem, he tried to inject a plot into material which had little intrinsic narrative direction apart from that of the natural order of events. . . . He wanted to submit the Songs (the sections of the poem) to the discipline of sequence and succession. He felt it important for them to imply a story. Continuity alone, whether of form and style, or of the creative life which the Songs composed, was just not enough. His aim was to impose an absolute form on a poem constituted by multiple occasions. . . .

He could not help looking ahead, however, trying to anticipate the nature of the work. He needed to control the direction of its progress (which was a type of wanting to control his own life), not to surrender it; to project its plot (and then to enforce it), rather than

to allow it self-definition. The effort to chart the poem to a determinative point was in most respects a losing one, for its true character was that of chance, of segmented insights, and of occasional lucubrations. While working on his second volume of Dream Songs in 1966, Berryman told Jonathan Sisson that *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* ''has to be composed out of whatever I save.'' The statement may be seen as tantamount to an admission that his structural principle was one of elimination, of chance and discovery. During the following year he gave all his time to writing more and more Songs, with the result that Book VII came to be seriously (and perhaps pointlessly) distended with sections ordered and written more on the principle of a diary. Because of that difference of approach, the work as a whole is unbalanced and desultory in structure.

> John Haffenden. *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* (New York Univ. Pr., 1980), pp. 6–7

The central experience of *77 Dream Songs* is certainly that of loss. Berryman himself, looking back from the perspective of the later dream songs of *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*, described Henry as ''a white American in early middle age sometimes in blackface, who has suffered an irreversible loss'' (Prefatory Note). Just what the ''loss'' is, however, is not a simple question. Like Hamlet's notoriously mysterious motivation, for which there is no clear ''objective correlative,'' the loss that motivates Henry's *Weltschmerz* is never definitely located, though there are a number of possibilities hinted at in different ''series'' of poems: the loss of sex or love, the loss of religion, the loss of friends and fellow poets. . . .

This despair, which is not motiveless but certainly in search of adequate motivation, is the real mystery of Berryman's later work, and it consumes the literate pose of his persona. Somewhat paradoxically, our best insights into its cause come not in the fully realized poems about Henry, but those poems where Berryman drops the mask and speaks of what is transparently his own grief. The death wishes and suicidal hints come into focus when Berryman forces himself to consider the event in his life no pose could ironize or mitigate, the suicide of his father. Significantly, the penultimate poems . . . deal with his father's death and Berryman's inability to come to terms with it.

> Jeffrey Alan Triggs. *South Dakota Review*. Summer, 1988, pp. 61, 67

Berryman's poetry, as he says of T.S. Eliot's, is ''grievous and profound beyond a single poet's.'' As for readers, they ''will have to follow, wherever, wherever.'' Berryman's making, unmaking and remaking of sound, sense, and self, his ferocity and tenderness; his songs, satires, petitions, lamentations, and blues require adept readers. His world is Cervantine, Shakespearean, and Joycean. Like Walt Whitman, the American poet he most resembles, Berryman delights equally in tragedy and comedy. He is proud and humble, learned and primitive, nervy and nervous, fantastic and realistic. His characters are victims and masters, self-pitying and brave, lecherous and loving, responsible and irresponsible, alienated and connected. He takes quite literally Coleridge's definition of the ''secondary Imagination'' that ''dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create.'' He is a poet of Keatsian ''Negative Capability'' in which the poet, as Keats says, ''is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.'' He believes that intensity, in Keats's words, is ''capable of making all disagreeables evaporate.''

> Charles Thornbury. *John Berryman: Collected Poems 1937–1971* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), pp. xviii–ix

Consider what Berryman did with language ''twisted and posed.'' He provides some leads to sources, such as blackface dialogue, the torturous verbal knots and density of Hopkins's terrible sonnets, jazz and the blues, Shakespeare (especially *King Lear* and *The Tempest*), languages he received already twisted, needing to be twisted again and ''posed''—that is, given a context and set off. These hints about what went into his linguistic recipe are interesting enough, but more so is what he does not mention, sources such as Krazy Kat, archie and mehitabel, the Katzenjammer Kids, and Pogo, all richly endowing the daily scene of his times with comedy and satire. They contribute a zaniness of language, comic rebelliousness, freshness, and color to Berryman's poetic medium. Whether they make some contribution to the stock of ''available reality,'' however, depends in part on how one perceives the grounding of these popular works in fantasy, escape, and the absurd—all to be expected in works of popular culture. Tristan Corbiere, an influence Berryman enthusiastically acknowledged, belongs perhaps to this group.

In the list of motives for writing poetry referred to above Berryman insists that poetry takes place ''out near the end of things,'' where life and language (whatever) can be made or remade—that is, transformed, *changed*.

> Manly Johnson. *World Literature Today*. Summer, 1990, p. 424

The same qualities that made Berryman a brilliant teacher—attention to detail, an authoritative voice, the willingness to do his homework—also made him an outstanding literary critic, as can be seen in the posthumously published collection *The Freedom of the Poet* (1976), which gathers essays, lectures, reviews, and even short stories originally written over a thirty-year period. The earliest piece, on Yeats's plays, first appeared in the *Columbia Review* in 1936, when Berryman was still an undergraduate. . . .

That Berryman was deeply serious about literature is proven on every page of this book. He has as much contempt for nonserious writing, for ''the popular boys,'' as he has admiration for the real thing—and the real thing is, by its nature, intellectual. . . .

Clearly Berryman himself was an intellectual; one of the most impressive characteristics of his critical writing is how well and how completely he did his homework. In areas that I am able to judge, the record is striking. . . .

The problem of the artist's relationship to his audience is, for Berryman, an especially tricky one in America. It may well be that serious art is an elite, rather than a popular, preoccupation—elite in the sense that one must have both intelligence and education to understand and appreciate serious works of art. Berryman makes it very clear that this is his perspective in his essay on Ring Lardner. . . . As Berryman says, ''It is a disconcerting feature of much American literary art that either it's so closely bound up with the world of

popular entertainment that the boundaries are not easy to fix, or else. . . it has no relation to the world at all.''. . .

It may well be that John Berryman himself succumbed to some of these dangers late in his own career. He loved to be treated as a celebrity, gave indiscreet interviews to large-circulation magazines, and even wrote a series of poems (in *Love & Fame*) that seem more nearly addressed to a popular than a serious audience.

Peter Stitt. In Richard J. Kelly and Alan K. Lathrop, eds. *Recovering Berryman: Essays on a Poet* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Pr., 1993), pp. 45–46, 55

Berryman's major achievement in short fiction is ''Wash Far Away,'' drafted in the 1950s but discovered and published only after his death. The title is from Milton's ''Lycidas,'' a text that figures prominently in the story. Along with *Recovery*, ''Wash Far Away'' is Berryman's most extensive prose treatment of the theme of loss and regeneration, and whereas the novel treats of experience late in its author's life, the partially autobiographical story draws to an event that took place early in his career as a writer and teacher. In 1939 Berryman met and summered with Bhain Campbell, a fellow aspiring poet, and the two men taught and roomed together, along with Campbell's wife, during the 1939–40 academic year at Wayne University (later Wayne State) in Detroit. But by late 1940 Campbell was dead from cancer. The loss was a major one, and the character of Hugh in the story is largely modeled on Campbell. This biographical parallel adds a third layer to the text, a story of a man dealing with loss while attempting to teach one of the great poems of loss. . . .

Awareness of a dead self and the desire for reinvigoration matters, for ultimately the teacher's challenge is not so much to conquer loss as it is to find self-significance. . . . In the process of coping with loss, a rebirth of self has begun. Berryman repeatedly alludes in his unpublished papers to what he saw as a clear connection between loss and freedom, death, and rebirth.

Ernest J. Smith. *Studies in Short Fiction*. Summer, 1993, pp. 313–16

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BIERCE, Ambrose (1842–1914?)

His stories are their own justification. We may not agree with the method that he has chosen to use, but we cannot escape the strange, haunting power of them, the grim, boding sense of their having happened—even the most weird, most supernatural, most grotesquely impossible of them—in precisely the way that he has told them. . . . Mr. Ambrose Bierce as a story teller can never achieve a wide popularity, at least among the Anglo-Saxon race. His writings have too much the flavour of the hospital and the morgue. There is a stale odour of mouldy cerements about them. But to the connoisseur of what is rare, unique, and very perfect in any branch of fiction he must appeal strongly as one entitled to hearty recognition as an enduring figure in American letters.

Frederic Taber Cooper. *Bookman*. July, 1911. pp. 478–80

There was nothing of the milk of human kindness in old Ambrose; he did not get the nickname of Bitter Bierce for nothing. What delighted him most in life was the spectacle of human cowardice and folly. He put man, intellectually, somewhere between the sheep and the horned cattle, and as a hero somewhere below the rats. His war stories, even when they deal with the heroic, do not depict soldiers as heroes; they depict them as bewildered fools, doing things without sense, submitting to torture and outrage without resistance, dying at last like hogs in Chicago, the former literary capital of the United States. So far in this life, indeed, I have encountered no more thorough-going cynic than Bierce was.

H.L. Mencken. *Prejudices: Sixth Series* (Knopf). 1927. p. 261

With his air of a somewhat dandified Strindberg he combined what might be described as a temperament of the eighteenth century. It was natural to him to write in the manner of Pope: lucidity, precision, ''correctness'' were the qualities he adored. He was full of the pride of individuality; and the same man who spent so much of his energy ''exploring the ways of hate'' was, in his personal life, the serenest of stoics. The son of an Ohio farmer, he had no formal education. How did he acquire such firmness and clarity of mind? He was a natural aristocrat and he developed a rudimentary philosophy of aristocracy which, under happier circumstances, might have made him a great figure in the world of American thought. But the America of his day was too chaotic.

Van Wyck Brooks. *Emerson and Others* (Dutton). 1927. p. 152

In his stories . . . the events are narrated with restraint, the descriptions have no excessive details, for the various details are ''constituents'' of the atmosphere and nearly every word is necessary for the realization of the detail. As a rule, Bierce aims to obtain the total and enduring effect by means of atmosphere, and in many stories it would be unsafe to say that the narrative has greater importance than the impression or the conviction that he wishes to ''flow'' from the stories; in some instances, he allows us to view an action from several points of vantage. He has a delicate sense of the shades of meaning and of strength in words; therefore, he puts the right word in the right place. The style, in brief, is excellent.

Eric Partridge. *London Mercury*. Oct., 1927, p. 637

If his name lives, it is within the range of probabilities that it will be as a tradition of wit, courage and decency. Whatever judgement

may be passed on his work, it does not affect the important fact that Bierce was one of the most provocative figures of his generation. One cannot reflect on the facts of his life without coming to entertain an admiration for his splendid courage and indomitable spirit. To those of us in the West who have watched the fate of his reputation with a peculiar and personal interest, it has always been a source of satisfaction to realize that dead, absent or unknown, he has survived his critics and that he has even bettered his enemies who pursued him into Mexico, ''to feast on his bones.''

Carey McWilliams. *Ambrose Bierce* (Boni). 1929. p. 335

The fame of Ambrose Bierce ultimately will rest upon his literary work as a whole. That his distinction as an author is not confined to his short-stories alone is apparent, for his fame as a writer was firmly established before any of them were written; they but extended his renown. To be sure, I hold these stories to be the greatest ever published in any language. . . . But Bierce was a great artist in all that he wrote; he was no better in one branch of literature than he was in another, poetry excepted—and his verse that was not poetry was yet the best of verse. So numerous were his literary activities, embracing so many classifications of literature—more classifications well done than any other author in all time achieved—that I find it impossible to isolate any one classification and say that his fame will endure mainly because of his contributions to that particular field.

Walter Neale. *Life of Ambrose Bierce* (Neale). 1929. pp. 453–4

Rejecting violently the novel, realism, dialect, and all use of slang, humorous or otherwise, Bierce stood firmly for the short story, romance, and pure English produced through intense, self-conscious discipline. Bierce was first and foremost a disciplinarian. He placed great emphasis on the technique of fiction and verse. He was constantly eager to be correct, and to see that others were correct even in the details of punctuation. . . . He sought, like Poe, to make a single vivid impression upon the reader. To that end he eliminated all extraneous references. Furthermore, each story is a complete world in itself, controlled by the writer's logic, not by the illogicality of life. Since Bierce saw no point in reproducing the flat tones of ordinary life, he found an interesting topic only in the impingement of the extraordinary or the unreal on the normal course of events.

C. Hartley Grattan. *Bitter Bierce* (Doubleday). 1929. pp. 118, 121–2

If it be objected that Poe's characters seldom seem lifelike, what must be our objection to Bierce? They have absolutely no relevant characteristics that strike us as human, save their outward description; it is never for the character's sake but always for the plot's sake that a Bierce story exists. Bierce was interested, even more than Brown, Poe, or Melville, in the *idea* of the story—seldom in the human significance of it. In fact some of the stories exist essentially for the whiplash ending, which in Bierce's handling antedated O. Henry. But the Bierce story can be reread with some profit for there is real evidence of a technician's hand.

George Snell. *AQ*. Summer, 1945. p. 51

It is fitting that someone should be born and live and die dedicated to the expression of bitterness. For bitterness is a mood that comes to all intelligent men, though, as they are intelligent, only intermittently. It is proper that there be at least one man able to give penetrating expression to that mood. Bierce is such a man—limited, wrong-headed, unbalanced, but in his own constricted way, an artist. He will remain one of the most interesting and eccentric figures in our literature, one of our great wits, one of our most uncompromising satirists, the perfecter of two or three new, if minor genres: a writer one cannot casually pass by.

Clifton Fadiman. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 12, 1946. p. 62

Along with Poe, Bierce was one of those rare birds in American literature—a Dandy in Baudelaire's sense of the term. The Dandy opposes to society, and to the human world generally, not some principles but himself, his temperament, his dreamed-of depths, his talent for shocking, hoaxing, and dizzying his readers. An aesthetic Enemy of the People, Bierce exploited whatever was most questionable in his personality, dramatizing his sense of guilt and perdition in theatrical horrors and a costume of malice. . . . Out there in his West Coast newspaper office Bierce was somehow seized by the hypnosis of evil and defiance that has inspired so much of modern literature from symbolism to Dada and Surrealism.

Harold Rosenberg. *The Nation*. March 15, 1947. p. 312

Like Swift he was driven by a passion for clarity; he simply could not write a muddy sentence. Like Swift, too, he was obsessed by a fierce determination to be precise and was, so to speak, a lexicographer by instinct. Not only does the *Dictionary* contain the best of Bierce's satire but it also reveals some of his underlying preoccupations.

Most readers of *The Devil's Dictionary* are so entertained by Bierce's wit that they fail to notice the recurrent themes. Politics, for example, was high on the list of subjects that most frequently engaged his attention. Bierce lived and wrote in a period when American politics were turgid, fatuous, and corrupt—the period from ''the bloody shirt'' through ''rum, romanism and rebellion'' to ''Remember the Maine!'' An idealist by temperament, he had recoiled violently from the bombast and corruption of the post-Civil-War decades. He liked to convey the impression that he regarded practical politics with complete disdain. But almost single-handedly he defeated the attempt of the Southern Pacific Railroad to make a final raid on the federal treasury—in the fight over the so-called Funding Bill in 1896—and in doing so had a strong case made for the public ownership of railroads.

Carey McWilliams. Introduction to *The Devil's Dictionary* by Ambrose Bierce (Hill and Wang). 1957. p.vii. [1952]

While Bierce was read and admired by many another writer, it is difficult to see his work as a direct influence on the journalistic style of later practitioners, few of whom possessed his skill. The same factors which formed his techniques—the cynicism which allowed him to live with conditions he felt himself powerless to affect; his fascination with words and their syntactic combinations as opposed to straight reporting styles—could have led others to imitate him unconsciously. But the imitations, conscious or unconscious, lacked Bierce's distinguishing mark, the tone of arrow-like

contempt, because they were assumed as an artificial way of dismissing the troubles of the world. Bierce's tone was a natural outgrowth of a personality so shocked by war that it held itself together only by the compulsive demonstration that meaningless slaughter contained all the meaning there was.

Larzer Ziff. *The American 1890s* (Viking). 1966. p. 170

It was his precise recollection of atmosphere, the limpid clarity of his description of physical setting that gave his Civil War stories such a startling air of realism. Mencken considered him the ''first writer of fiction ever to treat war realistically.'' Certainly he was the first to show that heroism had no place in the scientific slaughter which war had become even in his time. Both in his short stories and in his nonfictional sketches he conveyed the reality of Shiloh, Stones River, Chickamauga, Kenesaw Mountain and Franklin as no other writer has. . . .

If he is rediscovered in the near future, it will likely be as the first notable exponent of black humor in America. Prudish as he was in anything written for publication, he would be offended at inclusion in such raffish company. Anything bordering on the pornographic evoked an outcry for rigid censorship and harsh penalties from Bierce. Today's black humorists could, however, meet him with profit. He is their natural father.

Richard O'Connor. *Ambrose Bierce* (Little). 1967. pp. 5, 7

Bierce's tales of war are not in the least realistic; they are, as he doubtless intended them to be, incredible events occurring in credible surroundings. Triggered like traps, they abound in coincidences and are as contemptuous of the ''probable'' as any of Poe's most bizarre experiments. Bierce's soldiers move in a trance through a prefigured universe. Father and son, brother and brother, husband and wife, collide in accidental encounters. The playthings of some Power, they follow a course ''decreed from the beginning of time.'' Ill-matched against the outside forces assailing them, they are also victimized by atavistic ones. Bierce's uncomplicated men-at-arms, suddenly commandeered by compulsive fear or wounded by shame, destroy themselves.

Yet each of Bierce's preposterous tales is framed in fact and touched with what Poe called the ''potent magic of verisimilitude.'' Transitions from reality to surreality seem believable not only because the War was filled with romance and implausible episodes but also because of the writer's intense scrutiny of war itself. The issues of the War no longer concerned him by the time he came to write his soldier stories. They had practically disappeared in the wake of history. But the physical and psychological consequences of constant exposure to suffering and death, the way men behaved in the stress of battle—these matters powerfully worked his imagination, for the War was only meaningful to Bierce as a personal experience. If war in general became his parable of pitifully accoutered man attacked by heavily armored natural forces, the Civil War dramatized his private obsessions.

Daniel Aaron. *The Unwritten War* (Knopf). 1973. p. 184

It was not simply that [Bierce] had learned to despise social ideals of any sort, and to have ''a conscience uncorrupted by religion, a judgment undimmed by politics and patriotism, a heart untainted by friendships and sentiments unsoured by animosities.'' More than this, the world, as he perceived it, took on a threatening aspect; like the musket ball, it attacked his head, his reason. The terrain of reality which he plotted—he was a topographic officer—he saw filled with traps. Where others saw a handsome prospect, he saw danger lurking and always assumed that beneath pleasing appearances was a threatening reality. He was convinced, in short, that reality was delusory. By emphasizing mind he attempted to preserve mind, always threatened by physical obliteration or mental deception; he defended the mind, and in doing so, took as his major theme the *growth of reflection*, the compulsion to scrutinize and observe.

This might have been a tragic theme, for reflection leads to a deeper and deeper penetration of delusion and at last to the conviction that all is delusion—that, ultimately, as Bierce said in a late letter, ''nothing matters.'' Reality, Bierce did conclude in *The Devil's Dictionary*, was ''the dream of a mad philosopher,'' the logical product of irrational minds, and therefore absurd—''the nucleus of a vacuum.'' But he treated this conviction comically, and employed humor to expose the absurdities of his deluded contemporaries and the institutions delusions created and perpetuated. In short, he preserved his own mind by ridiculing the crazed world that questioned his sense and sensibility.

Jay Martin in *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (Rutgers). 1973. p. 196

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BISHOP, Elizabeth (1911–1979)

Elizabeth Bishop is spectacular in being unspectacular. Why has no one ever thought of this, one asks oneself; why not be accurate and modest? Miss Bishop's mechanics of presentation with its underlying knowledge, moreover, reduce critical cold blood to cautious self-inquiry. . . . With poetry as with homiletics tentativeness can be more positive than positiveness; and in *North and South* a much instructed persuasiveness is emphasized by uninsistence. . . . At last we have someone who knows, who is not didactic.

Marianne Moore. *The Nation*. Sept. 28, 1946. p. 354

The augury of Miss Bishop's early poems has been fulfilled in a small body of work which is personal, possessed of wit and sensibility, technically expert and often moving.

The distinction of the poetry. . . has been most often its insistence on the opacity and impenetrable presence of the object, whose surfaces will yield, to a pure attention, not sermons, but details. . . . The happiest consequence of this kind of work will be the refreshment it affords the language (which becomes impoverished by the moralizing of descriptive words) and the sense it gives of immense possibility opening; as if from playing checkers we now come to chess, we delightedly may foresee combinations endlessly intricate, and the happier for going beyond the range of conscious intention a good deal of the time. But there are consequences less cheerful as well: one of them is triviality, or you may call it the want of action, where the poem never becomes so much as the sum of its details and so, in two senses, fails to move; another closely related, is the inspired tendency to believe all things possible to a clever precision and a dry tone.

Howard Nemerov. *Poetry*. Dec., 1955. pp. 181–2

Miss Bishop's world is opulent, but in the most unexpected and most humble ways. As a poet, she gives order to this opulence. She enumerates it. She stabilizes the shudder, the nerve, the reflection, the pleasure and the irradiation. . . . In this poetic world there is nothing merely invented. There is no fantasy and no delirium. There are embellishments, in the best tradition, but what is embellished is always true. What is sanctioned is what has been found to be authentic. . . . Elizabeth Bishop is a partisan in the world.

Wallace Fowlie. *Commonweal*. Feb. 15, 1957. p. 514

She never moralizes. She is not interested in the abstract truth at the end of the road, but in the concrete truths that lie along the way—the shape of a tree, the look of gently broken water in the morning sunlight, or the appearance of an old fish half-in half-out the boat. Her truths are the truths of a bowl of peaches by Cézanne, a wheat field by Van Gogh, a lady playing the lute by Ter Borch. The reader must therefore be interested in the manner in which she selects or ''filters'' her subject, in the tonality she achieves, in her massing of the details into significant form. Her best poems do reveal moments of vision, but she inserts them so unpretentiously amid carefully and skillfully selected objective details that a careless reader easily misses them. Her vocabulary, too, is so utterly free from pomposity that its accuracy and suitability to the occasion is not at first apparent. Only rarely is she obscure, but on these rare occasions it is an obscurity arising from reticence rather than from a desire to mystify or to conceal lack of thought. She never forces a poem beyond its limits, nor herself to assume a pose that is unnatural. In this lies her strength, a strength with limitations.

James G. Southworth. *College English*. Feb., 1959. p. 214

Elizabeth Bishop is modest, and she is dignified. Because she is modest, she has not presumed to assign to her artistic sensibilities an importance incommensurate with their value. Hers may be a minor voice among the poets of history, but it is scarcely ever a false one. We listen to it as one might listen to a friend whose exceptional wisdom and honesty we gratefully revere.

Because Elizabeth Bishop is dignified she has been reluctant to fling her troubles at the world; she prefers always to see herself with a certain wry detachment. As a result, her poems are occasionally artificial; there is sometimes a coy archness which undermines the strength of her deeper perceptions. On the other hand, her tone savors more good manners than of mannerism. She would not insult us as she tells us the often unflattering truth. . . .

Elizabeth Bishop is a realist, but she sees miracles all the time. In her poems it is as if she were turning again and again to say to us: ''If man, who cannot live by bread alone, is spiritually to survive in the future, he must be made to see that the stuff of bread is also the stuff of the infinite.'' The crumb which becomes a mansion in ''A Miracle for Breakfast'' is more than a clever poetical conceit. It is a symbol of hope in a world which can be bearable—for some mysterious reason—in spite of its evils.

Anne Stevenson. *Elizabeth Bishop* (Twayne). 1966. pp. 126–7

Already, when her first book, *North and South*, was published in 1946, she was the tourist, the curious, sympathetic and delighted observer of place and custom, animal, and person, and the interaction between them which gave them identity and character. Now, twenty years later, she still has the eye for detail, the capacity for detachment, the sense for the right word and the uncanny image, and the mental habit that imposes order, balance, and clarity on everything she sees. But this third book [*Questions of Travel*] holds more yet: a greater richness of language, a grasp of proportion and progression that makes every poem appear flawless, and an increased involvement between the ''I'' of the traveler and the ''it'' and ''thou'' of landscape and stranger. As the sense of place becomes ever more insistent, the questions of travel are asked more openly and urgently, including the final, inevitable one: where is home? Miss Bishop does not provide answers. Her eagerness to discover, examine, and celebrate ''the sun the other way around'' exists for its own sake: her answers are the poems themselves.

Lisel Mueller. *Poetry*. Aug., 1966. p. 336

Questions of Travel is her first collection since 1955, and it shows her at the full maturity of her powers. There are 19 poems, many of them first-rate—it's not a term that comes easily—and there is a long prose story of childhood, ''In the Village,'' whose wide-eyed lucidity charges details with emotions and meanings.

Miss Bishop's method astonishes with its flexibility; within plain wrappers, it registers an extraordinary range of experience. It

can deal with Trollope's journal, or the life of the slums of Rio; it can face death in Nova Scotia, control the rainy season in a metaphor, take a close look at virtually anything, and tell the fantastic story of the Amazonian villager who decides to become a witch. The method—since it is a vision—suits itself to a variety of forms, to the ballad or the sestina, to the quatrain and to the stanza built of rhythms that refine and elaborate those of casual speech. In short, Miss Bishop can entertain artificialities without losing her directness; her genius is for seeing clearly. This book is a formidable achievement.

Gene Baro. *New York Times Book Section*. March 26, 1967. p. 5

[Bishop's] poems often resemble short stories both in the way that she weds action to visual detail, and in the way she makes characters emerge clearly from very few details. She creates people out of scraps of their conversation, pointing it affectionately and ironically with her rhythms . . .

These forty-four poems [*Selected Poems*] show how much she has developed in the twenty-five years they cover. The lines tend to get shorter as she becomes more economical with her adjectives and in ''At the Fishhouses'' she starts moving out from the immediate experience—an encounter with an old fisherman—to more general questions. . . .

In the later poems, her canvases get bigger and the interrelationships between characters and their physical environments subtler. In the Mexican poems, the sound is no more resonant than before, but the meaning is. Her analyses go deeper and she comes more to evaluate experiences at the moment of describing them, sometimes, as in ''Questions of Travel'' by the simple expedient of asking what she'd have missed if she hadn't had them.

Ronald Hayman. *Encounter*. July, 1968. p. 71

The poems in *Questions of Travel*, and some of the new poems first printed in *The Complete Poems* are so clear they seem spoken by someone fresh from dreams, just awake. Many of them describe a country where the truth is almost as strange as dreams and to which the forms of legend and ballad (''The Riverman''; ''The Burglar of Babylon'') seem entirely appropriate. Humble figures are described in an understated, humorous fashion, and yet take on a mythical air, like the tenant Manuelzinho or the seamstress who grows to be like one of the Fates, Cloth nourished in their midst. But nothing is overdone or beyond the daily exercise of composing oneself. Here, I think, is the point at which Miss Bishop's poems are most provocative. Finally their technique is the opposite of the poetic journal, Lowell's latest urgent attempts at registering character in verse. Registering, transmitting, is the *Notebook*'s strongest effect, these poems which end in blazing nightmares, clear vision frayed by underground warnings. Miss Bishop's instinct—from which so much of the modern poetic interest in character derives—is something else: without ever abandoning the feelings of the moment, continually aware, constantly using verse to master the flood of the particular, she writes poetry to compose rather than expose the self. Doing that, her *Complete Poems* makes us alive again to what poetic *composition* is—both something private and something shared.

David Kalstone. *Partisan Review*. Nov. 2, 1970. p. 315

Elizabeth Bishop is constantly brought back to the particularities of earth: thus she is ''contemplative.'' Yet her poems also demonstrate a search for understanding, for transcendence, for epiphany. She is a meditative poet. ''Sandpiper,'' then, is strangely different from Blake's poem to which it alludes. For Bishop is more likely to find in grains of sand simply the marvel of various color (as the sandpiper does at the end of her poem) than she is ''the world'' as does Blake. Such ''worlds'' as those of color and infinite variety which the sandpiper sees in the sand do become for him transcendent ''minute and vast and clear.'' Even with her apparent search for ''vision,'' however, Bishop is much more likely to see the properties in a wild flower in some new way which provides self-understanding than she is to see them as ''heaven,'' as does Blake—who is certainly the more visionary of the two poets. . . .

What characterizes Elizabeth Bishop's sensibility is a coalescence of realistic description and personal imagination. Her poetry results from a careful process of ''looking.'' Such seeing is reflected in her accurate images. Experienced as maps to her own experiences, however, Bishop's poems emerge as a record of her own manner of seeing things as they are and more often than not of the carefully evolved epiphanic insights into their particular meaning for her.

Sybil P. Estess. *Southern Review*. Autumn, 1977, pp. 721, 726

Admiring action, there may be behind Bishop's poems a fear of passivity in itself: the reduction of the status of the observer to that of the excluded. If one were to try to station the writer behind a movie camera in these poems, it would be hard to say from just what angle the movie was being shot. The object is everything, the viewer and the viewer's position—except by inference—the merest assumption. Yet how remarkably consistent that lens is, how particularly keen the eye behind it! There is a great deal to be said for scope, but more to be said, I think, for the absolutely achieved. These poems strike me as ageless; there are no false starts, no fake endings. None of the provincial statements of youth, none of the enticements of facility are allowed to enter. Starting with ''The Map,'' we are in the hands of an artist so secure in the knowledge of what makes and doesn't make a poem that a whole generation of poets—and remarkably different ones—has learned to know what a poem is through her practice. She has taught us without a shred of pedagogy to be wary of the hustling of the emotions, of the false allurements of the grand. Rereading these poems, how utterly absent the specious is! There is no need to revise them for future editions, the way Auden revised and Marianne Moore revised and Robert Lowell revised. Nothing need be added, nothing taken away. They constitute a body of work in which the innovative and the traditional are bound into a single way of looking. From a poet's point of view, these poems are the ones of all her contemporaries that seem to me most to reward rereading.

Howard Moss. *World Literature Today*. Winter, 1977, p. 33

The dignity and precision of Elizabeth Bishop's poetic delivery rely largely upon her imagery of detachment, an imagery that takes interior dilemmas and expresses them in terms of the exterior world of nature. In *Questions of Travel* such imagery draws the individual poems into a recognizable unity not only by physical recurrence, but also, more importantly, by complementing and interweaving

the major themes. These themes (or, alternately, the dilemmas or questions of the title) include the permanent realm of the potential in human life, the puzzles of epistemology, and the temporary resolutions of the imagination. Corresponding to these themes, the categories of imagery are, respectively, images of transformation, of frames, and of suspension. Despite my abstract nomenclature, the imagery, by which I mean the entire physical world presented in the poem and not just its figurative language, consists of quite concrete, often ordinary objects. For instance, the imagery of transformation revolves mainly around water; of frames, around colors; and of suspension, around birds. Very rarely do the birds, colors, or water grow into deliberate symbols; instead, they serve more humbly as indicators of the interdependence of theme and imagery.

Ruth Quebe. *Modern Poetry Studies*. 10, 1, 1980, p. 68

In the last years of her life, Elizabeth Bishop wrote poems that reflected a new belief in naturalistic narrative, stories that weave together dream states and old conversations, and a return to the ancient riddles of identity and human isolation. Published three years before her death in 1979, *Geography III* sounds something of a valedictory note, and yet it rehearses a familiar theme with renewed vigor: the tonic value of dreams. Practicing a secular form of rememberment and salvage, the poet initially looks backward to a child's first unsettling awareness of her body and then forward through evocations of lost love, to rueful intimations of mortality. Midway in this lyrical journey, Bishop stops to remember the way grandparents ''talked/in the old featherbed'' about ''deaths and sicknesses,'' about friends who ''died in child-birth'' or ''took to drink'' or lost their sons ''when the schooner foundered.'' The voices that first found their way into her dreams now find a place in her art, and they go on and on, ''talking in Eternity'' (''The Moose,'' *Collected Poems*, 171–72).

The foundered schooner, the shipwrecked life, or troubled mind is the burden, the ever-present bass line that runs through the poet's compositions. Against this central theme, Bishop introduces the sound of quiet affirmation and endurance. Muted, it can be heard in every crafted line, in each preserved detail from the past, but it comes through clearly, unmistakably, in ''The Moose,'' a poem twenty years in the making.

Marilyn May Lombardi. *The Body and the Song: Elizabeth Bishop's Poetry* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Pr., 1991), p. 218

To the figure of the moralist lurking in her mind and work, Bishop also added the figure of the scientist, and did this quite naturally and with fairly little fuss. In Bishop's love of patient description we have a persuasive example of a Wordsworthian wise passivity, of a Keatsian negative capability; in her fidelity to the ideal of the scholar-dreamer-artist content to bring to bear all of one's human resources of eye, hand, and mind to the chosen task, she resembles the best of her predecessors, her aesthetic generously syncretic. Like the sun that shines in her ''Large Bad Picture,'' no matter what the worked intention of the artist may turn out to be, Bishop's governing principle of light is ''comprehensive and consoling.''

Her fondness for Darwin's minute attentions testify to the enlarging effect of the dedicated mind. In Bishop's preoccupation with small, successive acts, we seem to be given a license to join a series of words like *small, understated, determined, modest*, and so on: the words weave a moral figure that goes on the one hand, back to the religious energies of the wealth of the harvest that springs from the mustard seed, and on the other back to Blake's romanticism. She may have mocked Blake with her scatterbrained sandpiper, and feared the disintegrative forces that a myopic obsession with the grains or atoms of life can summon. Yet this fear seems countered by the awesome release of powers that Blake describes in his ''Auguries of Innocence'' as ''a World in a Grain of sand [. . .] Infinity in the palm of your hand / and Eternity in an hour.'' Bishop's cool pragmatism, skeptical self-possession, and determined secularism, however, prevent any lifting abstractions from drift or dilution. Yet it is finally a transfigurative energy that Bishop recognizes. In her crucial description of that slide into the unknown, that ''self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration'' that is, after all, the moment of epiphany, it seems important to recognize the large and generous view of human effort that her words, all of her words, imply.

Lorrie Goldensohn. *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry* (New York: Columbia Univ. Pr., 1992), p. 286

Why object relations? It has been my contention that this revisionary psychoanalytic model offers a particularly advantageous method for reading poetry. Specifically, I argue that reading Bishop through object-relations theory yields a number of insights; foremost among them, an understanding of the psychodynamics of literary influence relations as they work themselves out between Bishop and her most formidable predecessor, Marianne Moore. In addition to the individual insights provided through such an approach, one can discern a larger, revisionist conceptualization of poetic influence through the lens of object relations. Particularly, one can understand the workings of influence not in the agonistic mode of Freudian theory but through the dynamics of gift exchange, the feelings of envy and gratitude that emerge from the originary primal scene, and the infant's nursing at her mother's breast. The conflictual responses that result from this experience—fear that the mother may prove insufficient, pleasure when a reciprocal balance of supply and demand has been reached, anxiety that the breast may be robbed of sufficient resources, bemusement at the site of the feeding and the rejecting breast—all can be transposed to the modulations of literary creativity and the interrelationship between the poet and her literary predecessor. . . .

Consequently, my foregoing discussion of Bishop's ''Efforts of Affection'' investigates the forces of envy and gratitude that operate in the daughter-poet's psyche as it traces the rhetorical strategies Bishop evokes to negotiate her way between the potentially destructive power of envy and the rehabilitative force of gratitude. The bemusement Bishop experiences when she meditates on Moore is itself useful, Klein would argue, for it allows Bishop the space afforded by *misrecognition*, thus enabling Bishop to survive the ambiguous double binds of a mother who simultaneously gives and withholds.

If envy and gratitude are the primary, polar emotions that dominate the originary site of poetic influence, then related feelings of loss, mourning, and reparation govern literary productivity itself. At the heart of Bishop's work lies a desire to make restitution, to find a compensatory gift that will make up to the wounded,

abandoning mother all that her daughter has paradoxically lost. The desire to make reparations stems from the interior need to replenish the self, to find a way to survive the first and most crucial loss, that of the mother. Any writer's work may thus be read as the product of the desire to make reparation. Interestingly, Bishop makes this search for reparation itself the *theme* of much of her strongest work as she delineates the longing that finds it origins in her sense of loss. . . .

Object relations, however, offers us more. By investigating the interpsychic processes that govern a writer and her precursor, we can begin to decipher patterns that illuminate our own experience as readers. For all of us, as readers, are affected by the formative process of life at the mother's breast. The individuating psychodynamics of one reader-writer's (in this case, Bishop's) relation to her parent and her parental texts affords us access to the processes that inform reading relationships more generally. If we understand reading as a process of reparation, a revisionist procedure of remaking what we read, then analysis of that process of revision enables us more accurately to assess the distinctive psychic life of any individual reader. Reading Bishop reading Moore, therefore, enables us to pinpoint more precisely than heretofore not simply Moore's and Bishop's mutual poetic origins, but the specific turns that differentiate Bishop from Moore, thereby shedding light on the distinctive workings of Bishop's *intrapsychic* life.

Finally, reading Bishop through Moore enables us to trace an alternative paradigm to male, modernist tradition, a paradigm based upon a female-centered model for literary influence that traces the processes of influence relations in terms of the pre-Oedipal stage, thereby acknowledging the primary importance of the mother and hence the literary foremother.

> Joanne Feit Diehl. *Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore: The Psychodynamics of Creativity* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Pr., 1993), pp. 106, 108–10

The world of the adult, even more than that of the child, is beguiling but unsettlingly diverse. Though most comfortable generating poetry from domestic images of her childhood, Bishop, like other perceptive people, was drawn to subjects, images of people and landscapes, language, and themes best defined by their otherness. How she explores this material, and the problem of why her poetry about African-American and Brazilian folk life compares poorly to her portraits of North American ancestral provincials are the issues of this chapter. From the perspective of her mastery of the conventions of English-language poetry, Bishop re-invents herself in an alien context. Working from romantic-modern traditions and expectations established by Wordsworth, Emerson, Hopkins, [W. C.] Williams, and Frost, including the reinvigoration of the pastoral mode, she attempts to advance her grasp of dailiness to illustrate, if not penetrate, aspects of culture from which she remains emotionally estranged. She juxtaposes familiar cultural images and constructs with those of the exotic cultures of Key West and Brazil, and, in the process, generates tropes of self-realization in which she herself becomes ''more truly and more strange.'' She becomes an ''experience-distant'' field-worker attempting to illuminate what Clifford Geertz has called ''concepts that, for another people, are experience-near.''

Bishop eventually reverses interior and anterior stances and learns to see herself as an alien (as the section titles of *Questions of Travel* suggest), a perpetual guest. The self-realization, however, earned in the struggle with an unmoored childhood and migratory adulthood furthers that quest for the fully grasped moment, which would be accomplished only in ''Crusoe in England.'' The challenge of these poems of provincial relocation, as with much of her work, is to transcend romantic conventions of the picturesque and the sublime and exact a language adequate to reconstitute, in a deconstructive landscape, a viable self-realization. Yet like Adrienne Rich's attempt to identify herself with an American slave (see ''From an Old House in America''), Bishop's gestures would often be troubled by what Aldon Nielsen in *Reading Race* has labeled ''presumptive identification[s]'' with the ''racial other.''

> C.K. Doreski. *Elizabeth Bishop: The Restraints of Language* (New York: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1993), pp. 102–3

Within the dialogue of her translations Bishop discovers intimate guides to Brazil. Likewise, her own writing about Brazil, where cultural and political differences meet, asserts in its tones, structures, and thematic insights that representation is in part a collaborative effort. Her relationships extrinsic to the writing, with a Brazilian poet, friend, or guide, make vitally complex her enactment of subject-subject relationships within the piece. Just as Ruy led Bishop repeatedly to revise her impressions during their trip to Vigia, and the community watch for the burglar on the loose as well as her research on the socioeconomics of Rio framed her ballad, so her outsider's distance from the voices along the Rio São Francisco or in the Brazilian mines colored her representations of these experiences. Within the ballad, then, Bishop's double point of view allows her to set the observing burglar beside the observing rich, for a moment erasing the difference that seems so inevitably to divide them. Within the story, Bishop-as-tourist converses with Ruy-as-guide, each investing the desires and interpretations of the other with the shades of his and her difference. Alert to the situatedness of speakers and subjects throughout her writing on Brazil, Bishop may not hear the words being called by the ''maddening little women'' or the squatter's children at play, but her poems inevitably concern themselves with the dynamics that bind and distance her speakers and her subjects in relationships of power, possession, and love.

> Victoria Harrison. *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1993), p. 182

The publication of Elizabeth Bishop's *Selected Letters* [in England, *One Art*, ed. Robert Giroux] is a historic event, a bit like discovering a new planet or watching a bustling continent emerge, glossy and triumphant, from the blank ocean. Here is an immense cultural treasure being suddenly unveiled—and this hefty selection is only the beginning. Before the millennium is out, Bishop will be seen as one of this century's epistolary geniuses, like that modernist Victorian Gerard Manley Hopkins, whom she lovingly admired and learnt from. . . .

The long, competitive love which existed between Bishop and Lowell, the parabola of her relationship with Marianne Moore, are the best examples in *One Art* of this dynamic textuality. Very many letters derive their fascination from this type of dialogic energy—a momentary, sometimes momentous communicativeness that stretches them like soap bubbles sent up into the sunlight of unrepeatable

relationships where each letter occurs as a historic moment whose taut nowness can be immensely exciting.

Tom Paulin. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. April 29, 1994, p. 3

For most of her writing life, Elizabeth Bishop was known for not wishing to be known. Where other poets muscled their careers to centerstage, she hovered in the wings. Where others importuned their audience with news of their private sorrows, she remained impressively tight-lipped. A near-contemporary of the so-called confessional poets, poets such as Robert Lowell and John Berryman, she once said of them: ''You just wish they'd keep some of these things to themselves.''

''Closets, closets and more closets'' was Bishop's response to the gay liberation movement. Her friends knew that she was lesbian, and also that she was alcoholic, but she herself liked to believe that each of these dispositions was a secret. Certainly her poems gave no clues. And since Bishop spent most of her career outside the United States, mostly in Brazil, and took little part in homeground literary politics, there was not much word of mouth to go on. Her geographical self-exile seemed perfectly in tune with her habits.

Ian Hamilton. *New Republic*. Aug. 8, 1994, pp. 29, 34

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BISHOP, John Peale (1892–1944)

His tradition is quite evidently aristocratic. He prefers the fine, the delicate, the rare in character or in performance. Several of the poems have to do with the aristocracy of the South. I do not think, however, that one can accuse Mr. Bishop of snobbery. Through the poems runs the realization that, regardless of preference, the time has come when the fine flower of aristocracy is decadent, that terrible though this process may be, aristocracy must now be reinvigorated by contact with more primitive and ignorant classes. . . . He shrinks a little from the common herd, but he does not entirely deny them.

Eda Lou Walton. *The Nation*. Feb. 7, 1934. pp. 162–3

There is, then, the contemporary preoccupation with styles (not simply style), with metrical forms, and with the structure of the line. But Bishop, of all the modern poets who take this approach, feels the least uneasiness about a proper subject matter. There is no one subject, no one scene, nor a single kind of imagery coming from a single subject or scene: every poem, as I say, is a new problem. And Bishop feels no inhibition in the presence of any kind of material.

Allen Tate. *New Republic*. Feb. 21, 1934. p. 52

One would surmise, even without the specific information, that his acquaintance with French poetry of the later nineteenth century is immediate, and not second-hand through Eliot and Pound. But it seems that Eliot, Pound, and Yeats have done something to define the precise use Bishop has made of these and other models. And it is not that Bishop has merely re-adapted current techniques; it is that he has written with the same attitudes from which those techniques were developed. The principle of unification to be detected in the attitudes behind the present poems is not so much the unification of a single personality or a philosophy or a fundamental theme, as it is the unification that a period affords its various fashions.

Robert Penn Warren. *Poetry*. March, 1934. p. 345

Mr. Bishop is one of the school of Eliot and Pound; he has the sense of an individual poem as being something as separately well made as a vase or a candlestick, a sense hardly to be found in Jeffers or Sandburg. . . . The range of Mr. Bishop's achievement is not great: a few detached observations sensitively recorded over a number of years; but he understands the meaning of craftsmanship. He knows that for words to take on the illusion of life there must be the precarious marriage between content and form.

F. O. Matthiessen. *The Yale Review*. Spring, 1934. p. 613

I believe that John Peale Bishop has written one of the few memorable novels of this decade (*Act of Darkness*). . . . Mr. Bishop has chosen his material with the same care that he devotes to the writing of a poem; and since he is a poet of unusual sensibility, one finds in his prose an admirable restraint in the use of the so-called ''poetic'' image and vocabulary. There is fine economy of words in his paragraphs; and by effective inversion of adjectives his prose cadence is of highly individual (but not spectacular) quality. I believe these matters were of concern to Mr. Bishop in the writing of his novel—and not whatever social implications it may contain. He had, however, something to say which was a record of experience, and the fact that he has said it well produced a narrative of continuously exciting revelation.

Horace Gregory. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. March 10, 1935. p. 7

This sensitive re-creation of adolescence (*Act of Darkness*), poetic, obviously autobiographical, Proustian in conception although not in style, introduces a new Southern novelist. . . . If I have read the novel aright, it is this: That body and spirit are not one but two that move along parallel lines, supplementing each other to form a track. . . . *Act of Darkness* must by all means be set down as a

superior book. There is power behind its sensitivity. And in its best passages this first novel achieves distinction.

Fred T. Marsh. *New York Times Book Section*. March 17, 1935. p. 6

Mr. Bishop is one of the few men now writing in America or elsewhere who recognize the privileges, tests, and ordeals of the aesthetic discipline. . . .The unity in (his) poems derives from his effort to return, after widely eclectic experiences in art and the sophistication of New York and Paris, to his native roots and loyalties, his moral plight as an individual, and to the recovery of his local habitation and a name. . . . Mr. Bishop still respects the impersonal discipline and objective moral sense of his symbolist teachers. His work asks to be considered as poetry before it makes its appeal as a private history or an American document. . . . His work has everything that taste, finish, and conscience can give it.

Morton Dauwen Zabel. *The Nation*. April 12, 1941. pp. 447–8

It is difficult enough to describe Mr. Bishop's essential talent. It is a rather unusual combination of the scholar and the sensualist. The intellectual today likes his learning and the lyricist, of course, loves his love poems. There is a bad separation. Mr. Bishop thinks what he feels, he experiences actually what ideally he knows as a scholar, he can be at the same time serenely intellectual and terribly sensual. . . . He combines one's feeling with one's thinking.

Peter Monro Jack. *New York Times Book Section*. Jan. 4, 1942. p. 5

Bishop's basic theme is the loss of form, the loss of myth, the loss of a pattern. . . . It is true that Bishop's poetry is often poetry about poetry, but then Bishop's conception of poetry is more profound than the man-in-the-street's essentially ''literary'' conception. The problems of writing poetry and the problems of a formless and chaotic age become at many points identical. . . . Certainly none of Mr. Bishop's problems would be solved by his abandoning his theme. . . . Or by giving up a concern for ''form.'' Indeed, the most successful of Bishop's poems are precisely those which exploit his theme most thoroughly and which are most precisely ''formal.''

Cleanth Brooks. *Kenyon Review*. Spring, 1942. pp. 244–5

One of Bishop's great merits was to have realized his limitations and, unlike so many other American writers, to have preferred perfect minor achievement to over-ambitious failure. In this way he turned a defect of destiny into an aesthetic virtue. He was that rare thing in American literature, a true type of the second-order writer who, though incapable of supreme creative achievement, keeps alive a sense for the highest values. It is this type of writer whom the French delight to honor, recognizing their importance for the continuance of a vital cultural tradition; and this is perhaps one reason why Bishop felt so powerful an attraction for French culture.

Joseph Frank. *Sewanee Review*. Winter, 1947. pp. 106–7

We have been used to hearing this West Virginian dismissed as *too* typical, i.e., too derivative on the one hand, too immersed in class consciousness (upper level) on the other; yet his essays and poems in their progress . . . amply display an original mind and reveal the generous, passionate, humane personality finally emerging from beneath the successive masks of the ''provincial,'' the dandy, the snob, the ironist. . . . Toward the end, the romantic exile came home to his own idiom, and achieved in his poetry a density of meaning projected with classic purity of tone.

Gerard Previn Meyer. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 2, 1948. p. 24

As a poet he is, perhaps, not obscure; his life was outwardly serene but it conceals a sensibility that was courageously tortured; conditions that look identical seem simultaneously to have hamstrung his talents and set him free. He is infinitely discussable, for he raises (how forcibly I was not aware) the crucial problems of writing now, in America, as well as the adequacy of available solutions. He is more pertinent, both in achievement and mechanism, than, say, Kafka. The achievement matters but the torture is instructive, for it is the torture of the creative will, persistently willing to will, but the will being again and again dissipated, and reviving, being frittered or smashed, but always returning.

William Arrowsmith. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1949. p. 118

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BLACKMUR, R.P. (1904–1965)

Blackmur is preoccupied with pure poetry. . . . His metrics have the individuality of the classic composers of chamber music. . . . The joints of his moods with everyday are thin at times, and one must be alert with utter inner poise to hear or to heed him. A whole page of print, which yesterday opened vistas, today will seem blank until tomorrow it opens wider. Always the subject matter . . . illustrates human subterfuge from oblivion and ruse against the unavoidable futility of existence. . . . Even as he finds home Way Down East and in the Hub where landscape and men exhausted smile and move and speak with grace unknown to their past times of strength, so does he universally at once express and comment upon a cultural decadence.

John Brooks Wheelwright. *New Republic*. July 21, 1937. p. 316

Specifically and primarily, the method can be described as that of taking hold of the words of the poem and asking two very important questions: (1) Do these words represent a genuine fact, condition, or feeling? (2) Does the combining of these words result in ''an access of knowledge''? Knowledge in the full sense, one must add,

for something must be made known ''publicly,'' ''objectively,'' in terms which any intelligent reader, with the proper effort, can grasp; as distinct from terms and language used ''privately,'' ''personally,'' ''subjectively.'' Now of the two questions, it is the first that Blackmur emphasizes and the second which he often neglects. The discrete parts—sentences, phrases, single words (which are sometimes counted)—are the main object of his attention. The way in which they combine is sometimes an afterthought (though this is less so in the more recent essays).

Delmore Schwartz. *Poetry*. Oct., 1938. p. 30

With a critic like Richard P. Blackmur, who tends to use on each work the special technique it seems to call for, and who at one time or another has used almost every type of criticism, the difficulty of placing any single way of operating as his ''method'' is obvious. What he has is not so much a unique method as a unique habit of mind, a capacity for painstaking investigation which is essential for contemporary criticism, and which might properly be isolated as his major contribution to the brew. . . . Blackmur is almost unique in his assumption that no demand for knowledge the poet makes on the serious reader (that is, the critic) is unreasonable, and that if he doesn't have the information he had better go and get it.

Stanley Edgar Hyman. *Poetry*. Feb., 1948. pp. 259, 262

The writing . . . is nervous, extraordinarily complex in texture, and urgent with a kind of religious New England cantankerousness that one has scarcely heard in contemporary verse since the too early death of John Wheelwright—not that I mean to imply that Mr. Blackmur derives from Wheelwright (the debt, if it exists, must surely be reckoned the other way around), but that the vibrant originality of the one stirs memories of the other, *discordes concordantes*. . . . I am saying, in short, that Mr. Blackmur, extraordinarily difficult though he can be, is a poet *sui generis*; and the *genus* is rare and important.

Dudley Fitts. *Saturday Review*. March 20, 1948. p. 28

These are poems of the most extreme situations possible, of a constricted, turned-in-upon-itself, contorted, almost tetanic agony: the poet not only works against the grain of things, but the grain is all knots. . . . Sometimes the pain is too pure to be art at all, and one is watching the nightmare of a man sitting in the midst of his own entrails, knitting them all night into the tapestry which he unknits all day. But there is in the poems, none of that horrible relishing complacency with which so many existential thinkers insist upon the worst; the poems try desperately for any way out, either for the Comforter—*some* sort of comforter—or else for that coldest comfort, understanding.

Randall Jarrell. *The Nation*. Apr. 24, 1948. p. 447

Again and again, until it touches a note of hysteria and one wonders at such insistence, Mr. Blackmur speaks out against his anathema—expressive language. He makes constantly an appeal to reason, which in poetry is objective form. . . . The fact is, Mr. Blackmur has been attempting as difficult a critical job as was ever conceived. . . . Perhaps Mr. Blackmur's fearful note is near to the cry of those who push analysis to the limit of reason. And perhaps, as I think, he has been pushed himself into statements that exceed his purpose, as when he says, for instance, that poetry is ''language so twisted and posed in a form that it not only expresses the matter in hand but adds to the stock of reality.''. . . Mr. Blackmur arrives, by way of the back stairs, at a sort of higher romanticism, where we children of his prior, or downstairs enlightenment are likely to feel timid or ill at ease.

Hayden Carruth. *The Nation*. Jan. 10, 1953. p. 35

In recent years as a Professor of English at Princeton he has become the fountainhead of a distinctly personal and highly original school of criticism. His standards are high, his language fluent, though sparse, and on occasion recondite, and he pays extraordinary attention to minute detail; his work represents a constant searching of the mind for the highest amount of intellectual pressure and insight it will yield.

During these years Mr. Blackmur has, in reality, gone to the school of his own bold intelligence and allowed himself that free and full ''response to experience'' he deems to be the first duty of a critic.

Leon Edel. *New York Times Book Section*. April 17, 1955. p. 4

The alienated artist is . . . ordinarily forced into one of two possible roles: that of the lonely prisoner in a personal ''ivory tower,'' or that of a prophet without honor, a rather owlish Cassandra.

To some extent, perhaps, R. P. Blackmur fills both these roles. . . . While he has not abandoned the technique of ''criticism of criticism'' which is often regarded as a kind of hallmark of modern ivory-towerism, he is essentially engaged in a work of public persuasion, evangelical, almost apocalyptic. . . . Criticism should turn, Mr. Blackmur, believes, from poetry, which, as poetry, seems to him to have declined in value for us, to the novel, which he regards as the most significant literary form now and in the future. The ideal which he sets before the critic is thus a synthesis of Coleridge and Aristotle.

John F. Sullivan. *Commonweal*. May 13, 1955. p. 159

Mr. Blackmur is all these things: poet, rhetorician, evangelist, university teacher, a lover of words, master of a weighted vocabulary. It is surely the poet in him and equally the rhetorician which makes one, reading this book, hate the things Mr. Blackmur hates: formula, methodology, pre-judgement, slogan. And love the things he loves; the acts behind such words as imaginative, plastic, symbolic, responsive, actual, form. It is also the poet in Mr. Blackmur which makes him use, quite freely and without quotation marks, phrases which he has remembered from such writers as Henry James, Melville, Thomas Mann, Ransom, and Santayana: sacred rage; compositional centre; operative consciousness; the sense of life; the shock of recognition; the outsider; a poet nearly anonymous; a philosopher almost a poet. There are other phrases, including 'disconsolate chimera', which appear to be quotations from Mr. Blackmur himself.

Denis Donoghue. *Twentieth Century*. June, 1957. pp. 540–1

In criticizing poetry, his concern is not with pattern but with language. He knows what words or groups of words affect him, and he wants to know why they affect him. He is aesthetic about words and carries them back into the poet's mind and forth into his own with a relished complexity that is as obscure and seemingly chaotic as anything in modern poetry.

Basically Blackmur is an impressionistic critic rapturizing over words and images. However, his raptures do cling to a theory that is worked out precisely as his impressions develop into speculations (which they often do). It is quite possible, to be sure, that the complicated verbiage of his essays fools one into suspecting more precision than is actually present, and sometimes one is startled by a dangerous overemphasis or even a contradiction, but the theory is there and can be described.

Maurice Kramer. *College English*. May, 1961. p. 553

Blackmur has tried to recreate in his own way Arnold's vision of the ''future of poetry,'' first by encouraging against the current of modern pragmatization and secularization a passion and a reverence for sensed mysteries; and second by discovering works of literature, whether for audience or artist, as experiences which put that passion and reverence into formal relation with the sense of the mysteries, with this discovered relation perhaps finally to be considered a kind of ''knowledge.'' It was something as ambitious and esoteric as this that Blackmur had in mind when in ''The Lion and the Honeycomb'' he wrote, with a rather irrelevant metaphoric humility for one who is nothing if not virtuoso, that the critic as ''go-between'' ought to disappear ''when the couple are gotten together.''

Blackmur's first task, to cultivate the mysteries, is very materially aided by his style. Rhythmic incantation, allegorical indirection, the mystical rhetoric of pun and paradox—these are the sorts of techniques creating in his criticism its distinctive aura of priestly and prophetic power.

Richard Foster. *The New Romantics* (Indiana). 1962. p. 98

Beside him, [Allen] Tate and [John Crowe] Ransom are boring indeed, and their styles, compared to his, are never capable of the resonance and suggestiveness that finally is essential to the literary essayist who is only incidentally a critic. From the early pieces on modern poets and the magnificent omnibus reviews now in *The Expense of Greatness* to the Byzantine labyrinths of the later essays on James and Eliot, Blackmur has shown that he can elevate the characteristic gestures of the New Criticism to a self-sustaining art. There is, furthermore, a wit in him which is quite uncharacteristic of the others.

Roger Sale. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1962. pp. 478, 480

To identify the tradition that links Blackmur with [Henry] James and [Henry] Adams one could do worse than adopt the term Blackmur himself uses when discussing the 1920s—''bourgeois humanism.'' This may suggest the New Humanists but Blackmur's struggle with modern literature was not merely polemical like theirs which left them free to dismiss or condemn it. Rather, since he had himself suffered the cultural crises that produced it, he understood how the ''malicious knowledges'' of the time, notably psychology and anthropology, had undermined man's faith in his rationality, had delivered him over to the ''great grasp of unreason,'' and had set him to inventing the ''techniques of trouble.'' Yet he believed that the great modern writers (particularly Joyce, Eliot, Mann, Yeats, and Gide) managed to create out of the remnants of the humanist tradition an ''irregular metaphysics'' which secured a measure of control over the irrational forces which had been unleashed.

One of the two major centers of formative power in Blackmur's thinking about America was, then, the literature of the twenties. This book [*A Primer of Ignorance*] shows that the other was his encounter with foreign, mainly European, culture concretized through his sojourns abroad in the 1950s. These provided the finishing touch to his already wide self-education, not changing his fundamental bourgeois humanism, but only ''improving'' it. What he found when he began to contemplate America in the presence of European culture can be exemplified in the comparison he draws in ''The Swan in Zurich'' between the New York City Ballet and the Ballet of Sadler's Wells and other European companies: the American troupe's ''excessive commitment to mere technique'' in contrast to the technical imperfections but greater human warmth of the European performances. This discovery of American devotion to pragmatic abstractions at the cost of the more personalized values and greater cultural density of Europe strikingly corroborates the earlier testimonials of Hawthorne, James, and Adams.

Ernest Sandeen. *Poetry*. Aug., 1968. pp. 357–8

Blackmur was a poet. He published in his lifetime three volumes of verse and hoped that some of his work at least would stand. At present he has almost no readers. At a time when so little poetry is read, it is not surprising that a small voice like Blackmur's should not be heard. Some critics, like Denis Donoghue, in an introduction to a recent collected edition of the poems, regret that we have forgotten Blackmur and urge us to discover the poetry for ourselves. But Donoghue is a fine critic, and even he cannot persuade us that there is much in Blackmur to compel sustained attention. ''Sometimes the knowledge in Blackmur's poems is not his own but what he recalls of Hopkins' knowledge,'' he concedes. Or one hears the music of Eliot, or Pound, or Yeats: ''But mostly the knowledge is his own.'' Perhaps. But then, the issue is not whether Blackmur occasionally broke free of his models and wrote in a voice that sounded more like his own than theirs. The fact is that, even in his best poems, Blackmur sounds more like a man who wants to write poetry than like a true poet. . . .

For Blackmur, ideas could be as interesting as they were for another sort of critic entirely. And he showed, in his later work especially, that politics and cultural institutions could be quite as absorbing to the literary mind as poems or stories. We go on with the question of content here because it is so central to our concern with poetical thinking. The content Blackmur could not honor was a content that was nothing but a sentiment, an attitude or an idea. He was ready to accept that certain ideas were more attractive than others, or that a particular attitude would readily serve the gifts of a particular poet. But in themselves these ideas or attitudes were not the facts that could inspire a final sympathy or allegiance. Eliot's mind was a fact in the more final sense, his better poems an enactment of his sensibility that would stand, permanently, as an emblem of a certain kind of possibility realized. Call it the possibility of a mind divided against itself but working strenuously

all the same at a wholeness it associated with utter singleness of purpose.

Robert Boyers. *R. P. Blackmur: Poet-Critic* (Univ. of Missouri Pr., 1980), pp. 8–9, 64–65

Blackmur's contribution to literature may be found in the form of the critical essays he wrote during the later phases of his career. The Library of Congress essays, in particular, represent the form of the critical essay that marks his unique contribution. These essays were his attempt to raise criticism to a new plane of discourse.

Briefly put, Blackmur attempted to incorporate into these essays an expression of his aesthetic experience of literature and of culture. Thus, in effect, he tried to ''open'' the form of the critical essay by giving equal emphasis to the nonrational expression of his own experience. Prior to Blackmur's practice, critical essayists had always tried to be, with more or less success, proponents of rational thinking. Blackmur, however, made the irrational, the emotional, part of the critical essay. . . .

Blackmur did not mean to discount the rational understanding of his essays. Rather, he sought what he thought should be a *total* experience that included the irrational with the rational. In this desire he was seeking for the art of criticism what modern artists had sought for painting, poetry, the novel, and music. Blackmur did not want his criticism to point to an experience but to *be* an experience. In this way he extended the scope and the form of literary criticism.

In addition to raising criticism to the level of a legitimate art form, Blackmur also contributed a whole body of work that will have permanent value as long as there is a Western culture. Throughout his work Blackmur questioned the lack of standards to judge not only art but life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. He was against the democratic inclusiveness of the spirit that meant whatever is done must perforce be ''creative.'' At the same time he agonized over the question of creativity and its manifestations in a democratic, romantic age. In his own work he applied the scrupulosity he admired so much in Henry Adams; that is, he took pains to give his essays a ''form'' as well as a content. Put another way, Blackmur thought he could control unbridled romantic effusions of spirit by insisting upon a rigorous attention to form.

All of his work has a certain tension that derives from this conflict between form and content, reason and imagination. Blackmur fought the same battle that every twentieth-century artist has fought and must fight. His particular art form was criticism, but it could have been poetry or the novel. In the last analysis, his work must be seen as his unique attempt to create order and meaning out of the undifferentiated chaos of the spirit. So Blackmur becomes one with the many who have built their own edifices of meaning through art.

Gerald J. Pannick. *Richard Palmer Blackmur* (Twayne, 1981), pp. 155–57

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BLY, Robert (1926–)

Robert Bly is one of the leading figures today in a revolt against rhetoric—a rebellion that is a taking up of the Imagist revolution betrayed, a reassertion of much of the good sense Pound brought to poetry—but also a movement which has in it much that is perfectly new. The new is found in a pure form in the work of Robert Bly and of his friend James Wright; it is not an easy aesthetic to describe; it can be found only in a response to their poems. . . .

[Bly's] is a poetry, I decided at last, that returns the reader to its subjects, a poetry of excitement primarily about a certain kind of life and vision to which the poem directs attention rather than stealing attention from that experience. Hence, this work is profoundly dependent upon the nature of reality—it reflects a choice of subjects and a judgment on them as experiences. Although all poets take into themselves parts of the exterior world and put them back in what is, to say the least, a rearrangement, Bly is committed more totally than most poets to their subjects for two reasons. The choice of his images, the excitements, the celebrant realities, is a mannered or narrowed one; and the intensity of that choice is such that it is opinionated—it expresses a judgment about what life and poetry should be. If, then, the poet should be one who rejoices at solitude, nature, the sullen beauty of the provinces and of our history, then as advocate of that vision he is not and cannot be the poet who celebrates sickness, glamorizes Miltown, smog and hypochondria. For Bly—and in this respect he is a visionary—the words of poems are real—they *are* expressways or ditches, cornrows or streetlamps, bathtubs or mailboxes; a poem is a chosen world.

David Ray. *Epoch*. Winter, 1963. p. 186

Robert Bly's first collection, *Silence in the Snowy Fields*, impresses because of its purity of tone and precision of diction. It is not until we begin to feel that Mr. Bly could do more, when the monotonous simplicity of many of the poems starts to pall and takes on a programmatic character (after all he edits a polemical magazine, *The Sixties*, that we become dissatisfied. This artful diction is heavily indebted to early Stevens . . . but we miss the cunning backdrop that the simpler poems of *Harmonium* surely have. . . .Bly's characteristic development is to begin a poem with a simple narrative or descriptive *donnée* and then proceed through modulations more or less subtle, to an overwhelmed, even apocalyptic end.

D. J. Hughes. *The Nation*. Jan. 5, 1963. p. 17

[Bly] is a poet of Western space, solitude, and silence. He writes poems about driving a car through Ohio, hunting pheasants, watering a horse, getting up early in the morning, and watching

Minnesota cornfields, lakes, and woods under the siege of rain, snow, and sun. His distinction in treating these subjects lies in the freshness of his ''deep images,'' which invest the scene he describes with an intense subjectivity and a feeling of the irremediable loneliness of man, who can never make contact with the things of the world. . . .

It is evident that Robert Bly's theory and practice cohere. His poetic voice is clear, quiet, and appealing, and it has the resonance that only powerful pressures at great depths can provide.

Stephen Stepanchev. *American Poetry since 1945* (Harper). 1965. pp. 185–7

Mr. Bly's poems . . . divide into poems of the inner and the outer. He does not deal with the relationship of one to the other, or not very often; usually, he writes of each separately and in opposite tones. His poems about present-day America, especially its political life, tend to be harsh and dissonant, and their sadness has a bitterly sharp edge, except for those dealing directly with the inhumanity of the Vietnam war, which are informed by deep compassion. The poems about the inner world, on the other hand, are slow-moving and quietly, intently joyful; they do not wish to come to grips with experience, but rather to let it flow by, to see it without forcing it. Mr. Bly is trying to free his diction of all rhetorical trappings, whether they be of the long-established or the current orthodoxies, in order to write simply, to render ''the light around the body,'' the *feeling* of the experiences unencumbered by any literal setting. The approach is essentially mystical.

Lisel Mueller. *Shenandoah*. Spring, 1968. p. 70

The Light around the Body is one of the most significant American volumes to be published in years. Maybe literary America is waking up. Maybe it has learned that ''inwardness'' is not necessarily looking at one's navel, listening to ''the way they ring the bells in Bedlam'' à la Sexton or tortuously describing the abnormalities of one's aunt or father. The seemingly uncontrollable malignant forces around us do indeed lead us to look inward, but it is at the least sentimental and at the most destructive of the creative self to allow that inward eye complete authority. . . .

There are many poems in the book with obvious and open political content. Such poems as ''Those Being Eaten by America'' . . . ''Smothered by the World,'' or such poems with specific references to recent and dubious episodes in American history as ''Sleet Storm on the Merritt Parkway,'' ''The Great Society,'' and the whole third section of the book with its poems on the Vietnam war—such poems are not mere propaganda poems, poems like those written freely in the 30's. They are not merely doctrinal. Although they are social protest poetry, they are not simplistic and doctrinaire. They are deeply poetic. They fulfill the needs of art, not those of politics. These poems, it must be remembered, are being written after the symbolists, the post-symbolists, written at a time in all the arts when the chief subject matter is art itself. The aesthetic emphasis is apparent here too, but it is an emphasis not on a sterile impersonality; not on a narrow formalism, or a fetishist autonomy of the work of art; not on disengagement, but on a reality stemming from a concerned, emotional self, inward and released, and from an outward self, yearning for a ''glimpse of what we cannot see,/Our enemies, the soldiers and the poor.''

Harriet Zinnes. *Prairie Schooner*. Summer, 1968. pp. 176, 178

Bly . . . has been in the forefront of the politicalization of contemporary American poetry, and his objectives and his zeal may well have our full sympathy. On the other hand, the apolitical tradition of American poetry since the 1930's has proved very hard to break through. Political ideology and political action have shown a habit of losing the excitement of political oratory in the tight, economic medium of poetry; the effect is often one of simple-mindedness. . . .

Considering the odds Bly is facing, his performance is admirable. . . .

The Light around the Body marks an advance over *Silence in the Snowy Fields*. The advance is perhaps most economically described as a success of subject-matter. There is an attractive and contagious commitment about these poems which occasionally gives rise to a grim, grotesque humor which was absent from the earlier poems. . . .

The best of Bly's poems . . . achieve an original expression of his personal gloom and his sorrow for a world which ''will soon break up into small colonies of the saved.''

G.A.M. Janssens. *English Studies*. April, 1970. pp. 128–31

For those who recognize that it is nations and not individuals that make war, Robert Bly's new book may be the best examination of our motives during the debacle in Vietnam. *Sleepers Joining Hands* looks at the dominion of chaos and death over recent American life and tries to discern its whole meaning, as if at last we have got far enough into it or beyond it to understand what happened, and as if we will not be devastated again by any more surprises. . . .

He can speak quietly of terrible things in a way that produces genuine chills. . . .

The spectacle of power is beautiful, and Bly can illustrate by the ominous unleashing of it that man's frail moral nature is inadequate for the enormous consequences of his acts. Bly can show, calmly, literally, how we writhe to defend our minds against this tragic knowledge, rationalizing, denying and generalizing our sins until viciousness appears demanded of us and we drive ourselves toward insanity.

David Cavitch. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 18, 1973. pp. 2–3

Bly is . . . the mystic of evolution, the poet of ''the other world'' always contained in present reality but now about to burst forth in a period of destruction and transformation. Bly's poetry of the transformation of man follows logically from his early poetry of individual and private transcendence. Repeatedly, *Silence in the Snowy Fields* announces an ''awakening'' that comes paradoxically in sleep, in darkness, in death, an awakening depicted in surrealist images as compelling as they are mysterious, evasive. Bly's sense of mystical transformation is not really completely articulated until, primarily in the 1967 collection, *The Light around the Body*, it achieves an apocalyptic dimension, the awakening no longer individual or private, but part of the spiritual evolution of the race.

This general awakening, like the analogous experience of the isolated mystic, comes in the long dark night of a dying civilization. The poems of ecstatic prophecy in *The Light around the Body* achieve much of their force by juxtaposition with the poems of political despair which dominate the collection. Constantly and convincingly Bly suggests that the psychological impact of Vietnam on America is as destructive as the physical presence of America in Vietnam. . . .

But the confluence of physical and psychological or spiritual in Bly is most striking when he depicts the paradoxically evolutionary aspects of apocalypse, apocalypse now considered not as end but as process.

Anthony Libby. *Iowa Review*. Spring, 1973. pp. 112–3

The late 20th century converges on Robert Bly from every side. In *Sleepers Joining Hands*, there is a seething cauldron of ecological devastation, genocide in Vietnam, Consciousness III, the long shadow of the Indian wars, the changing roles of the sexes. He is peculiarly the seer both of the present moment and the possible future.

In a few lines he can catch the essence of vast migrations and enormities. . . .

Alive and terrifying as this poetic vision is, in some ways it is surpassed by the long prose section which adduces vast amounts of anthropological evidence to prove that all societies were originally matriarchal, and that the Great Mother (including the castrating type, the Teeth Mother) is reemerging into the consciousness of Western man after being suppressed for millennia.

Chad Walsh. *Book World*. April 1, 1973. p. 13

The stimulus injected by Robert Bly into the poets of the Emotive Imagination has not been solely as translator, editor, and theoretician. *Silence in the Snowy Fields*, a 1962 collection of poems which had appeared earlier over a period of almost ten years in the magazines, was the first volume demonstrating extensively the realized potentialities of the Emotive Imagination. Bly's second volume, *The Light around the Body*, demonstrated his expanding interest in political poetry. The 1973 volumes *Jumping Out of Bed* and *Sleepers Joining Hands* disclose his enduring predilection for the Emotive Imagination, even as the political poems have diminished as a result of America's disengagement in Vietnam.

Bly's success as a poet depends of course on the quality of the individual poems, but . . . his own work has been indisputably shaped by his long interest in and translation of poets like [Pablo] Neruda and [Georg] Trakl. Moreover, his poetry also inevitably becomes a kind of illustration of his own poetics, outlined, as we have also seen, in scores of essays and reviews. When Bly says, for example, that a poem is ''something that penetrates for an instant into the unconscious,'' one expects his own verse to show how that is so. . . .

In the past quarter-century of Bly's publication of poetry, he appears to have found reinforcements of and elaborations upon a fundamental method which sprang up almost at once in his work and which was clearly worked out by the time of his first volume in 1962, *Silence in the Snowy Fields*. He has not departed radically from the use of the Emotive Imagination as we have defined it, and his work, perhaps more than the other poets treated here, represents a continuing and long-range experimentation with its resources. Most of Bly's poems are whimsical and minor; they have no pretensions of being anything else. Frequently his political verse manages to go little beyond bald propaganda. His poetry finally belongs in the same context as his translations, as well as his criticism and editing. As an indefatigable man-of-letters, in the best sense of the term, Robert Bly has been a vital phenomenon in American poetry since mid-century.

George S. Lensing and Ronald Moran. *Four Poets and the Emotive Imagination* (Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1976), pp. 71, 85

My sense of Bly's poetry is that it exhibits the skill it does because of its author's high seriousness, but such a sense can only be averred, not demonstrated. However, we can register the characteristic energy of Bly's lyrics by exploring them as resolutions (not solutions, in the sense of problems disposed of, but resolutions, in the sense of a consciousness articulated) through which two apparently opposing compulsions redefine one another. One of these compulsions is most visible as theme, the other as style. Thematically, the concerns of meditative poetry, namely the structures of consciousness and the relation of fact and value, outline the range and subject of these poems. Poetry for Bly offers a criticism of life, but a criticism available only through discipline, by a rectification of thought and feeling. Bly's antiwar poetry doesn't settle for expressing humanistic values; rather, he alleges that the grossest forms of false consciousness are necessary for such inhumanity as a war to occur and that only through a fundamental relearning of the world can it be prevented. This accounts for Bly's aggressive, sometimes intemperate modernism: he sees the poet simultaneously as a solitary craftsman and as a moral scourge. . . .

What I think Bly's poetry enacts, especially in the strengths and weaknesses of *Camphor*, is the persistent desire of American poets simultaneously to celebrate the body and to incorporate the universal energies, thus making them available to all. How to domesticate the sublime? Bly's answer seems to be to deify the *truly* immediate, that is, the data of consciousness understood not as thought, but as bodily sensation. Bodily presence and process—the purview of natural history, with its emphasis on seeing, on turning the given into a specimen by an act of loving attentiveness to detail and change—thus become equated with bodily ecstasy—the evidence of religion, with its proffered hope that the bodies of men and women can become one body, which will manifest, in a Blakean way, the transforming and divine energies of the universe.

Charles Molesworth. *The Fierce Embrace: A Study of Contemporary American Poetry* (Univ. of Missouri Pr., 1979). pp. 116, 138

The theme of the father-son relationship. . . . [Robert] Bly has discussed in depth what might be seen as the background to the poems in *Black Cat* on several occasions. Here is a summary of his views: ''Historically, the male has changed considerably in the past thirty years.'' The 1950s male ''was vulnerable to collective opinion'' and ''lacked feminine space . . . lacked compassion, in a way that led directly to the unbalanced pursuit of the Vietnam War. . . . Then, during the '60s, another sort of male appeared.''

The war ''made men question what an adult male really is. And the women's movement encouraged men'' until ''some men began to see their own feminine side and pay attention to it.'' Still, the ''grief and anguish in the younger males was astounding'' and ''part of the grief was remoteness from their fathers.'' Now, ''it's possible that men are once more approaching [the] deep male'' in the psyche, ''the *deep* masculine''. . . . ''A few years ago I began to feel diminished by my lack of embodiment of the fruitful male, or the 'moist male'. . . . The absorption with the mother may last ten, fifteen, twenty years, and then rather naturally, a man turns toward his father.''

This focus on the father as the first ''transformer'' of his son's energies is, ideally, followed by exposure to a ''wise old man,'' who ''assumes the role of a shaman'' and teaches the boy ''artistic curiosity and intellectual discipline values of spirit and soul, the beginnings of a rich inner life.'' This stage should be followed by an ''intensive study of mythology.''

> William V. Davis. *Understanding Robert Bly* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Pr., 1988), pp. 137–38

Bly himself is aware of the problem of isolation in such personal poetry, and admits as much in a comment on the *Snowy Fields* poems: ''I don't feel much human relationship in these poems, and the hundred thousand objects of twentieth-century life are absent also'' (*Selected Poems* 27). He claims that his purpose was ''to gain a resonance among the sounds,'' as well as ''between the soul and a loved countryside.'' This vein being worked, his solution was to follow Neruda toward the ''impure'' poetry of politics. The Vietnam War, of course, provided his occasion. . . . In an essay on political poetry, Bly speaks of the need of a poet, once he has fully grasped his own concerns, to leap up to the ''psyche'' of the nation: ''the life of the nation can be imagined . . . as a psyche larger than the psyche of anyone living, a larger sphere, floating above everyone. In order for the poet to write a true political poem, he has to be able to have such a grasp of his own concerns that he can leave them for a while, and then leap up into this other psyche.'' This statement acts both as an apology for the poems of *Snowy Fields* and as a program for the poems of *The Light Around the Body* (1967) and *The Teeth Mother Naked at Last* (1970).

> Jeffrey Alan Triggs. *New Orleans Review*. Fall-Winter, 1992, p. 164

Iron John, then, grows not only out of Bly's experience during the past decade in the men's movement but out of the central meanings of his life. . . . His devotion to asserting and cultivating the primalness and primacy of the imagination in a highly domesticated and institutionalized literary culture has led him to view the condition of men in similar terms and to apply the learning he has acquired in the archeology and anthropology of the imagination to remedy it. This authority is finally what makes *Iron John* a serious, ground breaking book. . . .

Also, *Iron John* has a lot of specific insight and lore to teach men and employs a very effective method. It takes an old story and gives it a new spin, thereby enlisting the child in us who is still most open to learning and the adult who is keen to escape from his own banality. Along with combining therapy for men, or at the very least clarity, with a course in the world mythology and ethnography of male initiation, *Iron John* is also a spiritual poetry reading in which the words of Blake and Kabir, Rumi and Yeats and many others join Bly's own poems as a kind of accompaniment to the text.

> Ted Solotaroff. ''Captain Bly''. In William V. Davis, ed. *Critical Essays on Robert Bly* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1992), pp. 262–63

Perhaps no one has excited greater single-handed influence on the course of mainstream American poetry since the early sixties than Robert Bly. The rise of creative writing programs coincided with Bly's energetic and broadcast polemicizing on behalf of a vision of a poetry revolutionized, internationalized, and politicized. The simultaneous escalation of the war in Vietnam gave Bly even wider exposure and influence. His essays spoke to a generation impatient with the status quo, irritated at the slowness of change, and enraged at the obduracy of an obsolete establishment. How easy it was to spill politics into poetry; the injustice of the war, of a national posture revealed in the Civil Rights movement, made Bly's message all the more urgent. And it didn't hurt that the ideas he advocated for poetry were easily applied in poetry workshops: focus on the image, on its psychological and political resonance, with little attention to the forms of verse, other than discarding the traditional (what worse condemnation?) trappings of rhyme and meter. Even the models he proposed were tailored to the political climate; Central Americans, Spanish surrealists, wild-eyed and free-spirited political activists or at least licensed outsiders.

Bly's essays are best read in light of this historic context. To this end, the essays bear the date of their initial publication. The essays from the first of the book's three divisions, ''Looking for Dragon Smoke,'' represent his thinking from the sixties through the early seventies, ''sum[ming]up,'' as Bly writes, ''the platform of viewpoint of my magazine, *The Fifties, The Sixties*, and *The Seventies*.'' The second section consists of essays on twelve of Bly's contemporaries, culled from reviews and, in some instances, combining shorter reviews of a poet across a span of many years. Finally, ''Educating the Rider and the Horse'' concentrates on the evolving shape of American poetry over the past thirty or so years. Most interesting here are the essays, composed in the eighties, wherein Bly levels a critical eye at the workshop mentality's effect on American poetry.

> Allen Hoey. *Southern Humanities Review*. Spring, 1993, pp. 189–90

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BODENHEIM, Maxwell (1893–1954)

His verse is Chinese. It does not resemble Chinese poetry; it is not a direct and unfigured commentary on nature; quite the contrary. It is Chinese in etiquette rather, being stilted, conventional to its own conventions, and formally bandaged in red tape. It is a social gathering of words; they have ancestries and are over-bred; they know the precepts of the Law and take delight in breaking them. Meeting together they bow too deeply, make stiff patterns on paper or silk, relate their adventures in twisted metaphor and under an alias, sometimes jest pompously behind a fan. They discovered irony late in life.

Bodenheim is a master of their ceremony and arranges it with an agile fantasy which takes the place of imagination.

Malcolm Cowley. *Dial*. Oct., 1922. p. 446

He has humiliated nouns and adjectives, stripped them of their old despotisms and loyalties, and of the importance which ages of power as vehicles of broad emotions had given them over the minds of poets and men. He has given them the roles of impersonal figures tracing his mathematics of the soul. His words are sharp, neatly strung, with tapping consonants and brief unemotional vowels, like the chip of a fatal chisel. . . . Metaphysics is a man's choice of his own *mise en scene*—in Bodenheim's poems it is an arctic light in which his brilliant images accept their own insignificance as finalities, yet are animated by the macabre elation which has thrown them into relief.

Louis Grudin. *Poetry*. Nov., 1922. pp. 102–4

Here is a ferocious anti-sentimentalist. I am not sure how much of a poet Mr. Bodenheim is. What I am sure of is that his work is honest—honest to the point of mocking at its own honesty—and that it never mistakes a state of sentiment for one of intense feeling. . . . Mr. Bodenheim is, as the stinging acidity of his style betrays, less concerned anyway with feeling than with thought. Life is to him a boundless paradox, an irony of defeat, a bitter act of treachery. Alike in his method of writing, his attitude to society at large, and his defiant individualism, he reveals the poet preoccupied with moral, rather than aesthetic values.

John Gould Fletcher. *Freeman*. Jan. 30, 1924. p. 502

One has a picture of Bodenheim as ring master, cracking his savage whip over the heads of cowering adjectives and recalcitrant nouns, compelling them to leap in grotesque and unwilling pairs over the fantastically piled barriers of his imagination. It is a good show—particularly for those who have not seen it too often. . . . He is still—if I may take my metaphor out of the circus—the sardonic euphuist; his irony leaps, with fascinating transilience, from one image to another. . . . But, for all his intellectual alertness, the total effect is an acrobatic monotony: what started as a manner is degenerating into a mannerism.

Louis Untermeyer. *Bookman*. April, 1924. pp. 220–1

Though his sensitive feeling for words betrays him sometimes into preciosity, mostly he makes it serve his purpose. For his is an art of veiled and egoistic emotions, in which the immediate subject, be it a lady or a buttercup or the rear porch of an apartment building reflects, like an actor's practice-mirror, the poet's swiftly changing expressions and attitudes. . . . With Mr. Bodenheim it is the one all-engrossing phenomenon of the universe. Standing before the mirror, he is kindled to frozen fires of passion over the ever-changing aspects of his thought in its mortal sheath; he is intrigued—nay, moved to the white heat of ice by the subtle workings of his mind, trailing off from the central unreal reality there visible out to nebulous remote circumferences of an ego-starred philosophy.

Harriet Monroe. *Poetry*. March, 1925. pp. 322–3

His poems frequently testify to the fact that he has had, and that he is capable of emotion; but they are almost never a direct expression of emotions. Rather, they are an analytic recollection of such states of mind; and the effect, in the hands of the curious word-lover that Mr. Bodenheim is, is odd and individual and not infrequently pleasing. In his simpler and less pretentious things, when he merely indulges his fancy, as in ''Chinese Gifts,'' he can be charming. Here the verbalist and the cerebralist momentarily surrender, the colder processes are in abeyance, and the result is a poetry slight but fragrant. But for the rest, one finds Mr. Bodenheim a little bit wordy and prosy. One feels that he works too hard and plays too little; or that when he plays, he plays too solemnly and heavily.

Conrad Aiken. *New Republic*. June 1, 1927. p. 53

To consider Mr. Bodenheim at all is very much like considering a prickly pear; one never knows when he is going to get a thorn run through his finger. Still, like the prickly pear, once the combative surface is pierced an edible and tasty (albeit faintly acidulous) fruit is to be discovered. In other words, Mr. Bodenheim has his values, his poetical accomplishments (of no mean order, either), his impalpable connotations, and his savage satirical zest that is quite often salty enough to delight the victim. Together with his value he

has drawbacks. Now these drawbacks are mainly on the surface, as the thorns of the prickly pear are. They are evidenced mainly in an undue suspiciousness of the world at large, in an instinctive gesture of defense that reveals itself in a consistent offensive, in an emphatic disgust for the commonplaces and courtesies of polite living and in a passion for cerebralism that sometimes goes to such lengths as to defeat its objective.

Herbert Gorman. *Saturday Review*. June 18, 1927. p. 912

Maxwell Bodenheim's book of poems (*Bringing Jazz*) might well be used as a starting point for a definition of jazz esthetics. First of all, it provides a particular kind of superlative entertainment that depends almost entirely upon the titillations of jazz rhythm and the impact of a brilliant, quickly assimilated image. . . . Next we see that Bodenheim's specific brand of irony which he has employed throughout his work, including the discovery of the American underworld in his novels, is converted into a jazz medium. . . . In spite of the many attempts to capture jazz rhythm with all its essentials intact and at the same time to create actual poetry, we have but two successful examples of this style, both significant because they display a like precision in technique: T.S. Eliot's ''Fragments of an Agon: Wanna Go Home, Baby?'' and a selection of three or four poems from *Bringing Jazz*.

Horace Gregory. *New Republic*. March 12, 1930. p. 107

Mr. Bodenheim is all personality. He has become a legendary figure of Bohemianism, a vague mixture of Greenwich Village orgies and soapbox oratory. Of course he is neither one nor the other. He is a poet entirely writing about himself and when he seems to be writing about the injustice of the world and the wretched social system of the world he is still writing about himself, as one might almost say, a willing and masochistic victim. He takes upon himself the whole burden of the worker's complaint against the capitalist's way of making his life. . . . His poems are largely a set of grievances, and they have their value. . . . Their value, in so far as it is a value, is in personality, not at all in communism or in religion but in one's self. . . . It is the quick, involved and rude life that Mr. Bodenheim writes of, his own life, not necessarily correlated with the life of our time.

Peter Monro Jack. *New York Times Book Section*. March 29, 1942. p. 4

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BOGAN, Louise (1897–1970)

Under a diversity of forms Miss Bogan has expressed herself with an almost awful singleness. . . . One can be certain that experience of some ultimate sort is behind this writing, that something has been gone through with entirely and intensely, leaving the desolation of a field swept once for all by fire. But the desolation is not vacancy or lassitude. The charred grass is brilliantly black, and the scarred ground is fascinating in its deformity. There still is life, hidden and bitterly urgent.

Mark Van Doren. *The Nation*. Oct. 31, 1923. p. 494

Miss Bogan's themes are the reasons of the heart that reason does not know, the eternal strangeness of time in its period and its passage, the curious power of art. Her mood is oftenest a sombre one, relieved not by gaiety but by a sardonic wit. She is primarily a lyricist. . . . It is the spirit's song that Louise Bogan sings, even when her subject is the body. The texture of her verse is strong and fine, her images, though few, are fit, her cadences well-managed. . . . Implicit in her work is the opposition between a savage chaos and the world that the ordering imagination, whether directed by the intellect or the heart, controls.

Babette Deutsch. *Poetry in Our Time* (Holt). 1932. pp. 238–9

There are bitter words. But they are not harassingly bitter. . . . There are paralleled series of antithetical thoughts, but the antithesis is never exaggerated. . . . There are passages that are just beautiful words rendering objects of beauty. . . . And there are passages of thought as static and as tranquil as a solitary candle-shaped flame of the black yew tree that you see against Italian skies. . . . There is, in fact, everything that goes to the making of one of those more pensive seventeenth century, usually ecclesiastical English poets who are the real glory of our two-fold lyre. Miss Bogan may—and probably will—stand somewhere in a quiet landscape that contains George Herbert, and Donne and Vaughan, and why not even Herrick?

Ford Madox Ford. *Poetry*. June, 1937. pp. 160–1

I hope she now decides to make some change in her theory and practice of the poet's art. Together they have been confining her to a somewhat narrow range of expression. Her new poems—meditative, witty, and sometimes really wise—suggest that she has more to say than can be crowded into any group of lyrics, and that perhaps she should give herself more space and less time. Most American poets write too much and too easily; Miss Bogan ought to write more, and more quickly, and even more carelessly. There are poems, sometimes very good ones, that have to be jotted down quickly or lost forever.

Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*. Nov. 10, 1941. p. 625

Miss (Leonie) Adams and Miss Bogan were surely sisters in the same aesthetic current; and while I must confess that I have often wondered why that sisterhood insisted on wearing its chastity belt

on the outside, poetry nevertheless remains wherever the spirit finds it.

But—speaking as one reader—if I admire objectively the poems of the first three (the earlier) sections of Miss Bogan's collection, with the poems of section four, I find myself forgetting the thee and me of it. . . . Miss Bogan began in beauty, but she has aged to magnificence, and I find myself thinking that the patina outshines the gold stain. . . . Miss Bogan sees into herself in the late poems—and not only into herself, but deeply enough into herself to find within her that jungle—call it the Jungian unconscious if you must—that everyone has in himself.

John Ciardi. *The Nation*. May 22, 1954. pp. 445–6

The virtues of her writing which have been most often spoken of are, I should suppose, firmness of outline, prosodic accomplishment, chiefly in traditional metrics, purity of diction and tone, concision of phrase, and, what results in craft from all these, and at bottom from a way of seizing experience, concentrated singleness of effect. . . . A large part of their moral force derives from the refusal to be deluded or to be overborne. The learning of the unwanted lesson, the admission of the hard fact, a kind of exhilaration of rejection, whether of the scorned or the merely implausible, the theme appears in the earliest work. . . . It is an art of limits, the limit of the inner occasion and of the recognized mode.

Leonie Adams. *Poetry*. Dec., 1954. pp. 166–9

Women are not noted for terseness, but Louise Bogan's art is compactness compacted. Emotion with her, as she has said of certain fiction, is ''itself form, the kernel which builds outward from inward intensity.'' She uses a kind of forged rhetoric that nevertheless seems inevitable. . . . One is struck by her restraint—an unusual courtesy in this day of bombast.

Marianne Moore. *Predilections* (Viking). 1955. p. 130

Miss Bogan's volume. . . is not the volume of a poet for whom verse is merely a pastime, a diversion; the care with which the details have been selected and ordered. . . is the care of devotion. . . . All this is fine and dandy, and it may properly lead—as it has led—to observations about the importance of cultivating a poetry of care in a careless world. . . .(Yet) some of the critics . . . have noted a coldness here, an overscrupulousness there, and a general absence of the warm rhetoric of persuasion in poems so strenuously dedicated to the ''verbal discipline.''

Reed Whittemore. *Sewanee Review*. Winter, 1955. p. 163

Miss Bogan is one of our finest poets. She has written twenty or twenty-five poems that are unforgettable; they may be the best of their kind in American literature. And what we get from them, I think, aside from our delight, is the recognition of her basic poetic wisdom. She has not resisted her temptations, for she has seen that resistance can produce only poems which are crafty and correct but rarely interesting. Instead she has yielded; she has taken her temptations as they came, and has outsmarted them. Let the poem be conventional, public, and occasional, since that is the mask one must wear—so she might have spoken—but let each poem reveal just enough of a private inner violence to make the surface move without breaking. A passionate austerity, a subtle balance; and only perfect poetic attention, far beyond technique, could attain it.

Hayden Carruth. *Poetry*. Aug., 1969. p. 330

To write as a woman of things that concern woman would have meant to me [as a young writer] soft prose, fine writing and poetical musings by three-named lady writers. I intended to avoid all of it. But Louise Bogan suggested something deeper: a lack of options as part of the condition of being a woman, a narrow life chosen by women because they were unwilling, if not unable, to take risk. And yet wasn't there something of a risk in the act of being the person who wrote the poem?. . .

For these are the cries of a woman—cries against the turning of luck or of bad timing, and they speak of the ability to face the mirror or the bottle, of the courage to go to the ''mad-house'' (as she called it in a letter to Theodore Roethke) when life went down on her and she could not pull herself up alone any more. There is a loss implied in these poems for all women who are alone and aging; that final loss when there is no one to turn to again at night in bed under the covers, when there is no one to hold you against the dark.

Nancy Milford. *New York Times Book Section*. Dec. 16, 1973. p. 1

It is [a] constant conflict between will and authority that shapes Bogan's poems. Because she herself unconsciously represented some of the strictures her spirit rebelled against, only form and symbol can express the tight, concentrated emotion of the unconscious struggling with the conscious. Although she strove always to make her poetry something beyond the narrowly personal and to cast out ''small emotions with which poetry should not, and cannot deal,'' to be objective (a note on the worksheet indicating the poems to be published in the volume *The Sleeping Fury* says ''. . . they must be as objective as possible''), it is often the personal emotion of the poet that informs the poem and gives authenticity to it. The emotion which is distanced by formal structures, sometimes distanced to the point of a ''mask,'' a male persona, operates to illustrate the inherent conflict that the poem is really about. . . .

Her use of lyrical stanzas with second and fourth lines of rhyme or slant rhyme link the intellectual content of the poem with the subjective response to rhythm and sound. The appeal is to both the conscious and unconscious, and the imagery is of both: the images of the conscious of the first two stanzas and the images of the unconscious in the last two (''whispers in the glassy corridor'' is especially wonderful in combining sound, imagery, and meaning). The tone is one of unhappy questioning rather than of being ''contented with a thought/Through an idle fancy wrought.'' Her poem wonders about the human state that, by implication, is ruled by the same ''forms and appetites'' as the rest of nature, but aspires to more and therefore suffers. . . .

Louise Bogan once made the comment that highly formal poetry has always been obscure because the universe is difficult. Her own formal poetry is an acknowledgment of that difficulty, that obscurity, and of the complexity of modern truth.

Jacqueline Ridgeway. *Women's Studies*. 5, 2, 1977, pp. 141, 147–48

Louise Bogan was a poet who matured during the first half of this century and who embraced traditional forms, masks, and mythologies. Compared to contemporary women poets, she is neither direct, personal, or particular. Yet buried under the metrical decorum, the masks, the symbols, and the reticence of her poetry is a person who is painfully aware of her situation as a woman, and who tries to escape it. . . .

The strongest desire in Bogan's poetry has Emersonian overtones: she wants to recover a sense of wholeness in the face of the human passion for destructive analysis. Bogan dislikes anything that the human mind superimposes on the world because human interpretations or analyses are distortions of the unity of nature and experience. Her clearest expression of this dislike is in ''Baroque Comment.''. . .

''Masked Woman's Song'' is extremely oblique and can only be understood by sifting it through the motifs in her other poems. . . . In Bogan's poetry men are always threatening or betraying. They try to pin women to words in ''The Romantic,'' try to trap women in those forms ''Coincident with the lie, anger, lust, oppression and death in many forms'' in ''Baroque Comment,'' and try to reduce women to heartless, emotionless servants who ''return, return,/To meet forever Jim home on the 5:35,'' in ''Evening in the Sanitarium.''. . .

In [''Masked Woman's Song''] . . . Bogan writes that men have overthrown the constructive values of life, like freedom and love, and have forced women to live, out of fear, at a distance, masked from the varieties of experience and the wellsprings of life. But such an interpretation must be made between the lines: Bogan's attitude toward men, as ever, is obscured by her restrained and elliptical style. Her true feelings are blurred by symbol, distanced by masks, muted by form.

Today, needless to say, such a style is rare, if not impossible, in a feminist poet. Where free verse is the exception in Bogan's poetry, something like a sigh of relief in a wasteland of anxiety and repression, most contemporary women poets use free forms as a matter of course, for their spontaneity, directness, and freedom from objectification and unwanted literary associations. But contemporary women poets have much less to fear than Bogan did; feminism is more secure now and support groups abound. Yet Louise Bogan was one of the earlier women poets who pointed to a way out of the strangling forms and mentalities of traditional verse. If for no other reason than that, her life and her poetry deserve our interest and attention.

Patrick Moore. In *Gender and Literary Voice*, ed. Janet Todd (Holmes and Meier, 1980), pp. 67–69, 78–79

When Farrar, Straus & Giroux . . . published a new collected edition in 1968, *The Blue Estuaries: Poems 1923–1968*, Louise Bogan's life as a poet came to an end.

Bogan had dedicated *Selected Criticism: Poetry and Prose* ''To Maidie Alexander, daughter, and friend,'' and she now dedicated what she knew to be her final book of poems ''To the memory of my father, mother, and brother.'' Her depression had been at least in part an attempt to connect with them, and this dedication acknowledged the bridge between her life's work and her love for her family. The poems in the sixth and last section of the book were Bogan's final fruits, and of two kinds, primarily. There were occasional poems, like those in the final section of *Poems and New Poems*, and simple, severe lyrics. Some were old poems, written or put down as first drafts as long ago as 1940; others had been written after 1948, about the time, that is, that Bogan had stopped thinking of herself as a *practicing* poet. Poems had come thereafter one at a time, for the most part, with long intervals in between.

Many of these later poems are in free verse, and in them Bogan arrives at a middle ground between formal rigor and the looser, more open feeling May Sarton had encouraged her to strive for. In ''The Dragonfly,'' for instance, written sometime in the fall of 1961, she worked with short free-verse lines in a delicate line of Thoreauvian naturalism. Its inspiration was a picture postcard of a dragonfly Ruth Limmer had sent her from Detroit, but she wrote the poem on commission for the Corning Glass Company—wrote it to order, that is!—and a piece of Steuben Glass was carved to illustrate it. She was fond of the poem, which, she informed Miss Limmer, was completely ''based on FACT.''

Her formal poems were correspondingly natural in diction.

Elizabeth Frank. *Louise Bogan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), pp. 400–401

A profound change in Louise Bogan's relationship to all poets came with her appointment as a poetry critic of *The New Yorker* in 1931. Bogan complained a great deal about the job: It interfered with her creative life; it reminded her that she was primarily self-taught, not as well-educated, in the formal sense, as most of the people with whom she associated; most important, . . . she was determined to be ''honest'' as she saw and put ''standards'' above friendship. . . . In 1931 then she was forced to take a public stand on poetry; this necessarily included an assessment of women poets. The task no doubt helped her to formulate in a coherent and sustained way her ideas about the special province of women of letters. Her reviews are invaluable to us as a record of one distinguished woman poet's response to American poetry from the twenties through the sixties.

Her strong public stance had a particularly marked effect on her relationships with women. For example, Bogan's reviews of Edna St. Vincent Millay's poems in the late thirties put an end to their friendship. . . . To understand the complexity of friendships and rivalries between ''exceptional'' white women in New York City in the twenties and the thirties, we need to be acutely aware of historical moment and context. This was the post-Suffrage era, the age, in sophisticated circles, of the ''free woman.'' Feminist analyses of the lives of American women in the late twenties and thirties are only now beginning to emerge, but it is surely too simple to say that feminism died utterly after the color, the class, the economic situation, and the location of the women involved. In New York, the white, middle-class, upwardly mobile woman saw it was in her interests to identify publicly more with men than with women. . . .

This, then, was the complex setting for Louise Bogan's poetry: a modernist milieu that had no great expectations for the work of women; subtle relationships among women poets, sometimes rivalrous, sometimes supportive; a powerful post as a critic, which led Bogan to think and write about the relationship of poetry by women to past and present traditions; her own experience of poetry and life, coupled with a shift in poetic taste in the forties, which in

turn prompted a passionate defense of the gift of women's ''heart'' to poetry.

Gloria Bowles. *Louise Bogan's Aesthetic of Limitation* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Pr., 1987), pp. 38–39, 64

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BONTEMPS, Arna (1902–1973)

Arna Bontemps' first venture in fiction [*God Sends Sunday*] is to me a profound disappointment. It is of the school of ''Nigger Heaven'' and ''Home to Harlem.'' There is a certain pathetic touch to the painting of his poor little jockey hero, but nearly all else is sordid crime, drinking, gambling, whore-mongering, and murder. There is not a decent intelligent woman; not a single man with the slightest ambition or real education, scarcely more than one human child in the whole book. Even the horses are drab. In the ''Blues'' alone Bontemps sees beauty. But in brown skins, frizzled hair and full contoured faces, there are to him nothing but ugly, tawdry, hateful things, which he describes with evident caricature.

One reads hurriedly on, waiting for a gleam of light, waiting for the Sunday that some poor ugly black God may send; but somehow it never comes; and if God appears at all it is in the form of a little drunken murderer riding South to Tia Juana on his back.

W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Crisis.* September, 1931, p. 304.

In that limited and almost barren field known as the negro novel, Arna Bontemps's *Black Thunder* fills a yawning gap and fills it competently. Covering all those skimpy reaches of Negro letters I know, this is the only novel dealing forthrightly with the historical and revolutionary traditions of the Negro people.

Black Thunder is the true story of a slave insurrection that failed. But in his telling of the story of that failure Bontemps manages to reveal and dramatize through the character of his protagonist, Gabriel, a quality of folk courage unparalleled in the proletarian literature of this country. . . .

Black Thunder is mainly the story of Gabriel, who believes in the eventual triumph of his destiny in spite of all the forces which conspire against it. He is convinced that God and the universe are on his side. He believes he must and will lead the Negro people to freedom. He seems to have no personal fear and no personal courage. He thinks, dreams, and feels wholly in terms of Negro liberation. . . . When considering Gabriel solely as an isolated individual, he seems sustained by an extremely foolish belief in himself; but when one remembers his slave state, when one realizes the extent to which he has made the wrongs of his people his wrongs, and the degree in which he has submerged his hopes in their hopes—when one remembers this, he appears logically and gloriously invincible. . . .

Gabriel believes [in the uprising], he believes even when he is caught; even when the black cowl is capped about his head, even when the ax swings, he believes. Why? For me the cardinal value of Bontemps's book, besides the fact that it is a thumping story well told, lies in the answer to that question. Perhaps I am straying further afield than the author did in search for an answer. If I do, it is because I believe we have in *Black Thunder* a revelation of the very origin and source of folk values in literature.

Even though Gabriel's character is revealed in terms of personal action and dialogue, I feel there is in him much more than mere personal dignity and personal courage. There is in his attitude something which transcends the limits of immediate consciousness. He is buoyed in his hope and courage by an optimism which takes no account of the appalling difficulties confronting him. He hopes when there are no objective reasons or grounds for hope; he fights when his fellow-slaves scamper for their lives. In doing so, he takes his place in that gallery of fictitious characters who exist on the plane of the ridiculous and the sublime. Bontemps endows Gabriel with a myth-like and deathless quality. And it is in this sense, I believe, that *Black Thunder* sounds a new note in Negro fiction, thereby definitely extending the boundaries and ideology of the Negro novel.

Richard Wright. *Partisan-Review and Anvil.* February, 1936, p. 31.

Arna Bontemps is a transitional figure whose novels bear the mark both of the Negro Renaissance and of the depression years which follow. . . . A minor poet during the 1920s, Bontemps turned later to fiction, history, and books for children. He has written three novels, of which the first *God Sends Sunday* (1931), is an unadulterated product of the Negro Renaissance. The setting of the novel is the sporting world of racetrack men and gamblers, of jazz and the shimmy, of fights and razor carvings. His historical novels, however, which deal with slavery times, reflect the mood of the Depression era. By choosing slave insurrections as a basis for his plots, Bontemps stresses an aspect of slavery which was emotionally appealing to the rebellious thirties. . . .

The narrative technique [of *Black Thunder* (1936)], which conveys the action by a progressive treatment of the participants, is reminiscent of the novels of Dos Passos. The plot is developed in fragments, through short chapters which open with the name of the character under consideration. From this constant shift in point of view, the reader must piece together the full panorama. It is a technique especially suited to the presentation of complex historical events, and Bontemps employs it skillfully. At its best, this technique requires deft characterization, since the action of the novel is constantly refracted through a new consciousness, which the reader must understand in its own right. . . .

Arna Bontemps' second historical novel, *Drums at Dusk* (1939), is in every respect a retreat from the standards of *Black Thunder*. Deriving its plot from the Haitian slave rebellion which brought Toussaint l'Ouverture to power, the novel is unworthy of its subject. In writing of a successful rebellion, Bontemps is deprived of the dramatic power of tragedy, and he discovers no appropriate attitude to take its place. Upon a highly romantic plot he grafts a class analysis of society which is post-Marxian and flagrantly unhistorical. Frequently lapsing into crude melodrama, he embroiders his narrative with all of the sword-play, sex, and sadism of a Hollywood extravaganza.

Robert Bone. In *The Negro Novel in America*, revised edition, Yale University Press, 1965, pp. 120–52.

Bontemps' poems [collected in *Personals*] make use of several recurring themes: the alien-and-exile allusions so often found in New Negro poetry; strong racial suggestiveness and applications; religious themes and imagery subtly used; and the theme of return to a former time, a former love, or a remembered place. On occasion he combines in a way common to lyrical writing the personal with the racial or the general. Many of these poems are protest poems; but the protest is oblique and suggestive rather than frontal. Over all of Bontemps' poetry there is a sad, brooding quality, a sombre ''Il Penseroso'' meditative cast. In *Personals* there are no obviously joyous or humorous pieces.

The poems of Arna Bontemps lack the clear, unambiguous statement of those of his contemporaries: McKay, Cullen, Hughes. There is modern obscurity in these verses, and the so-called meaning often eludes the reader. Their craftsmanship, however, is impressive. The reader somehow feels a certain rightness in Bontemps' lines, that what he has said could not be expressed otherwise. There is a quiet authority in these poems.

Arthur P. Davis. *From the Dark Tower: Afro-American Writers 1900–1960*. Howard University Press, 1974. pp. 83–9.

Arna Bontemps was a prolific, versatile writer whose books were trailblazers for the award-winning works of many of today's black writers—among them Virginia Hamilton, Ashley Bryan, Rosa Guy, Leo and Diane Dillon, and Gwendolyn Brooks. Bontemps's lasting legacy is his writing for children at a time when there were few books written by blacks for black children. His first was *Popo and Fifina,* written with Langston Hughes whom he met during the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. Popo and Fifina, ages eight and ten, are appealing, resourceful children of a Haitian family in a seacoast town. Their father is a fisherman who still finds time to make a red kite, their mother trains them in daily chores, their uncle introduces them to the art of wood designing. The setting is lush and tropical, sunny with mangoes and parrots, vibrant with sudden storms and the midnight music of drums in the forest.

Bontemps turned to Alabama for his next two stories. *You Can't Pet a Possum* is about eight-year-old Shine Boy and his pup Butch who get into trouble but are saved by Aunt Cindy, who finally agrees to let Butch join the family as long as he doesn't act as though he owned the house. ''Do, I'm gonna take a stick and run him raggedy,'' threatens Aunt Cindy in the local vernacular. (Although he used it occasionally in his writing, Bontemps found the Negro dialect mostly offensive and demeaning.) The second story, *Sad-Faced Boy,* is about Slumber and his two brothers who hitchhike to Harlem to visit their uncle. The boys with harmonica, guitar, and drum form a successful band, and have adventures in the library and the subway, but come cold weather, thoughts of cotton and ripe persimmons soon send them back to their cabin in Alabama. *Sad-Faced Boy* was the first children's book in which Bontemps touched on the ''lonesome boy'' theme. He admitted that it was partly autobiographical in origin; as a boy he had looked in vain for lonesome boy stories.

Years later Bontemps explored this theme more fully in the haunting lyrical story *Lonesome Boy.* Bubber is so passionately devoted to his silver trumpet that he blows it loud, fast, and high everywhere he goes. His Grandpa warns him, ''It ain't good to go traipsing around with a horn in your hand. You might get into devilment.'' Bubber grows up still playing his trumpet, all the way down to New Orleans where he plays to his heart's content until the eerie night he learns the meaning of his Grandpa's warning. The mystifying, opaque ending makes the story memorable and tantalizing.

The Fast Sooner Hound, co-written with Jack Conroy, is a lively humorous picture story about a long-legged, lop-eared hound who would ''sooner run then eat.'' He wins a bet for his master by outrunning the Cannon Ball, the fastest train on wheels.

Bontemps's finest achievement is *Story of the Negro,* a book he wished he had had when he was in high school. It is a comprehensive, powerfully written history of the causes and consequences of

slavery from the earliest times. The cruelty, suffering, and humiliations are heartbreaking; the struggles, survivals, and triumphs are extraordinary. The book demonstrates that from Aesop to Martin Luther King Jr., slaves and blacks have sought to arouse the conscience of the nation and the world.

Mary Silva Cosgrave. In *Twentieth-Century Children's Writers*, ed. Laura Standley Berger (St. James Press, 1995).

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BOURJAILY, Vance (1922–)

There are tenderness and violence in Mr. Bourjaily's story, the genuine, not the movie-advertisement kind, and there is much more than that. There is a lot about a generation that is without much hope, that has never known stability, that found, even in [World War II], not much to inspire a thinking man. I hope a lot of people will read *The End of My Life*; I'm sure almost everybody will enjoy it, despite its faults, which are numerous and obvious, and I'm equally certain that Bourjaily is going to write other and better novels. He has done an almost first-rate job with this one.

Merle Miller. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 30, 1947. pp. 17–8

In literary terms, *The End of My Life* stands as a transitional novel squarely between the two generations. Its early lyricism that is so much in the spirit of the old war writing gives way to the dead futility at its end that anticipates the spirit of the new war writing. The development of Skinner through the novel, from the confident cynicism of his prewar attitude to the self-destructive horror induced in him by the reality of war, sets the pattern of the new writing as surely as if he had written it himself. It shows how the discovery of war's truth carried this generation beyond the narrow but highly effective literary frame of simple disillusion and left them with an acute but essentially inexpressible awareness of the complex ills of their time.

John W. Aldridge. *After the Lost Generation* (McGraw). 1951. pp. 131–2

Vance Bourjaily's first novel, *The End of My Life*, had a slightly anachronistic flavor. It told of a second world war that was something of a lark, with ironic sad young men going to Africa to make funny conversation and die. With its extreme youthfulness it constituted a poignant memorial to the wide-eyed college intellectual of the last days of the New Deal.

The Hound of Earth reveals a writer purified of most of the postures of extreme youth. The mocking bright-boy melancholy . . . has been succeeded by a frighteningly immediate, perversely humorous perspective upon contemporary American problems of conscience. . . .

This novel is sometimes arch, as in the romance of its moral suicide; it is frankly sentimental at times and then abandons itself to whimsey. . . . But for the most part it holds in balance its humor and its pathos—this tension is the special note of Bourjaily's style—and endures past a first reading as an effective drama about how difficult it is to be both responsible and an individual in contemporary America.

Herbert Gold. *The Nation*. July 23, 1955. p. 79

All the characters in Vance Bourjaily's novel *The Violated* . . . pursue contemptible ideals insofar as they pursue anything other than love affairs. This enormously long, soggily earnest book is the more exasperating because it contains enough brilliant flashes to keep the reader hoping for better things.

According to Mr. Bourjaily, his novel is about a group of people who are ''violated . . . by their inability to communicate, to love, to comprehend, to create—violated by neurotic commitments to preposterous goals or, more tragically, to no goals at all.'' This is a perfectly accurate description of the three men whose dreary careers are followed over some thirty years, and also of everyone connected with them, and this is the book's weakness. . . . The nervous, inquisitive rootlessness of late adolescence is well conveyed, but the disabilities that prevent these characters from attaching themselves to the world as they grow older are nebulous. . . . They seem to be people congenitally incapable of coming to grips with anything. . . .

While it is possible to admire the skill with which Mr. Bourjaily writes, and respect his concern for the unhappy people he writes about, it is difficult to share his assumption that the plight of these unaccountable cripples is worth 599 pages.

Phoebe Adams. *Atlantic Monthly*. Oct., 1958. pp. 90–1

The Violated seems to me a failure, but an interesting one, if only because of the way in which Mr. Bourjaily's courage and ambition lead him to repeated troubles. He has chosen to write one of those full-scale, lavishly detailed narratives composed of parallel and intersecting levels. Such a technique, borrowed from the social novel of the early years of the century, assumes that society is

distinctly, even rigidly stratified; that its component classes are intrinsically interesting and worth observing; that a novelist can arrange a conflict between members of these classes which will be dramatic in its own right and representative of larger issues; and that thereby the narrative can finally be brought to a coherent climax.

But for the material Mr. Bourjaily has chosen—the lives of pitiful and bewildered drifters during the past two decades—these assumptions do not operate with sufficient force. His central characters are not distinctive enough, either in social or personal qualities, to warrant separate strands of narrative. As they collapse into each other's lives, the successes of one indistinguishable from the failures of the other, they create a smudge of sadness at the very point where the novel demands tension and clarity. Like the post-war society they reflect, these characters are too much of a sameness, so that one wearies of their presence almost as quickly as one credits their reality.

Irving Howe. *New Republic*. Nov. 10, 1958. p. 17

Bourjaily's first two novels were . . . ''symbolic.'' The main character in *The End of My Life* . . . is made to stand for an entire generation. As he gradually comes to lose all his feeling for other people, and thus all his desire for life, he represents in extreme . . . the effects of the war. . . . But Bourjaily's last two books have made every attempt to eschew these metaphorical devices, and for this reason they stand apart from most American fiction. . . . The characters, events, and ideas in *Confessions of a Spent Youth* are held together by a tone of detached yet committed inquiry and by a conversational style that moves easily from quiet humor to unobtrusive lyricism.

Harris Dienstfrey. *Commentary*. April, 1961. pp. 360–2

Vance Bourjaily in *The Man Who Knew Kennedy* . . . is examining the meaning of the event [the assassination of Kennedy] for the generation to which Kennedy belonged, and his novel is the story of a part of that generation. . . . In an earlier novel, *The Hound of Earth*, one I have always liked, Bourjaily also made a historic event his center—the explosion of the atom bomb over Hiroshima. . . . Bourjaily's most recent novel, on the other hand, *Confessions of a Spent Life*, seems to grow almost entirely and directly out of his own experience. His strength, whether his approach to a novel is subjective or objective, is his familiarity with American manners in the postwar world. It is really, of course, only a small segment of American experience that he presents in *The Man Who Knew Kennedy*; but such as it is, he gives it life.

The book is extremely readable, and in part, despite its solemn theme, it is charming. . . . What mildly bothers me about the book is that parts of it seem to me a little slick in a way that Bourjaily's earlier novels haven't been.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. Feb. 4, 1967. pp. 35–6

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BOURNE, Randolph (1886–1918)

Here was no anonymous reviewer, no mere brilliant satellite of the radical movement losing himself in his immediate reactions: one finds everywhere, interwoven in the fabric of his work, the silver thread of a personal philosophy, the singing line of an intense and beautiful desire.

What was that desire? It was for a new fellowship in the youth of America as the principle of a great and revolutionary departure in our life, a league of youth, one might call it, consciously framed with the purpose of creating, out of the blind chaos of American society, a fine, free, articulate cultural order. That, as it seems to me, was the dominant theme of all his effort, the positive theme to which he always returned from his thrilling forays into the fields of education and politics, philosophy and sociology. . . . Here was Emerson's ''American scholar'' at last, but radiating an infinitely warmer, profaner, more companionable influence than Emerson had ever dreamed of, an influence that savored rather of Whitman and William James. He was the new America incarnate, with that stamp of a sort of permanent youthfulness on his queer, twisted, appealing face.

Van Wyck Brooks. Introduction to *The History of a Literary Radical and Other Papers* by Randolph Bourne (S.A. Russell). 1956. [1919]. pp. 3–4

He discovered new educational experiments; new pathfindings in philosophy and literature; new flights in politics and musical art. To the problems of each field he seemed to bring the whole sum of his former experience, his deep intuition and sure sense of fact, sharp comprehension, quick imaginativeness, and pleasure in the sensuous. And through this liberal delivery, the reports of his discoveries, whether they assumed the shape of a description of the schools in Gary or of a review of a novel, of a whimsical account of friends, children, teachers, or a serious discussion of the future of American culture, became, almost always, experiments in themselves, new theories of facts, new keen images of reality. Bourne could speak with equal sureness, humanity, lightness on a dozen different topics; and his talk itself, like his book-reviewing, was a sort of adventure.

Paul Rosenfeld. *Dial*. Dec., 1923. p. 552

Already he is more or less a legend to many persons who have not even opened his books and do not know that they contain all the germs of the new spirit. But even a casual examination will prove that those germs are there. Touchingly prophetic, Bourne felt the coming struggle before it had become evident to less subtle

observers. During his brief, vivid life he managed to utter some significant reflection upon almost every topic which vitally concerns the age. He wrote of religion, the state, property, the arts, education.

Carl and Mark Van Doren. *American and British Literature Since 1890* (Century). 1925. p. 123

All of this work [of Bourne] represented the very first quality in the journalism of ideas, but for the most part, it was still journalism. His view of life was maturing, deepening, not yet ready for rounded expression, it was still a promise. . . . Randolph Bourne was precious to us because of what he was, rather than because of what he had actually written. . . . He will never occupy the place of a great teacher, but one feels that potentially he had exactly that office, and that in ten years, in twenty years, he would have distilled out of such pain and frustration as only a crippled man can know, a new image of beauty and perfection.

Lewis Mumford. *New Republic*. Sept. 24, 1930. pp. 151–2

He was very deformed. Not alone was he dwarfed and hunchbacked: his face was twisted, he had a tortured ear, his color was sallow and his breathing was audible and hard. He walked in a cape that hid him. He took a chair for the first time in your presence, let fall the black shroud about him, and revealed a form so mangled that you despaired ever to find sufficient ease for the sort of conversation his immediately brilliant mind demanded.

But the magic of Randolph Bourne was not separate from his poor body, and at once you knew this. This is why, in writing of this splendid spirit, it is meet to dwell upon his misery. Within half an hour, your discomfort was gone—so miraculously gone that your mind was prone to look about for it. But whenever, in the future, awareness did return of the grotesque shape in which this spirit was imprisoned and was doomed to walk, it was intellectual altogether: the mind needed to stir the senses with the thought of it, while the senses moved in full ease within his presence.

Waldo Frank. *In the American Jungle* (Farrar and Rinehart). 1937. pp. 59–60

His book-reviews tended always to be critical essays on the social roots of a man's thinking. They were radical in the sense that they were unsparing in the application of the critical canons they chose. Not that Bourne lacked a breadth of sympathy: his essay on Cardinal Newman had in it generosity and enjoyment. But the main direction of his mind was more exacting. . . . His attacks on the Philistines among novelists and critics . . . had a joyful abandon. He was, in a sense, an American Matthew Arnold, with a touch of Nietzsche's ''gay science,'' who had studied Veblen and delighted in him. His writing, like Veblen's, was ironic: and I am using the term here in Bourne's sense of irony—as flowing from a democracy of the literary realm in which no idea can plead privilege or immunity from a drastic deflation. . . . His attack on the liberal intellectuals of his day and on their role in bringing America into the war was one of the most scathing in American political literature. Bourne was pacifist in his deepest convictions; he was also a democrat in the truest cultural sense. The war crossed his grain on both counts.

Max Lerner. *Twice A Year*. 1940–1941. pp. 65, 68

Above all Bourne was the perfect child of the prewar Enlightenment; when its light went out in 1918, he died with it. Afterward his story seemed so much the martyrology of his generation that the writer was lost in the victim. Yet even when one goes back to Bourne's books—not merely his bitter and posthumously published collections of essays, but his early studies of contemporary youth, education, and politics—it is not hard to see why Bourne must always seem less a writer than the incarnation of his time. For from his first book, *Youth and Life*, to the *Impressions of Europe* which he wrote on a fellowship abroad and his books on education and the Gary schools, Bourne proved himself so inexpressibly confident of a future established on the evangelicisms of his period, so radiant in his championship of pragmatism, art, reason, European social democracy, and the experimental school, that he now seems a seismograph on which were recorded the greatest hopes and fiercest despairs of his time.

Alfred Kazin. *On Native Grounds* (Reynal). 1942. pp. 183–4

The key to the bewildering variety of essays and book-reviews which Bourne poured out in the short space of his career lay in their literary quality. He drew strength from the forces which were rapidly transforming the country; he was eager to assist that transformation. But his articles dealing with city and town planning, feminism, Americanization, and college reform—though keen and even startling, although based on solid studies in education, sociology, and political science—were essentially fragments. They served to show the impact of new social developments on a sensitive mind. Bourne's literary essays, on the other hand, were not only thought through, but made up a collection of work which could bear examination years later.

Louis Filler. *Randolph Bourne* (American Council on Public Affairs). 1943. p. 79

From a pragmatic standpoint Randolph Bourne was a tragic failure. In possession of all the intellectual qualifications for leadership, well on his way towards a position of power and influence, he deliberately rejected the world at a time of crisis and assumed the role of an outcast crying in the wilderness. With the Kaiser's military might let loose over Europe, with democratic society in grave danger, he quixotically expounded a pacifistic anarchism. It might even be argued that the poison of perversity had early entered his spirit and embittered his entire life's experience. From his first passionate attacks on the folkways and activities of the older generation he proceeded in a contrary direction which logically ended in his uncompromising opposition to a war which the best minds accepted as the lesser of the dire alternatives confronting the country. For all his native gifts, he was only a negative and fanatical eccentric.

History, however, will deal more fairly with him. For he belongs not with the politicians but with the prophets. What matters

in his case was not his reaction to daily events nor his judgment of temporal affairs but his energetic stimulation of minds and his vision of the good life. Few Americans possessed his enthusiasm for the deepending and enrichment of our indigenous culture. He early sought to remove the layer of rust and rot which crusted the minds of many Americans.

Charles Madison. *Critics and Crusaders* (Holt). 1947. pp. 440–1

Like Socrates he was a creative critic who placed his faith in the education of youth, education built around a fresh, intense, and ongoing examination of society. Bourne's life was all of a piece. Consistency was its badge. One can refer, as we shall see, to any part of his career without worry of finding contradictions in thought or method. He called continually for social progress through social enrichment.

Contrary to the misreading of critics, the core of Bourne's philosophy was neither the relation between political power and cultural creation nor a naive faith in a revolutionary mass movement of youth against the older generation. The root of Bourne's thinking was the conviction that modern times need a modern religion, a reestablishment of values and methods.

A.F. Beringause. *Journal of the History of Ideas*. Oct., 1957. p. 598

The only public issues that engaged Bourne's imagination for very long were questions, not of politics, but of culture: education, feminism, the rebellion of youth. . . . [A]ll his works came back in one way or another to the fact which from childhood had burned itself into Bourne's consciousness, the gap between the generations. . . . Bourne thought he was repudiating politics, and he attacked other progressives as having subordinated everything else to political concerns; and yet his own conception of politics as a ''means to life'' represented an extension of the political into the most intimate areas of existence. To say that politics was of no use unless it could improve the very tone and quality of people's private lives was to argue in effect that every aspect of existence was ultimately a question for political decision.

Christopher Lasch. *The New Radicalism in America* (Knopf). 1965. pp. 83, 90

Bourne had also begun to make literary experiments. Half a dozen of his ''portraits,'' some satiric, some almost poetic, were published in *The New Republic*. Like Henry Adams, he was captivated by the feminine mystique, and felt keenly the energy and the vitality and the attraction of women. He wrote of the suffragettes with a tartness. . . . But he wrote also of their longings and of their loneliness. He wrote of young men who played the violin, who spent long hours reading in the cavernous halls of the Forty-second Street Library. His portraits were not ''grotesques,'' as Sherwood Anderson would call his sketches of *Winesburg, Ohio*; they were wistful and lonely. Bourne's people were not yet adrift in Dos Passos' pulsating world; they were not yet ''lost'' in Paris cafes. They were at once gay and sad. Bourne was a poet of solitaries, of the ironic, idealistic young people who had not yet had the war cross their lives.

Lillian Schlissel. Introduction to *The World of Randolph Bourne* (Dutton). 1965. pp. xxviii–xxix

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BOWLES, Jane (1917–1973)

There is nothing propagandistic or topical in Jane Bowles's *In the Summer House*, . . . which is not the only reason I prefer it to most of the plays I have seen this season. Its author has an original writing talent and a not at all stock sensibility. It may even be deemed a paradox that I like the earlier or wackier part of the play better than the last part, in which the characters are resolved with the aid of a little off-the-cuff psychoanalysis. . . . The aimless dialogue, the sadly abstract atmosphere of the first part of *In the Summer House*, is lovely, colorful and strangely evocative: it spins a melody of the trivial and ''pointless'' which emanates from the semiconsciousness of rather ordinary folk with a primitive directness that is essentially poetic.

Harold Clurman. *The Nation*. Jan. 16, 1954. p. 58

Surrounding Mrs. Bowles's art is an effluvium of chic despair which will alienate many readers. On the other hand, her work can easily be overvalued since it combines proud idiosyncrasy with a rather startling prescience (her novel, *Two Serious Ladies*, . . . forecast the current vogue of comic gothicism). When that book first appeared here, reviewers could damn it with a clear conscience: modernism had not yet become an obligatory mass fashion. . . . Today in the United States, where the cultivated reader feels duty-bound to be affronted, Mrs. Bowles's controlled derision is likely to seem the definitive force of civilized disgust.

Surely her indictments have an easy inclusiveness. Like her husband Paul, Mrs. Bowles writes tight little anecdotes about the pull of bestiality, an unexpected form of self-fulfillment. Like her husband's stories, hers pit the weak against the strong, the righteous against the sensual, only to record a general rout. Though her tales lack his intellectual clarity, they have greater charm.

Charles Thomas Samuels. *New York Review of Books*. Dec. 15, 1966. p. 38

. . . I saw *In the Summer House* three times . . . because it had a thorny wit, the flavor of a newly tasted, refreshingly bitter beverage—the same qualities that had initially attracted me to Mrs. Bowles's novel, *Two Serious Ladies*. . . . And yet, though the tragic

view is central to her vision, Jane Bowles is a very funny writer, a humorist of sorts—but *not*, by the way, of the Black School. Black Comedy, as its perpetrators label it, is, when successful, all lovely artifice and lacking any hint of compassion. Her subtle comprehension of eccentricity and human apartness as revealed in her work require us to accord Jane Bowles high esteem as an artist.

Truman Capote. Introduction to *The Collected Works of Jane Bowles* (Farrar). 1966. pp. viii–ix

It is to be hoped that she will now be recognized for what she is: one of the finest modern writers of fiction, in any language. . . . Mrs. Bowles's seemingly casual, colloquial prose is a constant miracle; every line rings as true as a line of poetry, though there is certainly nothing ''poetic'' about it, except insofar as the awkwardness of our everyday attempts at communication is poetic. This awkwardness can rise to comic heights, and in doing so evoke visions of a nutty America that we have to recognize as ours. . . .

In her later stories Mrs. Bowles has played down the picaresque local color she used to such effect in the novel. . . . As in all her work, it is impossible to deduce the end of a sentence from its beginning, or a paragraph from the one that preceded it, or how one of the characters will reply to another. And yet the whole flows marvelously and inexorably to its cruel, lucid end; it becomes itself as we watch it. No other contemporary writer can consistently produce surprise of this quality, the surprise that is the one essential ingredient of great art. Jane Bowles deals almost exclusively in this rare commodity.

John Ashbery. *New York Times Book Section*. Jan. 29, 1967. pp. 5, 30

It is difficult to imagine—especially in these days of celebrity-authors—a writer who would actually *prefer* a limited readership, but then Jane Bowles is not like other writers. She is original to the point of being unnerving, and it seems entirely possible that she wrote as much with the intention to exclude as to include. She is fated to remain a specialized taste because hers goes beyond a mere idiosyncrasy of style, an identifiable semantic tic like Donald Barthelme's or William Gass's. One is tempted to make comparisons—to Ivy Compton-Burnett for the entrenched habit of irony, to Carson McCullers for the use of the grotesque—but they don't really hold up: she is both more human than the former and less sentimental than the latter. Bowles's voice is an uncompromisingly independent one and it bespeaks a vision of life so unflinching as to challenge most of our assumptions.

To read *My Sister's Hand in Mine* is to submit to a demanding presence. Jane Bowles is one of those writers who can truly be said to inhabit a country of her own making. Although the specific geographical location might change, the emotional terrain is characteristically depleted, and one comes away with an unsettling image of projected solitude. . . .

Jane Bowles is a capricious weaver of spells; her stories often end as though they were about to begin again somewhere else—now you see the magic, now you don't. Perhaps that is because her fiction is conceived at such a rarified altitude; her characters are living in domesticated penal colonies. . . .

There is a persistent mystery at the heart of Jane Bowles's fiction. What is amazing, finally, is that fiction so intentionally whimsical, even perverse, should reverberate the way Bowles's does, igniting sparks of recognition on every page.

Daphne Merkin. *New Republic*. Feb. 11, 1978, pp. 30–31

If there is one common denominator in Mrs. Bowles's work, it is women's relentless search for autonomy and self-knowledge, for release from all conventional structures. And a demonic, frenzied search it becomes in Mrs. Bowles's hands. . . .

Of the 20th-century novelists who have written most poignantly about modern women's independence from men—Colette, Lessing, Kate Chopin, Jean Rhys, Jane Bowles come immediately to mind—the last three are consummate artists who have each spent several decades buried in oblivion. . . . As for Jane Bowles, whose oeuvre also concerns a redefinition of female freedom, a considerable silence has attended her work since the production of her play *In the Summer House* 25 years ago, not-withstanding the critical acclaim she has received. . . .

The theme of women's independence, and its frequent coefficients of solitude and potential destruction, have more often than not been limned with Lessingesque earnestness in a socio-realistic setting. So Mrs. Bowles's oeuvre is all the more unique because of its Grand Guignol hilarity, its constant surprises, and a blend of realism and grotesqueness that occasionally recalls Ronald Firbank. There is extraordinary tension between the sturdy, supernormal physical world she describes and the gloriously unpredictable, fantastic movements of the eccentric personages who inhabit it. . . .

Mrs. Bowles's acerbic genius for the *outré* does not leave it any grounds for comparison with Radclyffe Hall's sentimental tale [*The Well of Loneliness*]. Neither are her heroines' precipitous declines caused by any preference for lesbianism, for they seem as asexual as they are independent and nomadic, turning to the flesh as a symbol of independence without appearing to enjoy one moment of it. Their gloriously uninhibited carousing, their voluptuous liberation from all male discipline . . . has much more to do with a return to the permissive sexual androgyny of juvenile bonding than with any sexual preference. It is this very childlike playfulness that gives Mrs. Bowles's work its fey power and its luminous originality, and that may disconcert readers fond of predictably ''female,'' ''mature'' heroines. . . .

In Mrs. Bowles's work, the traditional novelistic struggle between weak and strong characters ends inevitably in a draw. The rigorous pursuit of autonomy, and a rueful acceptance of its often tragic consequences, is the only heroic goal. For even the strongest are unmade by their failure to take into account ''the terrible strength of the weak,'' and follow an equally drunken downward path to wisdom. There is a severe avoidance of all moralizing. It is left to the individual reader to determine whether Mrs. Bowles's heroines were better off in the shelter of their repressive marriages and inhibited spinsterhoods than in the anarchy of their libertinage.

Francine du Plessix Gray. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 19, 1978, pp. 3, 28

From the time she was a child Jane had had the sense of sin—a sin that she could never define except to say that it was hers and original, that which separated her from others. Her life had been spent in the doubleness of the knowledge of that sin and the evasion of the knowledge. She had been obsessed by Elsie Dinsmore and

yet had mocked Elsie's obedience to her father and her even greater obedience to Jesus. She had read Simone Weil's work over and over, feeling an identity with her, but then she had laughed and said, ''But I have a sensual side too.'' For years she had spoken about sin and salvation—no one understood it. Most people thought it was Jane being funny, as when she'd said, ''Most of all I want to be a religious leader,'' and then laughed and said, ''But of course I'm not.''

That sin which she took to be her destiny was inseparable from her imagination. Her writing became both the evidence of the sin and also—by some turn within her—the religious sacrifice that was its expiation. In her work, from the beginning, the themes of sin and salvation were unrelenting: in the words of Miss Goering as a child, baptizing Mary, ''Dear God . . . make this girl Mary pure as Jesus Your Son''; in the words of Miss Goering at the end of her journey, ''. . . is it possible that a part of me hidden from my sight is piling sin upon sin as fast as Mrs. Copper-field?''; in the words that tell of Sadie's life, ''She conceived of her life as separate from herself; the road was laid out always a little ahead of her by sacred hands. . . .''

If in the earliest works there was a double edge—the sense of belief and the other side of belief, both present and united by her wiles—as the years went on, as her work became only unfinished work, the voices of sin and salvation became more urgent. ''My life is *not* my own,'' Bozoe Flanner screams at Janet Murphy. ''Have you missed the whole point of my life?'' And of a woman in an unfinished play, Jane wrote: ''She believes that she has a second heart and because she believes this she can accept a lie and protect it—Her wild clinging to this false trust is a result of her not wishing to discover that she has only one heart after all. . . . She guards her false trust in order not to fall into her single heart—The single heart is herself—it is suffering—it is God—it is nothing. . . .''

Millicent Dillon. *A Little Original Sin: The Life and Works of Jane Bowles* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981), pp. 414–15

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BOWLES, Paul (1910–1986)

There is a curiously double level to this novel. The surface is enthralling as narrative. It is impressive as writing. . . .In its interior aspect, *The Sheltering Sky* is an allegory of the spiritual adventure of the fully conscious person into modern experience. . . .Actually this superior motive does not intrude in explicit form upon the story, certainly not in any form that will need to distract you from the great pleasure of being told a first-rate story of adventure by a really first-rate writer.

Tennessee Williams *New York Times Book Section*. Dec. 4, 1949. pp. 7, 38

Once again, Mr. Bowles has written a frightening book. Only now there is an important difference. The *shock* is present, but is no longer a device. It is a conclusion justified by the hashish delirium that is the one possible resolution of Dyar's existentialist pilgrimage into the unknown interior of himself. If Mr. Bowles takes the chance of losing the *voyeurs* in his audience by this new discipline, he asks of others that he be judged more specifically on his merits.

These merits are considerable, but of a technical and exterior sort. Mr. Bowles, who is an accomplished composer, presents his characters contrapuntally. What each is doing at a particular moment is artfully disclosed. The theme of one is offered first and then followed by his antiphonal response to another whose theme has already been given. But only sensibility joins them, and a terrible rootlessness.

Leonard Amster. *Saturday Review*. March 15, 1952. p. 21

Mr. Bowles's stories and novels are the work of an exposed nerve. The pain is felt before the experience. There is a perennial dryness and irony in American literature of which Bowles is the latest and most sophisticated exponent; it has the air of premature cynicism, prolongs the moment when civilisation itself becomes entirely anxiety and disgust. . . .Bowles has been properly compared with D. H. Lawrence, for he has a marvelous eye for the foreign scene as it comes to the eye of the rich, rootless wanderer. He is also a brilliant collector of items of human isolation in its varying degrees of madness, and he is intellectually disapproving of both the isolated man and the man who has merely the apparent solidarity and gregariousness of the urban creature. . . .Where Bowles fails is that in reducing the Lawrence situations. . .to a kind of existentialist dimension, he has made them merely *chic*. The moral passion has vanished; even passion has gone.

V.S. Pritchett. *New Statesman and Nation*. July 12, 1952. p. 44

Bowles is an obsessionist, and his obsession may be simply stated: that psychological well-being is in inverse ratio to what is commonly known as progress, and that a highly evolved culture enjoys less peace of mind than one which is less highly evolved. . . .It is no accident that the three novels and that fifteen of the seventeen stories in *The Delicate Prey* have a foreign setting. Nor is it true, as has sometimes been charged, that Bowles is merely indulging in a pointless exoticism, for not only are the settings foreign, they are usually primitive as well. For this reason he chooses such remote locales as a small town in the Sahara, a Colombian jungle, a river boat winding painfully through the interior of an unidentified Latin-American country. And in nearly all of his work the tension arises from a contrast between alien cultures: in a typical Bowles story, a civilized individual comes in contact with an alien environment and is defeated by it.

Oliver Evans. *Critique*. Spring-Fall, 1959. p. 44

The abysses and furies of the human psyche; the fragile, provisional nature of the civilized instincts; the lure of the primitive and the inhuman; the sadness of deracinated people; the underground warfare of marriage and friendship; the lonely divisions between

desire and behavior, between having and holding, between one hand and the other hand; the modern world's contagions of angst, dread, deadness: all these strains of the existentialist vision are dramatically presented in Bowles' earlier work and come to a classic statement in his novel, *The Sheltering Sky*, one of the most beautifully written novels of the past twenty years and one of the most shattering. . . .

. . .*The Time of Friendship* brings together his first collection of stories in more than twenty years. Most of them are effective, several are memorable, but only one seems to me to break fresh ground. This is the long title story in which Bowles abandons his rather static view of primitivism, and moves beyond his somewhat fatigued fascination with its timeless mysteries and perversities, to write about post-colonial Algeria. . . .

The story is as complex in the telling as any Bowles has written; what is so strange and moving is its benignity. What it portends for his future work, I don't profess to know. But it's good to find him writing a tender story and one which strengthens his grip on contemporary experience. Perhaps the world is moving too fast for even his nihilism to have the last work. It's nice to think so.

Theodore Solotaroff. *New Republic*. Sept. 2, 1967. pp. 29–31

Reading *The Time of Friendship*, Paul Bowles's new collection of stories, I was aware of a career honest in its aims but only occasionally swinging free of a steady performance. Unlike Tennessee Williams' attempts at unmanageable forms, Bowles sticks with what he can do. Here are the gothic tales with their meaningless violence and seedy Arab settings which repeat the formula established in *The Delicate Prey* seventeen years ago. Here are the macabre Saki endings and the landscapes beautifully tuned to an indefinable melancholy. The stories are always carefully written but, for the most part, they are too self-contained and seldom have anything to match the atmosphere of frenzied desolation that drives through *The Sheltering Sky* to make it Bowles's masterpiece. He is still involved with his ideas of twenty years ago but he has lost his passion for them. The existential experience of *The Sheltering Sky* can never seem dated, but many of the empty exotic scenes in *The Time of Friendship* depend upon a bleak modernity which has worn thin even for Bowles.

Maureen Howard. *Partisan Review*. Winter, 1968. p. 149

Paul Bowles has produced a large body of work, only a fraction of which is represented in the *Collected Stories*. He has published poetry, four novels, an autobiography and two travel essays. He has taped and translated an impressive number of oral stories in Moghrebi, a North African dialect. These translations are an achievement in themselves and also play a central part in the development of his short fiction. Bowles is moreover a composer of some standing, and has recorded a large collection of North African music. Nevertheless, fiction is the central pillar of his work, and his autobiography, poetry and journalism are only interesting galleries attached to the central structure, ornamental perhaps, but hardly essential. His novels have excellent qualities but only his first, *The Sheltering Sky*, deserves to be classed with the short fiction. . . .

The majority of the stories published in Bowles's first collection, *The Delicate Prey*, already exhibit a mature sense of subject and of technique. ''A Distant Episode'' is one of the best of these stories. The title reminds the reader that the events described are far removed from the west. It is an initiation story (Bowles has written a number of these), a meeting between the rule-bound west, represented by ''the Professor,'' and the violence of North Africa. The Professor is a professor of linguistics; preoccupied by the structure of Language, he is incapable of communication. . . .

Like the Professor in ''A Distant Episode,'' Bowles may seem to have returned to his starting point, surrealistic description having been replaced by kif dreams and automatic writing by oral texts. But to see his career as static or circular is a mistake. The early surrealism was an act of violence towards language, a literal dismembering. The stories collected here redirect this violence, allowing dismemberment an uneasy coherence. The seventeen-year-old could only appropriate a style; the intervening years have created a master capable of appropriating a culture.

H. C. Ricks. *Chicago Review*. Spring, 1980, pp. 83, 85, 88

[William Carlos] Williams' characteristically trenchant observation of one of Bowles' techniques is one that holds true for all the novels and short stories that Bowles has published since *The Sheltering Sky*: he is an author who works to avoid cliché by confronting his materials, not by sidling past them with the help of the codified tics and patterns of ''fine writing.'' His work is unsettling, but rarely because of the raw materials, the content, of his stories. Rather, it is the acutely conscious attempt to deal with these materials honestly that enables him to transcend the content that, in other hands, might be the stuff of sensation or didacticism.

The language of Bowles' fiction is reticent and formal, but often brutal in its flat candor. No wonder Williams admired him. Over his work there lies a barely visible ''haze'' of anxiety or terror. His characters, once embarked upon the adventures that he invents for them, carry them through to the end; there is no point in a Bowles story at which one can say, with any certainty, *there* is where the story takes its turn. His stories do not take ''turns,'' but follow strait and undeviating paths, the beginnings of which are anterior to their first words. We ''come in'' on them, as it were.

It is as if Bowles has made a compact with his readers, one that assumes that he and they know that people are weak, vacillating, self-serving, envious, and often base, as well as being, more often than not, irrational because of fixed and unexamined beliefs in country, class, religion, culture, and so on. Granting the existence of this compact, the stories may be seen as inevitable, their characters not so much caught in a web of problems as playing out, so to speak, their hands. In a curious way, the stories may be seen as modern variations on the Jonsonian use of medieval ''humours.''. . .

[He] is most at home in his work in a North African setting, usually Moroccan, and . . . most of his stories have to do with Arabs or with Arabs and their dealings with Americans or Europeans. I would say that much of Bowles' power and clarity, his freshness and eschewal of the banal has come about because he uses this material without resorting to condescension, awed delight, or sociological analysis: the specific world of Morocco is *there*.

Nowhere in Bowles do we find any hint of the exotic. His Arabs don't think of themselves as such, but as people who live the lives that have been given them. The brilliance of Bowles' work is rooted in the fact that his prose takes his non-western world for granted, and this matter-of-fact attitude is tacitly held in subtle

opposition to what might be called the reader's expectations. We bring our great bag of *idées fixes* to Bowles' Morocco, and he calmly proceeds to empty it in front of us. Furthermore, Bowles' western characters are often seen to be carrying that same bag in the stories in which they appear: their reward for this cultural error is usually disaster. . . . He does what the good artist everywhere does: solves the problems he has created for himself with the same tools used to create the problems. He is responsible to his work and not to the dim flickerings of ''taste.'' These are distinguished stories indeed.

Gilbert Sorrentino. *Book World*. Aug. 2, 1981, pp. 3, 6

With his wife, Jane Bowles, he became a legendary example of the gilded expatriate—a sojourner who seemed to fit into the most exotic places; meet the most fascinating people; and go on to tell of his experiences in a manner cool and haunting. The manner cloaked the unpleasant, particularly the rigors of travel in primitive places and the emotional conflicts of the main parties in Bowles's adventures. At the same time the manner made possible the exhibition of the magnificent unconventional beauties available to the nomadic life Bowles had led. What emerges from his autobiography, *Without Stopping*, and his journal, *Days: Tangier Journal 1987–1989*, is the portrait of a man who cannot feel at home unless he has recourse to solitude, and for whom solitude must mean periodic journeying into unknown territories. In an earlier century Bowles might be called a romantic and compared to Byron or Sir Richard Burton. Today, he may be characterized as an example of the homeless virus that afflicts the gifted and sends them into exiles of the spirit, those who seek in their chosen rootlessness an insight into their condition and an acceptance of it.

Bowles, if judged by his autobiography, is a kindly man, much more so than he is in *Days; Tangier Journal 1987–1989*, which is a piquant, witty, and sometimes acerbic account of daily jousting with an increasingly larger public. Bowles is also a man who has tried to do his best by meeting responsibilities to his parents, wife, friends, employers, and public, and yet at the same time he has consistently tried to escape from the net of personal and professional demands. His way is a subtle and magnificent coil of escape; few are capable of practicing it well, for the process is monastic in its dues; its rewards, while inwardly palpable, are not outwardly evident.

Without Stopping then tells the story of a man who has determined his life's mission as seeing as much of the world as he can feel, and to utilize that rich experience in his music and writing. He tells, for example, the anecdote of an artist who put a collection of work under his pillow before he went to sleep in order to absorb it when he could no longer concentrate on it in a waking state. This anecdote and other revelations Bowles puts forth are fascinating precisely because he is low-keyed in his narration: much is clearly being withheld while much is subtly rendered in a sheltering style.

There is also plenty of gossip in his work: Bowles is aware of his need to sell to a public, but the real value of his autobiographical and travel writings are to be found elsewhere.

Martin Tucker. *Confrontation*. Fall, 1991, pp. 337–38

To the expatriates who landed there after World War II, the International Zone of Tangier was an enigmatic, exotic, and deliciously depraved version of Eden. A sun-bleached, sybaritic outpost set against the verdant hills of North Africa, it offered a free money market, and a moral climate in which only murder and rape were forbidden. Fleeing an angst-ridden Western culture, European emigrés found a haven where homosexuality was accepted, drugs were readily available, and eccentricity was a social asset.

But the decadence of the infidels who drifted to Tangier was offset by a singular thread in the city's complex fabric—the mysticism of its native Muslims. Paul Bowles, the most prominent of the literary exiles who settled in Tangier, was acutely aware of its spiritual undercurrent. ''I relish the idea that in the night, all around me in my sleep, sorcery is burrowing its invisible tunnels in every direction, from thousands of senders to thousands of unsuspecting recipients,'' he wrote. . . .

Taken with the promise of worldly pleasures in an occult setting, a flock of other Western intellectuals assembled in Tangier after Bowles embarked on his self-imposed exile in 1947. Along with Jane Bowles, the idiosyncratic writer whom he married in 1938, Paul became a magnetic force in a scene enlivened, at various junctures, by Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams, William Burroughs, Brion Gysin, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac. Over a period of two decades, they saw—and wrote about—the city from a remarkable range of perspectives: For twelve months of his four-year sojourn, the gaunt Burroughs, languished in a male brothel, where he ''had not taken a bath . . . nor changed my clothes or removed them except to stick a needle every hour in the fibrous gray wooden flesh of terminal addiction.''. . .

Few modern settings have offered such an alchemical blend of primitivism and sophistication, and few have spawned so many provocative tales. And while the spirited, raffish port has long since deteriorated into a desultory tourist town, Europeans who find themselves there still sit for long hours in its cacophonous cafes, talking of Paul and Jane and the tawdry glory that was Tangier. Most of the visitors never knew the Bowleses, but that hardly seems to matter; we have all become fellow travelers in a world ruled by entropy, and it was Paul who mapped the course. . . .

Paul Bowles never stopped complaining about his adopted home. At the end of 1990, he was lamenting the fact that the Villa Nouvelle had been marred by construction projects that would never be finished, and that the price of cookies at the Fez Market jumped from one week to the next. He talked about the absurdities of Moroccan bureaucracy, and he shuddered over the gloomy weather. But if some failed to see how Tangier had held him for so long, Bowles knew why he had stayed on after Jane had died: ''Tangier,'' he said, ''is like a gong that rang [forty] years ago. I still hear the resonance.''

Michelle Green. *The Dream at the End of the World* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993 [1992]), pp. xi–xii, xiv, xvi, 344

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BOYLE, Kay (1903–1992)

Anyone . . . whose standards of the short story are not the standards of the correspondence school will appreciate that the work of Miss Boyle, for simple craftsmanship, is superior to most of that which is crowned annually by our anthologies. Anyone with an ear for new verbal harmonies will appreciate that Miss Boyle is a stylist of unusual taste and sensibility. It is time, therefore, to cease to regard her as a mere lower case révoltée and to begin to accept her for what she is: more enterprising, more scrupulous, potentially more valuable than nine-tenths of our best-known authors.

Gerald Sykes. *The Nation*. Dec. 24, 1930. p. 711

Gertrude Stein and James Joyce were and are the glories of their time and some very portentous talents have emerged from their shadows. Miss Boyle, one of the newest, I believe to be among the strongest. . . . She sums up the salient qualities of that movement: a fighting spirit, freshness of feeling, curiosity, the courage of her own attitude and idiom, a violently dedicated search for the meanings and methods of art. . . . There are further positive virtues of the individual temperament: health of mind, wit and the sense of glory.

Katherine Anne Porter. *New Republic*. April 22, 1931. p. 279

She is one of the most eloquent and one of the most prolific writers among the expatriates; her work is always finished in the sense that her phrases are nicely cadenced and her imagery often striking and apt; her characters are almost always highly sensitized individuals who are marooned or in flight in some foreign country, banded together in small groups in which the antagonisms often seem intense beyond their recognizable causes. . . . It is noteworthy how much Kay Boyle gets out of the casual coming together of her people, what untold dangers and mysterious excitement she finds in their first impressions of each other—out of the tormented relationships and the eventual flight.

Robert Cantwell. *New Republic*. Dec. 13, 1933. p. 136

Kay Boyle is Hemingway's successor, though she has not that piercing if patternless emotion which is what we remember of Hemingway at his best. It is significant that both writers received their literary training in Paris, as did Henry James, that they are familiar with deracinates and those casual sojourners in Paris whose search is for the exciting and the momentary. Each has the observational facility of the newspaperman, with the poet's power of meditating on life; their work stands out from any other type of fiction written in any other country, in both content and technique.

Mary M. Colum. *Forum*. Oct. 1938. p. 166

To my mind, the chief defect in Miss Boyle's equipment as an artist is to be traced to her lack of a subject which is organically her own; and by an organic subject I mean something more tangible than a fixed interest in certain abstract patterns of emotion and behavior. Being in possession of an elaborate technique and having developed disciplined habits of observation, Miss Boyle seems to be able to turn her hand to almost anything. As a result one feels all too often that she is not really involved with her themes, that she has not conceived but merely used them.

Philip Rahv.*The Nation*. March 23, 1940. p. 396

In her best work, it seems to me, her style is never noticeably brilliant; it is always subdued, always subservient to the creation of scenes and characters. One seldom feels, either, that Miss Boyle's stories or novels have been carpentered to fit a carefully worked out thesis. The best of her fiction is convincing and lifelike; the ''meaning,'' seldom forced or imposed, rises—or seems to rise—naturally out of characters and actions, as though the author had actually observed the people and events just as she writes about them. . . . [S]he appears to be deeply committed to some ideal of social equality, personal freedom, universal tenderness or love—it is difficult to label what is usually subtle and complex—and she sees in the world about her the brutal violation of those who embody these ideals. Again and again in her fiction we are shown sensitive individuals, who respond to life feelingly rather than conventionally, attacked and defeated by tough, well-insulated barbarians flying the banners of custom and tradition.

William Stuckey, *Minnesota Review*. Fall, 1960. p. 118

Kay Boyle has added eighteen poems from the last ten years to her earlier work in verse that culminated in the long 1944 poem *American Citizen*; these *Collected Poems* are elusive but—as always in the poetry of a writer whose characteristic achievement is in prose—they offer a reliable thematic index to Miss Boyle's preoccupations over the years: she aspires to be, doubtless is, a good European, the kind of person who knows the right café to sit in front of, the interesting wine to order, a hard ski slope to descend, an easy man to love. Her landscapes, both American and European, are made into emblems of the wild heart, the behavior of her animals likened to the actions of men. It is not entirely fair, by the way, to refer to her ''earlier work in verse,'' since so many of these difficult pieces are experiments in mixing verse with extended prose passages; indeed, however obscure it may be, such prose is always firmer and, if not more deeply felt, then more dramatically honed than the verse, which in even the very latest poems is without much spine or spring, though Miss Boyle has spirit and to spare.

Richard Howard. *Poetry*. July, 1963. pp. 253–4

Put simply, Kay Boyle's theme is nearly always the perennial human need for love; her design is woven from the many forms the

frustration and misdirection of love may take. Her style and the care with which she limns a setting are, as they inevitably must be with a creative artist, but vehicle and adjunct for her central meaning. Although on occasion she may have forgotten the artistic obligation in exchange for sheer virtuosity (always a danger for the virtuoso), using her style to bedazzle rather than to aid vision, or letting exotic setting obscure the human situation with which she is dealing, in her better fiction, style, setting, and theme for a seamless web in which all the threads are held under a precise tension.

Richard C. Carpenter. *Critique*. Winter, 1964–65. p. 65

She is the author of 13 novels, some of them very good, but she is not quite a major novelist. Her major medium has always been the short story and the novelette. (And it is typical of this aristocrat, whose earlier work lay in the tradition of Edith Wharton and Henry James, not to use the fashionable word, novella.) But even here, she was in the early thirties, a writer of superior sensibility—or so I thought—using a foreign scene more successfully than her native one, and belonging, in essence, both to the expatriate line of James and Wharton and to that later ''lost generation'' of the 1920's.

What this new collection of Miss Boyle's short stories and novelettes does prove is that while all of the speculation above is somewhat true, none of it is really true, or profoundly true. She has all these elements in this new collection of her mature work. But, as in the case of every first-rank writer, she rises above the disparate elements in her work or in her temperament, to become something else. What *Nothing Ever Breaks Except the Heart* proves, in short, is that Kay Boyle has at last become a major short-story writer, or a major writer in contemporary American fiction, after three decades of elusiveness, sometimes of anonymity, almost of literary ''classlessness,'' while she has pursued and has finally discovered her true metier. . . . To her earlier vision of sensibility, she has added what every first-rate writer must have, a standard of human morality—and the fact that human morality is usually, if not always, related to a specific social or historical context.

It is this familiar concept, missing in so much current and ''new'' American fiction, that is embodied in the magnificent stories of her maturity.

Maxwell Geismar. *New York Times Book Section*. July 10, 1966. pp. 4, 16

Kay Boyle's contemporaries in the twenties and thirties assumed she would be one of the literary stars of her generation. In a review in *The The Nation*, Gerald Sykes said of her in 1930, ''It is time . . . to cease to regard her as a mere lower case revoltee and to begin to accept her for what she is: more enterprising, more scrupulous, potentially more valuable than nine-tenths of our best-known authors.''. . .

But acclaim for Kay Boyle's work nearly always has been contained within small circles. Her only popular success was *Avalanche*—the book that, on literary grounds, probably least deserved it and which earned her the damaging ridicule of that influential critic, Edmund Wilson. Despite her distinguished and prolific career, her work is not widely known today, and only a handful of her books remain in print. . . .

Her reputation has also suffered at the hands of critics who repeatedly devalued her work on the basis of its subject matter. It appears as though her subject matter—often the trials of a woman alone groping for an identity and a context in which to live—simply did not interest critics concerned with more ''substantial'' issues. . . .

As a young avant-garde expatriate, she wrote, ''I have no religion, except that of poetry, and in Poe, Whitman, and William Carlos Williams I recognize the apostles of America.'' She always has had much in common with the nineteenth-century American romantics, perhaps more than she has recognized. This romantic perspective is another constant that binds together the works of diverse material and style that make up her canon. From the beginning of her career to the present day, she has insisted upon experiencing life firsthand, ignoring any ''middlemen'' of letters, religion, or philosophy. She has believed in overstepping the confines of institutions and traditions and in spurning the dictates of convention and ''common sense.'' She has placed her faith in the intuition and the imagination and believed that no time has ever been more significant than the present instant.

Sandra Whipple Spannier. *Kay Boyle: Artist and Activist* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Pr., 1986), pp. 214, 220, 221

''Primarily a poet'' according to her own assessment, Kay Boyle has, nonetheless, been praised mostly as a writer of short stories, novels, and memoirs—when indeed this remarkable American artist has been acknowledged at all by the literary establishment. Her career has had a rather astonishing span: She was a member of the *transition* group in the Paris of the 1920s and a friend to many of the famed of those days; sojourner in various parts of Europe before and after World War II; opponent of McCarthyism back in the U.S.; a heroic inspiration to her students at San Francisco State during the most turbulent days of the Vietnam era. The diverse spirits of all these times—except perhaps the 1950s—flash forth memorably in the free verse of her new collection of poems dated variously between 1916 and November 1990. Boyle strongly favors the form of the address or verse letter: These poems are directly ''to'' or at least ''for'' a quite varied group of persons. . . . M.L. Rosenthal pronounced the poems of Boyle's 1970 volume to be ''museums of select political, moral, and social attitudes,'' but the best of these later poems seem not dated at all in their fierce expressions of an aging woman against injustice. . . . In ''A Poem for Vida Hadjebi Tabrizi,'' for example, Boyle, reading a poem of Babette Deutsch, feels a spiritual contact with her friend across a continent, but feels even more the spirit of another woman conjured up, an Iranian political prisoner. Some of the *communique* poems of the 1920s and 1930s are more cryptic/private in their intent (or we are farther from their politics), but they often contain striking images that may owe more to her ''idol'' Rimbaud than to her friend and avowed influence, [W.C.] Williams. Especially noteworthy are several experiments mixing prose poetry with free verse.

Joseph Milicia. *Multicultural Review*. April, 1992, p. 73

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BOYLE, T. Coraghessan (1939–)

T. Coraghessan Boyle is perhaps . . . most resourceful in making use of . . . comic forms, and [he is] temperamentally aligned with [Philip] Roth and other ''wild'' humorists (Woody Allen also comes to mind in his view of contemporary America). In [*The River Is Whiskey*], Boyle's third collection, the comedy derives from bizarre situations and characters, but above all from the author's corrosive wit and inventive use of language, virtues which are notable throughout these zany, energetic stories. What if a man in pursuit of fame were to transform himself into a human fly? What if a young woman were to follow the concept of ''safe sex'' to a grotesque extreme? What if a public relations man were assigned to improve the ''image'' of the Ayatollah Khomeini? Boyle pursues such questions with near-manic intensity even as he exerts careful control over his narrative structures, many of which are reminiscent of Twain in their combination of boisterous humor and a piercing commentary on their contemporary experience.

Boyle combines a wealth of detail about 1980s America with a keen awareness of literary tradition: his stories are furnished with compact discs, cellular phones, home security systems, and specific details about our food and drink, clothing, and entertainment; yet they also allude to fairy tales and the Faust legend, to Hemingway and Joyce and Kafka. Like many of the so-called minimalist writers, he has a fondness (at times excessive) for mentioning brand names, but his obsessive documentation of contemporary reality does establish a connection—as most minimalists either fail or refuse to do—between that reality and the spectrum of Western literary tradition, as if to place contemporary America within the ongoing progression of human folly.

Greg Johnson. *Georgia Review*. Winter, 1990, p. 714

The strength of *East Is East* lies in the story of Hiro, where Boyle's previously demonstrated talent for comic-grotesque invention comes into play. One of the funniest episodes occurs when a rich, garrulous, Japanophile old woman, Ambly Wooster, takes Hiro into her beach house under the impression that he is Seiji Ozawa. The cultural confusions multiply, as do the vigorously narrated mishaps that befall Hiro in his desperate attempts to leave the island and reach the City of Brotherly Love. While there is a considerable degree of Waugh-like cruelty in the fate Boyle metes out to his antihero, who follows the example of Mishima to its bloody conclusion, Hiro himself is engaging enough to provide a pathos at the end that in no way clashes with the comedy that precedes it. This is an exuberant reworking of the innocents abroad theme that goes back at least as far as Voltaire's *L'Ingenu*.

Paul Auster. *New York Review of Books*. January 17, 1991, p. 32

That a writer such as Boyle, invariably fascinated by quirky human behavior, chose John Henry Kellog for his focal historical character in the novel [*The Road to Wellville*] is no surprise. But curiously, though his title is taken from one of C.W. Post's most famous slogans, only John Henry Kellog appears as a character in *The Road to Wellville*. Post and W.K. Kellog are simply mental irritations to the hyperactive doctor [protagonist], enemies to be dealt with, vanquished, outlived.

In place of Post and W.K. Kellog, Boyle offers several wholly fictional characters, rather ordinary ones even for historical fiction and certainly for Boyle, who has earned a reputation for creating more entertaining and plausible representations of humanity than these turn out to be. . . .

One measure of historical fiction is a novel's success in keeping readers from slipping outside the plot to dwell on the historical plausibility of the events portrayed. With a Hawthorne or Faulkner, it simply doesn't occur to one to ask, ''Is this true—could this really happen?'' Readers do not pause to ask such questions of *World's End*, Boyle's 1987 novel that quite deservedly won the PEN/Faulkner award. But in *The Road to Wellville*, Boyle deliberately goads just these questions from readers. The regimen is too preposterous, the daily menu too ludicrous to have ever been taken seriously—even by such creatures as inhabit Boyle's fictive world. Even in a satire.

David R. Johnson. *America*. April 23, 1994, pp. 20–21

T.C. Boyle has proved himself time and again a canny storyteller at home with the offbeat and borderline grotesque; he applies his same sly skills here to characters heavily soiled with the grit of real life. The novel [*The Tortilla Curtain*] gamely addresses what has probably always been the great American political dilemma: In a country that proudly defines itself as a nation of immigrants, who gets to slam the door on whom? Boyle cuts to the heart of this question by describing two different nations, rich and poor, which occupy the same space but are often invisible to each other. Delaney's wife, Kyra, a powerhouse realtor, presides over a world of empty, immaculate mansions waiting to be sold. She clicks on high heels through these great halls admiring the space, without thinking once of homelessness. Kyra has a bleeding heart all right—it really gets her dander up to see a poor overheated pet locked in a car. But with a wave of her hand she scatters the labor exchange that is Cándido's lifeline, because the sight of those people hanging around is bound to affect property values. Meanwhile, Cándido crouches on the other side of the class wall, seeming to accept the excesses of *gabacho* wealth as an outlandish inevitability as he tries not to starve. In one of the book's many moments of fierce black comedy, he ponders the ethics of stealing food and crockery from a dog. . . .

What Boyle does, and does well, is lay on the line our national cult of hypocrisy. Comically and painfully he details the smug

wastefulness of the haves and the vile misery of the have-nots. It doesn't seem to dawn on anyone in this novel that opulence next to starvation is brutally immoral, but the reader can hardly escape that conclusion. Red-blooded Americans of every stripe all find themselves rooting for Cándido and América, right up to the rip-roaring deus ex machina ending that screams out that we are all in this together.

Barbara Kingsolver. *The Nation*. Sept. 25, 1995, pp. 326–27

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BRADBURY, Ray (1920–)

Ray Bradbury has drawn the sword against the dreary and corrupting materialism of this century; against society as producer-and-consumer equation, against the hideousness in modern life, against mindless power, against sexual obsession, against sham intellectuality, against the perversion of right reason into the mentality of the television-viewer. His Martians, spectres, and witches are not diverting entertainment only: they become, in their eerie manner, the defenders of truth and beauty. . . .

[Bradbury] thinks it . . . probable that man may spoil everything, in this planet and in others, by the misapplication of science to avaricious ends—the Baconian and Hobbesian employment of science as power. And Bradbury's interior world is fertile, illuminated by love for the permanent things, warm with generous impulse. . . .

Bradbury knows of modern technology, in the phrase of Henry Adams, that we are ''monkeys monkeying with a loaded shell.'' He is interested not in the precise mechanism of rockets, but in the mentality and the morals of fallible human beings who make and use rockets. He is a man of fable and parable. . . .

Bradbury is not writing about the gadgets of conquest; his real concerns are the soul and the moral imagination. When the boy-hero of *Dandelion Wine*, in an abrupt mystical experience, is seized almost bodily by the glowing consciousness that he is really alive, we glimpse that mystery the soul. When, in *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, the lightning-rod salesman is reduced magically to an idiot dwarf because all his life he had fled from perilous responsibility, we know the moral imagination.

''Soul,'' a word much out of fashion nowadays, signifies a man's animating entity. That flaming spark the soul is the real space-traveller of Bradbury's stories. ''I'm alive!''—that exclamation is heard from Waukegan to Mars and beyond, in Bradbury's fables. Life is its own end—if one has a soul to tell him so. . . .

[The] moral imagination, which shows us what we ought to be, primarily is what distinguishes Bradbury's tales from the futurism of Wells' fancy. For Bradbury, the meaning of life is here and now, in our every action; we live amidst immortality; it is here, not in some future domination like that of Wells' *The Sleeper Awakens*, that we must find our happiness. . . .

What gives [*The Martian Chronicles*] their cunning is their realism set in the fantastic: that is, their portrayal of human nature, in all its baseness and all its promise, against an exquisite stage-set. We are shown normality, the permanent things in human nature, by the light of another world; and what we forget about ourselves in the ordinariness of our routine of existence suddenly bursts upon us as fresh revelation. . . .

In Bradbury's fables of Mars and of the carnival [in *Something Wicked This Way Comes*], fantasy has become what it was in the beginning: the enlightening moral imagination, transcending simple rationality. . . .

The trappings of science-fiction may have attracted young people to Bradbury, but he has led them on to something much older and better: mythopoeic literature, normative truth acquired through wonder. Bradbury's stories are not an escape from reality; they are windows looking upon enduring reality. . . .

Russell Kirk. *Enemies of the Permanent Things: Observations of Abnormality in Literature and Politics*. Arlington House, 1969. pp. 116–20, 120–24.

Elements of what may be called ''fantasy'' were present in Ray Bradbury's works from the beginning of his writing career. His own recent remark distinguishing science fiction from fantasy in literature is that ''science fiction could happen.'' This implies, of course, that fantasy could not happen. But in today's world, where change occurs at such rapid rate, nobody would venture to state dogmatically that any idea is incapable of realization. Therefore, whether or not a work of literature is fantasy becomes more a matter of the author's intention rather than a matter measurable by objective criteria. This is especially true of an author such as Bradbury, who by his own admission writes both science fiction and fantasy.

Bradbury's own brand of fantasy apparently came to birth in the world of the carnival. His imagination was nurtured with carnival imagery. . . . Whenever a travelling circus or carnival came through Waukegan in the 1920s and early 1930s, Bradbury and his younger brother were always present. . . .

[The] carnival became for him a sort of subconscious touchstone for a whole system of moods and images which emerged later in his writings. As a result, the carnival world can be thought of as a clearinghouse for Bradbury's imagination—the place where he goes for his symbols when he is writing a tale of horror, nostalgia, fantasy, or some combination of the three. . . .

But of Bradbury's tales [during the 1940s] more were horror than fantasy. Perhaps he would regard an attempt to distinguish between horror and fantasy in his works as mere semantic quibbling. The difference, it seems to me, can almost be described as a matter of levity. In the horror tales, he was completely serious and trying his best to achieve a shock effect upon his readers. In the best of these, he probably succeeded because he also achieved, in the writing process, a shock effect upon himself. He was trying to exorcise something in himself as he wrote. Thus his horror tales were not written to enable his readers to escape, but rather to cause them to suffer so that they might be cleansed. . . . The fantasy stories, on the other hand, allow the readers' spirits to expand rather than to contract, as is the effect in the horror tales. The thrust of his effort seems to lie in the creation of a mood, and, lost in this mood, the readers can escape to a Secondary World. . . .

The theme running through [*Something Wicked This Way Comes*] is that Evil is a shadow: Good is a reality. Evil cannot exist except in the vacuum left when people let their Good become not an active form, not a pumping in their veins, but just a memory, an intention. As Bradbury has indicated in other stories and articles, he feels that the potential for evil exists like cancer germs, dormant in all of us, and unless we keep our Good in fit condition by actively using it, it will lose its power to fight off the poisons in our system. . . .

Love is the best humanizing force man possesses, Bradbury seems to be saying. . . .

The idea of the healing powers of love is perhaps most beautifully expressed in the story ''A Medicine for Melancholy'' (1959). The story is almost a parable. A young girl in eighteenth-century London is slowly fading away before the eyes of her concerned parents. No doctor is able to diagnose her illness, and finally in desperation they take her, bed and all, and put her outside the front door so that the passersby can try their hand at identifying what is wrong with her. A young Dustman looks into her eyes and knows what is wrong—she needs love. He suggests that she be left out all night beneath the moon, and during the night he visits her and effects a cure. In the morning the roses have returned to her cheeks and she and her family dance in celebration. . . .

[This] idea, or moral, if that is a better word, . . . seems to be at least implicit in the majority of Bradbury's stories from the late 1950s until the present. He did not cease to be a teacher when he stopped writing science fiction, but he did place a moratorium upon the more evangelistic kind of moralizing which he was practicing in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Now, at last, his own sense of values seems to have become completely at one with his art. . . .

> Anita T. Sullivan. *English Journal*. December, 1972, pp. 1309–14.

If Bradbury's ladders lead to Mars, whose chronicler he has become, or to the apocalyptic future of *Fahrenheit 451*, the change is simply one of direction, not of intensity. He is a visionary who writes not of the impediments of science, but of its effects upon man. *Fahrenheit 451*, after all, is not a novel about the technology of the future, and is only secondarily concerned with censorship or book-burning. In actuality it is the story of Bradbury, disguised as Montag, and his lifelong love affair with books. . . .

''Metaphor'' is an important word to Bradbury. He uses it generically to describe a method of comprehending one reality and then expressing that same reality so that the reader will see it with the intensity of the writer. His use of the term, in fact, strongly resembles T. S. Eliot's view of the objective correlative. Bradbury's metaphor in *Fahrenheit 451* is the burning of books; in ''*The Illustrated Man*'', a moving tattoo; and pervading all of his work, the metaphor becomes a generalized nostalgia that can best be described as a nostalgia for the future.

Essentially a romantic, Bradbury belongs to the great frontier tradition. He is an exemplar of the Turner thesis, and the blunt opposition between a tradition-bound Eastern establishment and Western vitality finds itself mirrored in his writing. The metaphors may change, but the conflict in Bradbury is ultimately between human vitality and the machine, between the expanding individual and the confining group, between the capacity for wonder and the stultification of conformity. These tensions are a continual source for him, whether the collection is named *The Golden Apples of the Sun, Dandelion Wine*, or *The Martian Chronicles*, Thus, to use his own terminology, nostalgia for either the past or future is a basic metaphor utilized to express these tensions. Science fiction is the vehicle.

Ironic detachment combined with emotional involvement—these are the recurring tones in Bradbury's work, and they find their expression in the metaphor of ''wilderness''. To Bradbury, America is a wilderness country and hers a wilderness people. . . .

For Bradbury the final, inexhaustible wilderness is the wilderness of space. In that wilderness, man will find himself, renew himself. There, in space, as atoms of God, mankind will live forever. Ultimately, then, the conquest of space becomes a religious quest. The religious theme in his writing is sounded directly only on occasion, in such stories as ''The Fire Balloons'', where two priests try to decide if some blue fire-balls on Mars have souls, or ''The Man'', where Christ leaves a far planet the day before an Earth rocket lands. Ultimately the religious theme is the end product of Bradbury's vision of man; the theme is implicit in man's nature.

> Willis E. McNelly. In *Voices for the Future: Essays on Major Science Fiction Writers, Vol. 1*, ed. Thomas D. Clareson. Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1976, pp. 167–75.

''It was a pleasure to burn,'' begins Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. ''It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and *changed*.'' In the decade following Nagasaki and Hiroshima, Bradbury's eye-catching opening for his dystopian novel assumes particular significance. America's nuclear climax to World War II signalled the start of a new age in which the awesome powers of technology, with its alarming dangers, would provoke fresh inquiries into the dimensions of man's potentiality and the scope of his brutality. . . . The opening paragraph of Bradbury's novel immediately evokes the consequences of unharnessed technology and contemporary man's contented refusal to acknowledge these consequences.

In short, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) raises the question posed by a number of contemporary anti-utopian novels. In one way or another, Huxley's *Ape and Essence* (1948), Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948), Vonnegut's *Player Piano* (1952), Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959), Hartley's *Facial Justice* (1960), and Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) all address themselves to the issue of technology's impact on the destiny of man. In this sense, Mark R. Hillegas is right in labeling *Fahrenheit 451* ''almost the archetypal anti-utopia of the new era in which we live.'' Whether, what, and how to burn in Bradbury's book are the issues—as implicit to a grasp of our age as electricity—which occupy the center of the contemporary mind.

What is distinctive about *Fahrenheit 451* as a work of literature, then, is not what Bradbury says but how he says it. With Arthur C. Clarke, Bradbury is among the most poetic of science fiction writers. Bradbury's evocative, lyrical style charges *Fahrenheit 451* with a sense of mystery and connotative depth that go beyond the normal boundaries of dystopian fiction. Less charming, perhaps, than *The Martian Chronicles, Fahrenheit 451* is also less brittle. More to the point, in *Fahrenheit 451* Bradbury has created a pattern of symbols that richly convey the intricacy of his central theme. Involved in Bradbury's burning is the over-whelming problem of

modern science: as man's shining inventive intellect sheds more and more light on the truths of the universe, the increased knowledge he thereby acquires, if abused, can ever more easily fry his planet to a cinder. Burning as constructive energy, and burning as apocalyptic catastrophe, are the symbolic poles of Bradbury's novel. Ultimately, the book probes in symbolic terms the puzzling, divisive nature of man as a creative/destructive creature. *Fahrenheit 451* thus becomes a book which injects originality into a literary subgenre that can grow worn and hackneyed. It is the only major symbolic dystopia of our time.

Donald Watt. In *Ray Bradbury*, Martin Harry Greenberg and Joseph D. Olander, eds. (Taplinger Publishing Company, 1980), pp. 195–213.

Ray Douglas Bradbury is probably the first American writer of science fiction to become widely known outside the field. Although his reputation rests in considerable part on two early novels, *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) and *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), many of his short stories are perennial anthology favorites. His fiction is noted for its poetic and lyrical qualities, but he has also written a number of dramatic works.

Bradbury was born in Waukegan, Illinois, in 1920; after some nomadic years his family settled in Los Angeles in 1934 and Bradbury has lived there ever since. His long residence on the West Coast notwithstanding, the Midwest of his boyhood is a persistent image in his work: a small-town American utopia of the past with green lawns, shady streets, and friendly neighbors. The image pervades his quasi-autobiographical novel *Dandelion Wine* (1957), and in *The Martian Chronicles* the Martians cruelly use it to enchant and destroy spacemen from Earth.

In the 1940s Bradbury made his way into large circulation magazines like *Collier's* and the *Saturday Evening Post.* The poetic quality of his work seemed to burst the confines of the genre, which made purists uncomfortable. Bradbury was in fact one of the few science fiction writers of note then who was neither a disciple of John W. Campbell, Jr., the innovative editor of *Astounding Science Fiction,* nor possessed of a technical or scientific education. His prize-winning short stories of the late 1940s led to his first novel, *The Martian Chronicles,* in 1950.

In form *The Martian Chronicles* is more a sequence of episodes (some had been previously published) than a novel. They stretch from 1999 to 2026, as the native Martians are destroyed by an Earth-borne plague (chicken pox), and Earth itself is made uninhabitable by nuclear holocaust. A few survivors flee to Mars: in the last chapter a man promises to show his children the true Martians and points to their own reflections in a pool of water.

Free water on Mars suggests that Bradbury's red planet is a poetic image, not a scientific fact. Strict definers of science fiction have had difficulty with Bradbury's inattention to scientific probability, and with attitudes in his fiction which seem downright anti-scientific. Yet Bradbury's concern is not with science in the abstract but with the human use or abuse of it. Science and technology, as represented in his fiction, are often the occasion for displays of human pride and folly, which is only to say that much of Bradbury's work is satire, a posture characteristic of science fiction. One of Bradbury's best-known short stories, ''The Veldt,'' illustrates the point: the Hadleys have put a technologically advanced playroom in place of their own care for their children. Their indifference finally kills them as the simulated African landscape becomes all too real.

That was futuristic enough for 1950, but generally the face of Bradbury's fiction is turned firmly toward the past, as in the idyllic portrayals of mid-America in perhaps the 1920s. In another noted short story, ''The Sound of Thunder,'' a time traveler is actually shot for altering the past, so precious it seems. In one sense, his fiction warns us about what we can lose.

The future world of *Fahrenheit 451,* for example, is one in which firemen set fires; they burn books. In the totalitarian regime postulated, effective thought control means destroying the heritage of the past, the knowledge that can make human beings wise and free. But this picture of a repressive dystopia ends with praise for the irrepressible human spirit: some people refuse to abandon their past. They memorize great literary and philosophical works; they carry within themselves and in a way become Swift or Thoreau or Thomas Love Peacock.

Since the 1960s Bradbury has turned from science fiction and fantasy to poetry (his *Collected Poems* appeared in 1982), drama, including productions of his own plays, and mystery fiction: his *Death is a Lonely Business* came out in 1986. Clearly Bradbury is a versatile writer, but the science fiction which established his name remains a poetic blend of the pastoral and the scientific, of the nostalgic and the satiric.

Michael N. Stanton. In *Reference Guide to American Literature, 3rd editon,*, ed. Jim Kamp (St. James Press, 1994).

When asked how he would like to be remembered by future generations, Ray Bradbury once replied ''as a magician of ideas and words.'' Indeed, Bradbury is such a magician, and he is one of the twentieth century's most important storytellers and allegorists. An author who writes from personal experience and cultural inheritance, who relies on the history of ideas and free word association, and who threw his first million words away, Bradbury has proven himself a warlock of words and a teller of universal tales that incorporate myths, beliefs, themes, rituals, and character types that define both American and world cultures.

Bradbury's short stories, novels, stage plays, screen plays, poems, and radio plays appeal to all ages, and his dexterity with issues of youth and age, and coming-of-age, make his writing significant and meaningful to a wide-ranging public. He has always drawn heavily from his personal experience, making autobiography the largest overriding thematic element of his work. Bradbury is a visionary who is sensitive to the emotions and idiosyncrasies and wonders that comprise the human experience. If at times the logic of his stories is suspect, his ability to solve the human equation makes these logistic errors insignificant.

Garyn G. Roberts. In *Twentieth-Century Young Adult Writers, 1st edition,* ed. Laura Standley Berger (St. James Press, 1994).

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BRAITHWAITE, William Stanley (1878–1962)

William Stanley Braithwaite is the Negro poet who unquestionably stands next to Dunbar. Dunbar found entrance into Stedman's American anthology; Braithwaite, who came upon the stage a little too late for this, is represented in Jesse B. Rittenhouse's *Little Book of Modern Verse*. Braithwaite is even better known for his critical work than for his poetry. In addition to editing anthologies of Elizabethan verse, Georgian verse, and Restoration verse, he has, since 1913, collected and edited yearly anthologies of magazine verse that have been of great service to all people interested in contemporary poetry. These books, together with his yearly reviews of contemporary poetry, have undoubtedly helped create a larger and more appreciative audience for contemporary American poets. His own poems have appeared in a number of the best magazines and have been collected in two volumes, *Lyrics of Love and Life* (1904), and *The House of Falling Leaves* (1908). A highly sensitive estheticism is the keynote of his poetry. In this sense, as well as in lyric ability, he suggests Sidney Lanier. In finish and grace his poems are superior to those of Dunbar; they are superior also in another and less important respect—literary allusiveness. Braithwaite has a superior savoir faire in handling literary background that is probably due to his longer and more intimate associations with books and writers. His poems have grace, but he is too idealistic for humor. He has a sense of human fate and the seriousness of life, but he falls far short of the knowledge of life and the sympathetic interest in human types that Dunbar possessed. Like Shelley (his principal master, along with Keats), he is idealistic to a fault. His poetry is too much ''out of time and out of space''—there is too much seclusion from the problems and men of his own day. His genuine and obvious refinement affords a pleasant contrast to much that is crude and raw in the more controversial writers but does not fully compensate for a deficiency in definite, tangible substance. His poems, some of which have been set to music, have a fine lyric quality, and the idealism of such poems as ''Nympholepsy,'' ''A Song of Living,'' and ''The Eternal Self'' is both sincere and inspiring. The poems, especially in the first volume, are often slight, and of no particular individual weight or ethical value, but his second volume shows a considerably greater depth of feeling and widening of interest. ''In a Grave Yard,'' ''A Little Song,'' ''By an Inland Lake,'' and ''It's a Long Way'' are lyrics from the first volume that would be no discredit to the best contemporary poets. Among the best poems in the second volume are ''From the Crowd,'' which describes a poignant lyric impression, ''A Song of Living'' and ''The Eternal Self.'' His later poems show a still higher technical finish and a mystical tendency that sometimes oversteps the bounds of rational comprehension.

Whether Mr. Braithwaite derives this tendency from his reading of Blake or from certain obscure strains in recent British and American poetry, it is one of the factors that sharply differentiates him from most of the other poets represented in this book. He himself objects, justly, to having his poems classed indiscriminately as ''Negro'' poetry. Just as the Caucasian really predominates in the poet's racial inheritance, so the non-racial is the striking characteristic of his verse. His poems have no more of the Negro race in them than the poems of Longfellow or Bryant; in fact, paradoxically, they have less, by reason of their remoter connection with the substantial realities of ordinary life. There is very little real passion in Braithwaite's poetry; on the contrary there is an exquisite restraint which seems rather to avoid vigorous emotional expression and prefers instead a fine lyric suggestiveness.

> Newman Ivey White. In *An Anthology of Verse By American Negroes*, ed. Newman Ivey White and Walter Clinton Jackson, 1924. Reprint by The Folcroft Press, Inc., 1969 pp. 1–26.

An older generation remembers the large annual anthologies of poetry collected by William Stanley Braithwaite of Boston. A veritable sleuth of rhyme, he read every publication large or small, near or remote in which a poem was published. He loved poetry and his attitude toward the new writer was generous and encouraging. Happy was the young poet to learn that he had won the approving eye of Braithwaite. It is fitting that Braithwaite should be given his just rewards as a poet as well as for his labors as a servant of the muse. His anthology selections are too inclusive to win lasting approval but they are a valuable reference. He is a more discerning taskmaster of his own poems than he was of the work of the poets he gathered in the highways and byways.

Braithwaite is a versatile craftsman, who can open his tool box and fashion a good sonnet, quatrain, or couplet with an admirable deftness. His talent as story-teller is shown in ''Fugue in Gardenia,'' and the philosophic ballad ''Sandy Star.'' One of his most effective poems is the psalm ''Off the New England Coast'' an eloquent prayer which concludes with the affirmative plea—

> Not an inch of thy Beauty to perish,
> not an ounce
> thy Might to be lost.

Mr. Braithwaite's scope as a poet is limited, and his rhetoric shows no electric images, nor dramatic power. His gift is as quiet and

consistent as the pleasure it evokes. To Braithwaite, noble servant of the muse and occasional rider of Pegasus, all lovers of poetry should give thanks.

The Saturday Review of Literature. February 12, 1949, p. 31.

[William Stanley Braithwaite] attained prominence as critic and anthologist. His leading reviews for the *Boston Transcript,* his anthologies of magazine verse, published yearly from 1913 to 1928, and a collection of Elizabethan verse mark him as a critic of great sensibility. Braithwaite's poetry, however, is of greater pertinence to this study. He is the most outstanding example of perverted energy that the period from 1903 to 1917 produced.

Various explanations have been given for the oddity which a study of certain Negro poets like Braithwaite presents, but not one takes into account the pressure of the age. It is not considered that the expression of certain thoughts, feelings, and ideas was denied if they wished the hearing of an important audience. No one of the explanations mentions that all but one of these poets wrote better verse on material that in the very nature of things was (rather than is) Negro material. Braithwaite is the exception. On this general head, Countee Cullen has something to say in the preface to *Caroling Dusk:* ''Since theirs [Negro writers] is also the heritage of the English language, their work will not present any serious aberration from the poetic tendencies of their time . . . for the double obligation of being both Negro and American is not so unified as we are often led to believe.'' Also, and apparently by way of explanation, Braithwaite's autobiographical sketch has this to say: ''I inherited the incentives and ideals of the intellect from an ancestry of British gentlemen.'' Further, it might be pointed out that he was born in Boston and has lived most of his life in Massachusetts. These remarks are definitely offered in the nature of excuses for divergence from the racial norm of creative ends.

Most of the Negro poets who from nearly the beginning of the century to the middle years of the World War turned their talents toward traditional poetic material—love, birth, death, beauty, grief, gladness—without any thought of their racial background developed a sort of dilettantism, a kind of love of display of poetic skill, and experience, and knowledge. In this their verse is comparable to the tricky poetics of the Cavaliers. It is bright and light, but without substance—Chinese fireworks.

Lolotte, who attires my hair,
Lost her lover. Lolotte weeps;
Trails her hand before her eyes;
Hangs her head and mopes and sighs,
Mutters of the pangs of hell.
Fills the circumambient air
With her plaints and her despair.
Looks at me:
''May you never know, Mam'selle,
Love's harsh cruelty.''

Now this is pretty and skillful poetry, but it is not poetry afire with the compelling necessity for expression. No passion (even slightly remembered in tranquillity) of pain or joy, no spring of pure personal knowledge or conviction justifies it. It is just ''lines expressing something or other.''

Mr. Braithwaite set the pace for this particular school. It is not enough, however, to say that he seems to be merely a dilettante. He is both much more and much less than that—but it is not quite clear what or how much. In the *Poetic Year* for 1916, he wrote: ''All this life that we live, this experience that we have of the world, are but footnotes to reality. . . . Ever since the beginning man has tried to translate the language of the spirit—the invisible, immaterial character of another existence that is as real as our own.'' Despite his brave, plain words, his translation of the language of the spirit leaves much to be desired in the way of clarity, and he seems never to have understood the ''footnotes to reality.'' His poems mark the path of his steady progress into the rare atmosphere of the spiritual world. . . .

J. Saunders Redding. *To Make a Poet Black*, 1939. Reprinted by Cornell University Press, 1988, pp. 49–92.

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BRAUTIGAN, Richard (1935–1984)

The best thing about Richard Brautigan's first published novel [*A Confederate General from Big Sur*] is the language, which is consistently more inventive and delicate than you might expect from one of the so-called ''beats.''. . . His metaphors alone make Brautigan's novel worth reading. . . . Brautigan's characters aren't violent, like Kerouac's. They are selfish, irresponsible, but they harm no one and do not obviously ''rebel.'' . . . The writer is as freely experimental as his characters. He gives us a choice of several written endings, and he dots the narrative with italicized flashbacks to the Civil War, which was ''the last good time this country ever had.'' It all makes for good whimsical reading. Perhaps, however, *A Confederate General from Big Sur* might have been more than merely whimsical if there had been more tension between the imagined society and the one we all live in, or between the writer's fancy and his reason.

Arthur Gold. *Book Week*. Feb. 14, 1965. p. 18

Mr. (if I may be so bold and square as to accord him the prefix) Richard Brautigan, in his novel *A Confederate General from Big Sur*, provides as good an account as has come my way of Beat life and humor; though the latter, I have to admit, won from me no more than the kind of wintry smile I habitually wore during the five sad years that I was editor of *Punch*.

Big Sur is, of course, hallowed ground to admirers of Henry Miller's writings, a Beat shrine, if ever there was one. A glimpse is caught in *A Confederate General from Big Sur* of Mr. Miller collecting his mail, and provides the only point in the narrative when the giggling stops and a respectful silence momentarily descends. Otherwise the novel consists of a series of bizarre (perhaps

it would be politer to say picaresque) adventures, sometimes salacious, sometimes narcotic, and sometimes pettifoggingly criminal.

Beats, according to Mr. Brautigan's account, are heathen, parasitic, dirty and idle. They are the devil's anchorites, covered with the lice of unrighteousness, and eating the bitter bread of boredom and vacuity. Only an occasional bout of fornication relieves the tedium of their days, and even that is precluded when they are too high to perform. As a protest against the American way of life, theirs would seem to lack point. They are but a waste product of what they affect to despise; refusing to participate in the feast of affluence, they grovel and crawl under the table and about the guests' legs in search of crumbs, cigarette butts and voyeur ecstasies. Poor Beats! Mr. Brautigan has convinced me that we are better without them.

Malcolm Muggeridge. *Esquire*. April, 1965. p. 60

Brautigan . . . is funny, but seldom satiric, sometimes bored but hardly ever angry, frequently happier than you but never holier than thou. . . . Alas for the hazards of being reviewed: Brautigan at secondhand is all too likely to sound merely whimsical and cute. He is not; what underlies these games is a modern fatalism, not maudlin fatheadedness. . . . [In *In Watermelon Sugar*] the spun-sugar simplifications of organized happiness and the naïve placidity of the narrator are repeatedly darkened by our perception of real misery, jealousy, frustration and unrequited love. It is more complicated technically and more disturbing emotionally than the earlier works, and it suggests that you should, while reading all the Brautigan now available, look forward to the Brautigan yet to come.

J.D. O'Hara. *Book World*. Jan. 11, 1970. p. 3

I'll call [Brautigan] a novelist because it is for his novels, *A Confederate General from Big Sur* and *Trout Fishing in America*, that he is best known. There are no books quite like them and no writer around quite like him—no contemporary, at any rate. The one who is closest is Mark Twain. The two have in common an approach to humor that is founded on the old frontier tradition of the tall story. In Brautigan's work, however, events are given an extra twist so that they come out in respectable literary shape, looking like surrealism. *A Confederate General from Big Sur* is a kind of Huck Finn–Tom Sawyer adventure played out in those beautiful boondocks of coastal California where Jack Kerouac flipped out in the summer of 1960. But it is with *Trout Fishing in America* that Brautigan manages to remind us of Mark Twain and at the same time seem most himself. As you may have heard, this one is not really about fishing, but it is really about America. In the book—call it a novel if you will—whopper is piled on dream vision with such relentless repetition that the ultimate effect is a little like science fiction.

Bruce Cook. *The Beat Generation* (Scribner). 1971. p. 206

The cover of *Trout Fishing in America* is important. It shows a young couple in front of the statue of Benjamin Franklin in San Francisco's Washington Square. The girl is dressed in a long skirt, high boots, wire-rimmed glasses, and a lace hair band; the man is wearing a nineteenth-century hat, a vest and black coat over his paisley shirt and beads. He too has wire-rimmed glasses. With his vest and glasses, with her boots and lace, they look like something out of an earlier America. They reflect the nostalgia which permeates this book: for a simpler, more human, pre-industrial America. Brautigan knows it's gone. But some of the values in this book are derived from this kind of nostalgia. Brautigan has created a pastoral locked in the past, a pastoral which cannot be a viable social future.

I want to live in the liberated mental space that Brautigan creates. I am aware, however, of the institutions that make it difficult for me to live there and that make it impossible for most people in the world. Brautigan's value is in giving us a pastoral vision which can water our spirits as we struggle—the happy knowledge that there is another place to breathe in; his danger, and the danger of the style of youth culture generally, is that we will forget the struggle.

John Clayton. *New American Review*. No. 11, 1971. pp. 67–8

Trout Fishing in America is a solid achievement in structure, significance, and narrative technique. For all its surface peculiarity, moreover, the book is centrally located within a major tradition of the American novel—the romance—and is conditioned by Brautigan's concern with the bankrupt ideals of the American past. Its seemingly loose and episodic narrative, its penchant for the marvelous and the unusual, its pastoral nostalgia—all of these things give it that sense of ''disconnected and uncontrolled experience'' which Richard Chase finds essential to the romance-novel. Brautigan's offhand manner and sense of comic disproportion give to the narrative an extravagance and implausibility more suited to the fishing yarn and tall-tale than to realistic fiction. Lying just below the comic exuberance of the book, furthermore, is the myth of the American Adam, the ideal of the New World Eden that haunts American fiction from Cooper to the present. The narrator of *Trout Fishing in America* is Leatherstocking perishing on the virgin land that once offered unbounded possibility, modern man longing for the restoration of the agrarian simplicity of pioneer America. That a life of frontier innocence is no longer possible adds to the desperate tone and comic absurdity of the narrator's frustrated excursions into the American wilderness.

Kenneth Seib. *Critique*. 13, 2, 1971. p. 71

[*A Confederate General from Big Sur* is] much better than *Trout Fishing in America*, which is the only other [Brautigan book] I have read. Its narrative may be pointless, but at least events follow one another in chronological sequence. Some hippies and their girls and a rich madman settle in a cabin in Big Sur and that's about it. They frighten away the frogs with alligators and have quite a nice time. The dialogue is relaxed, with occasional zany excursions into the pot vocabulary, which I like. Sometimes, even, it is enlivened by the sour wit one finds in Virginia Woolf's saner moments: ''I've heard that the Digger Indians down there didn't wear any clothes. They didn't have any fire or shelter or culture. They didn't grow anything. They didn't hunt and they didn't fish. They didn't bury their dead or give birth to their children. They lived on roots and limpets and sat pleasantly out in the rain.''

Does this not remind one of Woolf's description of the Great Frost? Whether it does or not, Mr. Brautigan writes five thousand times better than Kerouac ever did, and could easily produce some

modern equivalent of W. H. Davies's *Autobiography of a Super-Tramp* with a little more effort, a little more discipline and a little less of the semiarticulate exhibitionism which is what people apparently mean nowadays when they talk of ''creative'' writing.

Auberon Waugh. *Spectator*. Feb. 27, 1971. p. 287

Right now Brautigan is riding high. He is the Love Generation's answer to Charlie Schulz. Happiness is a warm hippie. . . .

That the young should have taken so passionately to Brautigan is not surprising. He is the literary embodiment of Woodstock, his little novels and poems being right in the let's-get-back-to-nature-and-get-it-all-together groove. His exceedingly causal, off-hand style is wholly vogue, and I readily concede that there is a certain charm about it and him. . . .

[*The Abortion*] is diverting, and Brautiganites will find in it their usual joys. The lovable Brautigan himself is on hand as always, his own hero, talking about love and peace and the beauties of nature. The book is modestly funny, can be read in a matter of an hour or so, and will not hurt a soul.

Jonathan Yardley. *New Republic*. March 20, 1971. p. 24

The stories [in *Revenge of the Lawn*], many of them only a paragraph or two long, are characterized by that Brautigan blend of simplicity, humor, surrealism, nostalgia, and bittersweetness that endeared Saroyan to an earlier generation of Americans. The simplicity is sometimes cloying and the nostalgia sometimes veers into the sentimental, but these are small faults if you enjoy Brautigan, as I do, enormously; if you don't, they'll madden you and make him seem dead-pan precocious and wildly self-indulgent. If you're a woman, you will also be maddened by the exaggerated Beat Generation attitudes toward women that linger here.

Sara Blackburn. *Book World*. Nov. 28, 1971. p. 2

Revenge of the Lawn is really one vision of people who have drowned their feelings and live underwater lives. For Brautigan's fishermen do not want to catch trout so much as they want to be like them. . . . Going underwater, underground, inside, Brautigan people live with no passionate attachment to anyone or any place and never permit themselves to feel a thing. But in Brautigan's scheme withdrawal can be a strategic maneuver. . . . Brautigan makes cutting out your heart the only way to endure, the most beautiful way to protest the fact that life can be an endless down. *Revenge of the Lawn* is not Brautigan's best book. But it has the Brautigan magic—the verbal wildness, the emptiness, the passive force of people who have gone beyond winning or losing to an absolute poetry of survival.

Josephine Hendin. *New York Times Book Section*. Jan. 16, 1972. p. 7

The most laconic of these new writers, Richard Brautigan is perhaps best known for *A Confederate General from Big Sur*, *Trout Fishing in America*, and *In Watermelon Sugar*, as well as for his poetry. Lucid, precise, whimsical, idyllic, Brautigan develops a unique fragmentary style: his ''chapters'' are sometimes no longer than his chapter headings. Yet beneath the surface of happy love and naïve humor, the reader feels the lurking presence of loss, madness, death, feels some great blankness enfolding the rivers and wrecking yards of Brautigan's America. Mocking the conventions of fiction, Brautigan engages both silence and speech in his rigorous art, spare as a haiku. A Californian, he has some affinities with the Zen sweetness of Snyder and Kerouac; but his knowledge of the dark also recalls Hemingway.

Ihab Hassan. *Contemporary American Literature* (Ungar). 1973. p. 171

On first reading Richard Brautigan's *In Watermelon Sugar*, one senses that something extraordinary has happened to the form of the novel, to the intellectual and aesthetic conventions to which we have become accustomed. Brautigan's work is jigsaw puzzle art that demands more than close reading; it demands an active participation by the reader, a reconstruction of a vision that has been fragmented but warmed by a private poetic sensibility. Three avenues of accessibility, the novel as a utopian instrument, the analogues to the Garden of Eden, and natural determinism converge and create a frame for Brautigan's novel.

Brautigan has created the utopian dream for the post-industrial age of affluence, beyond IBM, and finally beyond curiosity. His longings, unlike other utopian ideals, have no claim on progress, no uplifting of the material condition of man, no holy wars to redistribute the physical wealth, no new metaphors for survival based on the securing of human necessities, and no emotional nirvanas. Other utopian dreamers have responded directly to the events of their age, but Brautigan is responding to the cumulative ages of man, and no response can be significant for him that does not place the entire past on the junk heap (the forgotten works). Nothing will do but a fresh start, with a fresh set of assumptions; *In Watermelon Sugar* takes us back to the beginning, for this is Eden, with its syllabic and accented soul mate iDEATH, reconstructed.

Harvey Leavitt. *Critique*. 16, 1, 1974. p. 18

Like Kurt Vonnegut, Richard Brautigan is beloved by college kids. Each is admired for his tenderness toward human vulnerability, for his pose of the faux naif, for his air of sweet inexpressible sadness. The difference between them is that Brautigan is a singularly careful writer. . . . [He] is a miniaturist who broods about death, who builds his novels from small self-contained blocks. He cannot entirely avoid coyness or dead-end digressions. Yet he conveys a sense of spare economy, of humorous or graceful lines eased in almost imperceptibly. . . . *The Hawkline Monster* is rather more of a pastiche, more of a parody than any of Brautigan's other fictions. It lacks the complexity, the more evanescent refractions of his best book, *Trout Fishing in America*.

Peter S. Prescott. *Newsweek*. Sept. 9, 1974. p. 82

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1975 (n); *Loading Mercury with a Pitchfork*, 1976 (p); *Sombrero Fallout: A Japanese Novel*, 1976; *Dreaming of Babylon: A Private Eye Novel, 1942*, 1977; *June 30th, June 30th*, 1978; *The Tokyo-Montana Express*, 1980; *So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away*, 1982 (n)

BROOKS, Cleanth (1906–1994)

Modern Poetry and the Tradition is sound without being sententious; it is suggestive yet precise; it avoids the temptation of sensationalism and the opposite extreme of stodginess. Mr. Brooks writes lucidly rather than brilliantly about the reach of the image . . . and goes to some length to explain the ''difficulty'' of modern poetry and the reader's resistance to it. . . . All in all, this is the work of a scholar who is sensitive to every nuance of feeling and every change of pitch, Mr. Brooks is a probing analyst, but he is not a pedant. His work, reflecting his subject, is allusive rather than simple and straightforward, complex but clear.

Louis Untermeyer. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 13, 1940. p. 17

One test of a critical theory is its range of enlightenment. Mr. Brooks is illuminating about Eliot and Yeats, but neglects certain poets altogether—D. H. Lawrence, for example, who is certainly witty, or Laura Riding who is certainly intellectual. He may say that they are not good poets—though I should disagree with him—but it is up to him to show why, and their omission makes me doubt if his theory is equipped with the necessary critical tools. . . . Admirable as far as it goes, his criticism of the propagandist view of art fails to account for its success not only among hack critics but quite good artists. In my opinion the social-significance heresy is a distortion of a true perception, namely, that the *Weltanschauung* of a poet is of importance in assessing his work, and that there is, after all, a relation, however obscure and misunderstood, between art and goodness.

W.H. Auden. *New Republic*. Feb. 5, 1940. p. 187

Poetry is assumed to rest within a sacred circle, from which historical and psychological considerations on the critic's part are exorcised as profane. To this illiberal outlook Brooks gives the name ''humanism.'' A core of vigorous understanding is thus surrounded with inhibitions by no means always free from intellectual morbidity. Order becomes for Brooks almost an obsession. . . . Brooks is imprisoned in a cage. He suffers from the familiar limitations of narrow and dogmatic doctrines; yet within these limits he frequently writes with admirable discernment.

Henry W. Wells. *Saturday Review*. April 12, 1947. p. 50

Mr. Brooks suggests that poetry is great in proportion to its power to contain and reconcile whole systems of conflicting values. Truth in poetry is dramatic, determined by a right relation to its context. By studying the interior structure of poems it should be possible for criticism to discriminate the greatest poems from the less great and so to prepare the way for a new history of poetry based not on extraneous considerations but on solid observations of poems as poems.

Mr. Brooks's studies in the structure of poetry are masterly exercises in the kind of close critical explication that enriches our appreciation of the poems examined and confers a new dignity on the work of the poet.

George F. Whicher. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Apr. 20, 1947. p. 2

There was developed in the quarter-century between the wars both a system of criticism and a sensibility of poetry, the one fitting and predicting the other, which when they wanted a sanction invoked Donne and when they wanted a justification exhibited Eliot or Yeats. It is not surprising, therefore, that this criticism and this sensibility should bend backwards and try a testing hand on all the poetry that lay between Donne and Eliot. This is what Mr. Brooks tries for. . . . He reads the poems as if their problems were the same as those found in a new quartet by Eliot or a late poem of Yeats; and for his readings he uses the weapons of paradox, irony, ambiguity, attitude, tone, and belief.

R.P. Blackmur. *New York Times Book Section*. June 8, 1947. p. 6

Either I imperfectly understand Mr. Brooks's theory of poetry . . . or there is nothing very new about it. A poem, I take it, cannot contain one thing only: out of several things it makes its single effect. Some of these, we learn, are *different* from others. In the laboring of this, ''paradox'' behaves like an acrobat. I share Mr. Brooks's interest in the history of English poetry and his resistance to the critical relativists, but to pinch the diversity of observable phenomena into a single set of terms or insist on anything resembling a unanimity of style seems to me to be indiscreet, or worse. Worse, because it will blind you.

John Berryman. *The Nation*. June 28, 1947. p. 776

If there is one formulation which seems to him more suitable than others, for it recurs oftenest, it is that which asserts that the unity of poetic language has the form and status of a verbal paradox. He has always liked to stand and marvel at paradox—''with its twin concomitants of irony and wonder''—while I think it is the sense of the sober community that paradox is less valid rather than more valid than another figure of speech, and that its status in logical discourse is that of a provisional way of speaking, therefore precarious. We do not rest in a paradox; we resolve it. . . . As a literary critic he has a hollow scorn for the procedures of logic, which he generally refers to as the procedures of ''science''; and he advises the scientists in effect that they cannot understand poetry and had better leave it alone. But this is to underestimate the force of logic in our time and, for that matter, the great weight of the rational idea in western civilization.

John Crowe Ransom. *Kenyon Review*. Summer, 1947. pp. 437–8

I do not question . . . that ''irony,'' in Brooks's sense of the term, is a constant trait of all good poets, and I should have no quarrel with

him had he been content to say so and to offer his analyses of texts as illustrations of one point, among others, in poetic theory. What troubles me is that, for Brooks, there are no other points. Irony, or paradox, is poetry, *tout simplement* its form no less than its matter; or rather, in the critical system which he has constructed, there is no principle save that denoted by the words ''irony'' or ''paradox'' from which significant propositions concerning poems can be derived. It is the One in which the Many in his theory—and there are but few of these—are included as parts, the single source of all his predicates, the unique cause from which he generates all effect.

R.S. Crane. *Modern Philology*. May, 1948. pp. 226–7

It may be making virtues of natural limitations, but Brooks's style seems a deliberately plain, steady, utilitarian style. The critical commentary does not emulate but only serves the poem, assists it in the performance of its ''miracle of communication,'' like the disciples distributing the bread and fish. . . . If one can avoid thinking of a critical essay as properly either a contest or an amorous exercise between the author and the reader, Brooks is perhaps simply trying very earnestly to be precise about what he is saying, and again, not saying. Further, he makes no pretensions. One perfectly good reason for putting it plainly might be that he thinks it is a plain thing he has to say.

John Edward Hardy. *Hopkins Review*. Spring, 1953. pp. 160–1

There have even been objections from within the ranks to intrusions of ''personality'' into the critical labor. Cleanth Brooks, a New Critic whose style has always been efficient and spare, and who—aside from a catch-word or two—has contributed nothing to the poetry of New Criticism, once defended to Alfred Kazin the supposed ''impersonality'' of the New Critic (a supposition not easily supported outside Brooks' own work) and indicated his opposition to criticism that attempts ''rivalry with the work of art.''

Richard Foster. *The New Romantics* (Indiana). 1962. pp. 186–7

For whom, then, has Mr. Brooks caused his book The Hidden God *to be published in hardback?*

For a hypothetical ''Christian looking at modern literature,'' who, he says, ought to find in that literature ''a great deal that is heartening and helpful.''. . .

Is it Mr. Brooks' assumption, then, that his Christian reader has special difficulties with such a writer as Yeats?

It is: and with most other great modern writers; for many who are aware that a great modern literature exists ''continue to dismiss it as merely sensational, violent, meaningless, or nihilistic.'' It is his hope that he can induce such readers to approach and perhaps digest this literature. . . .

Is Mr. Brooks' effort then wasted?

No effort of so skilful a propagandist for literacy is ever wholly wasted. Ultimately those who must read will read, and will find out what they must read; and if Mr. Brooks can do no more with a segment of the rest, he will at least inhibit their too ready prattle about what they have not read or read imperfectly, and hence reduce their power to drive dedicated readers into rebellion against what is represented to them as Christianity. So at least one may pray.

Hugh Kenner. *National Review*. Aug. 13, 1963. pp. 109–10

. . . in *The Hidden God* Mr. Brooks, who is one of modern criticism's most distinguished practitioners of exacting verbal analysis, has chosen the broad view, and he offers us a series of essays on five major twentieth-century writers. These pieces, enclosed between an introductory and a concluding chapter, make up a little book that forsakes stringent inspection of the single text for a general reassessment of what is centrally definitive in the work of Hemingway, Faulkner, Yeats, Eliot, and Robert Penn Warren. . . . Mr. Brooks wants most cautiously to forego any claim that we are confronted with some sort of crypto-Christianity in the fiction of Hemingway and Faulkner or in the poetry of Yeats and Warren. He claims only that many of the great writers of our time are engaged by the essential problems of Christianity, that their work can be significantly illumined by reference to Christian premises—and this is brilliantly demonstrated by a sensitive marshaling of a solid body of evidence.

Nathan A. Scott. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 28, 1963. p. 60

. . . Mr. Brooks's study [*William Faulkner*] gives the impression of striving to do nothing less than to set the entire world of Faulkner scholarship, criticism, and appreciation in order. Since I have nothing like the space necessary to discuss his thesis in detail, suffice it to say that he is arguing principally that Faulkner is a writer whose Southern quality has been ignored to the detriment of accurate critical understanding. More specifically, Mr. Brooks places the community at the center of both Faulkner's life and work where it provides simultaneously a moral impetus and touchstone. In working out his thesis Mr. Brooks uses a multifaceted method. Thus, he attacks technical questions in a scholarly manner, as when he works out the time sequence of *Sanctuary*. He also devotes considerable space to correcting earlier critics guilty of either factual or interpretative errors. And, finally, he employs both the impressionistic and what might loosely be called the history of ideas approaches. . . . [T]hough he has many astute things to say—he is particularly rewarding on *The Unvanquished*—the general impression is one of a very uneven critical performance, one whose dominant trait seems to be that of extreme nervousness. It is this that seems to be back of the testy and selective treatment of critics, the hesitant and yet insistent reference to authors and concepts only tenuously related to Faulkner, and the largely unnecessary (in a scholarly work) stress on the immediacy of Faulkner's power as a writer. From all of this, one is led to conclude that Mr. Brooks has no real critical rationale for the study of fiction, or at least none of the order of coherence he has so ably demonstrated in the past with regard to poetry.

Olga W. Vickery. *American Literature*. Nov., 1964. pp. 380–1

Cleanth Brooks's work is significant not only because it is extremely influential, but also because it has, until recently, persistently advanced a single, coherent theory despite the author's awareness of its limitations. Much literary criticism since the 1920's has been theoretically irresponsible; it has tossed out theories and terminologies,

then immediately denied or ignored them. Brooks's work, on the other hand, illustrates the virtues and vices of theoretical consistency. Most of his criticism develops from three sets of terms: irony (and its near equivalents, paradox and wit), drama, and metaphor (or one of its variants). Irony creates unity in variety and helps to establish aesthetic distance; drama achieves both variety and distance; metaphor fuses meanings and removes the object from reality. Brooks has, then, two criteria for aesthetic value—structure (the combination of unity and complexity) and aesthetic distance. His varied but related critical machines are built to show that if a poem has a certain kind of complex structure and achieves a certain distance, it is a good poem.

Lee T. Lemon. *The Partial Critics* (Oxford). 1965. p. 139

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BROOKS, Gwendolyn (1917–)

All in all, despite the fact that this first book [*A Street in Bronzeville*] has its share of unexciting verse, there are considerable resources evidenced for future work. Miss Brooks, to use one of her own phrases, ''scrapes life with a fine-tooth comb.'' And she shows a capacity to marry the special quality of her racial experience with the best attainment of our contemporary poetry tradition. Such compounding of resources out of varied stocks and traditions is the great hope of American art as it is of American life generally.

Amos N. Wilder. *Poetry*. Dec., 1945. p. 166

This little book of poems [*A Street in Bronzeville*] is both a work of art and a poignant social document. It is doubly effective on both scores because it seems such delightfully artless art and (in spite of its razor edges) so innocent of deliberation in its social comment. Simply out of curiosity, let us say, the reader begins a stroll down that unnamed Street. Almost immediately, and with no coercion on the part of the author, we abandon our present identity and become one of the denizens of Bronzeville. . . . Oddly enough, we never feel sorry for these neighbors as we move among them. We know them instead. What we feel is not pity but sympathy—an extension of our capacity for aliveness and awareness of being.

Starr Nelson. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 19, 1946. p. 15

The work of this young Chicago poet never fails to be warmly and generously human. In a surly and distempered age one is genuinely grateful to Miss Brooks for the lively and attractive spirit that sallies forth from her poems. In contrast to most of her contemporaries, she is neither ridden by anxiety nor self-consumed with guilt. There is in her work a becoming modesty. Though the materials of her art are largely derived from the conditions of life in a Negro urban milieu, she uses these incendiary materials naturally, for their intrinsic value, without straining for shock or for depth, without pretending to speak for a people. In reading this second volume [*Annie Allen*] by the author of *A Street in Bronzeville* I have been impressed by how little of the energy that should go into the building of the work has been diverted to the defence of the life.

Stanley Kunitz. *Poetry*. April, 1950. p. 52

With a few exceptions when straightforward narrative takes over, [*Maud Martha*] is presented in flashes, almost gasps, of sensitive lightness—distillations of the significance of each incident—and reminds of Imagist poems or clusters of ideograms from which one recreates connected experience. Miss Brooks' prose style here embodies the finer qualities of insight and rhythm that were notable in her two earlier books of poetry (her *Annie Allen* received the Pulitzer Prize), and gives a freshness, a warm cheerfulness as well as a depth of implication to her first novel. In technique and impression it stands virtually alone of its kind.

Hubert Creekmore. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 4, 1953. p. 4

Nothing vague here [in *The Bean Eaters*], nothing European, nothing mystical. These poems, generous and full of humanity, rattle with verbs and jangle with action. Their images are everyday; their subjects are poor people (often Negroes), the dreams of the downtrodden, the frustrations of the meek.

Yet, for all the worthiness of their themes and their aims, you will probably find them incomplete as poems. Miss Brooks appears more concerned to condemn social injustice and to draw sympathetic character portraits than to write poems that echo on every level, and as a result she repeats the same kind of statement too often for poetic truth.

Peter Davison. *Atlantic Monthly*. Sept., 1960. p. 93

She has a warm heart, a cool head and practices the art of poetry with professional naturalness. Her ability to distinguish between what is sad and what is silly is unfailing, and she deals with race, love, war and other matters with uncommon common sense and a mellow humor that is as much a rarity as it is a relief. Sometimes she is overly sentimental or gets too involved with furniture and

ephemera, but on the whole this selected volume [*Selected Poems*]. . . is a pleasure to read.

Carl Morse. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 6, 1963. p. 28

Gwendolyn Brooks does the thing that so few poets anywhere can do, and that is to take a really spoken language and make it work for her. Most everyone writes a ''writing'' language, but in her work, there are all the familiar cadences and sounds of speech, right down to the bone-hard rhetoric of the 1960s. . . . I say that her technique is really useful to her because in addition there is visible a whole person behind her poems, and you always feel that she ''writes committed.'' She is one of the very best poets.

Bruce Cutler. *Poetry*. March, 1964. pp. 388–9

Coming to Gwendolyn Brooks, we find a writer avowedly a spokesman, and in this sense a writer who ''looks in'' to a group. . . . Indulging a fancy to make a point, one could say that Gwendolyn Brooks writes in the confidence and momentum of a tradition that *intends to be* established. Put it this way: there is a language that goes with current city events, or there are languages that attempt to hold that existence in human perspective that is local, indigenous. In Gwendolyn Brooks's writings there is this determination to see what is, not to opt for any falsity, and not to abandon the risk of individual judgment either. The result is a special kind of complexity. Sometimes the poems are confusingly local in reference; they shimmer with strong feelings that surface abruptly. But throughout there is implied a steady view, an insight.

William Stafford. *Poetry*. March, 1969. p. 424

It's too soon to say anything definitive about the work of Gwendolyn Brooks. Perhaps she hasn't yet written the poems that will stand out a hundred years from now as her major ones. But she has already written some that will undoubtedly be read so long as man cares about language and his fellows.

There have been no drastic changes in the tactics and subjects she has dealt with over the years. It's doubtful if future critics will talk about the early and the late Brooks, not unless she strikes out into much different territory after 1969. What one observes is a steady development of themes and types.

Her poetry is marked by a number of central concerns: black experience; the nature of greatness; the way in which man expresses his needs, makes do, or lashes out. Ordinarily the view is one of delicate balance, that of a passionate observer. The poems strike one as distinctly those of a woman but always muscled and precise, written from the pelvis rather than the biceps. [1969]

Dan Jaffe in *The Black American Writer*, vol. 2, ed. C.W.E. Bigsby (Penguin). 1971. p. 93

In recent years . . . Gwendolyn Brooks has abandoned her former integrationist position and moved steadily towards a black nationalist posture. With this ideological change, there has come a parallel shift in verse techniques. Influenced by the young black revolutionary writers of the 1960's, Miss Brooks has given up, not all, but many of the conventional forms used in her early publications. For one thing, like other modern poets, she employs rhyme very sparingly. Perhaps her most popular form now is the kind of flexible, unrhymed verse paragraph found in the volume *In the Mecca*. . . . Perhaps the most effective element in her poetic technique is word-choice. With strong, suggestive, often-times unusual words—words that startle the reader—Gwendolyn Brooks weaves a brilliant poetic tapestry. Never sentimental, never a mouther of clichés, she brings to any subject the freshness and excitement which characterize good poetry—and good poets.

Arthur P. Davis. *From the Dark Tower: Afro-American Writers 1900 to 1960* (Howard). 1974. pp. 192–3

[Gwendolyn] Brooks's religious faith is ambivalent regarding the supernatural. Yet it is deeply humanistic. Her apocalyptic imagery has a counterpart of stability, but its force is dynamic; its permanence, change. ''Divorce''—from nature, as decried by [W. C.] Williams and followers like Charles Olson: from God, as mourned in Eliot; from Stevens—is transformed by Brooks into a concern with divorce from human dignity. Her work cries out against the subjugation of blacks, which may have inflicted more physical than spiritual damage, while it has hurt whites spiritually. Brooks embodies caritas, expressed in the poetic voice as it articulates a racial and communal system. Hers is a unified sensibility, pragmatic and idealistic, shaped, in part, by the needs which it ventures to meet. This kind of artistic courage, risking ''the highest falls,'' is shown by a poet of the first rank, a major poet.

Brooks meets the criteria for major status on all four levels: craft and technique; scope or breadth; influence of the work in style, content, or productivity, upon others; and influence of the poet upon others. . . . She has extended language itself, as Whitman did, by imaginative compounding, word-coinage, and the use of black English vernacular. She belongs to that select category [Ezra] Pound called ''the inventors,'' the highest classification of poets who create and expand formal limits and, thereby, taste itself.

D.H. Melhem. *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice* (Lexington: Univ. Pr. of Kentucky, 1987), p. 237

Brooks joined Hughes not only in turning to the black urban folk for subject matter, but in their similar roles as observer-participants. As Hughes indicated, although he had early written lyrics about ''love, roses and moonlight, sunsets and snow,'' he felt that such ''lyric poetry'' contradicted much of his and his people's everyday experience. In his ''social'' as opposed to ''lyric'' poems, he found that ''sometimes, certain aspects of my personal problems happened to be also common to many other people. And certainly, racially speaking, my own problems of adjustment to American life were the same as those of millions of other segregated Negroes'' (''Adventures'' 205). Hughes thus combined individual and public perspectives to become participant-observer. When Brooks uses the figure ''pen'' for Hughes she is applauding the writer soaked in the life of his people who grasps and records that life in all its multi-faceted complexity: the poet keeps the folk's dream alive.

Brooks too saw in her work a preponderance of a different kind of lyric—one with social implications. ''I believe I have written more 'Kitchenette building' type poems than I have written about

birds singing and feeling sorry for a girl who's temporarily overwhelmed by grief'' (*Report from Part One*, 158). Brooks also minimizes the interiority of her poetry when she describes herself as a ''Watchful Eye, a tuned Ear, a Super-reporter'' (*Mecca* jacket). These metaphors reveal the poet's desire to hone her skills so as to shape artistic equivalencies of the urban folk. As she says, ''the city is the place to observe man *en masse* and in his infinite.''

Mariann Russell. *Langston Hughes Review*. Spring, 1988, pp. 31, 32–33

Maud Martha, Gwendolyn Brooks's only novel, appeared in 1953, the same year that *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, James Baldwin's first novel, was published. By that time, Brooks had already published two books of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) and *Annie Allen* (1949), for which she won the Pulitzer Prize. But although she was an established poet, Brooks's novel quietly went out of print while Baldwin's first publication was to become known as a major Afro-American novel. Brooks's novel, like Baldwin's presents the development of a young urban black into an adult, although Brooks's major character is female and Baldwin's is male. Brooks's understated rendition of a black American girl's development into womanhood did not arouse in the reading public the intense reaction that Baldwin's dramatic portrayal of the black male did. Yet Paule Marshall (whose 1959 novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, is considered by many critics to be the forerunner of the Afro-American woman's literary explosion of the 1970s), would in 1968 point to *Maud Martha* as the finest portrayal of an Afro-American woman in the novel to date, and as a decided influence on her work. To Marshall, Brooks's contribution was a turning point in Afro-American fiction, for it presented for the first time a black woman not as a mammy, wench, mulatto, or downtrodden heroine, but as an ordinary human being in all the wonder of her complexity.

Why is it that *Maud Martha* never received some portion of the exposure that Baldwin's novel did, or why is it still, to this date, out of print, virtually unknown except to writers like Marshall and a small but growing number of black literary critics? Even within the context of black studies or women's studies, Brooks's novel is unknown or dismissed as ''exquisite,'' but somehow not particularly worthy of comment. One could say, of course, that *Maud Martha* was not significant enough to receive such attention. However, comments such as Marshall's tend to nullify that argument. Or one could say that Brooks's accomplishment as a poet overshadowed, perhaps eclipsed, her only novel, although the novel shares so many of her poetic characteristics that one would think that it would attract a similar audience. I am inclined to believe that, ironically, the fate of the novel has precisely to do with its poetic qualities, with the compressed ritualized style that is its hallmark, and as importantly, with the period when it was published.

Barbara Christian. ''Nuance and the Novella.'' In Maria K. Mootry and Gary Smith, eds. *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Pr., 1989), pp. 239–40

[Her mother] Keziah was to say of Gwendolyn's poems: ''The poetry she wrote during her early teens was the type that appealed to all rhyme-lovers, but it was not the kind the critics select when awarding prizes.'' Looking back herself, Gwendolyn affirmed this judgment. In *Negro Story*, she stated that she had known nothing of the ''technical possibilities [of poetry] until she was 24.'' That would have been in 1941, when she was participating in the writing workshops of Inez Stark Boulton—an experience that contributed much to her writing progress. But when her comments about lack of technical knowledge before the 1940s is quoted to her today, she is puzzled, pointing out that she had read the *Winged Horse* anthology by 1932 and had by then begun to understand certain technical points from reading critics such as Louis Untermeyer. She had in 1933 written to James Weldon Johnson, the famous black writer of the Harlem Renaissance, and sent him some of her poems. In one of his two letters of response, he told her that she had talent but needed to read modern poetry. She had by then read Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen and other black writers in Cullen's anthology, *Caroling Dusk*, and in Robert Kerlin's *Negro Poets and Their Poems*. . . .

Not until the late 1930s did Gwendolyn make systematic and concentrated raid upon the storehouse of modern poetic techniques. And the raids were to increase under the influence of the Boulton workshop in 1941 and 1942 because it supplied what she had not had before: a systematic exposure of her faults and a coherent point of view regarding the assets of the modern poetry movement.

A reader who wanders into the juvenilia and the apprentice work by chance is likely to be startled. By 1931 there is a precocious body of work that predicts the early rise of a brilliant poet. The poet as delighted rhymester exists up to the latter part of 1935, during which period some development can be ascertained. The 1937–38 period shows a greater freedom of language, which the poet needed to get solidly into her own feelings. The progress became rapid in the 1940s.

George E. Kent. *A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks* (Lexington: Univ. Pr. of Kentucky, 1990), pp. 22–23

Gwendolyn Brooks's use of the sonnet form in her poetry of the 1940s and 50s signals her status as inheritor and critic of two Renaissance traditions, one originating in Europe during the fourteenth century and the other in Harlem around 1912. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the texts of every Afro-American writer ''occupy spaces in at least two traditions: a European or American literary tradition, and one of the several related but distinct black traditions. The 'heritage' of each black text written in a Western language is . . . a double heritage'' (4). For Brooks, this doubleness in the text doubles yet again over the question of gender; the feminine voice in Brooks's poems, as in the lyric generally, is necessarily dislocated, occupying uneasy ground between the Western tradition's figurations of poetic authority and its representations of silent women. Brooks's ambivalent relation to literary tradition is dramatized in her revision of a single form from two separate traditions, one white, one black, and both predominantly male. . . .

In her revision of English Renaissance conventions, Brooks succeeds in making of the sonnet a vehicle for her own form of complaint, a poetry of power trespassing on the restricted ground of the traditionally male, and white, sonnet. In her extension of the Harlem Renaissance's political concerns to include the construction of gender and the politics of form, she insists on the ideological nature of both the subject and its language. While petitioning for

power in the world, Brooks acts out this appropriation at the level of the poem. By forcing the sonnet's shackled and corseted form to embody questions of race and gender, she forces us to recognize the ideological power of form itself, as well as the subversions which that same power makes possible.

Stacy Carson Hubbard. '''A Splintery Box': Race and Gender in the Sonnets of Gwendolyn Brooks.'' *Genre*. Spring, 1992, pp. 47, 63

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BROOKS, Van Wyck (1886–1963)

He seems to wake up every morning and regard America, and everybody who ever wrote in America, or who signified anything in American life, with fresh, eager, and ever-interested eyes. His mind perpetually revolves around the idea of a national culture in America, and he pursues all sides of the subject with such a vividness of interest and vividness of language, that when you have read three or four of his books, you begin to believe that the creation of such a culture is one of the few causes left worthy of the devotion and self-sacrifice of men.

Mary M. Colum. *Dial*. Jan., 1924. p. 33

He, more than any one else, more even than Mr. H. L. Mencken, has created a certain prevalent taste in letters, a certain way of thinking about literature.

This eminence, though I feel it has been won through default, has been graced by estimable qualities of Mr. Brooks. He has scholarship which becomes imposing when applied to the waste land of American letters. . . . Happily, Mr. Brooks has a style at the service of his erudition and historical consciousness. . . . What is wrong with Mr. Brooks and what is wrong with nine-tenths of American critical writing is no less than a deficiency in the sense of proportion. . . . It lacks a standpoint which is high enough for the vision of contributory elements melting into a major and vital organism.

Gorham B. Munson. *Dial*. Jan., 1925. pp. 28–9, 42

He has been the most influential critic of the past twenty years. His early work was the principal factor in the erection of the lofty cultural standards that have encouraged the rise of a mature, serious, philosophical criticism. The effect of his later work was not so praiseworthy, for it led to the embittered subjectivity of Lewis Mumford's *Melville* and Matthew Josephson's *Portrait of the Artist as American*. . . . In any event, for good or bad, something of Brooks has seeped into almost every American critic under fifty (including even the Marxist, Granville Hicks). There is no better testimony to his fine mind, his exquisite taste, his integrity and unselfishness.

Bernard Smith. *New Republic*. Aug. 26, 1936. p. 72

When all is said and done, Mr. Brooks's achievement remains a prodigious one, conceived with audacity and carried out with extraordinary skill. In reading his literary history, one has a sense that Mr. Brooks has repeopled the American continent. On his benign Judgment Day, the dead arise from their graves, throw off their shrouds and become flesh and blood again, ready to take their place in eternity. The writer who in his youth called for a usable American past has, in the full tide of maturity, created that past for us; and has shown us that it was far richer, far sweeter, far more significant than we could, in our rebellious, dissident, adolescent days have dreamed of. To the writer who has accomplished this great feat, we owe unending admiration and gratitude.

Lewis Mumford. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 8, 1947. p. 13

Brooks has made so many switches in his forty years of writing and his nineteen books that it is difficult to perceive any consistent pattern. He has been an aesthete, a socialist, a Freudian, a manifesto-writer, a Jungian, a Tolstoyan book-burner, and finally a compiler of literary pastiche and travelogue for the Book-of-the-Month Club. He has moved from total arty rejection of America and its culture to total uncritical acceptance. He has occupied almost every political and philosophic position of our time, and called them all ''socialism.'' Nevertheless, there is a consistent pattern to his work, from his first book to his last, but it is a method rather than a viewpoint, the method of biographical criticism.

Stanley Edgar Hyman. *The Armed Vision* (Knopf). 1948. pp. 106–7

It is always said that Mr. Brooks is ''readable.'' This means that his style is pleasant and his anecdotes are delightful. Now Mr. Brooks's prose does have very agreeable manners, it has the air of well-tempered conversation. And his little stories are often charming. . . . We could wish for so civilized a ''desire to please'' in the writers of the humorless, perspiring little essays in some of American literary journals. But the chit-chat is too often without edge, where edge is needed: good form does not demand such a sacrifice. And the anecdotes come too close to being the whole of

the book; so much so that for me they cease to be ''readable,'' they are too dense on the page, they are so many acres of underbrush.

Henry Rago. *Commonweal*. March 28, 1952. p. 619

It is a complex personality, that of a cosmopolitan bent at all costs on being a glorious provincial. We can discuss all the high qualities, those that make him our genuine ''man of letters''—in the old-fashioned sense of the term—since the death of Howells. He has a style and manner, a sense of picturesque, a feeling for the anecdote as a work of art. He has a genuine relish for the idiosyncrasies and the *bizarréries* of literary bohemia and a tendency to suffuse with a pastel optimism even the dark moments in the lives of our great writers.

Leon Edel. *New Republic*. March 22, 1954. p. 20

By his own account of childhood and youth Brooks is the heir of culture and breeding; in this sense he is perhaps the last great disciple of the genteel tradition in our letters. But what is heroic and admirable in all this is the rejection of his own tradition in favor of the new forces which have appeared in our society since the 1850's. And his affirmation of our central ''Western'' line of progressive or radical thought extends even to his praise of the ''vulgarian immigrant'' Dreiser. We know this vein of American thought is at present in eclipse, with both our literary critics and our politicians. When—or perhaps, in more desperate moments, *if*—our mood changes, Brooks will be seen as a major spokesman for our literature who is indifferent to leadership but who has never relinquished his ''position.'' How could he? It is inside himself.

Maxwell Geismar. *The Nation*. Apr. 3, 1954, p. 283

After *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*—and after ''America's Coming-of-Age'' and ''Letters and Leadership,'' essays that Brooks wrote in the same period—there was a second renaissance, not so rich as the first in great personalities, perhaps not so rich in great works, but still vastly productive; it was a period when American writers once again were able to survive and flourish in their own country. The *Ordeal* and the essays had helped to make it possible. How much they had helped it would be hard to decide; one would have to know all the apprentice writers of the time who read them, and what the writers told their friends, and how the *Ordeal* in particular affected their ideals of the literary vocation. I can testify from experience, however, that the climate of literature seemed different after Brooks had spoken. He had given courage to at least a few writers, and courage is hardly less contagious than fear.

Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*. June 20, 1955. p. 18

As anyone would expect who has read Van Wyck Brooks's definitive volumes about the writer in America from 1800 to 1915 or his *John Sloan*—or, for that matter, any of his books—the chief trouble with *The Dream of Arcadia* is the embarrassment of riches it contains. Like all of his books, his account of American writers and artists in Italy from 1760 to 1915 is packed with detail, full of quotable quotations, wealthy in insights dropped casually even in footnotes. Before one begins to read, he wonders whether the subject is enough for a full-length book; before he finishes he realizes that here compressed is material for several volumes—the history of what Italy has meant to the American artist and, through him, to American culture as a whole.

Harvey Curtis Webster. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 27, 1958. p. 19

The Ordeal of Mark Twain is one of the earliest books in which a prominent American critic makes use of psychoanalytic ideas, although they furnish him neither the central theme of the book nor its chief method. . . .

The foundation of the book, however, does not seem to me to be wholly psychological, since it gives at least as much stress to social factors in the America of the Gilded Age and to Mark Twain's relationships with friends and business associates as it does to the primary bases of these in the family constellation. The book, consequently, may be characterized as a combination of criticism and biography using a method which is a combination of sociology and psychology. Its intention is to show the stultifying effect of psychic trauma, maladjustment, and frustration induced by adverse social conditions upon Mark Twain's latent artistic ability. This it does by tracing the ineffectual struggle which he waged against their combined power.

Louis Fraiberg. *Psychoanalysis and American Literary Criticism* (Wayne State). 1960. pp. 120–1

Even though Brooks did not know [William Dean] Howells as Howells knew Clemens, he has imparted to this volume something of the tone that Howells imparted to *My Mark Twain*. In its special fashion, Brooks's *Howells* is a masterpiece by one who has actually experienced a part of Howell's world and has vicariously lived in all of it as an indefatigable reader and writer.

But with a reminiscence done by a friend and contemporary we only ask on the factual level whether the author has remembered right or not. With the quasi-reminiscence that Brooks has done we are entitled to know something of his sources. Of these he tells us only a little in his prefatory note, asking readers to trust him rather than oblige him to fill another volume with ''the usual scholarly apparatus.''

George Arms. *American Literature*. Jan., 1961. pp. 478–9

As a biographer, Van Wyck Brooks believes that there is a fundamental relationship between the lives men lead and the things they do. He is primarily a chronicler and an *evoker;* he likes an atmosphere and a background. And he works, as biographers must, in mosaic, putting together bits and pieces of information as best he can to demonstrate human accomplishment. To be sure, we are sometimes too aware of the separate pieces; and sometimes a piece is fitted the wrong way, or is out of place. But Brooks' studies, compared with our giant biographies, exemplify the art of concision.

The shortcomings of Van Wyck Brooks' portraits stem from his reluctance to probe into the why and how of human endeavor. This seems to reflect his eternal optimism and faith in man's will to struggle and to succeed—and a particular faith in America's ''coming of age.''

Leon Edel. *New Republic*. Sept. 17, 1962. p. 14

As a critic, a single dissenting voice, he realized that he couldn't do much ''to change the whole texture of life at home.'' He might, however, do something to change our conception of the writer in America, and the writer's conception of his own task, always with the aim of encouraging himself and others to do better work, the best that was in them. To this aim he devoted himself with admirable consistency and—let it be recorded—with an amazing degree of success.

There is one field in which the success can be measured. When we think of the contempt for American authors, mixed with ignorance about them, that prevailed in universities during the reign of Barrett Wendell; when we contrast it with the reverence for many of the same authors that is now being proclaimed in hundreds of scholarly monographs each year, as well as being revealed statistically by the multiplication of courses in American literature—while living writers share in the glory reflected from the past by being invited to the campus as novelists or poets in residence—we might also remember that Brooks had more to do with creating the new attitude than anyone else in the country.

Malcolm Cowley. *Saturday Review*. May 25, 1963. p. 18

Brooks was not the critical Pollyanna that those New Critics who have read little by him maintain. Nobody in all our critical writings so far has been so perceptive about the faults of our writings and, indeed, of our whole literary tradition. Read *The Wine of the Puritans* (1908) and read *America's Coming-of-Age* (1915), and see what intelligent, well-informed, well-mannered criticism of our literary products can be. Brooks loved, but he also knew. Brooks searched for things to praise, but he was not blind to things not worthy of praise. Sometimes, indeed, he was so disappointed in many of the things he found that he overstated his disappointment—to take it back years later in his massive and magnificent five volumes about the *Makers and Finders* of our literary culture.

Charles Angoff. *Literary Review*. Autumn, 1963. p. 31

It has become the fashion today to regard the earlier work of Van Wyck Brooks as his main achievement. It is as the author of *America's Coming of Age*, *Letters and Leadership*, and the studies of Mark Twain, Henry James and Emerson, books of protest and of criticism, that he makes his chief appeal to the younger generation. And it is true that these are the books that cleared the air for a more wholesome creative life in America and tilled the ground in which many vigorous talents were able to take root. In his emphasis on our native note, as opposed to the then prevalent literary provincialism, his courageous holding up of the mirror to our spiritual life, his insistence upon the cultural communion out of which great literature arises, and his early discernment of the deep cleft, in the American soul, between idea and practice, Van Wyck Brooks was a forerunner, a voice crying in the wilderness. But this was only one part of his achievement. He had been a pioneer. Now he saw his vision coming true, and turned to the other and essential task that lay ahead: to bring to life for us our entire literary heritage, to exhibit the pageant of genius in our country, and give us, in his own phrase, ''a usable past.''. . . This was the second and greater part of the achievement of Van Wyck Brooks, a man in quest of the truth; truly, a man driven by the furies.

John Hall Wheelock. *Library Chronicle*. Winter, 1965. p. 4

The clue to Brooks' way of thinking may be found in his remark that ''Allston liked to contemplate extremes and try to fill, imaginatively, the space between.'' So, for example, he gives us ''highbrow'' and ''lowbrow,'' and the mediating term, ''middlebrow.'' More often, however, there is no mediation but only opposition, as in the ''creative life'' *vs*. the ''acquisitive life.'' Here, Brooks, a master polemicist, has followed his own advice to critics to find the deep, irreconcilable ''opposed catchwords''; and in what follows we realize that his melodramatic way of seeing is supported by an equally melodramatic way of feeling.

Sherman Paul. *New Leader*. Feb. 15, 1965. p. 20

It may be said that after *America's Coming-of-Age*, *Letters and Leadership* (1918), and *The Literary Life in America* (1927), his three deservedly famous manifestoes, he never wrote a whole book in his own person, but always masked himself in the identities of those about whom he wrote, or invented an alter ego, as in *Oliver Allston* (1941). This is also true of *An Autobiography* which in part reads like left-over notes from his literary chronicle. Yet he is capable for short stretches of an ordered amplitude and downrightness which puts us to shame.

Quentin Anderson. *New Republic*. April 17, 1965. p. 15

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(r); *Fenellosa and His Circle*, 1962 (b); *An Autobiography (Scenes and Portraits, Days of the Phoenix, From the Shadow of the Mountain)*, 1965

BROWN, Rita Mae (1944–)

For those who think fiction is not the place to sermonize, *Rubyfruit Jungle* is often too blatantly preachy. Molly, the main character, has been a radical lesbian from birth, refusing all the conventional limitations of being a girl. In play she says, ''I got to be the doctor because I'm the smart one and being a girl don't matter.'' Faced with the requirement to please others, she counters with, ''I care if I like me, that's what I really care about.'' These assertions are the sort also to be found in the new, right-minded literature for children being published by feminist presses. There is nothing wrong with them. Nor is there anything wrong with Molly's sermonizing to a friend who feels limited by her background in what she can do with her life. . . . But the earnestness would weigh heavily if the book were not lifted by arrogant humor, never-mind-the-consequences fury, and transcending tenderness. . . . The film Molly makes of her adopted mother as a thesis for her degree is the device by which Molly transcends the bitterness she might otherwise have fixed on, for the film is the real portrait of a woman who did what she could in a narrow, prejudice-ridden world from which she had no way of escape. At the same time, it underlines the remarkable gifts of defiance and intelligence which have marked Molly for freedom. *Rubyfruit Jungle* is a far shout from the maimed religious and psychological apology of *The Well of Loneliness* and, as propaganda, healthier, for protest is a more accurate weapon against bigotry than special pleading. Rita Mae Brown is ready to play without a handicap. . . .

Jane Rule. *Lesbian Images*. Doubleday, 1975, pp. 183–96.

Ever since *Rubyfruit Jungle*, her tough-talking, tenderhearted story of a girl who loves girls, Rita Mae Brown's subject has been the misfit between human passions and societal conventions. Imagine a Rubens nude trying to squeeze into a size 6 corset, and you've got the comic futility and wasteful pain that Miss Brown sees in the effort to confine desire within one standard form: respectable heterosexual marriage. In her view, sexuality is a first cousin of imagination, involving an irrepressible urge to honor and rival the crazy abundance of life.

Unexamined heterosexuality, in *Rubyfruit Jungle*, is a pressure cooker of far-out fantasies. The most dogged champion of decency in the small town of her boisterous novel *Six of One* is discovered, at age 80, to keep pornography under her mattress. And in Miss Brown's latest novel, *Southern Discomfort*, nearly all the good husbands of 1918 Montgomery, Ala.—including the judge and the chief of police—relieve the pressures of propriety chez Banana Mae Parker and Blue Rhonda Latrec, prostitutes of Water Street.

For Miss Brown, such duplicity is the stuff of human comedy. But her last two novels boasted women characters who dared to tell the naked truth and to love whom they pleased. . . . There is no such character in *Southern Discomfort*—no embodiment of passion triumphant, of fearless love and guiltless pleasure—and the novel is stronger for it.

Rita Mae Brown still believes in the fundamental innocence of passion, but for the first time she gives the old adversaries—rules, roles, prohibitions, limitations—a grudging respect, a kind of equal time. . . .

It's rare to say that a book would be better if it were longer but I suspect that in a less impatient era *Southern Discomfort* would have been a 700-page epic that slowly revealed the roots of character and the intertangling of disparate lives. As it is, the book often seems abrupt and arbitrary, jump-cut as if it were a two-hour movie. Lacking space to let us discover her major characters at their living, Miss Brown flatly tells us who they are: ''Hortensia wanted control over everybody and everything.'' It's a while before these authorial puppets come to life. Meanwhile, minor characters, like Hercules's boxing manager, Sneaky Pie, are so vivid that they cry out for more space. The plot moves in fits and starts. A fistfight between mother and son is perfectly rendered, but a later, even more crucial scene of violence is rushed and anticlimactic. The reader is left feeling charmed, moved—and a little bit cheated.

Annie Gottlieb, *New York Times Book Review*. March 21, 1982, pp. 10, 29.

In Rita Mae Brown's *Rest In Pieces*, every house, barn, shop, rectory and civic building in the tiny Virginia hamlet of Crozet seems to have a resident cat. One sees in such details the fine paw of Sneaky Pie Brown, Ms. Brown's cat., who gets co-author credit for this cozy tale and who bears ''an uncanny resemblance'' to one of its heroines, the ''wonderfully intelligent'' Mrs. Murphy, a tiger cat who resides with the town postmistress, Mary Minor (Harry) Haristeen.

When she isn't lording it over the other animals on Harry's farm, Mrs. Murphy trains her formidable intellect on the appalling case of a corpse (''No fingerprints. No clothes. . . . No head'') that turns up in bits and pieces all over town, just as a handsome stranger with a dark secret comes to Crozet and takes a friendly interest in Harry. The suspense isn't exactly killing, but it gets us jumpy enough to look over our shoulders in church.

Ms. Brown's earthy prose breathes warmth into wintry Crozet and pinches color into the cheeks of its nosy, garrulous residents. ''How close it made everyone feel,'' Harry muses on their funny nicknames, ''these little monikers, these tokens of intimacy.'' It is the shattering of this intimacy by acts of violence that Ms. Brown examines so thoughtfully, creating such an enchanting world of Crozet that we shudder to see any more of its citizens in their graves. Or caught with red hands.

Marilyn Stasio. *New York Times Book Review*. September 6, 1992, p. 17.

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Shotgun, 1996 (n); *Murder, She Meowed*, 1996 (n); *Rita Will*, 1997 (m); *Murder on the Prowl*, 1998 (n); *Cat on the Scent*, 1998 (n)

BROWN, Sterling Allen (1901–1989)

[As a college teacher, Sterling Brown] recalls that he learned as much about language from his students as they learned from him. He was fascinated by the talk and the songs of his students and their parents; they were intrigued by this lanky, athletic professor who took seriously the local lore. The students brought to class local champion singers and talkers. . . . Another brought Brown the first blues records he had ever heard.

Thus Brown began his collection of black folk songs and sayings. He realized that worksongs, ballads, blues, and spirituals were, at their best, poetical expressions of Afro-American life. And he became increasingly aware of black language as often ironic, understated and double-edged. Obviously, more than pathos and humor was expressed in the stinging couplet from the spirituals: ''I don't know what my mother wants to stay here fuh, / This ole worl' ain't been no friend to huh.'' Where in American writing about Afro-American life was this compressed, direct eloquence being equalled? And no one seemed to be writing about the man who might sing these blues lines: ''I hear my woman calling some other man's name, / I know she don't want me, but I answers jus' de same.'' Early on, Brown knew that he would try to render black experience as he knew it, using the speech of the people. He would not, because of white stereotyping, avoid phonetical spellings (although as the years passed, these ''dialect'' spellings seemed less and less necessary). His goal was not to run from the stereotype, but to celebrate the human complexity behind the now grinning, now teary-eyed mask.

Brown's poetry comprises a portrait gallery of Afro-Americans. The few whites who appear are seen in relation to their darker brethren. For the blacks there are certain joys and satisfactions. There is laughter—not just the grim ''laughing to keep from crying''—but belly laughter which may have nothing to do with social ills and frustrations. But in Brown's poetry the scene from which comedy or tragedy must be squeezed is an absurd and gloomy one. . . .

Perhaps Brown's greatest strength lies not in his grim surveying of the American scene, but in his portraits of the people who persevere in spite of everything. . . .

For Brown, folklore serves the function classically attributed to literature; it is functional, instructive, saving. . . . Blacks survived slavery, segregation, and prejudice by clinging to the hopeful, rugged values expressed in the songs of their fathers. . . .

Brown's poetic vision is riotously funny, hopeful, meditative—and ultimately dubious, tragical. . . .

> Robert G. O'Meally. *The New Republic*. February 11, 1978, pp. 33–6.

[Most of the poems in Sterling Brown's *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown* were composed in dialect and] had as their subjects distinctively black archetypal mythic characters as well as the black common man whose roots were rural and Southern. Mr. Brown called his poems ''portraitures,'' close and vivid studies of a carefully delineated subject that suggested a strong sense of place.

These portraitures the poet renders in a style that emerged from several forms of folk discourse, a black vernacular that includes the blues and ballads, spirituals and worksongs. Indeed, Mr. Brown's ultimate referents are black music and mythology. His language, densely symbolic, ironical and naturally indirect, draws upon the idioms, figures and tones of both the sacred and the profane vernacular traditions, mediating between these in a manner unmatched before or since.

But it is not merely the translation of the vernacular that makes his work so major, informed by these forms though his best work is; it is rather the deft manner in which he created his own poetic diction by fusing several black traditions with various models provided by Anglo-American poets to form a unified and complex structure of feeling, a sort of song of a racial self. Above all else, Mr. Brown is a regionalist whose poems embody William Carlos Williams's notion that the classic is the local, fully realized. . . . Mr. Brown boldly merged the Afro-American vernacular tradition of dialect and myth with the Anglo-American poetic tradition and . . . introduced the Afro-American modernist lyrical mode into black literature. . . .

Reading this comprehensive edition, I was struck by how consistently [Mr. Brown] shapes the tone of his poems by the meticulous selection of the right word to suggest succinctly complex images and feelings ''stripped to form,'' in Frost's phrase. Unlike so many of his contemporaries, Mr. Brown never lapses into bathos or sentimentality. His characters confront catastrophe with all of the irony and stoicism of the blues and of black folklore. What's more, he is able to realize such splendid results in a variety of forms, including the classic and standard blues, the ballad, the sonnet and free verse. For the first time, we can appreciate Mr. Brown's full range, his mastery of so many traditions.

> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *New York Times Book Review*. January 11, 1981, pp. 11, 16.

[Brown's] poetry was collected in anthologies as early as James Weldon Johnson's *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), and, like Johnson himself and Langston Hughes, he set about disrupting the patently false and banal image of the docile American Negro with his charming *patois,* artificially stylized and mimicked by the whites in the minstrel shows still popular in the 1920s and 1930s. Johnson says in his preface on Hughes and Brown that they ''*do* use a dialect, but it is not the dialect of the comic minstrel tradition or the sentimental plantation tradition; it is the common, racy, living, authentic speech of the Negro in certain phases of real life.''

Brown uses original Afro-American ballads such as ''Casey Jones,'' ''John Henry,'' and ''Staggolee'' as counterpoint for his modern ones, but the portent of his ironic wit should not be underestimated, for it is actually a tool to shape an ironic, infernal vision of American life as Hades: ''The Place was Dixie I took for Hell,'' says Slim in ''Slim in Hell.'' The American Negro is heralded not as Black Orpheus but as modern tragic hero Mose, a leader of *all* people while futilely attempting to save his own: ''A soft song, filled with a misery/Older than Mose will be.'' In ''Sharecropper'' he is broken as Christ was broken; his landlord ''shot him in the side'' to put him out of his misery; he is lost and wild as Odysseus in ''Odyssey of a Big Boy''; and found again:

Man wanta live
Man want find himself
Man gotta learn
How to go it alone.

Though small in quantity, Brown's poetry is epic in conception; his ballad, blues, and jazz forms are the vehicles for creative insight into themes of American life.

Carol Lee Saffioti and Dayana Stetco. In *Reference Guide to American Literature, 3rd edition*, ed. Jim Kamp (St. James Press, 1994).

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BUCK, Pearl (1892–1973)

She is entitled to be counted as a first-rate novelist, without qualification for the exotic and unique material in which she works. . . . This is the elemental struggle of men with the soil.

The design is filled out with richness of detail and lyric beauty. If now and then there is a straining for effects of biblical poetry, more often there is poignancy in the simple narrative of simple, rude events. . . . Most of all there is verity.

Nathaniel Peffer. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. March 1, 1931. p. 1

Such a novel as *The Good Earth* calls at once for comparison with other novels of the same general design—novels of the soil on the one hand and novels concerning Oriental life on the other. Any such comparison brings out the fact that despite Mrs. Buck's very good narrative style, despite her familiarity with her material, her work has a certain flatness of emotional tone. . . . Mrs. Buck is undoubtedly one of the best Occidental writers to treat of Chinese life, but *The Good Earth* lacks the imaginative intensity, the lyrical quality, which someone who had actually farmed Chinese soil might have been able to give it.

Eda Lou Walton. *The Nation*. May 13, 1931. p. 534

It ought to be very moving to a Western reader. There is only one difficulty. Romantic love is a fake center of psychology to ascribe to the typical Oriental man or woman, reared in the traditional bondage to quite different ideals. Although romantic love is second nature to the Western woman, trained to it by the traditions of a thousand years, it would not even be understood by an old-fashioned Chinese wife. By placing the emphasis on romantic love, all Confucian society is reduced to a laughable pandemonium. . . . *The Good Earth*, though it has no humor or profound lyric passion, shows good technique and much artistic sincerity. Thus, it is discouraging to find that the novel works toward confusion, not clarification. . . . Mrs. Buck, the daughter of a missionary, refuses from the start of her book to admit that there is such a culture as Confucianism.

Younghill Kang. *New Republic*. July 1, 1931. p. 185

There is a firm unity in her work which makes its component parts not easily distinguishable, . . . an identification with one's characters so complete and so well sustained is rare in fiction. . . . The language in which Mrs. Buck presents this material . . . is English—very plain, clear English; yet it gives the impression that one is reading the language native to the characters. . . . Mrs. Buck never, I think, uses a word for which a literal translation into Chinese could not be found. . . . Whether any novelist can be in the very first flight who depicts a civilization other than his own, I do not know. . . . But we may say at least that for the interest of her chosen material, the sustained high level of her technical skill and the frequent universality of her conceptions, Mrs. Buck is entitled to take rank as a considerable artist.

Phyllis Bentley. *English Journal*. Dec., 1935. pp. 791–800

Mrs. Buck is clearly not the destined subject of a chapter in literary history, and would be the last to say so herself. . . . [But] *The Good Earth*, the first volume bearing that name, not the trilogy, is a unique book, and in all probability belongs among the permanent contributions to world literature of our times. . . . It is a document in human nature, in which questions of style—so long as the style was adequate, and of depth—so long as the surfaces were true and significant—were not important. It did not have to be as well written as it was, in order to be distinguished. . . . We do not wish to be unjust to Mrs. Buck. Her total achievement is remarkable even though it contains only one masterpiece.

Henry Seidel Canby. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 19, 1938. p. 8

Although *The Good Earth* was among the most popular books of the 1930's—ranking just after *Gone with the Wind* and *Anthony Adverse*—and although it has received more prizes and official honors than any other novel in our history, there are still literary circles in which it continues to be jeered at or neglected. . . . It is the story of Wang Lu, a poor farmer who becomes a wealthy landlord, but it is also a parable of the life of man, in his relation to the soil that sustains him. The plot, deliberately commonplace, is given a sort of legendary weight and dignity by being placed in an unfamiliar setting. The biblical style is appropriate to the subject and the characters.

Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*. May 10, 1939. p. 24

It is a quarter of a century since Pearl Buck wrote a novel which, perhaps more than all earlier books combined, made the outside world Chinaconscious. In *The Good Earth* millions of Westerners

first met the Chinese people as they really feel and think and behave. . . . Before 1930 many Americans pictured the Chinese as queer laundrymen, or clever merchants like Fu Manchu, or heathens sitting in outer darkness; few believed they could greatly influence our own fate. Since then historical events have taught us otherwise—and among those ''events'' Pearl Buck's book might well be included. Her more than two dozen novels, translations, and nonfiction books interpreting traditional and revolutionary Asia have fully justified the early award to her of the Nobel prize in literature.

Edgar Snow. *The Nation*. Nov. 13, 1954. p. 426

Throughout her writing life, Pearl Buck has been building bridges of understanding between an old and a new civilization, between one generation and another, between differing attitudes toward God and nationality and parenthood and love. Not all Miss Buck's bridges have withstood the weight of problems they were designed to bear. But *The Good Earth* will surely continue to span the abyss that divides East from West, so long as there are people to read it.

Virgilia Peterson. *New York Times Book Section.* July 7, 1957. p. 4

Mrs. Pearl Buck has been enveloped in a kind of critical and popular literary personality which has very little to do with what she actually writes. To the professional critic, she is suspiciously prolific and some what single-minded. To the political extremists, she is subversive just because she has been so prescient on Asian affairs. Her sense of Asian politics and society results in such accurate predictions that it is, by the logic of the extremist, a clear-cut evidence of her advocacy of what has happened.

The Living Reed will confirm both the critic and the extremist in their views. To a wide public, it will be the most powerful and informative book Mrs. Buck has written in some years. *The Living Reed* retains Mrs. Buck's sense of tradition, her deep commitment to the family scanned over several generations as a microcosm of larger social configurations, and her almost visceral feel for how the civil Leviathan can crush the bones of mere mortals.

Eugene Burdick. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Sept. 15, 1963. p. 5

The reason Miss Buck has refused to keep pace with modern techniques is not far to seek. She is following the old-fashioned Chinese story practice of emphasizing event and characterization. And yet there is a dichotomy even here. In the 1930's her best fiction was objective, and the didactic element was usually muted or subordinated. When written in this vein, her work takes on force and meaning. After 1939, however, she breaks away from objectivity; didacticism becomes a dominant feature, and the quality of her work declines. If she had followed the same form of imitation of the Chinese novel type in her post-Nobel Prize writing, her work after 1939 might have reached the significance of her earlier productions. Increasing humanitarian interests brought a lack of *vraisemblance* and demonstrated the inadvisability of distorting what Thomas Hardy calls ''natural truth'' for the purpose of stressing didactic points. A growing sentimentalism also makes itself felt more and more in her later writing, and this attitude is detrimental to the highest artistry.

Paul A. Doyle. *Pearl S. Buck* (Twayne). 1965. p. 151

Written about a quarter century ago, around the time when Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth* was winning a Pulitzer, and, with her other work, a Nobel award, this novel [*The Time Is Noon*] was once set in type, only to have publication canceled with her approval—because, supposedly, it was ''too personal.''. . .

The parts that ordinary novelists do well stump this author, unfortunately; the parts that stump the others she handles wonderfully. Her villains are completely unbelievable—as if, in fact, she never really knew one. The minister father who steals the money hoarded by his wife, the farmer-husband and his doltish family, the scoundrel of a church organist are right out of dime novels. But her good people, customarily skimped or short-changed in fiction, often come touchingly, dramatically alive. . . .

W.G. Rogers. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 19, 1967. p. 44

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BUECHNER, Frederick (1926–)

There is a quality of civilized perception [in *A Long Day's Dying*], a sensitive and plastic handling of English prose and an ability to penetrate to the evanescent core of a human situation, all proclaiming major talent. . . .

The author's main objective seems to be to explore the implications of sensibilities which operate without a clearly perceived

moral base. This is, of course, one of the central themes of modern fiction: it is, in a sense, the sole theme of such a novelist as Virginia Woolf. But Mr. Buechner goes at it in his own way, probing into each incident until he has presented it in all its delicate significance, using background and setting to develop a tone in the light of which action and even dialogue take on new and richer meanings.

Yet this is not a fussy or a pretentious novel. The line of action moves clearly and steadily ahead, and modulations of the emotional pattern are achieved deftly and without any discursive speculation or brooding prose.

David Daiches. *New York Times Book Section*. Jan. 8, 1950. p. 4

It is truly as if Buechner had written [*A Long Day's Dying*] to fulfill an assignment in a Creative Writing course. Not only does he seem to have memorized a list of the exact ingredients that must go into a ''significant'' modern novel, but he seems to have gone to the library and set out consciously to collect them. He appears, furthermore, to have been exceedingly careful to choose only those which are in particularly special favor at the moment and of which his instructor would be absolutely certain to approve.

John W. Aldridge. *After the Lost Generation* (McGraw). 1951. p. 222

There is a deceptive air of ease about [*The Return of Ansel Gibbs*]. There are pages of witty and urbane conversation which are a pleasure to read, but every passage serves to advance the plot, to develop characters that live and feel and interact. Mr. Buechner is an abundant writer: epigrams, aphorisms, skilful and original imagery enliven his prose.

There is a quality of distinction about Frederick Buechner's writing which might best be compared to the gleam of hand-polished old silver—as opposed to the chromium gloss of much of the ''sophisticated'' writing being done today.

A.C. Spectorsky. *Saturday Review*. Feb. 15, 1958. p. 21

. . . Buechner's very interesting, perhaps over-subtle attempt is evidently to show how the springs of Gibbs' decisions flow and function, how underneath the perplexing movements of the mind of a ''rational man'' the deep currents of emotion and intuition may carry him to his real destiny. . . . Buechner's style, as others have remarked of his earlier books, is often noticeably ''Jamesian.'' Sometimes it echoes James's arch manipulations of phrases and attitudes, sometimes his comma-laden, packed attempts at precision. Occasionally it is overwrought. . . . In this novel there is less of the seemingly deliberate attempt to create bizarre situations than in *A Long Day's Dying* . . . or *The Season's Difference*. . . . Despite faults in both conception and execution, the maturity of tone and the skill with which it is constructed make *The Return of Ansel Gibbs* the firmest and clearest of his works.

Edwin Kennebeck. *Commonweal*. April 11, 1958. pp. 53–6

[*The Return of Ansel Gibbs*] is a dialectical novel of ideas. . . a readable, upstanding and ambitious member of the school. Mr. Buechner gained a somewhat unfair reputation for ''Jamesian'' preciosity in 1950 with *A Long Day's Dying* which he is now, and successfully on the whole, trying to shake off. As a job of intellectual and emotional plotting, in which events are arranged to force the characters to reveal themselves as candidly and concisely as they know how, it is very well done.

Mr. Buechner once again locates us in the mainstream between Wall Street and the East sixties, with climatic side trips to Washington, Harlem and big-time TV. But the real axis of the novel is that which ran, and may still run, between Stevensonian liberalism and a tragic (or ''pessimistic'') view of life derived from, or resembling, [Reinhold Niebuhr's] analysis of history and morals. . . . We are still in the familiar Buechner atmosphere of rather chic good living, good eating and genteelly tough-minded conversation. . . . But a novel of ideas as well-conceived can survive such things.

R. W. Flint. *New Republic*. June 23, 1958. p. 29

. . . the tone of *The Final Beast* . . . is religious and moral throughout—so much so at times that he seems almost to be moralizing. Yet it is a fine and moving novel, deeply and quietly felt, even though Mr. Buechner has unnecessarily complicated an essentially simple story. . . . The ironic moralities here are patent: the gossips of a New England town have been more destructive than the German concentration camps that the old woman had been able to survive; and the destroying instrument is a child who thought he was befriending the man of God.

William Barrett. *Atlantic Monthly*. Feb., 1965. pp. 140–1

He is like Salinger and Updike: all three are deft, charming and sensitive writers, but they all tend to suppose that those virtues automatically confer value on the people and situations they are writing about. Since that is not necessarily so, their work often turns into a merely narcissistic display of deftness, charm and sensitivity. They are all good at depicting wayward and vulnerable characters, but since they are all tempted to suppose that waywardness and vulnerability are in themselves manifestations of moral sanctity, we are constantly being called on to admire their characters, no matter how seedy they may otherwise be and no matter how much harm they do to themselves or to others.

Howard Green. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1965. pp. 285–6

For a clergyman to become a novelist is one thing, but for a presumably decadent novelist to become a clergyman (and a Presbyterian at that) is less easy to encompass. Still, it is a fact of life like martyrdom and malnutrition, and if we are to read Buechner's novels with the respect they deserve, we have to accept that there is a very definite connection between his two vocations. . . . His references are often literary or mythic, although he began in the second novel to make remarkable use of ordinary events infused with new meaning, as in the fine scene in *The Season's Difference* in which the dotty old clergyman, playing Statues with the children, re-enacts the Fall. In *A Long Day's Dying*, the symbols are either literary or bizarre, and they are usually overexplained. The style, once considered a virtue of the

book, seems now one of its weaknesses. The novel is still absorbing in its own right, but in retrospect it is primarily interesting as a starting point for Buechner's later work. If the end of the book is a little ambiguous, if the birds that abound are symbols of grace as well as of sex, it may be pointing beyond life as a long day's dying. In general, however, it is a picture of the world after the Fall.

In all three of the later novels, Buechner is concerned with the possibility of being born again. . . . The inspiriting power in *The Season's Difference* and *Ansel Gibbs* becomes explicitly Pentecostal in *The Final Beast*.

Gerald Weales. *The Reporter*. Sept. 9, 1965. p. 46

Black comedy and benign intentions do not very often mix well in a novel. Frederick Buechner's success in delivering to us the bizarre and the seamy details of the American backlands, with a weird, curiously absorbing, humour, is plain in almost everything he writes; yet the talent is shared by a host of American novelists of his generation and younger, is emulated in scores of zany *pièces noires* about the Great American Nightmare. Where Mr. Buechner differs is in his anxiety to reconcile, in as subtle and unobvious a way as possible, these horrors with a plausible affirmative view. He is a Christian novelist, taking pains to weave into the sick, alarming, ludicrous fabric of his plots some strand of allegory which will, if one listens with care, make the wretchedness bearable.

In his last novel, *The Entrance to Porlock*, the ghastliness somewhat outweighed the hope. It may be his real gain in technical assurance, in his control of an elegant deadpan style, in sheer entertainment value, which makes *Lion Country* so much more satisfying: a strange, serene balancing act which blends successfully at last the satirical talent and the moral purpose.

TLS: The Times Literary Supplement. Jan. 10, 1971. p. 1165

Open Heart is an ingenious and glorious metaphor of Christian messianism. But it is both more and less than this: a novel; and its ways are the ways of the novel. . . . Bebb is no theorem or metaphysics. Bebb lives—whether the world is felt to be hallowed or not—with an antic and radiant insatiability; he reminds one a little of Thomas Mann's Joseph. And Buechner is, by his own lights and in some of the most masterly comic prose being written in America, sanctifying the profane. Fraud is only a seeming; suffering and frailty are the means of our purification, and death is not death but eternal life. For me (for whom the Messiah has not yet come), these are illusions, and therefore how hard being a Christian seems!

Cynthia Ozick. *New York Times Book Section*. June 11, 1972. p. 36

Love Feast, the third volume of a trilogy, completes a process of self-recognition and revelation for Buechner. Its relationship to the earlier books, *Lion Country* and *Open Heart*, is paradoxical, for in those books the precision of language, the strength, inventiveness and whimsy of character, and the story itself promised a resolution Buechner doesn't manage gracefully in *Love Feast*. But it is still a novel of contemporary wit and elegance, full of small truths and unexpected mysteries. As Yeats said, out of our quarrels with ourselves comes poetry. . . .

Buechner's faith seems as stark and mysteriously natural as the desert. No dogma confines his writing, no credo fixes his characters for judgment. He claims to be a part-time Christian, yet to him the messages of Christ show themselves often, even in peculiar, mundane circumstances. In fact Buechner's sense of God and Christian teachings has a vigorous and fanciful quality, born of the Testaments and a conviction that ''the language of God is metaphor'' and that religion must be learned through story.

It is not surprising, then, that *Love Feast* closes artificially, when we no longer expect resolution to a tale we should have known all along would lead to new chapters and defy conventional ending.

Lincoln Caplan. *New Republic*. Jan. 25, 1975. pp. 27–8

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BUKOWSKI, Charles (1920–1994)

It is not, after all, Bukowski's subjects or his imagery, it is not his point of view or his neostoic attitudes that make his poetry remarkable and almost without parallel in our time—it is his voice, the rhythms and the characteristics of his own idiom that distinguish him from his contemporaries. He has replaced the formal, frequently stilted diction of the Pound-Eliot-Auden days with a language devoid of the affectations, devices and mannerisms that have taken over academic verse and packed the university and commercial quarterlies with imitations of imitations of Pound and the others. Without theorizing, without plans or schools or manifestos, Bukowski has begun the long awaited return to a poetic language free of literary pretense and supple enough to adapt itself to whatever matter he chooses to handle. What Wordsworth claimed to have in mind, what William Carlos Williams claimed to have done, what Rimbaud actually did in French, Bukowski has accomplished for the American language. . . .

There are no sweet endings in Bukowski's world. Because, unlike the Brothers Grimm and their contemporary followers, Bukowski recalls that no one lives happily ever after: there are

cancers and bullets; there are psychotic nightmares and tabloids full of excellent suicide motives. There is a world of chrome and neon, concrete and steel in which human beings are trapped like flies, like ants, like dissenters in the collapsing rooms of the Inquisition: sooner or later the question is asked, the answer given—and, the answer always being wrong in the end, the sentence carried out.

John William Corrington. Foreword to *It Catches My Heart in Its Hands* by Charles Bukowski (Loujon). 1963. pp. 5, 9

No Establishment is likely ever to recruit Bukowski. He belongs in the small company of poets of real, not literary alienation, that includes Herman Spector, Kenneth Fearing, Kenneth Patchen and a large number of Bohemian fugitives unknown to fame. His special virtue is that he is so much less sentimental than most of his colleagues.

Yet there is nothing outrageous about his poetry. It is simple, casual, honest, uncooked. . . .

Bukowski is what he is, and he is not likely to be found applying for a job with the picture magazines as an Image of Revolt. Unlike the Beats, he will never become an allowed clown; he is too old now, and too wise, and too quiet. More power to him.

Kenneth Rexroth. *New York Times Book Section*. July 5, 1964. p. 5

Some have likened the muscular music of Charles Bukowski to that of the early Sandburg, but the skidrow—mission stiff—greasy spoon—rented room bard is the only one of his kind. He cannot be classified or yoked with any other poet, living or dead.

And poet he is. One who can make words dance and roar like an earthquake or whisper softly like a Spring breeze freshening the fetid air of the streets where men past caring sleep fitfully in flophouse cubicles. In *Cold Dogs in the Courtyard* the death of a cockroach, ''blind yet begotten with life, a dedicated wraith of pus and antennae,'' inspires an eloquent commentary on the human condition. Again, in *Crucifix in a Death-Hand*, Bukowski has ''something for the touts, the nuns, the grocery clerks, and you. . . .''

Jack Conroy. *ABC*. Feb., 1966. p. 5

In Bukowski's world there is little wonder, and beauty has its foundations deeply sunk into ugliness. He took LSD once and was impressed—but not all that much. He drinks a lot but never glows rosily, instead his vision is getting greyer and greyer as he moves further and further into the completely rationalistic view of the mechanics-dominated world that rusts, wheezes and threatens at any moment to completely collapse.

He provides a necessary counterbalance to the hippy lotus-eater worldview of love, long hair and Ultimate Love. He works in the Post Office eight hours a night, he hasn't lost track of the work-a-day (or night) America which is the only reality for too many Americans. At the same time he has avoided that ivy-covered outlook of the college-town-based Platonic poets who read the daily newspapers through the double-layered glass walls of their air conditioned literary museum. He's an authentic, the real-thing, because he talks from the vantage point of the pavement, the dog biscuit factory, the whore house, the park bench, the run-down room with the shabby shade and worn-out rug stretched feebly across the sagging floor. He represents a kind of stepped-up reality in relation to the beats because he never tried to make the running-down American world sing or shout or chant—and they did. He just makes it talk. And if you listen to what it's saying it pays off. You don't go through the looking glass (for a change) but sweat it out in the real world on this side.

Hugh Fox. *Charles Bukowski: A Critical and Bibliographical Study* (Abyss). 1969. pp. 94–5

Buk, as he is known to ''little mag'' readers, is by now an American legend. Even those who merely hover near the underground press know of him as a unique blend of Whitman, Miller, and Dylan Thomas. With two years of college and countless drunks behind him, he now approaches his 50th year as a clerk in a Los Angeles post office—much to the dismay of the postal inspectors. Since he began chopping out poetry at age 35, he has appeared in every important ''little'' from one coast to the other; the bibliographies read like an ongoing history of the little magazine. Two major books have been published by Jon and Louise Webb of the Loujon press, but he's yet to find a large, established publisher. Thus the work of one of America's most original, hard-hitting, and imaginative poets probably is available in only a few libraries.

The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses over the Hills . . . should now bring Bukowski the attention he deserves. His language is sensitive, harsh, yet always accessible to the most turned-off layman. Even the failures are a hell of a lot better than the works of many modern, better-known poets published today.

Bill Katz. *Library Journal*. May 15, 1970. p. 1848

Charles Bukowski never did escape from California. Certainly he is quite unimaginable anywhere else, and he is still out there on the West Coast, writing poems and stories about his five decades of drinking, screwing, horse-playing, and drifting around, proving defiantly that even at the edge of the abyss language persists. ''A legend in his own time,'' the cover of his new collection of stories [*Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and General Tales of Ordinary Madness*] calls him, and that seems fair. . . .

He writes as an unregenerate lowbrow contemptuous of our claims to superior being. Politics is bullshit, since work is as brutalizing and unrewarding in a liberal order as in any totalitarian one; artists and intellectuals are mostly fakes, smugly enjoying the blessings of the society they carp at; the radical young are spiritless asses, insulated by drugs and their own endless cant from any authentic experience of mind or body; most women are whores, though *honest* whores are good and desirable; no life finally works, but the best one possible involves plenty of six packs, enough money to go to the track, and a willing woman of any age and shape in a good old-fashioned garter belt and high heels.

He makes literature out of the unfashionable and unideological tastes and biases of an average Wallace voter. And that sense of life is worth hearing about when it takes the form not of socko sex-and-*schmertz* but of blunt, unembarrassed explanation of how it feels to

be Bukowski, mad but only north-north-west, among pretentious and lifeless claims to originality and fervor.

Thomas R. Edwards. *New York Review of Books*. Oct. 5, 1972. pp. 21–3

The loose forms and cool, anarchic voice favored by so many of the Beats were not confined to them. Charles Bukowski, for instance, a writer associated with the urban sprawl of Los Angeles, uses a cryptic, free-floating line and an off-hand, casual idiom to describe the other America: life among the underclass, the bums, dropouts, and dispossessed who cast a cold eye on the national dream of success. ''I am not aiming high,'' Bukowski admits in one of his poems, ''/I am only trying to keep myself alive / just a little longer.'' This is true enough, in a sense. There are no large gestures in his work: he simply tries to record things as they pass in a downbeat, laconic, or even sardonic, way. However, this commitment to the notion of the writer as recording instrument does not inhibit judgment. Bukowski is a frustrated moralist, slyly reminding us of what Rexroth has called ''the unfulfilled promises of 'Song of Myself' and *Huckleberry Finn*.'' Nor does it limit the range of his voice. His poems are sometimes documentaries, alive with grubby detail (''Men's Crapper''), and at others strange and bizarre to the point of surrealism (''The Catch''). This reflects a common impulse among contemporary writers: the sense that the extraordinary landscapes of postwar America can only be accommodated by a vision ready to use both fact and fantasy—the eye of the camera, with its disposition for empirical detail, and the inner eye of the fabulist, alert to nightmares and magic. ''Our history has moved on two rivers.'' the novelist Norman Mailer has observed. . . .

How can American writers now navigate these two rivers? Mailer asks. How can they invent a language adequate to a reality that incorporates Harlem and Hollywood, the Vietnam War and MTV, Richard Nixon, Charles Manson, and Colonel Oliver North? The answer, suggested by a writer like Bukowski, is a mixture of naturalism and surrealism: demonstrating a willingness to write the facts down and to attend to the ''ecstasy and violence'' that generated those facts, to gravitate between outer space and inner, documentary and dream.

Richard Gray. *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century* (Essex: Longman, 1990), pp. 306–7

Charles Bukowski was in essence a writer with one character and one story. His familiar protagonist, Henry Chinaski, was a hard-drinking, unsuccessful writer, living in Los Angeles, who liked women for their old-fashioned attributes, and whose main cerebral activity, when not writing unsellable work, was studying the racing form. Bukowski is usually compared to Hemingway and Henry Miller, but Chinaski takes his place in a line of American fiction heroes, from Huckleberry Finn to Sergeant Bilko, whose message is their mischief.

Bukowski died in March this year, aged seventy-three. He had published his first short fiction in 1944, in the respected *Story* magazine, but it was not until three decades later, when Black Sparrow Press began publishing his work, that he gained a cult following, which turned into unexpected commercial success. While this was a welcome turn of events for Bukowski, it was bad news for Chinaski. For the two were essentially one, and it was a paradox of Bukowski's appeal that his success, from a reader's point of view, depended on failure. *Pulp*, which is published posthumously, is probably the worst thing he ever wrote. It's a Chandler spoof (itself a tired genre), with a touch of the supernatural, and some waves in the direction of literary heroes (a predictably sexy female hires Chinaski to track down Celine, last spotted in a Hollywood bookshop). Plotting was not within Bukowski's technical range—his picaresque novels are frankly episodic—and while *Pulp* gestures pitifully in that direction, the signals soon become unreadable, and the book descends into nonsense. A better idea of Bukowski's strength can be gained from *Run with the Hunted: A Charles Bukowski Reader*, edited by John Martin, an anthology of material taken from novels, stories, and poems published over the past twenty-five years.

James Campbell. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. August 19, 1994, p. 21

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BULLINS, Ed (1936–)

The American Place Theater has made another important find, Ed Bullins, author of three one acts, *The Electronic Nigger, and*

Others. . . . Unlike the general run of young playwrights, Bullins does not spend most of his time showing what a whiz he is at creating monologists who gab endlessly in back rooms about their cranky existences. He gives his attention to the impact of one character on another, the blood of drama, not its gristle.

The least formally structured of his plays, *A Son, Come Home*, happens to be the least effective. . . .

He comes into his own with the title play. *The Electronic Nigger* presents a young Negro novelist, Jones, conducting his first evening class in what prospectuses describe as Creative Writing I. Jones proudly tells his mixed garland of middle-aged and youthful students, ''You won't be graded on how well you write, but on how you grow in this class.'' Unluckily for him, one student turns out to be a verbose know-it-all who disrupts the lesson and steals the allegiance of the other students. . . .

Clara's Old Man, which winds up the trio, is one of the best short American plays I have come across: realistic in manner yet throbbing with weirdness and driven by bursts of extravagant invention that make a definition by genre seem impertinent.

Albert Bermel. *New Leader*. April 22, 1968. p. 28

The white problem in America is at the core of all Bullins's work. He denies being a working-class playwright: he is from the criminal class. All the other men in his family have been in prison. He is the only one who went to high school, who went to college; but he claims that working people in Harlem like his surrealist, intellectual plays.

The Electronic Nigger is not straight propaganda. An evening class in literary expression is being gently conducted by Mr. Jones, a novelist: the session is interrupted by a penologist, Mr. Carpentier, who spouts large generalisations in technical language—not unlike Marshall McLuhan's—and takes over the class, until Jones's head is full of noise and Carpentier is leading pupils in a mechanical goose-step, bawling abstract inanities. (All this is well staged, in-the-round, with life-like acting shifting slowly to an expressionist style, with a climax of disciplined noise and nightmare.) Neither Jones nor Carpentier is white. During the clash, Jones at one point appeals to Carpentier as his ''black brother,'' but the latter denies being black. A white pupil calls him ''Uncle Tom'' and a black pupil says: ''No. It's for me to say that.''

D.A.N. Jones. *The Listener*. Aug. 22, 1968. p. 253

It fascinated me that *In the Wine Time*, produced by an organization consciously devoted to Black Power [the New Lafayette Theater], was the only ''black'' play I saw this season not obsessed by Whitey. There were, to be sure, occasional references, but the central purpose of the play was ''to celebrate the Black experience'' *for fellow blacks*. This is no more nor less than the New Lafayette's official credo promised, but it is always a surprise when rhetoric and practice coincide.

Clarity and fidelity of purpose, however, have never yet guaranteed artistic success. *In the Wine Time* does not reverse my opinion of last season (based on an evening of Bullins' short plays done at the American Place) that his reputation has outpaced his performance. On the one hand, *In the Wine Time* is attenuated—a one-acter stretched into three—yet, on the other, its melodramatic ending is insufficiently prepared for, and is even at odds with the desultory humor and fitful tensions that precede it.

Martin Duberman. *Partisan Review*. No. 3, 1969. pp. 489–90

Ed Bullins, out of Genet via LeRoi Jones, writes like a man trying to dislodge a big white monkey from his back. His obsession is the corruption of black integrity by white values. His plays are composed like effigies, specially designed to torture his enemies, and based on the magical assumption that if one destroys the symbol often enough, the reality will also get impaired. Like the vendettas of LeRoi Jones, they belong less to the convention of art than they do to the world of black magic. Which is precisely why they are so fascinating in the theater.

Charles Marowitz. *New York Times Theater Section*. April 13, 1969. p. 3

Ed Bullins' *In New England Winter* . . . is compounded of sudden spurts of anger, violence, and passion, and spurts, just as sudden, of wit and humor, tenderness, and, finally, mystery. Like Mr. Bullins' *The Pig Pen* . . . the play opens up, to a certain extent, once it is over—when we realize, for example, that what seemed to be a prologue is actually an epilogue, and that everything that follows leads up to it. . . .

The plot is the least of it. Mr. Bullins' details of character and speech and behavior make up a whole style of living, especially when they are specific and precise. They are so strong that we take everything else on trust, and his language often makes poetry out of the casually obscene vernacular of his actors. The people and their feelings about one another are what give the play its depth.

Edith Oliver. *New Yorker*. Feb. 6, 1971. p. 72

Crazy dark laughter envelops all the proceedings [in *The Duplex*], but the meaning is frightful. It is not simply a matter of revealing the horrid messiness typical of most ghettos, whatever the color of their inhabitants; there is something more damaging beyond the specifics of promiscuous fornication, smoking of pot, gambling, drunkenness, outbursts of physical brutality, irresponsibility and wrecked lives. What is really being exposed is our civilization.

Bullins flatters no one and directly accuses no one. He offers hardly any preachment or ''propaganda.'' His method is largely realistic. . . .

What makes *The Duplex* so telling is that, apart from their native humanity, all of its characters are fundamentally abandoned people. What ails them is not due solely to white indifference, incomprehension or hostility but to a deprivation in the soil of sound values, which are not supplied by America because it has not for a long time actually possessed them.

Harold Clurman. *The Nation*. March 27, 1972. p. 412

In the best of Bullins' work, he is creating a tradition for black drama to follow, helping to create a fearlessness, a self-acceptance.

There is no sensational spooning up of filth nor is there sentimentality; instead there is the searing eye of unsentimental analysis. And subtlety, so that when one reads *Clara's Old Man*, one is reminded of the principle that in the presence of artistic greatness, the surface of a play does not necessarily reveal its depths; the depths are suggested rather than stated. And there is implicit direction; though Bullins' working class in his best work does not have conscious direction, one senses a kind of godly principle, a kind of holiness and enormous energy and power, and one perceives that all that is needed is a harnessing force, a wise and compelling leadership, and sweeping changes will be made. There is another artistic principle: that a great work of art must suggest the awesome potentialities of man for growth: this principle too is a spine of Bullins' best work.

There is thus great strength and great confusion in Bullins' working class, of whom one could say: in great chaos, great strength; in great lostness, the potentiality of decisive direction; in compulsive suicide, powerful life.

Lance Jeffers. *CLA Journal*. Sept., 1972. p. 34

Beyond the political activism and the racial consciousness of his plays (which are, of course, what Bullins most values in them), there is another side. *In the Wine Time, In New England Winter, Goin' a Buffalo*, and other Bullins plays create a mood of lost innocence, purity, and beauty that is universally meaningful. In fact, the dramatist creates in most of his work a counter-mood to that which dominates the actual dialogue—there is a sense of once-glimpsed loyalty, sensitivity, and romance which the ghetto reality of the setting makes impossible to attain. This obbligato of tenderness is so overpowered by the brutality of the ghetto that it exists in the plays as something once envisioned, but almost forgotten, by one or two main characters. The theme of a brutal reality destroying human dreams of tenderness and romance is, of course, a common one in twentieth century literature—black and white—and requires no specifically Black consciousness to respond to it. The three Bullins plays are, however, striking illustrations of this theme.

James R. Giles. *Players*. Oct.–Nov., 1972. p. 32

The Reluctant Rapist is Theatre of Cruelty on every level. And this is especially so when considering the book as a literary object. The writing is *bad*. Not bad-ass. Just bad. It reads like an appointment book (I went here, ate this, fucked that) rather than a work of fiction. It makes no attempts to penetrate to its characters' motivational cores. The prose itself creates no illusions. Neither does it reveal any. Politically, psychologically, linguistically, *The Reluctant Rapist* barely exists.

But at the level of etiology this novel does manage to exert a morbid fascination. The book's cantus firmus—entwined with Stevie Benson's near constant erection—is that not only is it right to humiliate women, but that no matter what they say they actually enjoy it! The idea seems to be that much like a sassy child will love a good whuppin' now and then, so will women love an occasional good raping. Especially the white ones—who have been unfairly denied their full share of degradation by an unenlightened society.

Jack Friedman. *The Village Voice*. Oct. 25, 1973. p. 35

The Reluctant Rapist is a handbook to the plays. As a playwright, Bullins rips, tears, rapes; he blows apart black life. As a novelist, he explains what the ripping, tearing, and raping are all about. They are the acts of a lover in deep need of blasting away the conventional faiths and beliefs to expose the truthful, irreducible center so that he and his beloved may at last be free. Steve Benson the rapist is a metaphor of Ed Bullins the playwright. And Steve's story is a reassembling of the bits from the exploded bombs and tearing beak. . . . The conventional order of events is one of those beliefs that has to be destroyed. And Bullins is successful in destroying it, in fusing the past with the present, in giving us the feeling of living the past again from the standpoint of the present and seeing the future infuse the past.

Jerry H. Bryant. *The Nation*. Nov. 12, 1973. p. 504

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BURKE, Kenneth (1897–1993)

Kenneth Burke is one of the few Americans who know what a success of good writing means—and some of the difficulties in the way of its achievement. . . . *The White Oxen* is a varied study, as any book where writing is the matter, must be. American beginnings—in the sense of the work of Gertrude Stein, difficult to understand, as against, say, the continuities of a De Maupassant. It is a group of short accounts, stories, more or less. They vary from true short stories to the ridiculousness of all short stories dissected out in readable pieces: writing gets the best of him, in the best of the book: ''The Death of Tragedy'' and ''My Dear Mrs. Wurtlebach.''

William Carlos Williams. *Dial*. Jan., 1929. pp. 6–7

Burke's approach to symbolism is not susceptible of verification, and depends for its convincing force on his ability to make the reader perceive immediately the author's intuitions. This is to say that the method is essentially a-scientific if not unscientific. A generation of readers brought up on the facile technique of popularized psychoanalysis will no doubt find this method acceptable. But even those who look with suspicion on the explosions of an imagination uncontrolled by a scientific governor must frequently adjudge Burke's intuitions to be happy hits indeed, often throwing a burst of light on the dark pockets of our social scene.

Eliseo Vivas. *The Nation*. Dec. 25, 1937. p. 723

If he suffers from a restraint, I should think it a constitutional distaste against regarding poetic problems as philosophic ones. I

suppose his feeling would be that poetry is something bright and dangerous, and philosophy is something laborious and arid, and you cannot talk about the one in terms of the other without a disproportion and breach of taste. . . . He has a whole arsenal of strategies, like the German general staff, who are said to have whistling bombs if they like, and whose campaigns rest upon a highly technical and sustained opportunism. . . . He is perspicuous and brilliantly original, and I would venture to quarrel with no positive finding that he makes, but only with his proportions, or his perspective.

John Crowe Ransom. *Kenyon Review*. Spring, 1942. pp. 219, 237

Mr. Burke's distinction as a critic is twofold. First, he is a man of amazing learning, who knows how to use his learning unpedantically and, if necessary, with a dose of irony. Second, he is that very rare thing among critics: a man who examines creative manifestations without *parti pris*, who does not put his own intention before the intention of the poet but carefully scrutinizes the mind of the agent as embodied in the act. His erudition aids him in treating literature universally, i.e. each particular literary instance is brought into relation with the whole body of *Weltliteratur*; while his patient ingenuity manages to disengage the hidden cross-references and ambiguities of each work.

Francis C. Golffing. *Poetry*. March, 1946. p. 339

Mr. Burke's courage is not purely of the theoretical kind. He dares to translate his doctrines into very definite instances, although his purpose is not indoctrination. He is fighting for free thought and free speech at a time when these are denounced as un-American activities. . . . It is a great comfort to find one who, ignoring the stampede, dares to say: ''So help me God, I cannot otherwise.'' There are enough clear-sighted and vigorous pronouncements in this book (*A Rhetoric of Motives*) to insure the wrath of Senator McCarthy; if the Senator could understand them.

Albert Guerard. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. July 23, 1950. p. 8

He started from literary criticism (after writing two books of fiction); he has provided us with many brilliant examples of the critic's art; and yet the most brilliant of all the examples is possibly his essay on *Mein Kampf*, in which he explains Hitler's strategies of persuasion. In other words the quality of his intention does not depend on the literary greatness of his subject; and when his literary subject happens to be a great one, as in another brilliant essay, on *Venus and Adonis*, he may not even discuss the qualities that make it a masterpiece. He is more interested in mechanisms of appeal, as in the Hitler essay, and in the disguises of social attitudes, as in the *Venus and Adonis*. We could, however, go further and say that his real subject is man as a symbol-using animal.

Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*. Sept. 14, 1953. p. 17

Burke's gift as a poet is. . . real. His word play is true mortal-fun, and his ear for a rhythm is rich and right. He does especially well in ending a poem on a kind of dissolving rhythm. Not with a bang but a whimper, perhaps, but the whimper sings. Above all, the poems, when put together, generate the sense of a real person—learned, bourbony, getting on to mortality as a bit of a hard case but still, and always, sweet on life. I like both the cantankerousness and the sweetness; one flavors the other. No one should have trouble believing that Kenneth Burke's despairs are humanly real.

John Ciardi. *The Nation*. Oct. 8, 1955. pp. 307–8

Throughout his writings Burke seems to have effected a neat ''conversion downwards'' of phenomena into terms. His system is, it seems to me, essentially a verbal one which treats words at what is often a great distance from the reality of things and people. It would be interesting. . . to study Burke semantically and to examine, among other things, the fluctuations in verbal level which he employs. His theory of poetic performance leads through the ascending order: poetry, act, motive, power, reality. This scale might well be applied to his critical system. Were this to be done, I have the impression that we would find it to be as much a poetic as a critical performance.

Louis Fraiberg. *Psychoanalysis and American Literary Criticism* (Wayne State). 1960. p. 200

Kenneth Burke . . . combines the methods of Marxism, psychoanalysis, and anthropology with semantics in order to devise a system of human behavior and motivation which uses literature only as a document or illustration. The early Burke was a good literary critic, but his work in recent decades must rather be described as aiming at a philosophy of meaning, human behavior, and action whose center is not in literature at all. All distinctions between life and literature, language and action disappear in Burke's theory. He seems to have lost all sense of evidence in his recent analyses of poetic texts. Thus he interprets Coleridge's ''Ancient Mariner'' as ''ritual for the redemption of his drug,'' and Keats's ''Ode on a Grecian Urn'' he reads in terms of the identity of love and death, of capitalist individualism and Keats's tubercular fever, in almost complete disregard of the text. A system which plans to embrace all life ends as a baffling phantasmagoria of bloodless categories, ''strategies,'' ''charts,'' and ''situations.''

Rene Wellek. *The Yale Review*. Autumn, 1961. p. 109

It would be a mistake not to see Burke's work in its historical context, not to realize that all of his books are verbal acts upon a historical scene, and that the dramatistic system as a whole is a humanist's counter-statement offered to the public at large as a reaffirmation of *human* purpose and as a means of ''purifying war'' (man's greatest rational lunacy) so that each person, in his own way, may *peacefully* and intelligently pursue the better life.

Since 1945, Burke has worked with missionary zeal to spread the good word (dramatism) that came to him upon completing the work started in the 1930's when he first began his study of communication and dedicated himself to the attainment of peace through knowledge. . . . As a theory of language, dramatism attempts to isolate and study the essence of language and, by

systematically examining the uses to which man puts it, to isolate and study the essence of man and the drama of human relations. One of the main conclusions reached is that man's views of himself, other men, nature, society, and God are language-ridden—that man necessarily views everything through a ''fog of symbols.''

W. H. Rueckert. *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations* (Minnesota). 1963. p. 161

. . .because Miss [Marianne] Moore was a person with roots in the American resurgence, in those lyric years when poets sought to revive and rephrase Whitman's messianic spirit, during her turn as editor [of *The Dial*] she achieved one splendid feat. She recognized Kenneth Burke as the critic who might well map a path along a middle road to the heavenly kingdom. Deciding that *The Dial*'s Award should go to Burke, she did not celebrate Burke's arrival there. Rather she hoped to dramatize the ways in which Burke exercised the highest care and accuracy and diligence. . . . in pursuit of the life of letters. In her view, he was the one American critic who possessed technique and sensibility enough to reconcile letters and culture, science and imagination in a single theory of literary value which is simultaneously a theory of human virtue in a comprehensive but probably not final sense of that bloody word.

William Wasserstrom. *The Western Humanities Review*. Summer, 1963. p. 262

Kenneth Burke's *The Rhetoric of Religion*, like everything else that Mr. Burke has written, is highly original, brilliantly stimulating, infinitely suggestive, and ultimately baffling. Mr. Burke is so thoroughly *sui generis* that it is difficult to fit him into any contemporary philosophical pigeon-hole; but if he belongs anywhere, it is certainly with those who have restored the symbolic imagination to a central place in modern thought. Mr. Burke's attention has always centered on the emotive, psychic, and ethical-moral needs of the human spirit, and on the ''symbolic actions'' by which these needs are expressed. Much of the paradoxical originality of his thinking comes from applying concepts taken from the study of magic or religion and employing them to characterize completely secular historical and cultural phenomena. If a good deal of modern thought has been engaged in debunking, or, to be more formal, in ''demythification''—that is, the interpretation of one or another ''sacred'' ideology in terms of ''profane'' categories—then Kenneth Burke might be said to have adopted the opposite tack of ''remythification.''

Joseph Frank. *Sewanee Review*. Summer, 1964. p. 484

Like Freud, Burke looks forward to a modification in our experience of guilt. Unlike Freud, however, he does not trace the origins of suppressed guilt-feelings to events in prehistory, recapitulated during the first few years of life; nor does he look upon religion precisely as a mass-neurosis, no better at promoting an ideal inner strength than the individual neuroses of secular men. For Burke, on the contrary, guilt is endemic to *any* human condition: it is virtually identical with the unacknowledged self-hatred that must accompany man's conflict with himself, nature, his fellowmen. . . .Man's life comprises not only physical motion but also symbolical action; one can quarrel with one's father or, like Hume, write a book denying the real, substantial power of antecedent causes. Burke doesn't mean to challenge the autonomy of philosophic effort by such interpretations; he means rather to argue the presence of poetic motives in metaphysical thought—means, that is, to underwrite poetry as the archetype of symbolic action generally, because it offers not only symbolical experiences but also appropriate symbolical expiations.

Alvin C. Kibel. *American Scholar*. Spring, 1965. pp. 304–5

A book [*Towards a Better Life*] so absorbed with style and stylization had better be well-written. Mr. Burke's prose, which has been known to develop opacities, displays here a translucent elegance and humor, but the novel isn't just fine writing. It is, in addition, beautifully expressive writing, with a vein of mockery at work under the formal turns of phrase. . . . *Towards a Better Life* is likely to count more, in future histories of American literature, than any given dozen of its soggier contemporaries.

A word here, in celebration of Mr. Kenneth Burke. He has been among us so long in so many capacities, and to such pervasive effect, that it is easy to lose track of how much the literary temper of our time owes to him. In whatever genre, his work has always carried the strong stamp of his individuality; he has never dissolved it into pap for the multitude or codified it into tablets for quick absorption by graduate students. He has never made it with a book club; he has never seemed ashamed of being learned. The subtlety of his critical work has challenged, its perversity has provoked, its original insights have opened up immense corridors of thought.

Robert M. Adams. *New York Review of Books*. Oct. 20, 1966. p. 33

We ask a prosaic question: what kind of book [*Towards a Better Life*] are we reading? It is certainly not a novel, nor was it meant to be. In ascriptions of this kind we are well advised to consult Northrop Frye's account of the several forms of prose fiction. Then it appears that Burke's book is not a freak, a sport of Nature, but an example of a distinguished tradition, the anatomy. . . . The masterpieces of the genre include *A Tale of a Tub, Candide*, the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, *Headlong Hall*, and *Brave New World*. . . .

It is not enough to say that *Towards a Better Life* is beautifully ''written,'' if by this praise we mean to consign the book to an anthology of Prose Style. However peculiar its origin, it is in fact one of the most moving books in modern literature, as well as one of the purest anatomies.

Denis Donoghue. *The Ordinary Universe* (Macmillan—N.Y.). 1968. pp. 214–5

If speculative in life, language, or literature, then you can hardly miss with *Language as Symbolic Action*, a rich and culminative work. Burke is still coming on with further developments, in this book and for future ones, but is meanwhile expressing his most important positions, it seems to me, more thoroughly and unmistakably than ever before, with the illustrations and exemplifications

sufficient in length and detail, brilliant in quality. Although *Towards a Better Life* has more than enough appeal as art, it will inevitably be of added interest because of its network of relationships to a major career in criticism—one that except for recent memory of KB's pious plumbings around the word itself might have been labelled (rather than libelled) ''solid gold.'' But golden or not, encomiums are not easy to avoid as an unusually productive and unusually successful life's work refines to quintessence, the artificer in fine fettle for completing the contract.

Neal J. Osborn. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1968. p. 321

If there is a title peculiarly fitting to Burke in all his work, it is one dear to Burke himself, the title of rhetorician. Burke is a rhetorician in a double sense: whatever he considers, he considers it rhetorically as an instance of rhetoric. Rhetoric, as I am thinking of it, is the use of words to evoke a specific emotion or state of mind. Whatever Burke studies, this is what he finds it to be, whether it is open propaganda, the Constitution of the United States, psychoanalysis, philosophy, or even pure poetry. Dialectics itself he defines as a kind of rhetoric; it is ''all enterprises that cure us by means of words.'' Pure poetry differs from other forms of rhetoric only in the sense that the state of mind it evokes is an end in itself, whereas ordinary rhetoric evokes a state of mind which is to lead to practical consequences.

The objective of Burke's own rhetoric is a consistent one: to evoke a state of oneness among men. If he can convince us that we are all rhetoricians, that we are all using words combatively for our own purposes, he will have purified our warlike natures by evoking in us a feeling of our final oneness.

Merle E. Brown. *Kenneth Burke* (Minnesota). 1969. p. 7

Most simply put, [Burke] can get more thoughts out of a book than anyone else can, evoking in his reader time after time a mixed attitude of surprise, gratitude, and chagrin—''yes, of course, why couldn't I have seen it for myself?''—while at the same time, in the same gestures, often in the very same sentences, he is developing a method and a terminology which the reader, if he will, can master for application elsewhere. . . .

There is an enthusiasm in all this that sometimes comes near enough to madness: criticism as rhapsody, or *furor poeticus*. Nor do I mean that in disparagement, though aware that some writers would; for among the most appealing things about Burke, to my mind, is the sense he has, the sense I get from reading him, that thought, if it is to matter at all, must be both obsessive and obsessively thorough, that thinking, if it is to salvage anything worth having from chaos, must adventure into the midst of madness and build its city there.

Howard Nemerov. *Reflexions on Poetry & Poetics* (Rutgers). 1972. p. 84

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BURNS, John Horne (1916–1953)

Mr. Burns writes unevenly, perhaps deliberately so, sometimes using the shock technique of photographic realism, sometimes employing a kind of stylized symbology, but always with telling effect. In [*The Gallery*], his first novel, Mr. Burns shows a brilliant understanding of people, a compassion for their frailities and an urge to discover what inner strength or weaknesses may lie beneath the surface.

J. D. Ross. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. June 8, 1947. p. 5

The appreciation of the Italian people grows occasionally into something like a sentimental idolatry. The bitterness against American crudity comes close in places to a youthful intolerance. And the steady stress upon sex . . . grows into what looks like an inadvertent concentration upon one aspect of human experience as if it were the sole aspect. The genuine love and understanding which marks much of [*The Gallery*] are, indeed, in a real way, vitiated by what appears a far too simple, far too easy falling back upon both sexual activity and a kind of vague, wistful brotherliness.

Richard Sullivan. *New York Times Book Section*. June 8, 1947. p. 25

In *The Gallery* John Horne Burns absorbs the soldier's idiom into a spacious narrative prose that modifies but does not dominate the language. It is an appropriate device, as the matter of the book is the mental confusion and emotional disruption of our American soldiers abroad. . . . On the one hand (Burns) is uneasy and guilty about the smug, provincial, materialist life in America, and shocked by the conduct of many American soldiers. . . . On the other hand, his sympathy with the Neapolitans is generous and ingratiating, and his affection for them is too specific and imaginative to be merely sentimental. . . . One regrets that he didn't employ his human insight and talent for social analysis to go beyond a just indignation and consider whether even American boorishness and immaturity couldn't be the reverse of certain substantial national virtues.

John Farrelly. *New Republic*. July 7, 1947. p. 28

[*The Gallery*] is not a book for little boys in any school, but for adults who recognize the truth and know good writing when they see it, and who do not object to blatant four-letter words. The author's place in American war fiction seems certain. Compared with *The Gallery . . . Three Soldiers*, the novel that started off the realistic fiction of the First World War, was a fragrant and tender lily.

Harrison Smith. *Saturday Review*. Feb. 14, 1948. p. 7

The central love affair of the novel, through which Guy Hudson finally realized the difference between sex and love, is not altogether convincing. What is apparent, however, just as in the English sophisticates, is the dominant sexuality of the novel, and a sexuality that finds expression in harsh and even violent terms. There is an inverted Puritanism in Mr. Burn's work, and a remarkably sophisticated sense of evil and malice.

Maxwell Geismar. *Saturday Review*. Apr. 2, 1949. p. 16.

Mr. Burns was not far enough removed from his experiences to be capable of relating them without an excess acidity. Consequently his attack is not pointed as directly as it might have been. His book is too long, and a few of his most acute and penetrating observations are obscured by paragraphs of unleashed fury which become rather tedious.

Virginia Vaughn. *Commonweal*. Apr. 29, 1949. p. 76

John Horne Burns is one of those American writers who believe in shock treatment. To judge by *Lucifer with a Book* he is a satirical moralist rather than a novelist. He has much of Henry Miller's rich comic gift, a fluency which amounts at times to lallomania, a passion for scatological images and a strong tendency to preach. It is not always easy to discover, in this whirlwind of words, just what Mr. Burns is preaching about, but one thing seems to emerge clearly; nothing is so dangerous and destructive as virginity of mind and body and, until this impediment has been removed, preferably by rape, no one can begin to live.

Antonia White. *New Statesman and Nation*. Nov. 5, 1949. p. 520

The Gallery is a hybrid book, made up of two kinds of material set in two different literary devices that are never fused. The affirmation of values in the ''Promenades'' is consistently thwarted by the negation of values in the ''Portraits''; and the non-dramatic treatment of the one is in the end completely overcome by the tensely dramatic treatment of the other. There is one step that Burns might have taken to ensure his point. He might have disregarded altogether the innate potentialities of the material he put into the ''Portraits'' and twisted the action in such a way that the book would have been forced to end on an affirmative note . . . but it would have meant a deliberate falsification of the truth as he saw it, and Burns was too scrupulous an artist for that.

John W. Aldridge. *After the Lost Generation* (McGraw). 1951. pp. 145–6

Each of (his) three books owes its degree of power to the author's ability to write exquisitely observed *mot*-filled prose which lends a stylish quality to every incident, even ones which might better have been omitted for reasons of taste. And common weaknesses stem mostly from the fact that Mr. Burns, the angry moralist, appears to be in conflict with Mr. Burns, the detached artist.

James Kelly. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 7, 1952. p. 4

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The ten episodes from William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* [which had appeared in *Big Table*, a magazine]. . . is writing of an order that may be clearly defended not only as a masterpiece of its own genre, but as a monumentally moral descent into the hell of narcotic addiction. . . . [The] writing does, to be sure, contain a number of four-letter words, but the simple fact is that such obscenities—if obscenities they are—are inseparable from the total fabric and effect of the moral message. . . .

What Burroughs has written is a many-leveled vision of horror. . . . And only after the first shock does one realize that what Burroughs is writing about is not only the destruction of depraved men by their drug lust, but the destruction of all men by their consuming addictions, whether the addiction be drugs or overrighteous propriety. . . . Burroughs is not only serious in his intent, but he is a writer of great power and artistic integrity engaged in a profoundly meaningful search for true values.

John Ciardi. *Saturday Review*. June 27, 1959. p. 30

Naked Lunch belongs to that very large category of books . . . whose interest lies not in their own qualities, but in the reception given to them in their own time. In itself, *Naked Lunch* is of very small significance. . . . From the literary point of view, it is the merest trash, not worth a second glance. What is worth a glance, however, is the respectful attitude that some well-known writers and critics have shown towards it. . . .

The only writer of any talent of whom Burroughs occasionally manages to remind one is the Marquis de Sade; but if one turns to the pages of Sade after *Naked Lunch* the resemblance soon fades, since Sade, however degenerate he can be at times, has always some saving wit and irony. Burroughs takes himself with a complete, owlish seriousness; indeed, in his opening section he seems, as far as one can make out through the peasoup fog of his prose, to be offering the book as some kind of tract against drug addiction. . . . Altogether, *Naked Lunch* offers a very interesting field for speculation, both pathological and sociological. No lover of medical textbooks on deformity should miss it.

John Wain. *New Republic*. Dec. 1, 1962. pp. 21–3

In its theme and techniques, the novel is open to misunderstanding by the highbrow Philistine (an animal possessed of a highbrow sophistication and a lowbrow taste). It is finally concerned with the extremes of horror in human life; and, therefore, it takes its place in that literary tradition preoccupied with the possibilities of emotional experience. . . . The effect of the book is Kafkaesque—a simultaneous sense of stark terror and reeling comedy. . . . In short, *Naked Lunch* is one of the more truly original and exciting pieces of prose to emerge from the fifties. It is precisely these elements that [John] Wain, in his youthful senility, is incapable of seeing.

Richard C. Kostelanetz. *New Republic*. Dec. 15, 1962. p. 30

According to literary legend, Allen Ginsberg, while visiting Burroughs in his Paris apartment sometime during the 1950s, found the floors littered with hundreds of sheets of paper that Burroughs had scrawled on while high on heroin. Ginsberg, it is said, gathered the papers together, read them with reverence, and put them into the form, or rather sequence, they now have. He needn't have bothered to sort them, since the book would have almost the same effect if he had shuffled the manuscript like a deck of cards. . . . It is all somehow a work of spite, a work of revenge—revenge against beer bottles and God, against matchsticks and love, against war and peace and Tolstoy and fingertips and sealing wax. Some of it is funny and some of it marvelously dirty, but it just goes on and on; it begins to sound like the whine of a girl who's been stood up. It begins to sound like a tantrum.

Alfred Chester. *Commentary*. Jan., 1963. pp. 90–1

The best comparison for the book, with its aerial sex acts performed on a high trapeze, its con men and barkers, its arena-like form, is in fact to a circus. A circus travels but it is always the same, and this is Burroughs' sardonic image of modern life. The Barnum of the show is the mass-manipulator, who appears in a series of disguises. *Control*, as Burroughs says, underlining it, *can never be a means to anything but more control—like drugs*, and the vicious circle of addiction is re-enacted, worldwide, with sideshows in the political and ''social'' sphere—the ''social'' here has vanished, except in quotation marks, like the historical, for everything has become automatized. . . .

The phenomenon of repetition, of course, gives rise to boredom; many readers complain that they cannot get through *The Naked Lunch* and/or that they find it disgusting. It *is* disgusting and sometimes tiresome, often in the same places. . . . Yet what saves *The Naked Lunch* is not a literary ancestor but humour. Burroughs' humour is peculiarly American, at once broad and sly.

Mary McCarthy. *Encounter*. April, 1963. pp. 94–6

It is easy enough to treat such a book [*The Ticket that Exploded*] as pathology, or to take the fact that Burroughs exists and is widely read and part of a literary movement as warning that some sort of counter-action is necessary. But this is not a literary judgment, and may be, as Sartre argued in the case of Jean Genet's early work, an inhumane one. We cannot know what the vision means unless we experience it totally, giving ourselves up to it as we do to other works of art, with suspension of disbelief and—in this instance—of distaste. We must confront Burroughs as a free being who in some sense chose to have his kind of life and write his kind of book. Our solemn, almost religious duty is to reach the bottom of his experience, take on the burden of it, see ourselves in it, temporarily *be* Burroughs. There may even be hypocrisy in pretending it is a burden. Some of the violence and filth is an expression of Swiftian disgust at the way things are. But obviously, as was true of Swift, the author delights in such imaginings. If we read the book properly we can feel the pleasure also—or learn to.

Robert Gorham Davis. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1963. p. 281

The element of humor in *Nova Express*, as in *Naked Lunch* and his two other novels, has moral strength of historic proportions, whereby the existentialist sense of the *absurd* is taken to an informal conclusion. It is an absolutely devastating ridicule of all that is false, primitive, and vicious in current American life: the abuses of power, hero worship, aimless violence, materialistic obsession, intolerance, and every form of hypocrisy. . . .

His attunement to contemporary language is probably unequalled in American writing. Anyone with a feeling for English phrase at its most balanced, concise, and arresting cannot fail to see this excellence. . . . Compared to Burroughs' grasp of modern idiom in almost every form of English . . . the similar efforts of Ring Lardner and of Hemingway must be seen as amateurish and groping.

Terry Southern. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Nov. 8, 1964. p. 5

Naked Lunch records private strategies of culture in the electric age. *Nova Express* indicates some of the ''corporate'' responses and adventures of the Subliminal Kid who is living in a universe which seems to be someone else's insides. Both books are a kind of engineer's report of the terrain hazards and mandatory processes which exist in the new electric environment.

Burroughs uses what he calls ''Brion Gysin's cut-up method which I call the fold-in method.'' To read the daily newspaper in its entirety is to encounter the method in all its purity. Similarly, an evening watching television programs is an experience in a corporate form—an endless succession of impressions and snatches of narrative. Burroughs is unique only in that he is attempting to reproduce in prose what we accommodate every day as a commonplace aspect of life in the electric age. If the corporate life is to be rendered on paper, the method of discontinuous nonstory must be employed.

Marshall McLuhan. *The Nation*. Dec. 28, 1964. p. 517

William Burroughs' popular reputation dates back only about two years. At that time Mary McCarthy and Norman Mailer proclaimed his talent in a moment of intemperate enthusiasm and Burroughs' most famous book, *Naked Lunch*, was subsequently published in this country in the general lapse of censorship restrictions. Burroughs' first book had appeared some ten years earlier under the pseudonym William Lee. This was entitled *Junk* and is now available in a paperback edition called *Junkie* under Burroughs' own name.

Junk is a more or less journalistic account of the experiences of a drug addict. It rises, however, considerably above the general literary level of sensational *exposé*. It is an authentically macabre vision of Hell and the flat literalism of the writing makes it more appalling in some ways than Burroughs' later accounts of the same material. . . .

Naked Lunch is the *Revelation* of an irreligious world. Its apocalyptic vision is more than the raving of a mind distraught by drugs. It is a terrible book in the true sense of the word. Even its humor and its pornography are streaked with blood and terror. . . . But it is not possible to dismiss it as mere pathology. It is a ''serious'' book for all its surface wise-cracking and toughness; it is serious in that it is a total vision of man in the universe, an existentialist attempt to extract meaning from total horror. . . . Unfortunately, the independent talent which expressed itself so powerfully in *Naked Lunch* has become, in *Nova Express*, the silliness of extreme hipsterism.

William James Smith. *Commonweal*. Jan. 8, 1965. pp. 491–2

The ''color'' [in *Nova Express*] changes from time to time as Burroughs feeds into his verbal kaleidoscope the major forms of science fiction: space mercenaries, time distortion, exotic symbiosis, galactic catastrophe, supergadgetry, and lost worlds. For all I know, he may have used existing texts; certainly he cribs (quite honestly, it should be said) from Kafka, T. S. Eliot and others, mixing their phrases into the plastic phantasmagoria. The effect after a time is pleasantly hypnotic. . . . At intervals, timed to check complete blackout, sense pops out of the amalgam; sometimes it is funny, more typically it is outrageous along the lines of Burroughs's well-established scatology. . . .

I'll accept his premise that we're being flummoxed out of our honest animal senses by high powered manipulators, and I think he is right to be sore about it. The trouble is that in his zeal to conjure with words he has produced what looks more like an abstract decoration than a terrible warning.

Robert Hatch. *Harper's Magazine*. Jan., 1965. p. 91

Burroughs is clearly writing, as does any novelist, his spiritual autobiography. Some novelists tell it through controlled fantasy, using the objective resources of action and invented character. Others disguise their own lives and write romanticized autobiographies, punishing their enemies and rewarding their friends (or sometimes the reverse). And a few, like Kafka and Burroughs, use neither plot nor personal career to carry the essential burden, but fly into fantasy, nightmare, persuaded dream. In *The Soft Machine* it is as if Burroughs does not trust the power of his nightmares. He jiggles and toys with them; he repeats naggingly; he eliminates the degree of sanity which makes the irony cut.

Herbert Gold. *New York Times Book Section*. March 20, 1966. p. 4

Burroughs's ideas are serious and interesting, and on the basis of the long interview in *Paris Review* (Fall 1965) one can see that he is one of the most intelligent and articulate writers in America today. And his experiments do produce some distinctive effects. Many passages in his books can catch something of the atmosphere of dreams in which vivid fragments of hallucinatory vividness rise and fade in utter silence, leaving one with the curiously abstract experience of witnessing concretions which do not impinge. Echoes, portents, disturbing details, flicker out at us, not as parts of legible propositions but as parts of a drifting turbulence with intensities and intermittences beyond the grasp of syntax. . . .

To escape from words into silence and from mud and metal into space is Burroughs's version of a well-established American dream of freedom from conditioning forces. It would perhaps be obtuse to ask what mode of life would be adopted in silent space. We are being given the morphology of an emotion as much as a literal prescription, when Burroughs exhorts us to shed all verbalizations and leave the body behind.

Tony Tanner. *City of Words* (Harper). 1971. pp. 130, 134

Burroughs is the great autoeroticist of contemporary fiction, the man who writes to stock up his private time machine. The ''absurdity,'' the world-craziness which he claims to reproduce in its comic disorganization, consists in dislodging all the contents of his mind in a spirit of raw kaleidoscopic self-intoxication. These rapid shifts and indiscriminate couplings of scenes take place in Burroughs's books as if they were violently oscillating and exploding in the telescopic eyepiece of an astronomer who just happens to be gloriously soused.

Alfred Kazin. *Bright Book of Life* (Little). 1973. p. 263

Burroughs' novels . . . become diabolical maps, maps whose surfaces have been so intersected with conflicting directions, so cut up, that they are unreadable; they are maps of hell. Even the ''conflicting directions,'' the sense of surrealistic contradiction in Burroughs, are finally neutralized by a cut-up world, a world existing in pieces that can't relate to each other enough to contradict. This is more true of the two later novels, *Nova Express* and *The Ticket That Exploded*, than it is of *Naked Lunch* and *The Soft Machine*. In *The Soft Machine* Burroughs makes his best use of cut-ups by establishing with them a dynamic rhythm of cohesion and fragmentation that becomes the experience of the novel. In the later novels, however, cut-ups come to seize their own space, to have less to do with other sections of the novels, except as waste bins to catch those sections when they drop. They become stagnant pools of amputated language and space through which the reader has to wade.

The amputation of language and space becomes also, at its extreme, an amputation of the body. Although the body in Burroughs is reified into two principles, an organic and a mechanical one, the mechanical is the final condition of the body, since even purely organic life, the body as blob, eventually swallows itself and falls into mineral existence, into death. Thus the objectification of the body in realism becomes in Burroughs a total dismemberment of the body, an explosion of it into separate existence, into pieces whose parts are all equal to each other and equal to any other object in the vicinity. This is the final condition of realism: schizophrenic atomism, living in pieces, in a world of pieces.

John Vernon. *The Garden and the Map* (Illinois). 1973. pp. 108–9

It is an extremely demanding way to write a book, to begin to do something different every five pages or so, and to bring it off requires not only skill but virtuosity of a very high order. The greatest likelihood is that the book will seem frightfully uneven, demonstrating that its author does some things better than others, which seems to me very much the case with *Exterminator!*. Another likelihood is that a book so discontinuous will seem, at its end, not to have been structured but only to have grown by accretion, like a scrapbook, and this too seems to me the case with *Exterminator!*. For all of its brutality, there is so much comic-strip stylization to its whores, pimps, junkies, presidential advisers, and scientologists, that the brutality never seems quite persuasive. The most chilling aspect of the book, in fact, seems to me the dust jacket photograph of Burroughs himself, gaunt, riven, Lazarus returned from the dead. Nothing in the art of *Exterminator!*, despite moments of great verve and inventiveness, seems to me commensurate with the implicit vision behind those hollow eyes.

Philip Stevick. *Partisan Review*. No. 2, 1974. p. 306

In *Naked Lunch* and its three less well-known sequels, *The Soft Machine*, *Nova Express*, and *The Ticket That Exploded*, William Burroughs weaves an intricate and horrible allegory of human greed, corruption, and debasement. Like Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World*, Burroughs' four works, taken collectively, seize on the evils or tendencies toward a certain type of evil that the author sees as being particularly malignant in his contemporary world and project them into a dystopian future, where, magnified, they have grown monstrous and taken on an exaggerated and fantastic shape. And like these classics of dystopian fiction, Burroughs' works are more novels of ideas that cleverly utilize the trappings of science fiction than they are what most people would consider ''pure and simple'' science fiction.

Even to the sophisticated reader they are troublesome puzzles; they are clearly more impenetrable than most popular literature. . . .

Significantly, this is not to say that they are without meaning or story, or that they are not imitations of life. But these elements are both realized differently here than they are in more conventional fiction. Although they share the same themes, metaphorical images, characters, and stylistic approach, this quartet—Burroughs' most serious novels—becomes more bizarre and takes on more of the appearance of science fiction as the novels progressively clarify and develop the author's thought. Each volume contributes to a single plot—or rather combines with the others to suggest the elements of what little plot there is. Thus, they may each be considered sections of one large work that encompasses them all.

Burroughs experiments with a style that has its closest analog in the cinematic technique of montage, although that technique is here most radically employed. He juxtaposes one scene with another without regard to plot, character, or, in the short view, theme to promote an association of the reader's negative emotional reaction to the superficial content (sexual perversion, drug abuse, senseless violence) of certain scenes with the implied narrative content (examples of ''addictions'': to drugs, money, sex, power, i.e., the allegory) of others. One clear instance of this technique is Burroughs' treatment of homosexuality, a practice that, while it is repeatedly equated with excrement and death (and is likely to have a negative connotation in the minds of most readers), is also endlessly juxtaposed to various addictions, particularly heroin addiction. The theory is that if such juxtapositions recur often enough, the feeling of revulsion strategically created by the first set of images will form the reader's attitude toward the second set of examples.

Donald Palumbo. *Extrapolation*. Winter, 1979, pp. 321–22

William Burroughs' novels provide the most graphic and extreme expression of anarchic idealism and rage in contemporary literature. His characters are incessantly beset by forces of exploitation which push them into lives of addiction, self-destruction and progressive dehumanization. Rarely do they perceive either what is happening to them or their own participation in their degradation. Most accept uncritically the propaganda broadcast by the media, the institutions of social control, the ''Time, Life, Fortune Monopoly,'' the ''reality studios,'' or the political groups of *Naked Lunch*—the Liquifactionists, Divisionists and Senders, all of whom are intent on replicating themselves through their victims or dominating people's thoughts by instilling a single pattern of cognition and expression in society.

But Burroughs also suggests that to struggle against social control means to battle against one's prior identification with it—and, even more distressing, that to actively oppose the enemy insures that one remains defined by them: for as long as one is obsessed with fighting the opposition, one is not free of it. In Burroughs' novels, the greatest danger is thus to allow oneself to become rigidly defined by something external to oneself, for then one's identity is restricted and vulnerable. Consequently, the individual must not only disrupt the reality studios, but continuously disorient himself and his language to prevent his life from being controlled by anything except immediate, personal will. Against the institutions of control, Burroughs sends his anarchists, terrorists and the ''Nova Police'' who expose what is taken for reality for the grotesque horror it is. Against the three political parties of *Naked Lunch*, he pits a fourth, the Factualists, whose job it is to reveal in the most brutal—and often pornographic—terms the truth of our normal lives. The Factualists, however, cannot substitute an alternative vision, for Burroughs trusts no codified message or program, which might then be co-opted or become an authoritarian voice in others' lives. All the Factualists can do is disrupt and expose reality to force people to recognize themselves for what they are both before and after they accept a version of the ''reality film''—''dying animals on a doomed planet.'' Paradoxically then, precisely what sends people into addiction—their fear of chaos and pain, their sense of personal fragmentation and insignificance—becomes the means and the basis of their cure. Disruption, chaos, violence and exposure are what one must learn to live in. Only those strong enough to exist without external support, without a rigid identity, will survive.

Charles Russell. *Sub-stance*. No. 27, 1980, p. 321

The truth is that the attempt to rescue Burroughs for literary respectability by representing him as a satirist is hard to carry through convincingly.

It entails an insistence that the erotic and violent materials in the novels, and perhaps also the drugs, are generally there to instil disgust (a word Burroughs uses and invites the use of) and fear. But when these motifs are so widely distributed in the book, with such invariant wording, it is hard to feel that a strong local meaning attaches to them. . . .

As Burroughs implies, disgust is irrelevant to the sexual effect of a motif. An erotic context will subdue a disgust that might otherwise have arisen. Erotic imagery is a poor weapon for the satirist, for its tendency is not to sharpen our aversion to, but to reconcile us with, what is morally or physically repugnant. In fact all three of the kinds of material in Burroughs which excite desire and subdue disgust—sex, physical violence, and drugs—are at various points in the novels used affirmatively.

Cities of the Red Night perhaps carries Burroughs's utopianism further than do any of its predecessors. A change in history is fantasized whereby ''pirate communes'' (of a kind pioneered in reality by Captain Mission in the early eighteenth century) successfully establish themselves in Central America, and with their fraternal, egalitarian doctrines dislodge the Spanish, and are posed for a global expansion. The commune leaders are vigorously active homosexuals; their military successes are due to an early invention of the cartridge and the explosive shell (suddenly envisaged by one of the characters at the climax of an act of buggery), and citizens are kept loyal and resilient through an efficient distribution of opium (so much for the execrated ''junk pyramid'' of *Naked Lunch*).

The utopian narrative cannot sustain itself, and is shown to collapse back into something more macabre, disorderly, and recognizably Burroughs. What follows is perhaps more ''satirical,'' but the juxtaposition with the earlier chapters, and the characteristic libration between horror and relish, produce the true Burroughs manifold of feeling: that ambivalence of the libertarian versus the eccentric and misanthropic. . . .

It is part of the abrupt and disconcerting sense of design which can crop up in a Burroughs novel that the final journey through the cities follows a progression which is announced many pages, and many hallucinatory episodes, earlier. Similarly, the quite orthodox first chapter of the book, which seems to have been lost sight of, is all at once referred to ten pages from the end. In *Naked Lunch* Burroughs undoubtedly developed a remarkable technique (whether by recording his dreams, using cut-up methods, or however) for getting on paper a very special kind of connected but free fantasy. It is essentially the repetition of that technique which *Cities of the Red Night* and the other novels have to offer. Burroughs's books, for all their afflatus, have a way of making the reader sit back and ponder, quite coldly: ''How was that done?'' The technique is not that new, either. It has very little to do with Jonathan Swift, but much to do with another Irishman. The present-tense, pantomimic rendering of the gruesome fantasy exemplified in the hanging sequences—and indeed their content—was first explored (and in this instance set in a thoroughly designed context) by Joyce in the ''Circe'' episode of *Ulysses*.

Michael Mason. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. March 27, 1981, p. 333

William Burroughs today lives in Lawrence, Kansas, caring lovingly for his cats. If the image of him rocking and reflecting scratchy-voiced on his porch in the final moments of the documentary *Burroughs* is an accurate portrayal, he's come a long way from his period of addiction, when he was known as ''EI Hombre Invisible,'' through his years as granddaddy of the Beat Generation and social philosopher cum superstar. Hardly that tired image of the old druggy who gets off on hung boys, he's . . . well, a respectable elder gentleman—with just a few strange (and possibly dangerous) habits like shooting target practice into plywood, for example. But shootist is only one of the many personae of the kaleidoscopic Burroughs mythology. Another is ''the old writer,'' afflicted with writer's block and living in a boxcar on an abandoned dump: William S. Hall, the central intelligence of the recently published *The Western Lands*—the last book in the trilogy that began with *Cities of the Red Night* (1981) and *The Place of Dead Roads* (1984).

An ingenious adventure involving the usual sex, drugs, and violence, *The Western Lands* is the most playful and self-consciously literary of Burroughs's late works. William S. Hall wants to ''write his way out of death'' by dreaming up words that are not his own. Mired in the junk heap of his own cliches, he wishes to transcend them, and in so doing transcend the deadening imagery of our civilization. A typical Burroughs surrogate who believes that no one owns words, Hall appropriates lines from Shakespeare and pulp fiction alike. And Burroughs frames the whole in the oldest, best-established literary motifs, grail legends, pilgrimages in the manner of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and poetic sequences like T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. . . .

Many ask, why does anyone—especially a woman—want to read this: I say, it's the most stimulating, exciting writing around. Burroughs once again proves himself to be a master storyteller who has found a way to wed his fragmentary stylistics to a unified and highly structured narrative. Even as far back as the recently published *Queer* (1985), written in 1951, he was beginning to invent the story within the story, the routines that would become high satire in *Naked Lunch* (1959). With this aesthetic strategy Burroughs hopes to find the way out of time that propels a good deal of his work. . . . In his fiction, Burroughs has worked out his theories, taking the narrative out of time and into space.

Regina Weinreich. *American Book Review*. November–December, 1988, p. 1

Burroughs's attitude toward language and the practice of the writer betrays the view that literary invention is authorized by a plenitude existing fundamentally outside language. . . . Burroughs often treats the practice of writing oneself out of Western civilization as a preparatory act for a genuine transfiguration of culture and society, and to this extent he might be seen as maintaining—despite his sympathy for polytheism—the Christian doctrine of life on this earth as a preparation for the life to come. Burroughs, one senses, would really *like* to be out in space, mutating, and he resorts to writing as the only available *supplement* for this accomplishment. More fundamentally, Burroughs's antipathy to time—to the culture of the One God, the God who has all the time in the world and before whom, therefore, everything ultimately must perish through having been already anticipated—entails a disdain toward writing itself as an irreducibly temporal medium. Leaving time entails leaving the word; but Burroughs can only articulate the need to stop articulating. Hence the air of bad conscience about Burroughs's books: writing is still something that happens in lieu of action. This double bind is symbolized by Burroughs's obsessive use of ellipses, which represent not simple pauses but active attempts to stop speech so as to point to something beyond it—namely space. . . .

Burroughs's critique of metaphysics contains metaphysical motifs and gives expression to metaphysical desires. His critique of the either-or proposition rests upon the claim that it conceals a more fundamental order—the liberating truths of space and eternity as opposed to the oppressive lies of time and causality. Space, the

absence of the constraints imposed by time and causality, is the realm where everything is possible and hence permitted. But Burroughs cannot think the leap from the time of language to that of space except in forms that indict themselves as temporalized narratives. He therefore resorts to nostalgia—for the truly marginalized outlaws, for pre-modern civilization, and even for the future. Yet the nostalgic yearning to escape time is as Heidegger teaches, the most metaphysical desire there is. And to avoid coming to terms with the limits of postmodern subversion, as practiced by contemporary literary theory, Burroughs must finally resort to fantasies of enemies, monsters, and other power addicts who serve as focuses of evil and whose ritual elimination might enable a new becoming to take place. In this sense, Burroughs continues the obsession with isolating and purging ''responsibility for evil'' that William E. Connolly has identified as a central trope of Western moralists and their critics; and he offers an ironical reversal of the ''political demonology''—the creation of monsters who threaten our freedom—that Michael Rogin has located at the center of American political culture. In his conviction that the political is entirely absorbed by the undoing of authority and that, once all public power has been thoroughly delegitimated, life, in its ''pregnant'' synchronicity, will take care of itself, Burroughs, and the practices of postmodern subversion he masterfully exemplifies, remains decisively within the tradition.

Frederick M. Dolan. *CL. 32*, no. 4, Winter, 1991, pp. 548–50

The monstrous and unreadable nature of much of [Burroughs's] fiction, the careful management of the revolt and the rationed nightmare of exile have returned him, with profit, to the great plains of American orthodoxy: home at last with honors to a nation of yawning Penelopes. He is nowadays mostly approved of and even the dismissals are a kind of homage. Pottering around his white woodframe house in Kansas and dressing, according to his biographer Barry Miles, from the L.L. Bean catalogue, Burroughs is nowadays a sedate American figure: an oddball reactionary, a gun handler, a bit of an anti-Semite, a sentimentalist—he says of his cats that ''they just opened up a whole area of compassion in me''—and, crucially, an American male who dispatched the American woman at a stroke.

As far as mind and metabolism go, Burroughs is the party who stuck his head under the wheels of a freight train or got flushed out of a jumbo jet toilet and lived, in a manner of speaking, to tell the tale. His endurance can be seen as superhuman or animal, but scarcely human. What general object it served, beyond Being Bill Burroughs, is not clear. In the last letter of the volume, making yet another of his points, he seems to hazard a one-line teleology: ''In this game the point is to lose what you have, and not wind up with someone else's rusty load of continuity.'' That, like many of the things he says, is good and memorable, yet one remains in doubt whether he ever really understood the purpose of ghastly stamina—which puts him squarely in the animal camp, if not with the circus act. As for his fellow creatures, they are to be found not in the entomologist's nightmare, as David Cronenberg would have it, but in the homestead paradigm of the old American TV series. Burroughs belongs, along with Lassie and Champion the Wonder Horse, in a dignified menagerie of beasts who have performed incredible feats with only an inkling of what they were about.

He has something of their loyalty as well. On the whole, he has stood morosely by his own shortcomings, while snapping bravely at the heels of those who deride his books. Rich or not so rich, he has kept a keenly aristocratic distaste for materialism and a contempt for corporate America. His mortuary humor has remained intact. (Paranoia, he said when he was living behind a series of locked doors on the Bowery ten years ago, is ''having all the facts.'') He has been prepared occasionally, on issues like EI Salvador, to speak up for the dispossessed—although what upset him most in the TV news clips was the pitiful state of the FMLN's small arms.

The rest is largely a case of standing things on their heads. Burroughs has played the shaman to more than one tribe and managed, in the role of healer, to help a few of them on the road to ruin. Most readers of *Naked Lunch* would probably agree that they got ill while he got better—which is one way to interpret Dr. Benway's magnificent remark in the early part of the novel: ''Want to cure anybody of anything, find out who doesn't have it.'' Over the years, Burroughs has also done away with some rather helpful distinctions between craving and satisfaction, boredom and terror, pleasure and aversion. It has always been hard to tell whether he is the survivor standing on his own grave, or the dead man under his shoes.

Jeremy Harding. ''Junk Mail.'' *London Review of Books*. Sept. 23, 1993, pp. 18–19

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BUTLER, Robert Olen (1945–)

For the Vietnamese immigrants in Robert Olen Butler's stories, distance is sentient. It buzzes inside them like a crossed telephone line, a haunting syncopation under the forthright American rhythms they are trying to learn.

Butler's Vietnamese live, for the most part, in waterside communities in Louisiana: Lake Charles, Gretna, Versailles. The author himself lives and teaches in Lake Charles. Ever since he went to Saigon in 1971 as an Army linguist, he found his personal

and literary vocation—unlike other writers there—less in exploring what it felt like to be an American in Vietnam than in what it felt like to Vietnam to have Americans there.

It is the Vietnamese voice that he seeks and that, in these stories, he has so remarkably and movingly found. What it means for these expatriates to come to a new country and function in it is more the setting than the theme. Butler writes essentially, and in a bewitching translation of voice and sympathy, what it means to lose a country, to remember it, and to have the memory begin to grow old. He writes as if it were his loss, too.

The 15 stories in *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* differ considerably in weight and complexity. One or two are brief lyrics. In ''Mid-Autumn,'' a mother speaks to her unborn baby about a village boy she passionately loved and who was killed; and of the calmer love she feels for her husband, an American soldier who brought her to the United States. She tells a fairy tale about a prince who came down from the moon, who longs to get back and cannot, but who finds the Earth good in its own way.

There is the romance of a New Orleans bar girl and an American who fell in love with Vietnam during the war. His passion for her memories allows her to become a contented American housewife. Another romance takes place between a waitress and an older man, a Polish Jew who becomes her mentor in overcoming the strangeness of America.

These stories are graceful but a little too easy in their emotional movements and their lessons. Others are harsher and more effective. In ''Open Arms,'' the Vietnamese narrator recalls serving as translator in an American-Canadian program to turn captured Viet Cong into informants. One day, they bring in Thap. He is a man of tragedy; his wife and children were killed in a Viet Cong raid on a village. His burning devastation contrasts with the sleek South Vietnamese major who takes part in his interrogation.

''If I was the major,'' the narrator recalls, ''I'd feel very nervous because the man beside him had the mountain shadow and the steady look of the ghost of somebody his grandfather had cheated or cuckolded or murdered 50 years ago and he was back to take him.'' Thap's tragedy is too big; his first allegiance had betrayed him. Now his new allegiance betrays him in a different way, a casual, pragmatic American way.

The sense of loss among the expatriates is played out in different fashions. In one story, the narrator has become a successful businessman, and put aside his memories of Vietnam to concentrate on his American future. The price he pays is emotional blankness. He dearly loves his wife, who lives closer to her memories, but when he embraces her, she is no more real to him than the itch in his ankle or his agenda for the next day.

The wife's grandfather arrives for a visit. She remembers how he used to carry her on his back; he represents all the tradition she left behind. Her excitement is dashed when he fails to remember her or to take any interest in anything except their new car. Her desolation spurs the husband to a redeeming leap of imagination; he hoists her up on his back and gallops around their garden.

There is poignancy in many of the stories, but, except perhaps in one or two, Butler avoids sentimentality. A principal reason for this, and one of his main strengths, is his ability to speak in his characters' voices—an almost perfect English but with odd strains and inflections—and to discover what they discover without foreknowledge or patronage.

One story is pure comedy. The narrator is a solemnly insignificant man with a beautiful and restless wife. In Vietnam, he ran a network of informants for the Americans. He used his position to warn off potential rivals; if they paid no attention, the Americans would receive a report of Viet Cong activity just where the rival worked or walked. An aerial attack would follow.

In America, of course, the narrator has no such power. So when a Vietnamese rival begins paying court to the wife, the reprisal has to be different. It is hilariously elaborate and utterly effective.

In a collection so delicate and so strong, the title story stands out as close to magical. It is narrated by Dao, an expatriate who is nearly 100 and lives with his daughter. His thoughts wander between past and present; he will die any day.

''Ho Chi Minh came to me again last night, his hands covered with confectioners' sugar,'' the story begins. Dao, so near death and with an unquiet memory of the past, receives visits from the ghost of Vietnam's founding leader. They had been roommates in Paris during World War I. Both had worked in the kitchen of the great chief Escoffier, Ho Chi Minh as an apprentice pastry cook. Ho's passion was his country's liberation; Dao remembers him putting on an ugly and ill-fitting bowler hat—and furious at having to do it—to go out to Versailles where the Peace Conference was taking place, and try to get the ear of Woodrow Wilson.

The two men went their different ways. The narrator became a Hoa Hao Buddhist, a sect of austere unworldliness. Its meditations take shape around the phrase: ''A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain.'' Ho, of course, chose revolution.

Ghost and dying man are now together, each with his own sense of incompletion. The narrator has lived spiritually apart from his country's tragedy. And Ho? He was never able to make a successful pastry glaze. Thinking of politics, he failed to listen properly to Escoffier. He used confectioners' instead of granulated sugar.

Through the words of Dao, Butler holds the two failures in equilibrium. To neglect a revolution and to neglect a glaze are two aspects of human limits. ''I was only a washer of dishes but I did listen carefully when Monsieur Escoffier spoke,'' Dao says. ''I wanted to understand everything. His kitchen was full of such smells that you knew you had to understand everything or you would be incomplete forever.''

Richard Eder. *Los Angeles Times Book Review*. March 29, 1992, pp. 3, 7.

For three decades Vietnamese have played the foils in an American psychodrama. We venture, we kill, we dream, we regret, we make peace; they smile their innocent or sinister smiles. One of the Vietnamese characters in Robert Olen Butler's first collection of short fiction gives a bitter self-portrait through distorting American eyes: ''We were fascinating and long-suffering and unreal or we were sly and dangerous and unreal.''

A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain goes a long way toward making the Vietnamese real, and its method is bold: each of the 15 stories is told in the first person from the viewpoint of a Vietnamese transplanted from the Mekong Delta to the Louisiana bayou. The Americans have become foils; it's the Vietnamese who are now at the center, haunted by the past, ambivalent about their hosts, suffering sexual torments, seeking a truce in their various wars.

This reversal makes for a less hyperbolic kind of story than most American fiction and film about the war in Vietnam and its aftermath. In their new home on the Gulf Coast these Vietnamese are often visited by old ghosts and legends, but the war itself is on

the periphery, a given. Unlike Americans, they don't pick at the horrors they've survived and there's hardly a word of politics. Their memories are dominated instead by bittersweet sense experience: in ''Preparation'' a woman readying her friend's corpse for burial combs and envies the beautiful hair she combed and envied when they were girls in Saigon.

Vietnam, where Mr. Butler served as an Army linguist fluent in the language, is the setting for two of his six novels— *The Alleys of Eden* and *On Distant Ground,* which share common characters. They are the work of a writer who is intoxicated by Vietnam and the Vietnamese, who loves what has alienated so many other Americans, including novelists: the strange lingual tones, the ambiguity of relations in an ancient and complex society, the teeming nighttime streets of Saigon. The heroes of both novels withdraw from the war—one as a deserter, the other as a traitor of sorts—in favor of personal ties, to a South Vietnamese woman and a Vietcong prisoner. Vietnam is where these Americans become more compassionate, not more cruel, and the memory of Vietnam keeps them in the grip of a powerful nostalgic longing for the smell of market food, the flesh of a lover or the face of a lost child.

In his stories Mr. Butler confers this longing on his Vietnamese characters. And in doing so he manages to make them completely original, with quirky interests and odd obsessions, as distinct from one another as from the Americans they brush against.

In ''Fairy Tale'' a bar girl, remembering what a delicacy apples were in Saigon, thinks how, like apples in America, sex has become too abundant for her to savor it: ''You take a bite now and you can make yourself remember that apples are sweet, but it is like the apple in your mouth is not even there. You eat too many apples and all you can do is remember them.'' In ''Snow,'' a spinster with little hope of ever marrying expresses a different shade of melancholy: ''There are other Vietnamese here in Lake Charles, Louisiana, but we are not a community. We are all too sad, perhaps, or too tired. But maybe not. Maybe that's just me saying that. Maybe the others are real Americans already.''

Probably not. These Vietnamese—even the businessman in ''Relic'' who swears that ''America is the land of opportunity''—seem to live their real lives in the past and the supernatural. In the title story, an old man preparing for death is visited by the ghost of Ho Chi Minh in search of memories. Ho's hands are covered in the sugar he baked with when the two men worked at a [Paris] hotel in 1917. In spite of the Communist victory, Ho's ghost confesses: ''I am not at peace.''

The dying man, whose relatives have brought Vietnamese political murder to New Orleans, asks Ho, ''Are there politics where you are now, my friend?'' The implicit answer is that there are only memories, that it's the burden of the dead to recover them all, that sugar is as important as war. The dying man finally understands Ho's restlessness. . . .

To become complete, these dislocated men and women return in memory and imagination to Vietnam, where folk tales narrated within the stories often illuminate their present condition. An expectant mother who lost her first lover in Vietnam tells her unborn American child a fairy tale: an emperor went to the moon and found happiness there, but after returning to earth he could never go back; he could only remember. A South Vietnamese soldier is saved from Vietcong ambush by a beautiful woman's ghost; later, when he finds the ghost to thank her; she devours him; and the man telling the story on a Greyhound bus feels devoured, too, in his uneasy American exile.

The intricacy of these stories, and of most of the collection, lies in their motifs, not in psychological insight. Mr. Butler uses the narrative surprises and symbolic imagery of folklore, and as in folklore his meanings can be both simple and opaque. The longest and most ambitious of the stories, ''The American Couple,'' comes much closer to the familiar terrain of contemporary fiction. But to do so it has to give its Vietnamese woman narrator an essentially American consciousness. In the shifting tensions of two couples spending a day together at a Mexican resort—one Vietnamese, one American, of whom the husband is an obsessive Vietnam vet—Mr. Butler loses in focus and compression what he gains in complexity. Nothing in ''The American Couple'' is quite as vivid as the sugar on Ho Chi Minh's ghostly hands.

But there are risks in the simpler tales. They sometimes tend toward melodrama: large, obvious emotions are generated by manipulations of plot. And Mr. Butler can't always resist sentimental endings. Since these weaknesses also show up in his two war novels, they're more than just functions of taking on so many convincingly Vietnamese points of view. But in the absence of sophisticated, familiar, telling ironies, and within the limits of what even this most sensitive American writer *can* know about his Vietnamese characters, he's often left with crude resolutions. At least three stories end happily ever after in at long last love.

One of the strongest stories, ''The Trip Back,'' shows Mr. Butler's art at its most moving and problematic. A businessman drives to the Houston airport to pick up his wife's grandfather, just emigrated from Vietnam. On the way home, the old man expresses interest in little other than the businessman's car, which has induced a memory of driving from Saigon to Hanoi years before. ''This man beside me was rushing along the South China Sea,'' the businessman thinks. ''Right now. He had felt something so strong that he could summon it up and place himself within it and the moment would not fade.'' The grandfather has returned so vividly to the deep past that he has no memory of the granddaughter he's about to be reunited with. And the businessman begins to dread that when his own time comes he won't ''die well,'' that his own life will be reduced to ''the faint buzz of the alarm clock beside my bed,'' that ''I may be prepared to betray all that I think I love the most.'' He's afraid that he'll end up remembering even less than the grandfather—without his homeland, without his wife.

In the end, he overcomes his wife's grief at being forgotten with a simple gesture, meant to be poignant, that seems inadequate to the profundity of his crisis. It takes a little away from an almost perfect story. But *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* is remarkable not for its flaws, but for how beautifully it achieves its daring project of making the Vietnamese real.

George Packer. *The New York Times Book Review*. June 7, 1992, p. 24.

Robert Olen Butler's *A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain* makes deeper and truer sense of the bittersweet life of exiled Vietnamese. He concentrates on Westernized families who escaped in 1975. The only American fiction writer who has delved deeply into the lives and psyches of these new Americans, Butler is fluent in Vietnamese, and it shows. It's refreshing to see this ancient and subtle language used with respect instead of GI pidgin.

Each of Butler's stories forms a poignant monologue. The Vietnamese characters take center stage and speak as if justifying their existence. Sometimes this didacticism is intrusive, but it may

be unavoidable; the world view of the characters differs so greatly from that of the audience. Butler's characters appear to have adapted well to American life, but they nonetheless bear an overwhelming sense of loss.

In their nostalgia, guilt, and pain, they are no different from Westerners who have experienced wrenching traumas. But Vietnamese traumas find their outlet in a spirit world—a mental universe of unseen, powerful forces. This alternative reality occasionally intrudes at moments of stress and dislocation: A translator in the war wonders if a turncoat Viet Cong is really a demon; a lonely housewife discovers that her grandfather's soul has transmigrated into a parrot; an elderly, dying man converses nightly with the ghost of his old comrade Ho Chi Minh.

Though Butler's book excels in presenting Vietnamese life, he is an outsider. It's too soon for the Vietnamese themselves to tell their stories. Like all immigrants, the first generation is preoccupied with survival. The next generation of Vietnamese-Americans will produce anthropologists, sociologists, and journalists with a foot in both cultures.

Kathleen Kilgore. *The Christian Science Monitor*. September 4, 1992, p. 12.

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C

CABELL, James Branch (1879–1958)

That he says impeccably his say is indisputable; that he says it for only a few is undebatable. . . . He is . . . enjoyed only by those who possess a certain scholarship plus a but slightly secondary interest in fiction plus a mental kinship that recognizes the aptness of his means.

Blanche Williams. *Our Short Story Writers* (Moffat). 1920. p. 23

Mr. Cabell, by questioning the reality of reality, has been naturalized in the world of dreams till he moves about there without the scruples lasting over from another allegiance. Thus the beauty of his Poictesme is double-distilled. Those lovers of beauty who must now and then come down to earth for renewal will occasionally gasp in Poictesme, wishing the atmosphere would thicken and brilliant colors change. But always Poictesme hangs above the mortal clouds, suspended from the eternal sky, in the region where wit and beauty are joined in an everlasting kiss.

Carl Van Doren. *James Branch Cabell* (McBridge). 1925. p. 83

Here at last is an American novelist with a culture and style of his own, a conscious artist and a man of letters. . . . Cabell . . . is an adept at artistic writing, the only prose writer in American fiction who cultivates style for its own sake. . . . He likes to call himself a classic, classic in style, though romantic in inspiration. . . . Cabell's ideal is harmony, clearness and grace. He moves within fiction as if it were a natural element and not as in a quarry where he is painfully hewing out stones.

Régis Michaud. *The American Novel Today* (Little). 1928. pp. 202–3

The high repute of the works of Mr. Cabell has not been attacked by critics, partly out of a faint snobbishness; partly for the amusing reason that those who were fit to criticize him found him almost impossible to read, and lastly because scholarship and love of good prose seemed too rare in America to be discredited on other grounds without a pang. His prose is, indeed, not only correct but constantly graceful in diction and liquid in rhythm. The trouble is that there is nothing in all these romances for the mind to grasp; one fumbles in a sunny mist; one hopes from page to page to come upon something either sharp or solid; that hope is soon abandoned and next it becomes clear that even the grace of this style is often falsely arch and knowing or effeminate and teasing. The style, in brief, is married to the matter and both are *articles de luxe*, like gorgeously enameled cigarette étuis diamond and ruby-studded, or riding crops with jeweled handles.

Ludwig Lewisohn. *Expression in America* (Harper). 1932. p. 531

This Virginian gentleman and genealogist could hardly be expected either to approve of life in the United States or to feel that he was under any obligation to improve it. Instead he has converted his petulant disgust into a melodramatic pessimism. . . . The artist has a function in this mad world, Mr. Cabell argues; it is to create beautiful illusions, which alone make life endurable. But, far from occupying himself with the dissemination of dynamic lies, Mr. Cabell has devoted all his talents to attacking man's illusions. He is, then, a fraud, for neither his romanticism nor his pessimism is genuine. He is a sleek, smug egoist, whose desire to be a gentleman of the old school breeds dissatisfaction with the existing order, but who has not enough imaginative vigor to create a robust world in which deeds of chivalry and gallantry are performed. Instead he has written mild little fantasies, carefully baited with delicate obscenities.

Granville Hicks. *The Great Tradition* (Macmillan). 1933. p. 221

His own style is indubitably established, consciously dependent on archaism, but dependent for relief on marked and homely modernisms. On the whole it is attractive, and sometimes it is charming. But it is pedantic in phrasing and in dispensable detail. Knowing that fancy is more important than fact in the tales, the reader is annoyed and distracted by circumstantial matters of chronology and genealogy that delay action and throw no light on motivation.

The notable fact about Cabell in the modern pageant has been his persistence in playing his own role until through ability and cooperation of the censors he achieved a wide hearing. He ought to be taken as seriously as he takes himself, which is not very seriously, for his tongue as a rule is ostentatiously in his cheek.

Percy H. Boynton. *Literature and American Life* (Ginn). 1936. pp. 799–800

Critics have persisted in putting Cabell into the wrong category. They have repeatedly called him a romanticist, bent upon escape. They refuse to see that his extravanganzas of Poictesme are all allegories. He is as close to the modern pulse as the most intense realist, and as alarmed over it. He is a humorist, a wit, a satirist, an intellectual, a classicist. And he is a characteristic twentieth-century pessimist. He is right in the thick of life, and he is so disgusted with it that he can see nothing sensible to do except laugh. If he is a romanticist bent upon escape, then so were Aristophanes, Rabelais, Ben Jonson, Congreve, Voltaire, Mark Twain, and Anatole France.

Vernon Loggins. *I Hear America* (Crowell). 1937. p. 287

Unlike that other artificer of the medieval. Thomas Chatterton, Cabell never persuaded himself; and he had no need to persuade his readers. They wanted just what he gave them: the touch of life bereft of life's prosaic sordidness; an easy road to wisdom; a masquerade of the soul in which, by mocking the daydreams of the great herd, one could liberate and enjoy one's own. Cabell did not pretend to be an ''escapist'' he was a realist whose cynical

appreciation of reality encouraged him to make it ridiculous. By dismissing the superficial world of the present, he illuminated its pathos lightly and fleetingly. . . . The critical Babbitts might think Cabell a satanic figure, but he was not even attempting to *épater le bourgeois*; he sought only to amuse him. Reading his books, good middle-class fathers and citizens, like good middle-class undergraduates, enjoyed the luxury of a depravity that was as synthetic as breakfast cereal, and as harmless.

Alfred Kazin. *On Native Grounds* (Reynal). 1942. pp. 233–4

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CAHAN, Abraham (1860–1951)

As Mr. Cahan is a Russian, and as romanticism is not considered literature in Russia, his story [*Yekl*] is, of course, intensely realistic. It could not be more so indeed than Mr. [Stephen] Crane's stories, and it is neither more nor less faithful than these. The artistic principle which moves both writers is the same; but the picturesque, outlandish material with which Mr. Cahan deals makes a stronger appeal to the reader's fancy. He has more humor than the American, too, whose spare laughter is apt to be grim, while the Russian cannot hide his relish of the comic incidents of his story. It is mainly not at all comic, however, but tragical as the divorce of the poor little Russian wife can make it, though the reader is promptly consoled by her marriage with a man worthier of her than Jake the Yankee. He goes away and weds the Americanized ''Polish snope'' whom he had flirted with before his wife came out to him. . . .

I had almost forgotten to speak of his English. In its simplicity and its purity, as the English of a man born to write Russian, it is simply marvelous.

William Dean Howells. *New York World*, July 26, 1896, in Clara M. and Rudolf Kirk. *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*. Sept., 1962. p. 52

He is a humorist, and his humor does not spare the sordid and uncouth aspects of the character whose pathos he so tenderly reveals. Poor, workworn, ambitious, blundering, grotesque lives they mostly are which he deals with, but they have often a noble aspiration, to which he does justice with no straining or vaunting. The rich Jew going home to his village in Poland to get a husband for his Americanized daughter, whose ideal is to marry an ''uptown feller,'' and bringing back a dreamy young Talmudist, who turns agnostic on his hands; the prosperous pedlar who sends to his native place, where he has been the byword and laughing-stock, and demands the daughter of the wealthy distiller in marriage; the young Russian wife, whose heart goes from her work-dulled husband to the student they have taken for a lodger to eke out their pitiful fortunes; the Yiddish bride who imagines spending all her savings on a wedding supper in the vain hope that the guests will bring gifts enough to set her up in housekeeping—such are the materials which the author handles so skillfully that he holds the reader between a laugh and a heartache, and fashions into figures so lifelike that you would expect to meet them in any stroll through Hester-street. It will be interesting to see whether Mr. Cahan will pass beyond his present environment out into the larger American world, or will master our life as he has mastered our language. But of a Jew, who is also a Russian, what artistic triumph may not we expect?

William Dean Howells. *Literature*. Dec. 31, 1898, in Clara M. and Rudolf Kirk. *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*. Sept., 1962. p. 41

And for a background that immense Russia, a country which has produced the greatest novelists and is the most illiterate of Europe, a nation of nations whose history is stained with the blood of conquered races and massacred sects. It is from this rich mine that Mr. Cahan has selected with an artist's care his material. But in *The White Terror and the Red* we have something far more interesting than a narrative of sensational episodes, or a gallery of interesting types, more valuable than a vivid picture of melodramatic history in the making. We have a work of art of the highest class.

It was reserved for a Russian realist to do full justice to the subject, and Mr. Cahan is a Russian and a realist. He is concerned with life. His literary god is the truth as he sees it, and because he is an artist and his theme throbs with passionate human interest, he has succeeded in writing a novel which bears out the bright promise of his earlier work.

Edwin Lefevre. *Bookman*. April, 1905. p. 187

The White Terror and the Red is, as far as I know, the first important novel which has applied the general spirit of Russian fiction to the

literal facts of the revolution [of 1879–81]. Mr. Cahan has been enabled to do this by virtue of an exceptional position. He is a Russian, living in America, and writing in English. He is, therefore, not limited by the despotism of the Russian government, as the Russian writers are. He is one of the very few men not now in Russia who combine with genuine literary ability an inside knowledge of the facts leading to the assassination of the Czar. In his book the Russian realistic method and the Russian idealistic spirit have for the first time been applied to the direct and literal facts of the revolution.

This directness of approach Mr. Cahan has had. *The White Terror and the Red*, is, therefore, at once a genuine historical novel, dealing with the events which resulted in the assassination of the Czar, and a genuine realistic novel, a rare combination.

Hutchins Hapgood. *Critic*. June, 1905. p. 561

The portrait of David Levinsky is a portrait of society, not simply of the Jewish section of it, or of New York, but of American business. And business is business whether done by Jew or Gentile. If Levinsky is a triumphant failure, he is so because American business, which shaped him to its ends, is, viewed from any decent regard for humanity, a miserable monster of success. Not that Levinsky is an abstraction, or that the novelist is forcing a thesis. Far from it. . . . Mr. Cahan is an artist; he knows how to think through his characters, by letting them do the thinking, as if it were their affair and not his.

John Macy. *Dial*. Nov. 22, 1917. p. 522

Of this East Side world, with its thick vitality, and push against the city, Mr. Cahan has drawn a picture of incomparable vigor, richly documented, admirably proportioned. This, you say, is the very life which corresponds to what the outsider can only see in street and shop and through his imagination. You are immersed in the life of the family, the synagogue, the sweatshop, the cafe, the theatre, the socialists and intellectuals. And you witness it through the eyes of a man of vigor and intelligence, David Levinsky, who is engaged in mastering, appropriating, nourishing his senses and ambitions by means of that life. Consider Mr. Cahan's art in the light of his opportunity for propaganda. For he makes his hero not a socialist but an exploiter who has no sympathy with the helpless workers from whom he has come, who fights the unions, is afraid of socialism, and remains unregenerate to the last, justifying his ''individualism'' by the Darwin and Spencer he had read during the intellectual ferment of the sweatshop. . . . Mr. Cahan makes him tell the story in rich human detail, as an understandable human being. You are no more appalled at David's tyrannies and greeds than David is himself. Yet in David's unperceptive reactions to the women he desires, in his annoyance at the radicals and ''intellectuals,'' Mr. Cahan makes a subtle back-fire of criticism more deadly than the most melodramatic socialist fiction.

R.B. *New Republic*. Feb. 2, 1918. pp. 31–2

There is no question whatever that the work of Abraham Cahan, Yiddish scholar, journalist, novelist, belongs to the American nation. As far back as the year in which Stephen Crane stirred many sensibilities with his *Maggie*, the story of an Irish slum in Manhattan, Mr. Cahan produced in *Yekl* a book similar and practically equal merit concerning a Jewish slum in the same borough. But it and his later books *The Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories* and *The White Terror and the Red* have been overwhelmed by novels by more familiar men dealing with more familiar communities. The same has been true even of his masterpiece, the most important of all immigrant novels, *The Rise of David Levinsky*. It, too, records the making of an American, originally a reader of Talmud in a Russian village and eventually the principal figure in the cloak and suit trade in America. But it does more than trace the career of Levinsky through his personal adventures: it traces the evolution of a great industry and represents the transplanted Russian Jews with affectionate exactness in all their modes of work and play and love—another conquest of a larger Canaan. Here are fused American hope and Russian honesty. At the end David, with all his New World wealth, lacks the peace he might have had but for his sacrifice of Old World integrity and faith. And yet the novel is very quiet in its polemic. Its hero has gained in power; he is no dummy to hand maxims on. Moving through a varied scene, gradually shedding the outward qualities of his race, he remains always an individual, gnawed at by love in the midst of his ambitions, subject to frailties which test his strength.

The fact that Mr. Cahan wrote *David Levinsky* not in his mother-tongue but in the language of his adopted country may be taken as a sign that American literature no less than the American population is being enlarged by the influx of fresh materials and methods.

Carl Van Doren. *Contemporary American Novelists, 1900–1920* (Macmillan). 1922. pp. 144–5

Cahan's absorbing interest in literature has been one of the reasons that the standard of literary criticism as well as the quality of fiction printed in the *Forward* has always been high. . . . Cahan has mellowed somewhat with the years, but in the old days he was considered a bit of a tyrant in the office. Writers often had what they considered their best copy mercilessly derided as ''fancy,'' and were told that the editor didn't want ''any Carusoes in the office.'' Reporters who lapsed into polysyllables or put style ahead of content had to stand by helplessly while Cahan called upon the elevator man, or some other representative of the paper's readers to judge the disputed passage. If the man was unable to understand the copy it was thrown away or rewritten.

J.C. Rich. *American Mercury*. Aug., 1947. pp. 175–6

I have purposely refrained from treating David Levinsky as a fictional character and have spoken of the novel as though it were the actual memoir of an American Jew, in tribute to Cahan's power of characterization. Such immediacy of revelation is the novel's strongest quality, and Levinsky is made to talk about himself not only with an authentic accent, but with a motive in disclosure verging on something sly—precisely as such a man would talk. This well known and widely respected businessman tells the truth about himself, his love affairs, his efforts to outsmart the unions, the way other men tell lies—to see if he can get away with it! But as

fiction, Cahan's writing lacks continuity: his transitions from subject to subject tend to be abrupt, with a perseveration in the linking of sex and economics. . . . Often the trains of thought collide within the single paragraph, business plowing into everything else. True, Levinsky's mind would work this way, and the habit would also serve him the purpose of saying, ''I may not be doing so well with the girls—but think of the money I'm making.'' (Though business is meaningless to Levinsky, one of the most touching insights of the novel is provided by Cahan's showing how he succumbs to a businessman's vulgarity of tone and manner, and berates himself for the weakness.)

Isaac Rosenfeld. *Commentary*. Aug., 1952. p. 135

And if one had to select a single person to stand for East European Jews in America, it would be Abraham Cahan, the editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*. . . . In one of his novels, the best yet written about American Jewish life, we are given a vivid and convincing picture of the helplessness and irrelevance of East European Judaism in the America of the early years of the mass immigration. We read in *The Rise of David Levinsky* of how a young Russian Jewish yeshiva student, learned and pious, emigrates to this country. On the boat he eats no forbidden food and prays daily. In America he seeks out and finds solace in the synagogue established by the people from his home town. But he also moves inevitably from one transgression to the next. First his earlocks are cut off, then he shaves, soon he abandons the synagogue in favor of night school and English studies. And soon nothing is left—and with practically no soul-searching.

Nathan Glazer. *American Judaism* (Chicago). 1957. pp. 68–9

This perceptive Russian intellectual shared in all the experiences of his fellow immigrants: he was factory hand, lecturer, teacher of English, labor organizer, law student, and socialist preacher. But from the outset he cultivated literary ambitions. In his first year Cahan mailed an article describing the coronation of Tsar Alexander III to the *New York World* and it was promptly published. By the mid-1880's Cahan's journalistic career encompassed the Russian, Yiddish, and English fields. . . . In 1896 his first novel, *Yekl, A Tale of the Ghetto*, was published by Appleton's. . . . His novel, despite the high praise of William Dean Howells, brought him no royalties. Women, who constituted the major market for novels, devoured knightly romances but had no interest in immigrant stories; furthermore, an unmoral love story that alluded to sex was taboo.

Moses Rischin. *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870–1914* (Harvard). 1962. p. 124

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CAIN, James M. (1892–1977)

Every so often a writer turns up who forces us to revalue our notions of the realistic manner, for, no less than reality itself, it is relative and inconstant, depending on the period, the fashion, the point of view. There is the feeling of realism, of intense realism, in James M. Cain's work, and yet he cannot be compared to such diverse types of realists as Zola, Ibsen, Sandburg, Dreiser, or Hemingway. It is the hard-boiled manner that has been heralded for some time, and is now upon us. . . . Cain can get down to the primary impulses of greed and sex in fewer words than any writer we know of. He has exorcised all the inhibitions; there is a minimum of reason, of complexity, of what we commonly call civilization, between an impulse and its gratification. In the broadest sense he is no asset as yet to American literature, for he adds nothing in breadth, but only in intensity, to our consciousness of life.

Harold Strauss. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 18, 1934. p. 8

The Postman Always Rings Twice . . . is a brutal story of adultery and murder whose appropriate setting is a wayside filling-station in California. Up to a certain point it rings horribly true: the bungled attempt at murder, the unsuccessful crime, the maggots of mutual suspicion that begin to prey on the guilty partners. But then Mr. Cain begins to make things up. He has almost succeeded in showing two triumphantly evil people—the reader is uncomfortable but can't let the story drop—When his intention falters: he converts his two villains into another Paolo and Francesca and rings down the curtain on a Hollywood-tragic ending. *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is a short, meretricious but exciting book; it does not pretend to tell the whole story, but it does pretend to tell nothing but the truth.

T.S. Matthews. *New Republic*. Feb. 28, 1934. p. 80

In the theatre they call it ''pace.'' Mr. Cain had phenomenal pace in his story *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and he demonstrates this gift again in *Serenade*. And another thing. There is no use being too nice about the fact that what gives Mr. Cain's novels their intensely readable quality is their deliberate and even brutal sexual honesty. . . . Mr. Cain is a real writer who can construct and tell an exciting story with dazzling swiftness—one of our hard-boiled novelists whose work has a fast rhythm that is art.

William Rose Benet. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 4, 1937. p. 5

Cain deals with ciphers, picturesque cardboard characters whom he cuts into attractive designs. He has certain specific knowledges that he draws on in all his novels: the workings of the law, the inside of the restaurant business and the world of music. . . . He has a few favorite themes: fate, the relationship of art and sex, and particularly the relationship of sex and violence. All his books give the sense of having been pieced together skillfully out of these shiny bits of glass, having no organic existence or internal necessity.

Stanley Edgar Hyman. *New Republic*. Oct. 6, 1941. p. 442

. . . in his work there is clearly a difference between sensationalism for its own sake and the effects sought by a writer obviously concerned with style and technique, even when the basic premise is violence. And it is truly an astonishing style, rippling and easy in a nervous sort of way, the people talking as such people would talk, the writing vivid and direct. . . . For when Mr. Cain's faults have all been pointed out—and the principal one is that character doesn't matter much in his writing—the pertinent fact remains: when he is at the top of his form it is all but impossible to put down the story he is telling.

John K. Hutchens. *New York Times Book Section*. April 18, 1943. p.7

The elements of a Cain novel add up to a kind of bogus tragedy, in which ill luck takes the place of fate. Perhaps here is one reason why the illusion of life is so strong in *The Postman*. Luck has no place in tragedy, but it has ample scope in our daily lives. At any rate, the illusion of life is there, so strong that we accept any number of details which, in another book, would thoroughly spoil the reader's pleasure. . . . What we have in *The Postman* is a dose of unattenuated violence, describable in the jargon appropriate to the dignity of the book as possessing ''terrific punch.'' If the book were one of greater dignity and higher seriousness, we would stop talking of punch and begin to discuss ''impact'' or ''concentration of effect.'' Such suddenly delivered impact is commonly recognized as one of the essentials of tragedy. Cain's books do not strike a tragic note, however, because the violence in them is not endowed with any sort of moral significance. We are aware of his violence not as something which we must accept because it is a part of Man's Fate, but as something for a clever writer to play tricks with.

W.M. Frohock. *The Novel of Violence in America* (Southern Methodist). 1950. pp. 97–9

Bemused by violence, Americans like to feel out, Cain says, all the nuances of the cliché ''There but for the grace of God go I.'' To involve the reader more intimately in the social communion with violence, ritualized by mass media reportage, Cain deals with characters just removed from the gangster and private eye milieu. . . . Cain admires the clear, hard, cold mind, and thrusts his characters into actions in which their daring and know-how enable them to meet any challenge. His typical hero is an ''educated roughneck'': a meat packing executive, an insurance agent, a bank executive, an engineer. But even his boxers, farmers, and mechanics prove adroit. These men crave praise and are sometimes immobilized, momentarily, by condemnation. . . .

Tough optimism is clearly expressed in all of Cain's writing. At times he is cynical and satirical, but the American brand of masculine romanticism is also active, and occasionally even sentimentality intrudes. In Cain's world, chance, luck, coincidence, gamble and counter-gamble, risk, audacity, and the ability to improvise upon the given serve his characters, but usually end in defeating them. While he is capable of creating finely drawn moral dilemmas, as in *Mignon*, he is primarily interested in the *action* produced by them and their impact on character rather than in elaborating upon facets of the abstract issues.

David Madden in *The Thirties*, edited by Warren French (Everett Edwards). 1967. pp. 68–9

Though Cain writes out of the social and literary milieu that produced the deliberate attacks of the proletarian novelists, Cain never deals directly, as we have noted, with society's ills. While in several novels the relevance of Cain's characters to a larger social context is fairly intimate, his most effective social criticism emerges from his treatment of another interest—character portrayal, handled statically in the essays; dramatically, in the dialogues; narratively, in the novels. But, in all three genres, it is the dramatic thrust of characters in action that intrigues him; and they add up to an impressive gallery of American public types. . . .

While there seems to be no serious intention nor artistic conception at the heart of any of his sixteen novels, [Cain] does exhibit in his work a strange mingling of serious and of popular elements which he has made his own; and he has always, in his own way, been serious about craft. A writer of unfortunate faults, he is an interesting example of the author who often lets his journalistic temperament blur his creative field of vision. But, if his vision of life never becomes sharply focused, controlled, or conceptualized, it is obviously heightened and exaggerated to create effects that are often poetically compressed. While Cain seldom rises above certain commercial elements and never seems quite to step over the threshold into novelistic art, as it is normally conceived, his novels are valuable illustrations of the concept of the ''pure'' novel.

Certainly Cain's art, more than anything else, moves even the serious reader to almost complete emotional commitment to the traumatic experiences Cain renders; and this artistic control convinces me that without his finest novels—*The Postman* [*Always Rings Twice*], *Serenade*, *Mildred Pierce*, and *The Butterfly*—the cream of our twentieth-century fiction would be thinner. Straddling realism and expressionism, he often gives us a vivid account of life on the American scene as he has observed and experienced it; and, in his best moments, he provides the finer vibrations afforded by the esthetic experience. Cain the entertainer may fail to say anything truly important about life, but he takes us through experiences whose special quality is found in no other writer's work.

David Madden. *James M. Cain* (Twayne, 1970), pp. 164, 175–76

In the Twain-Crane-Dreiser-Hemingway tradition, Cain successfully made the leap from journalism to fiction although he never abandoned magazine writing. Journalism not only provided him with some knowledge of a number of career fields but, more significantly for his craft, helped him achieve the compression, tautness and detached objectivity which, coupled with his sensational and brutal subject matter, characterize his writing and link him with other ''tough guy'' writers of the period. . . .

Cain's L.A. novels, drawing on this tradition, express the collective and destructive fantasies of the depression decade and turn these fantasies into nightmares. All of his heroes and heroines are self-destructively driven by sexual passion, a too-consuming love or an overpowering desire for material possessions. Such hunger is always the force driving them to desperate acts. Cain's pattern is to give his protagonists the temporary illusion of victory and then to take everything away from them. . . .

What defeats Cain's heroes . . . is not what defeats Fitzgerald's: the truth that the dream, once realized, can neither be preserved nor recaptured. For Cain the characters are defeated because their dreams are in direct conflict with those of others. Each character is

yoked to, and set against, another—Frank and Cora, Mildred and Veda, Walter and Phyllis—and destroyed because the other is more ruthless, more clever or simply more determined. The pairs are suicidally tied to each other by passion, greed and jealousy. . . . There is never a chance they will get away with anything. . . .

For Cain, who arrived in Los Angeles soon after the Crash and remained through the Depression, the city came to represent the betrayed dreams of the whole nation. In the boom years hundreds of thousands had come seeking their fresh starts and new beginnings—a detached house, open space, mobility, good climate, renewed health and a piece of the wealth. The dream seemed within grasp. Fortunes, real and rumored, were being made in real estate, restaurants, oil and movies. Where the dream was most fervently believed and seemed closest to fulfillment, the collapse was more painful. Cain gave us a sense of what it was like to live, work and dream in Los Angeles in the thirties. His restless, driven and self-destructive heroes and heroines remind us of the hunger and the desperation that were a part of that not-so-distant past.

David M. Fine. *American Studies*. Spring, 1979, pp. 27–29, 33–34

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CALDWELL, Erskine (1903–1987)

It is as difficult for an outsider as it is for Mr. Caldwell to find in his work any systematic, even any conscious doctrine. He has not shaped himself by reasoning and he does not make up stories to prove abstract points. . . . (His stories) somehow sound as if they had been invented a long time ago and cherished in the popular memory, waiting for the hand of art if it should chance upon them. Mr. Caldwell, handling these matters, partly goes back to a manner at least a hundred years old. Again and again he brings to mind the native humorists before Mark Twain, when American humor had not yet been sweetened but was still dry, blunt, and broad. . . . It is in Mr. Caldwell's choice of heroes and in the boldness with which he speaks of their love and religion that he goes beyond any of the older humorists.

Carl Van Doren. *The Nation*. Oct. 18, 1933. p. 444

I have denied that Caldwell is a realist. In his tomfoolery he comes closer to the Dadaists; when his grotesqueness is serious, he is a Super-realist. We might compromise by calling him over all a Symbolist (if by Symbolist we mean a writer whose plots are more intelligible when interpreted as dreams). . . . I am not by any means satisfied by the psychoanalytic readings of such processes to date, though I do believe that in moralistic fantasies of the Caldwell type, where the dull characters become so strangely inspired at crucial moments, we are present at a poetic law court where judgements are passed upon kinds of transgression inaccessible to jurists, with such odd penalties as no *Code Napoléon* could ever schematize.

Kenneth Burke. *New Republic*. April 10, 1935. p. 234

Mr. Caldwell is said to think of himself as a realist with a sociological message to deliver. If that message exists I fail to find it very clearly expressed in the present play (*Journeyman*). . . . But there is no point discussing what a work of art means or whether or not it is ''true to life'' unless one is convinced that the work ''exists''—that it has the power to attract and hold attention, to create either that belief or that suspension of disbelief without which its ''message'' cannot be heard and without which its factual truth is of no importance. And to me the incontrovertible fact is that both Mr. Caldwell's novels and the plays made from them do in this sense ''exist'' with an uncommon solidarity, that his race of curiously depraved and curiously juicy human grotesques are alive in his plays whether or not they, or things like them, were ever alive anywhere else.

Joseph Wood Krutch. *The Nation*. Feb. 12, 1938. p. 190

His intention . . . seems to be that of arousing sympathy for Southern tenant farmers, black and white. I believe this intention is good and that nothing effective will be done to correct the bad conditions now prevailing throughout the South until the sympathy of the nation is aroused. At the same time, I am convinced that sympathy is not enough. There must be some real understanding, and the ideas in people's minds must have some correspondence with actual conditions as they exist. If the picture of tenant farmers and of poor people in the South generally, as rendered in *God's Little Acre* and *Tobacco Road* are authentic, then there is little which can be done by landlord or tenant, by government or God, unless, of course, Mr. Caldwell's writings should so arouse the interest of the Deity that he would then proceed to make tenant, landlord, and land over again.

W.T. Couch. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Spring, 1938. p. 309

The chief theme of Caldwell's writing is the agony of the impoverished land, which has now so nearly reached a state of complete exhaustion in large sections of the old South that it is only a matter of time (he thinks) when the dust storms will cross the Mississippi and extend the desert to the east. This is the material basis for the social conditions which he sets forth in his stories. But, of course, it is the people who interest him as a student of human nature; and with the people, it is not so much their material sufferings as the moral degradation which follows steadily on the decline of their material well-being. It is the illiteracy passed on from generation to generation of those who cannot find time to go to school or have not

clothes to wear to school. . . . It is the shiftlessness and irresponsibility wrought by habitual want of hope.

Joseph Warren Beach. *American Fiction 1920–1940* (Macmillan). 1941. p. 223

Erskine Caldwell is two writers, both good of their kind, and one a sort of genius in his own narrow field. They collaborate on most of his books, but with conflicting aims; and the result is that reading some of his novels . . . is like a week-end visit to a bickering household. ''I am a social novelist,'' says the first Caldwell. . . . The second Caldwell does not talk about his aims, and in fact he isn't completely conscious of them; but sometimes, pushing his twin brother away from the typewriter, he begins pounding out impossible fancies and wild humor.

Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*. Nov. 6, 1944. p. 599

Where Faulkner's supreme dimension is time, Caldwell's is space, and the whole quality of their art lies distinguished in these separate dimensions. Plot, being essentially a matter of space, becomes of necessity Caldwell's sphere of operations, and though his characters are seldom nuanced and the range of his emotions remains pretty narrow, he handles incident and action and spatial movement with a skill that holds the reader to attention. . . .

Yet the exigencies and narrowness of space landlock Caldwell's writing, and make it, despite its clearer and firmer outlines, more limited and less important than Faulkner's. It demonstrates that a mastery of plot linked to a cargo of social significance is not enough to establish a great reputation. Though Caldwell impresses his readers, he does not haunt them in the sense of lingering in their imaginations or compelling them to read him a second time.

Leo Gurko. *The Angry Decade* (Dodd). 1947. pp. 138–9

It's a shame that Erskine Caldwell in his new novel, *Claudelle Inglish* . . . is still imitating Caldwell in this, his thirty-eighth book. Since *Tobacco Road* (1932) he has written a series of vivid if uneven accounts of life and lust in the backwoods South. The South has not liked its picture as taken by the Georgia-born novelist.

But neither the South nor Mr. Caldwell can maintain the same indignation in the same form for twenty-seven years. As long ago as 1940 Clifton Fadiman suggested Caldwell was ''beginning to repeat himself,'' and the quality of repetition has ranged from pretty good to pretty bad. Lately it has been pretty bad. . . .

It is said Caldwell was bitter when Broadway received *Tobacco Road* as comedy, yet humor has always seasoned the raw taste of his plots and social commentary in an up-again, down-again career. Both are tried in the same way in *Claudelle Inglish* but the lesson is no longer about the South or a bad economic system. It is about the dullness of the same joke and the same cry of protest too often repeated in the same tone.

Doris Betts. *Saturday Review*. May 2, 1959. p. 25

Like most best selling authors, Erskine Caldwell tends to be patronized or ignored by academic critics and serious readers. Many know of *Tobacco Road* and *God's Little Acre*, but tend to dismiss them as merely popular or salacious novels. Few seem to know the full range of the man's work: his text-picture documentaries, such as the remarkable *North of the Danube*; his charming books for children; his neglected *Georgia Boy*, a book that stands with Faulkner's last work as one of the finest novels of boyhood in American literature; and his short stories, some of which rank with the best of our time. A brief study cannot fully redress the indiscriminate neglect of readers and critics (nobody will argue that all Caldwell's works are valuable, or that all need to be considered at length); but I will indicate briefly the achievement of Erskine Caldwell, in an attempt not only to do justice to the writer, but to prevent if possible another disgrace in American letters: the sort of disgrace we visited on Melville, forgotten for years; the sort of disgrace we seem to be visiting on Phelps Putnam, Delmore Schwartz, and other good poets now almost entirely out of print, as well as on Glenway Wescott (who remembers that first novel, so highly praised by Ford Madox Ford?).

James Korges. *Erskine Caldwell* (Minnesota). 1969. p. 5

Caldwell's portrayal of Southern religion can be summed up . . . in the three themes of fatalism, poverty of ethic, and sexuality, but does Caldwell's account coincide with historical reality? In most of his work Caldwell can plead poetic license, but in *Deep South* he sheds the cloak of the novelist and becomes a combination of reporter, historian, and autobiographer. With surprising consistency, both in *Deep South* and in the fictional works, Caldwell captures the essence of Southern revivalistic religion. The latent sexuality which he brings to the surface has certainly been a feature of the Southern religious scene, especially of the more fervent brands of fundamentalism. Caldwell's emphasis on the ethical barrenness of Southern religion penetrates to the very heart of the South's religious difficulties. Finally, Caldwell ferrets out the curious Southern blend of John Wesley and John Calvin, of evangelicalism tinged with fatalism.

Caldwell's picture is, of course, partial. Southern life and Southern religion are far more complex than they appear in Caldwell's pages. But Caldwell makes no claim to the completeness of the historian. Rather, he fictionalizes important features of the Southern religious scene, and in so doing creates a fictional religious world which, in its approximation to reality, furnishes an invaluable aid to the historian of the South. . . .

James J. Thompson, Jr. *Southern Humanities Review*. Winter, 1971. p. 43

When all is said and done, how significant a writer is Caldwell? The critical consensus, as of 1979, was that he is an interesting, but unquestionably minor figure, whose work never fulfilled his early promise. And yet, as we have seen, this consensus is largely a result of a consistent failure on the part of Caldwell commentators to deal with Caldwell on his own terms. Of course, even the most careful attention to the ways in which Caldwell's aesthetic functions in his work does not negate the fact that this work has limitations, some of which are a direct result of the aesthetic itself. For one thing, there are certain kinds of reading pleasure Caldwell does not provide, even at his best. The enjoyment of re-reading a story or novel, carefully exploring its subtleties until its full implications are

apparent—an enjoyment Faulkner, Hemingway, Bellow, and so many of the most respected contemporary writers give us again and again—is almost entirely absent from the experience of reading Caldwell. By and large, rereading a Caldwell story or novel not only fails to uncover subtleties missed the first time through, it eliminates the suspense originally generated by our curiosity about what the characters might do next. To put it another way, once we've finished a Caldwell story, it ceases to be ''fiction''—at least according to Caldwell's definition—and becomes memory. Secondly, since Caldwell's fiction is centered entirely on his characters' statements and actions, we do not experience the exploration of fictional forms which makes Stein or Faulkner enjoyable volume after volume. Third, no matter how many of Caldwell's books we read, we do not grow aware—as we do, say, in Eliot or Hardy or Steinbeck—of a World View, a model against which we can measure our interpretations of our own experience. . . .

In the final analysis, Caldwell has as much to offer us—despite his perfectly obvious ''limitations''—as any other first-rate modern writer. Working within an unusual but cogent definition of fiction, he has created dozens of interesting stories characterized by a courageous willingness to be honest about the mysterious complexities of human lives and by a determination to communicate the fruits of his intensive observation in a form which is clear enough, direct enough, and powerful enough to be read, understood and vividly remembered for years by both trained literary critics and lay readers . . . I believe [Caldwell] . . . is a great writer, and he may be the most refreshingly unpretentious great writer we've ever had.

Scott MacDonald. In *Critical Essays on Erskine Caldwell*, ed. Scott MacDonald (G.K. Hall, 1981), pp. xxix, xxxi–xxxii

Any final assessment of Caldwell's contribution to the documentary genre in America must rest on the work he did in the 1930s, when he developed the techniques that have served him throughout his literary career. He recognized from the outset that documentary truth has more kinship with the authenticity of fiction than with scientific poll-taking and therefore never assumed a factitious air of disinterestedness about the material he recorded. Documentary and nonfiction writing has always been for Caldwell partisan, personal and highly selective; his imagination has played as vital a part in it as his conscience and observation. Yet there are clear stylistic and ideological distinctions between Caldwell's fiction and nonfiction. Despite the obvious inventive quality of much of his reporting which has led several of his critics to label it fiction, Caldwell maintains a separate persona, vocabulary, technique and even point of view in his nonfiction. While the fiction is almost consistently notable for the author's disengaged stance from the ''antics and motivations'' of the characters, the nonfiction permits an intrusive author, calling attention to his presence, his awkwardness, his anger and his sympathy. The more sophisticated vocabulary of the nonfiction reveals to what extent the ingenuous style of the fiction is a consciously contrived technique, while the tendency to separate comedy from degradation in the nonfiction suggests a different ideological purpose—reform rather than despair for the victims of economic and racial exploitation. While the underlying vision of human nature and society, especially as symbolically manifested in the South, is consistent in all his work, it is in the nonfiction that the intensity of Caldwell's moral purpose is most evident; by developing a carefully wrought, inventive literary method for his documentary reporting, he has succeeded in his best works, in negating the conventional distinction between effective propaganda and genuine aesthetic merit.

Sylvia Jenkins Cook. In *Critical Essays on Erskine Caldwell*, ed. Scott MacDonald (G.K. Hall, 1981), pp. 390–91

Unsustained by the adrenaline of his early public sensation, the literary vitality of Erskine Caldwell now depends on just two works, *Tobacco Road* (1932) and *God's Little Acre* (1933), the only major titles among his almost sixty books available in the paperback format necessary for classroom study and the limited immortality that it confers. To that short list I would add, at a minimum, the story cycle *Georgia Boy* (1943), currently out of print. The case for this recommendation may be expressed syllogistically. First, in order best to judge a writer's achievement, we must include a judgment of his work at its finest. Second, both Caldwell and a quorum of commentators have cited his stories as his best work and the *Georgia Boy* collection as the apex of his achievement in the form. Therefore, for our own enrichment and in fairness to Caldwell, we need to resurrect *Georgia Boy* for the extended reconsideration it deserves.

Although some critics have dismissed *Georgia Boy* as flawed and trivial, the book's structural integrity and the thematic depth should rank it with another major American story cycle, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. Far from being a loosely articulated constellation of simple stories, *Georgia Boy* is unified by contrapuntal characterization and a related animal motif, by dialogue refrains, by a complexly comic tone calling for varied reader responses, and by the twofold theme of coming of age in the South and the South's coming of age—a theme developed through a deceptively naive narrative perspective that requires our careful examination of the title itself. . . .

When Erskine Caldwell told an interviewer in 1986 that the stories here are ''not in any way autobiographical,'' he almost certainly meant only that the specific incidents are fabrications and that his own stable parents had not stood as models for the elder Stroups. In 1983, however, Caldwell left no doubt that his personal experience of boyhood had been the inspiration for this book. After citing *Georgia Boy* as a favorite work, he described it as follows: ''This was a whole series of short stories I wrote as the result of looking back at my early life and a playmate who happened to be a black boy. . . . That was a sort of landmark [for me] as far as writing was concerned, because I wrote it purely for the fact that I wanted to go back and think about my early life.'' Thus, even if *Georgia Boy* is not personal history, it is a kind of spiritual autobiography—the more significant of the two because that is the material of mythology, which we value above the historical record.

Not since before the revival of academic interest in Erskine Caldwell's writings over the last decade has *Georgia Boy* been available in a paperback edition. For classroom study, the book, in effect, does not exist. . . . Certainly, there are other works by Caldwell that deserve to be brought back. The novels *Journeyman* (1935), *Trouble in July* (1940), and *Tragic Ground* (1944) all have champions; and many voices have praised his early stories. The combinative advantages of the story-cycle form, however, set *Georgia Boy* apart from, and arguably above, these other works. It is distinguished, moreover, by a complex structural and stylistic weave and by the many variations on its major theme played by an instrumental narrator whose personal simplicity is the book's greatest sophistication. For these reasons and others, if I had to

choose just a single Caldwell work for regeneration, I would unhesitatingly select the too-long neglected *Georgia Boy*.

> Ronald Wesley Hoag. In Edwin T. Arnold, ed. *Erskine Caldwell Reconsidered* (Jackson: Univ. Pr. of Mississippi, 1990), pp. 73, 83– 84

[T]o write Caldwell off as a second-rate pornographer, a facile humorist, or an outdated proletarian is to make a judgment on a body of work whose most essential quality is its defiance of any such conventional terms of assessment—of literary categories, schools of thought, and ethical and aesthetic labels. When French critics asserted that ''no one is more American than Erskine Caldwell,'' they referred not merely to the hard-boiled style and brutal pessimism associated with American naturalists, but to Caldwell's affinity for the macabre, the irrational, and the subversive that undermined all certainty about the nature of his fiction, tingeing tragedy with farce and comedy with horror. His work thus resists coherent schemes of interpretation, a situation that Caldwell appeared to exacerbate by his continual mocking disparagement of the pursuit of criticism and by his efforts throughout his life to present a simplified and contradictory public image of himself, in interviews and autobiographies, that effectively kept the riddle of his literary world intact. . . .

By the end of Caldwell's long life, in 1987, he had passed through notoriety, fame, neglect, and even, eventually, a certain amount of honorific ceremony. From Poland he received the Order of Cultural Merit; France made him Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters. In Japan, he was honored at a banquet given by the Erskine Caldwell Literary Society; and at home, finally, he was made a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. There was also a modest revival of scholarly and critical interest in Caldwell's work, although it still remains largely omitted from the classroom anthologies that mark successful admission into the great tradition of American literature, despite his remarkable skill in producing dozens of short stories that seem eminently suitable for such selection. By being ''particularly American,'' Caldwell had proved perhaps too crafty and recalcitrant to be satisfactorily assimilated and classified.

This exclusion of Caldwell means, however, the loss of a unique and audacious voice that explored aspects of life hitherto rarely approached in American literature. He exposed the depravity of poor people's lives with the venom of a naturalist and then held them up to moral irony and incongruous humor. He noted laconically the search for spiritual transcendence in his fellow mortals and the frenzied sexual channels into which it was so often diverted. He observed the powerful instinct of human sexuality and saw how readily it might be bartered or exploited for money, transformed into obsessions, or confused into foolish whims. He portrayed individuals as variously irrational, foolish, and vicious, but he attacked fiercely a social system that exposed them to hunger, disease, and persecution. He envisioned an absurd world, but always insisted that not all of its cruel manifestations were beyond cure. He did this in a style that seemed so simple as continually to risk banality, for only in such a context could his startling dissonances and incongruous juxtapositions have their full impact. He was a powerful imagist and a wildly inventive creator of character and incident. If the greatest successes of his career in short stories, novels, and nonfiction were concentrated largely in the twelve years between the publication of *American Earth* in 1931 and *Georgia Boy* in 1943, his earlier preparation for them was enlightening; and his later work, especially in the 1960s, was often intriguing. Many of these later novels about women and blacks were written well in advance of, and often well beyond the realm of, the verities of current feminist and civil rights thinking; but verities and certainties were never Caldwell's mode, even in his most dedicated proletarian period, unless mixed with more disconcerting and oblique attitudes. . . .

Though in his later work Caldwell lost the stimulus of the intellectual context of the Great Depression and tried rather unsuccessfully to broaden his fictional realm, in his major work of the 1930s and 1940s he created a dissonant and defiant literary vision of poverty and social powerlessness. He simultaneously invoked naturalistic theories and undermined them; he was disconcertingly simple in his narration yet complex in his meaning; he relished vulgarity and reviled the circumstances it was forced to dwell in; and his fiction finally refused, much like the poor themselves, to accommodate itself to any comfortable category, either aesthetic or political.

> Sylvia Jenkins Cook. *Erskine Caldwell and the Fiction of Poverty* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1991), pp. 2, 4–5, 284

In 1946, William Faulkner named Erskine Caldwell as one of America's five greatest novelists. This was not considered an unusual comment. With the publication of *Tobacco Road* in 1932 and *God's Little Acre* in 1933, Caldwell attracted a following of distinguished literary critics. Malcolm Cowley was only one of many who ranked him alongside F. Scott Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Thomas Wolfe. Cowley later wrote that Caldwell ''had a greater natural talent for telling stories than anyone else in his generation.'' . . . Many critics shared the opinion of the *Baltimore Sun* reviewer who felt that Caldwell had surpassed both Faulkner and Wolfe in his depictions of Southern life. Across America, universities offered seminars on his fiction, and eager doctoral candidates analyzed every aspect of his thought. As late as 1960, Caldwell was under serious consideration for the Nobel Prize in literature. . . .

Caldwell's writing would always draw the loudest cry from those who found his work obscene or pornographic. Outraged citizens picketed theaters that dared show his plays, and high-minded city councilmen found political capital in banning his books. Boston's ''Committee for Decency'' targeted Erskine Caldwell as America's ''chief purveyor of filth.'' When *God's Little Acre* was seized from bookstore shelves in New York and declared ''obscene'' by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, Caldwell took his complaint to the state Supreme Court. With the help of testimony from such literary lions as H. L. Mencken and Sherwood Anderson, he was acquitted, and his case became a landmark on First Amendment litigation. . . .

Today, Erskine Caldwell is virtually forgotten by scholars and popular readers alike, and he surely represents one of the greatest disappearing acts in our literary history. To date, there is no full-scale biography of Caldwell in print, and until now, no fiction that so impressed the literary scholars of his day. Sylvia Cook's *Erskine Caldwell and the Fiction of Poverty* represents not only a renewal of interest in this all but disregarded artist but, happily, a sophisticated and intelligent starting point for meaningful, contemporary debate on his work.

Part of Caldwell's critical decline resulted from the sheer volume of poor writing he did, both before and after his valuable contributions of the 1930s and early 1940s. Reading this immense body of work—over one hundred short stories, thirty novels, and twelve books of nonfiction—is a massive undertaking, and to Cook's great credit, she has mined from this enormous corpus valuable insights into Caldwell's creative vocabulary.

Dan B. Miller. *Southern Literary Journal*. Spring, 1993, pp. 112–14

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CALISHER, Hortense (1911–)

[*False Entry* is] the work of a writer who knows what she wants to do and how she wants to do it. The style, at least at first, seems rather mannered, and indeed it is involved and allusive, but the further one goes, the more one recognizes how beautifully it suits her purpose. . . .

Identity is not given us; it is something that we either do or do not achieve. That Miss Calisher can take this familiar truth and make of it something fresh and exciting is proof of her deep insight and her mastery of a most difficult method. Despite her unconventional method of telling her story, Miss Calisher knows how to make use of the traditional arts of the novelist. . . . If her aim is to explore deeply the mysteries of a particular person, she is able to bring minor characters on the stage in such a way that we can see them clearly. The novel rewards the closest possible reading, but it can give a more casual kind of pleasure, too.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 28, 1961. p. 17

Hortense Calisher's second novel [*Textures of Life*] attempts, and pretty well pulls off, something of a *Golden Bowl*. This one could not be symbolised by the extravagant *objet d'art*, with its bizarre flaw, conceived by James. Miss Calisher's material is the American bourgeoisie at home, and the textures of the lives she interweaves are homely. Here is a Golden Bowl in, so to speak, basketwork. But the working is Jamesian indeed in firmness of structure and subtlety of superstructure. Sometimes she uses the master's very idiom—not in pastiche but as legitimately and creatively as Tiepolo used Veronese's. . . .

In James's nexus the Prince is admittedly not up to the other three. Yet it is not simply as a weak character that he lets the dance down. Weak characters can be boldly portrayed; but James is too relenting towards the Prince to make him a Vronsky or a George Osborne; the weakness lies not only in the Prince but in James—where it is perhaps a weakness for Italian young men, or just for princes. Miss Calisher's construction has a comparable flaw, and again in the younger generation. *Jeune premier* parts are always the hardest to do. Her David may not properly exist—there is little to him but a trick of letting his glasses slide down his nose—but he is waved into being by adroit sleight of hand. It is Elizabeth, reacting against her mother's ''taste,'' bohemianly disregarding material objects except such as she herself, as a sculptor, makes, in whom one suspects a lightweightness of character and a college-girl pretentiousness of intellect—which the author seems not to realise. With the older couple Miss Calisher can do no wrong. The vivid, invalid's life of David's father, the vaguer but penetrating vision of Elizabeth's mother—she splendidly creates both and superbly counter-poises them. Miss Calisher is not only that rarity, a talented novelist, but that double-blossomed rarity, a talented novelist who is serious about art.

Brigid Brophy. *New Statesman*. Sept. 13, 1963. p. 326

Hortense Calisher's *Extreme Magic*, a novella and a number of short stories, is a collection remarkable for uneven achievement. The sensibility is extremely feminine—in the faintly pejorative sense—and the talent diaphanous. . . . The writing is sometimes skillfully evocative, the nuances suggestive, the imagery just; but then there are ornaments (many of them) as trashy as ''the river gave a little shantung wrinkle.'' . . . But there are two stories, ''The Rabbi's Daughter'' and ''The Gulf Between,'' that are harmoniously true and moving—even substantial—because they rise from authentic experience: in this case cultivated, haute-bourgeois, upper-West-Side Jewish life, a little down on its uppers. Miss Calisher has a real sense of a past . . . she can show where things

come from; what people really are; how they feel; how they affect one another; why what happens happens.

Eve Auchincloss. *New York Review of Books*. June 25, 1964. p. 17

[In *Journal from Ellipsia*] Hortense Calisher expends a great many words on a sophisticated science-fiction theme, and these words are not cleanly bolted into clear but complex structures so much as—as though they were all made of some colloidal substance—allowed to stick into great lumps, like long-forgotten sweets shaken out of a paper bag. Admittedly her literary problem is the representation of communion between two worlds—one here, one *out there*—and the effect of cotton wool coming out of, or being stuffed into, desperately communicating mouths may be regarded, by some readers, as appropriate. But the book, besides being very long, is very hard to read, and one wonders whether it was all worth it. What happens in *Journal from Ellipsia* is this: an androgynous creature from beyond tries to break through into this world; it contacts Janice, a beautiful anthropologist, who now wants to break out of this world into the one beyond. Her story is told, as it were, posthumously—the unearthly talking machine, the top arguing scientists, the throwing of the ball of narration to different players (including the one from out there). There are British characters, and they tend to speak in what I call the toodle-pip idiom, an American invention. This, in a book about intergalactic communication, makes everything said seem more implausible than it ought to.

Anthony Burgess. *The Listener*. April 21, 1966. p. 589

The New Yorkers is a miraculous novel in that it is exactly equal to its ambition. For the first fifty or even hundred pages its ambition is hidden or apparently denied. You think you are reading a futility—another perhaps wise but old-style novel ''rich in texture,'' ''closely worked,'' patient beyond easy disclosure, afflicted with the paradox of a choking capaciousness. Then begins the extraordinary glimmer of Design, and very rapidly there is evidence of something new—newly against the grain of expectation.

The miracle is not in the language, which, though controlled and self-aware, is occasionally formally florid, like porcelain. Sentence by sentence it does not always distinguish itself. Yet the method of its obliqueness. its internal allusions, echoes, and murmurings, all this is uncommonly cunning and thick with the ingenuities of discovery. The miracle is nevertheless not in the language but in the incredible spite—everything is spited, from literary fashion straight up to the existentially perceived cosmos. If the anti-novel can be defined in part as spiting expectations, then Calisher's concept of it belongs with Nabokov's. Like other ''New'' novels. *The New Yorkers* is also about itself—which is to say it aspires to fool, to lead, to play tricks with its own substance. But unlike others, especially unlike the most intelligent—for what is more intelligent than a novel by, say, Susan Sontag?—Calisher's novel is *about* intelligence. Or, better yet, Intelligence.

Cynthia Ozick. *Midstream*. Nov., 1969. p. 77

Hortense Calisher . . . is one of our most substantial yet elusive writers. By any narrow or literal definition, she is becoming less and less a strictly narrative artist. Her characters are boundless states of mind. Nor does she structure books conventionally: *Queenie* doesn't move; it spins, pausing for scenes, pausing for ideas. Mrs. Calisher appears also to borrow imaginatively from the other arts, giving the reader the feel of the dance, of the mobile, of sculpture. In *Queenie*, probably the most light-hearted of her novels, she has made a tripping entry into the mind of a present-day young girl, and has with wit and spirit fashioned a kind of ballet around the story of Queenie's coming of sexual and intellectual age.

The story unwinds in the form of tapes addressed to various ''interlocutors,'' including the admissions dean of ''Hencoop College'' in New York. God, a Hencoop professor in whom for a time Queenie reposes some faith, and finally the President of the United States. . . .

The book overflows with ideas, couched in sparkling aphorisms. Touching on the generation gap, the sexual gap, the abysmal political gap, the communication gap. As the device of the tapes suggests, the story is, among other things, about someone who wants to have a good talk with *Someone*.

Lucy Rosenthal. *Saturday Review*. April 3, 1971. p. 34

Like any good writer, Hortense Calisher keeps a reader on the move. She has a ''style,'' though it worries her when people say that, because for some it implies surface, a glib veneer with nothing beneath it. But she needn't worry. Her intelligence shows without aid of italics and block capitals. To be ''carried away'' is not in her case to be swept off into rhetorical clouds of Chestertonian pomp, but to be led on by the imagination into fresh perception, awe and an occasional all-out celebration. . . .

Hortense Calisher is a creator of voices, moods, states of mind, but not of worlds. Her fiction, like her autobiography [*Herself*], sends us back into the world we know; it may refresh and enhance it, but it does not, even for a moment, obliterate or remake it. This is not to say that she is, in some old-fashioned sense, a realist. On the contrary, rather than fabricating reasonable facsimiles of ''things as they are,'' she takes certain ''scenes'' for granted and lets her quick wit and marvelous imagination play over them. If we know a bit about the scenes she selects, we're likely to find her works beautifully agile and astute. If not, she is not about to hammer the parts together for us.

Robert Kiely. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 1, 1972. pp. 3, 20

Calisher is a shrewd observer of our social ills—displacements of youth, futilities of the rich—but she is more than a naturalist noting easy details, cataloging crimes or sins. She is a maker of fictions; she insists on private consciousness—even when this consciousness is extreme, obsessive, and ''poetic''. [*Eagle Eye*] is a powerful indictment of social wrongs by an odd hero who may see less (or more) than he believes. . . . Calisher stuns us with the ''magic forbidden leaps'' of her imagination. She forces us to enter—and withdraw from—her narrator's mind; she offers few clues to his ultimate condition. But by testing us with her sharp vision she emerges here as a true creator—an eagle of fiction-makers.

Irving Malin. *New Republic*. Nov. 3, 1973. p. 26

In this novella [*The Man Who Spat Silver*], we are dealing with a private event. The probing of this woman's inner space is achieved with intelligence and original imagery. It is a story that will have appeal to intellectual puzzle solvers. At times the writer's penchant for playing with words and form become self-conscious. The split personality, the bizarre dreams, the hallucinatory details of the mythical figure are the stuff of literary techniques used widely today, and [Hortense] Calisher is following in the footsteps of her personal and her generation's manners and fondness for peculiar techniques. In her novella some of the techniques begrudge the revelation of their mysteries as well as clarify the issues. The reader must work hard to carve a path through the mysteries. The rewards of the effort are what may be called illuminated mystery.

Lee Mhatre. *Confrontation*. Fall, 1989, p. 86

Hortense Calisher, known primarily as a ''writer's writer,'' has been turning out works of serious fiction for over forty years. Her eleven novels, six collections of short stories and novellas, and two autobiographical works have been consistently, sometimes lengthily, reviewed. . . . But despite her reputation as a significant voice in American fiction she has received neither popular acclaim nor, excepting two doctoral dissertations, in-depth critical analyses. The absence of the first is understandable enough: Calisher's dense and quirky fictions are not the stuff of which bestsellers are made. Reasons for the critical silence are less easy to come by. One possibility lies in the resistance of her works to easy categorization: she is not, in any narrow sense, a woman's writer, a Jewish writer, or a New York writer. She is, however, a writer known for her distinctive, even idiosyncratic, style. Especially when surveying Calisher's career, reviewers single out her style—usually summed as ''convoluted,'' ''elliptical,'' or ''Jamesian''—as the one constant. They rarely situate a new novel within Calisher's canon, let alone the context of contemporary fiction. As a result, each new work seems, notwithstanding its stylistic signature, sui generis.

It is certainly true, as a number of her reviewers have remarked, that Calisher's subject matter covers a vast range of territory. Yet however varied the novels' imaginative worlds, a thematic continuity exists that, for too long, has gone unnoticed. It was not until a 1987 *Paris Review* interview that Calisher, recalling the unique physical sensation of her childhood's trolley rides, referred to that theme's presence in her fiction. . . .

For the next forty years Calisher has spun out variations on that theme: her protagonists may yearn for if not the true place then at least a firmly manageable one in which to stay put, but by novel's end or novella's end, they come out into a world that promises not a safe place, but an open-ended journey. That reviewers have failed to grasp that theme's all-pervasiveness—the thematic centrality of, simultaneously, rites of passage and of extradition—only underscores her achievement. That they have failed to see that style is not something imposed on subject matter, but, rather, the perfect vehicle for and embodiment of her life's theme, has resulted in an unfortunate stereotyping of Calisher the consummate stylist.

Calisher's impressive range, the variousness of story, character, and structure, have vitalized a theme which, by nature of its very universality, could easily have conjured up cliché upon cliché. . . .

Calisher has always savored contradictions and dualities. Hester Elkin of the autobiographical stories is the first of many protagonists to experience the necessarily painful pull between mutually exclusive ways of being in the world. . . . To be in-between is to be in motion and, thus, fully alive, capable of changes in direction.

On one level, Calisher's own sense of in-betweenness is reflected in her character's names. . . .

On the one hand, Calisher seems bent on explaining and encompassing the self and the world in elegantly attenuated sentences reminiscent of James, Hugo, the Bible. On the other hand, equally representative sentence fragments bespeak a resolutely modern consciousness that is always (literally, it would seem) brought up short by the impossibility of ever really articulating and communicating experience. . . .

The ''outdoors-indoors blend'' that Calisher has known and savored since childhood, from an early awareness of her household's encompassing eras and temperaments, may, in part, explain why it is so difficult to securely ''place'' her in a literary context. Her subjects—but not her themes—reflect the times she lives in. Her style may straddle eras and genres, yet her voice is distinctly her own.

Kathleen Snodgrass. *The Fiction of Hortense Calisher* (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Pr., 1993), pp. 11–12, 116–17

What does the novelist of manners do in a world without privacy, without secrets, in which it seems that anything can be said anywhere? What happens to a writer with a mastery of nuance, a fine attentiveness to the things not said, to her characters' unvoiced knowledge of one another's knowledge? For it's a mastery that seems to have no place in our age of televised confessionals.

Nevertheless it's appropriate to the landscape of Hortense Calisher's twenty-first book and nineteenth volume of fiction. The movie king of her title [*In the Palace of the Movie King*] is Paul Gonchev, born in Vladivostok, reared in Kyoto, who has chosen, however improbably, to base his career in Albania. Gonchev makes exquisite pseudodocumentaries about great cities for a country that has shut the door on the outside world. . . .

The best parts of *In the Palace of the Movie King* show how a psychology born of a leisured world in which private life seemed all can be used to register a society in which it seems to count for nothing. Or rather one where the very power of the state gives privacy a value it may no longer have for us. . . .

There are some fine scenes throughout: the opening, the Albanian chapters, and late in the novel an extraordinary account of a California earthquake. Yet too often the details she picks to document America's national mood just don't fit. . . .

In the Palace of the Movie King is a kind of love song to an ever-changing America, where to be an exile, both free of and weighted down by one's past, is the national fate. One wants to like Ms. Calisher's latest novel, but its very contemporaneity makes it seem quite oddly out of touch.

Michael Gorra. *New York Times Book Review*. February 20, 1994, p. 12

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ETHAN CANIN (1960–)

It is far harder to compress plot, character, and atmosphere into a compact order than to sprawl over a novel's length. That is the rare talent of a good short story writer. It is all the more remarkable that Ethan Canin has managed to write four short stories [in *The Palace Thief*] that are a pleasure to read the first time around and in two instances are worthy of anthologizing so that they can be reread for years to come.

The narrators in [two of the stories] ''The Accountant'' and ''The Palace Thief'' are riveting in their quiet ways because they have the fascination of dormant volcanos that erupt without warning and then return to their quiescent state. The transcending value of these two stories is not the unexpected revolt by these characters against their lifelong passivity but their reaction to and rumination on their distinct moment of rebellion. Above all, it is the characters' own surprise and the subsequent struggle to reconcile their lives, their values, and their concept of themselves with their singular eruption out of the pattern of conformity and restraint. As they subside again into passivity, their inability to comprehend what led them to act and their complementary inability to understand what they know with certainty, that they will never rebel again, binds the reader to them. It is the nearly universal human ability to glimpse but never fully to command one's destiny. As the accountant reflects, ''I suppose I was wondering, although it is strange for me to admit it, why, of all the lives that might have been mine, I have led the one I just described.''

Of all the lives that Ethan Canin may lead, let us hope he chooses to lead the life of a writer.

Barbara Milbauer. *Confrontation*. Fall, 1994–Winter, 1995, pp. 341–42

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CAPOTE, Truman (1924–1984)

Other Voices, Other Rooms abundantly justifies the critics and readers who first hailed Capote as a writer of exceptional gifts. . . . Capote's sensibility is as notable as his insight, and its range is impressive, for it enables him to describe elements of physical environment that would be scarcely perceptible to most of us; yet these elements, however unnoticed, are recognized by the reader as authentic, and indisputably present. But although his descriptive writing is masterly, it is his ability to create and interpret character—to increase both the scope and depth of our understanding of ourselves and others—that yields the major excellences of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. . . . It is not only a work of unusual beauty, but a work of unusual intelligence. In it, readers will establish contact with one of the most accomplished American novelists to make his debut in many a season.

Lloyd Morris. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Jan. 16, 1948. p. 2

Even if Mr. Capote were ten or twenty years older than he is, his ability to bend language to his poetic moods, his ear for dialect and for the varied rhythms of speech would be remarkable. In one so young this much writing skill represents a kind of genius. On the other hand, I find myself deeply antipathetic to the whole artistic-moral purpose of Mr. Capote's novel. . . . For it seems to me to create a world of passive acceptance in which we are rendered incapable of thinking anybody responsible for his behavior in any department.

Diana Trilling. *The Nation*. Jan. 31, 1948. pp. 133–4

Other Voices, Other Rooms is easily the most exciting novel to come from America this year. Though one of its chief characters is what is customarily referred to by reviewers as ''decadent,'' both he and the rest of the characters in this emotional story of the South make the average character in contemporary American fiction seem perverted by comparison. For the only moral standard that literature knows is the truth, and it is truthful intensity of Mr. Capote's book that makes it so remarkable. . . . He has dared to write of life in all its complex splendor and to tell of the human heart, and yet he has triumphed without sinking into romanticism or departing from any of the desired standards of taste and maturity. . . . But what ensures its success is the quality of Mr. Capote's writing, which is very high indeed, and original without being exhibitionist or obscure.

Robert Kee. *Spectator*. Nov. 19, 1948. pp. 674–6

If the Mad Hatter and the Ugly Duchess had had a child, and the child had almost grown up, these are almost the kind of short stories he could be expected to write. . . . Who wants, really, to crawl back into the twilit cave and roll the papier-mâché stone over the doorway? Who would want to let Alice's wonderland serve as the myth around which he organized his adult life? . . . With these reservations, however, one must fairly assert for these stories a kind of triple power: a mind at times disciplined toward poetry, with a special skill at naming; a pleasant and only slightly grotesque humor, and an ability to suggest, as in the novel, the outlines of haunted personalities.

Carlos Baker. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 27, 1949. p. 7

As a teller of tales he has a peculiar and remarkable talent. . . . In his hands the fairy tale and ghost story manage to assimilate the attitudes of twentieth-century psychology without losing their integrity, without demanding to be accepted as mere fantasy or

explained as mere symbol. . . . In Capote's stories the fairy world, more serious than business or love, is forever closing in upon the skeptical secure world of grown-ups.

Leslie A. Fiedler. *The Nation*. April 2, 1949. pp. 395–6

Mr. Capote's second novel, *The Grass Harp*, remains within the extreme limits of what we call Gothic, but it is a sunlit Gothic, an aberrant form with a personality, an agreeable personality, entirely its own. . . . Mr. Capote keeps his story beautifully under control. His story has elements of allegory, it expounds a rather simple, basic statement concerning the nature of love. . . . In the beginning of the novel one does catch whiffs of the well-known Southern decay, but the book is not concerned with morbidity. It is a light, skilful, delightful story.

Oliver La Farge. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 20, 1951. pp. 19–20

One thing about Truman Capote . . . that one notices right off is that he looks a little like a toy. That's what some people *say*, anyway. If he is a toy, he nevertheless has a mind that would turn those big thinking cybernetic machines green with envy. As a matter of fact, his mind has enough good steel in it to turn too many human beings the same violent color—and it has, no doubt about it. Mr. Capote's appearance is lamblike but all intellectual bullies are warned not to be deceived.

Harvey Breit. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 24, 1952. p. 29

The dichotomy of good and evil exists in each Capote character just as the dichotomy of daylight and nighttime exists in the aggregate of his stories. We might almost say that Capote's stories inhabit two worlds—that of the realistic, colloquial, often humorous daytime and that of the dreamlike, detached, and inverted nocturnal world. This double identity must be viewed with a double vision because Capote's stories can be interpreted either psychologically or as an expression of a spiritual or moral problem. In either case, whether the story be realistic or fantastic, the central focus is on the moment of initiation and the central character is either adolescent or innocent.

Paul Levine. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Autumn, 1958. p. 602

The form of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* approaches perfection. It has pace, narrative excitement, a firm and subtle hold on the sequence of events from the first backward glance to the final salutation. A novelette in scope, it still manages to treat a subject usually accorded the fuller scope of the picaresque novel with marvelous selectivity. The point of view, the tone, the style herald no technical discoveries in the field of fiction: they simply blend to make the subject spring to life.

Ihab Hassan. *Radical Innocence* (Princeton). 1961. p. 254

Among the surprising qualities of Truman Capote's mercurial talent and a quality that is made very plain by such a selection from the entire body of his work as this [*Selected Writings*] is its range, the variety of its development over the nearly twenty years in which the author has been publishing. A prose of many moods, it is equally at ease in situations of black nightmarish horror and of high, often hilarious comedy, and perhaps its single constant quality is the unerring sense of style. By style one means, when speaking of Capote's work, not only the right words in the right places, but the body of detail precisely and freshly observed and the varieties of the speaking human voice accurately heard and quintessentially reported.

Mark Schorer. Introduction to *Selected Writings of Truman Capote* (Random). 1963. p. vii

This [*Breakfast at Tiffany's*] novella's similarities to Isherwood's Sally Bowles have often been noted. The difference is more revealing. Isherwood's story is quintessential social-political history. This is quite beyond Capote who, for all the war-time detail, delivers finally a relatively isolated portrait of a romantic figure in quest of the perennial romantic grail, utter happiness. . . .

. . .His concluding essay [in *Selected Writings*] on Brooklyn Heights—written for *Holiday* in a manner quite different from his own pointillist travel pieces—proves yet once more that he is a literary actor, good only when he gets the right part. Capote's writing depends on which magazine commissions him or which author he is imitating. There is no clear personal imprint. The only generalization possible is that, so far, he is at his best with humorous observation. . . . His fiction is strongest, most vital, when it resembles his best non-fiction. It is noteworthy that he is now at work on a long examination of a Kansas murder case. . . . Almost half of this collection is non-fiction; the book on which he has been engaged for some years is non-fiction. Perhaps he has recognized that his forte is in using his artistic abilities on factual material, and in that self-recognition may be the pleasant end of a search. For this collection is the record of a man trying out many voices in many rooms.

Stanley Kauffmann. *New Republic*. Feb. 23, 1963. pp. 22, 24

It is to Mr. Capote's disadvantage that every book he writes turns into what our great grandmothers used to call ''a pretty book.'' He knows that ours is a bloodstained planet but he knows also that it turns on its axis and moves round the sun with a dancer's grace, and his style defines the dancer as ballet-trained. For this reason Mr. Capote is often not taken as seriously as he should be, and it is possible that his new book, *In Cold Blood*, may be regarded simply as a literary *tour de force* instead of the formidable statement about reality which it is. . . . That Mr. Capote has invented nothing and recorded with a true ear and utter honesty is proved by the conversations in the book. The inhabitants of Holcomb, Kansas, do not on any page engage in the subtle and economical dialogue Mr. Capote ascribes to the characters in his novels. They speak the words which reporters hear when they interview the participants in prodigious events, and listen to with embarrassed ears. The stuff is corny, yet not just corny. The corn is celestial. Even the cleverest writer who tries to invent it achieves an obvious fakery, which is quite absent from this book.

Rebecca West. *Harper's Magazine*. Feb., 1966. p. 108

The author [of *In Cold Blood*] is . . . deeply concerned with his people and the six lives that were lost. To this he adds an acute and sympathetic interpretation of their behavior. Indeed, one feels throughout the book that he is in the company of a highly perceptive, very civilized man who wants to understand but has no desire to instruct, judge, or condemn. The literary form may not be new, but, it must be conceded, this self-restraint assuredly is.

But the special brilliance of the achievement lies in the writing. This serves flawlessly and effortlessly the purposes of the narrative. . . . But the author's resources go far beyond narrative. The main actors are visible in all dimensions and precisely as they must be seen for the purposes of the history.

John Kenneth Galbraith. *The Reporter*. March 10, 1966. p. 58

Much has been made, in the unprecedented hullabaloo that surrounded the publication of *In Cold Blood*, of that book's inaugurating a ''new literary genre.'' . . .

What Mr. Capote thinks he has discovered is already known to the world by a different name: history. History is the art of telling the truth, selectively (so that the reader may not strangle on vast accumulations of data) and gracefully (so that the reader will want to read in the first place). That is what Mr. Capote has done. If it is objected that history is usually concerned with larger issues, reflect what the similar ordeal of a 15th century family might be worth today to the historian, if he were lucky enough to find it written in such careful and well-authenticated detail. . . .

What Mr. Capote wants to do for his history, I take it, is what the novel can do for its subject matter: present it so compellingly that it escapes its relatively narrow base into universal significance. That is a commendable ambition in the historian, who is far more than the novelist committed to specifics. It is in terms of this problem that I apprehend Aristotle's dictum that poetry is truer than history. Even so, the best historians have always been able to present their facts so creatively and suggestively as to make small incidents serve great generalizations.

Charles Alva Hoyt. *Columbia University Forum*. Winter, 1966. p. 53

Why . . . did Capote honor himself by calling [*In Cold Blood*] in any sense a ''novel''? Why bring up the word at all? Because Capote depended on the record, was proud of his prodigious research, but was not content to make a work of record. After all, most readers of *In Cold Blood* know nothing about the case except what Capote tells us. Capote wanted his ''truthful account'' to become ''a work of art,'' and he knew he could accomplish this, quite apart from the literary expertness behind the book, through a certain intimacy between himself and ''his'' characters. Capote wanted, ultimately, to turn the perpetually defeated, negative Eros that is behind *Other Voices, Other Rooms* into an emblematic situation for our time.

Alfred Kazin. *Bright Book of Life* (Little). 1973. pp. 210–1

It is [Capote's] attention to style, to the extraordinary pull of places, to all the fleeting wisps of the past that give [*The Dogs Bark*] a durability far beyond the perfunctory compendia of pieces with which publishers stay in the graces of their good writers when those writers are between big books. . . . This is less a guidebook for the millions of aspiring journalists and city-room entrepreneurs in the land who wish to break the shackles, than a self-charting of a courageous literary life, a life of stamina, and despite the misleading public appurtenances, of course, of considerable solitude. If the ''new journalism,'' which moves from one symposium to the next, has in fact become something more than we had bargained for (some of its exponents now belittling the act of fiction and poetry as irrelevant, obliterating in one fairly broad sweep some of the deepest impulses of the human blood), then *The Dogs Bark* is an effective answer, for while much of it does indeed stand on ''reporting,'' it is at the core a great deal more ambitious: it is the written geography of an imaginative artist.

Willie Morris. *New Republic*. Nov. 3, 1973. p. 22

Readers who accept the idea that Capote's early writing should be categorized as romance can then dismiss irrelevant issues. They are the people who find Capote's second book remarkable in its voyage into the human psyche via the route of the romance. *A Tree of Night and Other Stories* is like a heavily woven tapestry of different depths that draws one from layer to layer. The collection contains stories in both a light and dark mode. Although Capote was never again to publish stories of the latter kind, some of the characteristics appear in other works, and some of the characters surface under other names in the fiction of the past decade.

Capote has spoken of his work as belonging to cycles in his development as a writer. He labels *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms* at the end of the first cycle, and he places *A Tree of Night and Other Stories* in the second. During the ten-year period of his second cycle, his most varied and prolific, he wrote the autobiographical story, ''A Christmas Memory''; *The Grass Harp*, a novel which he also turned into a play; ''House of Flowers,'' a short story which later became a musical comedy; essays and portraits, *Local Color* and *Observations*; film scripts for *Beat the Devil* and *The Innocents*; a nonfiction, comic, book-length travel report, *The Muses Are Heard*; and finally, the very popular novel, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

Capote's third cycle, corresponding to the decade of the sixties, was devoted primarily to the preparation and writing of *In Cold Blood*, although during that time he also published two of his well-known pieces, ''A Thanksgiving Visitor,'' which is a spin-off from ''A Christmas Memory,'' and ''Among the Paths to Eden,'' one of his best short stories, and one which led some critics to predict, incorrectly, that this was the direction his future fiction was to follow.

Much has been written about *In Cold Blood*, its genre, its style, its narrator. Every conceivable type of study of the book has been undertaken. In interviews Capote continues to explain the genesis of the book and his interest in developing a new art form. During the time that he was writing articles on a regular basis for *The New Yorker*, particularly those that became *The Muses Are Heard*, he developed a strong interest in narrative journalism. He decided he wanted to expand reporting into something more meaningful, to create a work which combined journalism and fiction. When his attention was piqued by a news story of the murder of a Kansas family, he felt that he had found the subject matter to experiment with a different type of novel. The result was Capote's most noted book and greatest literary achievement, to which he gave the

designation, the ''nonfiction novel.'' Other writers, American and European, have been using similar techniques since Capote introduced them; yet, he is bitter about the failure of some critics to acknowledge his contribution in devising a new theory of writing. One of those he singles out is Norman Mailer, who, Capote says, was disparaging of the form, yet quickly saw the value of it for his own work and wrote a number of nonfiction novels. Whether or not sufficient credit is given to Capote for his innovativeness, nobody can question the impact the book has had.

Helen S. Garson. *Truman Capote* (Ungar, 1980), pp. 7–9

Music for Chameleons consists of a brief autobiographical introduction, then six short stories followed by a novella; and it ends with seven ''Conversational Portraits.''. . . Despite [Capote's] claims, the technique is (mercifully) innovatory only in one or two superficial and formal ways; in many more important ones it is a brave step back to older literary virtues. He now writes fiction increasingly near fact, and *vice versa*. In practice this means that he is very skillfully blending the received techniques of several kinds of writing. . . .

If all one required of a writer was high stylishness, a marvelous eye and ear, a far from contemptible degree of self-honesty, and a piquant readability in all he attempts, then one cannot fault Mr. Capote. He is as good as sheer literary intelligence can make a writer. What he seems to me to lack (and what raised his French models above being *only* great stylists) is a literary heart, which requires not only magnanimity but a patience with ordinariness, the gray muddle of average existence.

He speaks in his foreword of wanting to assimilate into his new style of writing all he has learned from ''film scripts, plays, reportage, poetry, the short story, novellas, the novel.'' The odd man out here, the awkward fit, is surely that last thing. It is the very length and diffuseness of the novel that allows the growth of deeper feelings in both writer and reader; and creating such feelings in the short story is the most difficult Indian ropetrick in fiction. Yet all the truly great masters (most famously James Joyce in *The Dead*) have accomplished it, and as I read these glittering and always entertaining stories I found myself wondering why Mr. Capote came close at times, but never quite made it. . . . Of one thing I am certain: Contemporary literature would be much, much duller and poorer without him.

John Fowles. *Saturday Review*. July, 1980, pp. 52–53

In his later nonfiction Capote continues to assume an objective point of view, only this time eschewing omniscience entirely and acknowledging the perceiving ''I,'' In ''Hello Stranger'' (*Music for Chameleons*), he presents without commentary a conversation with a friend who confesses a strange sexual indiscretion. The sketch is constructed around the interview form itself—''TC's'' question followed by ''George's'' answer—with a minimum of connecting description. The surface of the story and of the man who tells it are presented, without explicit interpretation, for us to judge. . . . Acknowledging the ''I'' in its act of observation calls our attention to the opaqueness of surfaces we must interpret for ourselves.

Chris Anderson. *Midwest Quarterly*. Spring, 1987, pp. 348–49

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CARSON, Rachel (1907–1964)

When poets write about the sea their errors annoy scientists. When scientists write about the sea their bleak and technical jargon paralyzes poets. Yet neither scientists nor poets should object to *The Sea around Us*. It is written with precision more than sufficient for its purpose, and its style and imagination make it a joy to read. . . .

[Miss Carson] must have read many bristling books about tides and ocean currents and felt the thrill and mystery that lie deeply buried in them. She must have learned how to talk with oceanographers, those salty and crusty scientists who go down to the sea in ships to probe the sea's insides. While doing all this she must have read a fine variety of literature, for her chapters are headed by unusually apt quotations from authors as diverse as Homer, Matthew Arnold and The Venerable Bede.

The product of Miss Carson's learning is a book packed with information expressed in charming language. She tells how old the sea is and how all life came from it. The land in those old years was as bleak as the mountains of the moon, but the sea was as full of churning life as it is today. Then, little by little, plants learned to live on land. Animals followed to eat them. At last land animals developed that could sail on the sea in ships and measure the flowing tides and drop ingenious instruments into the deep ocean basins. Those prying animals are the oceanographers, Miss Carson's friends.

Miss Carson has other friends, and she obviously loves them all. She tells with a gardener's tenderness of the ''blooming'' of the northern seas, a magic moment in spring when the winter-chilled surface water sinks into the depths. Bottom water rises, bringing to the surface the salts that are needed by all living things. Then microscopic plants (diatoms) sprout by billions and trillions. Slightly larger animals multiply to devour them. Shrimps, squids, fish and whales struggle for the living broth and add their young to enrich it. Everybody eats everybody, and Miss Carson enjoys and describes it all. . . .

Miss Carson loves mysteries too, and the sea has plenty of them. She tells of the black depths where no ray of light ever penetrates. All sorts of strange things live there, she says. Besides the giant squid that are hunted by sperm whales, the deeps are swarming with mysterious creatures that have, so far, evaded man's efforts to capture them. They are known only by clues picked up by the most modern instruments. What are these deep-living phantoms? How

big are they? How shaped? Miss Carson seems glad that she does not know, and her reader is glad too.

The sea is alive with rhythm and cycles, some of them centuries long. This branch of science is formidable, but Miss Carson explains it in language that is soft and disarming. . . .

Each of Miss Carson's chapters is worth sampling and savoring, and her book adds up to enjoyment that should not be passed by. Every person who reads it will look on the sea with new pleasure. He will know that it is full of lights and sounds and movements, of sunken lands and mountains, of the debris of meteors, of plains strewn with ancient sharks' teeth and the ear-bones of whales.

Jonathan Norton Leonard, *New York Times Book Review*. July 1, 1951, p. 1.

The Edge of the Sea lacks the organ tones of Miss Carson's *The Sea around Us*. It deals not with the sea as a majestic whole but with the narrow strip of part-time sea bottom that rings the land between high and low tide marks. No habitat on earth is more fiercely contended; none supports more teeming and more varied life. The tidal strip has, also, a philosophical importance. It was the cruel training ground where sea creatures learned to live on the hostile land. Miss Carson points out forms that are making that great transition today and also a few that are returning from the dry land to the sea.

The Atlantic Coast of the United States, the author explains happily, has almost every kind of shore, from the hard rocks of Maine, pounded by icy surf, to the coral reefs and mangrove swamps of the tropical Florida keys. She seems to love the Maine coast best, and she takes her readers there when the tide is high and the waves are tossing spray among the shoreside junipers. No sea creatures are in sight except the waiting gulls. ''But the gulls,'' says Miss Carson, ''know what is there.''

When the ebb begins (Miss Carson can *hear* the tide turn) she and the gulls follow the water line down the dripping rocks. The gulls are looking for clams and crabs big enough to be edible. There is nothing too small for Miss Carson to note and make interesting. She points out a dark line high on the rocks. It was drawn by blue-green algae, perhaps the oldest plants on earth, and it is likely that the rocky shores of one billion years ago had that same dark line.

Little by little the sea retreats, followed by Miss Carson. She pays loving respects to each species as it emerges: the crowding barnacles, the rock weeds, the mussels, starfish, snails and crabs. Each has a fascinating history and each its own way of life. Most of the animals are carnivorous, eating each other and smaller things with untiring gusto. This slaughter is not horrifying. Clams do not cry for mercy when fierce whelks bore holes in their shells. Even when there is visible struggle Miss Carson takes it philosophically. It is part of the feeding cycle, the steady mainspring of life. . . .

On Carolina beaches and limey Florida reefs Miss Carson shows her readers the beauty and oddness of the living things peculiar to those places: eyeless worms that prowl through the mud glowing with phosphorescence, bright colored clams that dance in the surf, sea urchins that point their venomous spines toward an approaching shadow. Each form is stranger than the last; there is no end of strangeness.

Miss Carson's book is beautifully written and technically correct. People who get bored by too much lolling on beaches should read it as a guide book. All around them, even beneath them, are fascinating worlds. A little wading, searching and poking will open their doors.

Jonathan N. Leonard. *The New York Times Book Review*. October 30, 1955, p. 5.

The enduring quality of the sea is a central theme of Miss Carson's writing; the sea which almost, but not quite, subjugates and dominates the land; the vast and unplumbed sea from which life as naturalists see it sprang; the sea, pressing always against the land, lapping higher, until, in some shadowy future, more and more land crumbles away again into the sea, and material life marches once more into the watery depths from which it came.

In *The Edge of the Sea*, Miss Carson's latest book, the enduring quality of the sea again is a theme, though in a different way. In this book Miss Carson has left the deep sea world, in which the sperm whale and giant squid, titans of the deep, battle in a midnight abyss, and has turned toward the shore, to that intertidal world which belongs at high tide to the sea and at low tide to the land. . . .

Though the author preserves in this book the essential mystery of the sea, *The Edge of the Sea* portrays a world more nearly understandable to the average reader than is the deep water world of *The Sea around Us*. The intertidal world has been glimpsed by every reader who has walked along a beach or sea coast. If that beach has been a sandy one in the temperate zones, the reader will remember strings of kelp and other weeds along the high tide line, will have marveled at the structure of minute shells, will have watched the primordial horseshoe crab tracing its way across the sands, will have seen a dozen forms strange and new to him. . . .

The Edge of the Sea is pitched, perhaps, in a lesser key than was *The Sea around Us*, if only because of the intertidal world is a more limited subject than was the whole sea itself. In her new book, however, Miss Carson's peri is as poetic as ever, and the knowledge she imparts is profound. *The Edge of the Sea* finds a worthy place beside Miss Carson's masterpiece of 1951.

Harry B. Ellis. *The Christian Science Monitor*. November 10, 1955, p. B8.

It is characteristic of the imbalance in Carson's reputation that although many have praised her as a scientist who wrote like a poet, she is not recognized as a significant literary figure, much less given her place in the pantheon of American writers with Henry David Thoreau.

From her earliest occasional writing, through the four major books, to her latest speeches, Carson's work is of a piece in substance, artistry, and underlying philosophy. But even beyond this, her life and work together formed an artistic whole. Preparation, dedication, and her sense of vocation as an artist interlocked with her sense of mission as a moral and social person. . . .

As naturalist and writer, she is a literary descendant of Thoreau. In personal terms, although they shared a certain reclusiveness, her life seems the opposite of his. Thoreau claimed to have lived the life he ''might have writ,'' even though he did commit many careful words to paper. Carson's life was in her work, except for the part she devoted to her family. . . .

Carson's major books form changing patterns of pairs. The first, *Under the Sea-Wind*, and the second, *The Sea around Us*, focus on

the oceans, while the third, *The Edge of the Sea*, and the fourth, *Silent Spring*, concentrate on the land. . . .

In poetic effect, *Under the Sea-Wind* is the highest point on the incline, with the next two books sacrificing some loveliness to the cause of instruction, although the balance remains tilted to the artistic. With its concentration of unpleasant facts, *Silent Spring* is at the lowest point of Carson's poetic writing, yet is still a book of spare beauty with passage of lyrical brilliance. . . .

Silent Spring began as an exposé of the dangers of pesticides but came close to becoming the major ecological work Carson had wanted to write. As in all her work, style and structure relate organically to the particular subject, but *Silent Spring* is nonetheless an extension of the motifs and themes of earlier books. When Douglas Costle, as Administrator of the United States Environmental Protection Agency, declared that Rachel Carson ''sounded the alarm about environmental dangers,'' he credited not *Silent Spring* alone, but ''her unique, empathetic presentation of the workings of nature in *Under the Sea-Wind, The Sea around Us, The Edge of the Sea*, and finally *Silent Spring*''. . . .

[Carson's] claim to a place in literature as well as history rests on all her books, each an individually realized achievement representing a different kind of writing, all testifying that she possessed what William Beebe considered the ''*ideal* equipment for a naturalist writer of literary natural history.''. . .

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CARVER, Raymond (1938–1988)

In most of these 22 short fictions [*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please*] the objects of Raymond Carver's close attention are men and women out of work or between jobs, at loose ends, confused and often terrified. If they are kids, they play hooky. Husbands and wives lie beside each other in bed, touch cautiously, retreat, feign sleep, lie, each bewildered by what has just happened and by what might happen next. The stories themselves are not at all confused; they have been carefully shaped, shorn of ornamentation and directed away from anything that might mislead. They are brief stories but by no means stark: they imply complexities of action and motive and they are especially artful in their suggestion of repressed violence.

No human blood is shed in any of these stories, yet almost all of them hold a promise of mayhem, of some final, awful breaking out from confines, and breaking through to liberty. . . .

In his choice of plots and materials Mr. Carver is in the modernist train of Kafka. Odd and threatening messages come as though by magic through the mails or by telephone. Strangers invade one another's lives and offer preposterous challenges to one another. In the customary literary execution of such procedures, identities shift, characters are misled into taking enemies as friends, conspiracies develop or are, at the least, apprehended. Mr. Carver, by contrast, anchors his men and women, his children, even his dogs and cats, in stable identities. With a speed common to all his stories he fixes the special tic or manner he wishes to develop: ''I was out of work,'' says the narrator of ''Collectors'' in the story's first sentence. ''But any day I expected to hear from up north. I lay on the sofa and listened to the rain. Now and then I'd lift up and look through the curtain for the mailman.''

Geoffrey Wolff. *New York Times Book Section*. March 7, 1976, pp. 4–5

Compared to the more ''mannered'' writers of the sixties and seventies—Barth, Pynchon, Barthelme, for example—Carver's style seems ingenuously simple, almost photo-realistic. Even the prose of Grace Paley and Leonard Michaels, both considered exemplars of lean, taut language, seems positively lush, almost Baroque in resonances and allusiveness, when held up to that of Carver. The temptation is to classify Carver as a throwback to an earlier era, say, of Anderson, Lardner and Hemingway. Although he derives from and to some extent reminds us of these earlier writers, there's a crucial difference. The sensibility here is clearly postmodern: beyond the flat quality of the Hemingway hero struggling to preserve an identity in the dreary vastness of the wasteland, beyond the psychological frameworks of Anderson's stories, beyond the comic satire of Lardner. Carver's simple language is a disguise, as is Harold Pinter's, for the emotional violence lurking beneath neutral surfaces. . . .

Like most of us, his characters aren't heroes. They don't teach us how to behave nobly or honorably or even intelligently in moments of crisis. Like the voyeurs they are or resemble, Carver's characters shy away from dramatic confrontation, they avoid existential tests of character. These people are completely removed from Mailer's or Hemingway's preoccupation with masculine assertion. Although there are showdowns in these stories, no one really wants them to occur. Betraying wives are threatened with bodily harm, but rarely do their husbands actually make good on their threats. . . .

Nothing happens because in the main Carver's dissociated characters prefer it that way. Living in a world of unarticulated longing, a world verging on silence, they may even, like the couples in ''Neighbors'' and ''Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?,'' consider themselves ''happy.'' But such happiness is fragile, Carver tells us. Something or someone always happens along to disturb the uneasy equilibrium, forcing a sudden confrontation with a hidden or suppressed part of the self. The disturbance itself acts as a trigger to larger revelations of self-alienation.

David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips. *Iowa Review*. Summer, 1979, pp. 81, 83–84

Raymond Carver's America is helpless, clouded by pain and the loss of dreams, but it is not as fragile as it looks. It is a place of survivors and a place of stories. People live to tell their tales and the tales of others. ''Things are better now,'' they say. ''I am sitting over coffee and cigarettes at my friend Rita's and I am telling her about it.'' ''That was in Crescent City, up near the Oregon border. I left soon after.''

Mr. Carver is the author of two volumes of short fiction and two books of poetry, as well as other works in limited editions. His writing is full of edges and silences, haunted by things not said, not even to be guessed at. He has done what many of the most gifted writers fail to do: He has invented a country of his own, like no other except the very world, as Wordsworth said, which is the world of all of us. It is an American world, of course, littered with place names, credit, convertibles, Stanley Products, sunburst clocks, shopping centers, Jell-O, motels, Almond Roca, baseball caps, trips to Reno, Elks, Indian reservations, beckoning spaces of Western country and children with names like Rae and Melody. But there are simple, central solitudes and bewilderments here too: local enough, but not the property of any one nation. ''I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone's heart. I could hear the human noise we sat there making. . .'' . . .

Mr. Carver's first book of stories [*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*] explored a common plight rather than a common subject. His characters were lost or diminished in their own different ways. The 17 stories in *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love* make up a more concentrated volume, less a collection than a set of variations on the themes of marriage, infidelity and the disquieting tricks of human affection. . . .

''Things change,'' a character says in [one] story, and this is the dominant note in the book. People lose track of who they were and what they wanted, mislay their lives and are startled by their memories. . . .

In other stories it is the failure of speech, rather than its absence, that does the talking: ''He wanted to say something else. But there was no saying what it should be.'' ''There were things he wanted to say, grieving things, consoling things, things like that.'' In the last story in the book a husband leaving home insists that he wants to ''say one more thing. . . But then he could not think what it could possibly be.''

The point is not that words are inadequate, or that actions speak louder. It is that the desire to talk can be perceived as a need, and that need has its fluency, makes use of any language that comes to hand. This is a troublesome fact for a writer, but Mr. Carver does not dodge it. ''She seemed anxious, or maybe that's too strong a word.'' Only a very delicate stylist would worry about the strength of ''anxious'' and the milder, perhaps unnamable quality of feeling that hides behind this attempt at description. In Mr. Carver's silences, a good deal of the unsayable gets said.

Michael Wood. *New York Times Book Section*. April 26, 1981, pp. 1, 34

Mr. Carver has been mostly a writer of strong but limited effects—the sort of writer who shapes and twists his material to a high point of stylization. In his newest collection of stories, *Cathedral*, there are a few that suggest he is moving toward a greater ease of manner and generosity of feeling; but in most of his work it's his own presence, the hard grip of his will, that is the strongest force. It's not that he imposes moral or political judgments; in that respect, he's quite self-effacing. It's that his abrupt rhythms and compressions come to be utterly decisive. . . .

Cathedral contains a number of similar stories, very skillful within their narrow limits, written with a dry intensity, and moving, at their climaxes, from the commonplace to the unnerving. . . .

These stories yield neither the familiar recognitions of realistic narrative nor the ambiguous motifs of symbolic fiction. They cast us adrift, into a void on the far side of the ordinary. Ordinary life is threatening; ordinary life is the enemy of ordinary people.

Behind Mr. Carver's stories there are strong American literary traditions. Formally, they summon remembrances of Hemingway and perhaps Stephen Crane, masters of tightly packed fiction. In subject matter they draw upon the American voice of loneliness and stoicism, the native soul locked in this continent's space. Mr. Carver's characters, like those of many earlier American writers, lack a vocabulary that can release their feelings, so they must express themselves mainly through obscure gesture and berserk display.

It's a meager life that Mr. Carver portrays, without religion or politics or culture, without the shelter of class or ethnicity, without the support of strong folkways or conscious rebellion. It's the life of people who cluster in the folds of our society. They are not bad or stupid; they merely lack the capacity to understand the nature of their deprivation—the one thing, as it happens, that might ease or redeem it. When they get the breaks, they can manage; but once there's a sign of trouble, they turn out to be terribly brittle. Lacking an imagination for strangeness, they succumb to the strangeness of their trouble.

A few of Mr. Carver's stories—''They're Not Your Husband,'' ''Where I'm Calling From'' and ''A Serious Talk''—can already be counted among the masterpieces of American fiction; a number of others are very strong. But something of the emotional meagerness that he portrays seeps into the narrative. His art is an art of exclusion—many of life's shadings and surprises, pleasures and possibilities, are cut away by the stringency of his form. . . .

I think Mr. Carver is showing us at least part of the truth about a segment of American experience few of our writers trouble to notice. Neoconservative critics, intent upon pasting a smile onto the country's face, may charge him with programmatic gloom and other heresies, but at his best he is probing, as many American writers have done before, the waste and destructiveness that prevail beneath the affluence of American life. . . .

Cathedral shows a gifted writer struggling for a larger scope of reference, a finer touch of nuance. What he has already done makes one eager to read his future work.

Irving Howe. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 11, 1983, pp. 1, 42–43

INTERVIEWER: *Ray's [Raymond Carver] last story, ''Errand''—I thought I could always recognize a Ray Carver story.*

RICHARD FORD: You can't though—by which I don't mean that you can't sometimes recognize a story of his by its ''style.'' But you couldn't *always* do it. He could surprise you. His work—his style—changed. That's an unfortunate thing about the terms *Carver Country* or *Carveresque* as a putative literary description. Most of the sightings that people took on Ray's style—by which I mean, particularly, the length and cadence of his sentences, the length of his stories—those sightings mostly are from *Will You [Please] Be Quiet, Please?*—his first book.

Do you believe they are overlooking his later work?

FORD: Well, *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*, his next book, contained stories of longer duration, sentences of less clipped cadences. Some stories in that book were edited and revised so that they *seemed* superficially more like earlier stories. But I'd already seen them in manuscript, and I knew them in the original. . . . By the time Ray's third book of stories (*Cathedral*) had been published . . . the kind of normal changes that go on in any

writer's style as one gets older and learns more and uses things up, and as the demands on one's sentences become different and perhaps greater—these changes were evident. The style and cadence of Ray's sentences had changed. He could still write *short* stories, but he could do more, too—and would've done a great deal more.

People who love Ray's stories sometimes remember them as seeming more alike than they really are; as in all things, love often prospers through the agency of a kind of restrictiveness. But Ray was a more various writer than many of his fans give him credit for. His sympathies enlarged. As he became, in his life, more comfortable and had a more ample life, his stories became more ample.

Richard Ford. In Sam Halpert, ed. *When We Talk about Raymond Carver*, (Layton, Utah: Peregrine Smith Books, 1991), pp. 146–47

INTERVIEWER: *You've said that you have high regard for his stories. But beyond that, what do you see in his work?*

JAY MCINERNEY: One of the things that hasn't been mentioned enough is that each of his major collections represented a different stage in his development. That was not frequently noticed. People kept discovering him, as if he'd just been born. That is to say, even the *New York Times* review of his second book, *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*, was actually a review of his first book. And so we were disappointed that the reviewer treated it all as one lump.

This collection—What We Talk about When We Talk about Love—*wasn't this the one where the stories seem pared down to a bare minimum?*

MCINERNEY: Yes, this was the collection that fixed a stereotyped image of minimalism to his work. The collection went very far in exploring how much can be left out in a story—the old Hemingway notion. In fact, so much was left out that Ray subsequently published these stories in their original, and to me, more satisfying longer versions.

Do you find his earlier work preferable to his later?

MCINERNEY: I wouldn't pick one period over another. To me, it's remarkable to see the continuity *and* the development. That is to say, by the time Ray published his first book, he knew what he was doing. I suppose nothing could have the impact on me that ''Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?'' did, because it was like a bolt out of the blue. For some of us it must have been like picking up *In Our Time* for the first time—suddenly this very new language, this wonderful new idiom. It's the world as you always suspected, but you never realized it was, until you read the book. It had an incredible impact, and I suppose I'll always love that book, especially as it hit me so hard.

Jay McInerney. In Sam Halpert, ed. *When We Talk about Raymond Carver*, (Layton, Utah: Peregrine Smith Books, 1991), p. 47

To be inside a Raymond Carver story is a bit like standing in a model kitchen at Sears—you experience a weird feeling of disjuncture that comes from being in a place where things *appear* to be real and familiar, but where a closer look shows that the turkey is papier-mâché, the broccoli is rubber, and the frilly curtains cover a blank wall. In Carver's fiction things are simply not as they appear. Or, rather, things are *more* than they appear to be, for often commonplace objects—a broken refrigerator, a car, a cigarette, a bottle of beer or whiskey—become transformed in Carver's hands, from realistic props in realistic stories to powerful, emotionally charged signifiers in and of themselves. Language itself undergoes a similar transformation. Since there is little authorial presence and since Carver's characters are often inarticulate and bewildered about the turns their lives have taken, their seemingly banal conversations are typically endowed with unspoken intensity and meaning. Watching Carver's characters interact, then, is rather like spending an evening with two close friends who you know have had a big fight just before you arrived: even the most ordinary gestures and exchanges have transformed meanings, hidden tensions, emotional depths.

Ewing Campbell. *Raymond Carver: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Boston: Twayne, 1992), p. 98

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CATHER, Willa (1873–1947)

Miss Cather's mind is basically static and retrospective, rich in images of fixed contours. . . . The characteristic quality of her mind . . . is not its puritanism or its idealism, but something deeper in which these are rooted. She is preeminently an artist dominated by her sense of the past, seeking constantly, through widely differing symbolisms, to recapture her childhood and youth. A sort of reverence for her own early years goes, hand in hand, with her Vergilian ancestor-worship; and out of this has flowered her finest work.

Clifton Fadiman. *The Nation*. Dec. 7, 1932. pp. 564–5

In *My Ántonia*, Ántonia Shimerda . . . became the symbol of emotional fulfillment in motherhood on a Western farm. The thesis was arresting, appearing as it did in 1918 at the very moment when farm and village life were coming under the critical eyes of the novelists intent upon exposing its pollution. Without satire or bitterness and with only a little sentimentalism, Willa Cather pictured a strong character developing under severe difficulties which would crush a less heroic soul, surviving the most primitive hardships in a sod hut, toiling like an ox in the field with the men, enduring want, cut off from ordinary pleasures, withstanding betrayal and the cheap life as a hired girl in a village, and emerging

at last after such desperate conditions to a triumphant serenity as mother to a healthy group of shy, awkward but happy and laughing boys who are content with their life on the farm.

Harlan Hatcher. *Creating the Modern American Novel* (Farrar and Rinehart). 1935. p. 66

A Lost Lady, Miss Cather's most explicit treatment of the passing of the old order, is the central work of her career. Far from being the delicate minor book it is so often called, it is probably her most muscular story, for it derives its power from the grandeur of its theme. Miss Cather shares the American belief in the tonic moral quality of the pioneer's life; with the passing of the frontier she conceives that a great source of fortitude has been lost.

Lionel Trilling in *After the Genteel Tradition*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (Norton). 1937. p. 55

Miss Cather's style, grave, flexible, a little austere, wonderfully transparent, everywhere economical, is wonderfully apt for her purposes. There are certain things, to be sure, it cannot do. It cannot register wit or amusement or even humor, save rarely; it never rises to passionate indignation; it lacks earthiness, despite Miss Cather's profound belief in a normal relation with the earth. Dialogue, as she reports it, is seldom more than adequate. But within its boundaries it is beautiful writing, liquid to the ear, lucent to the eye. . . . There are few to whom the adjective ''classic'' can be more truly applied, for beneath the quick sympathy there is a Roman gravity, a sense of the dignity of life which contemporary fiction . . . has mainly lost.

Howard Mumford Jones. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 6, 1938. p. 16

Willa Cather's traditionalism was . . . anything but the arbitrary or patronizing opposition to contemporary ways which Irving Babbitt personified. It was a candid and philosophical nostalgia, a conviction and a standard possible only to a writer whose remembrance of the world of her childhood and the people in it was so overwhelming that everything after it seemed drab and more than a little cheap. Her distinction was not merely one of cultivation and sensibility; it was a kind of spiritual clarity possible only to those who suffer their loneliness as an act of the imagination and the will. . . . Later, as it seemed, she became merely sentimental, and her direct criticism of contemporary types and manners was often petulant and intolerant. But the very intensity of her nostalgia had from the first led her beyond nostalgia; it had given her the conviction that the values of the world she had lost were the primary values, and everything else merely their degradation.

Alfred Kazin. *On Native Grounds* (Reynal). 1942. pp. 250–1

From beginning to end, the Cather novels are not stories of plot, but chronicles, given a depth and significance lacking in the merely historical chronicle by that ''sympathy'' which leads to a perfect interplay of environment and character.

Her art was essentially a representation of this reaction between the soul of man and its environment. That is why the best of her stories are told against the land. . . . Her own absorption in her people and her land creates the suspense that she herself has felt. . . . She is preservative, almost antiquarian, content with much space in little room—feminine in this, and in her passionate revelation of the values which conserve the life of the emotions.

Henry Seidel Canby. *Saturday Review*. May 10, 1947. pp. 23–4

From the whole range of Cather's values, standards, tastes, and prejudices, her tone is that of an inherent aristocrat in an equalitarian order, of an agrarian writer in an industrial order, of a defender of the spiritual graces in the midst of an increasingly materialistic culture. . . . Selecting and enhancing the most subtle effects of wealth, she has, rather like Sam Dodsworth's wife, either looked down upon or ignored the whole process of creating wealth. Writing so discreetly about the age when business was a personal adventure, she has neglected to mention the most typical forms of the adventure.

Maxwell Geismar. *The Last of the Provincials* (Houghton). 1947. pp. 217–8

Death Comes for the Archbishop is a historical novel; it is also a regional novel and a deliberately picturesque novel, with natural description helping to set the emotional tone. . . . The ritual and beliefs of the Catholic Church, the heroic activity of missionary priests, and the vivid colors of the southwestern landscape combine to produce a new kind of warmth and vitality in her art. . . . Yet one wonders whether this lively creation of a golden world in which all ideals are realized is not fundamentally a ''softer'' piece of writing. . . . There is, it is true, a splendid sympathy in the treatment of the characters and a most genuine feeling for the period and natural setting in which the action is laid. But there is no indication here of an artist wrestling successfully with intractable material. The material is all too tractable, and the success, though it is real, seems too easy.

David Daiches. *Willa Cather* (Cornell). 1951. p. 105

Mr. Maxwell Geismar wrote a book about her and some others called *The Last of the Provincials*. Not having read it I do not know his argument; but he has a case: she is a provincial; and I hope not the last. She was a good artist, and all true art is provincial in the most realistic sense: of the very time and place of its making, out of human beings who are so particularly limited by their situation, whose faces and names are real and whose lives begin each one at an individual unique center. Indeed, Willa Cather was a provincial as Hawthorne or Flaubert or Turgenev, as little concerned with aesthetics and as much with morals as Tolstoy, as obstinately reserved as Melville. In fact she always reminds me of very good literary company. . . . She is a curiously immovable shape, monumental, virtue itself in her work and a symbol of virtue—like certain churches, in fact, or exemplary women, revered and neglected.

Katherine Anne Porter. *The Days Before* (Harcourt). 1952. pp. 72–3

Miss Cather's central theme is that of people who pull themselves up by their bootstraps. . . . The inner voice of the early novels of Willa Cather suggests this fascination with, and need to describe,

various forms of success—but also certain forms of failure. The drive to power in these books is overriding, with the result that the novels contain no complicated plots, no complexity of human relationships, no love affairs that we can take seriously. Her heroines, those women with feminized masculine names, Alexandra, Ántonia—and the name Alexandra itself reminds us of one of history's greatest conquerors—have tenacious wills and an extraordinary capacity for struggle.

Leon Edel. *Willa Cather: The Paradox of Success* (Library of Congress). 1960. p. 8

What she did not want to admit was that the heroic ideal is impossible in the age of the machine; this was the real source of her animus against science, technology, and the industrial revolution. . . . Willa Cather was unwilling to give up her belief in hero worship; when she saw it failing in the modern world, rather than adopt some other view she made a villain of life. . . . Because of Willa Cather's aversion to conflict and because the whole impulse of her being tended toward the expression of a single unified emotion or mood, I have regarded her novels as being not novels at all in the conventional sense but extended lyrics in prose.

John H. Randall. *The Landscape and the Looking Glass* (Houghton). 1960. p. 372

The country has shrunk, and our sense of the weight and relevance of Willa Cather's observation of Nebraska has shrunk with it. Nebraska is no doubt still there, but as a distinct imaginative possibility it has for the moment simply disappeared. As in so many other cases we are left confronting the artist who has been abandoned by his ostensible subject. The artist we now see is one whose energies are largely lavished on defensive maneuver, on masquerade. The power she now exercises is a measure of the degree to which the masquerade is itself something American. It is a small power when compared with Whitman's, but it is, despite the shellwork of fictional convention, a power of the same kind which engages us in ''Song of Myself'': a delighted absorption in the capacity of the self to embrace the world. In Whitman this play is overt; in Willa Cather it is masked. . . . Whitman's acceptance of his role was not open to a woman; instead Willa Cather carried on a masquerade which made it appear that she was accepting the conditions of adulthood while actually rejecting them. It was a shrewd woman of 40 who published *O Pioneers!*, and discovered the terms of her disguise.

Quentin Anderson. *New Republic*. Nov. 27, 1965. pp. 28, 31

All of what Willa Cather wrote, it seems to me, is ultimately a metaphor of the conflict which Miguel de Unamuno referred to as an ''inward tragedy,'' the conflict ''between what the world is as scientific reason shows it to be, and what we wish it might be, as our religious faith affirms it to be.'' For Willa Cather, this conflict was most broadly expressed in terms of the world she knew in her childhood—the pioneer era which she clearly idealized and ennobled in her fictional re-creation of it—and the post–World War I wasteland she so thoroughly repudiated. It is easy to lose sight of the essentially symbolic nature of this conflict and to read it too narrowly in terms of literal past versus literal present. Her theme was not the superiority of the past over the present, but, as Henry Steele Commager has observed, ''the supremacy of moral and spiritual over material values, the ever recurrent but inexhaustible theme of gaining the whole world and losing one's soul.''

Rather than being irrelevant to the modern world, the moral thrust of Willa Cather's art, her concern with pioneers and artists as symbolic figures representing the unending human quest for beauty and truth, places her among the number, not of the backward-looking (which she saw herself as being one of), but of the true spiritual pioneers of all ages in whose lives or work other men continue to find inspiration.

Dorothy Tuck McFarland. *Willa Cather* (Ungar). 1972. pp. 4–5

It is love's partner, affection, that warms the life in [Cather's] work, and love's opposite, hate, that chills it. We meet pity and reconcilement there, and we meet obsession, and the hunger for something impossible. But what her characters are most truly meant for, it seems to me, is to rebel. For her heroines in particular, this is the strong, clear, undeniable impulse; it is the fateful drive. It is rebelling not for its own sake so much as for the sake of something a great deal bigger—that of integrity, of truth. It is the other face of aspiration. . . .

The desire to make a work of art and the making of it—which is love accomplished without help or need of help from another, and not without tragic cost—is what is deepest and realest, so I believe, in what she has written of human beings. Willa Cather used her own terms; and she left nothing out.

Eudora Welty. *New York Times Book Section*. Jan. 27, 1974. p. 20

In . . . much of her fiction, Cather connects sexual passion with self-destruction; this remark suggests that the creator's passion, by contrast, thwarts death. The artist may ''die of love'' in the process of creation, but he is ''born again.'' Cather's romantic apostrophe to the Nebraska soil in the concluding paragraph of *O Pioneers!* also promises rebirth for Alexandra, the novel's artist, after she has ''faded away'' into the land: ''Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!''. . .

In speaking of *O Pioneers!* Willa Cather provided support for those critics who have found the novel's structure loose, insisting that she made no effort to impose form on her material: the book formed itself without her conscious intervention. The ''cold Swedish story'' had simply ''entwined itself'' with the Bohemian story, she told Elizabeth Sergeant, and ''somehow she had on her hands a two-part pastoral.'' She struck a similar note in her preface to the second edition of *Alexander's Bridge* (1922), explaining that when the artist found ''his own material'' (as she had in *O Pioneers!*) he would have ''less and less power of choice about the molding of it. It seems to be there of itself, already molded.'' But to trust the tale rather than the teller is to find that the two parts of Willa Cather's pastoral are carefully intertwined; these contrasting and counterpointed explorations of creative and sexual passion with their opposed heroines give the novel both thematic and structural unity. Willa

Cather quite likely believed her statement that she did not consciously shape *O Pioneers!*, but in drawing on creative and psychological energies beneath consciousness she produced a novel whose structure may even seem overly controlled and balanced.

Sharon O'Brien. *Studies in American Fiction*. Autumn, 1978, pp. 168–69

My Ántonia (1918), Willa Cather's celebration of the American frontier experience, is marred by many strange flaws and omissions. It is, for instance, difficult to determine who is the novel's central character. If it is Ántonia, as we might reasonably assume, why does she entirely disappear for two of the novel's five books? If, on the other hand, we decide that Jim Burden, the narrator, is the central figure, we find that the novel explores neither his consciousness nor his development. Similarly, although the narrator overtly claims that the relationship between Ántonia and Jim is the heart of the matter, their friendship actually fades soon after childhood: between these two characters there is only, as E.K. Brown said, ''an emptiness where the strongest emotion might have been expected to gather.'' Other inconsistencies and contradictions pervade the text—Cather's ambivalent treatment of Lena Lingard and Tiny Soderball, for example—and all are in some way related to sex roles and to sexuality.

This emphasis is not surprising: as a writer who was also a woman, Willa Cather faced the difficulties that confronted, and still do confront, accomplished and ambitious women. As a professional writer, Cather began, after a certain point in her career, to see the world and other women, including her own female characters, from a male point of view. Further, Cather was a lesbian who could not, or did not, acknowledge her homosexuality and who, in her fiction, transformed her emotional life and experiences into acceptable, heterosexual forms and guises. In her society it was difficult to be a woman and achieve professionally, and she could certainly not be a woman who loved women; she responded by denying, on the one hand, her womanhood and, on the other, her lesbianism. These painful denials are manifest in her fiction. After certain early work, in which she created strong and achieving women, like herself, she abandoned her female characters to the most conventional and traditional roles; analogously, she began to deny or distort the sexuality of her principal characters. *My Ántonia*, written at a time of great stress in her life, is a crucial and revealing work, for in it we can discern the consequences of Cather's dilemma as a lesbian writer in a patriarchal society. . . .

In order to create independent and heroic women, women who are like herself, the woman writer must avoid male identification, the likelihood of which is enhanced by being a writer who is unmarried, childless, and a lesbian. In the case of *My Ántonia*, Cather had to contend not only with the anxiety of creating a strong woman character, but also with the fear of a homosexual attraction to Annie/Ántonia. The novel's defensive narrative structure, the absence of thematic and structural unity that readers have noted, these are the results of such anxieties. Yet, because it has been difficult for readers to recognize the betrayal of female independence and female sexuality in fiction—their absence is customary—it has also been difficult to penetrate the ambiguities of *My Ántonia*, a crucial novel in Cather's long writing career.

Deborah G. Lambert. *American Literature*. Jan., 1982, pp. 676–77, 690

Blithe appropriations of Cather as a lesbian-feminist are anomalous and inappropriate—as here:

Thirty years after her death, . . . at a public hearing on gay rights, a speaker would cite Willa Cather as one of the homosexuals whose presence in New York had enriched the city's cultural and intellectual life.

Cather looks uncomfortable under this banner. She did not call herself a lesbian, would not have thought of herself as such, wrote disapprovingly of Oscar Wilde's ''infamy'' even when she was enthusiastic for 1890s decadence, obscured her sexual feelings in her fictions, and may not have had sexual relationships with the women she loved. Nor did she have the slightest interest in political support among women, or in what Adrienne Rich, in her attempt to extend the definition of the word lesbian, calls ''the bonding against male tyranny.''

None of this means, of course, that we are not allowed to describe her, now, as a lesbian writer. If we can't say anything about writers which they would not have said about themselves, then there is no use in writing about them. But it is important not to collapse Cather's imaginative life into a simple matter of repression, nor to condescend to her for her lack of ''openness.''. . .

Though she is best known, I suppose, for the strong immigrant women heroes of her earlier novels, these semimythical figures are in sharp contrast to her dangerously seductive, theatrical ''ladies,'' and to the obstructive matriarchs who play such persistent and alarming roles in her writing. (At the same time that she gives her female characters such various power, allure, and force, she invents male ''heroes'' who are contemplative, passive, sensitive, and withdrawn.) From the first, too, Cather is interested in groups of women whose stoical domestic labor is a form of narration, and who provide inspiration for an American writing which can be at once heroic and female. . . .

But this is not her only kind of writing, nor her only subject matter. Cather's work gets its energy from contraries. She is pulled between the natural and the artificial, the native and the European. She is a democrat and an elitist. She relishes troll-like energy and primitivism as much as delicacy and culture. She is religious, and fatalistic. She is equally interested in renunciation and possessiveness, in impersonality and obsession. Her fictions are of split selves and doublings. Above all, there is a paradox for Cather in the act of writing itself.

Hermione Lee. *Willa Cather: A Life Saved Up* (London: Virago, 1989), pp. 10–12, 15–16

Willa Cather's fiction responds to the secularization of American space after the Darwinian revolution and to the threat it represents to the moral and spiritual moorings of Americans. Before Darwin, Americans considered themselves as the chosen of the universe; after Darwin, they were no longer the pinnacle of God's creation—they no longer could claim the benevolent garden as their home. As a result, Americans were forced to come to grips with new notions concerning the space that surrounded them, and Cather's fiction demonstrates how a person's world influences the direction of that person's life. Nevertheless, Cather's redefinition of American space goes beyond a mere acceptance of the Darwinian deterministic scenario. While the natural environment of Willa Cather's characters is antagonistic, it is not deterministic. She redefines the Darwinian world by rejecting the Darwinian laws of survival and by affirming the natural environment as an enabling context for

proper human relationships. Yet Willa Cather's fiction also counters a romantic view of natural space by painting a picture of nature as hostile, by reducing the centrality of characters in the created order, by stripping those characters of their sense of ''home,'' and by picturing the land itself as ''other.'' Nature is no longer simply a means to transcendent reality, but nature is also not simply a means toward the human goals of success and domination. Rather, nature is otherness itself, and it participates in satisfying the human longing for an existence legitimated by, or grounded in, something greater than human design or control. . . .

What are the positive contributions of nature to human life in Cather's fiction then? First, nature is unpredictable and large enough to strike awe in those able to acknowledge its power; second, nature is a stabilizing force because it grants humanity a sense of limitation; third, nature is capacious enough to provide the room for understanding and reconciliation between differing cultural groups (on the frontier, many cultural groups can live and work together in a common effort to survive the harshness of the natural world); fourth, nature is both beneficent and forbidding, and this ambiguous quality, along with awesome power, grants it a sense of otherness; and finally, nature makes constructive human relationships possible, for while the natural life alone is not sufficient, it is necessary for the emergence of personal fulfillment and wholesome relationships.

The principal belief advocated by Cather's fiction, then, is in the paradigm for human relationships that it implies: (1) harmonious communion with nature is the context for the peaceful existence with one's neighbor; (2) natural and cultural communion establishes harmony within the (at times) antagonistic natural settings; (3) such harmony reinvests human life with a significance that the constraints of a Darwinian universe prevents; (4) finally, the human element overcomes the secularizing impulses of American life—impulses that fail to recognize the potential for sacrality in a person's relation to natural environments and to personal relationships. In other words, in Cather's secular world, human relationships replace what one loses from the destruction of the sacred environment, namely a relationship with deity.

> Conrad Eugene Ostwalt. *After Eden: The Secularization of American Space in the Fiction of Willa Cather and Theodore Dreiser* (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Pr., 1990), pp. 73–74

[Willa Cather] was a very intense woman. She herself said that she always wanted to hang garlands on people or else put them to torture, and this tendency was so strong in her that it evidently rubbed off on those whose paths crossed hers, for all her life people seem either to have liked her greatly or else felt repelled by her. She made Thea Kronborg say that there was such a thing as ''creative hate''; a good example of this in her own writing is her review of D'Annunzio's *Il Fuoco*, which she resented for its treatment of Eleonora Duse. . . .

[Cather] liked what was ''real,'' honest, straightforward, clean by the standards of common, decent humanity. As early as her first trip to Europe in 1902, she turned with relief from Monte Carlo, where she even felt that the artificial activities carried on corrupted nature herself. In the *Archbishop* she would deplore the replacement in the churches of the Southwest of the original, crude, handmade art created by the people themselves with cheap purchased images, factory-made, and imported from the East. Even in Nebraska itself, once the generation of the pioneers had passed, a new breed came in that was more interested in driving into town in an automobile to buy something instead of staying on the farm and making it.

> Edward Wagenknecht. *Willa Cather* (New York: Continuum, 1993), pp. 139, 143–44

The new political readings of Cather are presumably being put forth in the service of political causes. Will they help those causes? Will it be useful if we argue that, while heterosexual men can write about anything they want, women can write only about gender, homosexuals only about sexuality? . . . Such a restriction, Cather decided, would not be placed on her. She wrote novels showing that women could do something important besides have sex. Then she wrote novels about history and exile and the life of the mind in relation to the world—in other words, all the things that women were not supposed to write about, though today they do, partly because Cather did. If we now argue that those subjects of hers were just covers, that what she was really writing about was the very things she chose not to write about, sex and gender, is this a vote for the rights of women and homosexuals? Or is it, however unwittingly, another attack on them?

Reading Cather criticism has taught me one thing. If it is not realistic to expect a nonpolitical criticism, one can still wish for and sometimes get a *sophisticated* criticism—one that, while indebted to a certain politics, can balance that concern with a sustained attention to what the artist is saying. . . .

I should add that feminism is no longer the cutting edge of Cather criticism. Multiculturalism is, though most of the work in this area is being done by feminists. These critics, probably born, on the average, in 1950, attempt to cope with the amazing fact that Ulysses S. Grant, sometimes betrays views different from theirs about blacks, Mexicans, and American Indians. Now and then, someone notices that Cather's opinions were typical of her generation—indeed, that they were also expressed by good feminists of the time. . . .

The parade of American literature goes by, float after float: realism, naturalism, psychological novel, social novel, political novel. Cather belongs with none of them, which means either that she is left out or, if she is desperately needed, that she is forced at gunpoint to put on a paper hat and join a group in which she has no place. Hence her uneasy standing with the feminists. She is not one of them, and they know it. That's why they don't like her.

> Joan Acocella. ''Cather and the Academy.'' *TNY*. Nov. 27, 1995, pp. 70–71

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CHABON, Michael (1965–)

[In *A Modern World: And Other Stories*] each of the stories concerns an individual's adaptation to a changed relationship, be it with wife (or ex-wife), friend, lover, or parent. Particularly evocative are the five final stories which fall under the rubric ''The Lost World.'' They deal with a boy's response to his parent's divorce and their subsequent attempts to establish new partnerships. [Michael] Chabon writes with intelligence, humor, and an obvious love of language. In the first story's marvelous opening paragraph, the protagonist goes from performing his toilet ''with patience, hope, and a ruthless punctilic'' to sitting in the back at his cousin's wedding ''awash in a nostalgic tedium . . . wishing for irretrievable things.'' It leaves one hoping that like Dr. Shapiro in ''More Than Human.'' Chabon never surrenders his love for ''the soothing foolishness of words.''

David W. Henderson. *Library Journal*. February 15, 1991, p. 219

When Michael Chabon published his first (and so far only) novel at the age of twenty-three, responses tended to concentrate on its youthful decadence and sexual precocity. His fey charm and classic good looks seemed to merge with the novel's eloquent unease; writer and text were projected as one, the ''brat-pack'' had at last found their dandy. In place of [Bret Easton] Ellis's sparse postmodernity or McInerney's apocalyptic quest for selfhood, Chabon offered a prose rich with promiscuous abandon and articulate sensitivity. *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* follows Art Bechstein through the summer of his graduation year—his ambiguous detachment from his gangster-father, his entanglement in a web of homo- and heterosexual friendships, and the eventual collision between these two apparently mutually exclusive worlds. Art's heroic drive is to reject the corrupt acquisition of money as represented by his father, and embrace instead the sublimated currency of his contemporaries—the language of learning, the veneer of social bohemianism, the alternative realm of righteous possession. As the very pun on his name suggests, Art opposes the laundered money of his family with the purity of the aesthete—a projection of himself whose value is measured by its distance from utility. In short, Art is not for sale.

From this brief synopsis, it is easy to see why [F. Scott] Fitzgerald provided the most common reference point for Chabon's readers and reviewers. Indeed, the novel's very first line evokes a conscious echo of the opening of *The Great Gatsby*. . . .

Similarly, the network of relations with which Art becomes involved all playfully invite their Fitzgeraldian equivalents. The hoodlum chic of Cleveland and the corrupt gentility of his girlfriend Jane both offer comparison with Tom and Daisy Buchanan. . . .

What seems to be emerging then is an unproblematic inheritance by Chabon of Fitzgerald's oeuvre—both writers standing side by side at the junction of propriety and transgression, the reserved and the renegade, the flavor of Europe and the freshness of America. Certain critics have even gone so far as to translate the last of these oppositions—Europe and America—into a paradigm for Art's bisexuality. . . .

Relationships through recall, discourse and desire, Chabon's trajectory is towards the histories of mystery, rather than the peculiarities of Pittsburgh. As with his collection of short stories, *A Model World*, the ironies that under pin his prose are implicit in his titles. The Euro-American may regard herself as exemplary, as the perfect model, yet behaves with the static all-consuming commerciality of the fashion model. From paradigm to mannequin, from the Art of speech to the (f)act of silence, Chabon presents us with an America torn between the ideal and insubstantial. His work testifies to the double-edged demands of appearance, the emotional *double entendres* of utterance. Chabon's achievement is to maintain the pose of the dandy while seeking to explode the foundations of that fiction.

In his novel and short stories, Chabon exists at the junction where his posture and imposture converge and do battle, where decorum and desire merge into the deceptive world of masquerade. Chabon's world is a model one, and therein lies its problem. For behind the model lurks the exposé, the expired, the self-destructive exhibition of never-ending desire.

Graham Caveney. ''French Kissing in the U.S.A.'' In Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney, eds. *Shopping in Space: Essays on America's Blank Generation Fiction* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1992), pp. 75–76, 83–84

Much of *Wonder Boys* possesses [a] fever-dream quality of narration, as the perpetually drugged, failed author Tripp stumbles through a weekend that would be much better lost, but refuses to go away.

Tripp's problem is not writer's block but writer's bloat; he is a former *Wunderkind* whose fourth novel, *Wonder Boys*, is clearly turning into a monster as flabby and directionless as its author. It is hard to avoid making ironic parallels between Tripp's work and Chabon's novel of the same title: indeed, the dust-jacket photograph (of Chabon's manuscript) and the blurb positively encourage such thoughts. Since his first novel, the much-hyped *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, was published in 1987, Chabon has produced only one book of short stories, while his more prolific contemporaries, Jay McInerney and Bret Easton Ellis, have seen their celebrity turned against them. But he has managed to make out of the stuff of novelist's nightmares a winningly cynical comedy of literary fame. *Pittsburgh* was praised for its transformation of the rite-of-passage genre; here, Chabon opts for a mixture of campus novel, *Sunset Boulevard*, and picaresque Gonzo-monologue. . . .

Perhaps inevitably, Tripp's story runs out of steam; and the novel ends up too much like *Fear and Loathing in the Creative Writing Faculty*. Nevertheless *Wonder Boys* has been worth the wait, although it may well prove a disappointment to devotees of Chabon's earlier work. The book provides a great deal of fun, partly because it stubbornly refuses to be the Great American Novel that Tripp's *Wonder Boys* fails to be. Chabon offers us a sobering suggestion that writers are destined to become the losers they love to portray; and an ounce of self-parody is worth several volumes of portentousness. Even so, one can't help feeling that he is gnawing a little too gleefully at the hand that feeds him.

Bharat Tandon. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. April 21, 1995, p. 20

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CHANDLER, Raymond (1888–1959)

Most of the characters in this story [*The Big Sleep*] are tough, many of them are nasty and some of them are both. . . . The language used in this book is often vile—at times so filthy that the publishers have been compelled to resort to the dash, a device seldom employed in these unsqueamish days. As a study in depravity, the story is excellent, with Marlowe standing out as almost the only fundamentally decent person in it.

Isaac Anderson. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 12, 1939. p. 20

After a long and notable career in the pulp magazines, Raymond Chandler made his mark in books with four novels published between 1939 and 1943. Most critics and almost all readers recognized in him the legitimate successor of Dashiell Hammett. . . . His new novel, *The Little Sister*, has been awaited with as much eagerness as Hammett's ten-year promised novel—especially by those critics and readers who have felt that Hammett and Chandler are significant exponents not merely of the detective story, but of the American novel. It is partly, of course, the heightened expectation which makes *The Little Sister* seem unsatisfactory. But partly, too, dissatisfaction comes from the revelation of an abyss of emptiness.

Plot and characters are the stuff of any run-of-the-mill toughie. Chandler's treatment differs from the routine in his prose, which is still vigorous, clean, distinctive. . . . But the great distinction dividing this from all other detective stories is its scathing hatred of the human race. The characters, aside from the little sister, are reasonably well-painted cardboard, brought to life only by the sheer force of their viciousness.

Anthony Boucher. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 25, 1949. p. 24

I pulled his leg about his plots, which always seem to me to go wildly astray. What holds the books together and makes them so compulsively readable, even to alpha minds who would not normally think of reading a thriller, is the dialogue. There is a throw-away, down-beat quality about Chandler's dialogue, whether wise-cracking or not, that takes one happily through chapter after chapter in which there is no more action than Philip Marlowe driving his car and talking to his girl, or a rich old woman consulting her lawyer on the sun porch. His aphorisms were always his own.

Ian Fleming. *London Magazine*. Dec., 1959. p. 50

The writer of mystery novels, if he takes his work seriously, must find his situation maddening. His books may be relished by highly cultivated people and his literary skills widely admired, but through all the praise there will run a streak of condescension. Even his most ardent fans will never take him quite seriously, and their loftiest compliment is only too likely to be the suggestion that he ought to be writing ''real'' novels.

The frustrations this situation can provoke are vividly demonstrated in the letters of Raymond Chandler [*Raymond Chandler Speaking*] which have now been published, together with some essays, notes on writing, and scraps of fiction, three years after his death. . . . They differ from most letters in that they are as gripping as any novel. They are cantankerous, forthright, and often hilarious. . . . But what they reveal most clearly is the anguish of a man who considered himself an artist but knew that he was generally regarded as merely a brilliant hack. . . .

Sarel Eimerl. *The Reporter*. May 10, 1962. pp. 54–5

Mr. Raymond Chandler has written that he intends to take the body out of the vicarage garden and give the murder back to those who are good at it. If he wishes to write detective stories, i.e., stories where the reader's principal interest is to learn who did it, he could not be more mistaken, for in a society of professional criminals, the only possible motives for desiring to identify the murderer are blackmail or revenge, which both apply to individuals, not to the group as a whole, and can equally well inspire murder. Actually, whatever he may say, I think Mr. Chandler is interested in writing, not detective stories, but serious studies of a criminal milieu, the Great Wrong Place, and his powerful but extremely depressing books should be read and judged, not as escape literature, but as works of art.

W.H. Auden. *The Dyer's Hand* (Random). 1962. p. 151

Chandler's hero is the all-American boy with whom the reader easily identifies himself, the rough man of action who would never harm a fly but would stamp out injustice with a vigorous passion. Thematically, Chandler's work is in one of the mainstreams of American literature, not the nineteenth-century New England one of concern for the brooding thoughts of the introvert, but the broad stream of frontier literature that moved from Georgia of the 1830's to the California of the 1950's—enveloping as it traveled westward the simple problems of the extrovert who, by knowing right from wrong, had only to exert a courageous amount of rugged individualism in order to end up a hardened but virtuous hero. This mainstream of American literature contributed thousands of modern morality plays, of which Chandler's are excellently written examples.

T.S. Eliot discovered his poetic home in England; Eugene O'Neill rarely strayed from the Atlantic or its seaboard; Raymond Chandler found Los Angeles to be the natural milieu for his hero's efforts to untangle the messy web into which the American man had naively wandered.

Philip Durham. *Down These Mean Streets a Man Must Go: Raymond Chandler's Knight* (North Carolina). 1963. pp. 5–6

The obvious accomplishment of his thrillers is to generate a sort of nervous tension which is the literary analogue to the tension generated by being an American. . . . Chandler's attitude is to look at what's there in the expectation that good and evil are all mixed together. . . . It is a stoic vision. In his novels Chandler did not quite sustain it, being much too romantic and not quite courageous enough to bear the full bitterness of that vision. . . .If you say that all this provides somewhat meager fare for romance, I must agree. But if you say that this distorts life beyond recognition, I must object that you do not know that meager region, Southern California, as well as Chandler did. His chief accomplishment, it seems to me, is to create for the place a fictional image which corresponds to the actuality more vividly and more accurately than anything written by anyone else. . . . Still, Chandler's version is not *the* version of Southern California. He, rather more than is strategic in a writer, puts himself at the mercy of the place's notion of itself; for this notion is self-deceiving, somewhat inaccurate and confused.

George P. Elliott. *A Piece of Lettuce* (Random). 1964. pp. 54–5, 58, 63

There are all gradations of class and milieu and speech and diction in Chandler's novels. For these reasons, Chandler, through Marlowe, succeeds as no one else has succeeded in portraying Los Angeles, including Hollywood, and it seems at times that it is neither the violence nor the solution of the mystery Chandler is interested in as it is the city and the people, through the whole range of which, in the solution of the crime, Marlowe moves. . . . Emphasis is usually placed on the portrayal of Southern California, including Hollywood, and on the interrelation in this society between power and crime; and the unexpected relation of one segment to another, from the bottom (the little, helpless, incompetent, and hurt), to the top (usually the ruthless, rich, and spoiled). . . . In Marlowe's world, disunity, disruption, mobility, immorality, rootlessness and ruthlessness provide the constant motif. Marlowe himself is an old-fashioned character, chivalrous, with an individual sense of conduct and of justice; he judges his world, implicitly at least, from a point of view as conservative as Chandler's upper-class English education and his own cheerful admission that he was a snob would suggest.

Herbert Ruhm in *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties*, ed. David Madden (Southern Illinois). 1968. pp. 178–9

The action of Chandler's books takes place inside the microcosm, in the darkness of a local world without the benefit of the federal Constitution, as in a world without God. The literary shock is dependent on the habit of the political double standard in the mind of the reader: it is only because we are used to thinking of the nation as a whole in terms of justice that we are struck by these images of people caught in the power of a local county authority as though they were in a foreign country. The local power apparatus is beyond appeal, in this other face of federalism; the rule of naked force and money is complete and undisguised by any embellishments of theory. . . .

In this sense the honesty of the detective can be understood as an organ of perception, a membrane which, irritated, serves to indicate in its sensitivity the nature of the world around it. For if the detective is dishonest, his job boils down to the technical problem of how to succeed on a given assignment. If he is honest, he is able to feel the resistance of things, to permit an intellectual vision of what he goes through on the level of action. And Chandler's sentimentalism, which attaches to occasional honest characters in the earlier books, but which is perhaps strongest in *The Long Goodbye*, is the reverse and complement of this vision, a momentary relief from it, a compensation for it. . . .

The detective's journey is episodic because of the fragmentary atomistic nature of the society he moves through. . . . The form of Chandler's books reflects an initial American separation of people from each other, their need to be linked by some external force (in this case the detective) if they are ever to be fitted together as parts of the same picture puzzle.

Fredric Jameson. *Southern Review*. Summer, 1970. pp. 632–3

Chandler had a fine feeling for the sound and value of words, and he added to it a very sharp eye for places, things, people, and the wisecracks (this out-of-date word seems still the right one) that in their tone and timing are almost always perfect. . . . It is impossible to convey in a single quotation Chandler's almost perfect ear for dialogue, but it comes through in all the later books whether the people talking are film stars or publicity agents, rich men, gangsters, or policemen. To this is joined a generous indignation roused in him by meanness and corruption, and a basic seriousness about his violent entertainments.

Julian Symons. *Mortal Consequences* (Harper). 1972. p. 142

[*The Big Sleep*], and the six other novels by Chandler, are in the tradition of a negative romanticism which is perhaps the dominant mode of American literature from Hawthorne to our contemporary black humorists—that power of darkness which Hawthorne, Poe and Melville explored, which Mark Twain could not laugh away, and which created a mythical landscape in Faulkner. Poe's ''The Fall of the House of Usher'' can be regarded as the rehearsal for the saga of the Sartoris-Compson-Sutpen families in Yoknapatawpha County. And the predecessor of Chandler's Californian nightmare had his hero Dupin ''be enamored of the night for her own sake.'' But where Poe brought inductive light to moral darkness, Chandler refuses to cheat his vision in like manner. When Marlowe has solved a dilemma, he has not explained the enigma. All of Chandler's books end on a note of dissatisfaction. The purported solution does not tidy things up since there is no end to a waking nightmare.

This dark vision has lost none of its power today. The excess of violence of which Chandler has been needlessly accused is now hardly noticeable, nor was it lovingly attended to for shock effect, but rather described because life is simply that cheap in this truly egalitarian society: literally, a matter of fact. And so Chandler does

not laud death with the lyrical mesmerism of Hemingway, nor does he play metaphysical games with it in Sartrean ingenuity. A death is a waste of life.

E.M. Beekman. *Massachusetts Review*. Winter, 1973. p. 164

Now if in comparing the tender and the tough conventions one is looking for ''real life'' in the verifiable sense, one must conclude that although the first kind of story will not bear sceptical examination, the second is—as Shakespeare says apropos of two liars—''an even more wonderful song than the other.'' Nor is this all that Raymond Chandler's essay [''The Simple Art of Murder''] brings to mind. The tender school aims at producing a denouement having the force of necessity, as in Greek tragedy. All the facts (clues, words, motives) must converge to give the mystery one solution and one only. That by itself is a good reason for making the crime occur in a law-abiding circle, where the habits of the *dramatis personae* are by hypothesis regular and reasonable. In such a setting the violence of murder is the more striking, and stronger also the desire to manacle the offender. Murder among thugs and drug addicts is hardly unexpected, and the feeling that in this milieu anything can happen does not increase but rather lessens the interest. Hence the artistic need for the tough writer to involve some innocent, whose ways *are* peaceable, and to put steadily in peril the detective-defender of that lump of virtue. In short, in murder à la Chandler, murder is not enough to keep us going—and neither is detection, since it is never a feature of the foreground.

Chandler as artist is so aware of these lacks that he reinforces the damsel-in-distress motive with what is nothing less than a political motive. He makes it clear in his essay that the hero of the new and improved genre is fighting society. Except for the favoured victim, he alone is pure in heart, a C-green incorruptible. The rich are all crooked or ''phonies,'' and cowards in the end. Since the police, the mayor, the whole Establishment are soon shown as a conspiracy to pervert justice and kill off troublemakers, we naturally share the detective's smothered indignation and are powerfully driven, like him, to see the right vindicated.

Jacques Barzun. In *The World of Raymond Chandler*, ed. Miriam Gross (A & W, 1977), pp. 161–62

Chandler's uniqueness—and the source of his popularity—is the product of a wide variety of personal traits and talents, circumstances and coincidences. He brought to his work a European sensibility and education supported by a bedrock of childhood experiences in the American Great Plains of the late nineteenth century. He arrived in California while the pioneering spirit still thrived and witnessed the rise of the movie studios and the attendant exploitation of glamour and illusion. He barely survived the First World War and was just achieving the peak of his writing career as Western civilization threatened to fall apart in the Second.

Given his far-ranging experience, it is perhaps remarkable that he maintained the conviction throughout it all that ''the best way to comment on large things is to comment on small things.'' The ''small things'' that preoccupied him were character and language. By concentrating on the motives of individual characters, he approaches such larger themes as the unpredictability of human emotion under pressure and the manner in which changing times appear to alter one's ethical possibilities. He illuminates the way in which characters are alternately responsible for the world in which they live and trapped by that world. As Dostoevsky reminded us in *Crime and Punishment*, ''this damnable psychology cuts both ways.'' The reactions of Chandler's characters to their psychic binds imply the pervasive instability at the core of modern society. And the language by which these characters reveal themselves allows the author to convey a sense of the delicate web by which we are all bound together.

The most significant ''small things'' that occupy Chandler are the mind and actions of his detective, Philip Marlowe. Marlowe is a microcosm of both Chandler's concern for character and his concern for the language by which that character is expressed. It is Marlowe's voice, of course, that is the constant ground of Chandler's stories. It is the detached, ironic, frequently alienated tone of that voice that holds our attention and provides an interpretive framework for the tales.

But while we may feel we know Marlowe's voice almost instinctively, a close examination of the novels reveals very little of a ''factual'' nature about the detective. We know a few details about his surroundings, almost nothing about his past, and very little about his personal motives. We almost never see his mind working, except as that mental activity is translated into dramatic action. And yet, we identify with him.

Understanding that identification may be as close as we can come to appreciating Chandler's power and uniqueness as a writer. And comprehending what Chandler called his ''objective method'' is essential to that appreciation.

Jerry Speir. *Raymond Chandler* (Ungar, 1981), pp. vii–viii

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CHAVEZ, Denise (1948–)

With the publication of *The Last of the Menu Girls*, Denise Chavez joins the ranks of writers who are rounding out the parameters of

Chicano literature. The feminine voice adds a new vision and dimension to the literature of this community. Clearly, a new vanguard is here, and its name is woman.

In this collection, the reader will savor the poignant experiences and dreams of Rocio, a young girl whose rites of passage into womanhood give unity to the collage of stories. At the beginning of the novel Rocio cries out against the traditional serving roles which society has prescribed for women, and she opts for the life of the artist. By the novel's end she has found her calling, and that is to give meaning to the emotionally turbulent lives of the people she has known. It is Rocio's mother who wisely counsels and dares her daughter to write the story of their lives.

Denise's novel reflects her particular sense of place, revealing the depths of the world of women and the flavor of southern New Mexico. The central metaphor of the novel is the home. The family, the known neighborhood and the role of women in this context are Denise's concern as a writer. Her eye for detail is sharp; the interior monologues of her characters are revealing; and Denise's long training as a dramatist serves her well in creating intriguing plot and dialogue. In short, all the strengths of a writer are here.

Rocio's yearning is to write a great novel from the lives of those people she knows best. It is the same dream Denise Chavez has followed, challenging us to let go of familiar patterns and to enter the rich and imaginative world which she portrays with such feeling and insight.

> Rudolfo A. Anaya.In the *The Last of the Menu Girls*, by Denise Chavez (Arte Publico Press, 1986), p. ix.

At this time, Chavez must be considered *the* chicana play-wright from New Mexico. Consistently active in the theater since the early seventies, she has written more plays and had more plays produced than any other Hispanic playwright. Her plays reflect different segments of New Mexican society; her characters talk and act like people familiar to all Hispanic New Mexicans. She celebrates the traditions and customs of Hispanic New Mexico. The *Sabor nuevomexicano* serves to root the plays in time and place. Yet there is a universal quality which makes these plays produceable outside of New Mexico. *Plaza* was a success at the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland). The inner conflicts of the characters are common to all humanity; so are their triumphs and defeats. Chavez' characters are masterful conceptions. They live on after the curtain has come down. For this reason, above all, Chavez is on her way to becoming an outstanding and original playwright. She is someone whose works are worth seeing and therefore deserves more recognition and support.

> Martha E. Heard. *The Americas Review*. Summer 1988, pp. 83–91.

In the introduction to Denise Chávez's *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1986), novelist Rudolfo Anaya states: ''With the publication of *The Last of the Menu Girls,* Denise Chávez joins the ranks of writers who are rounding out the parameters of Chicano literature. The feminine voice adds a new vision and dimension to the literature of this community. Clearly, a new vanguard is here, and its name is woman.'' With these words Anaya alludes to the fact that Chicano literature written in the 1960s and 1970s, a literature that largely promoted the political agenda and ideals of a sociopolitical movement, was written primarily by men and manifested a male world view. This characteristic of the early stages of Chicano literature was to change drastically in the 1980s as the voices of Chicanas began to be heard and heeded as part of the corpus of Chicano literature. Denise Chávez's is one of the strongest female voices to speak with vigor and authority about the lives of Hispanic women, thereby contributing the missing brush strokes in the collective literary portrait of the Mexican American community. Of special importance is the fact that she writes about a region of the United States, Southern New Mexico, that has been virtually ignored at the national level. Its proximity to the Mexican–United States border makes this an area where two cultures meet, sometimes in violent confrontation but more often in an interdependent relationship. The use of Spanish in her English text brings to readers of American literature an acute reminder that ours is a nation comprised of racial, ethnic and linguistic diversity. . . .

Chávez's theater focuses on the quotidian aspects of life in small New Mexico towns. She blends Hispanic cultural imagery and folk traditions with motifs from mainstream popular culture to show the New Mexican Hispanic community struggling to maintain its ethnic identity vis-a-vis the swift and powerful currents of the dominant culture. But even as Hispanics resist the temptation, a process of cultural hybridization is apparent in Chávez's work. A sharp observing eye and a keen ear for colloquial speech allow Chávez to capture the richness that results from the clash and mingling of cultures that occur in the border contact zone where her stories and dramas unfold. While her dramatic themes are broad and encompass many aspects of Chicano culture, Chávez privileges female characters in her dramatic work, particularly in pieces such as *Novena Narratives y Ofrendas Nuevomexicanas* and *Hecho en México.* In this sense, her plays are the literary antecedents to her better-known work, *The Last of the Menu Girls*. . . .

Chávez's style, in both her drama and her narrative, is characterized by a persistent movement from exterior to interior reality. The poetic description of landscapes, for example, lead her to interior spaces where critical self-examination takes place. She explores the physical attributes of her characters as a means of revealing their psychological profiles. The enumeration and cataloging of cultural artifacts can turn abruptly to musings of a spiritual nature. Humor is also a mark of Chávez's work. The latter is most often achieved through the blending of Spanish and English and through the use of colloquial folk expressions intended as satirical barbs.

Memory is an important ingredient in Chávez's writing. In *The Last of the Menu Girls,* what Rocío Esquivel remembers most vividly from her past are family, place, and the many women who had an impact on her life. She recalls transcultural and cross-class relationships but she focuses most sharply on the intimate relationships between sisters and between mothers and daughters. The absence of the divorced father calls attention to the aching desire to fill the gap that he leaves in the family. But the presence of a bountiful and take-control mother, of aunts and Mexican maids, creates security for the growing daughters. This work fits well within the tradition of coming-of-age fiction in America. In keeping with this tradition, the text takes the reader on a journey to the narrator-protagonist's past to reveal gradually the discovery of selfhood. Those moments, events, places, objects and persons that

imprinted themselves upon the narrator's psyche become significant in the present not only through the act of remembering but, more important, through the act in inscription. As is commonly the case with coming-of-age narrative, the final pages reveal the remembering self as writing self as well. It is thus at the crossroads of memory and inscription that the possibility of self-discovery and self-construction lies.

A sense of place is central to all of Chávez's work, and in *The Last of the Menu Girls* it is the crucial organizing metaphor. In the broader geophysical sense, the space that Rocío remembers is the desert of Southwestern New Mexico, or what she calls ''the arid tension of the desert's balance.'' The balance brings spiritual solace to Rocío Esquivel; the arid tension stirs desire. Female desire thus becomes another theme that Chávez explores as an important facet of the young girl's journey to maturation. The neighborhood is a special place where children begin to learn the intricacies of social interaction. As Rocío recalls the ditch bank of her neighborhood and the special trees of her yard, she is able to reconstruct those first social encounters that structured the early configuration of her gendered self. And finally, Chávez's sense of place can be private. Rocío Esquivel spends hours in her mother's closet, scrutinizing family photos, forgotten Christmas gifts, old wedding dresses, bottles of perfume as she searches for clues to the meaning of womanhood. The home, with all its secret niches, thus becomes a key to the unfolding of the self within the circle of family.

While it is her fiction that has brought Chávez national recognition, there is no doubt that she continues to see theater as an essential part of her life. The recent tour in the United States of her one-woman performance piece, *Women in This State of Grace,* is a dramatization of scenes from her narrative works. In this performance, the talents of writer and actor blend as the characters come alive to share with the viewers their profoundly human qualities, their strong belief in the primacy of human relationships— especially relationships between women—and their ability to survive social pressures with dignity.

Erlinda Gonzales-Berry. In *Reference Guide to American Literature, 3rd edition,* ed. Jim Kamp (St. James Press, 1994.)

In *Face of an Angel*, Soveida Dosamantes, the narrator and protagonist, unravels the lives of her family, her coworkers, her husbands, and her lovers. Agua Oscura (Dark Water), New Mexico, is one of those small towns where everyone knows everybody's ancestry, as well as their darkest secrets. ''What stories I know about these people I will share with you. The stories begin with the men and always end with the women; that's the way it is in our family.'' Soveida views her world with a woman's eye, and the objectivity of a goddess. Rich in family gossip, the book is engrossing, amusing, and definitely one to be savored. The author's mordant wit is pervasive, the language is pithy, blunt, and explicit.

The novel's many characters are deeply flawed human beings who enmesh the reader in their complex lives. Soveida's Grandmother Lupita and her lifelong maid, Oralia, are the strong influences in this young woman's life. Her mother, Dolores, a seemingly weak woman, has been beaten down by Trancha, her strange and domineering mother.

Her Grandmother Trancha, until the day she died, remained a bitter woman whose words were ''hard as a fist and painful as flesh doubled over.'' It was her Grandmother Lupita that Soveida called Mamá. Her mother was always Dolores or Dolly. Her father, whom she called by his first name, Luardo, had shown much promise: ''If it hadn't been for his two loves—drinking and screwing—Luardo Dosamantes would probably have been a great man, maybe even governor of New Mexico.'' Soveida falls in love with good-looking men whom she marries. The first marriage ends in divorce; the second leaves her a widow. She then gets pregnant by her lover's brother.

For more than 25 years, Soveida works at El Farol Mexican Restaurant in Agua Oscura. The intimate details of the restaurant's life are related with humor and irony. The staff—chef Eloisa, ''the Queen of Mexican food in Agua Oscura''; Larry Larragoite, the hard-working, anxiety-ridden owner of El Farol; Petra, the old waitress who could not add; and an odd assortment of busboys, salad chefs, and waitresses—delight the reader with their daily affairs. The funniest restaurant episode concerns the ''the night of the cucas,'' when Chuy, the elderly custodian, decides to spray for roaches in the middle of the day rather than after the late evening closing: ''Clumps of stunned and writhing roaches lay on the floor, or leapt from the moist walls, throwing their agitated bodies wherever they could. Others bounded past, feverishly driven, and under siege.''

Soveida's legacy to her profession is *The Book of Service: A Handbook for Servers*, a 14-chapter handbook for waitresses. The theme of service is pervasive in the lives of Soveida and her female relatives, and is revisited throughout the novel through excerpts from Soveida's handbook. In the first chapter of her handbook, Soveida writes: ''As a child, I was imbued with the idea that the purpose of life was service. Service to God. Country. Men. Not necessarily in that order, but lumped together like that. For God is a family man. . . . Life was, and is, service, no matter what our station in it.''

The densely packed pages of this long novel made me laugh and nod in agreement. It left me wanting to read it again to catch the nuances I might have missed. Chavez has become a fine writer and a great storyteller. With *Face of an Angel*, her second book, her name can be added to the growing list of Chicana authors making their mark in contemporary American fiction.

Irene Campos Carr. *Belles Lettres*. Spring 1995, pp. 35.

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CHEEVER, John (1912–1982)

As examples of fiction from *The New Yorker*, these stories of Mr. Cheever's [*The Way Some People Live*] are among the best that have appeared there recently, and this is particularly true of those which exploit a cool and narrow-eyed treatment of tensions arising from the war. Mr. Cheever's drunken draft-dodger and his young draftee are particularly well managed, and the sketches in which they appear are quite unblemished by the pieties and embarrassments which ordinarily mark war fiction published while a war is on. Many of the other stories—and if my count is right, all but six of the thirty included here are from *The New Yorker*—have not improved by their being collected in a book. As individual magazine stories they seemed better than they are; read one after another, there nearly identical lengths, similarities of tone and situation, and their somehow remote and unambitious style, produce an effect of sameness and eventually of tedium. The formula has been flourished too obviously and too often.

Weldon Kees. *New Republic*. April 19, 1943. p. 576

He does not so much imagine experience as have clever ideas for stories. There are [in *The Enormous Radio and Other Stories*] the ingenious camera-angles, the elevator operators (two of these) and the apartment-house superintendents, very cute and innocent and staring wide-eyed at quality folk. There are the neat discoveries of commonplace morals in sophisticated lives. When Mr. Cheever tries for the big idea, his stories waver toward a formally—and therefore morally—ambiguous melodrama. . . . These are the stories of a clever short-story manufacturer, a man who has ideas about experience but has never known these ideas in experience. Their language and technique are highly refined; their feeling is crude.

Arthur Mizener. *New Republic*. May 25, 1953. pp. 19–20

The Wapshot Chronicle is an antique bureau filled with everything and apparently everybody under the sun. . . .

Roughly the first third of the book is devoted to life in this charming old river town. Most of the rest is about the fortunes and misfortunes of the two sons, Moses and Coverly, in Washington, New York, San Francisco, Island 93 in the South Pacific, a rocket launching settlement in the West, and an imported castle inhabited by an ancient Wapshot cousin named Justina and her toothsome ward, Melissa.

As readers of Cheever's short stories know, he is a wonder with the limited scene, the separate episode, the overheard conversation, the crucial confrontation. *The Wapshot Chronicle* reflects these powers with immense vitality, largesse, and profusion. But it is held together largely by spit and wire. It shows that while John Cheever's fortes are many, amusing, touching, and admirable, one of them is not architectonics.

Carlos Baker. *Saturday Review*. March 23, 1957. p. 14

This is . . . a central theme in Mr. Cheever's work: the power of human love and desire, which turns out to be a shield for human loneliness and melancholy—along with a note of broad farce, or of downright burlesque at times, which accompanies the tragicomedy of sex. It is at this point that [*The Wapshot Chronicle*] breaks through the proper confines of ''sensibility'' in the typical *New Yorker* story. The depth of the narrative lies in the accent on human ''unrequital'' and in the lyrical apostrophes to the sea-born Venus, to love and women. The ironic twist lies in the antics of lovers. . . . The last half of the book is a picaresque of modern times set against the earlier, nostalgic background of the New England past. The two parts don't quite hang together, and the story as a whole becomes rather fragmentary and episodic. One has the final impression of a series of related ''sketches,'' which do not quite achieve either the impact of the short story proper or the inner growth and development of a novel.

Maxwell Geismar. *New York Times Book Section*. March 24, 1957. p. 5

For years every discussion of what constitutes a typical *New Yorker* short story has got around to Cheever, the common view being that he is quite representative and yet a good deal better than average. . . . He is one of the sharpest of observers, and some of his descriptions of suburban scenes are a pure joy. He has also developed an admirable technique for handling a complex series of incidents, so that such a story as ''The Trouble of Marcie Flint'' has a remarkable density. But his great gift is for entering into the minds of men and women at crucial moments. . . . Cheever knows where drama is to be found, and he has taught himself how to make the most of it.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 13, 1958. pp. 33, 47

What Cheever's well-heeled admirers want is what, by an ultimate failure of sensibility, he recedes into giving them: an exercise in sophisticated self-criticism, together with a way back into the situation as before. This isn't to say that he has nothing else to give; only that the extravagance of esteem for him has psychological, not esthetic origins . . . For Cheever, with all his wit and sophistication and his coldness of eye, is essentially a sentimentalist and usually contrives to let his fish off the hook. It is never clearer than when he is opposing something to the toreador pants and sterile parties and waspishness of suburban marriages. The land of deliverance he prays for is wholesome and American: ''the trout streams of our youth,'' a lighthearted game of softball, bright welcoming lights behind the picture window. Or else it is romantic and ''deep''—the ''churches of Venice'' or islands in the ''purple autumn sea.''

Richard Gilman. *Commonweal*. Dec. 19, 1958. p. 320

His first novel and best book, *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957), was decorated with lively quotations from an old New Englander's autobiography, but its hero was a rocket technician. His four volumes of short stories tell of marital agonies and failures of love not wholly unheard-of in the past, but invariably these agonies have a spot news quality. . . . Cheever is never angry, merely sad; his own range of feeling extends only to a generalizing pity for human helplessness; he neither claims nor possesses a massive power of intellect. And as should be added, unrelenting contemporaneousness

is, in his fiction, a form of built-in obsolescence. (The march of events is already overtaking some of Cheever's newsy tales—''The Enormous Radio'' for one.) But if this writer is what is called a minor figure, he is also an American original: witty, suggestive, intelligent, aware of the endless fascination of the junk with which his world and ours is furnished, and able almost at will to make his audience laugh out loud. There are fewer than half a dozen living American writers of fiction for whom more than this can be said.

Benjamin DeMott. *Harper's Magazine*. Feb., 1964. pp. 111–12

It is the peculiar and original genius of novelist John Cheever to see his chosen subject—the American middle class entering the second decade of the Affluent Society—as figures in an Ovidian netherworld of demons. Commuterland, derided by cartoonists and deplored by sociologists as the preserve of the dull-spirited status seeker, is given by Cheever's fables the dignity of the classical theater. . . .

Cheever's art deals less with what is called character and idiosyncrasy than with archetypes: father, son, brother, husband, wife, lover, seen in situations so intensely felt as to claim universality. His people move like characters in classic drama; the actors wear their fixed masks and are not expected to change one mask for another in the course of the action. Over the formal masks are fitted others modeled in the naturalistic detail required by the conventions of realism. He is able to give to the abstract personalia of this theater a local habitation and a name—a habitation so truly seen in detail that it becomes more real than the town's tax rolls. But the easygoing realism that accepts wife-swapping or any impiety of evaded obligation with a sociological shrug enrages him, for at bottom he is a New England moralist.

Time. March 27, 1964. p. 66

Most of John Cheever's people, even the wicked ones, are wistful secret angels—like seraphim they have their errands and burdens, only nobody notices. That nobody ever notices is the real scandal of *The Wapshot Scandal*. It is, also, in a way, Cheever's own scandal as a writer. . . . [In] the latest Wapshot novel the chief character is the 20th century, and now everything but Cheever's prose has deteriorated and grown corrupt. . . . Confronted by vulgarity and evil, Cheever takes a cautious step backward, shuts his eyes, waves his fastidious wand, and ping! vulgarity and evil are all at once redeemed by a secret beauty—''the abandoned buildings with the gantries above them had a nostalgic charm,'' he writes of the weapons site. Ping!

And exactly this sentimental disposition in the Wapshots and in his rendering of them is what Cheever himself seems not to have noticed. His ironic exposures add up only to a lightweight comic deceptiveness. . . . The larger deception implicit in his novel—the victory of supermarket and hardware culture over our better hopes—is lost finally in Cheever's hesitancy to push his irony to the hurting point, and to push right through the shield of his fantasy.

Cynthia Ozick. *Commentary*. July, 1964. pp. 66–7

Cheever writes in a relaxed, seemingly casual but thoroughly disciplined manner; his general mood is a compound of skepticism, compassion, and wry humor; he is concerned with the complexities, tensions, and disappointments of life in a strictly contemporary world, a world of little men and women, non-heroic, non-spectacular, non-exceptional. . . . He is concerned with the loneliness which festers beneath the facade of apparently ''happy'' or ''successful'' individuals; he suggests the potential terror or violence inherent in the metropolitan apartment-dweller's condition. Beneath the often placid, impeccably depicted surfaces of his stories there is a reservoir of excitement or unrest which is capable or erupting into violence; his well-mannered characters walk a tightrope which at any moment may break; the vast, shining city masks cruelty, injustice, and evil.

William Peden. *The American Short Story* (Houghton). 1964. pp. 47–8

The novel [*Bullet Park*] is bleak, full of danger and offense, like a poisoned apple in the playpen. Good and evil are real, but are effects of mindless chance—or heartless grace. The demonology of Calvin, or Cotton Mather. Disturbing or not, the book towers high above the many recent novels that wail and feed on Sartre. A religious book, affirmation out of ashes. *Bullet Park* is a novel to pore over, move around in, live with. The image repetitions, the stark and subtle correspondences that create the book's ambiguous meaning, its uneasy courage and compassion, sink in and in, like a curative spell.

John Gardner. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 24, 1971. p. 24

Now, because Mr. Cheever has written a volume of stories [*The World of Apples*] which tend to show people as being motivated by old-style feelings like love and loyalty and kindness and consideration for others and protectiveness toward the weak (e.g., children), one doesn't want to represent him as preaching. It is merely that every work of art, like every creation of any kind, comes out of a system of values and preferences, and this is a book by a gifted and established writer which doesn't, for once, seem to come out of negativism, alienation, despair of the human condition and frantic self-gratification in whatever horrifying ways suggest themselves. One meets people in everyday life who have these old-fashioned values, and perhaps the shortest way to convey the rare quality of Mr. Cheever's book is to say that here, for a wonder, we have a modern work of literature in which people behave as decently as they generally do in real life, rather than behaving like sick fiends.

John Wain. *New Republic*. May 26, 1973. p. 26

With one or two exceptions, these stories [in *The World of Apples*] chronicle the sadness and futility of suburban and moneyed existences. In several the sound of the rain is intended as a balm for the bruised spirits of those grown more accustomed to the sounds of traffic. And perhaps this is one of Cheever's shortcomings. Writing strictly of one class, his books cannot compare with those attempting a Balzacian cross-section of humanity. . . . Cheever's humor and irony make him a greater writer than, say, Louis Auchincloss, whose humorless novels also examine the professional classes to the exclusion of all others. But the limitation is there.

The fictional landscape of Cheever's art includes the social pretensions and moral implications of modern suburbia, the larger patterns of human experience, such as the loss of innocence and the deep spiritual hunger for a golden simpler past, and the discovery of beautiful moments to celebrate within the contemporary wasteland. These themes and ideas occur again and again in the short stories and novels. The way they are organized and detailed reveals the form in which Cheever's fictional landscape is created. . . .

The emotional center or vision of Cheever's fiction remains somewhat elusive. His light, ironic style can cut both ways. On the one hand, he seems to be a romantic, yearning for the good old days of yesteryear, far from the madding crowds of the aimless, tasteless contemporary world. On the other hand, he seems to realize the essential futility and unreality of such romantic notions and seems determined to find moments of beauty within the chaotic and graceless contemporary world. . . . In either case Cheever's style can both illuminate and avoid the implications of the situations he writes about. He seems to want his style to be both disarming and protective at once. He seems, finally, to be celebrating his own ability to find delight in both the romantic past, however false, and the contemporary present, however chaotic. . . .

Cheever is neither concerned with uncovering the complexities within a particular moment of experience nor interested in sounding the depths of an episode. His is more an attempt to translate that immediate experience into the artistic opportunity to display the lyric gracefulness of his style, to focus the reader's attention primarily upon the encounter between the artist and his material.

Samuel Coale. *John Cheever* (Ungar, 1977), pp. 115–17

My father was always a storyteller. His homeroom teacher at Thayer Academy used to promise her class that John [Cheever] would tell a story if they behaved. With luck, and increasing skill, he could spin the story out over two or three class periods so that the teacher and his classmates forgot all about arithmetic and geography and social studies. . . .

My father told these stories over and over again all his life. He wrote them into short stories and novels, and he passed them on to his children. He won the National Book Award, and the Howells Medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Pulitzer Prize, and the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the National Medal for Literature. He also kept us amused. Still, he never got the stories quite right. Otherwise, how can you explain the way he kept changing them, embroidering some anecdotes and shifting the emphasis in others, adding sequences and even characters, as if he was searching for some ideal balance that might set him free?

As he grew older, my father became increasingly reluctant to talk about his early years, especially to psychiatrists, who invariably zeroed in on his anger at his dominating mother and identification with his weak father. Later, when he became famous and journalists' questions forced him to talk about his childhood, he patched together a background of suggestions and half-truths that implied a happy youth and a slow but steady progress in his chosen career. It wasn't so. . . .

My father's certainty as a writer was never more apparent than during the year he was writing *Falconer*. When he read from it aloud to us, his voice vibrating with authority and pleasure in his own skill and imagination, it seemed to generate an electricity and excitement that reached outside the circle of listeners slumped in chairs in the library or the living room of the house in Ossining. I think I knew then that the book would be a best seller, and that my parents wouldn't have to worry about money anymore, and that my father was going to be successful and famous in a different way than he had ever been before.

Not only did my father have the energy to write at the top of his talent that year but the timing and the subject were ideal. Each chapter and scene seemed to stream from his imagination already written. These were the things he had been longing to say—the joys and anxieties he had not been able to write about before. *Falconer* is a novel about a man imprisoned for the murder of his brother. He is a heroin addict, and his marriage is a travesty of marriage vows. The center of the book is a tender homosexual love affair. The book's hero, Ezekiel Farragut, is in jail for violating the laws of society. In the end, he is freed from prison and from his addictions by a triumph of love and ingenuity. All these themes were deep in my father's consciousness, and they were to dominate the remaining years of his life. . . .

[T]he last half of the decade was as much a turning point for my father as the mid-fifties had been for the family. Once again, the miserable anxieties of failure and poverty gave way to a glorious success. In June of 1978, he was awarded an honorary degree from Harvard—a triumphant moment for a boy who had dropped out of Thayer Academy. And after the success of *The Stories of John Cheever* that same year, Knopf contracted to pay a $500,000 advance for his next novel. This was not a fortune by famous writers' standards—some authors command advances in the millions—but for my father it was a guarantee of financial security for the foreseeable future, and for the first time in his life he made a few conservative investments.

Susan Cheever. *Home before Dark* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), pp. 1, 2, 202–3, 206

By 1979, John Cheever had become a literary elder statesman. ''I'm a brand name,'' he used to say, ''like corn flakes, or shredded wheat.'' He seemed to enjoy this status. He must have suspected that the publication of the journals would alter it. His public image was that of a courtly English gentleman who lived in an antique farmhouse and raised bird dogs. His later books had expressed a candid interest in other facets of his life, but it was certainly conceivable that this interest was purely intellectual. Few people knew of his bisexuality. Very few people knew the extent of his infidelities. And almost nobody could have anticipated the apparent desperation of his inner life, or the caustic nature of his vision. But I don't think he cared terribly about being corn flakes. He was a writer before he was a breakfast food. He was a writer before he was a man.

In notes and letters many writers of astonishing talent will let down their guard, and one can see them blundering along like the rest of us, seeking clumsily for the cliche. This didn't happen to my father. ''I know there are some people who are afraid to write a business letter because they will encounter and reveal themselves,'' he used to say with disdain. I can see now that the person he was disdaining was himself. He didn't write a postcard without encountering himself. But he'd write the postcard anyway. He'd encounter himself, transform himself, and you'd have a hell of a postcard.

He saw the role of the serious writer as both lofty and practical in the same instant. He used to say that literature was one of the first indications of civilization. He used to say that a fine piece of prose could not only cure a depression, it could clear up a sinus headache. Like many great healers, he meant to heal himself.

Benjamin Cheever. Introduction. *The Journals of John Cheever* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), pp. ix–x

This present collection of thirteen hitherto uncollected stories allows us to watch. . . [Cheever's] stories take shape. But not that only: to watch a career take shape as well. For these stories provide a synoptic glimpse of his formative years, those efforts (as he called them) to discover his ''singing voice,'' that assured, expansive, intensely personal style we associate with the mature Cheever of the 1950s and the 1960s. . . .

I insert. . .biographical parallels with some trepidation, because Cheever himself was vehement about the oft-noted confusion between fiction and autobiography. In a 1976 interview, later published in the Stanford University literary review, *Sequoia*, he reiterated this objection by saying: ''What I usually say is, fiction is not crypto-autobiography: its *splendor* is that it is not autobiographical. Nor is it biographical.''

George W. Hunt, S.J. Introduction. In Franklin H. Dennis, ed. *Thirteen Uncollected Stories* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1994), pp. v–vi, vii

From the utter despair of *The Journals*'s opening paragraph to the cancer-driven agonies of his final pages, Cheever's command of language stuns with its eloquence, incisive scrutiny of both the author's depravity and his nobility, and its absolute, searing honesty.

You may be annoyed or disgusted by this book, but you won't be bored. *The Journals* seem to have functioned partly as notebooks for Cheever's fiction—he often writes about ideas for new stories or revisions of old ones—partly as therapy. . . . The entries, organized by year, focus most consistently on his family troubles, mainly his constant pleading for affection and/or sex from his wife, Mary, who responds with apathy or vicious denial. . . that prompt comments that range from homicidal . . . to sarcastic (''Can I do anything to help you,'' he asks her once, ''short of dropping dead?'')

The picture that slowly emerges, page by page, is one of a marriage that is a sort of mutual nervous breakdown over three decades, an infected relationship sadly indissoluble because of Cheever's insatiable need for both sex and tenderness and because, as he wryly observes, ''people named John and Mary never divorce.''

When he is not lamenting his wretched married life, Cheever writes most often of the war that went on without surcease inside him: the tension between desire and fear of his homosexual relationships, and his fragile control over his urges. ''If I followed my instincts,'' he writes, ''I would be strangled by some hairy sailor in a public urinal.''

Cheever's bisexual and throbbing erotic hunger made a normal, satisfying sex life impossible, leaving him alternately ravenous or raw. . . . And it is fascinating, as you read his journals, to chart the progress of Cheever's coming out of the closet—at least on paper: he never openly avowed his homosexuality. . . .

Perhaps, in the last year of his life, wasting away from chemotherapy and talking to his dogs of the first snowfall that he would not be able to walk them in, Cheever realized that, at least in death, he could lead a truthful life.

Doug Rennie. *Plant's Review of Books*. Winter, 1994, p. 17

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CHESNUTT, Charles W. (1858–1932)

The keynote of the [seven stories in *The Conjure Woman*] is the blind superstition and duplicity of character fostered by the life of servility and cringing to the master. These stories stand out as an impartial picture of the life of the slave in the Southern States. Uncle Julius is a fine type of the old slave devoted to his master, never lacking in dignity and courage, but withal possessing an indifferent code of morals, the result, most likely, of his close association with the white man whose ethics were, to say the least, pliant. All the wrongs of the race are in these simple tales unfolded, but with never a complaint, a strict justice being displayed in the drawing of the good and bad master, the good and bad slave, each having a fair showing. Mr. Chesnutt does not strive for any dramatic effects, nor does he ever introduce any unnecessary harrowing situations; there is a surprising absence of false sentiment. Love, hate, jealousy and cruelty are dealt with in a thoroughly sane, good-natured, sensible manner. No hysterics, no posing, mar the simple recitals of Uncle Julius as he happens to talk to the Northern man and his wife who have come to North Carolina. . . .

Between the introduction of slavery into the South and the Civil War lies a picturesque period, something more than dramatic and less than tragic, fraught with wonderful possibilities for just such a facile, discriminating pen as Mr. Chesnutt's. As we of this day look back over that shadowed bit of history, such a transaction as is set forth in ''Sis' Becky's Pickaninny'' seems absolutely incredible, and moves our hearts to an outspoken rebellion that such things could ever have been, and yet the author does justice to every one in the tale. . . . In this story more than in any other of the group does Mr. Chesnutt place before his readers the two kinds of masters, and a strong wave of irrepressible compassion sweeps over us as we grasp the tragical undercurrent of those lives bowed down with ignominy and shame. Through the medium of ''The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt'' and ''Po' Sandy'' the author pictures the every-day, pathetic side of the negro's life, and forcibly brings out that peculiar mysticism which may be the black man's inheritance from the Orient; the beliefs and superstitions which have been transplanted along with the race. But across the darkest phase of the slave's life there flashes that quaint humour which saves even the

most tragic scenes from too heavy a shadow of horror. So clever a master of literary skill, so keen a student of human nature is Mr. Chesnutt, that he never allows himself to drift into too great gloom, but plays with an artistic touch on our emotions and our sense of humour in an equal degree. . . .

The Conjure Woman is a collection of quaint tales, with an admirable Southern setting, replete with the humour and tragedy of slavery, so skilfully blended that often one does not know where the one begins and the other ends. The dialect in which the story-teller speaks is smooth and readable, evidently a means and not an end, and Mr. Chesnutt's English is remarkable for its literary style and quality.

Florence A.H. Morgan. *The Bookman,* New York Company. May, 1899, pp. 372–73.

[To Mr. Chesnutt] may perhaps be given the credit of the first publication of a subtle psychological study of the negro's spiritual nature, the first actual revelation of those secret depths of the dusky soul which no white writer might hope to approach through his own intuition.

The depth of the revelation [in ''The Wife of His Youth'']—its width and completeness—are scarcely apparent at a glance, the little story is so short and so simply and quietly told. The author extenuates nothing. The man is drawn as he is—vain, conceited, puffed up over his small measure of success, thinking, over-much of his white blood, and looking forward to an ambitious second marriage, without troubling himself as to whether the wife of his youth be living or dead. The woman also stands in full light, a mere withered atom of old plantation life—ignorant, bent and black—''so black that her toothless gums, revealed when she opened her mouth to speak, were not red, but blue''—with tufts of wool, instead of hair, protruding around her ancient bonnet. Such are the actors in the humble tragedy that Mr. Chesnutt has written, yet neither they nor their lowly environment ever touch the absurd or even the commonplace. There may be a smile at the sidelights of the quiet beginning, but the long shadow of slavery still stretches too far across the lives of the emancipated for the smile to last. From its very simplicity, its quiet, its reserve, comes the force of its great appeal.

All this and more may be said in praise of the first and the shortest of the nine stories forming the volume. The others are hardly worthy of mention in comparison with the first. The single partial exception is ''Uncle Wellington's Wives,'' but even this is readable chiefly because of its kind, mellow humour and its photographic portrayal of a familiar type of the negro. As fiction it has little if any claim to consideration, and a graver fault than its lack of literary quality is its careless approach to the all but unapproachable ground of sentimental relations between the black race and the white race. Touching this and still more dangerous and darker race problems, Mr. Chesnutt shows a lamentable lack of tact of a kindred sort, an incomprehensible want of the good taste and dignified reserve which characterises his first beautiful story and the greater part of all his work. ''The Sheriff's Children'' furnishes, perhaps, the most shocking instance of his reckless disregard of matters respected by more experienced writers. In saying this there is no intention to deny the too probable truth of the untellable story, nor any wish to dispute its tragic importance as legitimate literary material. On the contrary, it is the recognition of that terrible truth and its mighty weight which cause the protest. Had the author recognised these things, it would seem that he must either have left them alone or have approached them more carefully, and with greater strenuousness; that he must have felt the need of laying hold of them with far surer, firmer, larger grasp, if he touched them at all. It may be, however, that Mr. Chesnutt earnestly tried to reach beyond his grasp, and failed.

Be that as it may, it is much to be regretted that he has not held to the themes well within his scope, where the surety and strength of his touch needs no better proof than the faithfulness and beauty of *The Wife of His Youth*.

Nancy Huston Banks. *The Bookman*, New York. February, 1900, pp. 597–98.

The critical reader of the story called ''*The Wife of his Youth*'' . . . must have noticed uncommon traits in what was altogether a remarkable piece of work. The first was the novelty of the material; for the writer dealt not only with people who were not white, but with people who were not black enough to contrast grotesquely with white people,—who in fact were of that near approach to the ordinary American in race and color which leaves, at the last degree, every one but the connoisseur in doubt whether they are Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-African. Quite as striking as this novelty of the material was the author's thorough mastery of it, and his unerring knowledge of the life he had chosen in its peculiar racial characteristics. But above all, the story was notable for the passionless handling of a phase of our common life which is tense with potential tragedy; for the attitude, almost ironical, in which the artist observes the play of contesting emotions in the drama under his eyes; and for his apparently reluctant, apparently helpless consent to let the spectator know his real feeling in the matter. Any one accustomed to study methods in fiction, to distinguish between good and bad art, to feel the joy which the delicate skill possible only from a love of truth can give, must have known a high pleasure in the quiet self-restraint of the performance; and such a reader would probably have decided that the social situation in the piece was studied wholly from the outside, by an observer with special opportunities for knowing it, who was, as it were, surprised into final sympathy.

Now, however, it is known that the author of this story is of negro blood,—diluted, indeed, in such measure that if he did not admit this descent few would imagine it, but still quite of that middle world which lies next, though wholly outside, our own. Since his first story appeared he has contributed several others to these pages, and he now makes a showing palpable to criticism in a volume called *The Wife of his Youth, and Other Stories of the Color Line*; a volume of Southern sketches called *The Conjure Woman*; and a short life of Frederick Douglass, in the Beacon Series of biographies. The last is a simple, solid, straight piece of work, not remarkable above many other biographical studies by people entirely white, and yet important as the work of a man not entirely white treating of a great man of his inalienable race. But the volumes of fiction are remarkable above many, above most short stories by people entirely white, and would be worthy of unusual notice if they were not the work of a man not entirely white.

It is not from their racial interest that we could first wish to speak of them, though that must have a very great and very just claim upon the critic. It is much more simply and directly, as works of art, that they make their appeal, and we must allow the force of this quite independently of the other interest. Yet it cannot always

be allowed. There are times in each of the stories of the first volume when the simplicity lapses, and the effect is as of a weak and uninstructed touch. There are other times when the attitude, severely impartial and studiously aloof, accuses itself of a little pompousness. There are still other times when the literature is a little too ornate for beauty, and the diction is journalistic, reporteristic. But it is right to add that these are the exceptional times, and that for far the greatest part Mr. Chesnutt seems to know quite as well what he wants to do in a given case as Maupassant, or Tourguenief, or Mr. James, or Miss Jewett, or Miss Wilkins, in other given cases, and has done it with an art of kindred quiet and force. He belongs, in other words, to the good school, the only school, all aberrations from nature being so much truancy and anarchy. He sees his people very clearly, very justly, and he shows them as he sees them, leaving the reader to divine the depth of his feeling for them. He touches all the stops, and with equal delicacy in stories of real tragedy and comedy and pathos, so that it would be hard to say which is the finest in such admirably rendered effects as ''The Web of Circumstance'', ''The Bouquet'', and ''Uncle Wellington's Wives.'' In some others the comedy degenerates into satire, with a look in the reader's direction which the author's friend must deplore.

As these stories are of our own time and country, and as there is not a swash-buckler of the seventeenth century, or a sentimentalist of this, or a princess of an imaginary kingdom, in any of them, they will possibly not reach half a million readers in six months, but in twelve months possibly more readers will remember them than if they had reached the half million. They are new and fresh and strong, as life always is, and fable never is; and the stories of *The Conjure Woman* have a wild, indigenous poetry, the creation of sincere and original imagination, which is imparted with a tender humorousness and a very artistic reticence. As far as his race is concerned, or his sixteenth part of a race, it does not greatly matter whether Mr. Chesnutt invented their motives, or found them, as he feigns, among his distant cousins of the Southern cabins. In either case, the wonder of their beauty is the same; and whatever is primitive and sylvan or campestral in the reader's heart is touched by the spells thrown on the simple black lives in these enchanting tales. Character, the most precious thing in fiction, is as faithfully portrayed against the poetic background as in the setting of the *Stories of the Color Line*.

Yet these stories, after all, are Mr. Chesnutt's most important work, whether we consider them merely as realistic fiction, apart from their author, or as studies of that middle world of which he is naturally and voluntarily a citizen. We had known the nethermost world of the grotesque and comical negro and the terrible and tragic negro through the white observer on the outside, and black character in its lyrical moods we had known from such an inside witness as Mr. Paul Dunbar; but it had remained for Mr. Chesnutt to acquaint us with those regions where the paler shades dwell as hopelessly, with relation to ourselves, as the blackest negro. He has not shown the dwellers there as very different from ourselves. They have within their own circles the same social ambitions and prejudices; they intrigue and truckle and crawl, and are snobs, like ourselves, both of the snobs that snub and the snobs that are snubbed. We may choose to think them droll in their parody of pure white society, but perhaps it would be wiser to recognize that they are like us because they are of our blood by more than a half, or three quarters, or nine tenths. It is not, in such cases, their negro blood that characterizes them; but it is their negro blood that excludes them, and that will imaginably fortify them and exalt them. Bound in that sad solidarity from which there is no hope of entrance into polite white society for them, they may create a civilization of their own, which need not lack the highest quality. They need not be ashamed of the race from which they have sprung, and whose exile they share; for in many of the arts it has already shown, during a single generation of freedom, gifts which slavery apparently only obscured. With Mr. Booker Washington the first American orator of our time, fresh upon the time of Frederick Douglass; with Mr. Dunbar among the truest of our poets; with Mr. Tanner, a black American, among the only three Americans from whom the French government ever bought a picture, Mr. Chesnutt may well be willing to own his color.

But that is his personal affair. Our own more universal interest in him arises from the more than promise he has given in a department of literature where Americans hold the foremost place. In this there is, happily, no color line; and if he has it in him to go forward on the way which he has traced for himself, to be true to life as he has known it, to deny himself the glories of the cheap success which awaits the charlatan in fiction, one of the places at the top is open to him. He has sounded a fresh note, boldly, not blatantly, and he has won the ear of the more intelligent public.

William Dean Howells. *Atlantic Monthly*. May, 1900, pp. 699–701.

Mr. Chesnutt, it seems to me, has lost literary quality in acquiring literary quantity, and though his book, *The Marrow of Tradition*, is of the same strong material as his earlier books, it is less simple throughout, and therefore less excellent in manner. At his worst, he is no worse than the higher average of the ordinary novelist, but he ought always to be very much better, for he began better, and he is of that race which has, first of all, to get rid of the cake-walk, if it will not suffer from a smile far more blighting than any frown. He is fighting a battle, and it is not for him to pick up the cheap graces and poses of the jouster. He does, indeed, cast them all from him when he gets down to his work, and in the dramatic climaxes and closes of his story he shortens his weapons and deals his blows so absolutely without flourish that I have nothing but admiration for him. *The Marrow of Tradition*, like everything else he has written, has to do with the relations of the blacks and whites, and in that republic of letters where all men are free and equal he stands up for his own people with a courage which has more justice than mercy in it. The book is, in fact, bitter, bitter. There is no reason in history why it should not be so, if wrong is to be repaid with hate, and yet it would be better if it was not so bitter. I am not saying that he is so inartistic as to play the advocate; whatever his minor foibles may be, he is an artist whom his stepbrother Americans may well be proud of; but while he recognizes pretty well all the facts in the case, he is too clearly of a judgement that is made up. One cannot blame him for that; what would one be one's self? If the tables could once be turned, and it could be that it was the black race which violently and lastingly triumphed in the bloody revolution at Wilmington, North Carolina, a few years ago, what would not we excuse to the white man who made the atrocity the argument of his fiction?

Mr. Chesnutt goes far back of the historic event in his novel, and shows us the sources of the cataclysm which swept away a legal government and perpetuated an insurrection, but he does not paint the blacks all good, or the whites all bad. He paints them as slavery made them on both sides, and if in the very end he gives the moral

victory to the blacks—if he suffers the daughter of the black wife to have pity on her father's daughter by his white wife, and while her own child lies dead from a shot fired in the revolt, gives her husband's skill to save the life of her sister's child—it cannot be said that either his æsthetics or ethics are false. Those who would question either must avow, at least, that the negroes have had the greater practice in forgiveness, and that there are many probabilities to favor his interpretation of the fact. No one who reads the book can deny that the case is presented with great power, or fail to recognize in the writer a portent of the sort of negro equality against which no series of hangings and burnings will finally avail.

W. D. Howells. *The North American Review*. December, 1901, pp. 872–88.

Charles Waddell Chesnutt, a ''voluntary Negro,'' reflects in his writings major inter- and intraracial tensions of the 19th-century United States. Beginning and ending his life in Cleveland, Ohio, and from age seven to 25 living in North Carolina, he found the major motivations and materials of his works in his own life and that of contemporaries or immediate forebears on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line. Chesnutt's preoccupations with the problems of powerless blacks and poor whites is doubtless a reflection not only of the trauma which marked his own poverty-stricken youth but also of the resultant resolve to improve the quality of life for all those denied access to the fullness of American life because of color and/or class.

Chesnutt's fiction ranges in form from simple tale to highly plotted novel, in mood from comic to tragic. The subject matter reflects the major contemporary concerns of black Americans. However, the general reading public, primarily white, rejected Chesnutt's increasingly explicit advocacy of equal rights for blacks and other under-privileged citizens. Consequently, after *The Colonel's Dream* in 1905, Chesnutt terminated his writing career.

By that time, however, Chesnutt had won a permanent place in American literary history, especially for his short fiction. His serious consideration as a conscious, accomplished author by critics such as William Dean Howells and George Washington Cable was unprecedented for a black American prose writer. His works, usually presented from a black perspective, are historically

and sociologically accurate as well as aesthetically satisfying and ethically admirable. Chesnutt is recognized as ''the first real Negro novelist,'' ''the pioneer of the color line,'' and the first American writer not only to use the folk tale for social protest but also extensively to characterize black Americans.

After he stopped writing Chesnutt used in other ways his increasing influence to improve the status of his fellow blacks. In recognition of his achievements, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People awarded him its annual Spingarn Medal in 1928. Upon Chesnutt's death in 1932, a friend summed up accurately: ''His great contribution in letters is a monument to our race and . . . to our national life.''

> Sylvia Lyons Render. In *Reference Guide to American Literature, 3rd edition*, ed. Jim Kamp (St. James Press, 1994).

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CHESTER, Alfred (1928–1971)

Except for the juvenilia of his Paris years, most of [Alfred Chester's] reviews and literary essays were written between 1962 and 1964, a period when he was one of the most sought after and talked about writers on the New York literary scene. This was in sharp contrast to the neglect a few years later, after his virtual ''disappearance,'' when he had rejected writing criticism as a betrayal of his talents, and after his book of short stories, *Behold Goliath* (1964) and the novel. *The Exquisite Corpse* (1967), failed to get more than cursory critical attention. . . .

The irony was that the minute he turned to criticism, the editors started pursuing him, and he was faced with the shocking but undeniable fact that as a critic he was a hot number on the scene. This was very hard for him to swallow. Alfred's critical prose was high-powered, racy, and iconoclastic. He was called a ''sport'' in the critical field, for his original, off-center, ruthless, and devastating analysis. But beyond that, he turned literary criticism into entertainment, much as he insisted that fiction should be entertaining.

Editors started asking him for more than book reviews, they wanted controversial reassessments. . . . He was willing to oblige them, and produced, one after another in the next two years, essays on Updike (a famous roasting), Nabokov, Burroughs, Rechy, Albee, Salinger, Genet, and others. He worked with great intensity, laboring for long hours through draft after draft. . . .

Writing a column aimed at a mass readership was at variance with Alfred's image of himself as writer for the literary few, but he could not ignore the fact that he was being widely read for the first time. It disturbed him. . . .

When he returned from Morocco to New York, in the winter of '65–'66, he began his novel, *The Foot*, much of which has been lost. And as his mental state deteriorated and he disappeared, for real this time, his literary production became sporadic. There is firm evidence that he wrote a story called ''Trois Corsages,'' about his three friends, Harriet (Sohmers) Zwerling, Susan Sontag, and Irene Fornes, but this too has been lost, along with most of his unfinished and unpublished works. In his madness, I believe he destroyed much correspondence and many letters. . . .

After much erratic wandering, Alfred Chester settled in Israel sometime in 1970, where he wrote a final essay, ''Letter from the Wandering Jew,'' that was never published. (It exists thanks to Theodore Solotaroff who photocopied it when it was submitted to him. . . .) If his charm has disappeared, and his sense of humor (either due to a state of mental deterioration or on his way to death), it reveals a new identity, no longer worried about who he was. . . .

In a commentary in the *New York Review of Books*, Gore Vidal wrote that he ''was a glorious writer, tough as nails, with an exquisite ear for the false note; his review of [John] Rechy's *City of Night* is murderously funny, absolutely unfair, and totally true, a trick that only a high critic knows how to pull off.''

> Edward Field. Foreword. In Alfred Chester, *Looking for Genet* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Pr., 1992), pp. 7, 9, 15, 16–17

Chester was frequently an enthusiastic and generous reader, who . . . recognized the virtues of writers such as Updike and Sarraute before elucidating why he found them irksome. He was particularly fond of the work of Jean Genet, Christopher Isherwood, Mary McCarthy, and the early and late writings of Truman Capote.

The columns Chester wrote for *Book Week* are more informal and chatty than his book reviews. Frequently he begins with anecdotes of his life in Morocco, then moves on to some literary topic such as the relation of the author's life to the work. Like his acquaintances Baldwin, Mailer, and Sontag, Chester may have been most suited to this form: the literary essay that builds on autobiography and applies the same critical eye to life and books. Some of his finest fiction is thinly disguised autobiography (in which, for example, Paul Bowles appears as Peter Plate). The columns parade his variety and range. Though his literary musings could never be called disinterested, the remote vantage of Morocco provided him with added perspective on the literary questions that continued to obsess him. . . .

The third section of *Looking for Genet: Literary Essays & Reviews* [an anthology of Chester's writings, edited by Edward Field] is a true miscellany, tracking the parabola of Chester's career by collecting writings from the young unformed novelist in Europe through those of the sad teetering crank on the verge of oblivion, insanely attempting to substitute Israel for his beloved Morocco, from which he had been suddenly expelled without explanation. The earliest piece, ''Silence in Heaven,'' was published in *Botteghe Oscure* when Chester was twenty-three years old. Reading it, one understands why the magazine's publisher, the Princess Caetani, thought so highly of Chester that she not only solicited on his behalf a recommendation for a Guggenheim grant from Lionel Trilling, but sent Trilling's first recommendation back to its author for not being enthusiastic enough. . . . The last published essay, ''Letter from a Wandering Jew,'' chronicles Chester's hapless last days in Jerusalem. I agree with Edward Field that the letter reminds one of Celine, but I never wanted to weep for Celine the way I feel like weeping for Chester. Sadly, the substance abuse that is so much a

part of Chester's descent into hell has become too familiar; we know whence some of the madness comes.

Gary Lenhart. *American Book Review*. June–July, 1994, pp. 9, 14

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CHILDRESS, Alice (1920–)

Alice Childress, a serious contemporary playwright whose work has received little scholarly recognition, has been working in American theater for four decades. Born a decade before Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Childress produced her first play, *Florence*, ten years before Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Childress was, in fact, the first black woman to have a play produced on the professional American stage, and she is still writing successful drama in the 1980s. . . .

Like Hansberry, Childress has affirmed a deep commitment to social and political causes that promote human rights for black people and women. Unlike Hansberry, however, Childress features black women as protagonists in her fiction and drama.

Although all of Childress's published work deserves to be read, *Wedding Band* is her finest and most serious piece of literature and deserves comparison with the most celebrated American tragedies. Like Childress's other plays, it features an ordinary black woman past her prime. What we have here is that Julia's soul-searching in the midst of her moral dilemmas takes place on stage; her confusion is fully dramatized. The problems which face Julia are complicated by a convergence of historical and political dilemmas with which a woman of her education and conditioning is ill prepared to cope. That she and the other flawed women in *Wedding Band* survive is tenuous but believable.

Childress's mode of characterization is unflinching realism. Earthy dialogue and crude figurative language characterize the ''nitty-gritty'' characters who populate her plays as bursting with vitality and a fully realized sensuality. No saints or villains clutter Childress's dramatis personae. In *Wedding Band*, racism and the desire for respectability obsess both black and white characters. Every ethnic minority suffers insults. . . .

Name-calling and racist insults bolster the fragile dignity of the member of any ethnic minority desperate to be thought respectable or at least higher on the ladder of social respectability than someone else. Clinging to symbols of respectability is the only way to survive the rejection of the larger society. In a similar way, Fanny brags about her silver tea service, her English china, and her Belgian linen; Julia keeps her hope chest. In an absurd attempt to conceal Julia's indiscretion from the children, Mattie tells them that Herman is Julia's husband—''a light colored man.''

The antagonist of *Wedding Band*, seems to be the whole system of government-sanctioned oppression and the conservative status quo fearful of change. However, Childress's uneducated characters lack the ability to understand the nature of the enemy or to articulate their own victimization. Herman and Julia are not presented as the American version of Romeo and Juliet, although their plight invites comparison. They lack the requisite youth and beauty, social prominence and wealth, romantic perfection. They are weak, confused, superstitious, lonely, and impatient; no empires crumble when catastrophe strikes them. Herman's death and Julia's madness create nothing to nurture the healing of racial hatred. However, despite their insignificance, they are brave and honest enough to carry on a love affair threatened by criminal penalties because they know instinctively that love is stronger than unjust laws.

Wedding Band dramatizes more than a tragic love affair. It presents the social, economic, moral, religious, legal, political, historical, psychological context in which a black woman like Julia Augustine makes independent decisions that affect her life and the lives of everyone she touches.

Rosemary Curb. *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* Winter, 1980, pp. 57–67.

Alice Childress has written a remarkable book [*A Short Walk*] that takes its title from the answer given by protagonist Cora James' father to the question ''What is life?''—which she asks him at age five while watching a minstrel show. Life, he responds, is ''a short walk from the cradle to the grave . . . and it sure behooves us to be kind to one another along the way.'' On the same occasion, when a storm threatens to erupt out of a black performer's impromptu musical discourse on oppression, Cora's father counsels, ''Let all run that wants to run, Cora. We stay put where we are, so's not to get trampled.''

Deeply influenced by her relationship with her father (which relationship, incidentally, displays our child-rearing system in one of its most satisfactory variations), Cora develops into a kind, loving adult who stays put a good deal and is adept at dealing with those problems that present themselves. From her father she has taken a strong will, a deep love for her people and their culture, a critical eye and a strong sense of responsibility for herself and those close to her.

In Cora James' odyssey from the Low Country of South Carolina to the Big Apple, we see reflected those legions of black folk who made the journey and poured their energies into creating Harlem, U.S.A. Thoughtful, womanly, strong, responsible, tough, resilient and stubborn, Cora is at once uniquely herself and every black woman ''that's ever had to stand squarefooted and make her own way.'' Author Childress sees to it that we come to know and understand the whole Cora and that we take special note of her solitariness, that pronounced aloneness which often goes unrecognized in the lives of so many black women. Cora's blood mother, we learn, had suffered such aloneness to a tragic degree at a very young age.

We also realize, after reading what it was like for Cora to come to a big city and survive, that her struggle is the same forty or fifty years later and will probably be the same forty years from now. So you check back through the pages of *A Short Walk* to note again just what it was that kept her going.

In her relationships with men, Cora seeks some justice, comfort and understanding, *and she struggles for them*. The man, Cecil,

whom she deeply loves, she loves through the long haul though she is pained because ''he cannot see himself at all as I see him.'' She realizes that the reverse is also true. The male characters are dramatic and memorable, each for different reasons; and though not all are strong, entirely admirable people, none is caricatured.

Perhaps it is the author's playwrighting skills which account for the novel's superb dialogue—a veritable celebration of the black community's use of language. And not only the dialogue but the descriptive passages as well are rich, both in imagery and adroitly used proverbs.

Through the author's masterful juxtapositions of tragedy and humor, sorrow and joy, cruelty and kindness (sometimes in the same person), readers are led to deal with her juxtaposition of African/African-American culture and cultural repression in stunning ways. There are political elements which invite family discussion—you will recognize them. You will be energized by this book, and you will be surprised from time to time—nobody's predictable, certainly not Cora. You will remember *A Short Walk* and think about your own.

Geraldine L. Wilson. *Freedomways*. 1980, pp. 101–02.

[Childress's *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*, which has been adapted for film,] is the story of Benjie, a thirteen-year-old drug addict. There are some awesomely beautiful and powerful moments in this novel. One that comes immediately and vividly to mind is the poignant scene in which Butler Craig, the ''stepfather,'' saves spaced-out Benjie from falling from a Harlem rooftop, even as the boy begs his stepfather to let him go. '''Let go, Butler . . . let me die. Drop me, man!' He's flailing his legs, trying to work loose my hold, hollerin and fighting to die. 'Let me be dead!'''

There are times in the book, however, when the characters, the victims, in this novel are their worst enemies. They appear unable to get out of their own way. Perhaps life is a treadmill, but the enemy of the people, the hand of the oppressor, is not clearly delineated in this one. Mari Evans says: ''To identify the enemy is to free the people.'' Which just goes to prove that no one is perfect. Even an expert marksperson like Alice Childress does not hit the bull's-eye every time she picks up the rifle.

Alice Childress's latest and most rewarding novel is *A Short Walk*. ''Life is just a short walk from the cradle to the grave—and it sure behooves us to be kind to one another along the way.'' This is the saga of Cora James from just before her fifth birthday in a racist Charleston, South Carolina.

Alice Childress brings the history of the times alive, as we, along with Cora James, join the Garvey movement, the U.N.I.A. (Universal Negro Improvement Association), the fabulous pomp, the militant pageantry, the grand and colorful parades through Harlem, the African Orthodox Church. It's all here, along with the struggle for race pride and identification with Africa. ''Back to Africa!''—''Africa for the Africans! At home and abroad!'' You've seen it written about many times before, but never has it come alive like this. It is history relived. We go with the Movement's ship, the Black Star Line's S.S. *Frederick Douglass* (Yarmouth) on its maiden voyage to Cuba. The writer's genius, her artistry, is her ability to totally involve you in the happenings, as you, the reader, happen along with them. You emerge from the spell of her writing with the feeling of a lived experience.

Alice Childress is a tremendously gifted artist who has consistently used her genius to effect change in the world: to change the image we have of ourselves as human beings, Black and white. Her primary and special concern has been the African image. She knew that Black was beautiful when so many of us thought that Black Beauty was the name of a storybook horse, a figment of a writer's fantasy. Her gift has been used as an instrument against oppression; notwithstanding, she is always the consummate artist, telling her story powerfully and artistically. Her writing is always realistic, avoiding somehow the indulgence of wallowing in quagmires of despair and pessimism. After all, life *is* a short walk. There is so little time and so much living to achieve. Perhaps her greatest gift, along with her satiric bent and the thematic accent on struggle, is the leitmotif of love for people, particularly her own people. I have come away from most of her writing feeling mighty damn proud of the human race, especially the African aspect of it. Portraying it with great fidelity in all of its meanness, its pettiness, its prejudices, its superstitions, Childress captures most of all its capacity to overcome, to be better than it is, or ever could be, its monumental capacity for change.

At a writers' conference sponsored in 1974 at Howard University by Dr. Stephen Henderson and the Institute for the Arts and Humanities, writer Toni Cade Bambara said: ''The responsibility of an artist representing an oppressed people is to make revolution irresistible.'' At the same time, when so many Black writers have decided that the thing to do is to ''get over'' with the great white racist publishing establishment, despite the price one may be forced to pay in terms of self-esteem, human dignity, and artistic integrity, Childress has made a deliberate choice of weapons; she has chosen the weapon of creative struggle. Black blessings on you, Alice Childress.

John O. Killens. *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation,* Mari Evans, ed. (Anchor Press/Doubleday) 1984, pp. 129–33.

Most of the plays of Alice Childress are about common people. Avoiding racial stereotypes found in much of contemporary literature and drama, her works present deftly drawn and realistic portraits of human beings attempting to find a sense of dignity in a world which seems rather to appreciate less noble values. Through her dramas, Ms. Childress exposes racism in the United States and challenges each of us to redress our racial problems. Her dynamic, poignant plays prepared the commercial stage for the works of other African-American playwrights, including Lorraine Hansberry, Amiri Baraka, and Ed Bullins.

Set during the rehearsal of a melodrama about lynching in the South, *Trouble in Mind* concerns black and white cast members who become involved in a real-life drama of racial tensions arising from the portrayal of black stereotypes. The drama skillfully mirrors a world where racist and sexist problems are initially hidden under ''masks,'' but are forced to surface. The play centers on Wiletta Mayer, a veteran actor. She is an attractive middle-aged black woman, with an outgoing personality. She has made a career out of playing stereotypical black roles, but aspires to be cast in parts more deserving of her rich talents. Initially, she readily gives advice to a novice black actor on how to ingratiate oneself; to stay on good terms with the management no matter how loathsome the

production may be. When rehearsals begin, however, she cannot adhere to such a strategy when the white director uses tactics that humiliate her and the script calls for the black characters to make statements and perform actions that offend her racial pride. Consequently, by the play's end, Wiletta removes her ''mask'' and becomes an outspoken critic of the production even though this action puts this job and, possibly, her career in jeopardy. It is a courageous choice, but a lonely one. None of the other cast members are willing to support her.

Wine in the Wilderness, set in Harlem in 1964, examines the arrogance of the black middle class in their relations with lower income African-Americans. Bill Jameson, an artist with a privileged background, seeks a model for his painting characterizing the average African-American woman as coarse, poorly educated, and culturally illiterate. The artist's married friends, Sonny-man and Cynthia, bring to Bill the person they believe best represents this ideal—Tommy, a thirty-year-old factory worker. Despite their dubious intent, by the play's end it is Tommy who teaches the others how they are merely dilettantes masquerading as blacks. Tommy's speech and behavior communicates that being black demands a sense of unity and respect for all members of the race, no matter how different their backgrounds and lifestyles might be. Tommy's actions exemplify her philosophy as, unlike the others, she shows respect to the character Oldtimer, by asking about and calling him by his birth name. Tommy recognizes the role of black organizations in the socio-political progress of African-Americans. Like her birth name, Tomorrow, she is forward-looking, while the others are mired in the past. She identifies with current black leaders, whereas Bill talks only of dead heroes. Through Tommy, the once pretentious characters are humbled as they learn being black lies not in the way one looks, but in the way one thinks and relates to the world.

Wedding Band deals with the subject of interracial romance in an insightful, unsentimental manner unlike the usual depiction of this subject on the stage and in popular media. The drama is set in 1918 in South Carolina when it was illegal for blacks and whites to marry or cohabit. For ten years Julia, a black woman, and Herman, a white man, have nurtured a clandestine relationship held together with the promise that they will one day move to the North to marry as soon as Herman has fulfilled his financial obligations to his mother. However, Julia comes to the painful realization that marriage to Herman is nothing more than a pipe dream. She learns that Herman harbors many of the same prejudices as other whites; and he is unwilling to endure the racial taunts of others who would object to their relationship once out in the open. The recognition of the futility of their relationship also awakens a sense of racial pride within Julia. Once a passive woman, by the play's end Julia asserts her right to live the way she chooses in a country cultivated and sustained by the labors and lives of her African ancestors.

A more recent work—*Moms*—is based on the life of the famed comedienne Jackie ''Moms'' Mabley. A series of scenes with music and dance depict her public and private life from her performances on a early-20th century black theatre touring circuit to her death in 1975. The play pays tribute to the comedienne's impeccable comic timing and strong rapport with the audience. However, the author does not gloss over the comedienne's more ignoble traits. The play mentions her overbearing personality, miserly disposition, portrayal of degrading stereotypes, ambivalence concerning her sexual preference, and lack of personal attention to the care of her children. Still, *Moms* is a fitting, even-handed tribute and a fine tour-de-force for the appropriate black actress.

> Addell Austin Anderson. In *Contemporary Dramatists, 5th edition.*, ed. K. A. Berney (St. James Press, 1993).

Although Alice Childress is known for her participation in theater arts, the impact she has had upon the theater far exceeds the recognition she has received. Childress began her career as an actress and director with the American Negro Theater in New York. Her first performance was in *On Strivers Row* (1940), but within nine years Childress had written and directed her own play *Florence* (1949). In 1952, Childress became the first black woman to write a play and have it professionally produced on the New York stage. *Florence* went on to be performed on Broadway. Along with several of her other works, including *Wine in the Wilderness: A Comedy-Drama* (1969), *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White* (1973), *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich* (1978), and *String* (1979), for which Childress wrote screenplays, *Florence* was produced for television.

At a time when the country found itself embroiled in many racial conflicts, Childress chose to explore racial concerns through her art. Due to her frank representations of racial issues, however, her work often received unfair treatment. *Wine in the Wilderness,* for example, was banned by the state of Alabama and *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich* was barred from the school library system of Savannah, Georgia. And some affiliate television stations refused to air her plays. Childress has been characterized as a forerunner of her time because her choice of subject matter challenged audiences to establish new ways of understanding race in America. By refusing to accept race and gender concerns as binary oppositions she positioned herself as more than an artist, playwright, or novelist by laying the groundwork for valuable social critiques.

Childress' writings dismiss much of the negative imagery so common in representations of the black community and replace stereotypical characters with vibrant themes that celebrate black experiences. Unlike the psychological characterizations prevalent in contemporary theater, in the plays of Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller for instance, Childress emphasizes theme rather than character. In her essay, ''A Candle in a Gale Wind,'' Childress explains: ''My writing attempts to interpret the 'ordinary' because they are not ordinary. Each human is uniquely different. Like snowflakes, the human pattern is never cast twice. We are uncommonly and marvelously intricate in thought and action, our problems are most complex and, too often, silently borne.'' In her exploration of the particularities of individuals and their specific situations, Childress finds the content of her work.

Childress' writings depict the heroic nature of the struggle to do more than simply survive the racist institutions which circumscribe the lives of her characters. Whether through the use of fiction, television, or the stage, Childress' work seeks to be a vehicle of transformation for social concerns. In her novel *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich,* as well as the television production by the same name, to give one example, she explores the potential of human relationships to impact the life of a teenaged heroine addict either positively or negatively. The novel ends without a resolution

but Childress invests a tremendous amount of hope in man's ability to reach out to his stepson. It is the ''human'' part which most interests Childress in her work because it is the part that is most unwilling to be defeated and the most likely to overcome.

Valerie Sweeney Prince. In *Reference Guide to American Literature, 3rd edition,* ed. Jim Kamp (St. James Press, 1994).

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CHOPIN, Kate (1851–1904)

Kate Chopin belongs to the artistic realism of today, as well as to her own generation. This generation sees life, or reality, differently from any generation before it. The literary artist in his absorbing process is no longer a discoverer, no longer a refiner, still less a dictator, but an observer at best, with an impulse to state his impressions clearly. And if one were to ask in what way after all Kate Chopin differs from a pastmaster in the short story art, say, de Maupassant, the answer may be that she blesses while he bewailed the terrible clearsightedness which is the strength and the anguish of every good writer. . . .

The Awakening follows the current of erotic morbidity that flowed strongly through the literature of the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The end of the century became a momentary dizziness over an abyss of voluptuousness, and Kate Chopin in St. Louis experienced a partial attack of the prevailing artistic vertigo. The philosophy of Schopenhauer, the music of Wagner, the Russian novel, Maeterlinck's plays—all this she absorbed. *The Awakening* in her case is the result—an impression of life as a delicious agony of longing.

In *The Awakening* under her touch the Creole life of Louisiana glowed with a rich exotic beauty. The very atmosphere of the book is voluptuous, the atmosphere of the Gulf Coast, a place of strange and passionate moods.

Daniel Rankin. *Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories* (Pennsylvania). 1932. pp. 170, 175

But there was one novel of the nineties in the South that should have been remembered, one small perfect book that mattered more than the whole life-work of many a prolific writer, a novel of Kate Chopin, who wrote Creole stories, like one or two others in New Orleans who carried on the vein of George W. Cable. *The Awakening* was more mature than even the best of Cable's work, so effortless it seemed, so composed in its naturalness and grace was this tragic tale of Grand Isle, the fashionable New Orleans summer resort where the richer merchants deposited their wives and children. There, with the carelessness and lightness of a boy, the young Creole idler Robert awakened, with sorrowful results, from the dull dream of her existence the charming young woman whose husband adored her while he made the sad mistake of leaving her alone with her reveries and vague desires.

Van Wyck Brooks. *The Confident Years: 1885–1915* (Dutton). 1952. p. 341

There is a good deal of marital instability in the fiction of Kate Chopin, whether she writes of Acadians or New Orleans Creoles. She was bilingual and translated Maupassant. The situations in her first novel [*Atlantic Monthly Fault*] were already rather uncomfortable from the point of view of conventional morality; but in the central one she followed the then standard procedure of getting rid of an undesirable wife by having her accidentally drowned so that the lovers might be finally united. In 1899, however, she published a novel, *The Awakening*, quite uninhibited and beautifully written, which anticipates D.H. Lawrence in its treatment of infidelity.

Edmund Wilson. *Patriotic Gore* (Oxford). 1962. p. 590

In detail, *The Awakening* has the easy candor and freedom appropriate to its theme. It admits that human beings are physical bodies as well as moral and social integers and that spirit acts not only by sublimation but directly through the body's life. Not many English or American novels of the period had come so far. And its successive scenes—of household, country place, cafe garden, dinner party, and race track—are vividly realized. Kate Chopin seems to have paid some attention to the recently translated *Anna Karenina* and its extraordinary clairvoyance of observation. (Her short stories . . . are less successful, relying excessively on Maupassantesque twists of ironic revelation on the last page. But the people in them are real physical presences; invariably they strike us as having actual body, breath, color and temperature.)

Warner Berthoff. *The Ferment of Realism: American Literature, 1884–1919* (Free). 1965. p. 89

. . .there are two respects in which Mrs. Chopin's novel [*The Awakening*] is *harder* than Flaubert's [*Madame Bovary*], more ruthless, more insistent on truth of inner and social life as sole motivation. Edna Pontellier has her first affair out of sexual hunger, without romantic furbelow. . . . And, second, Mrs. Chopin uses no equivalent of the complicated financial maneuvers with which Flaubert finally corners his heroine. Edna kills herself solely because of the foredoomed emptiness of life stretching ahead of her. It is purely a psychological motive, untouched by plot contrivance.

The patent theme is in its title (a remarkably simple one for its day): the awakening of a conventional young woman to what is missing in her marriage, and her refusal to be content. Below that theme is the still-pertinent theme of the disparity between woman's sexual being and the rules of marriage. And below *that* is the perennial theme of nature versus civilization.

Stanley Kauffmann. *New Republic*. Dec. 3, 1966. p. 38

Greater attention, it seems to me, has to be given to the integral relationship between local color in [*The Awakening*] and the development of its theme, as well as to Kate Chopin's use of related symbolism. There is no doubt a certain irony in suggesting a new reading of *The Awakening* in terms of its local color. It was precisely because of diminished interest in regional literature that many commentators feel it was so long ignored; there is the obvious implication that regional literature is somehow incompatible with universal appeal. In exploring both local color and related symbolism more fully though, it seems to me that critics will do greater justice to the profundity of Kate Chopin's theme. For the novel is not simply about a woman's awakening need for sexual satisfaction that her marriage cannot provide; sexuality in the novel represents a more universal human longing for freedom, and the frustration that Edna experiences is a poignant statement about the agony of human limitations. . . .

There is a wealth of sensuous imagery in the novel, and this has been noted consistently by the critics; but what has not been noticed . . . is that sensuousness is a characteristic feature of the setting, a product of climate and the Creole temperament. And thus it must be considered primarily as constituting the new environment that Edna marries into, and not as directly supporting a preoccupation with sexual freedom. It is this environment that becomes the undoing of the American woman.

John R. May. *Southern Review*. Fall, 1970. pp. 1032–3

It does not seem probable that [Kate Chopin] will burst into glory with the reissue of her complete works . . . but she is deserving of a good deal more attention than she has received, partly because she was long before her time in dealing with sexual passion and the intricate familial and personal emotions of women, and partly because she is an uncommonly entertaining writer. The stories, a good many of them only a page or two long, are frequently no more than anecdotes or episodes or even tricks; but, like Maupassant, whom she translated and by whom she was much influenced, she usually embedded her skeleton in sufficient flesh and musculature to conceal the joints. . . .

Mrs. Chopin's landscapes and her interiors, metropolitan or rural, are animate and immediately perceived; there is no self-indulgent clutter in them, just as her characters rarely are cartoons, generally recognizable as they may be. She is sparing and precise whether she is dealing with simple folk or people of elaborate construction, and she seems to have known and to have comprehended fully a great variety of people in a variety of strata.

Jean Stafford. *New York Review of Books*. Sept. 23, 1971. pp. 33, 35

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CIARDI, John (1916–1986)

Evidently of immigrant family, Ciardi searches out for himself the meaning of America for his own generation. Undoubtedly he is well acquainted with the English poet, Auden. His technique, at best, stems from Auden. Weaker passages hint MacLeish. But, more important, he proves that for the young American poets as for the English, the personal themes of love, friendship and family relationships cannot be divorced from the social theme. . . . He can write. . . the symbolic lyric—and beautifully. But for his purposes—the precise representation of the American scene without utopian thinking, and of the growing psychology of general apprehension—his poetry of statement rather more than that of song or of violent image is successful.

Eda Lou Walton. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 25, 1940. p. 5

The poems have a youthful ring which it is pleasant to come upon, and it is a tone not obscured by echoes. That Ciardi seems fresher than most poets is probably due to the fact that he is content with getting a scene down on paper, sometimes sprawlingly, but with care for the truth of it. He is not yet concerned to any great extent with interpretation.

Coleman Rosenberger. *New Republic*. July, 1940. p. 36

Unlike Eliot, who is only one of his ''ancestors,'' Ciardi likes humanity well enough to satirize with warm wit, rather than with cold distaste. There is throughout his work a personality that expands to encompass the experiences of his fellows.

His considerable wit shows itself not only in the surprising juxtaposition of images, ideas, and language. . . but also in the rhythms and stanzaic forms. . . . But make no mistake—he deals in serious matters. His sense of the ironic gives him that authority (only the humorous should be allowed to be serious).

Gerard Previn Meyer. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 6, 1947. p. 60

John Ciardi is a poet of genuine if unequal gifts, whose best poetry has wit, perception and humanity. His greatest fault is lack of poetic liveliness, which derives not from any dullness of imagery or conventionality of vision but from rhythmic monotony. . . . But this fault Mr. Ciardi shares with many distinguished modern poets, including, in some degree, Eliot himself. His virtues are more individual and more interesting. . . . Ciardi produc(es) poetry both intelligible and mature, poetry which draws upon all the resources which the modern tradition has made available to the poet without losing touch with the reader.

David Daiches. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Jan. 1, 1950. p. 6

Mr. Ciardi's poetry depends on the world of his imagination as much as it does on the world in which he is living, and, they are not discrete but interdependent essences. Therefore, he writes a poetry that is psychologically sound as he exercises his wit, satire, and

compassion with precise control. He may be acidulous, but he is genuinely humane.

I.L. Salomon. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 28, 1956. p. 24

The most notable thing about John Ciardi's *As If* is a kind of crude power. The hesitations, reticences, and inabilities of the poetic nature—for to be able to say what it does say is to be unable to say everything else—are unknown to natures of such ready force, natures more akin to those of born executives, men ripe for running things. This writer uses Stevens's, or Shapiro's, or half a dozen other poets' tricks and techniques as easily, and with as much justification as a salesman would use a competitor's sales-talk—it works, doesn't it? But he doesn't use the styles as delicately and helplessly as these poets used them—after all, he *can* help himself, has helped himself. . . . He is much at his best as a translator where his native force can put on a more sensitive and individual mask—his translation of the *Inferno* has more narrative power, strength of action, than any other I know.

Randall Jarrell. *The Yale Review*. Spring, 1956. p. 479

The one theme which stands out above others which could be cited in Mr. Ciardi's variously paced poetry is a concern with time, a concern which shows itself in the birthday poems, the elegies, the family poems . . . and those poems in which the poet meditates on the history and meaning of man. . . . Several of these poems which explore history and childhood are, at bottom, the signs of the poet's encounter with the hard old fact of death. The transiency of human life and all human things is a theme as old as poetry but Mr. Ciardi's version is so modern as to be almost fashionable. He faces time, death and change under the contemporary shadow of man's existential nothingness. . . . Yet the sweat of the engagement is real and is his own.

Ernest Sandeen. *Poetry* July, 1956. p. 267

The best thing about John Ciardi is his personality. He is singularly unlike most American poets with their narrow lives and feuds. He is more like a very literate, gently appetitive, Italo-American airplane pilot, fond of deep simple things like his wife and kids, his friends and students, Dante's verse and good food and wine. The next best thing about John Ciardi is his poetry. It is truly refreshing. It is singularly free from the vices that beset most American poets nowadays, with their provincial imitations of English-Baroque verse and their trivial ambiguities. . . . These are good poems—clear, intimate and living.

Kenneth Rexroth. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 3, 1958. p. 6

His poems show the same lack of subterfuge, perhaps even of nuance, as his editorial deeds. Everything is stated as it arises, with a curbed vigor rather than with mystery or subtlety. This poetry is the spectrum of a whole man who, however antic he may be in life, feels in his art no need to strike literary poses. . . . He is at times as good a phrasemaker as Dylan Thomas, but more sparing in his effects. . . . His phrases are the body, often the naked body, and not the clothing of his thought.

Dilys Laing. *The Nation*. Sept. 13, 1958. p. 138

Most of the pieces in this book [*Dialogue with an Audience*] will be familiar to librarians, having first appeared in *The Saturday Review* where the author has been poetry editor since 1955. The book is composed of five general sections: ''Dialogues,'' ''Controversies,'' ''Robert Frost'', ''On Reading and Writing,'' and ''The Situation of Poetry.'' Included is the celebrated review of Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *The Unicorn and Other Poems* which precipitated such a wrath of indignation on the poor poetry editor's head. As interesting as that article is, it is not nearly so interesting as the reaction it provoked. Here are the letters that constituted ''the biggest storm of reader protest in the thirty-three-year history of *The Saturday Review*.'' If ''Controversies'' is the most sensational part of *Dialogue with an Audience* (is this what makes the book so heavy?), this reviewer preferred the quieter pieces on Dante, Robert Frost, and poetry in general. Although Mr. Ciardi's style is marred by repetition and the relentless underlining of the obvious (e.g., ''On Writing and Bad Writing''), he is a passionate partisan of poetry, a veritable Roman candle who strikes sparks.

John C. Pine. *Library Journal*. Jan. 1, 1964. p. 108

He has not God's loveliest gift to poets, the gift of breathing in impressions and letting them gather in silence into a perfect richness. He is a controversialist, a banger-together of arguments, an anecdotalist of sorts, full of memories of his childhood in an Italian immigrant family. He likes to make loud noises, sometimes to impress a political point, sometimes in wryly comic deference to the family life he remembers, sometimes out of sheer exuberance and a purely technical interest in being noisy like Ezra Pound's when he was writing ''Sestina: Altaforte.'' . . .And yet the quieter sensitivity that links him at times with Mr. [Richard] Wilbur is never altogether absent. . . . It is precisely this felt sensitivity, present but neglected in so many poems that leap about and shout and run as fast as their impatient metric can carry them, that is irritating in his poetry.

M. L. Rosenthal. *The Reporter*. Feb. 15, 1962. p. 50

The pressure of imagination is very low. Sometimes he rises above the dead level, with tenderness or good humor, but never does he surprise us. Now and then he remembers that he is a poet, and uses a word that has poetic pretensions. . . . But poetry is not a matter of mechanics, it is a vision; and vision Mr. Ciardi has not got.

Louis Simpson. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1963. p. 134

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CISNEROS, Sandra (1954–)

In some recent essays collectively titled ''From a Writer's Notebook,'' Sandra Cisneros talks about her development as a writer, making particular references to her award-winning book, *The House on Mango Street*. She states that the nostalgia for the perfect house was impressed on her at an early age from reading many times Virginia Lee Burton's *The Little House*. It was not until her tenure at the Iowa Writers Workshop, however, that it dawned on her that a house, her childhood home, could be the subject of a book. In a class discussion of Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, she came to this realization: ''the metaphor of a house, *a house, a house*, it hit me. What did I know except third-floor flats. Surely my classmates knew nothing about that.'' Yet Cisneros's reverie and depiction of house differ markedly from Bachelard's poetic space of house. With Bachelard we note a house conceived in terms of a male-centered ideology. A man born in the upper crust family house, probably never having to do ''female'' housework and probably never having been confined to the house for reason of his sex, can easily contrive states of reverie and images of a house that a woman might not have, especially an impoverished woman raised in a ghetto. . . . Cisneros inverts Bachelard's nostalgic and privileged utopia, for hers is a different reality: ''That's precisely what I chose to write: about third-floor flats, and fear of rats, and drunk husbands sending rocks through windows, anything as far from the poetic as possible. And this is when I discovered the voice I'd been suppressing all along without realizing it.''

The determination of genre for *Mango Street* has posed a problem for some critics. Is *Mango Street* a novel, short stories, prose poems, vignettes? . . .

The focus. . . on compression and lyricism contributes to the brevity of the narratives. With regard to this generic classification, Cisneros states:

> I said once that I wrote *Mango Street* naively, that they were ''lazy poems.'' In other words, for me each of the stories could've developed into poems, but they were not poems. They were stories, albeit hovering in that grey area between two genres. My newer work is still exploring this terrain.

On a different occasion, Cisneros had called the stories ''vignettes.'' I would affirm that, although some of the narratives of *Mango Street* are ''short stories,'' most are vignettes, that is, literary sketches, like small illustrations nonetheless ''hovering in that grey area between two genres.''. . .

Mango Street is a street sign, a marker, that circumscribes the neighborhood to its latino population of Puerto Ricans, Chicanos and Mexican immigrants. This house is not the young protagonist's dream house; it is only a temporary house. The *semes* that we ordinarily perceive in house, and the ones that Bachelard assumes—such as comfort security tranquility esteem—are lacking. This is a house that constrains, one that she wants to leave; consequently, the house sets up a dialectic of inside and outside of living *here* and wishing to leave for *there*. . . .

The realization of the possibility of escape through the space of writing, as well as the determination to move away from Mango Street, are expressed in ''Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes.'' . . .

I do not hold with Juan Rodríguez that Cisneros's book ultimately sets forth the traditional ideology that happiness, for example, comes with the realization of the ''American Dream,'' a house of one's own. In his review of *Mango Street*, Rodríguez states:

> That Esperanza chooses to leave Mango St., chooses to move away from her social/cultural base to become more ''Anglicized,'' more individualistic; that she chooses to move from the real to the fantasy plane of the world as the only means of accepting and surviving the limited and limiting social conditions of her barrio becomes problematic to the more serious reader.

This insistence on the preference for a comforting and materialistic life ignores the ideology of a social class's liberation, particularly that of its women, to whom the book is dedicated. The house the protagonist longs for, certainly, is a house where she can have her own room and one that she can point to in pride, but, . . . it is fundamentally a metaphor for the house of storytelling. Neither here in the house on Mango Street nor in the ''fantasy plane of the world''—as Rodríguez states, does the protagonist indulge in escapism.

We can agree, and probably Cisneros on this occasion does, with Bachelard's observation on the house as the space of daydreaming: ''the places in which we have experienced daydreaming reconstitute themselves in a new daydream, and it is because our memories of former dwelling places are relived as daydreams that these dwelling places of the past remain in us for all time.'' The house that Esperanza lives and lived in will always be associated with the house of story-telling—''What I remember most is Mango Street''; because of it she became a writer. Esperanza will leave Mango Street but take it with her for always, for it is inscribed within her.

> Julián Olivares. In María Herrera-Sobek and Helena María Viramontes, eds. *Chicana Creativity and Criticism* (Houston: Arte Publico, 1988), pp. 167–69

Writing is central in Sandra Cisneros's work of fiction *The House on Mango Street*, [which is characterized] by a deceptively simple, accessible style and structure. The short sections that make up this slim novel, . . . are marvels of poetic language that capture a young girl's vision of herself and the world she lives in. Though young, Esperanza is painfully aware of the racial and economic oppression her community suffers, but it is the fate of the women in her *barrio*

that has the most profound impact on her, especially as she begins to develop sexually and learns that the same fate might be hers. Esperanza gathers strength from the experiences of these women to reject the imposition of rigid gender roles predetermined for her by her culture. Her escape is linked in the text to education and above all to writing. Besides finding her path to self-definition through the women she sees victimized, Esperanza also has positive models who encourage her interest in studying and writing. At the end of the book, Esperanza's journey towards independence merges two central themes, that of writing and a house of her own: ''a house as quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem.''

Esperanza's rejection of woman's place in the culture involves not only writing but leaving the barrio, raising problematic issues of changing class:

> I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free. One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say good-bye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. One day I will go away. Friends and neighbors will say, what happened to Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away?

But Esperanza ends the book with the promise to return: ''They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot get out.''

The House on Mango St. captures the dialectic between self and community in Chicana writing. Esperanza finds her literary voice through her own cultural experience and that of other Chicanas. She seeks self-empowerment through writing, while recognizing her commitment to a community of Chicanas. Writing has been essential in connecting her with the power of women and her promise to pass down that power to other women is fulfilled by the writing and publication of the text itself.

> Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano. In María Herrera-Sobek and Helena María Viramontes, eds. *Chicana Creativity and Criticism* (Houston: Arte Publico, 1988), pp. 142–43

If ideological and economic considerations structure Moraga's and Lizárraga's rape narratives, it is the theme of loss of innocence that predominates in Sandra Cisneros's short story ''Red Clowns.'' In this vignette we encounter Esperanza, the innocent and naive protagonist who is accompanying her older and street savvy friend Sally to the carnival. Sally disappears with her boyfriend and Esperanza, alone in the amusement park, is attacked by a group of boys. The narrative begins with the bitter recriminations of a disillusioned and traumatized Esperanza after the sexual transgression has occurred where, in a monologue full of hurt and despair, she mourns her loss of innocence: ''Sally, you lied. It wasn't what you said at all. What he did. Where he touched me. I didn't want it, Sally. The way they said it, the way it's supposed to be, all the storybooks and movies, why did you lie to me?'' The diatribe is directed not only at Sally the silent interlocutor but at the community of women who keep the truth from the younger generation of women in a conspiracy of silence. The protagonist discovers a conspiracy of two forms of silence: silence in not *denouncing* the ''real'' facts of life about sex and its negative aspects in violent sexual encounters, and *complicity* in embroidering a fairy-tale-like mist around sex, and romanticizing and idealizing unrealistical sexual relations. . . .

The theme of the silent, voiceless victim, the woman that is afraid to denounce her attackers, is reiterated in Cisneros's story: ''Sally, make him stop. I couldn't make them go away. I couldn't do anything but cry. I don't remember. It was dark. I don't remember. I don't remember. Please don't make me tell it all.'' This response to block out the rape scene and to become silent and withdrawn is common in victims of sexual assault.

> María Herrera-Sobek. In María Herrera-Sobek and Helena María Viramontes, eds. *Chicana Creativity and Criticism* (Houston: Arte Publico, 1988), pp. 177–78

Besides the double marginalization that stems from gender and ethnicity, Cisneros transgresses the dominant discourse of canonical standards ideologically and linguistically. In bold contrast to the individualistic introspection of many canonical texts, Cisneros writes a modified autobiographical novel, or *Bildungsroman*, that roots the individual self in the broader socio-political reality of the Chicano community. As we will see, the story of individual development is oriented outwardly here, away from the bourgeois individualism of many standard texts. Cisneros's language also contributes to the text's otherness. In opposition to the complex, hermetic language of many canonical works, *The House on Mango Street* recuperates the simplicity of children's speech, paralleling the autobiographical protagonist's chronological age in the book. Although making the text accessible to people with a wider range of reading abilities, such simple and well-crafted prose is not currently in canonical vogue.

The volume falls between traditional genre distinctions as well. Containing a group of forty-four short and interrelated stories, the book has been classified as a novel by some because, as occurs in Tomas Rivera's. . .*y no se lo tragó la tierra*, there is character and plot development throughout the episodes. I prefer to classify Cisneros's text as a collection, a hybrid genre midway between the novel and the short story. Like Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, Pedro Juan Soto's *Spiks*, Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, and Rivera's text, Cisneros's collection represents the writer's attempt to achieve both the intensity of the short story and the discursive length of the novel within a single volume. Unlike the chapters of most novels, each story in the collection could stand on its own if it were to be excerpted but each attains additional important meaning when interacting with the other stories in the volume. A number of structural and thematic elements link the stories of each collection together. . . .

On the surface the compelling desire for a house of one's own appears individualistic rather than community oriented, but Cisneros socializes the motif of the house, showing it to be a basic human need left unsatisfied for many of the minority population under capitalism. It is precisely the lack of housing stability that motivates the image's centrality in works by writers like Cisneros and Rivera. For the migrant worker who has moved continuously because of job exigencies and who, like many others in the Chicano community, has been deprived of an adequate place to live because of the inequities of income distribution in U.S. society, the desire for a house is not a sign of individualistic acquisitiveness but rather represents the satisfaction of a basic human need. . . .

Unlike many introspective writers, Cisneros links both the process of artistic creation and the dream of a house that will enable this art to social rather than individualistic issues. . . . She conceives of a house as communal rather than private property; such sharing runs counter to the dominant ideological discourse that strongly affects consciousness in capitalist societies. Cisneros's social motifs undermine rather than support the widespread messages of individualized consumption that facilitate sales of goods and services under consumer capitalism.

Cisneros touches on several other important women's issues in this volume, including media images of ideal female beauty, the reifying stare of male surveyors of women, and sex roles within the family. In an effort to counter the sexual division of labor in the home, for example, Esperanza refuses one instance of women's work: ''I have begun my own quiet war. Simple, Sure. I am the one who leaves the table like a man, without pulling back the chair or picking up the plate.'' Although this gesture calls critical attention to gender inequities in the family, Cisneros avoids the issue of who, in fact, will end up performing the household labor that Esperanza refuses here. This important and symbolic, yet somewhat adolescent gesture merely touches on the surface of the problem and is likely, in fact, to increase the work for another woman in Esperanza's household.

The majority of stories in *The House on Mango Street*, however, face important social issues head-on. The volume's simple, poetic language, with its insistence that the individual develops within a social community rather than in isolation, distances it from many accepted canonical texts. Its deceptively simple, childlike prose and its emphasis on the unromanticized, non-mainstream issues of patriarchal violence and ethnic poverty, however, should serve precisely to accord it canonical status. We must work toward a broader understanding among literary critics of the importance of such issues to art in order to attain a richer, more diverse canon and to avoid the undervaluation and oversight of such valuable texts as *The House on Mango Street*.

> Ellen McCracken. In Asunción Horno-Delgado et al, eds. *Breaking Boundaries: Latina Writings and Critical Readings* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), pp. 63–64, 66, 70–71

From the moment of its publication, *The House on Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros, has attracted critical interest for various reasons. Some critics do a feminist reading of the work, as do Erlinda Gonzalez-Berry and Tey Diana Rebolloedo or Julián S. Olivares; others deal with the problem of literary genre, as does Pedro Gutierrez-Revuelta; and others are concerned with ideology, like Gutierrez-Revuelta, again, or Juan Rodriguez. . . . I am going to analyze the work as an act of discourse, a speech act, inscribed in a communicative literary situation, through which its author narrates a series of real or imaginary experiences with the intention of establishing a dialogue with an unknown audience and creating certain effects with her communication.

From this point of view, the change in the book's title that I suggest *The Book on Mango Street* is justified in two ways. First, externally, because as readers we confront The Book of Mango Street, that is, the literary text that creates the fictional space that is Mango Street. The other, internal, because in one of its symbolic possibilities, the house represents the book. . . . Moreover, the book is one of the preoccupations that Sandra Cisneros reveals in her critical essays. . . .

As a writer, Sandra Cisneros approaches the writing of *The House on Mango Street* as a cross between poetry and fiction: she wants to write narratives that individually have a unity in themselves but that, at the same time, could be brought together to form a larger work. . . .

As an act of discourse, *The House on Mango Street* must be understood in two ways: one, on the level of the characters' discourse, the other as a connection between the author and the group of readers who receive the work. In the first case, we encounter a multiplicity of voices coming, for the most part, from the barrio in which Esperanza, the narrator, lives. In the second, it is the voice of the author that we perceive through the text as we apprehend the work, which makes us conscious that we are dealing with a literary text produced by the author as such. . . .

Nonetheless, the representation of the community's voice should not be confused with the community's own voice expressing itself. In this sense, *The House on Mango Street* is an individual speech act, product of a concrete author. This author's intention, as she indicates in ''Notes to a Young(er) Writer'' was to speak about what others barely mention, the reality of the barrio and of the women without voice and without access to the world of books. . . .

The book thus takes on the importance of an object capable of achieving certain effects, particularly in recording the voices of those silenced beings or, at least, channeling their stories through the voice of a central narrator. In this sense, it belongs to the category of speech acts that J.L. Austin has called illocutionary.

> Manuel M. Martín Rodriquez. In Aralia López Gonzalez et al, eds. *Mujer y literatura mexicana y chicana*, vol. 2 (Mexico City: Colegio de Mexico; Tijuana: Colegio de la Frontera del Norte, 1990), pp. 249–50, 252–53

In Sandra Cisneros's autobiographical prose poems, *The House on Mango Street*, the child protagonist Esperanza has a mystical experience of solidarity. Three elusive aunts, like fairy godmothers, admonish the aspiring young writer, ''You will always be Mango Street. . . . You must remember to come back. . . . For the ones who cannot leave as easily as you.'' Although Esperanza dreams of ''a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem,'' her girlfriends reiterate, ''Like it or not you are Mango Street and one day you'll come back too.'' Cisneros, the ''About the Author'' tells the reader, ''reaffirms our belief that art and talent can survive even under the most adverse conditions.''

This meeting of a history, in this case a multiethnic history, that will not be past and the distinction of the writer who nonetheless sees herself as somehow different, separate, from it, is one of the most sensitive issues of feminist autobiography. For students of autobiography per se, it has historical resonances. In nineteenth-century working-class writers, one often sees a similar struggle to distinguish oneself from the anonymous, unindividuated ''masses'' in order to establish a position from which to present oneself as a distinctive ''I.'' Yet, like Cisneros, these workers separated themselves from history only the better to objectify and ultimately reclaim it: ''What I remember most is Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to.''

Cisneros's artistic distinction, although similar in some respects to that of earlier working-class writers, echoes another tradition

about which feminists might be more ambivalent. . . . Cisneros's autobiography gives rise to a tension between an ethos of artistic distinction (the privileged creative imagination) and the kind of gender and ethnic solidarity Cisneros seeks.

Regenia Gagnier. *Feminist Studies*. 17:1, Spring, 1991, p. 137

In *House on Mango Street*, Esperanza herself is the narrative medium and the bridge. The narrative itself is a series of vignettes joined by the consciousness of Esperanza, whose role as medium and go-between is signaled by her doubled name: ''In English it means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting.'' The very titles of the vignettes suggest the conversation of voices the narrative represents: ''Cathy Queen of Cats''; ''Alicia Who Sees Mice''; ''Edna's Ruthie''; ''Elenita, Cards, Palms, Water''; ''Rafaela Who Drinks Coconut and Papaya Juice on Tuesdays.'' Esperanza becomes a writer who will tell these stories: ''I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much.'' Esperanza can tell these stories because she is the one between, the one who has ''gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot get out.''

In *The House on Mango Street*, ''los espiritus'' visit the kitchen of the wise woman Elenita. Holy candles burn on the top of her refrigerator; ''a plaster saint and a dusty Palm Sunday cross'' adorn the kitchen walls along with a ''picture of a voodoo hand.'' Elenita, the ''witch woman'' who ''knows many thing'' tells the protagonist's fortune with the tarot, while in the next room Elenita's children watch Bugs Bunny cartoons and drink Kool-Aid on the plastic slipcovered furniture. Esperanza sees her ''whole life on that kitchen table: past, present, future'' and tries to feel on her hand the cold of the spirits, while a part of her mind is turned to the favorite cartoon she hears from the other room. Waiting for the spirits at the kitchen table is made no stranger nor more unfamiliar here than sitting in the living room drinking Kool-Aid.

Wendy K. Kolmar. In Lynette Carpenter and Wendy K. Kolmar, eds. *Haunting the House of Fiction* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), pp. 245, 239

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CLAMPITT, Amy (1920–1994)

Like the tornadoes that occasionally rip across the flatlands of her native Iowa. Amy Clampitt seizes upon whatever lies in her path. No living poet writes with fiercer energy, or is able to transform the diversity of life into such a variegated unity. In her fourth collection, *Westward*, there is a poem that contains descriptions of landscapes from turn-of-the-century Pasadena to present-day Manhattan, and takes us on side trips to the Caucasian steppes. This ''travelogue,'' full of philosophical overtones, is spiced with quotations from Homer, George Eliot, Emerson, Simone Weil, and Joseph Brodsky. Its cast of characters includes Anton Chekhov, New York bag ladies, native Americans, the writer herself, and her pioneering grandfather as a young man. The poem's very title, ''The Prairie,'' suggests the vastness of Clampitt's concerns.

Clampitt stormed the poetry scene in 1983 with her first book, *The Kingfisher*. Before that her only published work had been a few poems in magazines, and two minor chapbooks. Nevertheless, readers of the initial collection encountered not a ''promising talent'' but a mature voice, as authoritative as those of her most distinguished contemporaries. Already middle-aged, Clampitt had formed her style on the icons of her college days: John Donne, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Marianne Moore. Her themes, however, were intensely of her time. Allen Ginsberg in his prime never chose more topical subjects. Ecology, feminism, Eastern European politics, modern education, and many other similar issues have been examined by her. Over the past seven years she has broken new ground with each volume.

Since her ideas are of great complexity and need space in order to be worked out, Clampitt favors long poems. (Her allusions also require her to append explanatory notes to each book, and these make a fascinating study in themselves.). . . .

The new collection's title poem is a meditation on Clampitt's most abiding preoccupation—human culture. ''Distance is dead,'' the poet affirms as she lands at London's Heathrow Airport in a jet—one of those ''overleapers of the old silk route.'' Soon she boards a creeping train for western Scotland. She is making a pilgrimage to the isle of Iona, where, in 534, St. Columba led his educated monks to ''the raw edge of Europe'' (an apt image for the jagged coastline, as well as this distant outpost of human habitation). . . .

Indeed, the poet envisions our civilization as a web of migrations, splayed and tangled like so many spun-out threads. . . . Clampitt believes ''it's there in all of us,'' this impulse to project our inner turmoil onto natural forces, or to imagine that our private conflicts echo historical ones. Whether or not that is the case, her obsession with pilgrims and pioneers seems an appropriate metaphor for her poetic adventurousness—her ambitious wrestling with large, complicated subjects. Her knapsack is crammed with the most sophisticated tools of traditional—even old-fashioned—poetry. What she makes with them, however, becomes as surprising as a tall building rising out of the buffalo grass in the midst of an otherwise uninhabited plain. From her farmer grand-parents, she has learned how to cultivate unplowed territory.

Phoebe Pettingell. *New Leader*. April 16, 1990, pp. 16–17

If James Merrill was a father figure in poetry, Amy Clampitt was even more definitively my mother. (In this, too, I was not alone: many younger poets sought her generous guidance.) For fifteen years she and I shared drafts of nearly every poem we wrote, though in receiving her criticisms, I got the much better deal. Her death at the age of seventy-four last September seemed impossible, even if one had seen her slender frame starved to nearly nothing from cancer. Never have I met anyone who combined such seriousness of purpose with such dizzying, childlike vivacity. Having discovered her vocation late—her first book, *The Kingfisher*, was published when she was sixty-three—she had taken in her rapid stride the overwhelming acclaim our culture usually reserves for novelists. As if hardly pausing to look up, she wrote in the next

eleven years a book of essays and a play, and four more volumes of poems, densely musical and fiercely original.

But she did look up, to watch birds—all of which the Iowa farmer's daughter seemed to know personally, by their colorful names. She peered down at wildflowers and derived morals from moss. Her first published poem in *The New Yorker*, ''The Sun Underfoot among the Sundews,'' heralded all the traits we would come to think of as distinctively Clampitt: a microscopically detailed vision, . . . a wry refusal to believe in a First Cause, . . . and an abandonment of pure sensation. . . .

In her final weeks she had little strength to speak but, fittingly, her last really animated conversation had to do with a book. It was the advance galley of Alice Munro's *Open Secrets*. . . . Her words came out breathlessly, with spaces between them: ''Trees. Rivers. Rain. And the names of things that grow.'' It's a parent's job to teach us to name things. For a generation of younger writers, Amy Clampitt and James Merrill taught by example—and made it clear that we're never too old to need someone to look up to.

Mary Jo Salter. *New Republic*. March 9, 1995, p. 46

What an antidote to youthful ambition she [Clampitt] was! She had decided from the beginning that she would not marry and have children—but as time went on the identity of her true vocation remained stubbornly beyond her ken. Amy spent her first thirty years patiently groping toward the thing she felt called to produce, and then, having committed herself to writing, she spent the next twenty years slowly reorienting herself from fiction to poetry. Along the way she wrote three novels which no editor was interested in publishing, while supporting herself in New York as a secretary for Oxford University Press, a librarian for the Audubon Society, and an editor for E.P. Dutton. Periodically she returned home to her native Midwest to wonder if she was really making the best of her life. . . .

If she'd been able to look into the future, she wouldn't have worried. From the moment her first poem was accepted by *The New Yorker*, Amy's ascension was both sure and swift. She wrote with the awareness of having to produce a lifetime's length, a challenge she met with grace. *The Kingfisher* was followed by *What the Light Was Like* (1985), *Archaic Figure* (1987), *Westward* (1990), and *A Silence Opens* (1994), as well as *Predecessors, Et Cetera* (1991), a collection of essays. And there was acclaim. The Academy of American Poets awarded her a fellowship for distinguished achievement, and a MacArthur Fellowship enabled her to purchase the small cottage she loved, in the Berkshire Mountains of Western Massachusetts.

Amy's funeral, held in the backyard of the cottage only a few days after her death on September 10 from ovarian cancer, was—fittingly—infused with a strange but ultimately transcendent happiness.

Jean Hanff Korelitz. *Poetry Society of America Newsletter*. Spring, 1995, p. 5

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CLARK, Walter Van Tilburg (1909–)

The tendency to explain, to probe, to analyze, is certainly more characteristic of the people of the eastern half of this country than it is of Westerners. Though born in the East, Walter Van Tilburg Clark is a Westerner in sympathy and spirit. Like the large landscapes with which the book is filled, his style is ample and spacious rather than compact. The reader whose life is not leisurely may find himself skipping paragraphs. . . . The dialogue is never false but it lacks the impact of character, and there is no humor.

William Maxwell. *Saturday Review*. June 2, 1945. p. 13

He is a storyteller before he is a moralist, a writer before he is a philosopher. . . . What makes him a serious writer, to my mind, is that he can write with parables which are as absorbing for their telling as for their moral. . . . It may just be that Walter Van Tilburg Clark is a Young Lochinvar coming riding out of the West to the American novel's rescue.

Hilary H. Lyons. *Holiday*. Oct. 1949. p. 20

(*The Watchful Gods*) reinforces our awareness of that combination of personal integrity and artful concentration which, aside from his Western settings, is the trade-mark of Mr. Clark's talent. . . . The activities of the Western setting seem always to be under examination, as though the author recognized the challenge to investigate the relationship of the human being to an environment which has too often frustrated the attempts of the writer to subdue it.

Mr. Clark's nature is not the idyllic world of nineteenth-century romanticism; neither is it a world of irrational malevolence such as that portrayed by our literary naturalists. Nature represents, rather, a stage whereon man's actions of necessity become more clearly defined.

Ray B. West, Jr. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 30, 1950. pp. 17–8

The difficulty is not that Mr. Clark is too much preoccupied with man's relation to the forces of nature but rather that he is apparently so little interested in the relations that exist between men, except in those limited areas where people have differing conceptions of their connection with the natural world. . . . When in 306 pages of short stories (*The Watchful Gods*) perhaps only 15 contain any dialogue, aside from people talking to animals, one must inevitably consider the extent of their relevance to the human situation, and one must wonder whether the writer's horizons are not bounded on the one hand by the hawk and on the other by the boy with the twenty-two.

Harvey Swados. *The Nation*. Oct. 7, 1950. p. 318

Clark's world is spiritually the world of the rural American, consisting of Nature, on the one hand, and Man on the other. . . . In all of Clark's fiction his exceptionally acute observations of outdoor sound, light, smell, mass, texture, and relationship are superior to his understanding of the human psyche in any but a decivilised area of operation. There is no living American writer of fiction who can type a richer page of landscape but no writer of

equal talent is more endangered by the inability to enrich his human types.

Vernon Young. *AQ*. Summer, 1951. pp. 110–1

The Track of the Cat deals with a great theme in American fiction, perhaps the greatest: the pursuit of an enemy in nature. . . . Clark localizes his theme in the attempt by a family of brothers to track down a great black panther during a mountain blizzard. His story is continuously and wonderfully exciting. He is able to bring before the reader with extraordinary vividness the clash of stubborn wills in the snow-bound ranchhouse, the unpopulated mountain landscape, the snow and cold, and above all, the hunt itself.

Paul Pickrel. *The Yale Review*. Autumn, 1949. pp. 190–1

There is an artistic unity and simplicity in *The Track of the Cat*, but there is also some of the looseness and apparent capriciousness of events which are in life. The actions have implications that go far beyond their limited context. . . . You can take *The Track of the Cat* as a symbolic, universal drama of Man against an implacable Evil Principle, forever stalking him, and you can ponder its implied question: If humility and violence meet the same end, is it a stalemate? Or you may enjoy it, without mysticism, as a stark story of man struggling with elemental antagonists in nature.

Edmund Fuller. *Saturday Review*. June 4, 1949. pp. 9–10

The Track of the Cat is one of the great American novels of ''place.'' Something of its nobility should be suggested by the fact that one cannot bring to mind a similar novel of its kind that is quite worthy of comparison. One thinks of the best in the genre, even of such work as Elisabeth Madox Roberts' *The Tree of Man* and Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, and they come to seem, by comparison, more than ever like miniature studies of special manners, more than graceful surely, yet without grandeur. Mr. Clark's new novel likewise transcends his own earlier books. . . . *The Track of the Cat* may well be the achievement that twentieth-century American regionalism has needed to justify itself.

Mark Schorer. *New York Times Book Section*. June 5, 1949. p. 1

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At first glance Andrei Codrescu seems to be an anti-traditional poet. Nothing happened until I was here, he says [in *The History of the Growth of Heaven*]:

> allowing for the thousand distortions
> that make us laugh, tell me,
> has anyone ever said anything?

Like the Dadaists he denies the existence of tradition, although this itself has become a well-known tradition. He treats the world as a newly created *tabula rasa* for his imagination. This is brash, but it has advantages. Perceptions are fresh, and there is genuine psychological realism; when experiences occur in life they often seem totally unique and the comparing process occurs only after the event. It is hard to be true to the experience and to the intellect at the same time.

Many actions in the poems are stated rather than evoked. Often the language is rather flat, without nuances, and there are some mistakes in English. After an interesting description of sex in New York and thousands of intertwined limbs, tongues, and genitals, the poet concludes: ''A ball of flame floats permanently around the city.'' This is a disappointing stock image. Or: ''things look real/ they freak me out''. Or: ''All resurrection must begin right away.'' Miraculous things occur and the poet presents many metaphors which are quite original but usually directly stated, with only a dime-store finish, and not evoked. There is freshness and magic in these poems; there is little intense feeling, but I think this is the intention of the author. He assumes that the world makes no sense, and because he believes each of his experiences is totally new he refuses to put himself in anyone else's shoes. He cannot speak for other, nor for what has happened in the past; he cannot compare. He gains in spontaneity, but loses in participation; the freshness is specialized. There are many good poems in this book: ''To the Virgin as She Now Stands'' and ''Late Night, San Francisco'' are strong poems with powerful endings. . . .

John R. Carpenter. *Poetry*. December, 1974, pp. 166–73.

[Andrei Codrescu is] considered by many writers to be one of this country's most imaginative poets, with talents similar to those of Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams. . . . Collections of [Codrescu's] poetry have appeared in numerous small press chapbooks and in two full-length books: *License To Carry a Gun* and *The History of the Growth of Heaven*. His poetry has been characterized as a ''magnificent clash of words,'' touched by an imagination that is magical, a clearer penetration into the soul of America by a foreigner than any by a native American poet.

All of these tributes are made to his poetry and it would be overly generous to extend these same characterizations to all of his prose writing. This autobiographical account [*The Life and Times of an Involuntary Genius*] is a procession of short jerky sentences that tell the story of the poet's childhood spent in a haunted castle in the dark hills of Transylvania. His grandmother lived in just two rooms on the lower floor which were the former servants' kitchen next to the big old kitchen. The other inhabitants of this dreary place were spiders, bats, ghosts, and various astral species. Andrei would see his mother on occasions whenever ''her men left her'' and then ''she would go into unending fits of despair and would threaten to wash the world away with her tears.'' Bursts of his poetic powers appear in almost every description of his parents, his grandmother, his young associates. . . .

The autobiography races rapidly through early adulthood and the worthless struggles with communist power which the poet experienced as an unbearable burden because of his scorn for authority. His early attempts at writing were belittled by the critics

and he was expelled from the university and served notice for military conscription. He decided to escape from his country without money, friends, or any knowledge of other languages and he wandered through the ghettos of Paris, Rome, Detroit, and New York's Lower East Side, and finally reached California. These accounts are full of adventure and colorful experiences with many bizarre characters and they move with spirit and brio. America becomes a place for him where the people ''smile dazzlingly and bang their Cadillacs into one another.'' Two Frenchmen whom he meets there at the corner of Bleecker and MacDougal in the Village had the ingenious way of making money by working with a Sperm Bank. Andrei worked at the famous 8th Street Bookstore before he finally migrated to San Francisco ''that wicked town filled with the most marvelous Mediterranean air and suicidal fog.''

The imagery and the freshness of the descriptions never cease to come, one after the other. It may be the greatest tribute to Codrescu that his prose drives a reader to the magical language of his poetry. . . .

Thomas A. Wassmer. *Best Sellers* June, 1975, pp. 69–70.

The typical Codrescu text throughout *Selected Poems* is short, quickly paced rather than discursive or meditative, surreal, erotic, intermittently violent, full of surprising turns of phrase and image—images and phrases enigmatic enough to invite more than one reading—and pervaded by a playful sense of humor. For Codrescu, even the most serious poetic utterance is a kind of joke, often a joke on the poet, told with the glee of a naughty little boy, which he clearly enjoys being. He revels in the shifting identities of the creator's role. . . .

The writer is having a good time, engaging in mischievous and ironic activity even when writing from the depths of sadness and depression, but not in a manner to set him brooding on the artist's tragic fate. No, the poet's art is magical, miraculous, and therefore comic for Codrescu: it can turn grief into fun simply by a twist of the sinewy mind, a turn of the tongue, his tongue, which is all the more amazing because it speaks in a second language, American English, which he wields with remarkable facility, felicity and fire.

Selected Poems is a sprightly book, light and smart like the banter of streetwise city boys after a horror movie, charged with a nervous youthful energy, sexy, a little menacing at times and clever in the best and worst of ways. At worst Codrescu's work comes off as evasive, cute or frivolous—''Creative Jive''—but at least these pieces make no pretense of their own importance. Most of the poems have a refreshing gleam in their eyes, a good-natured slash at the sensitive ego so often wounded by delusions of significance. At best they resonate very mysteriously, offering lively proof of the power of imaginative play. . . .

In America's Shoes is a parallel tale in prose which documents the period during which the poems were written, a warmly humorous narrative account of the poet's emergence as an American. It is a sequel to Codrescu's earlier ''autobiography,'' *The Life and Times of an Involuntary Genius*. While continuing with what purports to be his own life story—a sometimes fanciful mixture of legend and confession—he focuses on several of his friends of the 1960s and '70s, portraying them not only as interesting characters but also as cultural archetypes, poets and hippies and borderline bohemians with whom he shared various adventures, tragedies and revelations in the course of coming of age, marrying, and fathering two children.

The book opens with a very funny account of the author's induction into American citizenship. His perspective as an immigrant with a wickedly sardonic sense of the oppressive stupidity of all governments makes his testimony deliciously disillusioned yet cheerful. There is much shrewd, cynical insight into the workings of bureaucracy, and at the same time a tender appreciation of the sweetness and solidarity of friendship in the land of the free, where he now writes within earshot of a baseball stadium.

Because of his East European Jewish background, Codrescu becomes a kind of grandfather figure to many of his American contemporaries. He has an almost protective understanding of the fragility of yankee innocence and rootlessness while relishing the freshness of that innocence and mobility, enthusiastically cultivating those qualities in himself. Like any wandering rascal poet he experiments with experience, making assorted urban and rural scenes from coast to coast, meeting eccentric people, taking drugs, making love, and writing it all down.

What makes Codrescu's story more than just another personal tale of the life and loves of a roving rogue is his keen apprehension of American culture as only an outsider can see it. He claims, paradoxically, ''I've always been an American,'' and he is, in some ways even more profoundly than his native friends. The restlessness of his energy, his optimism, his refusal to be a sober adult—these are a few of his typically American traits. The book is an essay on US cultural history in the '70s, informally chronicling the massive turn toward guru-worship and the marketing of the psyche as suffered by some of his dearest comrades from the counter-culture.

In America's Shoes is also an interesting glimpse, or kaleidoscope of glimpses, into various poetry ''scenes''—especially of the San Francisco Bay area—of the '60s and '70s whose participants continue to make waves, or stagnant pools, in the swamps of American writing.

Codrescu is gossipy, alive to what's happening, young but seasoned enough to discount cultural icons or joyfully skewer their presumed authority. Kenneth Rexroth, Robert Bly, Jack Hirschman, and Bob Dylan are among the figures he sketches with delightful insight and irreverence. He seems an unusually happy person and his happiness radiates from the pages of his prose even more generously than from the poetry. The writing is a celebration, a festive song of gratitude for his good luck in the New World, and is pleasantly free of literary pretense even though he moves in literary realms.

In Baltimore, where he now lives, Codrescu writes a column for the Sunday Sun and co-edits the new journal *Exquisite Corpse*, ''a monthly of books and ideas,'' whose first few issues have been a dynamic mixture of opinion, polemic, satire and otherwise stinging commentary on current events in contemporary culture. If the *Corpse* survives, it promises to be a notable contribution to the country's maelstrom of little magazines. The wit and energy of his efforts give me the impression that Codrescu's presence as a poet and all-around cultural agitator will matter more and more. *Selected Poems* and *In America's Shoes* are suggestive evidence of a versatile writer whose gifts are swiftly evolving. . . .

Stephen Kessler. *San Francisco Review of Books* Winter, 1983–84, pp. 5–6.

When one reads the young Codrescu, one imagines an artist who wants to burn the museums. But he has written 15 volumes of poetry and two autobiographical prose works. Today he teaches at

Louisiana State University after a stint at Johns Hopkins and is a regular commentator on National Public Radio's ''All Things Considered.'' In the contemporary world of accelerated pace and dislocation, his expatriate sensibilities of wonder and detachment seem ever more timely.

In *Comrade Past & Mister Present*, his splendid new collection of poetry, prose and journal entries, this perpetual outsider offers ample evidence that even as his life grows more settled, he continues to push at his own outer limits, all the while treating the derangement of his senses with uncommon spontaneity and wit. Perhaps Flaubert was right when he suggested in his letters that one should live as a bourgeois, so that one can be wild and free in one's art. In [*Comrade Past & Mister Present*], he has successfully found a meeting place for his prose and poetry. He has left the characteristic movement of his earlier work, which was posing questions, taking them out of context and then allowing his diabolically dialectical mind to eat up the question itself. ''Comrade Past'' is an elliptical, extended poem with longer lines, designed like a series of opening doors or peeled-off layers. . . .

For Mr. Codrescu, images are embedded in language ''like anchovies in a pizza,'' as he puts it. He may play games, but if his intent is to take the reader's head off, he gently unscrews it and places it in one's lap. He shifts effortlessly from comic surrealist to naturalist, philosopher to saint to madman, but he is always the seeker after transcendence, in thrall to the unknown. . . .

In Mr. Codrescu's native Transylvania, poets are social spokesmen, and that perhaps explains his fearlessness of treading on the languages of philosophy, religion, politics, science or popular culture. His focus on a pet theme, oppression, is as much concerned with the private as with the public. He ominously begins the poem ''Momentary Bafflement with Return Home at Dawn'': ''Extremely logical circumstances are in effect / we are in danger of behaving as expected.'' Mr. Codrescu has a knack for bringing out dichotomies in matters moral, sexual and political, as when asking the perplexing question in the poem ''Dear Masoch'': ''What do you do if you're a masochist but have been placed / in a position of power?''

His journal entries, entitled ''The Juniata Diary: With Timely Repartees,'' range from remembrances of losing his virginity at the Museum of the Communist Party to explorations of ''sleep linguistics'' for a university of the future and reflections on those who have influenced his work (he eulogizes the late poet Ted Berrigan, much venerated as the ''Gulf Stream of Consciousness,'' as a mentor and a father). In this diary Mr. Codrescu also includes some of the rigorous intellectual gymnastics that find lyrical expression in the poems. Even when his sharp observations yield little more than dime store philosophy, it is a most interesting and frequently dazzling dime store presided over by one of our most prodigiously talented and magical writers.

Bruce Shlain. *The New York Times Book Review*. January 25, 1987, p. 15.

''America can be taken for granted,'' counsels Andrei Codrescu near the outset of his latest prose flight. ''The obvious is very serious about itself here.'' The point can hardly be argued in a country where morning papers carry headlines like ''Study Reveals Unreality May Be Good for You.'' It is with healthy doses of such medicine that the Romanian-born poet seeks to treat his adopted homeland. If these stories are termed ''instances of realism'' that's only because this eternal emigre views American reality as the outdated passport each new arrival carries in his vest pocket. As in his weekly musings for National Public Radio's ''All Things Considered,'' Mr. Codrescu succeeds in carving out his place as an American voice by failing to heed his own advice. In his work, not a single advertising jingle is taken for granted, the obvious is subverted through carefully aimed barrages of obscurity and no punditry is ever handled more seriously than a trip to the 7-Eleven.

Still, this volume [*Monsieur Teste in America*] will baffle a listening audience who have come to expect a cross between Andy Rooney and Andre Gide. Out of artistic integrity or self-indulgence, Mr. Codrescu chooses here to abandon mass taste, along with linear thought and most literary conventions. ''He was irony, she was subjective mysticism'' is about as much character development as we get. While *Monsieur Teste in America* offers copious servings of poetic observation, it skimps on the everyday detail that makes Mr. Codrescu's radio musings so affecting.

The title novella in this collection of short fiction offers an intriguing premise. On his 29th birthday, Mr. Codrescu summons Monsieur Teste, the Paul Valery creation who represents his intellectual conscience, to help him make sense—or better yet, nonsense—of American symbology. But premises are mere pretense, as is writing about how all writing is pretense, and Mr. Codrescu's dialogue soon makes the two alter egos sound like dueling Zen roshis: '''The point is that you can't trust the world with your understanding of it.' 'But how then . . . . can you entrust the world to your understanding?''' The story meanders off into the birth of a hermaphroditic love-child named Maximum, a discourse on ''crypto-morons'' and the cataloguing of American schools of poetry in the form of a luncheon menu. (''Aktup, Metabolism, the Bowel Movement and Syllogism. All have me as one of the founders.'') It comes as no shock when the piece concludes about Mr. Codrescu's European shadow, ''I had learned nothing from him and he who knew everything had taught nothing.''

In ''Samba de los Agentes,'' the ramblings and cadence of a Colombian immigrant named Jose sound suspiciously Slavic. Everyone in Mr. Codrescu's universe, including this ex-cop protagonist, is a poet and knows it. And all gain acceptance in America by sending some packaged piece of their souls to market. ''I have an agent, therefore I am,'' seems to be one of many subtexts in this odd regurgitation of the crime story genre. The six shorter pieces in the collection are scattershot affairs united solely through the use of female narrators who are hip, sassy and, once again, familiarly literary in their obsessions. The only voice individuated from the author's is faint indeed, emanating from the disembodied spirit of a spacey grad student channeled through a Brooklynese medium named Madame Rosa.

Like Nabokov's, Mr. Codrescu's greatest strength lies in his outsider's appreciation for the succulence of American idioms. Where language is reinvented daily on billboards, it offers liberation from the chains of connotation. ''Contagious words imbued with mass-market meanings like a sponge full of ink crowded my mind to dictate their grammar to me!'' the narrator confesses. ''The words of America's language brought me an incalculable dowry.''

Unlike that strain of American writing that seeks authenticity through spareness, Mr. Codrescu proves he's comfortable with the American idiom by taking colloquialisms out for every possible spin. For him, English is not a tool chest but a toy box—and there is playing in every page here. By now, Mr. Codrescu has become a master at mixing ontological speculation with such random bits of

Americana as ''flying K-Mart lawn chairs.'' But the author remains too enamored of purple prose for purpleness's sake. ''My dreams are dotted with the dance of psychopatia sexualis in the graveyard of the planet,'' is one of many sentences that read like bad sendups of beatnik prosody. And Mr. Codrescu would do well to sign up for the 12-step recovery program at Simile Addicts Anonymous. A sampling: New York is said to lie ''under the general strike like an actress under a Foreign Legionnaire''; ''Vague regrets coursed through him like phosphorus through protozoa''; '''I'm stuffed up with thoughts like a swan with pomegranates'''; ''Truth sits in an autobiography like a bird dog in an underground hospital.''

At this rate, America will need Andrei Codrescu the way a cement mixer needs a parakeet. *Monsieur Teste in America* opens with the author's admission that he's ''bored in heaven''—and what follows is both a celebration and a frantic evasion of that delicious fate that unites the assimilated and the lunatic. Perhaps Mr. Codrescu can't admit aloud that there's as little to becoming an American as he feared—or that, for all his wealth of associations, America may yet prove too small a subject.

John Krich. *The New York Times Book Review*. January 10, 1988, p. 17.

Like the panorama of life in post-revolutionary Romania, which the poet and essayist Andrei Codrescu describes with both awe and revulsion, *The Hole in the Flag* is a work of great complexity and subtlety. For everyone who watched as the Romanian revolution unfolded, Mr. Codrescu provides a gripping political detective story.

Mr. Codrescu, a regular commentator for National Public Radio who had been fiercely critical of the Ceausescu regime, arrived in Bucharest with a radio crew in the days of the December 1989 revolt. On one level, his book is a travelogue. In crisp, often humorous detail, he describes his experiences and reactions on returning to a land he had left as a teen-ager.

We learn a great deal about the harsh conditions in Romania that induced Mr. Codrescu and his mother to leave their homeland, and about the subtle and not-so-subtle changes brought about by 25 years of Ceausescu rule and a few days of revolution. These observations provide the background against which the other, more unsettling, themes of the book are woven. Foremost among these is the dark and still-unsolved mystery of what exactly did happen during those eight fateful days when Nicolae Ceausescu was toppled and a new Government took control.

Like most everyone else, Mr. Codrescu starts out convinced that the Romanian revolution was the result of a spontaneous popular uprising by an oppressed people against a tyrannical, narcissistic dictator. Early chapters describe the images of the revolution as portrayed in the media: a peaceful protest in Timisoara; machine guns firing into a crowd of unarmed civilians; the flight, capture and execution of the Ceausescus; a protracted battle between the Army and the shadowy forces of the Securitate; the deaths of tens of thousands and destruction reminiscent of World War II; the defeat of battalions of fanatical Ceausescu loyalists; and the final victory of the people under the benign leadership of a spontaneously created caretaker Government. A euphoric and ingenuous Mr. Codrescu—like much of the rest of the world—accepted this melodrama as the revealed truth.

Having skillfully carried us with him, he starts planting seeds of doubt by pointing out inconsistencies and improbabilities in the official account of the revolution. He winds up dissecting it event by event, image by image, assumption by assumption. The glorious, pure, idealistic vision of the Romanian revolution gives way to an ugly and misshapen thing, the product of a grotesque masterpiece of deception, ''a process of mass hypnosis.''

Everyone, of course, recognizes tyranny in a monster like Ceausescu. But Mr. Codrescu explores the ways in which government can accomplish its tyrannical ends by misdirection, without need of force. He argues that the revolutionary Government bamboozled the Romanian people through its control over the country's only television station. By manipulating televised images, Mr. Codrescu believes, members of the new Government managed to etch themselves into the minds of the Romanian people so deeply that no other party stood a chance of dislodging them. Much of the evidence the author marshals to support his thesis consists of deduction and speculation; it will be up to the reader to decide which vision of the Romanian revolution to believe.

What seems unassailable, however, is Mr. Codrescu's touching, painstakingly accurate description of Romania and its people, the good and the bad, the pristine and the hideous. Romania is one of the most beautiful places on earth. With a loving eye, Mr. Codrescu fills his book with the rich texture of Romanian culture, from the noble, turn-of-the-century buildings of Bucharest to the peasant shrines of his Transylvanian birthplace. He contrasts these with the unsightly rows of boxcar apartments built by Ceausescu and the ghastly pollution generated by mindless industrialization.

The Romanian people, too, present a series of disquieting contrasts. They are portrayed as generous, friendly, cosmopolitan and politically savvy, and as mean-spirited, grim, ethnocentric and politically naive. Drawing from the country's violent and often tragic history, Mr. Codrescu explains how the contradictory images are both accurate. Indeed, one cannot understand Romanian society, or grasp the magnitude of the problems it faces on its way to a Western-style democracy, without understanding paradoxes such as these in a country that has guarded the gateway to Europe for two millennia.

The most significant lesson of the Romanian experience may be that he who controls the media controls the course of events. This underscores the conviction that the ultimate guarantee of our own freedom lies not in our system of checks and balances, nor in our constitutional protections against unreasonable searches and seizures, nor in many of the other protections afforded by the Constitution—important though they all be—but in the First Amendment, which puts private individuals, the Government, firmly in control of our political and social discourse. It is a lesson well worth keeping in mind.

Alex Kozinski. *The New York Times Book Review*. June 30, 1991, p. 16.

Mr. Codrescu, a poet who is best known as an essayist on National Public Radio, takes this drive-time script and turns it inside out into a fine trick bag of wit, discovery and self-deprecation in a book badly titled *Road Scholar: Coast to Coast Late in the Century*.

From the outset, he is smart enough to anticipate the main pothole in driving a 1968 red Cadillac and retracing his own racy immigrant roots (he was born in Romania and came to the United States in the 1960s) through the locales of Hippiedom. ''I expected to find nothing in those places,'' he concedes, ''partly because

there would be little time to discover anything genuine, and partly because I never found anything of interest deliberately; the best discoveries of my life have been by accident.'' Fortunately, he changed his mind upon being advanced ''a ridiculously small amount of money that was, however, more than my poetry had earned me in a lifetime of practicing its dangerous pinturns.''

Mr. Codrescu takes off with a television documentary crew and a photographer, David Graham, who complements the author well in glimpsing the random nonsense and unreliable reality of things in general. It is a measure of Mr. Codrescu's talent that such an orchestrated mission manages to produce an unpretentious, wry journey in the art of essay writing, from light to sparsely serious. Once at the wheel of America's ''banal instrument of carnage,'' the writer buys fuzzy dice and a drink holder and begins driving from his New Orleans home to the Lower East Side digs of Allen Ginsberg. There they lightly agree to plot for the reburial of the poet Ted Berrigan's remains in the St. Mark's Church grave of Peter Stuyvesant, documented in passing from Mr. Codrescu's interesting store of American antihistory as a founding anti-Semite.

Thus does he putter in a kind of countertravelogue about the land, all the way to San Francisco, via the ''Kingdom of If,'' Las Vegas, with rarely a dull page in this simple book. It is mainly about the fun of writing and reading and meandering, rather than self-conscious synthesizing. Better for the reader to have Mr. Codrescu philosophically accepting a fax about the next city's lodgings from a cemetery attendant in Camden, N.J., who intrudes as the writer tries to have a special thought at the grave of Whitman, ''sexually manifold and optimistic, the spokesman of liberty in all its guises.''

Non sequitur, no harm. We're soon visiting the Burned-Over Patch region of surviving zealotries in a narrow swath of rural western New York. First, the Hutterians, the Christian communist and pacifist refugees who fled Hitler to live in Amish-like aloofness in a Bruderhof, or ''place of brotherhood.'' Then the descendants of the Oneida Perfectionists, who lived in a community conceived in free love, where the poet pines for the lost spirit of ''continual flirtation as in a medieval court of love.'' Mr. Codrescu is the sort of writer who feels obliged to satirize and interplay with reality and not just catalogue impressions. He can redeem flagging curiosity in a single sentence, as when, returning to Detroit haunts he loved as a student, he finds he must wax more Mad Maxish than Whitmanesque: ''I see that when a city becomes extinct, its last inhabitants go crazy.''

Mr. Codrescu is a reminder that locomotion is not the heart of the matter; a decent imagination is. Opinionated travelogue inventories of Americana won't do. Nor will serial compilations of unforgettable characters suffice, as Pete Davies proves in *Storm Country: A Journey Through the Heart of America*. Mr. Davies, a British novelist, is tireless as a lepidopterist in netting what feels like each and every flitting Midwesterner he spies in his travels (13 states, 1981 Ford pickup) in the heartland ''with its savage weather and its sentimental music.'' He packs his pages with characters, and the friends and relatives of these characters, each of them with a story to tell and each story pretty much told in his book to the point of Chaucerian overdrive. ''It's the nearest thing I know to going to the moon—and I love it! '' he exults as he wheels about, trying to document the withering of ''the whole mythic notion of what America is'' and capturing individual lives ''fresh out of a country song.'' It is the latter quality that intoxicates the book all too well. He concludes his 7,449 miles by comparing America to ''that girl you had that thing with when you were 20,'' an experience ''bigger than good or bad, bolder than right or wrong.'' Well, I guess. . .

. . . .Like a traveling child, a reader needs road games in these wordy jaunts. Mr. Codrescu, one eye on the mirror to check on our attention span, takes care to detour to places like Sun City, Ariz., a retirement community of gray-haired bikers, so we can hear its punk rock band, One Foot in the Grave, play ''Menopause.'' It beats counting brindled cows from the back seat. His imagination even saves us, just barely, at the book's more extended side trips into the post-Hippie spiritual pranks and placebos of the New Age counterculture in Santa Fe, N.M. Mr. Codrescu cannot resist nostalgically sampling the latest distractions from life at the hands of a crystal healer who transports him to ''a profoundly tacky psychic gap.'' ''You better hurry,'' he advises voyeuristic America. ''Prices are going up as we speak.''

Mr. Codrescu does well by vicariousness. His trip, antic as it is, silly as it can get, is best as a selfish sample of a nation changing weirdly, wonderfully, in one of its liveliest, most valuable eras of new immigrants—those fresh life-and-death travelers who are instantly redefining the lay of the land. ''America is the place where you must deliberately forgo revenge if you are to go forward,'' is as close as Mr. Codrescu comes to prescribing from the wheel of the red Caddy. ''You can be born again here, but like a baby you must cancel the pain that brought you here.''

Francis X. Clines. *The New York Times Book Review*. May 9, 1993, p. 1.

In his buoyant 1993 film, *Road Scholar*, the Romanian expatriate Andrei Codrescu emulated the American odysseys of Walt Whitman and Jack Kerouac. Stopping along the way west to scrutinize quaint national divinities, from hamburgers to crystals, Mr. Codrescu, grinning in his red Cadillac, fulfilled his immigrant's pledge: ''We were done with the Old World; liberty was ours.''

In his new novel, *The Blood Countess*, a Hungarian emigrant goes back to his bloody Old World, with no red Cadillac in which to escape crazy faiths. Drake Bathory-Kereshtur, a journalist in America, returns to an ''anxious and unsettled'' Budapest swarming with skinhead fascism, anti-Semitism and medieval magic from the fairy tales—or horror stories—that Communist indoctrination had suppressed. He sees that ''the lightly settled soil of democracy and atheism was rapidly turning over, releasing dormant agents.''

Awakening after a burial that seems long only to mortals, these ancient agents of savagery overwhelm modernity and its representative, the bemused Drake. The most tenacious monster is a woman: the 16th-century Countess Elizabeth Bathory, Drake's ancestor and the personification of his national past, who is said to have preserved her youth by bathing in virgins' blood. Elizabeth erupts into the present when a monarchist coterie declares Drake King of Hungary.

At the climax of the novel, Drake travels with these motley believers to ancient Bathory castles. In this nightmare journey, characters and country revert to their haunted past. Elizabeth returns as various strange apparitions, instigating a murder, which Drake accuses himself of before a high-minded American judge.

This parable of atavism and possession is chilling, but unfortunately, it is not the only story; interwoven with Drake's journey is a historical novel about Countess Bathory herself. Though she does not bathe in maidens' blood, she showers in it with the help of an

ingenious cage. Menstruating, marrying, studying herself in mirrors, biting little pieces out of her maids, experimenting with baroque sexual refreshments, Elizabeth Bathory supposedly embodies the demonic past.

Alas, she is too silly for that. On her wedding night she arouses herself with dreams of spurtings and spoutings and whippings fit to print only on the walls of a boys' locker room. As an incarnation of history, Elizabeth is closer to pornographic Victorian biters like Swinburne's pagan goddesses than she is to the cold hate at the heart of Mr. Codrescu's historical horror. Her supposed perversions distract from and diminish the authentic abominations of our own chilling times.

The Blood Countess is an ornate novel, thick with dense symbolism and decorative violence. It reveals a more ambitiously literary Andrei Codrescu than the popular commentator on National Public Radio, who is a wry and realistic political observer flaunting his dissociation from all countries, relishing quirks and denouncing all specimens of stupidity and tyranny. As a novelist, Mr. Codrescu borrows Kafka's enigmatic dream mode. He no longer aims to observe nations, but to create fantastic national allegories. His novel is so drenched in elaborate (if studiously metaphorical) sadism, in obscure fairy tales and legends, that I longed for his incisive radio voice to tell me what was going on.

The problem in this novel, as in its version of history, is women. They are virgins or vamps, victims or furies, who mess up an effective thriller. In the course of *The Blood Countess* the spirit of Elizabeth possesses all the modern characters, including a glamorous female professor who studies the Bathory archives, beats her adoring students and finally turns into a ridiculously overdrawn emanation of the Countess. Elizabeth also inhabits a comatose woman, allegorically named Eva, who prowls ominously around Hungary at the end, getting younger and younger. The arousal of women, this ending suggests, is the death of civilization.

I don't believe that, and I don't think Mr. Codrescu does either. *The Blood Countess* gets lost in lurid symbolism and bizarre sexual embellishments. Its operatic women become scapegoats for all social viciousness, but in the best parts of the book hatred is a pervasive, even casual motivation to everyone. I wish Mr. Codrescu had written a sparer, tighter novel about his bedeviled King of Hungary without trying to resurrect Elizabeth. As a specter, she is wonderful; as a character, she is ludicrous. Mr. Codrescu writes splendidly about women as remote agents of fear, but when he tries to depict them, campy posturing undermines political dread.

Nina Auerbach. *The New York Times Book Review*. July 30, 1995, p. 7.

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CONDON, Richard (1915–1996)

Mr. Condon shows himself well able to construct an exciting tale of crime on traditional lines, with all the homey concomitants of violence, double-cross, and rubbings-out. . . . Mr. Condon has placed his story [*The Oldest Confession*] in a Spanish setting so wild as to interfere with this enjoyable reading. We are constantly breaking off to laugh aloud or to rub our eyes and wonder if we really see what we think we do. . . . Mr. Condon can also be funny when he means to be. But the unconscious efforts remain, for me, the best.

Honor Tracy. *Saturday Review*. June 14, 1958. pp. 39–40

Unlike most other first novels, Richard Condon's [*The Oldest Confession*] is a fully controlled job of writing rather than an ardent grope. Written throughout with painstaking grace, not one scene or description is ever thrown away or treated in a commonplace manner. . . .

And yet the one thing its author is unable to convey is any feeling of depth, of real mortality unfolding before the reader. The deterioration of James Bourne, ivy-league master criminal, is singularly unmoving even as one stunningly dramatic scene or ingenious plot turn follows another. . . . If, the next time out, he can manage to open up and write more personally without marring his exceedingly refined sense of literary form, then we shall really be seeing a book. As things are now, no apologies are necessary to anyone for this is quite an impressive debut.

Gerald Walker. *New York Times Book Section*. June 22, 1958. p. 18

Richard Condon has found an original way of avoiding the second-novel problem. Last year he published his stimulating *The Oldest Confession*. Now in *The Manchurian Candidate* he comes up, simultaneously as it were, with his second, third, and fourth volumes. Within two covers he compresses (a) a breathlessly up-to-date thriller, gimmicked to the gills, from judo to narco-hypnosis; (b) a psychoanalytic horror tale about (what else?) a mother and a son; and (c) an irate socio-political satire that tries to flay our shibboleths alive.

Into all three stories Mr. Condon wades with the same brash, flat vim and with widely varying degrees of skill. . . . Mr. Condon is a fervently vivid, phrase-prone writer whose every sentence packs a compulsory punch. As soon as he becomes aware of an insight, he hits it home promptly with such might that the bang often drowns

out the meaning. When it comes to the rendition of mental states his typewriter really stutters.

His verbal manner fits much more happily into the satirical portions of *The Manchurian Candidate*. . . . Here Mr. Condon brings into play his true gift: a villainous flair for the ribald anecdote. His account of the sexual misadventures of a Senator is a wonderfully mean little masterpiece. The ignition and confusion of Washington's publicity engines by a surly Medal winner makes a vignette of murderous hilarity. What Mr. Condon has done to political conventions has been done to them before by other writers, but not very much better.

Frederic Morton. *New York Times Book Section*. April 26, 1959. p. 4

Richard Condon has concocted a smooth and palatable pousse-café of political satire, psychological speculation, pleasantly risqué antics a la Thorne Smith, and espionage maneuvering. His characters [in *The Manchurian Candidate*] are believable, if one-sided: Shaw remains an automaton, despite a rather dream-like love affair; his mother, the lovely and ambitious Mrs. Iselin, is by all odds the wickedest witch since Lady Macbeth, guilty of incest, adultery, pandering, betrayal and a host of other crimes, including nailing a puppy's paw to the floor; the Russian agents are superhumanly efficient; our own FBI and CIA only too fallible. Also, the basic assumptions of the plot do not withstand close examination. Happily, however, such examination is not necessary: this is a diversion, and a good one.

Talliaferro Boatright. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. June 28, 1959. p. 8

Meanwhile, we have Mr. Condon's spectacular—a documentary novel that reads rather like a newsreel with action packed people scenes between. *An Infinity of Mirrors* also has what film people call a strong story line as well as plenty of hotsy scenes. In fact the basic plot, like too many TV salesmen's faces, could move any product. It fits a western as well as a thriller. In this case, it just happens to be intercut with the holocaust. . . .

All the same, it's only fair to add that *An Infinity of Mirrors* is very readable, fast-moving, and rich in romantic detail of the high life. In fact what Mr. Condon has succeeded in doing is to make the rise of Hitler seem glamorous and sexy. There is even a comic subplot about secret agents in the best British film tradition. My chief complaint, then, is not that Mr. Condon has written a bad novel, it is that he has written an immoral one.

Mordecai Richler. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Sept. 13, 1964. pp. 4, 19

In *The Vertical Smile* Richard Condon, like many of his compatriot writers, has much to offer in brimming energy and expertise while displaying a complex and varied background. He sub-titles this long comprehensive novel as an ''entertainment'' but not everyone will accept this as an accurate description of the provocative disclosures and sexual deviations, sufficiently ''off-beat'' to alert even the most ''permissive'' reader. Ada Harris and Osgood Noon, lovers who met fortuitously by night in a hotel corridor and embarked upon a passionate affair without the formality of an introduction, are both in their ''seventies.'' . . . This curious situation could have been sufficient content for the novel. In fact it is only the jumping off point for a commentary on the American manner of conducting national policies. . . .

Clearly, Richard Condon is genuinely concerned at the pace, the corruption and the general craziness of so much in the American way of life. Like James Hanley, he sees people as being irrevocably divided into separate camps, but his technique of putting this across is totally different, in that he draws outsize, self-obsessed characters and places them in exaggerated situations. He offers no solutions. The reader may be so appalled by the frankness and crudity that he will reject the jolting disturbance of reading *The Vertical Smile*. If he persists he will emerge from the experience shaken but wiser, having enjoyed quite a few laughs on the way.

Rosalind Wade. *Contemporary Review*. July, 1972. p. 46

One has to piece together the Condon life—its details being inseparable from data about bathtubs in Indianapolis and zoning laws in Portugal—but the confusing evidence suggests that he got into writing late (except for an early monograph for *Esquire* on Mickey Finns) via a curious Hollywood route. He had been ''chief braggart'' for a number of films, then decided one day to leave press agentry, scribble up some scripts and thereby ''be fitted for gold toenails''; but when he sat down to his Olivetti he slipped inadvertently into the past tense and so turned novelist.

Maybe some of the extravagance of such tales as *The Manchurian Candidate* and *The Vertical Smile* derives from his Hollywood braggart period, but more likely it goes further back; as he says somewhere in this crazy new book [*And Then We Moved to Rossenarra*] he was perfectly modest until he was six. Anyway you would think that in dealing with dear old reality rather than fiction he would slow down. He is not noveling in the new book—and he is nearer 60 than six—but it makes no difference; he is still a glorious verbal braggart.

Reed Whittemore. *New Republic*. June 2, 1973. p. 26

Winter Kills is . . . a triumph of satire and knowledge, with a delicacy of style and a command of tone that puts Condon once again into the first rank of American novelists. Condon's hero is the lineal descendant of the ineffectual avengers who stalked the movie world of the 1950s. But while they were trying to hold onto a warped dream of individuality, Nick Thirkield is merely trying to find a fact. And Condon goes with him, less interested in facts than in nonfacts and superfacts, not historical truth but the Macy's parade of history, the overblown images from which we have all manufactured our own paranoid vision of the true connections of American society. . . .

Winter Kills, then, is ''some kind of bummer through American mythology,'' in which almost all of Condon's characters, from highest to lowest, are driven by the American dream of being someone, making a difference, having power and control. *Winter Kills* isn't the world; it's the way we think about the world, the distortions and how they are created, ''the application of the techniques of fiction playing like search-lights on a frenzied façade of truth.'' Condon has created a paranoid novel that does not leave us trapped inside its world, but functions instead as a liberation, exposing through the gentler orders of fiction the way we have been

programmed to believe anything in print. By mingling historical reality with his own fabulous invention, Condon savagely satirizes a world in which fiction and reality are mingled to manipulate, exploit and kill.

Leo Braudy. *New York Times Book Section*. May 26, 1974. p. 5

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CONNELL, Evan S., Jr. (1924–)

The writer who tries to create art with the story must . . . take a position. He must feel deeply (passionately, I suspect) about why the human beings he is telling about operate as they do. It's not a matter of striking a pose or rising to a moral. It is a matter of finding motivation that prevails, getting at a piece of truth.

This is what makes Connell's short stories worth considering seriously. His people are captives within themselves. They are isolated—so isolated that we wonder whether Mr. Connell wouldn't like to make this isolation one of those ''eternal verities'' or whatever they are that William Faulkner insists on throwing at us. For when Mr. Connell's characters reach out from their isolation to make contact with the world and its inhabitants, they are either rebuffed, entangled in the debris of other lives, turned further inward or simply destroyed.

Webster Schott. *New Republic*. Oct. 14, 1957. p. 20

It seems to me that Evan Connell could become one of our best writers. . . . The Bridges [in *Mrs. Bridge*] are as vivid a family as I have encountered in modern fiction, and as individuals they are scarcely less immediate. But they are terribly, deliberately and predictably limited. . . . Mr. Connell knows so much more than he is willing to tell that he has failed us by remaining partially silent. . . .

But whether Evan Connell writes up, down or sideways he is a joy to read for he employs a prose style that is his own and yet not grotesque in its singularity nor dense in its idiosyncrasies. It is clear, it is clean, and it communicates. Finally, Mr. Connell is able to do easily—so easily—the one thing that it has always seemed to me hardest and most important for a novelist to do. He can make his characters change.

Robert Gutwillig. *Commonweal*. Feb. 13, 1959. p. 525

[*Mrs. Bridge*] is a startling performance, one of brilliant wit and, despite a surface coldness of satire, a sympathetic one. Mr. Connell's characters are not notably depraved or wicked or even ungenerous, but they are small. They seem bent upon making spiritual midgets of themselves, or perhaps it is the thin air they breathe that makes them so small, so disappointing to themselves. . . . In spite of the superb technique many readers may find this a chilling book, but for others that very astringency will be part of its individuality and impact.

Riley Hughes. *Catholic World*. March, 1959. p. 509

Evan Connell has written a curious and original book about an American at war. Everybody knows the intensity with which American writers have studied the experience of the last war, but *The Patriot* avoids their inclination to regard the experience as somehow too big to be moralized over. Such novelists have concluded that the war was fearsome, that it was ''real'' in an unprecedented way and altered understanding and attitudes, but only the squarest characters in their fiction discuss it in terms of good and bad. Cadet Isaacs, by contrast, escapes with his moral faculty just intact. . . . Mr. Connell and his hero rend their innards in the effort to digest an experience conventionally indigestible.

Neal Ascherson. *New Statesman*. Feb. 16, 1962. p. 235

In a remarkable, long poem [*Notes from a Bottle Found on the Beach at Carmel*] written in prosaic lines chocked and often choked with facts, containing all manner of odd, bizarre and quaint information, Evan S. Connell, Jr. states the condition of our times. . . .

Evan Connell is a Spengler for declining the West. The speaker of the poem is a speculative protagonist, a meditative man, a philosopher who goes on a vast odyssey of seas, libraries, and histories to discover the meaning of life and final meaning. . . .

It is enjoyable to read the poem for its philosophy. The author never raises his voice as he traverses his fabulous seas, lands, histories, and life cycles. He poses no solutions. He is unprophetic. He warns and remonstrates, baring his calm, rational, all-observant wisdom throughout.

Richard Eberhart. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 10, 1963. p. 18

A recent and extraordinary book which has a growing underground reputation is *Notes from a Bottle Found on the Beach at Carmel* by Evan S. Connell, Jr. [It] is a long (238 pp.) beautifully executed narrative poem of the size and scope of Pound's *Cantos*. It is a learned and subtle poem, yet written in a style of great clarity and precision, all its virtuosity gracefully concealed. This poem could easily be the most important single poem of our period when we have enough perspective to see things clearly. That it has, so far,

been ignored by most of the critics of poetry may charitably be attributed to the fact that Connell enjoys a considerable reputation as a prose writer and has published very little verse in the magazines. Meanwhile, strange as it seems, without fanfare or controversy, *Notes from a Bottle Found on the Beach at Carmel* has sold quite well in the bookstores.

George Garrett in *American Poetry*, edited by John Russell Brown, Irvin Ehrenpreis, and Bernard Harris (St. Martin's). 1965. pp. 237–8

The sensational but truly descriptive title of Mr. Connell's fine new novel [*The Diary of a Rapist*] may lead readers who do not already know his work to expect a lurid sex adventure concocted for the best-seller and paperback trade. This is very far from the case. The diary is a low-keyed, pointillistic rendering of the needs and despairs of a young clerk working in a federal employment bureau, married to a woman who has rejected him, and seeking refuge in hopeless ambitions, fantasy, and petty violence. The quiet piecing together of incident recalls Mr. Connell's *Mrs. Bridge*; the jeremiads against civilization, *Notes from a Bottle Found on the Beach at Carmel*. On the whole, however, Mr. Connell's book is closer to Keith Waterhouse's *Jubb* than to any of his own previous books. The mood is British, restrained, melancholic; the prose highly polished, elegant even in its occasional inelegancies.

Dorothy Nyren. *Library Journal*. April 15, 1966. p. 2084

Before attempting a novel, Connell mastered the short story. His first book was *The Anatomy Lesson, and Other Stories*. He has acknowledged debts to Proust, Mann, and Chekhov, has studied under Wallace Stegner and Walter van Tilburg Clark, and has expressed his admiration for the historical fiction of Janet Lewis. The tone of a Connell story is unmistakably American; the perception is European. He can evoke a heightened moment of experience, relying less on plot than on innuendo. With Joyce and Flaubert, he shares a predilection for epiphanic detail and ''the ineluctable modality of the possible.''

A Connell story is like the sieve of Eratosthenes: everything nonessential is filtered out until only what is prime remains. Grace and equipoise are properties of his work, and he is adept at rendering the ambiguity of an emotion or situation. Avoiding the beginning-middle-end artifice of narrative fiction, Connell creates the illusion that his stories are nothing more than textures or surfaces. Smooth overall, the narrative armature of a Connell story is oblique, helical, and sinusoidal. Here his affinities with Chekhov and Proust are apparent, particularly in his preference for the rough-edged story of mood. Shunning any realistic imitation of life, he unerringly achieves intense verisimilitude. With Joyce's godlike author, Connell remains aloof from his creations, completely outside them, in apotheosis, paring his fingernails.

Gus Blaisdell. *New Mexico Quarterly*. Summer, 1966. p. 183

Ten years ago Evan S. Connell, Jr., published a first novel entitled *Mrs. Bridge*. It consisted of 117 related vignettes in which Connell, with great skill, laid bare the privileged yet empty life of his white Protestant, upper-middle-class heroine. . . .

Mrs. Bridge was a tour de force, a well-written, bittersweet book in which the author's despair for the fate of his people was nicely balanced by his love for them.

Now, ten years and several books later, Connell has returned to the materials of his early success. In *Mr. Bridge* the characters are the same, as is the technique, but this time the spotlight is trained on the husband. . . .

The vignettes in *Mr. Bridge* are readable, often insightful, sometimes brilliant; but they lack the consistent precision and dazzle of the earlier work. The story itself has less of a cumulative effect. . . .

Taken alone, *Mr. Bridge* is not a bad book, in spite of its defects. But it is not as good a novel as the one with which it will inevitably be compared.

Peter L. Sandberg. *Saturday Review*. May 3, 1969. p. 32

Like many of his contemporaries, Connell is no storyteller. Writers like Roth and Bellow, however, find cunning facades for their jerry-built structures (through Portnoy's psychoanalysis or Herzog's letters), whereas Connell is ingenuous in disguising his inability to construct a tale. *Mrs. Bridge* is written in a series of very short chapters (some paragraph-long) that simply slice up the heroine's life, while *The Diary of a Rapist* employs the oldest and least convincing plot evasion known to literature.

Evan Connell, then, is a novelist who can't construct stories about uninteresting or remote people told in characterless prose. Why give him any attention? Because in everything he writes, he is admirably serious and painstaking and because, like a character actor who disappears into his role, Connell always has the potential for turning imitation into insight.

Charles Thomas Samuels. *New Republic*. June 7, 1969. p. 21

Ten years ago, when everything was different, the novel *Mrs. Bridge* by Evan S. Connell, Jr. attracted attention as one of those few American books which succeed in telling us something about that mysterious realm, the American Middlewest of the middle classes. . . .

In *Mrs. Bridge* Connell named the artifacts of that place and that time, spoke the dialect, rehearsed its folkways, all with the inseparable mixture of love and horror we must each of us have had for our parents and for our own childhood. Its form was ingenious. A major part of the success of the book was that Connell had found a solution to the problem of making a whole book out of lives whose only story, whose entire theme and plot and texture, is simply that they have no story.

John Thompson. *Commentary*. July, 1969. p. 63

[*Points for a Compass Rose*] is a book—plainly and simply that, gracefully written in fine ironic style expressing very well the moral tensions of the inner man who is the author. The work most like it, of course, is Connell's earlier *Notes from a Bottle Found on the Beach at Carmel*, for both of these must have found their origin in his journals. But *Points for a Compass Rose* also calls to mind J.G. Ballard's collection of grotesqueries, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, and William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*.

His purpose is didactic—and now beware, for we are into the meaning of it all. Connell seems constantly to be adjuring us to ''look'' or ''listen,'' or challenging us, ''Do you understand?'' Clearly, he wants us to understand, for this work which he calls ''a gnomic book about America'' has been written to show us what we have become. ''Of what value is life,'' he asks, ''if it's not woven on history's loom into other lives?'' Well, in *Points for a Compass Rose*, Evan S. Connell, Jr., attempts to do just that. Our civilization, our culture, our lives are on his loom here. We may not like the pattern of moral disaster that emerges, but there is no denying a certain cruel accuracy in the lineaments of his design.

Bruce Cook. *Book World*. May 27, 1973. p. 10

When I first heard that Evan S. Connell, Jr. had brought out another epic-length poem [*Points for a Compass Rose*], I was exhilarated for days. We have here on the planet with us a man of such courage and strength of spirit that he has not lost what Alfred Adler calls ''the nerve for excellence.'' He has kept it despite the burden of an awareness not only of the enormity of his project and of the limitations of his own human understanding, but also of the abject ignorance and indifference of his audience. . . .

It is time—past time—to approach Connell's poetry seriously, with meek heart and due reverence. . . .

[*Points for a Compass Rose* and *Notes from a Bottle Found on the Beach at Carmel*] are masterpieces. You could bend a lifetime of energy to their study, and have lived well. The fabric of their meaning is seamless, inexhaustible. . . .

Their language is steely and bladelike; from both of its surfaces flickering lights gleam. Each page sheds insight on every other page; understanding snaps back and forth, tacking like a sloop up the long fjord of mystery. Thinking about these poems, one at a time or both together, is a sweet and lasting pleasure to the mind.

Annie Dillard. *Harper's Magazine*. Jan., 1974. pp. 87, 90

A certain kind of novel has always reported on reality for us, told us things we didn't know; has let us into feelings and places we haven't had and haven't seen; and it is probably the current scarcity or ineptitude of this kind of novel which is driving us to biographies for a sense of how other people live (or used to live) their daily lives. *The Connoisseur* admits us into a man's mind, persuasively evokes the beginnings of a mild mania, takes us to Taos, brings us back to New York, propels us through a party, a museum, an art gallery, and a Mexican restaurant. But its major development is an extended description of an auction held in a motel in Queens. . . .

The effect is not that of a documentary, but it is that of a novel: an unfamiliar world is made present, real enough for us to feel that our experience of life has been extended by our reading. It doesn't matter whether Connell invented the auction or transcribed an actual event more or less faithfully. It is the business of many novels to make such distinctions seem trivial. . . .

Connell's writing . . . is discreet, efficient, sometimes flat, quite often verging on cliché. . . .

The Connoisseur seems to be asking whether this kind of fiction—the imaginative exploration of a moment of change in a none too representative life—has any future.

Michael Wood. *New York Review of Books*. Nov. 28, 1974. pp. 29–30

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CONNELLY, Marc (1890–1980)

George S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly, whose delectable comedies *Dulcy* and *To the Ladies* struck one more through their reserve than through any expression of ironic vision, have let themselves go at last. . . . I wish to praise the authors of *Beggar on Horseback* most heartily for this, that they laugh at fatuousness and gross materialism, at triviality of mind and soul, at stubborn stupidity and dishonor no longer conscious of itself, not as these qualities are contrasted with some specious moralistic idealism, but as they are contrasted with art, with the eternal creative spirit, with the quest of him who is driven despite himself to pursue that beauty which is also truth.

Ludwig Lewisohn. *The Nation*. Feb. 27, 1924. pp. 238–9

What would make *Beggar on Horseback*, agreeable as it is all through, into a play of importance, would be a continuation of the exact comment on life, and especially on middle-class American life, that appears in the first act. This satire, tinged with love and with the purity that arises in the young man through his desire for beauty and creation, might move to a slightly darker note now and again, but the comic simile and the wit of it would in the end arrive only through this exactitude and this patient study with delight. . . . In sum *Beggar on Horseback* starts sharply toward something that, if it were achieved, would be gayer by reason of its subtlety, more biting for its reckless satire and crude truth, and more unforgettable because of its long thought and because of the wistful, frank reserve that underlies so much of American self-expression. It does not arrive at this something, though the promise is there often enough, and in the first act almost always.

Stark Young. *New Republic*. March 5, 1924. p. 45

. . . Mr. Connelly does not go far into social philosophy; his play *The Wisdom Tooth* has only implications of social satire, only little hints about business men and boarders, and not many hints and implications at that. His hero is a single case and we are to watch his fortunes more, I gather, for the sentiment involved, the fantasy and the homely romance, than for any sting or theory about our society, our national or local characteristics, our blurred uniformity. And yet there are elements in *The Wisdom Tooth*, as there were in *Dulcy* and *To the Ladies*, and *Beggar on Horseback*, that stick in the mind and ramify.

Stark Young. *New Republic*. March 3, 1926. p. 45

Leading the play [*The Green Pastures*] thus, through numerous scenes and incidents that may sometimes appear merely casual and relaxed, on to a final summit, makes for the inclusion of many conceptions familiar in religious thought—that, for instance, of God needing man as man needs God—and by ending on that note of God's sacrifice through his own son, achieves a genuinely heroic and mystical level. And this is accomplished with no violation of the material in the book. . . . In Mr. Connelly's play, in Mr. [Roark] Bradford's book [*Ol' Man Adam an' His Chillun*] . . . this figure of God, with his kindness, his tricks, his patience, pleasures and human troubles and ups and downs, is a remarkable interpretation of the whole soul of the people in the play; it is, in the finest sense, a creation of an idea in dramatic terms.

Stark Young. *New Republic*. March 19, 1930. p. 129

Marc Connelly, to whom the play [*The Green Pastures*] was suggested by a series of stories in Negro dialect—Roark Bradford's *Ol' Man Adam an' His Chillun*—is the person most immediately responsible for the extraordinary performance, but neither he, the original author, nor even the fine cast of black actors can claim the largest share of the credit, since the fundamental creative work was done by the anonymous geniuses who composed the spirituals upon which the whole is based. Mr. Connelly and the rest have cooperated with great skill and delicacy; they seem, one and all, to have been gifted with a remarkable imaginative insight into the mood of the materials at hand. . . .

Joseph Wood Krutch. *The Nation*. March 26, 1930. p. 376

. . . *The Green Pastures* is not a dramatization. Distinctly this is an adaptation. The book of [Roark] Bradford's served as a springboard for the play of Connelly's. I am aware that there are a number of lines in the play which are taken literally from *Ol' Man Adam an' His Chillun*, but there is a vast change in mood. Mr. Bradford seems to have been interested almost exclusively in the humorous potentialities of Bible folklore told from a Negro point of view in Negro dialect. The agonizing, heartbreaking moments of the play are wholly Connelly.

I do not hold that pathos is of necessity a higher artistic expression than the merely comic, but Connelly's contribution is better rounded. He has taken black loam and breathed upon it. There is nothing in the book which lays hands upon my spine as does the march of the Children in the scene which pictures the road to *The Promised Land*.

But whether the play or the book is better makes a small difference for the purpose of this piece. It is enough to indicate that they are different.

Heywood Broun. *The Nation*. April 9, 1930. p. 415

In a sense *The Farmer Takes a Wife* is robustious enough and enlivened by a great deal of very picturesque speech, but I am led to wonder whether or not anyone has ever noted the fact that Mr. Connelly is distinguished from other Broadway playwrights with whom one might tend to think of him by the fact that he is not in the least ''hard-boiled.'' Somehow or other he has managed to escape from the tough tradition which rules our stage in so far as it is dominated by that Broadway with which he is more or less associated. His plays are never vulgar and never, like the typical product, somehow unpleasantly brassy. Below the surface of his sophistication is a delicate fancy, an essentially gentle spirit, something one would be inclined to call a kind of quaintness if it were not for the unfortunate associations of that word. It is that which in general makes the charm of his plays and that which contributes so much to *The Farmer Takes a Wife*. It is romantic with a romanticism which takes one unawares, charming with a charm which one does not resent because it is insidious without being obtrusive.

Joseph Wood Krutch. *The Nation*. Nov. 14, 1934. pp. 573–4

''Gangway! Gangway for de Lawd God Jehovah!'' The modern theatre has produced no entrance cue better known or more affectionately remembered. These are words which even when read make the heart stand still. Heard again in the theatre, heard in the world as it now is, their impact is, if anything, greater than when they were spoken twenty-one years ago in that other simpler and comparatively civilized world in which *The Green Pastures* was first produced.

When Marc Connelly finished his script, he had written a far, far larger play than perhaps he realized he was writing. . . . *The Green Pastures* is a masterpiece. I came to realize this early during its initial run and only wish I had had the sense to do so on the night of its opening. But then, to my shame, I missed the boat, which was quite a boat to miss considering it was the Ark. Though back in 1930 I saluted *The Green Pastures* as being brave and meritorious, I felt that, in spite of its charms and delights, it somehow fell short of its ultimate goal. . . . Whatever my reasons may have been, this much I know: I was wrong.

John Mason Brown. *Saturday Review*. April 7, 1951. pp. 28–30

The Green Pastures has always seemed to me a deft, picture-book sort of play for big-city people who are nostalgic about a quality they believe their parents or grandparents once possessed and which they can only recapture in the form of ''clever'' fun—gay pigment and self-consciously cute drawing. I find no trace of genuine moral sentiment here, only the pseudo-religiosity of the Easter pageant in the larger movie houses—far more skillful and entertaining, of course, but only a little less hypocritical.

Harold Clurman. *New Republic*. April 16, 1951. p. 30

He says he is attempting [in *The Green Pastures*] to translate the religious conceptions of thousands of untutored Negroes as they have adapted the Bible stories to suit the experiences of their lives. Yet . . . he admits that he has used certain characters in his dramatization which are not in the Bible at all. His only justification for using such counterfeit characters is his belief that ''persons like them have figured in the meditations of some of the old Negro preachers.''

However, let us not hold this inconsistency against Mr. Connelly. Let us see whether or not he has achieved his main purpose, which is to present a genuine representation of the religious beliefs of thousands of untutored Negroes in the deep South.

I charge that Mr. Connelly has utterly failed to accomplish this purpose, and that his representation is counterfeit.

Nick Aaron Ford. *Phylon*. Spring, 1959. p. 68

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CONROY, Pat (1945–)

He's not much of a stylist and his sense of humor needs work, but Pat Conroy has a nice, wry perspective and a wholehearted commitment to his job. It's a hell of a job and *The Water Is Wide* is a hell of a good story. . . .

Why did Pat Conroy want to go to Yamacraw [Island]? Because he was young and ambitious and he loved teaching. Even more important, he was a do-gooder, enveloped in a ''roseate, down-like and nauseating glow'' at the masochistic prospect of accepting a job in which the odds were all against him. A former redneck and self-proclaimed racist, he brought to Yamacraw the supererogatory fervor of the recently converted. . . .

Mr. Conroy's first job was to prove to his pupils that learning could, and should, be fun. His theory of pedagogy held ''that the teacher must always maintain an air of insanity, or of eccentricity out of control, if he is to catch and hold the attention of his students.'' He believed in ''teacher dramatics, gross posturings and frenzied excesses to get a rise out of deadhead, thought-killed students. . . . '' Two things he did not realize were that his students would take his antics literally and that they could hardly understand a word he said. Nor could he understand them at first, because they spoke a local version of the Gullah dialect. . . .

Mr. Conroy's modesty will not allow him to claim much for his year at Yamacraw, but he did get his pupils to listen to Beethoven and Brahms by alternating them with James Brown. He also opened their minds to an outer world they had never even conceived of. And, most memorable of all, he taught them to trust a white man and to believe that he cared about them.

After his first year, Mr. Conroy ''desperately'' wanted to return to Yamacraw, but he was fired on the grounds of insubordination, failure to respect the chain of command and lateness when his boat got lost in the fog or buffeted in heavy water. The real reason was never in doubt: He had tried to do too much too soon. If he had been more diplomatic, if he could have conquered his ego, the author says with commendable candor, he might have been allowed to continue.

He refuses to make a villain out of the school superintendent who fired him. Unlike many liberal do-gooders, Mr. Conroy does not see all conservatives, racists, reactionaries or rednecks as one-dimensional monsters. In his eyes, they are as much victims of their history—at least in their thinking—as the black people whose problems they haven't even begun to understand.

Anatole Broyard. *The New York Times Book Review*. July 13, 1972, p. 33.

''They gave me a boat, told me 'Good Luck,' and that was all they told me,'' Conroy recalls [in *The Water Is Wide*]. Apparently, however, he had a tape recorder in hand and photographers in tow. Conroy's brief sojourn into the life of Yamacraw Island seems to have been a planned ''experience,'' one from which he was determined to garner a book.

This is not to negate the experiential value of Conroy's travels into the wilds of the Sea Islands, but it is to suggest that as educational literature *The Water Is Wide* offers nothing. Conroy does not provide any of the badly needed alternative suggestions for alleviating or controlling the stifling ignorance that is an ever-present part of the American education scene. Perhaps this was not his intent; if so, his writing style unfortunately belies it. . . .

When Conroy arrived at the little schoolhouse on Yamacraw, the average reading ability of the 17 students in grades five through eight was first grade level. We never really know if Conroy attempted to teach them to read as opposed to remembering information by rote, or if he tried to apply his call-answer technique to the teaching of information more fundamental to their Sea Islands existence.

Conroy's book is worth reading if only for the acknowledgments, which read like the Charleston and Columbia, South Carolina, social register. It is entertaining and very readable as a sympathetic view of the Sea Islands and as the story of a young white Southerner's awakening. It gives interesting insights and observations about the processes of black Southern rural education from a young white Southerner's point of view; but it would seem that while Conroy understood that the water is wide, he did not ''keep the river on his right.''

Jim Haskins. *The New York Times Book Review*. September 24, 1972, p. 10.

[With *The Lords of Discipline*], Mr. Conroy has found a great subject and has produced a book so superior to his other efforts that it might have been written by a different person. In fact, I read the first 200 pages thinking that this not only was a very good book but also one so memorable and well-executed that it would become the yardstick against which others of its kind would be measured. Alas, the next 300 pages proved this not so.

The Lords of Discipline deals with those beautiful, terrible years when a boy struggles toward manhood, when he must try to decide wherein honor lies, when he is faced with making the decision about what he wants and what he is willing to pay to get it. And he must, during this dreadfully uncertain time, bear the burden of what his parents want and expect of him, as well as the crushing pressure of his peers. Some fight their way through to their own truth; others bend or break during the ordeal.

Will McLean, the boy at the center of this story, makes the passage to manhood without breaking, but he is left with deep and permanent scars. . . .

In the second section of the book, the story that has been set into motion thus far stops and Will McLean relives his own nightmarish plebe year. This may seem an unlikely way for the novel to proceed, but to my mind it works and is natural and necessary. Here Pat Conroy lays open the barbaric nature of the human heart. Boys set upon other boys like packs of dogs. For the plebes, there is no recourse, no redress. They either bear it or break. Some break, and many who don't become sadists.

The story has more twists than a snake's back. There are reversals inside reversals. Mysteries sprout like mushrooms after a summer rain. The greatest plot reversal comes in the final 10 or so pages. But I was not surprised; I knew who the arch villain was long before he was revealed. Even if I had been surprised, I don't think I would have cared. It's that kind of book.

Simply put, after a very auspicious start, Pat Conroy's creative energies are sidetracked during the course of this book. Ultimately, he is more interested in posing and solving clever puzzles than in developing the character of the human beings inside those puzzles. Consequently, the reader remains unmoved . . . by the ultimate betrayal that ends the novel.

Harry Crews. *The New York Times Book Review*. December 7, 1980, pp. 12, 43.

The Southern-boy protagonists of Pat Conroy's fiction have twin obsessions—oppressive fathers or father figures, and the South. Against both they fight furiously for selfhood and independence, yet they never manage to secede from their seductive entrappers. Some fatal combination of nostalgia and loyalty holds them back; they remain ambivalent sons of their families and their region, alternately railing against, then shamelessly romanticizing, the myths and strictures that imprison them.

After Bull Meecham, the self-aggrandizing hero of *The Great Santini*, crashes his F-7 and is buried with military honors, his oldest son, who has often prayed for his death, dons the father's flight jacket and is overwhelmed with love for him. In *The Lords of Discipline*, a corrosive fictional expose of racism and brutality in a Southern military college, the narrator, a graduate of the college, tells us: ''I want you to understand why I hate the school with all my power and passion. Then I want you to forgive me for loving the school.''

The same ambivalences are rife in *The Prince of Tides*. The Southern-boy narrator, Tom Wingo, is now in early middle age. A fired high school teacher and football coach, he describes himself as a Southern-made and Southern-broken failure, ''the most dishonest person I've ever met. I never know exactly how I feel about something.'' But he also claims that it is the Southern part of him ''which is most quintessentially and fiercely alive,'' and that his Southern memories ''surround the lodestar of whatever authenticity I bring to light as a man.''

In contrast, Tom's twin sister, Savannah, is ''one of those southerners who were aware from an early age that the South could never be more for them than a fragrant prison administered by a collective of loving but treacherous relatives.'' Having fled the low country of South Carolina right after high school, she is now a famous poet, living in New York and writing poems that make the language ''sing and bleed at the same time'' about growing up as a shrimper's daughter. ''The South kills women like me,'' she tells Tom. However, safe in Greenwich Village, she periodically tries to kill herself.

It is her latest suicide attempt, followed by a severe psychotic withdrawal, that lands her in Bellevue, summons Tom to New York and provides the novel's narrative device. Savannah's psychiatrist, Dr. Susan Lowenstein (''one of those go-to-hell New York women with the incorruptible carriage of lionesses''), asks Tom to stay in New York for an extended period and tell her ''all he knows'' about Wingo family life. ''From beginning to end,'' he promises, over a candlelit dinner at Petite Marmite. For the rest of the book, the chapters alternate between Tom's narratives of ''the grisly details of our epic childhood'' and his increasing romantic involvement with his sister's psychiatrist.

The Wingo family configuration bears resemblances to previous parent-sibling setups in Mr. Conroy's work, but this time everything is bulging with symbol and jacked up to the lofty realm of myth. The bullying Henry Wingo is another Santini, with a shrimp boat instead of an F-7, but the negative aspects of fatherhood and manhood that he personally embodies now extend to the bigger Bad Daddies of business, politics and the narrow- minded authoritarianism of government. The beautiful Lila Wingo belongs to that species of Southern mothers described in *The Lords of Discipline* who ''rule their families with a secret pact of steel,'' and whose sweetness, deadly as snakes, ''has helped them survive the impervious tyranny of Southern men.'' But her beguiling, undermining poisons have now leached beyond the domain of a specific family and stand for treacherous womanhood in all its manifestations, as well as the Southern way of life.

In the Wingos' ''grotesque family melodrama,'' as Tom calls it, each of the three children has been assigned an unchangeable role. Savannah is the gifted lunatic who bears the accumulated psychotic energy. Luke, the older brother, is the strong, simple man of action, ''The Prince of Tides'' in Savannah's book of poems by that name, who becomes a local martyred folk hero after waging a one-man guerrilla war against the heaviest father of them all, the Atomic Energy Commission, which appropriates his hometown and the family's island to make plutonium for hydrogen bombs. And Tom is ''the neutral country, the family Switzerland,'' a go-between with ''the soul of a collaborator,'' who has been ''tamed by mortgages, car payments, lesson plans, children, and a wife with more compelling dreams and ambitions than my own.''

The ambition, invention and sheer energy in this book are admirable. But many readers will be put off by the turgid, high-flown rhetoric that the author must have decided would best match his grandiose designs. And as the bizarre, hyperbolic episodes of Wingo family life mount up, other readers are likely to feel they are being bombarded by whoppers told by an overwrought boy eager to impress or shock.

But readers who have a high tolerance for the implausible, the sentimental and the florid will pad happily off to bed for a week or so with this hefty tale of a Southern family ''that fate tested a thousand times'' clasped cozily to their chests, and read about the birth of twins in a hurricane, and a boy shooting the last bald eagle (his father makes him eat it and wear the feathers to school), and dead siblings stored in the freezer with the shrimp until burial time, and the pet tiger that rips the faces off rapists; and, progressing parallel to all this Wingo memorabilia, the satisfying, present-time story of a sassy, middle-aged Southern boy who sweeps the ''breathtakingly beautiful'' New York psychiatrist off her feet, teaches her unhappy son to play football, and comes to better terms with ''the beauty and fear of kinship, the ineffable ties of family,'' so he can return home to ''try to make something beautiful out of

the ruins,'' as his sister has done with her poems, and raise his children ''in a South stolen from me by my mother and father.''

''With all due respect,'' Dr. Lowenstein asks Tom in their first meeting, before she succumbs to his charm, ''why should we entertain the opinion of a white southern male?''

''Because, Doctor,'' Tom retorts provocatively, ''when I'm not eating roots and berries . . . and when I'm not slaughtering pigs out back at the still, I'm a very smart man.''

The thing is, beneath all his anguished ambivalence and excessiveness, Mr. Conroy is a smart man too. ''I have a need to bear witness,'' his narrator tells us in *The Lords of Discipline*. ''I want a murderous, stunning truthfulness. I want to find my own singular voice for the first time.'' In *The Prince of Tides*, the smart man and serious writer in Pat Conroy have been temporarily waylaid by the bullying monster of heavy-handed, inflated plot and the siren voice of Mother South at her treacherous worst—embroidered, sentimental, inexact, telling it over and over again as it never was.

Gail Godwin. *The New York Times Book Review*. October 12, 1986, p. 14.

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COOVER, Robert (1932–)

[*The Origin of the Brunists*] is a remarkable effort of the imagination, concern, and a sheer creative force—sustained and elaborated from beginning to end. . . . Mr. Coover's characterizations are sharply wrought and remarkably multi-dimensional. . . . The handling of so many characters so masterfully is virtually unknown in first novels. In addition, Mr. Coover sustains the intensity and readability of his narrative joining and moving his people and their dilemmas toward a final effort that is compelling and lasting. . . . This is fiction as it should be, the product of high emotion and dedicated talent; real, hot with life in conflict, filled with the bizarre and the commonplace.

William Mathes. *Book Week*. Oct. 9, 1966. p. 14

A sense of metaphysics . . . pervades Robert Coover's book [*The Origin of the Brunists*]. . . . Coover's is a major work in the sense that it is long, dense, and alive to a degree that makes life outside the covers almost pallid. As a first novel it is extremely impressive in massive architecture, assurance, texture and invention. . . .

The chief merit of the novel is the reality of the characters. . . . There is much irony in the book, but it is never facile, and is made the deeper by the compassion with which the characters are felt and drawn. . . . If Coover can equal this book with his second novel he will be quite formidable. In fact he is formidable already.

Miles Burrows. *New Statesman*. April 14, 1967. p. 514

It would be a pity if the baseball buffs were put off by this mythology [in *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc.*] or the mythology rooters dismayed by the baseball. Coover has in fact written a fine baseball novel, the best I can remember in an admittedly thin field, and based obviously on a study of the texts. The atmosphere is turn-of-the-century early Lardner, when the game was in full swagger, but his averages are lively-ball 1930. The best of both worlds, in my opinion. The language is just right—colorful but not fancy. Take away the big metaphor in the middle, and the book still stands up. Conversely, not to read it because you don't like baseball is like not reading Balzac because you don't like boarding houses. Baseball provides as good a frame for dramatic encounter as any. The bat and ball are excuses. Baseball almost involves a real sub-culture, a tradition, a political history that were in some sense pre-ordained when the first diamond was laid out, that were implicit in the distance between bases, and that continue to make ball parks seem like unfrocked churches, places where even the boredom is of a finer quality. That the players and fans might be shadows in the mind of a Crazy Accountant up there is not only believable but curiously attractive.

Mr. Coover's admirable novel adds to our stock of benign legends. And how many books have you read lately that do that? [1968]

Wilfrid Sheed. *The Morning After* (Farrar). 1971. pp. 81–2

Robert Coover has published two novels. . . . What makes these books something more than rattling good tales is the fact that they treat in a loose, semi-allegorical way the origin and nature of religion. They say something about the meaning or lack of meaning of history. And they make a tentative statement about supernatural possibilities. The books are grounded in an impressive knowledge of religion, history, philosophy, theology, black arts and assorted crafts.

Though much of the factual detail in Coover's books appears to rest on Christian tradition, ritual and faith—on the Bible particularly—the books are in no way arguments for Christianity. They contain no pietistic strains, no gentle instruction, no comforting hope. A slangy, cocky, hip tone characterizes Coover's treatment of religious themes; the writer is above his subject, a kind of literary-theological folk-rock thing straight out of a hustler world that would rather not be conned. Perhaps Christians have consistently misunderstood human experience and its relationship to a creator: ''I'm afraid, Gringo, I must agree with our distinguished folklorist and foremost witness to the ontological revelation of the pattern of history,'' says one character towards the end of the baseball book, ''and have come to the conclusion that God exists and he is a nut.'' The flip and playful tone in no way diminishes the seriousness of the observation.

Lee J. Hertzel. *Critique*. 11, 3, 1969. pp. 12–3

Coover doesn't care what his characters feel about radical politics, not even what they did last summer; he is concerned with them only as types which put readers on, onto ''new modes of perception and fictional forms.'' To that end he reconstructs fairly tales—''The Ginger-Bread House,'' ''Jack and the Beanstalk'' and ''Little Red Riding Hood''—and Bible tales: Joseph and Mary, Noah's flood. All this is done to flow our minds out of their ruts of conventional

responses to traditional formulations, demonstrates to our satisfaction that ''anything can happen,'' in art if not in life. . . .

We are not asked to be concerned with resolutions in his characters' lives, but with resolutions in his technique. Coover has written fine fiction before . . . fiction which deals with people who create their own fictions (religion, baseball), they live and die in them. But these novels were located in the world, not in the anti-world of *Pricksongs and Descants* where, if anything can happen, anything and nothing happens and it all doesn't matter much anyway.

Shaun O'Connell. *The Nation*. Dec. 8, 1969. p. 640

John Barth looms behind the crude fatuities and linguistic boisterousness of Mr. Coover's ''Morris in Chains,'' and Donald Barthelme is likely to be at once brightly attentive and slightly bored in the face of the whimsical-sinister tales which adapt Red Riding Hood and Hansel and Gretel. . . .

Fortunately there is the benign influence of Beckett. *Pricksongs and Descants* has affinities with *More Pricks than Kicks*. Sometimes the debt is a bad one, creating nothing but the pastiche of a tone of voice. . . . But Mr. Coover—who is manifestly very clever indeed, and very sensitive despite his decision that it is *de rigueur* to alternate between glowering and twinkling—has caught much more than mannerisms from Beckett or from the zeitgeist. . . .

''The Wayfarer,'' ''The Marker,'' ''The Babysitter,'' ''The Hat Act'': these are not vacant surrealisms, and even those who feel that the sick joke has been an unconscionable time dying may yet like Mr. Coover's bedside manner. The glacial hauteur is designed to ward off any possibility of finding out whether or not the words are heartfelt, but there can be no doubt as to their being headfelt.

Christopher Ricks. *New York Review of Books*. Feb. 12, 1970. p. 22

In his fictions, long and short, Coover has always been primarily concerned with the power of the imagination and its inextricable involvement with religious and sexual urgings, not in the argumentative chicken-egg primacy sense of Freud and Jung, but with an understanding of how they are all one, all manifestations of the principle of growth at the center of all being, the continual motion flowing from the universal's love of the particular. And he is as aware of the danger inherent in that power as of its creative and moral potential. In *The Origin of the Brunists*, he approaches the force of sex and the imagination in the birth of a religious sect; the blood and violence on the Mount of Redemption in a night of religious frenzy are as essential to the creative union of the lovers in the novel as the Beast's rage is to the curing of its poisonous head. In *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc.*, he celebrates the reality of the living moment in all its inscrutability even as he admits the danger of the imagination to the dwellers in that moment. In both books, he cares truly for the creation with all its madness and disaster.

R.H.W. Dillard. *Hollins Critic*. April, 1970. p. 3

Like a child who pats a pile of wet sand into turrets and crenelated ramparts, Robert Coover prods at our most banal distractions and vulgar obsessions, nudges them into surreal and alarming forms. His fictions—novels, stories and . . . plays—sound at times like incantations which, as they progress, mount to frenzy. What began slowly, seemingly grounded in homely realistic details, lurches, reels a bit, becomes possessed by manic excitation; the characters' faces dissolve to reveal archetypal forms beneath; time and direction come unglued; the choices a writer makes to send his story one way or another are ignored so that simultaneously all possible alternatives occur and, at the end, as often as not, we find our laughter contracting in our throats because some of Coover's stories can be fearsome indeed.

Peter S. Prescott. *Newsweek*. May 15, 1972. p. 98

Robert Coover's fictions demonstrate how diverse perceptions combine and recombine to create meaning. His work, from the early *Origin of the Brunists* (1966) to the recent *The Public Burning* (1977), does not employ language to refer to a fixed set of meaning behind which lies a central, unifying order. Rather, his fictions suggest that meaning resides everywhere and nowhere. It can be located only by a fiction—perhaps the reader's, perhaps the narrator's—constructed in language. Of course, even there, new meanings accrue as we sally into the world of the imagination, a world where interpretation mounts on interpretation and perceptions can constantly shift.

Coover plays with the many possibilities and alternatives contained within language and narrative structures. At the same time, fictions which open a labyrinth of meanings do not therefore imply an absence of ethical strategy or even moral vision. The world of experience exists despite our fictions, and it is a world to which we must always return, even if it is fundamentally incomprehensible. Yet, the imagination gives us our sense of the world, and Coover enjoins us to become aware of the various relationships and perspectives in constant need of reformulation. To live, we choose whatever fictions best sort out our perceptions and sensations. Yet, we often and conveniently forget that our point of view, itself fictional, implies an element of choice. In our forgetfulness, we allow our fictions to overtake our lives. . . .

Coover does not, therefore, dispense with the notion of consciousness or imagination but rather underscores need for balance. Neither narrator nor character, writer nor reader, self nor environment create independently. On the other hand, he does not go as far as the French objectivist novel, for example, or Donald Barthelme, for another example, in the reduction of the self to the level of all other surfaces. Coover's stories present the mind at work, discovering the contiguous relations amidst a network of alternatives. . . .

[A] metaphor for the place of imagination—neither here nor there—appears in *The Universal Baseball Association*. Creative renewal occurs on the playing field. In this novel, Coover suggests that realms of the actual and of the imagination interpenetrate but must remain autonomous as well. For Coover, life bears on our fictions and fictions bear on our lives. The interdependence of imagination and actuality, however, assumes their separation. One realm must not be totally submerged by the other. Henry Waugh submerges himself so completely in his fiction that he not only becomes lost to life, but his invention fails him as well. We need our fictions to cope with life, and we need experience to keep our fictions vital.

Brenda Wineapple. *Iowa Review*. Summer, 1979, pp. 66, 68–69, 71

Coover's fictions clearly emphasize their author's interest in providing his readers with the kinds of metaphors that are necessary for a healthy imagination. Unfortunately, Coover says between the lines in every story he writes, people today have lost their desire for the thrill of discovery. They have become comfortable with having their conventional viewpoints confirmed through a limited range of artistic forms that have outlived their usefulness. Each of Cover's stories, then, invites its reader to relinquish one or more of his traditional approaches to art and participate with its author in an exercise of wit that frequently juxtaposes what is fantastic in life with the everyday.

The principal method through which Coover liberates readers from sensibilities that have been deadened by the familiar is irony. Irony enables Coover and his readers to distance themselves from traditional forms without isolating themselves from the human content of those forms. As a result, Coover's readers have the opportunity and pleasure of tearing down many of society's inherited approaches to art and life without losing their concern for humanity's condition. The result is a healthy sense of humor and the awareness of a developing consciousness. . . .

Reworking history, as he has done with myths, legends, and fairy tales, may represent a new arena in which Coover can explore further the interests that have been of primary concern to him since *The Origin of the Brunists*: ''Like in the creation of myths, I sometimes transpose events for the sake of a kind of inner coherence, but there's a certain amount of condensation and so on, but mainly I accept that what I'm dealing with here is a society that is fascinated with real data, facts and figures, dates, newspaper stuff. I can't mess around too much with the data here lest I lose contact with that fascination.'' . . .

However Coover chooses to reinterpret history, his readers can be assured of accomplished and inventive stories that deal absurdly and metaphysically with the human condition without losing their sense of humor.

Richard Andersen. *Robert Coover* (Twayne, 1981), pp. 141–43

Robert Coover is one of the great innovators of contemporary American fiction. Primarily a novelist, Coover's first collection of short fiction, *Pricksongs & Descants*, published in 1969, had an immediate impact upon the writers and readers of the time. The novellas and two collections he has published since then have all had an influence on the writing and understanding of American short fiction and on American culture.

The short fiction of Robert Coover is an integrated part of the culture in which it appears. It would be difficult, for example, to read *P&D* with full appreciation without knowing something of Grimm fairy tales, the Bible, the TV game show format, American movies and movie houses of the 1940s and 1950s, and the art of fiction as practiced in the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century, the ''wreck'' of which Coover seeks ''to intuit the enormity of.''

To satisfactorily appreciate Coover's short fiction in context requires some preliminary consideration of the situation of American fiction of the past three decades and the attitude of publishers, writers, and readers toward realism and reality in American fiction. In the 1960s a curious thing happened in American fiction. Writers divided into two opposing groups: One moved toward what purported to be ''real life,'' and the other engaged itself with reality as artifice, distancing itself from everyday perceptions of reality in order to explore reality's greater dimensions as well as the dimensions of the art that defines reality.

Thomas Kennedy. *Robert Coover* (Twayne, 1992), p. 3

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CORSO, Gregory (1930–)

Gregory Corso's an aphoristic poet, and a poet of ideas. What modern poets write with such terse clarity that their verses stick in the mind without effort? Certainly Yeats, Pound, Williams, Eliot, Kerouac, Creeley, Dylan & Corso have that quality.

Corso's handling of ideas is unique, as in various one-word title poems (''Power,'' ''Bomb,'' ''Marriage,'' ''Army,'' ''Police,'' ''Hair,'' ''Death,'' ''Clown,'' and later ''Friend''). He distills the essence of archetypal concepts, recycling them with humor to make them new, examining, contrasting, and alchemizing common vernacular notions into mind-blowing (deconstructive or deconditioning) insights. In this mode, his late 1950s poems (like Kerouac's 1951–52 scriptures on ''Joan [Crawford] Rawshanks in the Fog'' & ''Neal and the Three Stooges'') manifest a precursor Pop artistry, the realized notice of quotidian artifacts. . . .

As poetic craftsman, Corso is impeccable. His revision process, which he calls ''tailoring,'' generally elision and condensation, yields gist-phrasing, extraordinary mind-jump humor. Clown sounds of circus, abstracted from plethora are reduced to perfect expression. ''Tang-a-lang boom. Fife feef! Toot!: Quick sketch, sharp mind scissors.''. . .

Corso also excels as political philosopher; his many years as classic artist wanderer dwelling in European hotels, castles, & streets give him perspective on North America. His crucial position in world cultural revolution mid-xx century as originator of the ''Beat Generation'' literary movement; along with Kerouac, Burroughs, Orlovsky & others, grants him an experience inside history few bards or politicians have known. Readers of the poem cluster ''Elegiac Feelings American'' will appreciate Corso's generational insight into Empire sickness. Earlier poems like ''Power,'' ''Bomb,'' ''Army,'' & many brief expatriate lyrics prove Corso to be Shelley's natural prophet among ''unacknowledged legislators of the world.''

Corso is a poet's Poet, his verse pure velvet, close to John Keats for our time, exquisitely delicate in manners of the Muse. He has been and always will be a popular poet, awakener of youth, puzzlement & pleasure for sophisticated elder bibliophiles, ''immortal'' as immortal is, Captain Poetry exampling revolution of

Spirit, his ''poetry the opposite of hypocrisy,'' a loner, laughably unlaureled by native prizes, divine Poet Maudit, rascal poet Villonesque and Rimbaudian whose wild fame's extended for decades around the world from France to China, World poet.

Allen Ginsberg. Foreword. Gregory Corso. *Mindfield* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1989), pp. xiii–xv

The central concerns of Corso's work, the ideals which his writing consistently strives to affirm and to uphold are those which are most concisely summarized in a phrase from the poetry of William Wordsworth: ''Delight and liberty, the simple creed of childhood.''

The theme and the element of delight are manifest in virtually every poem, every play and prose piece that Corso has written. The droll humor, the astonishing imagery, the exuberant invention and the playful use of language which characterize his writing are all expressions of this quality. Delight is, for Corso, the natural condition of man, his original and final state; it is a natural force latent in every mind and spirit, but blocked, suppressed by blind negations, by distortive habits and conventions, by fear and resignation.

It is from such checks and limitations that Corso's work seeks to liberate us. His writing both urges and enacts that liberation, disrupting and denying conventional perceptions of reality, and affirming magic, joy, wonder, and beauty. Corso's work vehemently opposes all forms of tyranny and oppression, together with all agencies of repression and joylessness, as it celebrates the persistence and the irrepressibility of imagination, desire, and liberty. . . .

In an era of so many university-trained writers, so many professor-poets, Gregory Corso represents something of an anomaly: a drop-out with a sixth grade education, an ex-con, an autodidact, a natural singer-seer, a street bard. At a time when so many poets seem implicitly to have accepted W. H. Auden's dictum that ''poetry makes nothing happen'' and to have adjusted their vision and their verses accordingly, Corso has reaffirmed the Shelleyan role of the poet as prophet and catalyst, as ''unacknowledged legislator of the world.'' In an age of American literary mandarinism, a critic-ridden period whose most characteristic poems are distinguished by pinched wit, learned allusion, and polite despair, all carefully structured and measured, all polished and ready for explication by graduate students of English, Corso stepped forth as an outlaw clown, ''a word-slinger'' determined to redeem the time.

Gregory Stephenson. *Exiled Angel: A Study of the Work of Gregory Corso* (London: Hearing Eye, 1989), pp. 8–9, 97–98

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COWLEY, Malcolm (1898–1989)

By an ill adjustment Malcolm Cowley is best known as a critic and translator, whereas his verse is by far his most important contribution. . . . Cowley is not to be labeled the poet exclusively of this or that. But the one note which appears most often is a kind of indefinite regret. Though willingly accepting this as the only possible of worlds, to the contemporary he supplies a Baudelairean corrective of nostalgia prior to the facts, a nostalgia which would prevail regardless of the environment. There is the frequent meditation upon death and upon that stagnation of the mind which may precede death by many years. There is the constant suggestion of a vague return. . . . There is the hankering after something native.

Kenneth Burke. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Aug. 18, 1929. p. 2

It would be difficult to find a single book of poems more symptomatic of the experiences of the post-war writers of America than Malcolm Cowley's. . . . *Blue Juniata* is important not only because it gives us the assembled verse of a new and definitely interesting poet, but because it sets itself up as a self-confessed logbook of literary youth in America during the ten years which followed the war. . . . Unlike many poets who at the present moment are being read and quoted with high favor, Mr. Cowley is not devising his tunes with gymnastic agility on a single string. He has obviously submitted to the charms of many influences, and he has managed to go through a period of high excitement in our cultural experience and yet realized a significance in the manifold distractions and vogues that crowded it.

Morton Dauwen Zabel. *The Nation*. Aug. 21, 1929. pp. 200–1

His mind is basically concrete and unspeculative; he brings to facts and observations an even emotional tone that is the mark of a genuine style; but in criticism Cowley's instinct for exact definition is not strong; and the necessity for a certain amount of abstraction only violates the even tone of his style. It is in poetry, at least for the present, that Mr. Cowley may be seen at his best.

And yet the long discipline of prose has given to his poetry much of its distinction of form. . . . There are no great moments in Cowley, and there are no disconcerting lapses. There is subdued emotion; there are exact feelings and images; and over all, a subtle vision of the startling qualities of common things.

Allen Tate. *New Republic*. Aug. 28, 1929. pp. 51–2

Cowley has the sense of a lyric poet (which he is) for the unique value of the individual. . . . Yet because he also has the social historian's sense that each life, besides having a pattern of its own, is a part of the pattern of the age, he can make you see how all these lives fitted the pattern of alienation which led a whole generation of intellectuals into exile. . . . *Exile's Return* is far and away the best book about this generation (of the 1920s) by a participant, and this is a generation that was crucial not only for American literature but for the whole of American culture.

Arthur Mizener. *New York Times Book Section*. June 10, 1951. p. 9

Calmly ignoring those austere critics who claim it is the literary work that should concern us and not the private life of the creator, Malcolm Cowley has put together a fascinating account of the American writer as a human being (in *The Literary Situation*). A

critic, editor, and poet who brings to his interest in writers' lives an *avant-garde* background, Mr. Cowley transforms literary anecdotage and journalism into a valuable analysis of what makes the American writer run. His approach is like that of the Lynds to Middletown, U.S.A., except that his conclusions are based on personal observation and inquiry rather than statistics and questionnaires, and that some of the best things in the book are purely—and maliciously—subjective.

Milton Rugoff. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Oct. 24, 1954. p. 6

No other critic was more engaged in the *Kulturkampf* of the times or more strategically placed to observe the sorties of the warring intellectual platoons—Humanist, Communist, Technocrat, Agrarian, Liberal. And few writers identified with the left during this period managed better than Cowley did to remain on speaking terms with literary acquaintances to the right and left of him.

For more than ten years, beginning in 1930, Cowley ran the book section of *The New Republic*. Almost every week, from 1934 until the early 1940s, he reviewed a book that challenged his interest or provided him with a text. Through a newly acquired ''Marxist'' perspective he was able to arrange such diverse items as Yeats, the Bonus Marchers, Thomas Mann, revolutionary China, the Lynds' *Middletown*, Cummings's verse, Russian films, Trotsky's history and Faulkner's novels, in one ideological panorama. Each article or essay-review, composed under pressure, also served (Cowley tells us) as ''my blank verse meditations, my sonnet sequence, my letter to distant friends, my private journal.'' Some of the men and events he dealt with now seem pretty remote, yet *Think Back On Us. . .* conveys the intellectual excitement and moral fervor of the period. Illuminating simply as social history, it can also be read as the public soliloquy of a man in the process of acquiring and shedding certain political convictions; the Cowley of 1940s is not the Cowley of 1930.

Daniel Aaron. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 12, 1967. p. 4

I wasn't altogether happy when I heard last fall that Henry Dan Piper of Southern Illinois University was publishing a selection of pieces that Cowley had written in the Thirties. I had read the pieces as they appeared, with great eagerness and usually with marked appreciation though sometimes with sharp disagreement; but I didn't look forward to rereading them thirty years later. In those three decades I had changed and Cowley had changed and the world had changed, and I thought that the pieces would be dated if not dead. In a sense they *are* dated, and that is why the book [*Think Back on Us. . .*] serves the purpose for which Professor Piper edited it—to give young people some idea of what the Thirties were like. But almost nothing seems merely old stuff, and the best of the pieces are alive today.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. March 11, 1967. p. 31

It is possible to approach a work like [*A Second Flowering*] with just a touch of resentment. We have read about the Lost Generation until our heads are water-logged with its self-congratulation, its nostalgia. One broods over the gallons, the tuns, the tank cars of ink spilled out on the lives and work of these men—Hemingway's bibliography alone must be on its way to several volumes requiring sturdy book ends—and one thinks: enough. . . .

These are not just thrice-told tales, they seem by now to be so numbingly familiar as to be almost personal—tedious old gossip having to do with some fondly regarded but too often outrageous kinfolk. And if the work also affects a critical stance, do we look forward to still more commentary on ''The Bear'' or Cummings's love lyrics? Or another desolating inventory of the metaphors in *The Great Gatsby?* In *A Second Flowering* all of these matters are touched upon, yet it is testimony to Cowley's gifts both as a critic and a literary chronicler that the angle of vision seems new; that is, not only are his insights into these writers' works almost consistently arresting but so are his portraits of the men themselves.

William Styron. *New York Times Book Section*. May 6, 1973. p. 8

In a sense *A Second Flowering* represents a part of a long struggle on Cowley's part to redeem the American writer from his condition of alienation. It would be misleading to say that this struggle has dominated Cowley's wide-ranging work as a literary critic. It is hardly too much to say that it provides a strong unifying theme in his complex and varied achievement. But in the same breath we must observe that it is a struggle Cowley has never intended to win. When we add to his criticism Cowley's small but important body of poetry, we see running through the whole range of his work as a twentieth-century poet, critic, and literary and cultural historian a basic motive of alienation. As both a creator and an interpreter of the literature of the lost generation, Cowley is a contributor to one of its leading aspects: a myth or a legend of creativity which is definable as a poetics of exile.

Lewis P. Simpson. *Sewanee Review*. Spring, 1976, p. 225

What is perhaps most impressive about Cowley as a literary and cultural commentator is his ability—most clearly demonstrated in his earlier writings—to sense and report the psychic weather, the dominant moods and styles, the subtle forces that shape the collective state of mind of the historical moment very often while the moment is still in the process of being formed and he himself is being formed by it. This is what gave *Exile's Return* its special quality of seeming to be almost magically evocative of his generation's experience at the same time that it arranged that experience into a pattern of tonal and thematic development which was more fictive than historical. . . .

But although Cowley had something of Dos Passos' historical perspective and wrote a prose that at times uncannily resembled Hemingway's, he was most like Fitzgerald in seeing his personal experience as a sort of microcosmic version of what had happened to them all, as emblematic of their common fate and fortune. . . .

Cowley's literary contemporaries did indeed have a remarkable awareness of shared experience, and his own career is not only . . . representative but almost seismographically reflective of the changes that have occurred in the literary life of this country over the past sixty years. During that time he has lived through nearly all the

evolutionary phases of the modernist movement in literature, and he has made his own significant contribution to each. More than any other historical critic except possibly Edmund Wilson, he has been persistently alert to the complex interplay of cultural and intellectual forces which have helped shape the character of modern literature even as they provided the collective history from which his generation of writers derived their strong sense of united creative purpose. . . .

If now in his old age Cowley cannot enjoy the satisfaction of spectacular triumph, great reputation, or large public accolade, he does have behind him more than half a century of working honorably and successfully at the writer's trade, retaining a devotion to the high calling of literature that is now very nearly extinct in the world, and keeping alive the works and days of his generation whom he now lives on to commemorate and represent.

John W. Aldridge. *Michigan Quarterly Review*. Summer, 1979, pp. 482–83, 489–90

That [Malcolm] Cowley is seen almost as two different persons by scholars of differing persuasions, backgrounds, and critical methods is evident in another published essay on his work. Citing an essay on Van Wyck Brooks that Cowley wrote in 1936, which Joseph Epstein used as evidence of Cowley's anti-Americanism, Lewis P. Simpson wrote in 1976 that when looked at as a whole, Cowley's published work is more complex than has generally been noticed. While apparently preoccupied with a ''poetics of exile,'' the alienated aesthetic and social ideas that have dominated Western intellectual and artistic life for almost two hundred years, Cowley has, in fact, taken for his subject the role of the writer in the modern world. And Cowley's major theme in this enterprise has been to show the public, as well as writers themselves, the ways in which artists must recognize and come to terms with their human need for social community, even though social revolt and spiritual isolation have been the characteristic themes in modern art. Paradoxically, Simpson pointed out, the American literary tradition, which Cowley spent much of his career coming to terms with—and helping to define—was one of individual solitude, as indeed were Cowley's own life and work. For Simpson, then, Cowley's work could be said to deal with the central issue of a particular American tradition of literature.

All these conflicting assessments of Malcolm Cowley reveal, I believe, not only that Cowley is an interesting figure in his own right in modern American literary history but also that a study of his life permits one to focus on issues that have remained subjects of critical conflict for much of modern cultural history. These issues include a debate over what modern American art represents, why political and social rebellion by American artists has been so persistent, and what constitutes ''Americanism'' with respect to American writers and the American literary tradition. That Cowley's involvement with modern art and Communist politics has been sometimes vigorously attacked by polemicists from both the political left and the right may say less about Cowley than about the confusions of American cultural politics. The persistent misunderstanding of his views is, however, puzzling.

A further example of this misunderstanding is the assertion that Malcolm Cowley's work in the 1930s resulted only from a flirtation with radical Communist politics. This assertion obscures the more complex reality of his intellectual development and his actual writing. Those who make it must ignore his persistent attempt in those years to clarify, counteract, and socialize the intellectual and aesthetic tradition of modern art, with which for almost a decade before 1930 he had been locked in personal struggle.

James Michael Kempf. *The Early Career of Malcolm Cowley: A Humanist among the Moderns* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1985), pp. 6–7

Sharing Faulkner's ''admiring and possessive'' love of the land, as well as his ''compulsive fear lest what he loves should be destroyed,'' Cowley remained a country boy at heart. All his life he was a devoted gardener and conservationist. Though he spent a substantial part of his professional life in the cosmopolitan company of big-city writers and intellectuals, particularly in New York and Paris, such a milieu filled him with feelings of uneasiness and distrust. How deeply country tastes and habits remained an ingrained part of his character is difficult to fathom. Although he may have exhibited a degree of posturing in his way of confronting city intellectuals and academics, some literary acquaintances have perhaps concluded too easily that Cowley was playing a plebeian part, construing a facade of sophisticated provincialism to hide his weaknesses. Such a feeling may have informed John Peale Bishop's condescending epithet: ''the plowboy of the Western world who has been to Paris.''

In a literary career spanning over seven active decades, Cowley combined an impressive multiplicity of functions: he was poet, critic, literary consultant to publishers, and, in general, ''middleman'' of letters. His awareness of the literary profession as ''interdependent at all its levels'' prompted him to speak up in its defense whenever he saw it threatened. On behalf of the ''little American republic of letters'' he took his own firm stand against the ''Philistines'' in the controversy over the Bollingen Award to Ezra Pound in 1949. At the same time he recurrently expressed his skepticism about the inroads made into the writing trade by commercialism and collectivization and voiced his fear that writers might lose their status as ''independent craftsmen'' to become officials in a bureaucratic structure, possessing technical virtuosity but paralyzed by timidity, conventionality, and lack of personal courage. During the McCarthy years he was disturbed by the pervasive mood of anti-intellectualism, by the decline of the reading habit, and by the potentially dangerous effects of an alliance between creative writing and academic careerism. At the same time, he worked within academe as a teacher, writer in residence, and lecturer at writers' conferences. Always, however, he felt slightly out of place among academic scholars. . . .

Few have had Cowley's talent for friendship and geniality of temperament to associate on terms of equality (and often intimacy) with a wide and varied circle of literary friends and acquaintances, from Faulkner, Hemingway, Crane, and Tate, to younger writers like John Cheever, Tillie Olsen, and Ken Kesey. . . . Though some of his literary friends must have strained his capacity for tolerance and compassion, Cowley, in his dealings with writers, often showed (in the words of George Core) ''an uncommonly even disposition, a remarkable ability to forgive, and a wise but not uncritical acceptance of human fallibility.''

Hans Bak. *Malcolm Cowley* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Pr., 1993), pp. 16, 486–87

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COZZENS, James Gould (1903–1978)

There is no question but that Cozzens's work, except in regard to his larger dramatic frames, shows a steady progress toward greater mastery of his craft, increased consciousness of his effects, and constantly augmented scope. Except for *Castaway*, however, he has given us every ingredient of first-rate novels except the novels themselves. His faults, the prejudices and blockages that make his treatment of race and sex so unsatisfactory, and his constant dissipating of tragedy into irony and melodrama, seem to be the obverse of his virtues: his enormously representative quality and his uncompromising honesty. When Cozzens can write novels with the breadth and depth of *The Just and the Unjust* or *Guard of Honor* in as taut and satisfactory a dramatic frame as *Castaway* has, when he learns to combine the realism of his later work with the symbolism of his middle period and deepen both in the process, he should be a novelist to rank with the best America has produced.

Stanley Edgar Hyman. *New Mexico Quarterly*. Winter, 1949. p. 497

He has nothing less than a passion for detachment.

This passionate detachment of his is closely associated with his great technical skill. I do not mean that he has acquired that skill merely by virtue of being detached, for obviously he has worked hard for it, but the basis on which his craftsmanship has developed is his objectivity. Deliberately standing apart from his material, he strives to see clearly and to render with perfect accuracy what he sees. His writing is always careful and never more careful than in the avoidance of pretentiousness.

Granville Hicks. *English Journal*. Jan., 1950. p. 4

Mr. Cozzens's grasp of American life is not based upon long familiarity with a single region, . . . but upon his wisdom in the ways of the upper middle class, which is very much the same all over the country. He has profound respect for the responsible citizens who actually make our civilization work. Ibsen called them ''pillars of society,'' and made the very term imply hypocrisy. Mr. Cozzens, on the other hand, likes to portray this class from the point of view of a member of one of the great professions, Law, the Church, Medicine, and by that means he brings out the humane values he sees in *his* pillars of society.

Francis Fergusson. *Perspectives U.S.A.*. Winter, 1954. pp. 36–7

I know of no modern novelist who commands such a range of idiom, allusion, cadence, rhetorical radiation and vocabulary. It is a muscular, virile style with certain strong affinities to seventeenth-century prose—Cozzens is found of Bunyan, Milton, Defoe, among others. Yet one does not get the feeling of reading a literary novel. The ironic view alone prevents this. . . . In Cozzens's novels the world of types explored by Dickens and by Shaw and by Ben Jonson comes before us again in its unfamiliar shape—the shape of the local, urban, and workaday, qualities too trivial to most novelists in recent years to seem worthy of their attention. Cozzens forces our attention, concentrates it, makes us inescapably aware of the density of the lives we live.

Louis O. Coxe. *American Literature*. May, 1955. pp. 163, 168–9

Cozzens would no more deform a character to meet the demands of his plot than he would steal from his Delaware Valley neighbors. Nevertheless, it *is* a pattern, almost a formula, and it has reappeared in one of his novels after another.

There is a lawyer, young or old, or a staff officer in the Air Force, or a clergyman deeply involved in the lives of his parishioners. There is a climax in his career, a period of two or three days during which hell breaks loose; men die in accidents, women commit suicide, friends of his family are charged with sexual crimes, his closest associates betray him through irresponsibility; and meanwhile the hero tries to do his best for everyone, succeeding in some cases, failing lamentably in others, yet somehow surviving by force of character.

Malcolm Cowley. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 25, 1957. p. 1

The essential difference between Cozzens and his contemporaries lies in the character of his work. Here he is the complete nonconformist: a classic man, operating in a romantic period. This, I suspect, is the basic reason why he has missed both popular and critical appreciation. He puzzles ordinary readers whose palates have been dulled by the Gothic extravagance of most fiction; and he offends critics whose professional mission has been to exalt the romantic novel which has been in high fashion for the last thirty years. . . . Cozzens may, indeed, signal the turning of the tide. In his salad days, he too flirted with the romantic technique, but in his mature novels he has moved steadily away from it. Instead he has

been attempting something far more difficult: to write an engrossing story about ordinary people, living ordinary lives, in ordinary circumstances.

John Fischer. *Harper's Magazine*. Sept., 1957. pp. 15–8

Cozzens's heroes are becoming steadily richer and more Protestant, while his upstarts—Catholics, Jews, or reformers—are something like caricatures and invariably obnoxious. (His Negroes now, because of spotless subservience, fare somewhat better. They *like* to take communion last.) He has, of course, like any author, the right to choose the class he will deal with—Jane Austen did as much—but this kind of limitation is doubled because of Cozzens's obvious distaste for the people into whose minds he will not choose or deign to enter. . . . His sympathy is husbanded too narrowly, and he lacks what Henry James called ''the sacred rage.'' He walks away from us cool, disenchanted, a little superior, pleased to have kept his distance.

Richard Ellmann. *The Reporter*. Oct. 3, 1957. pp. 43–4

Like most of Mr. Cozzens novels (making some exceptions for *Castaway*) *By Love Possessed* suffers from a want of essential drama: though all the great rites of tragedy are prepared and invoked, the demonstration remains at last unmade; as though the author had some reservations—possibly about ''real life'' and ''the way things really work out''—which protect his major actors from their ends. I cannot help thinking that the book, in this respect, functions as a kind of secular apologetics, the defense of an image of life, much idealized, which is regarded with so much reverence and nostalgia that its exemplars may not and must not be brought down from their high places. . . . The mere acknowledgement of the possibility will do instead, so that in the end honor, wealth, position, are saved at the expense of honesty, on the stated ground that considerations higher than honesty (charity, compassion, expedience) are involved, a shift of justifications not without its Jesuitical quality.

Howard Nemerov. *The Nation*. Nov. 2, 1957. p. 308

In his previous works there has always been a certain absence of primary feeling; he is a cold writer who has needed a recharge, say, of human sympathy. To a certain degree *By Love Possessed* is probably the attempt to get at just this issue in his own work and career—but an attempt which, rather than enlarging the writer's capacity to feel, simply confirms his prejudice against feeling. It is a treatise on the different kinds of love—parental, oedipal, sibling, self-love or vanity, religious, sexual. But why is it that all these types of love are only destructive and never even momentarily rewarding?. . . What Mr. Cozzens does not seem to understand for all his classical lore, is that the Goddess of Love, whatever her cruel demands on her afflicted subjects, is also the Goddess of Life.

Maxwell Geismar. *American Moderns* (Hill and Wang). 1958. pp. 148–50

He is writing about the individual in society, about the obligations, the hazards, the rebellious and painful accommodation of human beings to the way things—not *are* (this has been misunderstood)—but *work:* the way things work, the functioning of the world. His heroes are men who understand these functions, live with them, interpret them for others and in some part keep the machinery running. Able, responsible men, more burdened by duty than eager for power, learning in maturity that one never really knows enough, stoically bearing the weight of the world—these are the men Cozzens sets up as admirable. They are admirable. But they are also the Ruling Class, if only on the provincial level.

This being so, it is easy to see why he has been attacked for supporting the status quo and writing ''Novels of Resignation.''

Elizabeth Janeway. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 9, 1959. p. 1

His style is essentially eighteenth-century, like that of Swift or Steele, both of whom he admires. It is good for saying that whatever is, is right (or wrong, as the case may be), but it is not so good for saying that whatever is, is continually changing. He does not use the symbolic structure of death and rebirth which many romantics from Wordsworth to Hemingway have used to formulate the essence of change, nor does he use the kind of symbolic imagery with which they commonly reinforce that structure and that theme. As a result, his heroes tend to give an impression of stuffiness or priggishness instead of the vision of heroic maturity arising out of heroic struggle which they seem to be intended to give. They and the works they live in are, to a degree, intellectually abstract and emotionally thin.

R. P. Adams in *Essays in Modern American Literature*, ed. Richard E. Langford (Stetson). 1963. p. 110

The peculiar excellences or distinctions of Cozzens' art, more than anything else, justify critical study, for these distinctions reveal a complicated and deliberate novelist at work. No other writer of our time has dared to make such an extreme commitment to reason; and this commitment has led Cozzens into an attitude toward man which dares to be condescending, anti-democratic, and altogether dispassionate. To the rational principle Cozzens has remained firmly loyal, although his growing mastery of the technical aspects of literature has allowed him to dramatize his vision of reality with more and more impact and meaning. At the same time, Cozzens has persisted in standing apart from the literary fashions of his time: he has worked consistently within the framework of the traditional English novel, and has (with one exception) rejected any attempt at experimentation. And appropriately enough, a large part of his current significance lies in his ability to expand beyond the capacity of anyone else in his generation the scope and quality of the traditional.

Harry John Mooney. *James Gould Cozzens* (Pittsburgh). 1963. p. 3

Cozzens' respect for life as it is gives him an exceptional interest in the actual world. This interest ranges all the way from his pleasure in the ingenious organization of things like department stores and air force bases to his almost anthropological curiosity about the customary life of social institutions like the small town or of

professions like the law and medicine. He has a deep respect for men who can function effectively in the world, whether they are skilled mechanics or talented pilots, able generals or smart judges, and this respect, because it is not dictated by a theory, is without condescension. Both *The Just and the Unjust* (1942) and *By Love Possessed* (1957) are legally impeccable novels about the law; the hero of *The Last Adam* (1933) is a doctor and the hero of *Men and Brethren* (1936) is a priest. Three of these four novels show a fascinated intimacy with the social life of the American small town. *Guard of Honor* (1948) is a novel about life on an Army Air Force base during the war; no one has ever been able to find a flaw in its minutely detailed account of that life. . . .

Cozzens confronts squarely the rawness of the deal that drives the subjective novelists to a defiance of life itself. He knows, as well as Melville and Faulkner, how strong the passions of the heart are. But, since he never loses sight of the simple, obvious fact that life is what life is, he is always conscious that it is not what these passions so often convince men it is, or may be. To him, their effect on men is a kind of possession—in the sense of being influenced to the point of madness.

Arthur Mizener. *Kenyon Review*. Nov., 1966. pp. 598–9

It is . . . harder to write about Cozzens than it is to write about the romancers who form the majority of our authors, whether Poe and Hawthorne back then, or Pynchon and Ellison and Updike now. . . .

Almost all of Cozzens's best work is laid in small towns or communities with urban values. . . . In each case you have a center which is yet a provincial center, which has firm traditions of its own, and which has little or not desire to drop its own values for those of the big city. On the contrary, representatives of big-city culture. . . . tend to be seen as threats and even as corrupters. In our prevailing literary view, they ought, of course, to be seen as bringers of enlightenment. . . .

But in his fiction what produces that sense is the difference in values between the provincial center and the metropolitan center. The metropolitan center is, of course, pluralistic. It is the place where roots matter least, and oneself now matters most. . . .

By contrast, both the pastoral milieu and the town milieu tend to carry a single set of standards, which express and contain the whole history of the place, which all accept. There is one network—and maybe one hierarchy—of which everybody is a part. . . .

To my taste, he is one of the supreme stylists in American literature. I mean, he writes well. But what he writes is the periodic sentence, the highly wrought paragraph, the book which is clearly the product of the whole history of English and American literature. Such a style is exclusionary. It's not difficult to read, in the way that almost any important work in social science is difficult, or in the way *The Sound and the Fury* is difficult. But it does withhold itself, at least in part, from the reader whose ear is not attuned to the cadences of language, and perhaps from the reader whose past has not included considerable reading of classical English literature—books in the high style. Perhaps a better way to put it would be that Cozzens seems to assume consistently that there still is a high style, and not merely a lot of different ways of writing, which there is no way to grade or rank or sort. As opposed to the ingratiating openness, the friendly looseness of the American casual style, which invites the reader in (''come as you are''), a chapter of Cozzens makes demands, puts the reader on his mettle, may even shut doors in his face. You can do that in the pastoral milieu, as Frost did, but not so readily in the town milieu.

Noel Perrin. *New Republic*. Sept. 17, 1977, pp. 44–45

James Gould Cozzens is the least-read and least-taught of the major American novelists. It cannot be said that his work has suffered from inadequate exposure; but not even six Book-of-the-Month Club selections have attracted a broad readership. Except for *By Love Possessed*, no Cozzens novel has had a substantial mass-market paperback sale; and none has become a college classroom standard text. Although he has staunch admirers, one of the master American novelists is in some ways a cult-author. The resistance to Cozzens's work has been blamed on his refusal to make concessions to inattentive or unintelligent readers. Yet he is not difficult to read. His prose is precise; his meanings are clear; and, before *By Love Possessed*, his style is unembellished. The increasing dignity of style enforces Cozzens's objectivity. The ''coldness'' that critics have cited in Cozzens's observation of his characters is the stoical detachment of a writer trying to achieve ''the stability of truth'' in dealing with profound matters of human conduct. The periodic sentences and heavy subordination of *By Love Possessed* and *Morning Noon and Night* can intimidate only those who have not mastered the structure of the English sentence. The by-no-means overwhelming use of uncommon words achieves exactness of statement. Such words are intended to fix the reader's attention and, if necessary, send him to a dictionary. Cozzens's developed style is the natural expression for a highly literate writer with a traditionalist's respect for language. The complexity of sentence structure is appropriate to the complexity of his thinking. His use of open or concealed literary allusion in *Guard of Honor*, *By Love Possessed*, and *Morning Noon and Night* does not exclude the much-cherished general reader. The allusions are there for readers who recognize them; but the meanings of the books do not depend on that recognition. Cozzens is not a mandarin author; his work is far more accessible than that of many novelists currently in critical favor. He does not, in fact, make extraordinary demands on readers—beyond requiring them to pay attention.

The concept of vocation is central to Cozzens's representations of general nature, but he fully credits the determining factors in human conduct—education, social position, intelligence, training, luck, and what used to be called ''character.'' The mark of Cozzens's people is that their values and behavior are developed in terms of their professions. You are what you do and how well you do it. This recognition may partly account for the denigration of his work among humanists who hold the job of teaching literature. Believing that success is a sign of corruption, they endeavor to persuade students that the real business of life is to live in accordance with one's feelings. Cozzens alarms proponents of the higher failure.

Cozzens has been called a conservative, an aristocrat, and a classicist. He rejects all of these identifications, insisting that he tries only to render life and people accurately as he sees them. He respects intelligence, moral firmness, and self-discipline. He rejects emotions as guides for conduct while recognizing the force of ''Man's incurable wish to believe what he preferred to believe.''

Matthew J. Bruccoli. Introduction to *Just Representations: A James Gould Cozzens Reader* (Southern Illinois Univ. Pr. and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), pp. xviii–xix

The burden of Cozzens's fiction is that man must recognize and accept his condition and still bear the responsibility of action. . . . To act in the full awareness of the irony of the conditions within which he must act is, for Cozzens, the dignity of man.

If this is Cozzens's theme—and it is, I think, present in all the major novels—then he may now have found his own moment in time; until now Cozzens has been neglected, but there are signs that this neglect is about to end. History has finally prepared for him an audience that can share his angle of vision. Until it did, Cozzens went his solitary way, writing fine novels, pursuing his own sense of what life is about, undeterred by the almost total absence of recognition.

John William Ward. In *James Gould Cozzens: New Acquist of True Experience*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (Southern Illinois Univ. Pr., 1979), pp. 15–16

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CRANE, Hart (1899–1932)

Mr. Crane has a most remarkable style, a style which is strikingly original—almost something like a great style, if there could be such a thing as a great style which was, not merely not applied to a great subject, but not, so far as one can see, applied to any subject at all. . . . One does not demand of poetry nowadays that it shall provide us with logical metaphors or with intelligible sequences of ideas. Rimbaud is inconsecutive and confused. Yet, with Rimbaud, whom Mr. Crane somewhat resembles, we experience intense emotional excitement and artistic satisfaction; we are dazzled by the eruption of his images, but we divine what it is that he is saying. But, with Mr. Crane, though he sometimes moves us, it is in a way curiously vague.

Edmund Wilson. *New Republic*. May 11, 1927. p. 320

Crane labored to perfect both the strategy and the tactics of language so as to animate and maneuver his perceptions—and then fought the wrong war and against an enemy that displayed, to his weapons, no vulnerable target. He wrote in a language of which it was the virtue to accrete, modify, and interrelate moments of emotional vision—moments at which the sense of being gains its greatest access—moments at which, by the felt nature of the knowledge, the revealed thing is its own meaning; and he attempted to apply his language, in his major effort, to a theme that required a sweeping, discrete, indicative, anecdotal language, a language in which, by force of movement, mere cataloging can replace and often surpass representation. He used the private lyric to write the cultural epic.

R.P. Blackmur. *The Double Agent* (Arrow). 1935. p. 126

His world has no center, and the compensatory action that he took is responsible for the fragmentary quality of his most ambitious work. This action took two forms, the blind assertion of the will; and the blind desire for self-destruction. The poet did not face his first problem, which is to define the limits of his personality and to objectify its moral implications in an appropriate symbolism. Crane could only assert a quality of will against the world, and at each successive failure of the will he turned upon himself. . . . By attempting an extreme solution of the romantic problem, Crane proved that it cannot be solved.

Allen Tate. *Reactionary Essays* (Scribner). 1936. pp. 40–3. Courtesy of Alan Swallow

Although Pound and Eliot had been largely responsible for reviving an interest in the poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they were themselves temperamentally incapable of doing more than adapting, imitating, and assimilating certain of its characteristics. . . . It remained for Crane, unschooled, unspoiled by scholastic nostalgia and self-consciousness, to use the medium in a completely modern way, easily and naturally combining in it rhetoric, conversation, and discursive thought, and sounding afresh the grand note so rarely heard in modern times. . . . In the process of renovating blank verse Crane also revivified the poetic language of his time. He was able to discover words, and use them, almost as things in themselves, prized their colors, sounds, and shapes as more meaningful than their strict definitions.

Philip Horton. *Hart Crane* (Norton). 1937. pp. 309–10

Essentially Crane was a poet of ecstasy or frenzy or intoxication; you can choose your own word depending on how much you like his work. Essentially he was using rhyme and meter and fantastic images to convey the emotional states that were induced in him by alcohol, jazz, machinery, laughter, intellectual stimulation, the shape and sound of words and the madness of New York in the late Coolidge era. At their worst his poems are ineffective unless read in something approximating the same atmosphere, with a drink at your elbow, the phonograph blaring and somebody shouting into your ear, ''Isn't that great!'' At their best, however, the poems do their work unaided except by their proper glitter and violence.

Malcolm Cowley. *Exile's Return* (Viking). 1951. pp. 230–1

Crane referred to *The Bridge* as his *Aeneid*, and his critics have generally taken the genre of the poem for granted. Yet what happens when the romantic poet becomes a culture hero, when the reference of the myth is shifted from the usual epic hero, who embodies the positive ideals of his world and is in tune with it, to a figure who stands outside society? When Crane interpreted the

death of the voyager as the death of Everyman, he was doing no less than re-creating Everyman in the voyager's image, fashioning society in the image of himself; and it is here that the distinction between lyric and epic is wholly obscured.

Yet in another sense, Crane himself is representative, for his dilemma, establishing an imaginative vision in a society that no longer can believe in visions, is the dilemma of the twentieth-century man who finds himself alone and unimportant in the universe and will not accept his fate. Perhaps, after all, Crane was a kind of culture hero, appropriate to the times and in a way he never imagined: uneducated, alcoholic, homosexual, paranoic, suicidal—victimized by himself and by the world—he still wrote optimistic, visionary poetry. Indeed, Allen Tate has actually called him a hero, and it seems to me that those who believe in heroes would have to agree.

L.S. Dembo. *Hart Crane's Sanskrit Charge* (Cornell). 1960. pp. 132–3

Many have justly criticized *The Bridge* as a ''Myth of America'' for its chaotic historical and chronological sense and for the apparent lack of continuity between several of its sections. Yet it is fair to look again at the poem with a little more of Crane's eye. In the first place, he considered his poem symphonic, a ''mystical synthesis'' of America in which history, fact, and location ''all have to be transfigured into abstract form.'' It was not to be a narrative epic which would proceed in historical sequence but an evolution in which idea and motif would in recurrence construct the imaginative body of the poem as an ''organic panorama.'' Thus one might dare to say that *The Bridge* is not the Myth of America in an historical sense at all, but a construction and ritual celebration of the spiritual consciousness and creative force possible to America. Because present and past are often simultaneous and chronology distorted (as in a Faulkner novel), *The Bridge* must rely on a psychological order that is more intuitive, emotional, and mystical than rational.

Bernice Slote. *Start with the Sun* [with James E. Miller and Karl Shapiro] (Nebraska). 1960. p. 163

Mistakenly assuming that Crane's intention was oversimple—a total, indiscriminate affirmation—critics have then condemned it for its complex duality, its vacillation, its merely partial affirmation, its tension between ''an over-simplified vision and a tortured awareness of realistic circumstance.'' In one breath Crane is charged with a mindless optimism or idealism; in the next he is charged with including ugly realities and negations that conflict with this idealism and ''confuse'' the poem.

A more consistent and, I believe, more accurate view will recognize that *the ugly realities are intended*. The tortured awareness of realistic circumstance is *an integral part of the vision*. The poem's vacillation, or dialectic (to give it an approved name), serves the clear purpose of keeping the vision from being oversimple—tempers it, ironically qualifies it, complicates it. In short, Crane is trying for a difficult rather than an easy beauty, a complex rather than a synthetic coherence.

Gordon K. Grigsby. *College English*. April, 1963. pp. 518–19

Crane's poetry is important for several reasons. First, he possessed an extraordinary gift for metaphor. As stated earlier, the remembrance of single phrases or lines is the most widespread general response to Crane's work. His poems, of course, present a harmony embracing more than single images, but their greatest intensity—their brilliance—is located in particular phrases. His distinguishing trait is the pitch of eloquence that he often achieves several times in a single poem through the startling aptness of his imagery. . . .

His work is significant, too, because of its irresistibly moving theme: man's quest for enduring love and absolute beauty. He expresses moods varying from exultant trust that the fulfillment of his quest is imminent to a downcast premonition of continued failure, but his desire never deviates from the true north of his idealism. This preoccupation gives a dignity and a universality to his poetry.

Vincent Quinn. *Hart Crane* (Twayne). 1963. p. 127

If one approaches *The Bridge* without a precommitment to Crane's own statement of its theme, it is possible to find in it a theme which provides a high degree of organic unity. The poem is a search or quest for a mythic vision, rather than the fixed, symbolic expression of a vision firmly held in the poet's mind. The vision sought is one that will be based on a knowledge of a glorious past, and will provide a bridge from that past to the hopeful future, in spite of the dearth of hopeful signs in the actual present. The poem is highly subjective in language and content, and understandably so, because the quest is a personal quest, the search of the poet for a vision that will satisfy his *own* needs. But Crane also saw the problem of the poet as reflecting the central problem of the society in which he lived, and the poet's solution to the problem—if he could achieve one—as having consequences far beyond the poet's own private life.

Thomas A. Vogler. *Sewanee Review*. Summer, 1965. pp. 381–2

Hart Crane's six ''Voyages'' are one poem, the only one of his poems in which Crane manages to express a sense of being at peace with himself. ''The Broken Tower'' tries to do the same, but the experience is new and uncertain; the title belies the swelling tower of the last stanza. In ''For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen'' and *The Bridge*, the positive, transcendental conclusions are doctrinaire rather than personal; they are necessary responses to poems full of experienced despair. In other personal poems of the mid-Twenties, the aspiration toward transcendence is itself a desperate maneuver. Only in ''Voyages'' can the tone even remotely be called serene. . . .

In another, less finished poem, ''Repose of Rivers,'' the sound of willows is made to represent what happiness Crane knew as a child. His adult search to rediscover that happiness culminates in hearing the sound of the sea. At the end of the ''Voyages,'' however, the sound is hushed. The ''imaged Word . . . unbetrayable reply'' is completely apart from Crane's hello-and-goodbye adventures in real life. At the top of his power, Crane isolates the axle-pole of his best self, assured that his love has found poetry and that his poetry has found infinity.

Maurice Kramer. *Sewanee Review*. Summer, 1965. pp. 410, 423

Finally, one must point to the fundamentally religious character of his outlook as another source of his comparative obscurity. By nature and nurture a transcendental idealist, he embraced no formal philosophy and no organized religion, despite his reading of Plato and Nietzsche and his exposure to Christian Science. His religion became the pursuit of the Absolute, conceived not as God but as the equivalent of God and experienced as a living ideal whose reality transcends space and time. His pursuit of this ideal is manifested in religious diction which may often appear Biblical or Neoplatonic yet has no specific traditional content, no reference to a text which would guide us to his meaning. It is not so much the confusion of his ''vision'' as the relative lack of a traditional vocabulary that leads to the charge of unintelligibility. In short, Crane is one of the many who, through no fault of their own, have been largely deprived of the common sources of the western tradition—the Bible and classical mythology and philosophy.

Hilton Landry in *The Twenties*, ed. Richard E. Langford and William E. Taylor (Everett Edwards). 1966. p. 24

Crane ends [''Passage''] characteristically, with questions rather than answers (when his poetry contains answers, they are usually silent ones, as in ''At Melville's Tomb''). But it seems evident that the grasp of memory and everything associated with it—memory that is committed to the already written and established, memory escaped from, earlier, and then yielded to—has been broken; and that hearing, the ability to hear the voice of spirit, is about to be restored. The ceremonial action of ''Passage''—its rhythm of gain, loss and potential recovery—is badly cramped in execution. But it is Crane's honest and accurate account of the continuing rhythm of his own poetic career.

R.W.B. Lewis. *Massachusetts Review*. Spring, 1966. p. 232

In one way perhaps Whitman's example, which seemed to offer [Crane] validation, did him more harm than good. Temperamentally, perhaps, especially in the final years of his short life, Crane had more in common with St. John of the Cross than with Whitman. If he had lived earlier and elsewhere, he might have trusted his mystic experiences, and interpreted them as ''a flight of the alone to the alone.'' ''The way down,'' into the depths of consciousness, was very possibly the only mystic way Crane had ever personally and strongly experienced. His life was too anguished, his experience too scarifying, to encourage frequent perceptions of ''immanent divinity.'' But Whitman's ''way up,'' his nature mysticism, was the only *example* Crane knew. He was forced to interpret his experiences of illumination in terms fundamentally alien to his temperament.

Hyatt H. Waggoner. *American Poets from the Puritans to the Present* (Houghton). 1968. p. 509

In modern American poetry the lyric customarily records the confessional impulses of a tormented sensibility, often in an overwrought rhetoric, in a poem of and about self-consciousness. In these journals of pain, the poet's forcing of feeling sometimes induces a forcing of syntax and a taxing of language. Each poem is an unfolding of contraries, a religious-erotic experience. In Crane's poems, the points of pressure are often the sublimated equivalents of the pressure of feeling in his life: the swings from hurt to joy and from exaltation to despair, the air of tense, distraught eagerness to will love into being and to war with death in the self. This drama of both unfulfillment and transfiguration is played out to a dazzling, driven music. The language sweeps along lyrical currents—jammed, excited, buoyant, involuted, majestic.

The immediacy and verve of Crane's poetry or its complicated verbal surface cannot be denied. Many of his readers feel that they are looking through a frosted window and are only dimly if tantalizingly aware of what is behind that window. But, as T.S. Eliot said, it is a test that ''genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood.'' What is not sufficiently accepted is that Crane was a good poetic workman, devoted to his craft and continually refining his tools. He is not an unschooled rhapsode. There are pattern, sense, and method in his poems. . . .

Herbert Leibowitz. *Hart Crane* (Columbia). 1968. p. 21

The synesthesia, synergy and syncopation [Crane] so brilliantly mastered were the shifts of a peculiarly naked temperament supported by a first-rate intelligence.

In all the many willingly submissive acts he had to perform, acts of graceful homage to masters genuine and spurious, to Stieglitz, Stein, Whitman, Blake, Rimbaud, Hopkins, Dante and Eliot on the one hand (I've left out a dozen), to Ouspensky and Spengler on the other, his keen mother wit told him that he had arrived somehow just off the beat—by a hair. It had already cost him a mighty effort to break free of the myths laid down by the great Midwestern novelists. Once free, like Keats he seemed to embrace and swallow all his own time, releasing it only in a poetry so splendidly ambiguous about most of the things that harried his time-bound friends that to this day it guards its wisdom with a positively Delphic severity.

Not bridges, harbors, Manhattan or the Indians, not Columbus or Pocahontas or the tropics or jazz or the sea, were his private discoveries. But it was a measure of his genius that his finest verse in *The Bridge* dared to rival Twain on the Mississippi and Whitman on New York, achieving in his serviceable contracted iambic pentameter almost the same magnificence. No models, then, but the best and least widely understood.

R. W. Flint. *New York Times Book Section*. July 21, 1974. p. 5

Not only is *The Bridge* constructed according to Crane's theory of organic poetry, and hence to some extent explicable in terms of his poetics; but also, *The Bridge* is a poem about the creation of a poem, one that can embody the truth of the fictional poet's imagination in ''one arc synoptic'' (''Atlantis''). The poem, then, not only results from a process of organic creation, it also continually celebrates and re-enacts that process as its proper subject. Thus to propose a goal for, or a critical appreciation of, *The Bridge* which is based on categories or intentions not inherent in Crane's poetic purposes is to run that risk of a confusion of categories. In the American tradition of Emerson and Whitman, Crane was not concerned with society except insofar as it proceeded from the life of the individual, which for the poet means the life of the individual's imagination. Such poetry ''teaches'' society by evincing that life. . . .

There are three major aspects of Crane's poetic theory which bear on the nature and direction of *The Bridge*: the process by which a poem is created, the kind of poem resulting from this process, and the function of the poem in relation to the reader. The creative process is an organic one in which the poet submits to experience, assimilates and unifies it, then represents to the world the evidence of this unifying of experience within a poem. . . . Thus . . . the poem is . . . a celebration of the power of the imagination, the harp that engenders the chord, and hence a celebration of the life and act of the imagination. The dream of act is the dream that the poet-persona will, in the life of his particular imagination, be able to unite diverse materials, reach a state of unity and absolute innocence, symbolized by Atlantis, and then cast a ''mythic spear,'' meaning write the poem, *The Bridge*, that will urge others (the audience) to the same kind of activity, the same kind of life, that engendered the poem. It is within this context that *The Bridge*, Crane's epic of the modern consciousness, must be described.

Richard P. Sugg. *Hart Crane's ''The Bridge''* (Univ. of Alabama Pr., 1976), pp. 4, 7

The Romantic tradition in which Crane is writing has been profoundly antidogmatic from the beginning. In Crane's poetry the balance between circumstantial or contingent truth and its dissolution in random occurrence is never given over in favor of some answer from Beyond. Crane celebrates the possibility of meaning, faith, and work in individual circumstances, while he demonstrates through the dramatic contexts of the poems that ''meaning'' is a temporary product of an always creative destructive mind. This is why seeing Crane as a ''redeemer'' must be seriously qualified. I do not believe that Crane's poems represent an attempt to reassert the religious consciousness in an unreligious age. Their honesty and skepticism continually see through the efforts of the mind to redeem the world. What Crane has discovered is that the power of the mind never has depended on the absolute truth of its beliefs. Instead, the flexibility of the mind, its genius for disagreeing with itself, is its greatest strength. . . .

Crane's poems work toward a revelation which could be characterized as seeing through an experience without surrendering or demeaning a naive sense of its reality. Absolute knowledge for him is a momentary recognition of what is naive about the experience *and* what is wonderful about it. Such a recognition is absolute in the sense that it is both undeniably real and free of the biases of the poet and of the reader. Crane accepts the problematical nature of its interpretation and the precarious state of its existence as challenges to expression. . . .

The special character of Crane's lyrics was produced from a sensibility passionate and simple, by a mind as brilliant as Eliot's. Crane could glean from a magazine article or an offhand conversation the essence of a current of thought too advanced for most to grasp with the best education. His poetry begins with the complete and honest indulgence of personal feelings; then a most penetrating introspection pushes these toward what I have called absolute knowledge. The result is an intensely personal lyricism cast in the light of an awareness of the deceiving nature of thought and feeling themselves. But neither the feeling nor the awareness is surrendered. Crane's difficult style is his solution to the problem of sustaining tension between the two. It involves exploiting the ambiguity of sense experience under the direction of the sense of value. His willingness to destroy the comfortable individuation and public aspect of experience results in a Dionysian art which rejects optimism but transcends pessimism. And it results in a uniquely Romantic lyric which celebrates life without pretending to correct existence. His poetry is thus unabashedly personal, confessional, proud, and relentlessly self-conscious.

Robert Combs. *Vision of the Voyage: Hart Crane and the Psychology of Romanticism* (Memphis State Univ. Pr., 1978), pp. x–xi, 39, 106–7

The Bridge is a revolutionary breakthrough for [Hart] Crane, not just as a poet but as an individual; it is, in fact, the great extended moment in which he acts as an individual and as a poet.

But *The Bridge* was not supposed to be a personal epic. And everyone was ready with an idea of what it should be instead. Allen Tate pressed him hard to write a historical poem; Waldo Frank looked forward to one more voice added to his dialogue with the machine and its problems; and Yvor Winters cautioned him, as he cautioned everyone, to marshal his thoughts in a more rigorous and logical manner. There were others who could not be disappointed: his parents, his patron, influential friends. The extraordinary breakthrough of 1926 was reassembled almost as it was still assembling itself, and what emerged at last offered a bit of something for everyone. The 1930 *Bridge* offered history to Tate, the machine to Frank, a stronger narrative line to Winters, even a passage on the airplane for his new friend and patron, Harry Crosby.

In the process, all these extras crowded Crane out of his own poem. There are a number of reasons why Crane had so much difficulty bringing his epic to a conclusion and so much difficulty writing at all after 1927, but first among them must be his own intuition that the poems as he was presently shaping them somehow excluded him. Only in the letter-poems, where he almost stubbornly insisted upon directly addressing those who mattered to him, did he thoroughly include himself; and in those works, he is as modest as he can be.

Would the cycle have come around again, had Crane continued to live? Would he have been able, under some extraordinary or unique condition, to risk again writing as intimate and personal and vulnerable as in the 1926 *Bridge*? Possibly not for some time. As his new relationship with a woman suggests, he was at this moment compelled to change his own life rather than to accept his life as it was; the relationship appears as a desperate swerve, an effort to lose who he is by believing he can become someone new and different. Out of such pressures, suicide seems to be a familiar alternative; so many preceding decisions are, in effect, miniature suicides themselves, decisions to die to one's self, to adopt a mask, to play a role.

But twice in his life he had let himself be more open than ever before—once in *Voyages*, again in 1926 with *The Bridge*. He carried within himself the seeds of understanding what it was that he needed; both of his extended poems, as well as some shorter works, were acts of self-understanding and achievements of self-therapy: confrontations of the problems that were crushing him. The problems were immensely complex, and made even more so by his own integrity. So complex were they that a third try might perhaps have been beyond his reach. Yet if he had lived longer, his own compulsion to write might have carried him through, or led

him at least to another work in which, once again, he broke through to matters of deepest importance to him.

Edward Brunner. *Splendid Failure: Hart Crane and the Making of ''The Bridge''* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Pr., 1985), pp. 244–45

With Crane line and stanza are the primary expressive units, to the point frequently of putting at risk the larger structures meant to contain them; the effect of something ''fragmentary'' in his finished and published work that was noted early on by the English poet and critic D.S. Savage marks individual poems as well as the mass of his writing. His desire to make each such expressive strophe effectively autonomous and incontrovertible has about it something of the same willfulness and urgency, the same intemperate adventuring, to be felt—his closest friends all sensed this—in his private conduct and erotic life. (''Creative opportunism'' was Philip Horton's critical phrase for it in 1937.) Hart Crane lived along the knife's edge in more ways than one. Technique for him, as Waldo Frank was not wrong in thinking, was more than a choice of means to a foreseen end. His verse stanzas—he seems to me as great a master of the formal lyric stanza as Yeats, Eliot, Wallace Stevens—work to advance thought and crystallize further apprehension as well as concentrating and intensifying the undertaken statement. Line and stanza became, for Crane, acts of life, and not only poetic life. Each one when completed served as a renewal, a vital self-justification. In some definite and self-acknowledging fashion the delivered words of each poem are meant, for this child of the Protestant sensibility's American diaspora, to realize anew the generative ''Word'' at the axis of all creation.

In any round estimate of Crane's place in American writing and in twentieth-century poetry, Yvor Winters's extreme ambivalence will remain a crux. Whatever we decide about its causes and reasons. But it was Winters himself who, years after dismissing Crane as a performative model, most memorably articulated what I think anyone who responds to Crane's imaginative and prosodic intelligence more than glancingly will be brought to feel. ''So far as I am concerned,'' Winters wrote (in scorn of the homogenizing intelligence of an imaginary Professor *X*); ''I would gladly emulate Odysseus, if I could, and go down to the shadows for another hour's conversation with Crane on the subject of poetry.''

Warner Berthoff. *Hart Crane: A Re-Introduction* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Pr., 1989), pp. x–xi

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CRANE, Stephen (1871–1900)

He sang, but his voice erred up and down the scale, with occasional flashes of brilliant melody, which could not redeem the errors. New York was essentially his inspiration, the New York of suffering and baffled and beaten life, of inarticulate or blasphemous life; and away from it he was not at home, with any theme, or any sort of character. It was the pity of his fate that he must quit New York, first as a theme, and then as a habitat; for he rested nowhere else, and wrought with nothing else as with the lurid depths which he gave proof of knowing better than anyone else.

William Dean Howells. *North American Review*. Dec., 1902. p. 771

In his art he is unique. Its certainty, its justness, its peculiar perfection of power arrived at its birth, or at least at that precise moment in its birth when other artists—and great artists too—were preparing themselves for the long and difficult conquest of their art. I cannot remember a parallel case in the literary history of fiction. . . . His art is just in itself, rhythmical, self-poising as is the art of a perfect dancer. There are no false steps, no excesses. And, of course, his art is strictly limited. We would define him by saying he is the perfect artist and interpreter of the surfaces of life. And that explains why he so swiftly attained his peculiar power and what is the realm his art commands and his limitations.

Edward Garnett. *Friday Nights* (Knopf). 1922. p. 205

He had a quiet smile that charmed and frightened one. It made you pause by something revelatory it cast over his whole physiognomy, not like a ray but like a shadow. . . . Contempt and indignation never broke the surface of his moderation simply because he had no surface. He was all through the same material, incapable of affectation of any kind, of any pitiful failure of generosity for the sake of personal advantage, or even from sheer exasperation which must find its relief. . . . Though the word is discredited now and may sound pretentious, I will say that there was in Crane a strain of chivalry which made him safe to trust with one's life.

Joseph Conrad. Introduction to Thomas Beer's *Stephen Crane* (Knopf). 1923. pp. 5, 7, 9–10

He is American literature's ''marvelous boy.'' Like the Bowery, he was elemental and vital. He would sleep in a flop house to taste the bitter of experience. He loved living. And adventure enough was crowded into his eight sick years of manhood. He looked at life clearly and boldly, knew its irony, felt its mystery and beauty, and wrote about it with a sincerity and confidence that spring only from genius.

Vernon Loggins. *I Hear America* (Crowell) 1937. p. 23

Crane left on me an impression of supernaturalness that I still have. It was perhaps the aura of that youth that never deserted him—perhaps because of his aspect of frailty. He seemed to shine—and perhaps the November sun really did come out and cast on his figure, in the gloom of my entry, a ray of light. At any rate, there he stands . . . radiating brightness. But it was perhaps more than anything the avenging quality of his brows and the resentful frown

of his dark blue eyes. He saw, that is to say, the folly and malignity of humanity—not in the individual but in committees.

Ford Madox Ford. *Portraits from Life* (Houghton). 1937. p. 24

For all its beauty, Crane's best work was curiously thin and, in one sense, even corrupt. His desperation exhausted him too quickly; his unique sense of tragedy was a monotone. No one in America had written like him before; but though his books precipitately gave the whole aesthetic movement of the nineties a sudden direction and a fresher impulse, he could contribute no more than the intensity of his spirit. Half of him was a consummate workman; the other half was not a writer at all. . . . His gift was a furious one, but barren; writing much, he repeated himself so joylessly that in the end he seemed to be mocking himself with the same quiet viciousness with which, even as a boy, he had mocked the universe.

Alfred Kazin. *On Native Grounds* (Reynal). 1942. pp. 71–2

Crane was one of the first post-impressionists. . . . He began it before the French painters began it or at least as early as the first of them. He simply knew from the beginning how to handle detail. He estimated it at its true worth—made it serve his purposes and felt no further responsibility about it. I doubt whether he ever spent a laborious half-hour in doing his duty by detail—in enumerating, like an honest, grubby auctioneer. If he saw one thing that engaged him in a room, he mentioned it. If he saw one thing in a landscape that thrilled him, he put it on paper, but he never tried to make a faithful report of everything else within his field of vision, as if he were a conscientious salesman making out an expense account.

Willa Cather. *On Writing* (Knopf). 1949. pp. 69–70

The immense power of the tacit . . . gives his work kinship rather with Chekhov and Maupassant than Poe. ''I like my art''—said Crane—''straight''; and misquoted Emerson, ''There should be a long logic beneath the story, but it should be carefully kept out of sight''. How far Crane's effect of inevitability depends upon this *silence* it would be hard to say. Nowhere in ''The Open Boat'' is it mentioned that the situation of the men is symbolic, clear and awful though it is that this story opens into the universe. Poe in several great stories opens man's soul downwards, but his work has no relation with the natural and American world at all. If Crane's has, and is irreplaceable on this score, it is for an ironic inward and tragic vision outward that we value it most, when we can bear it. . . . Crane does really stand between us and something that we could not otherwise understand. It is not human; it is not either the waves and mountains who are among his major characters, but it acts in them, it acts in children and sometimes even in men, upon animals, upon boys above all, and men. Crane does not understand it fully. But he has been driven and has dragged himself nearer by much to it than we have, and he interprets for us.

John Berryman. *Stephen Crane* (Wm. Sloane Associates). 1950. pp. 291–2

Jean Julius Christian Sibelius (born six years before Stephen Crane) may or may not slink down the cellar stairs whenever ''Finlandia'' is played, and Stephen Crane might have developed a comparable skin-crawl every time *The Red Badge of Courage* was mentioned. The fact that his other novels, all of them short for their day and rather shorter for ours, now go unread might not distress him, and toward his verse, with its conscious and even proclaimed echo of Emily Dickinson (an echo louder than the voice of origin), he might today be as patronizing and indulgent as the next man. (There is one great advantage to dying young—you can impute all your faults to your youth.) But he would, I am sure, take high pride in his competence with the short story, and it would be a proper pride. For Crane still has, and always will have, the capacity to teach by sterling example (as in ''The Open Boat'' and ''The Blue Hotel'') the fine art of narration.

John T. Winterich. *Saturday Review*. Feb. 3, 1951. p. 43

Irony is Crane's chief technical instrument. It is the key to our understanding of the man and of his works. He wrote with the intensity of a poet's emotion, the compressed emotion that bursts into symbol and paradox. . . .

Crane's style is prose pointillism. It is composed of disconnected paintings, which coalesce like the blobs of color in French impressionist paintings, every word-group having a cross-reference relationship, every seemingly disconnected detail having interrelationship to the configurated whole. The intensity of a Crane work is owing to this patterned coalescence of disconnected things, everything at once fluid and precise. A striking analogy is established between Crane's use of colors and the methods employed by the impressionists and neo-impressionists or divisionists, and it is as if he had known about their theory of contrasts and had composed his own prose paintings by the same principle.

Robert W. Stallman. *Stephen Crane. An Omnibus* (Knopf). 1952. pp. xxv, 185

. . .the Crane story again and again interprets the human situation in terms of the ironic tensions created in the contract between man as he idealizes himself in his inner thought and emotion and man as he actualizes himself in the stress of experience. In the meaning evoked by the ironic projection of the deflated man against the inflated man lives Crane's essential theme: the consequence of false pride, vanity, and blinding delusion.

James B. Colvert. *Modern Fiction Studies*. Autumn, 1959. p. 200

Any student can recall that Stephen Crane has been termed realist, romantic, naturalist, imagist, existentialist, symbolist, impressionist, expressionist, and *pointilliste*. (I may have overlooked some). That roaster becomes doubly formidable when one remembers that somebody has taken the trouble to deny the validity of almost every one of those labels—if only to make room for pasting on his own red wafer. Common sense suggests, therefore, that we are dealing with a vivid and significant writer who cannot be catergorized simply—perhaps not at all. . . .

One conclusion suggested by these facts is that Crane never outlived his apprenticeship. He did not live to become any sort of ''list.'' . . . Crane died a Seeker. . . .

His experience of sports brought Crane knowledge, and attitudes consequent on that knowledge, important to his point of view. It give him the experience of testing his courage and thence personal knowledge of pain and fear, victory and defeat. From what vantage point he commanded the cosmic gambler's stoic outlook: despising the petty, safe and comfortable; prizing the chance-taking, the enterprising, the seeking, aggressive and tough. In this he was at one with the prophets of the strenuous life. But he went beyond them in the depth of his forceful but ambivalent compassion for losers. He was anxious that their courage or at least their agony be defended against and registered upon the smug and ignorant. But he would not have defended them against the law, against the rules of the game of life.

Edwin H. Cady. *English Literary History*. Dec., 1961. pp. 378, 381

Both Crane and Hemingway began with a sense of irony, a gift for understatement, an abhorrence of sentimentalism and a view of man that made war one of the important, inevitable metaphors for dramatizing their insights. Man under stress, at the center of powerful, irrational forces, man forging and tempering an answerable courage and code is the repetitive situation at the center of both writers' works. They both assert that in heaven there is *nada*, that nature is indifferent, that the unlimited, unwounded are ignorantly cruel and barbarously sentimental. Only the scarred can hope to offer even a tentative interpretation of man's dilemmas.

Sy Kahn in *Essays in Modern American Literature*, edited by Richard E. Langford (Stetson University). 1963. pp. 36–7

Maggie

Maggie is not a story *about* people; it is primitive human nature itself set down with perfect spontaneity and grace of handling. For pure aesthetic beauty and truth no Russian, not Tchekhov himself, could have bettered this study which, as Howells remarks, has the quality of Greek tragedy.

Edward Garnett. *Friday Nights* (Knopf). 1922. pp. 214–5

It is a short, a novelette. Yet it suggests more life than any American contemporary of Crane could have depicted in a thousand pages. In its every crowded phrase and metaphor it is reality. The little book breaks all traditions of fiction. Crane has no model for it—except possibly the page or two he had read from Zola. But it is not Zolaesque. Critics like to call it the first specimen of genuine realism produced by an American. Perhaps it is that. But it should be judged as a thing unique—just a faithful and vivid projection of the grim degradation and sordid beauty of the Bowery.

Vernon Loggins. *I Hear America* (Crowell). 1937. pp. 25

The Red Badge of Courage

The deep artistic unity of *The Red Badge of Courage* is fused in its flaming, spiritual intensity, in the fiery ardour with which the shock of the Federal and Confederate armies is imaged. The torrential force and impetus, the check, sullen recoil and reforming of shattered regiments, and the renewed onslaught and obstinate resistance of brigades and divisions are visualized with extraordinary force and color. If the sordid grimness of carnage is partially screened, the feeling of war's cumulative rapacity, of its breaking pressure and fluctuating tension is caught with wonderful fervour and freshness of style.

Edward Garnett. *Friday Nights* (Knopf). 1922. pp. 212–3

Intense, brutal, bloody, *The Red Badge of Courage* vitalizes the smoke, noise, stench dread, terror, agony, and death of the battlefield. Thrust into the horror, the reader identifies himself with Henry Fleming and feels with him the trepidation of fear and heroism. How a boy of twenty-two conceived the story and within a few days got it down on paper with such truthfulness to detail that no veteran soldier has ever been able to question its authenticity is one of the mysteries of artistic creation.

Vernon Loggins. *I Hear America* (Crowell). 1937. p. 26

Suddenly there was *The Red Badge of Courage* showing us, to our absolute conviction, how the normal, absolutely undistinguished, essentially civilian man from the street had behaved in a terrible and prolonged war—without distinction, without military qualities, without special courage, without even any profound apprehension of, or passion as to, the causes of the struggle in which, almost without will, he was engaged. . . . With *The Red Badge of Courage* in the nineties, we were provided with a map showing us our own hearts. If before that date we had been asked how we should behave in a war, we should no doubt have answered that we should behave like demigods, with all the marmoreal attributes of war memorials. But, a minute after peeping into *The Red Badge* we knew that, at best, we should behave doggedly but with a weary non-comprehension, flinging away our chassepot rifles, our haversacks, and fleeing into the swamps of Shiloh.

Ford Madox Ford. *Portraits from Life* (Houghton). 1937. pp. 22–3

Crane's hero is Everyman, the symbol made flesh upon which war plays its havoc and it is the deliberation of that intention which explains why the novel is so extraordinarily lacking, as H. L. Mencken puts it, in small talk. Scene follows scene in an accelerating rhythm of excitement, the hero becomes the ubiquitous man to whom, as Wyndham Lewis once wrote of the Hemingway man, things happen. With that cold, stricken fury that was so characteristic of Crane—all through the self-conscious deliberation of his work one can almost hear his nerves quiver—he impaled his hero on the ultimate issue, the ultimate pain and humiliation of war, where the whole universe, leering through the blindness and smoke of battle, became the incarnation of pure agony. The foreground was a series of commonplaces; the background was cosmological.

Alfred Kazin. *On Native Grounds* (Reynal). 1942. pp. 71–2

The Red Badge of Courage probes a state of mind under the incessant pinpricks and bombardments of life. The theme is that man's salvation lies in change, in spiritual growth. It is only by immersion in the flux of experience that man becomes disciplined

and develops in character, conscience, or soul. Potentialities for change are at their greatest in battle—a battle represents life at its most intense flux. Crane's book is not about the combat of armies; it is about the self-combat of a youth who fears and stubbornly resists change, and the actual battle is symbolic of this spiritual warfare against change and growth. Henry Fleming recognizes the necessity for change and development, but wars against it. The youth develops into the veteran: ''So it came to pass. . . his soul changed.'' Significantly enough, in stating what the book is about Crane intones Biblical phrasing.

Robert W. Stallman. *Stephen Crane. An Omnibus* (Knopf). 1952. p. 193

The achievement of Crane in *The Red Badge of Courage* may be likened, it seems to me, to Chaucer's in *Troilus and Criseyde*, despite the lesser stature of the novel. Both works are infused with an irony which neatly balances two major views of human life—in *Troilus and Criseyde*, the value of courtly love versus heavenly love; in *The Red Badge of Courage*, ethical motivation and behavior versus deterministic and naturalistic actions. Both pose the problem, ''Is there care in Heaven?'' One is concerned with human values in a caring Universe, the other in an indifferent Universe. . . . Crane's magnum opus shows up the nature and value of courage. The heroic ideal is not what it has been claimed to be: So largely is it the product of instinctive responses to biological and traditional forces. But man does have will, and he has the ability to reflect, and though these do not guarantee that he can effect his own density, they do enable him to become responsible to some degree for the honesty of his personal vision. It is the duality of view, like Chaucer's, that is the secret of the unmistakable Crane's art.

Stanley B. Greenfield. *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*. Dec., 1958. pp. 571–2

Crane artistically rendered the raw experiences of war in a special, prismatic prose, in our color-shot imagery and elegant impressions. It is a world where each sound is amplified by human terror, each color made brilliant and blaring by the frightened, wary eye, and the enemy invested with one's deepest, primitive fears. All this Crane instinctively knew in *The Red Badge of Courage*. In the fictional world of war, Crane's ironic vision, his talent for bizarre imagery, his curious religious and biblical diction (by which he inflates the egoistic actions and poses of his characters for later puncturing by pointed, ironic understatement), and his impressionistic descriptions could find their most made ample expression. Crane's young soldier, Henry Fleming, like Hemingway's Nick Adams, finds himself thrust into a world that shocks him into new levels of feeling and perception; the two men are symbols of innocence blasted by violence, by what at worst seems an intelligent malevolence.

Sy Kahn in *Essays in Modern American Literature*, edited by Richard E. Langford (Stetson University). 1963. p. 36

Poetry

The poems have an enigmatic air and yet they are desperately personal. The absence of the panoply of the Poet is striking. We remember that their author did not like to be called a poet nor did he call them poetry himself. How unusual this is, my readers will recognize: most writers of verse are merely dying to be called poets, tremblingly hopeful that what they write is real ''poetry.'' There was no pose here in Crane. His reluctance was an inarticulate recognition of something strange in the pieces. They are not like literary compositions. They are like things just seen and said, *said for use*. . . . He has truths to tell. Everybody else in the 'nineties is chanting and reassuring and invoking the gods. So Crane just says, like a medicine man *before* chanting or poetry began. And what he says is savage: unprotected, forestlike.

John Berryman. *Stephen Crane* (Wm. Sloane Associates). 1950. pp. 272–3

Crane's best poems. . . present the bare outlines of a narrative situation in which there is a tension between two opposed forces. The tension may be expressed in terms of antithetical statements, dialogue, descriptions, or the effect upon the observer of an action he witnesses. . . . By making his human figures faceless and nameless, by pitting them against elemental forces, by describing their ambitions and their plights in simple yet overwhelming metaphors, Crane created for his poetry a symbolical form which represented a great advance in subtlety and flexibility over its allegorical beginnings.

Daniel Hoffman. *The Poetry of Stephen Crane* (Columbia). 1956. pp. 263–4

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CREELEY, Robert (1926–)

Robert Creeley . . . is a hit-or-miss poet; and, if he is satisfied, then so must I be—for he is a good poet. Intransigent, ''engaged,'' he can perceive the apocalypse in almost any moment he chooses. His method has been from the first poems in *Le Fou* staccato, elliptical. The dramatic situation—almost all the poems entail one or reactions to one—is made clear to the reader by shreds of rhetoric which are the involvement in it and act like images in a cluster. In this latter connection, Creeley's poems are one of our stronger links

with other literatures—the Spanish and French especially—where writing from image to image is at least as important and frequent as protracting a single image into a rational conceit.

David Galler. *Sewanee Review*. Winter, 1961. p. 171

[William Carlos] Williams also presides behind the work of Robert Creeley. Most of the poems are short, and it is often the movement quite as much as the words that does the work, as for example in one of the best early poems, ''The Innocence.'' At the same time his plainness of language may on occasion become a baldness, and the resulting poems are sometimes more similar to the notes for poems than to completed poems. . . .

His effect is at best one of purity and elegance; ''care'' is a favorite word in his early poems, and his care in suggesting minutiae is close to a moral care. There is a fragility, however, to most of his work, and it is only seldom (notably in ''The Figures'') that one feels his concerns are as fully explored as they deserve.

Thom Gunn. *The Yale Review*. Autumn, 1962. pp. 130–1

Creeley seems not to like pattern, really to be afraid of it, whether it is intellectual, structural (as in parallels or antitheses), metrical (when metric patterns are set up it is only so that they may be abandoned, thus defeating the expectation of recurrence), or a matter of rhyme (which is sometimes forced into a parody of itself that denies it value). Creeley seems not to like excitement either, at least in the forms of sound and image, for he persistently reduces poems to language that is prosaic. . . . What I hope is happening in Creeley's poetry is that the reticences are diminishing, and that the individual, direct and effective features of language which have been there all along—brevity of development, short lines, simple diction with considerable colloquialism and a little useful profanity—are now more willing to be united with an explicit situation.

William Dickey. *Poetry*. March, 1963. pp. 421, 423

Robert Creeley does a simple but rare thing. In each form he uses—up to now poetry, criticism, and a huge amount of letter writing—he insists on being ''personal.'' That is, he allows his own mind to dominate, to dictate, formal procedure. He is the man who said it: ''Form is only an extension of content''; and in his own work it is *consciously* so. He is, for instance, the only writer I know in whom I cannot find one rhetorical instance, i.e., ''fitting'' a sound: Creeley insists the opposite. And the forms themselves are of course changed by this, in the sense that they are ''re-formed'' each time to his personal measures. Also as a consequence, Creeley may maintain a consistency this way as ''person'' that is ''trans-formal.'' He is one of the minority of poets who write good prose, and is even rarer for writing prose that is ''like'' his poetry.

Aram Saroyan. *Poetry*. April, 1964. pp. 45–6

The subject of [*The Gold Diggers and Other Stories*] is that kind of relation between people which is penetration, a locking or growing together in which the life becomes not what each one has alone but what is between them—all the inseparable pains and pleasures, terrors and joys of that kind of relation, in its presence, or at times in its absence. . . . In such an effort, the principled use of the conventional arts of fiction becomes a distraction. What takes their place, giving the stories the concrete texture of their substance and giving the reader his experience, are the kinesthetic rhythms of the utterance. These rhythms are the gestures of Creeley's apprehension of his characters, at the level where apprehension is itself response. . . .

It is because Creeley is so completely ''in'' these stories . . . that he has discarded conventional craft for utterance. It is for the same reason that in his poetry he has discarded the formal use of symbol and meter, again for utterance. He has minimized the differentia of poetry and fiction in his work, so that his stories take a position somewhere between the novel and the poems in a continuum, different not so much in kind from each other as in narrowness of focus. The stories are comparable in length to the chapters of the novel, but their intensity is much greater. The poems are at the other end of the range, straining articulation to its limits and approaching absolute intensity.

Samuel Moon. *Poetry*. August, 1966. pp. 341–2

Pieces is a very wise and very beautiful book of verse. It enacts the piecemeal achievement of a vision so scrupulous and catholic that what by method is merely muscular and aesthetic becomes in the end profoundly moral. . . . Ordinary objects . . . locate extraordinary experiences in Creeley's poetry because he is so careful about his words and the expressive possibilities of line length. . . .

The stunning quality of such spareness can perhaps only be fully appreciated in the context. This means, in the fullest sense, as part of the entire book, for Creeley has carefully constructed the whole thing as a unit of beautiful discretions: ''My plan is/these little boxes/make sequences.'' Which is to say, every word, every line, every poem, is forced to absolute separateness, for Creeley believes that real unity can only come when the pieces possess their own radical integrity. . . . Language here is perfectly articulated—if the poem courts a danger it is that all the pieces will collapse and scatter, like a stack of blocks—yet the whole accumulates itself in a collective refusal to swallow up any of its parts. We see the pieces and the sequences with equal clarity, as Creeley planned us to do. Such a devotion to language is a double pleasure, of purpose, of result. One does not achieve this easily: a poet must know his place and see to it.

Jerome McGann. *Poetry*. Dec., 1970. pp. 201–3

The basic organizational plan [of *A Day Book*], the jacket explains, is of ''a record of experience.'' The implicit aim is to embody poetic process, the way we get from our daily empirical consciousness into a self-transcendent art. Almost half the book's approximately 165 pages is made up of prose entries in a journal; the rest consists of poetic entries, often parallel or at least reciprocal to the prose. Since the book is unpaginated (an annoyance, given its size, whenever one wants to go back and find anything in it), and since no time divisions within its span of more than thirty months are specified, we have the impression of an almost undifferentiated drift of consciousness. Yet the sequence retains a fundamental, sometimes absorbing *promise*. Who can tell what will show up next in the float, partly confessional and partly atmospheric, of events, conversations, gossip, crumbs of literary or philosophical thought,

introspective moments, *aperçus*, outbursts of erotic fantasy and memory, and moments of defeat by or triumph over depression that the drift carries along with it? If we take into consideration the poet's varied interests in jazz, drugs, varieties of sexual behavior, being on the move, and the confusions of love and family life, we have an ambience not unlike the television documentary *An American Family*, with modulations—would God that side were more consciously striven for!—toward Proustian recollection. When that Proustian effort does occur, as in the long poem ''People,'' we see how moving the whole work might have been.

M.L. Rosenthal. *Parnassus*. Fall–Winter, 1973. pp. 205, 207

I believe that Creeley's major accomplishment will be technical and that he will be remembered primarily as a craftsman. Time and again I have been impressed with the total control he exerts over the rhythms, especially, of his prose and poetry. The line, the pauses, the hesitancies, the syntax and ellipses usually mirror precisely the statement of the poem; in fact, in his best poems and in his best short stories, these elements become the statement itself. What he says is relatively less important than how he says it, or at least I believe that that is what future generations will say. . . .

Creeley has chosen, or as he might say, it has been chosen for him, to write poetry that constricts itself to a small point of intensity, with the emphasis on small as well as intensity. His poetry and fiction avoid the grand statement and the grand method; in fact, they accept technical limitations in the same way that they accept thematic limitations. His work is minimal in that it functions more by what is excluded than by what is included. The question then is not so much whether Creeley is or will be known as a major writer, but rather whether minimal art itself can ever be major. In other words, has Creeley, by the course he runs, removed himself from consideration as a major writer? Although any answer to this question can be argued endlessly, I suspect that the answer is yes. So far in his career at least, Creeley's work lacks both the thematic and technical scope to qualify as major. Within the self-imposed limitations of his poetry and fiction, the achievement is impressive; however, those self-imposed limitations are still limitations. To the literary historian, that evaluation is both justifiable and understandable; however, to the poet such a statement remains fortunately irrelevant.

Arthur Ford. *Robert Creeley* (Twayne, 1978), pp. 137–38

Apart from [Charles] Olson. . .the most important poets connected with the Black Mountain group are Robert Creeley, Ed Dorn, and Robert Duncan. In Creeley's case, an interest in open forms and the belief that ''words are things too'' has combined with two quite disparate but in a way complementary influences. There is, first, his involvement with the free-flowing experiments of Abstract Expressionism and modern jazz. ''To me,'' Creeley has said, ''life is interesting insofar as it lacks intentional 'control,''' and it is clear that the example of painters like Jackson Pollock and musicians like Charlie Parker and Miles Davis has encouraged him to see the artist as someone immersed in the work he creates, experiencing its energy, involved in its movement, and limited in terms of how he expresses himself only by ''the nature of the activity.'' Along with this, there is what Creeley has termed his ''New England temper.'' New England has given Creeley many things, including a tendency to be ''hung up,'' to suffer from pain (''I can / feel my eye breaking'') and tension (''I think I grow tensions / like flowers''). Above all, though, what it has given him is two things, one to do with perception, the other with expression. ''Locate *I*,'' declares Creeley in one of his poems; elsewhere, he insists, ''position is where you / put it, where it is.'' He is fascinated, in effect, by the perceptual position of the speaker, how the poem grows out of the active relationship between perceiver and perceived. The preoccupation with the limits of vision that earlier New Englanders demonstrated is consequently translated into cool, modernist terms: the aim being not an ''ego-centered'' verse but precisely its opposite, words that reveal how our eyes and minds ''are not separate. . .from all other life forms.'' At the same time, New England habits have, Creeley says, given him a ''sense of speech as a laconic, ironic, compressed way of saying something to someone,'' the inclination ''to say as little as possible as often as possible.'' So the forms of his saying have become, as he believes they should, an extension of content. His purpose is ''a realization, a reification of what is'': ''a process of discovery'' that turns out to be a matter of vocabulary as well as vision. ''What's the point of doing what we already know?'' Creeley has asked, and his writing continually illustrates this belief in experiment. His poems evolve on both a sequential grammatical level and a cumulative linear level; each line reaffirms or modifies the sense of the sentence and the total argument, each word exists in contrapuntal tension with all the others. There is risk here, in fact, a taste for the edgy and subversive, of a kind that would be equally familiar to Thelonious Monk and Emily Dickinson.

Richard Gray. *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century* (Essex: Longman, 1990), pp. 285–86

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CULLEN, Countee (1903–1946)

There are numerous things which Mr. Cullen as a poet has not yet begun to do, and there are some which he will never do, but in this

first volume (*Color*) he makes it clear that he has mastered a tune. Few recent books of poems have been so tuneful—at least so tuneful in the execution of significant themes. . . . Mr. Cullen's skill appears in the clarity and the certainty of his song. . . . If Mr. Cullen faces any danger it is this—that he shall call facility a virtue rather than the aspect of a virtue.

Mark Van Doren. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Jan. 10, 1926. p. 3

Cullen is, it seems to me, just a little too much the product of our American colleges. His earlier work was more his own. This is true not only because his earlier poems had to do, often, with the emotions of the Negro race, but because they were more direct statements of the poet's own sensitivity. If the earlier poems were less perfect technically, they had more complete sincerity. Sincerity is not necessarily art, of course, but while a poet speaks his own language, however crudely, there is hope that he may develop the necessary skill of the true artist. When he speaks too often in literary phrase and image, he ceases to be significant. These last lyrics and sonnets of Cullen's have this defect.

Eda Lou Walton. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Sept. 15, 1935. p. 17

Where Oxford dons have so often failed, an American Negro writer has succeeded. Mr. Cullen has rendered Euripides's best known tragedy (*The Medea*) into living and utterable English. He has made little attempt to convey the poetry of the original, preferring to concentrate on dramatic situation and realistic portrayal of character. The result is a very forceful and poignant re-creation of the story of the barbarian sorcerer. . . . Mr. Cullen's version is admirably suited to the exigencies of the contemporary stage. For an adaptation which does not pretend to be a literal translation, it follows the original closely, giving English equivalents for all but a few of the speeches in the Greek.

Philip Blair Rice. *The Nation*. Sept. 18, 1935. p. 336

Cullen's verses skip; those by Hughes glide. But in life Hughes is the merry one. Cullen was a worrier. . . . Equally evident . . . was Cullen's tendency to get his inspiration, his rhythms and patterns as well as much of his substance from books and the world's lore of scholarship. . . . Cullen was in many ways an old-fashioned poet. . . . About half of his ''best poems'' were written while he was a student of New York University, and it was during these years that he first came up for consideration as an authentic American writer, the goal to which he aspired. . . . Cullen did not live to see another springtime resurgence of his own creative powers comparable with the impulse that produced his first three books of poetry, the books which give his selected poems most of their lilt and brightness.

Arna Bontemps. *Saturday Review*. March 22, 1947. pp. 12–3, 44

As we read Cullen's racial poetry today, our feelings are mixed. Even though we understand and appreciate the larger implications of the alien-and-exile theme, we recognize its basic fallacy just as Cullen himself seemed to recognize it in *The Black Christ*. We also recognize that protest poetry of every type has lost much of its former popularity. We realize too that in the age of ''new criticism'' and intellectual verse, Cullen's style and general approach to poetry are dated; the Pre-Raphaelite delicacy of his lyrics is lost upon a generation which can find value only in ''metaphysical'' poetry. And yet in spite of these drawbacks, I believe that Cullen's racial poems will live. They will live first of all because they are a record of and a monument to the New Negro Movement, and as such they will always be important to the literary historian. Second, they will live for the social historian because they have made articulate the agony of racial oppression during a dark period in our continuing struggle for democracy. And most important of all, a few of them will live because they are good poems—good enough to survive the ravages of time and changing taste.

Arthur P. Davis. *Phylon*. Sept., 1953. p. 400

[Cullen] was, and probably still is, considered the least race-conscious of the Negro poets. . . . Nevertheless, it was because of the color of his skin that Countee Cullen was more aware of the racial poetry and could not be at all times ''sheer poet.'' This was clearly a problem for Cullen—wanting to write lyrics on love, death, and beauty—always so consciously aware of his race. This can be seen, for instance, in his poem ''Uncle Jim,'' where the struggle is neatly portrayed through the young boy, thinking of Keats, and his uncle, bitter with thoughts of the difference between being a black man or a white man in our society. . . .

For Cullen, then, the racial problem was always there, even when one was thinking of odes by Keats, and he was impelled—*in spite of everything I can do*—to write about this subject. This was the cause of much weakness in his writing, as well as some strength; for there are poems about race which have an emotional intensity that most of his white peers could not have matched.

Margaret Perry. *A Bio-Bibliography of Countee P. Cullen* (Greenwood). 1971. pp. 26–8

Few of the notable Negro poets of the 1920s worked with the pagan primitive theme as much as Cullen (indeed, it appears in only a few of his poems). . . . And Cullen's efforts were confused as well, because they were not merely attempts to explore the source of African nativity, the wellsprings of Negro spirit and identity. But for that poet, Africa and ''paganism'' were instruments in his personal rebellion against the Christian church. His religious skepticism was always voiced as stemming from race consciousness: ''Lord, I fashion dark gods, too.'' Cullen's attitudes about Africa and primitivism are enigmatic because they are only tools of this deeper revolt. ''The Shroud of Color,'' which is free of primitivism, is a far more successful statement of his problem with Christianity than ''Heritage.'' And while the latter is probably the author's best known work, the former is far the better poem for its clarity. Actually, even his struggle with faith was emblematic of a far deeper and more traumatic rebellion which his training in the genteel convention ill-equipped him to handle. Both as a person and a poet, Cullen tried to free himself of an unusually close relationship with his adoptive father, a minister. His personal

rebellion was slight and genteel. Searching always—and futilely—for an adequate *persona*, Cullen toyed with the self-image of the pagan poet.

Nathan Irvin Huggins. *Harlem Renaissance* (Oxford—N.Y.). 1971. pp. 164–5

In his earliest poems, Cullen . . . wanted to believe that impulses of his African heritage surged past his censoring consciousness and forced him to repudiate the white gods of Western Civilization. Cullen's Africa, however, was a utopia in which to escape from the harsh actualities of America, and the heritage a myth on which he hoped to erect a new faith to comfort himself in a world seemingly dedicated to furthering the interests of white men. . . .

As the African impulse waned, Cullen knelt before the altar of love, but there also false gods demanded sacrifices he would not offer. Like a wanderer disconsolate after a worldwide search, Cullen turned back to Christ. But he still could not rely upon the white god who governed the Methodist Church in which he had been reared; he could not believe a white god capable of comprehending the depths of a black man's suffering. Therefore, he fashioned for himself a black Christ with ''dark, despairing features.'' This image, however, furnished scant comfort; Cullen knew that his own creation could not correct mankind's transgressions. Without faith, without vision, Cullen, whom Saunders Redding has compared with Shakespeare's ethereal Ariel, lost his power to sing and soar above the fleshly Calibans.

Darwin T. Turner. *In a Minor Chord: Three Afro-American Writers and Their Search for Identity* (Southern Illinois). 1971. p. 61

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CUMMINGS, Edward Estlin (1894–1962)

I have heard two personal friends of E. E. Cummings debating as to whether his prosodical and punctuational gymnastics have not been a joke at the expense of the critics of poetry. One of them thinks Cummings will some day come out and announce that he has been joking; the other insists with fervent and faithful admiration that he is really as crazy as he seems.

Max Eastman. *The Literary Mind* (Scribner). 1932. p. 103

What Mr. Cummings likes or admires, what he holds dear in life, he very commonly calls flowers, or dolls, or candy—terms with which he is astonishingly generous; as if he thought by making his terms general enough their vagueness could not matter, and never noticed that the words so used enervate themselves in a kind of hardened instinct.

R.P. Blackmur. *The Double Agent* (Arrow). 1935. p. 20

Leave him alone, and he will play in a corner for hours, with his fragilities, his colors, and his delight in the bright shapes of all the things he sees. . . . The important point about E.E. Cummings is, however, that he was not left alone. He was dumped out into the uninnocent and unlyrical world. . . . His lyricism, shy enough at best, ran completely for cover, and he turned upon the nightmare worlds of reality, partly with the assumed callousness and defensive self-mockery of the very sensitive, and partly with the white and terrible anger of the excessively shy.

S.I. Hayakawa. *Poetry*. Aug., 1938. pp. 285–6

No American poet of the twentieth century has ever shown so much implied respect for the conventions of his milieu through conscious blasphemy as E. E. Cummings. If Cummings's verse seemed ''revolutionary'' and radical (which it was in the sense that its wit was concerned with the roots of syntax and grammar) it was because its life was and still is so completely surrounded by conventions. . . . The entire question of Cummings's maturity in the writing of his poetry has been and still remains a private matter. In the light of Cummings's accomplishments and in the recognition of the boundaries or limits that they have circumscribed, it is very nearly an impertinence for anyone to tell him to ''grow up,'' for one must not forget that he is one of the finest lyric poets of all time.

Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska. *History of American Poetry* (Harcourt). 1947. pp. 337–47

The Enormous Room has the effect of making all but a very few comparable books that came out of the War look shoddy and worn. It has been possible to re-read it, as I have done . . . and always to find it undiminished. . . . Cummings . . . encountered, in that huge barracks at La Ferté-Macé which he calls the Enormous Room, a sad assortment of men. They from being his companions in misery become, whether they speak or not—and the most eloquent are those who have the smallest command of words—his counsellors in compassion. . . . The mind provides no answer to the problem of suffering. . . . The answer, even for a poet, is not in words. . . . For what can oppose the poverty of the spirit, but the pride of the body? . . . And in Cummings there is from now on, in all he writes, an exaltation of the lowly and lively. He is himself, and he accepts his common lot.

John Peale Bishop. *Collected Essays* (Scribner). 1948. pp. 89–91

If Cummings is undistinguished as a thinker, he is always surprising as a creative craftsman. He is simultaneously the skillful draftsman, the legpulling clown, the sensitive commentator and the ornery boy. The nosethumbing satirist is continually interrupted by the singer of brazenly tender lyrics. A modern of the moderns, he displays a seventeenth-century obsession with desire and death; part Cavalier, part metaphysician, he is a shrewd manipulator of

language, and his style—gracefully erotic or downright indecent—is strictly his own.

Louis Untermeyer. *Modern American Poetry* (Harcourt). 1950. p. 509

We see him ever as an individual, liking and respecting other individuals, but hating the masses as masses, hating governments, hating war, hating propaganda (ours or anybody else's), hating machinery, hating science. Willing to settle for nothing less than perfection, he is a great hater, although he is also a great lover, perhaps the most ardent or at any rate the most convincing poet of love in our day. Whom and what he loves he loves deeply, but for him the existence of love demands the expression of anger, contempt, disgust for what is unworthy of love. That is what he is and what he has been since coming of age, though practice has refined him in the art of being nobody-but-himself.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 22, 1958. p. 14

Cummings' concept of the individual did not emerge fully developed at the beginning of his career to be reaffirmed through successive volumes of poetry without any perceptible change or increase in significance, as has too often been stated. Rather, the early volumes primarily celebrate the simple joy of living through the senses, though they also contain some of Cummings' best satiric pieces.

The middle volumes, beginning approximately with *is 5* in 1926, reaching a culmination with *no thanks* in 1935, and showing evidence of a changing emphasis with *50 Poems* in 1940, reveal a heightened and defensively sensitive awareness of the individual in relation to his social environment. . . .

With the publication of *50 Poems* another important dimension becomes evident in Cummings' poetry. Beginning approximately with this volume and extending through *95 Poems* in 1958 and *73 Poems* in 1963, we find Cummings examining the positive impact that the individual exerts upon his fellow men. As we have seen, what the individual has to offer, what the pattern of his life illustrates, is love. He is a practitioner of love for life, for others, and for one particular beloved. In the latest poems the individual emerges as the only true exponent of love.

Robert E. Wegner. *The Poetry and Prose of E.E. Cummings* (Harcourt). 1965. pp. 80–1

. . . cummings' free style is exemplary in the sense that he seems never to imply, ''Exactly imitate me!'' but rather, ''Here is what one of us can do with the conventions and still communicate effectively (at least on a par with most attempts); so why not go and see what you can do in *your* way? Each of us is valuable to others chiefly as he is honestly himself.'' Together, the love-poems and the satires, the many pages of vital, maturing poetry from *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923) to *73 Poems* (1963), present a broad spectrum, from brutal irony against what he felt unworthy of human beings to pure lyricism, celebrating the love which he found inseparable from truth and beauty, and the best, even the noblest, human experience. If he shocks, it is not to lower standards but to raise them—invariably in the direction of valuing and respecting individual worth and freedom, toward realizing and cherishing the dignity in each created soul.

Robert G. Tucker in *The Twenties*, edited by Richard E. Langford and William E. Taylor (Everett Edwards). 1966. p. 26

Although in so frankly a primitivistic ethos as Cummings', ideal perception and response are not really a matter of exotic vision, Cummings is inclined to make the same kind of distinctions that one would find in objectivist theory. There are the deluded rationalists (bourgeois society) and the enlightened irrationalists (poets). . . . Similarly, Cummings' ideas concerning the ''self'' and its relation to the external world, nature, follow a logic not remote from the objectivist's. To begin with, identity with ''Life'' means ''self-transcendence'' and what would be called by ''most people'' nonidentity, since to be ''most truly alive'' means to transcend the social self and to acquire the natural one (selflessness) that comes with response to the universe.

L.S. Dembo. *Conceptions of Reality in Modern American Poetry* (California). 1966. p. 119

Generally we may say that Cummings' typographical inventions are instruments for controlling the evocation of the poem in the mind of the reader; they are means of mitigating the temporal necessities of language with its falsification of the different, temporal rhythms of experience itself. Cummings is a painter, of course, and most of his poems are two things, auditory art and visual art, nonrepresentational pictures whose appearance on the page is essential to the artist's intention. (His correspondence with his publishers confirms this.) There is, typically, an intimate connection between the poem's appearance and the proper control of reading rate, emotional evocation, and aesthetic inflection. Indeed, one has the sense, reading these ''picture poems'' (his phrase) aloud, that one is translating inadequately from one language to another, with proportionate loss to the mere listener. This is an especially striking realization when one remembers that Cummings himself read his poems memorably, indeed read his own work better than any other living poet. One wonders what the greatness would be if he could hear in Cummings' voice what is added in the eye.

John Logan in *Modern American Poetry*, edited by Jerome Mazzaro (McKay). 1970. p. 260

I certainly don't think Cummings' reputation is helped by the persistent preservation, inviolate, of all 739 poems in the new edition [of *Complete Poems*]; for his was a narrow art; he repeated himself shamelessly and went through practically no development of theme or method once he had settled into a niche. If poems were paintings the 739 could be bought and sold and hung with joy in 739 individual parlors, but since they are not paintings they huddle together uncomfortably in this heavyweight volume and represent him as a heavyweight poet, which he was not: he was a gloriously special poet who could do what he could do.

Particularly since he prided himself on his uniqueness—and in fact thought of any act of creation as primarily an individual's assertion of uniqueness—it seems a mistake to have the 739

wandering around forever in a lump. He deserves a slimmer, brighter image, for he remains a delight for youth. It doesn't matter that while he tells youth not to pay any attention to the syntax of things he is himself infatuated by the syntax of things; he comes over loud and clear as an indefatigable promoter of spring, love and the private life, and an equally indefatigable condemner of most of our faceless modernity.

Reed Whittemore. *New Republic*. Oct. 21, 1972. p. 32

Where Emerson was essentially a Neoplatonist, Cummings was a scoffer in his youth, then more and more a Christian. He does not think of Christ as the most perfect man, in Emerson's way of speaking, but rather prays to him as a divine intercessor. In theological terms his God is less immanent than Emerson's and more transcendent. He says in a poem addressed to God—here I translate into prose—''How should any tasting, touching, hearing, seeing, breathing, merely human being—lifted from the no of all nothing—doubt unimaginable You?'' As regards a future life, one of the subjects on which Emerson remained ambiguous, Cummings lets us infer that he believes in the resurrection of the flesh.

Malcolm Cowley. *The Yale Review*. Spring, 1973. p. 352

The mystery of E.E. Cummings's great aborted talent is not solved, only deepened, by his *Complete Poems*. His brave quixotry . . . has made him one of the poster gurus of a new generation: ''one's not half two. It's two are halves of one,'' says the motto shining poignantly on a brilliant yellow-orange background, with a single flower as shy adornment of this revealed truth. In fact, Cummings's first and last lines are nearly always, as in this case, his memorable ones, and most of his poems sag in the middle. While we all go round remembering ''nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands,'' or ''the single secret will still be man,'' or ''there's a hell of a good universe next door, let's go,'' we rarely recall what led up to these declarations. Something is wrong with the relation of parts to wholes in Cummings: we do not receive, as Coleridge thought we should, ''such delight from the *whole*, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component *part*.'' Cummings was capable of stunning parts, and these parts glitter on the page like sparklers, float up like scraps of hurdy-gurdy music—but the sparks don't organize into constellations, the music falls apart into notes and remains unorchestrated. ''Our genuine admiration of a great poet,'' says Coleridge, ''is a continuous *under-current* of feeling; it is everywhere present, but seldom anywhere as a separate excitement.'' Whether this is true or not, it is certain that for the most part Cummings provides only separate excitements, and is for that reason beloved of the young, who vibrate to his local effects and ask no more.

Helen Vendler. *The Yale Review*. Spring, 1973. p. 412

The poetry of E.E. Cummings has made a lasting impact upon twentieth-century literature. For one thing he taught his audience how to read him. To date four editions of his *Complete Poems*, each with an expanded number of items, have been published, and many of his earlier volumes have been reissued. His poems continue to appear in anthologies, particularly those for literary study in college courses. The persona that the poems project has a special appeal for young, sensitive readers who are aware of the overwhelming forces, social and political, that surround them and whose emotions surge as they grope for ways to adjust to their world. Cummings's self-characterization as ''i,'' the ''non-hero,'' expresses for them their joy in life, their conflicts of desire, their push against authority, and their desire to grow. . . .

In addition Cummings showed the way in which he could choose ordinary scenes and experiences and make them become little myths of twentieth-century life whether they were the childhood activities of Cambridge, the street happenings of New York, or encounters with the features of rural life in New Hampshire.

As for his love poems and his treatments of natural phenomena, he was continuing the Romantic tradition in a time when the harsh realities of urbanization and the pervasive intrusions of technology were bruising the sensibilities of modern human beings and blunting the awareness of the essential self and the consciousness of individual feelings.

But the exploration of the possibilities of linguistic expression was his special contribution. His legacy to later writers was the spectacle of his pushing language to its extremes. Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Dos Passos, and Faulkner were the major innovators of his time, but Cummings did not imitate them. He responded in spirit to their work but he made his own innovations, inspired especially by the modern movements in the visual arts: Impressionism and Postimpressionism, Cubism and Futurism, Dada and Surrealism. His poetic practice shows continuing experiment and growth over a stretch of forty-five years so that like Eliot and Yeats he was a poet of two generations. Not all of his attempts were aesthetic successes, nor was he critically stringent in what he allowed himself to publish. But an extensive selection of his poetic output would yield a huge body of permanently valuable work. . . .

Richard S. Kennedy. *E.E. Cummings Revisited* (New York: Twayne, 1994), p. 137, 139–40

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DAHLBERG, Edward (1900–1977)

The author of *Bottom Dogs* is . . . very close to us—he is closer to us, indeed, than we quite care to have literature be. *Bottom Dogs* is the backstreets of all our American cities and towns. . . . The prose of *Bottom Dogs* is derived partly from the American vernacular, but to say this may give a misleading impression—Dahlberg's prose is primarily a literary medium, hard, vivid, racy, exact, and with an odd kind of street-light glamor. I do not agree with D. H. Lawrence . . . that the dominating feeling of the book is repulsion—it would be quite easy for a writer of the harsh or satirical kind to make Dahlberg's material repulsive, but I do not feel that Dahlberg has done so: the temperament through which he has strained the barber-shops, the orphan homes, the bakeries and the dance-halls of his story is, though realistic and precise, rather a gentle and unassertive, and consequently an unembittered, one.

Edmund Wilson. *New Republic*. March 26, 1930. p. 157

Dahlberg's second novel [*From Flushing to Calvary*] emerges from his first—*Bottom Dogs*. Having laid his foundations there, he here uses cinematic photography of the life of Lorry and his mother, Lizzie, in their new environment, the suburban slums of Long Island. . . . Dahlberg's gift lies in his ability to re-create actuality, either by a process of building up detail; as in his story of the orphan days in *Bottom Dogs*, or swiftly, sharply, as in this novel. There is no character study here. There is neither psychology nor ideas nor meaning nor interpretation. When he gives the thoughts of his people, it is their immediate conscious thoughts which interest him. The thinking is merely a phase of the realism. And his people are moths that flit in and out of the path of an intense light until, singed and defeated, they fall away into darkness. But during the intervals of light he sets them forth with remarkable accuracy, and in the same way he sets forth their background with definitive sureness.

F. T. Marsh. *The Nation*. Nov. 16, 1932. pp. 483–4

Dahlberg is adept at taking grotesque, harried and abysmal characters, and prodding them to become more and more themselves. The persons of his books whom he has selected for particular dislike, he pursues with a corrosive brand of comment which constantly crashes through their own concepts of their lives, like a heckler who breaks a debater's sequence at every point by shouting out unwieldy questions. Dahlberg's style is highly mannered, with a distinctiveness that can readily alienate whenever it ceases to attract. . . . Dahlberg has obviously been under great strain in this ailing society, and in his writing he is settling a score.

Kenneth Burke. *New Republic*. Nov. 21, 1934. p. 53

Dahlberg and other writers of his ilk, together with their raving readers and other less studious camp-followers, are but the pseudo-intellectual auxiliaries, in our decadent civilization that they rightly revile, of the ''garage proletariat'' that they unjustifiably despise. Their claims to an intuitional omniscience are thus another expression of the unlettered ''know-all'' faith that also characterizes the modern gadget-maniac. The Dahlbergs and those whom they attack thus represent, together, the two elements of disruption that threaten our civilization most gravely: Practical reason and intuitional reason that both pose as pure reason.

Edouard Roditi. *Poetry*. Jan., 1951. p. 238

Not surprisingly, the best depression novels are those which were least mindful of the party line as this was being laid down in the *New Masses* by Michael Gold and Granville Hicks, and proselytized locally over the country by the John Reed Clubs. Edward Dahlberg's *Bottom Dogs*, published in 1930 with a rather inappropriate introduction by D. H. Lawrence, has hardly any overt political feeling at all. But this mordantly whimsical and grotesque book, with its echoes of Mark Twain and Sherwood Anderson, makes very good reading, especially if one had shared the dim image of Dahlberg that came down into the 1940s as some sort of Lawrencian apocalypticist who had once said something important about Melville. The picaresque story has to do with the adventures of Lorry Lewis, who as a young boy is put in an orphanage by his mother, a lady barber with a horrible pair or pince-nez glasses that are always slipping awry, so that she can take up with a Mississippi river-boat captain. There is much sordid realism and much sharp observation in the chapters dealing with the boy's early days in Kansas City and the years in the orphanage with such brilliantly caricatured companions as Herman Mush Tate and Bonehead-Star-Wolfe. The later scenes, in which Lorry Lewis, now a tramp on the eve of the depression, winds up in Los Angeles and gets involved with a group of vegetarian intellectuals and homosexuals in the Y.M.C.A. are very funny. And the chapter about Solomon's Dancepalace is a memorable picture of the underside of the Fitzgerald era.

Richard Chase. *Commentary*. Jan., 1957. p. 69

Mr. Edward Dahlberg's *Can These Bones Live* is an American classic, even if only a few people know it, but what kind of classic, it is difficult to say. Criticism as we write it at present has no place for it, and this means that I probably shall not be able to do justice to my own admiration. Mr. Dahlberg, like Thoreau whom he admires more than any other nineteenth-century American, eludes his contemporaries; he may have to wait for understanding until the historians of ideas of the next generation can place him historically. For we have at present neither literary nor historical standards which can guide us in to Mr. Dahlberg's books written since *Bottom Dogs*, which was published more than thirty years ago. It is significant that he has repudiated this early, naturalistic novel, in spite of the considerable admiration that it won and still retains among a few persons. *Can These Bones Live* may be seen as the summation of a three part visionary and prophetic work which includes *The Flea of Sodom* and *The Sorrows of Priapus*.

We shall get nowhere with Mr. Dahlberg if we begin with an inquiry into his influences and his philosophy; this kind of thinking would inevitably be reductive. We must return repeatedly to the text to ponder the hundreds of aphorisms, epigrams, and paradoxes which add up to an intuitive synthesis of insights which defies logical exposition. . . . His tragic vision of the human condition redeems what might otherwise appear to be a kind of romantic anarchism. . . .

Allen Tate. *Sewanee Review*. Spring, 1961. pp. 314–16

What appears at first to be no more than a rewrite of Dahlberg's *Bottom Dogs*, that expatriate log of a vernacular midwest childhood, a crapulous youth and a lady-barber mother, is in fact a performance of another order entirely—one of the rare examples in our letters of the self overtaken. For this new book *Because I Was Flesh* is the creative reflection (a reflexive as well as a reflective act) of a man upon his own life (autobiography and lyric) and his mother's (hagiography and demonology). By his metamorphosis of the first version of those lives, by what has happened to his prose since that version, we discover how *he* has been changed, what he has learned, lost, won. . . . It is only, at last, in this new book, a memorial instance ''because a breath passeth away and cometh not again'', that raw event is inspissated by myth and morality, transcending the limitations suggested by comparison with other great American autobiographies.

Richard Howard. *Poetry*. March, 1965. pp. 398–9

The fact is that in *Because I Was Flesh*, Dahlberg has given us a world of the kind we used to find in the great novels, and, that it casts a spell. One forgets that there were, and some still are, living people who walked the earth, for the book envelops us in so authentic an atmosphere that the actualities of time and space die down, and another existence, that of eternity, takes its place. Even the cobblestones of the old streets in Kansas City have their echoes, as does the very grass and sky, and the dinginess of the back-parlor, where Lizzie heats soup in a battered kettle for her squeamish, delicate but remarkably enduring son, is no more than the mirrored light of countless scenes which most modern fiction would have us forget. The very image of a whole woman, sensual, pining, mistaken and utterly appealing in her unworldly attempts to battle with the world is, by this time, a novel event. One even forgets that the son, who flees the mother to find himself, and returns to the mother to beseech for the unknown father, and who must invoke the dream for revelation, is the author, and not the fable. For the fable takes over, as the dream enlightens the author, and the magic of an experience that sought the dark to find the light, casts its mighty spell.

Because I Was Flesh is a great achievement, and, as the culmination of a long, arduous, dedicated, creative venture during which the contraries, the irascible, the didactic were finally reconciled with the *Amor Fati* of acceptance, it is also a triumph.

Josephine Herbst. *Southern Review*. Spring, 1965. p. 351

Edward Dahlberg's imagination is rich in history and myth; his style is fresh in allusion and muscular with verbs. The best of his work, alive with incantatory rhythms and a prophetic tone, generates the power of psalm or prayer. In the title poem [*Cipango's Hinder Door*], celebrating the innocent antiquity of the western hemisphere, Mr. Dahlberg combines impeccably cadenced free verse with short prose paragraphs in a remarkably successful contrapuntal structure.

As these generalizations imply, this book transcends egocentricity. In a foreword, Allen Tate calls attention to the recurrent myth of Cain and Abel, which, he says, suggests ''that the historical past (Abel) is dead and that it can live again only in the timeless intuition of the poet''. That seems an oversimplification, partly because other mythological and historical symbols recur—Greek, Central American, North American Indian—and partly because Mr. Dahlberg invokes the past of the race for more specific reasons. Our slaughtered innocents lie there, but so does our lost innocence.

Donald W. Baker. *Poetry*. March, 1967. pp. 403–4

Dahlberg's early novels dealt with the theme of alienation, loneliness, separateness. They showed Lizzie clinging to society by the precarious handhold of other people's bunions, double chins, sagging breasts, stubby chins, and unwanted pregnancies, and her son forced by the hailstorms of the world into a relationship with her that was too close for comfort, so that he longed continually to be free; yet when circumstances did free him for a time, it was always into some hell like the Cleveland Jewish Orphans' Home. These disadvantages would have sunk an ungifted man, turned him permanently into a grumbling failure. In Dahlberg's case, the disadvantages became the title-deed to his own birthright. During his period of re-thinking, he rejected the dominant assumptions of the modern world, including its cultural assumptions, and by a paradox this catapulted him into the imaginative world of Yeats, Eliot, Joyce and Rilke. That he drew his own map of the world is owing to another important element in Dahlberg's character as an artist: his Jewishness.

John Wain. *New York Review of Books*. Jan. 2, 1969. p. 13

Dahlberg's ''*Walden*'' is his masterpiece, the autobiography *Because I Was Flesh*. In it the American of *The Carnal Myth* (and *The Sorrows of Priapus*) is personified as Dahlberg and his mother, who are mythologized as Ishmael and Hagar wandering in the American urban wilderness. Through the vision and style forged in *The Carnal Myth* (and other works) Dahlberg is able to assimilate their story into the universal aspects of man's nature and its embodiment in the western cultural tradition (especially its classical and Biblical aspects) and thus make of it a specific exemplification of that nature and that tradition. In so doing he overcomes that alienation from other men which all Americans suffer from he believes, but which he suffers more acutely and with more awareness because of his illegitimacy. The book is also an act of expiation, he says, through which he embraces in love the mother he could not fully accept in life. He calls the book ''a memoir of my mother's body.'' In it she is both a human being and an image of the earth, that ultimate source which all of his adventurers in *The Carnal Myth* unknowingly were searching for. In making her such an image and in finally embracing her, Dahlberg has, again,

implicitly achieved—in the work at least—release from the American fate; instead of a sterile ''treeless ghost'' he is a living man in vital connection with man's source, as well as with other men.

Melvin Lyon. *Prairie Schooner*. Spring, 1970. p. 83

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DELANY, Samuel R. (1942–)

Delany's literary style is a combination of subtly derived linguistic techniques coupled with a disturbing liberation of certain structural elements. Within Delany's novels, time, logic, and point of view are cut loose from traditional literary positions, and function relativistically. Yet these free elements are rigidly controlled by the rules of a relativistic universe, thereby fulfilling Delany's comment that technical possibility actualizes metaphor in science fiction. . . .

In the relativistic universe, time is indeed not a constant, but is related to the velocity and frame of reference of the observer. This is dramatized in *Dhalgren*, and although it is a physical reality of the universe we all inhabit, we persist in viewing time as a universal and linear norm.

The uses of time in Delany's novels, here and more notably in *Empire Star* (1966), violate certain conventions of prose fiction. What seems to be a fantastic use of time is in fact a realistic use of time, because time is psychologically a function of the state of the observer and physically a function of the velocity of the observer. In more traditional fiction, the use of psychological time is well understood. But when Delany applies relativistic physical laws to time, the psychological metaphor of variable time becomes confusing, because the metaphor has been-transformed into fact. . . .

The handling of simultaneous material in a necessarily linear form is a good indication of the kind of word-by-word craftsmanship in Delany's prose. In resolving the problem of rendering a ''fantastic'' or science-fictional sequence realistically, he visualizes the subject matter completely, rather than retreating from it into vague cubist shapes or highly mannered prose. And remarkably, by striving to describe the seams of reality, he breaks through ''reality'' to describe the perceiving mind as much as the perceived experience. The parenthetical statement is a good example, for it is both a pause in the exposition and a gloss on the transcribed experience without. Together, reality, observer, and language form a collage of meaning. It is like his concretizing of metaphor. The vaguely like becomes the solid is. Precision is what these two techniques share.

Delany's theoretical concern with the uses of prose appears frequently in his fiction, almost as if the work was a test-bed for linguistic theory. He considers the totality of the story, plot, character, language, etc. to be a textus, or web of meaning, within which the text proper resides. The manner in which *textus* translates into text he alludes to with the term metonymy, the concept of language as connotative rather than denotative. . . . It is therefore not unusual to find images of myths, meanings, and memories, as well as convoluted symbolism in Delany's fiction. His concept of language and literature implies this rich depth of layering. . . . That each major group of metonymic meanings has an analogue in the surface of the story is proof enough of that. What Delany does with this technique is to make the reader feel the weight of meaning and symbol around the text, i.e., invoke a textus for the story. This enriches the story, and charges the linear tale with alternative meanings, possibilities, and significance. It is another way of transcending the limitations of realism, of working in the subjective mind of the reader. . . .

For Delany, the process of artistic creation is an attempt to derive order from the chaos of experience. More precisely, it is an attempt to reconcile the contrary demands of the subjective perspective of the artist, who must admit to experiencing life from a biased point of view—the structural requirements of formal literary patterns, which can wrench meaning and order from randomness, and the restrictions inherent in language as a medium of transmitting vision. In Delany's prose, neither the subjective nor the objective—neither the chaos of the individual mind's perceiving, nor the artifice of literary device, is given primacy. Just as metaphor is solidified by fact, experience is ordered by the effect of art upon the raw material of the mind, which is able to translate the chaotic elements of life accurately into words. Delany's later novels, especially, are arenas in which life and language confront one another and come together to form a dialectic of literature. Delany's science fiction includes and capitalizes on the tension between scientific theory and linguistic potential.

Peter S. Alterman. *Science-Fiction Studies*. March, 1977, pp. 25–34.

Delany's career is a fascinating one in terms of the cultural development of science fiction. Born in Harlem in 1942, Delany's own transmigration took him into the nascent hippie culture, and in 1962, with the publication of his first novel, *The Jewels of Aptor* (he was 20 at the time), into a world of pulp science fiction then undergoing radical reorientation. In the early 1960s, Campbell's ''Golden Age'' was over, but it had generated a flood of writers and formulas that poured, from the mid-50s on, into the new medium of paperback novels. Out of this flow, however, a new kind of SF writer was emerging. Judith Merril's blurb on the cover of the Ace Books first edition of *Jewels of Aptor* sees in young Delany ''a mythopoetic power comparable only to that of Sturgeon, Ballard, Vonnegut, and Cordwainer Smith.'' Here we have the emerging line: Sturgeon, link to the Golden Age; Ballard and Vonnegut, British and American surrealists respectively; the indescribable SF fantasist ''Cordwainer Smith.'' Delany's early work, published in the (for the decade) garish and pulpy Ace paperback line, fits at

once into this emergent ''mythopoetic'' SF tradition. His career, from this point on, is a voyage, via the ''New Wave'' SF, out of this pulp matrix, into first of all the world of ''literature,'' then (following perhaps the much-discussed exhaustion of that literature), into the academic world of postmodernism, and a university professorship.

From the beginning, it is clear Delany entered science fiction with the desire to be a ''literary'' writer. . . .

Of the early fiction, *The Fall of the Towers* is most interesting in its sense of design and scope; in terms of the intricate variational *system* Delany builds here, this large work looks forward to the labyrinthine complexities of *Dhalgren* (1975), and even those of the Nevèrÿon series (begun with *Tales of Nevèrÿon,* 1979). Already in this early trilogy, we have a textual web Derrida would be proud of. . . .

In 1966, still in Ace Books, Delany published two novels: *Empire Star* and *Babel-17.* The latter novel won the Nebula Award, given not by fans but by writers of SF, and is an homage to the craft of this novel, which in its tightness of construction and highly developed mythic resonances, ushers in what many believe the high period of Delany's art, set forth in two subsequent novels: *The Einstein Intersection* (1967) and *Nova* (1968), and in the short stories collected in *Driftglass*. . . .

Einstein is Delany's masterpiece of suggestive complexity. Like *Babel,* it is a tightly patterned work; yet in its greater mythopoetic suggestiveness, its structures resist analysis. This novel too approaches the human condition as enmeshed in a human *system.* Yet, if in *Babel* the system is engaged as primarily a grammatical or linguistic problem, *Einstein* operates less on the level of mankind's words than its myths—the patterns of behavior or codes of action that contain its system of values. . . .

The third great novel of this mid-60s period is *Nova* (1968). It is a longer work, and one in which the quest myth, the search for the grail, attains epic proportions as it extends across galaxies, taking as its decor the space-opera in the high Doc Smithian sense. Delany's full fascination for Romantic mythology is deployed in this work. . . .

A gap of seven years separates *Nova* from the publication of a very different novel, *Dhalgren* (1975). The very opposite of Delany's earlier concise and symbolically dense textures, *Dhalgren* is a long, loose exploration of a quite plausible American inner city in decay. The novel is science fictional only in the sense that two moons and a giant red sun have risen inexplicably over this urban landscape. Delany here for the first time is doing what his later fiction revels in: playing with the generic codes that he sees marking reader expectations. . . .

If *Dhalgren* is under the sign of Joycean metafiction, his next novel, *Triton* (1976), is under that of theoretician Michel Foucault. This novel, shifting decor from an isolated contemporary city on Earth to an equally ''alternate'' urban landscape on a moon of Neptune, is an extended, and often tedious, exploration of the Foucaultian theme of ''heterotopia'': sexual and gender power, and the multivalent nature of social systems in an experimental context. . . .

Perhaps the real ancestor of Nevèrÿon, pairing off with it as *Dhalgren* pairs with *Triton,* is the piece of literary pornography, *The Tides of Lust* (1973). We have a Gulf Coast contemporary setting, minimal evocation of SF codes (the Black Captain compares boats and ports with spaceships and stars), and a lush overlay of literary allusion—the Captain is on a Faustian quest, doomed to come 24 times before the cock crows; Proctor the artist, ''doomed to restoring old work with the energy I want to put toward new,'' paints clocks ''whose long hand is a penis, the short, a hirsute sack.'' This preciosity covers, again in a world whose characters are free to explore society as system, what has become an ''ambiguous dystopia,'' an obsessive world of perversity, sexual violence, pederasty, and coprophagy. The same kind of curious ''experimentation'' marks the Nevèrÿon books, which begin in earnest with *Nevèrÿona* (1983, linked stories), and proceed through *Flight from Nevèrÿon* (1985, more stories), to *The Bridge of Lost Desire* (1987). These, along with the 1988 revision of the earlier *Tales of Nevèrÿon* (1979), comprise a vast set of ''fictions'' where, marked by open ''theoretical'' pleasure of manipulating codes, formulas, and signs, all sense of the fictional ''life'' of the story, however debased it might be in sword-and-sorcery fantasy, is gone. These works, filled with self-reflexive poses and disquisitions on the polyvalence of ethics, values, and, most notably, problems of economic systems (conceived in the semiotic-Marxian vein of a critic like Roland Barthes), are every bit as tedious as the didactic digressions of the late Heinlein, if more pretentious. What makes works like *Einstein Intersection* and *Nova* so powerful is Delany's ability to *deepen* and enrich SF formulas with the mythopoetic resonances that once belonged to their ''epic'' plotlines. To do so, however, a writer must in a sense suspend disbelief, and take the monomyth seriously, as a dominant cultural and human pattern. Delany's later fiction, following the ''theoretical'' deconstructive questionings of the same French thinkers who dominate academic criticism in U.S. universities today, loses itself in its own labyrinth of roles, codes, and system-building.

In the Nevèrÿon books, increasingly, Delany takes up such topics as bisexuality and the AIDS epidemic. Some have seen the switch in Delany's publishing venues, from mass market paperbacks to small press and university press editions, as a result of market censorship: these are forbidden themes for the SF market. I would argue however that Delany, writing more and more openly under the aegis of ''deconstructionism,'' and taking on issues of gender deviance and social guilt associated with the AIDS question, has simply shifted narratees. He is no longer writing for the science fiction fan world (whose generic codes he better than anybody else knows), but for the university graduate student and professor. This milieu is today caught up in theoretical debates over ''power'' in the Foucaultian sense; its pundits and students welcome a bisexual, African American writer who engages these debates, and who, as well as any academic critic, speaks the language of the French masters. Quite simply, Delany is not writing for the mass market SF reader any more.

This shift is more than clear in his most recent publications. *Nevèrÿona,* for example, has recently been reissued in a lavish university press edition (Wesleyan University Press, 1988), given a tasty non-generic cover, and adorned with obfuscating quotes from prominent critics: Fredric Jameson calls the series ''a major and unclassifiable achievement in contemporary American literature.'' Delany himself has played enough jokes on the unclassifiability of generic forms to make this statement a joke on the critics. More significant yet is the publication, 20 years after its being written, of Delany's *other* piece of pornography, *Hogg* (1994). Published by Black Ice Books, again with a classy abstract cover (and an x-rated warning on the back), *Hogg* is again hailed as a ''literary'' achievement. Norman Mailer (an authoritative voice when speaking for the criminal artist) tells us that ''there is no question *Hogg*

. . . is a serious book with literary merit.'' Another quote calls it ''a terrifying journey into the body and soul of a man who embodies all the nightmarish excesses of our century.'' The novel itself, from page one, is a spewing forth of sexual and bodily depravity, which makes it, like all pornography, eminently boring. If anything it is a symptom of our times, not a critical anatomy. Written in the early 70s as a literary exercise, it is lauded in the 1990s as a portrait of Jeffrey Dahmer.

Much of Delany's most recent work is either autobiography, or critical essays, the university scholar's main mode of writing. His exercise in literary autobiography, *The Motion of Light in Water: East Village Sex and Science Fiction Writing,* an attempt to capture the milieu of the 1960s hippie culture in New York, is for the most part anecdotal. Essays and articles include *Wagner/Artaud,* today an almost mainstream scholarly topic; *The Straits of Messina* (Serconia Press, 1989) features critical articles by Delany's alter ego Leslie K. Steiner, a composite of names of famous academic critics. Most recently, Delany has published (again in University Press of New England) *Silent Interviews: On Language, Race, Science Fiction, and Some Comics* (1994), where he talks again of reading codes for SF and other genre forms. The most recent fiction he has published fits these sophisticated semiotic analyses like its matching glove: *They Fly at Çiron* (Incunabula Press, 1993). It is another piece of meta-sword-and-sorcery in the Nevèrÿon vein (and complete with complex diacritics in the title).

In conclusion, Delany is following a career pattern analogous to that of fellow Ace Books author in the 1960s Ursula K. Le Guin. Le Guin has spoken of lifting herself, through the craft of fiction, out of the ''saurian ooze'' of her early pulp SF beginnings, into a world of literary and social high seriousness and ''relevance.'' What has occurred, however, is what happened to Antaeus when held up from touching his Earth roots—enfeeblement. Here the result is academic effeteness. Works like *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Einstein Intersections* or *Nova* are powerful because they fully engage the deep river of the science fiction culture. They are new works, because they work within, and out of, the old formulas and patterns that, in SF, cover even deeper mythic paradigms. To trade this for a literary or academic ivory tower means today what it has always meant—abandoning storytelling in its primal sense.

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DELILLO, Don (1936–)

Although his eight novels have been widely and well reviewed, and although several—*End Zone*, *Americana*, and *Ratner's Star*—are formally innovative, [Don] DeLillo has received comparatively little academic attention. Although *End Zone* is a particularly explicit and perhaps Derrida-influenced deconstructive work, a novel in which DeLillo's intellectual and artistic sophistication is plainly evident, its subversions are largely ignored, whereas Coover's *Universal Baseball Association*, to which *End Zone* is similar, is explicated again and again. *End Zone* also has, as a ''sports novel,'' readerly interests that the more academic or militantly theoretical novelists exclude, interests or expectations that, once denied, create a wider play of internal differences than more narrow, writerly texts can offer. ''Midfiction'' is the term Alan Wilde has coined for recent writers, such as Barthelme, Stanley Elkin, and Max Apple, who have synthesized or compromised experimental and realistic techniques. *End Zone* and the best of DeLillo's other books are, rather than ''midfictions,'' polarfictions, combinations of unusual extremes, popular subgenres such as the detective story, disaster book, or science fiction mixed with profound ideas and forms from extraliterary sources—linguistics, anthropology, cybernetics, mathematics, and neurophysiology. Polarization, says Derrida in *Of Grammatology*, is the structure of language. DeLillo's polarizations in *End Zone*, as well as in *Americana*, *Ratner's Star*, *The Names*, and *White Noise*, create a plurality of orientations—inward to the processes of language and fiction, outward to psychological, social, and ecological relations, and outward as well to the readers solicited and confuted by DeLillo's rhetoric.

Thomas Le Clair. ''Deconstructing the Logos: Don DeLillo's *End Zone*.'' *Modern Fiction Studies*. Spring, 1987, pp. 105–6

In general, DeLillo is haunted both by an attraction to pockets of cultural marginality, and by a dread that the currency of such marginality in contemporary political art is a trap—including, by the way, the marginality of contemporary art itself: ''How I would enjoy being told the novel is dead,'' he has one dreamily romantic character say, ''How liberating, to work in the margins, outside a central perception.'' It is important, though, to see his wavering *ressentiment* as the underside of a deep longing for some such discourse of opposition, and a despair at being denied such positions by his own—and postmodernism's—attitudes toward language. The ultimate lesson of DeLillo's novels, in political terms, is a warning that postmodernism badly needs a way of shaping a political discourse that is unified by something other than the

position of its speakers. The most useful complaint of the novels is that the postmodern discourse of political opposition is dangerously built on a shallow mythology about social origins that limits its own political possibilities. Certainly, within such a discourse, the white male writer who seeks to discover his own political voice will necessarily find his desire for opposition to be unspeakable.

> John Kucich. ''Postmodern Politics: Don DeLillo and the Plight of the White Male Writers.'' *Michigan Quarterly Review*. Spring, 1988, p. 341

Given his diffidence toward his readers, and the games and puzzles he confronts them with, and given his inclination to dress his ideas in masquerade, it's no wonder that he has been misjudged. ''The writer is working against the age,'' he told an interviewer in 1983, ''and so he feels some satisfaction in not being widely read. He is diminished by an audience.'' Furthermore, DeLillo has taken pains to separate himself from his characters. He neither likes nor dislikes them, he says; he recognizes them and reports their attitudes, leaving it up to the reader to decide the degree to which he shares or rejects their sentiments. (I think he does care about their ideas, although he is professedly indifferent to them as ''persons,'' and he isn't always so detached as he claims to be.)

Yet it so happens that a good many speakers in his novels from *Americana* to *Libra* roundly and eloquently savage American society and culture. In brief, their collective indictment might be summed up as follows: the country is ''totally engulfed by all the so-called worst elements of our national life and character.'' It is populated with lonely, bored, empty, fearful people inured to abominations and complicit, whether they realize it or not, in the destruction of what they ostensibly revere—including the treasured beliefs and artifacts of the past. Perceived from abroad, America signifies ignorant, blind, and contemptuous corporate power, ''the whole enormous rot and glut and glare'' of its popular culture spreading across the world like a cancer. It is ''big business, big army, and big government all visiting each other in company planes for the sole purpose of playing golf and talking money.''

This hyperbolical indictment is usually voiced by wacky or disintegrating personalities launched on obsessional quests. They may serve as vents for DeLillo's own vagrant mediations, but there's no reason to assume that in unequivocally rejecting an ''Amerika'' devoid of ''beauty, dignity, order, proportion'' they are invariably speaking for him. DeLillo is no ideological Jeremiah. He thrives on ''blaring'' social imperfections and is fascinated by the one-dimensional, ruthless half-men, the single-minded system planners and management consultants and nuclear strategists who exhibit ''distinctly modern'' characteristics. The blackened America in which they flourish is less a historical place, a people with a history, than it is a premonition, a clue to the puzzle of what's to come, and a target of a universal grievance. America in DeLillo's fiction is objectified in the accents and tones of American language. It's a real place with its own colors and textures, not like the allegorical or abstracted settings of Kafka and Beckett. . . .

Don DeLillo is a writer of fiction but like Nicholas Branch his mind's eye fixes on the shadowy connections professional historians usually fail to see or dismiss as baseless supposition. All of his novels breathe a kind of historical essence. They catch what he has described as the ''movements or feelings in the air and the culture around us'' and (I should add) the reverberations from below. I like to read him for many reasons: for his intelligence and wit, his range of reference, vocabulary, energy, and inventiveness, and not the least for the varieties of styles in which he couches his portentous bulletins to the world.

> Daniel Aaron. ''How to Read Don DeLillo.'' *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Spring. 1990, pp. 311–12, 319

In *Mao II*, I think more than in any of his previous novels, DeLillo extends himself into private and political languages that must ultimately escape compositional control: the language of crowds and street people, ''the rag-speak of shopping carts and plastic bags,'' a television representing ''everything that is not clear and sharp and bright.'' The resistance of these things to the writer's control is not a limitation of the novel, but rather a source of its political insight: ''The experience of my own consciousness,'' says Grey, ''tells me how autocracy fails, how total control wrecks the spirit, how my characters deny my efforts to own them completely, how I need internal dissent, self-argument, how the world squashes me the minute I think it's mine.'' DeLillo's recognition of both the power and the limits of language suggests that, as he himself comes to occupy a culturally central role, his art will continue to have a more than topical interest.

> Joseph Tabbi. *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. Fall, 1991, p. 270

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DELL, Floyd (1887–1969)

Moon-Calf, by Floyd Dell. . . , will have a sequel and will certainly be compared with *Jean-Christophe*, but it has its private merits in moments of unexpected loveliness, in the occasional presentation of relevant and illuminating truth. These are chiefly in the story of Felix Fay's childhood, after which the author writes carefully until adolescence with all its terrors sets in. The author has surprised his enemies by not writing *à thèse* and delighted his friends by a masquerade, but *Moon-Calf*, as it stands, has the importance of showing how serious and how well-composed an American novel can be without losing caste. It is an effective compromise, in manner, between the school of observation and the school of technique.

> *Dial*. Jan., 1921. p. 106

Sherwood Anderson's *Poor White* and Floyd Dell's *Moon-Calf* are the latest important recruits in the ranks of realistic reporting, but, to a certain extent, they march backward, backward toward the gods of an elder day. True, they maintain the Underwood and Underwood photographic standard of descriptive writing, and their

atmosphere is that of the same unimportant middle class which pervades *Miss Lulu Bett* and *Main Street*. But in their heroes they forsake the commonplace. They are both unusual men, however usual their surroundings may be. . . . Felix Fay is not a successful inventor. In fact, he is not a successful anything. But he is not an ordinary boy by any means. He is a hyper-sensitive, nervous lad, whose confinement to the prosaic surroundings of his home town constitutes much more of a tragedy than the confinement of Carol Kennicott to Gopher Prairie in *Main Street*, for Felix's aloofness was born of a genuine distinction, whereas Carol was at heart a Gopher Prairieite herself with a Sears-Roebuck education.

And Felix Fay grows up to use his brain, which would disqualify him forever from competition with a hero of real life. It is true, he uses his brain to bad advantage and flounders about in a maze of socialism, atheism, and free-love, bungling them all very badly, especially the free-love. But he is a superman mentally compared to the people in *Miss Lulu Bett* and *Main Street*, and whoever heard of a superman in a novel which is strictly truthful?

Both *Moon-Calf* and *Poor White* have a certain vein of poetry running through them which distinguishes them from the rest of the realistic novels, and it is probably this poetic sense which would not allow their authors to have ordinary men for their heroes.

Robert C. Benchley. *Bookman*. Feb., 1921. pp. 559–60

The spirit of revolt and the passion of poetic protest infuse this book [*Intellectual Vagabondage*] with a beauty and an eloquence that are more reminiscent than real. The May Days of yesterday rather than of today and tomorrow afford its inspiration. The vagabondage is of a generation of youth that already has begun to age, already has begun the prosaic task of adjustment, marrying realities instead of dreams, forced to live life instead of changing it. . . . Mr. Dell is really an essayist and not a critic. He polishes a thought so neatly that its most radical import would never excite or offend.

V.F. Calverton. *The Nation*. May 26, 1926. p. 585

The maladjustment of individuals to our modern society, so he tells us [in *Love in the Machine Age*], is caused by faults in their upbringing. These faults, in turn, are produced by lingering survivals of the patriarchal family system. Under this system, which was introduced by the aristocracy, but which spread through all classes of society, individuals were never permitted to become fully adult; especially they were prevented from making an adult choice of their life-mate. The results of this repression were public and private vices—prostitution, adultery, homosexuality, drunkenness—as well as celibacy, impotence, frigidity and neuroses of every sort. . . . Mr. Dell reveals the patent medicine he is vending. It is, in a word, liberty—the liberty of modern children to follow their own desires. He abandons other theories of education to preach the *laissez-faire* of the instincts.

Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*. April 30, 1930. p. 304

Until now I have placed *Moon-Calf* well above Mr. Dell's other writings. My present judgment is that the autobiography belongs beside the autobiographical novel. Neither the one nor the other approaches greatness (even though I once called the earlier ''a masterpiece of fiction''); and, as regards the probable life of either, we all know how oblivion scattereth her poppy. But *Moon-Calf* did reveal a character, and *Homecoming* confirms and extends the revelation. The first is an interesting novel of adolescence, and the second is an interesting record; more interesting, I am afraid, than has been indicated here, with its sexual and psychological data that could provoke comment and argument running far beyond this review or a dozen like it. But it is never a scandalous record. As the author said, he had no intention of telling other people's secrets.

Ben Ray Redman. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 30, 1933. p. 145

A large part of the work of Floyd Dell, including most of this autobiography [*Homecoming*], is amazingly intelligent and much of it is fine and sensitive. It is doubtful if any other writer has covered so expertly and broadly the mental world of the ''intellectuals'' of our time, and as a result the autobiography is constantly entertaining, the pages full of half and quarter-thoughts, perceptions, complex mental reactions and points of view. It is readable, surprisingly lucid and, particularly in the opening chapters, which deal with his childhood and family, rich in concrete detail presented with literary art. Yet, as in Floyd Dell's early work, there seems no personality behind his writing; the problems of his life, however vividly and entertainingly told, are reflections from the mental life of his environment.

Hutchins Hapgood. *New Republic*. Nov. 29, 1933. p. 80

Floyd Dell has the rare felicity of being able to remember and recreate the experiences of childhood and by a flawless selection of significant detail to bring out a ''clear emotional pattern.'' The very nature of his materials in *Moon-Calf* permitted him to work in a realistic manner and at the same time introduce the poetry as well as the humiliations to which youth is subject. The book was so autobiographical that when he wrote his excellent *Homecoming* . . . he incorporated into it pages and paragraphs from *Moon-Calf* without change. . . . The novels came along through the twenties, amplifying with unequal power the themes defined in the first two. *Janet March* . . . moved directly into Greenwich Village in search of the ideal of joy, companionship, freedom, self-giving love, picnic excursions to the beach by moonlight or to the woods, and a carefree, irresponsible existence in an attic studio. Floyd Dell has written beautifully about it all in *Homecoming* in a fine chapter entitled ''Greenwich Village.'' In fact, the autobiography is done so capably that, in a sense, it supersedes the novels.

Harlan Hatcher. *Creating the Modern American Novel* (Farrar and Rinehart). 1935. pp. 77–8

If it was Francis Hackett who first brought the new light to Chicago, it was Dell who made plain the creative power of its rays, and his task by no means ended with its departure for New York in 1913. He moved on to Greenwich Village, the *Masses*, and a larger theater of operations, but the force he had acquired in Chicago and the Midwest remained fresh in his memory and operative in his life. In 1920 and 1921 he published two important novels, *The Moon Calf* [*sic*] and *The Briary Bush*, and wrote into them what must remain the classic account of the Chicago experience. The novels,

written with the same lively and intelligent imagination Dell brought to all his work, caught up not only the details of his adventure but enlivened them with a high and dramatic sense of the whole movement.

Bernard Duffey *The Chicago Renaissance in American Letters* (Michigan State). 1954. p. 180

This ''Spiritual Autobiography'' [*Intellectual Vagabondage*] is a description of the literary and social influences which had produced in his time, he believed, a generation of intellectual vagabonds, a deracinate group pushed to the boundaries of society by its inability to find a place in or come to terms with a machine civilization. . . . In his excellent first novel, *Moon-Calf*. . . , he had drawn an autobiographical character sketch of a very young man who happens, as part only of his intellectual development, to join the Socialist Party. It was not a radical novel at all, in the usual sense, but a shrewd psychological study of an intellectual vagabond. His later novels were likewise psychological studies, for he had become deeply interested in Freudian theories.

Walter Rideout. *The Radical Novel in the United States* (Harvard). 1956. pp. 125–6

The assault against Dell as the disagreeable anti-hero, the radical corrupted, was carried on by [Michael] Gold and the spiritual sons of John Reed with increasing bitterness after 1926. Gold and Dell had sparred with each other in *The Liberator* days when Dell repudiated his anarchistic notions about love and marriage and came out for monogamy and babies. He had also poked barbed fun at Gold's proletarian imago. Yet Dell had not given up his socialist convictions, and in such books as *Intellectual Vagabondage*, in his biography of Upton Sinclair, and in occasional reviews and articles, he continued to voice his radical opinions.

But to the young radicals, Dell was merely paying lip service to ideas he once believed in, and had retired from the class struggle.

Daniel Aaron. *Writers on the Left* (Harcourt). 1961. pp. 214–15

Few small-town lads ever had their high-school poems accepted by *Harper's* and *Century* and *McClure's*, as Floyd Dell's were. Nor had many been, like him, a card-carrying Socialist and religious freethinker at fifteen. Dell nevertheless fitted a certain pattern: the dreamy, sensitive boy or girl of impoverished family whose thoughts roamed to conquests of artistic worlds, the kind in whom a teacher or librarian saw the fire and felt the iron and urged, ''Go try!''

Some time later Dell grew into the very picture of a gay, brave, poetically handsome city bohemian, indeed the acknowledged Prince of New York's Greenwich Village, lover of the haunting Edna St. Vincent Millay, his name a synonym for uninhibited, reckless love. He would sit nonchalantly in court as the Government sought his life for, so it claimed, treason in the first World War. He was to be, too, a well-known editor, a successful novelist, a Broadway playwright.

Yet his most important work was done in the first blush of young manhood, as a book critic on the one hand and on the other a personal leader among the young men and women of Chicago who were assaulting old traditions on their way to making a literary Renaissance.

Dale Kramer. *Chicago Renaissance* (Appleton-Century). 1966. p. 13

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DEVOTO, Bernard (1897–1955)

This book [*Mark Twain's America*] is a polemic, infused in many passages with the kind of exasperation which Mark Twain himself often exhibited; and its densely packed pages stir a crowd of responses. First of all, its importance as a ''preface'' for Mark Twain and also for an understanding of basic elements in American literature is unmistakeable. The book is not, strictly speaking, a biography; at the outset Mr. DeVoto declares that he has not tried to represent ''the most engaging personality in American letters,'' and though he has not been able entirely to sustain this renunciation, the title is a true one. The major passages unroll Mark Twain's America, not with the obvious mileage of that great contemporary panorama which has sometimes been emulated by writers on the older American scene, but with a highly knowledgeable sense of those influences that bore upon Mark Twain during his youth and early years as a writer. . . .For critics *Mark Twain's America* should provide life-giving provender for many a long day. It is, above all, in many of its passages an eloquent book, with the warm eloquence of partisanship, lavishly evoking a whole mind and an era.

Constance Rourke. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Sept. 11, 1932. p. 3

On certain aspects of life on the frontier and on its edge, in Mark Twain's early days, Mr. DeVoto is informed and eloquent; on the purely literary derivation of Mark Twain's humor (the tall tale, frontier burlesque, etc.), he makes a valuable contribution to criticism. But, taken as a whole and as a portrait of a complex character, his book [*Mark Twain's America*] is almost worthless. In his eagerness to adorn himself with the scalps of [Van Wyck] Brooks and his followers, Mr. DeVoto has overstated or misstated everything, and he leaves us with a false and superficial impression of his subject.

Newton Arvin. *New Republic*. Oct. 5, 1932. p. 211

Mr. DeVoto also belongs to the school of the gentlemanly essayist—though he might not like to be told so. ''Tough guy's essays'' might be his own term for these truculent and forthright papers, which range in subject from a study of the origin and evolution of

the Mormon Utopia to appraisals of New England and culture and examinations of the theory of biography and criticism. In history, Mr. DeVoto wants us to remember—and very sensibly too—that we are dealing with a pluralistic world, about which it is dangerous to dogmatize on restricted evidence. In biography, he wants us to stick to facts, and nothing but facts—just the documents, no guesswork, no psychoanalytical reconstruction or re-creation or interpretation—which leaves just about nothing at all. . . . In criticism, he would like to see a sociological or functional check on esthetic and popular judgments, as on evolutions in taste or fashion—not an original idea, but worth saying often. In short, Mr. DeVoto is sensible, a lot of the time, but is inclined to be a little angry and repetitive about it, and a little too sure that nobody else is as sensible as himself.

Conrad Aiken. *New Republic*. Jan. 20, 1937. p. 364

This volume [*Mark Twain at Work*] contains the ''Boy's manuscript,'' the *Huckleberry Finn* notes, and part of the most interesting manuscript preparatory for *The Mysterious Stranger*. It also contains three essays by Mr. DeVoto, one about the writing of each of the three books involved, in which he brilliantly records the results of his study of these and other relevant documents. He ponders all his evidence, reasons shrewdly, and unfolds the story of his deductions with skill comparable to that of a mystery novel writer. Consequently, this book sets forth information which hereafter will be indispensable to scholars, and sets it forth in such a way as to make it fascinating reading.

Walter Blair. *Saturday Review*. June 20, 1942. p. 11

On the whole I expect that Mr. DeVoto's conception of Mark Twain's development as a writer and of the partial disintegration of his talent after his bankruptcy and the deaths of his wife and daughter will gain more acceptance as time goes on. . . . Since Mr. DeVoto never forgets that he is dealing with an instinctive and great artist, his criticism of Mark Twain is the best that we are likely to have for some time to come.

George F. Whicher. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. July 12, 1942. p. 7

When DeVoto is not attempting to defend any thesis, either about Twain or the frontier or himself, he gives us some of the ripened insights that can come only through years of devoted attention to an author. . . . We can be grateful for these insights, even though DeVoto seems determined to prove through his tub-thumping exaggerations that he possesses every temper except the critical temper.

F.O. Matthiessen. *New Republic*. Aug. 10, 1942. p. 179

Written in the tradition of vivid narrative history, this volume [*The Year of Decision: 1846*] is in many ways a prime example of its kind. Conceive of a latter-day poet of Manifest Destiny with a sense of humor and you have an idea of Mr. DeVoto's work. He has the first requisite of a good narrative historian: an imagination lusty enough to reach out for the full body of life, and yet disciplined enough to stay within range of his sources. He has done a capital job of research and he has a flair for getting a concrete image out of his documents. He has, moreover, a talent for cordial malice.

Richard Hofstadter. *New Republic*. May 3, 1943. p. 610

This complex narrative [*The Year of Decision: 1846*], managed with a firmness and vividness which can have proceeded only from an absolute steeping of the historian in his sources, is kept in perspective by constant reference to the endless political maneuvers in Washington . . . and by ''Interludes'' devoted to such aspects of mid-century American society as Stephen Foster's songs, the hints of the machine age in the National Fair of 1846, and William Morton's first public demonstration of anesthesia in Boston.

There can be no doubt that Mr. DeVoto has magnificently achieved his announced intention: ''to realize the pre-Civil War, Far Western frontier as personal experience.'' This is, as he points out, a literary purpose, and he rather self-consciously adopts the fiction that he is only an amateur historian, half afraid to venture into the preserves of the professionals. It is a graceful pose; it would be less amusing and more convincing if Mr. DeVoto had not so resolutely disciplined himself to precisely those rigors of documentation, contempt for secondary sources, and thoroughness in detail which make up four-fifths of the academic guild. If he comports himself in any ways unlike those of the professionals, it is in the liveliness of his style, his willingness to state conclusions even though they might be open to some question, and the frankness with which he avows his preferences among the characters who people his stage.

Henry Nash Smith. *New England Quarterly*. Sept., 1943. pp. 499–500

When his *The Year of Decision* appeared last year and we found that if he would but gag his babbling ego he could still write remarkably sound and unhackneyed history, many of us believed, however, that he still had a soul to save, and that the salvation might require nothing beyond a couple of miracles and twenty years of patience. . . .

[*The Literary Fallacy*] certainly is not a complete account of the literary crimes of the 1920's. In fact, it is nothing at all but a long-winded confession of DeVoto's obsession about Van Wyck Brooks, plus a few envious references to other contemporaries, and two essays, one on the geologist John Wesley Powell and the other on the medical treatment of burns. These essays, which are as original and definitive as a high-school theme, are supposed to indicate how many things we others failed to know and write about in the 1920's and to show how our books would have been written if we had been so lucky as to have Mr. DeVoto write them for us.

Sinclair Lewis. *Saturday Review*. April 15, 1944. p. 10

The principal crime of which DeVoto accuses both generations together is that of indulging in what he calls ''the literary fallacy.'' . . .There is also a critic's fallacy, however, and it is somewhat less innocent than the others we have mentioned. It consists in projecting an imaginary purpose for works of literature, quite different from the actual purposes of their authors, and then condemning the

authors jointly and separately because they failed to achieve it. DeVoto writes as if to illustrate that fallacy. He takes for granted that the authors of the 1920's should all have been cultural historians and should all have depicted American civilization as DeVoto now sees it; then he charges them with offering only a false or fragmentary picture.

Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*. April 24, 1944. p. 565

Bernard DeVoto's investigation of the origins and growth of what he calls the ''continental mind'' has been persistent and brilliant. *Mark Twain's America* displayed Manifest Destiny in its peak years, the period closed and symbolized by the meeting of the rails at Promontory. *The Year of Decision* went back in time to trace the complex lines of force that in 1846 made inevitable the pattern of western settlement, the war between the states, the eventual triumph of the continental idea. The present book *Across the Wide Missouri* goes still farther back, into the closing years of the mountain fur trade. In his next he will deal with Lewis and Clark, back in the years when the West was still Louisiana or Mexico, and the idea of a continental nation had just been born. . . . But because of its constant cross-references and its restless curiosity in a very wide context, it [*Across the Wide Missouri*] becomes something more: the kind of intelligent study of social dynamisms that not too many historians are capable of.

Wallace Stegner. *Atlantic Monthly*. Jan., 1948. p. 122

Mr. DeVoto makes a number of shrewd observations on the treatment of time, of character, of point of view (''means of perception'' is the phrase he prefers), of conveying information, and of dramatizing ideas in novels. He returns again and again to the central truth that a novel is a story, a work of enchantment, a stay against boredom or confusion, whether it be by Margaret Mitchell or Marcel Proust. The novelist departs at his peril from the obligation to tell a story, and when new technical devices, new social sanctions, or new critical theory drive the novelist too far from this primitive but primary necessity, fiction reaches a dead end. The modern ''revulsion against story'' is, on the whole, a revulsion among a small group of persons who desire experience so far refined it cannot be recognized.

Howard Mumford Jones. *Saturday Review*. April 15, 1950. p. 46

The sustained poetic intensity of DeVoto's continental vision explains part of the success of *The Course of Empire*. Part lies too in his geographical intuition, which sharply indicates limitation and opportunity and places human striving in a specific background of land, water, forest and plain. And much of the success lies in his careful and exact knowledge and his inexhaustible curiosity—knowledge of the terrain, of the routes of trade, of the contemporary conditions of geographical understanding, curiosity about the human experience,—and in his style, a powerful weapon, more disciplined here, perhaps, than it has been before. . . .

Summary hardly does justice to this work. It brings the history of continental exploration into a new poetic perspective, and it founds its poetry on the hard substratum of provable fact. Mr. DeVoto's old and robust confidence has not waned; and occasionally he may utter judgments more definite than the facts permit; but on most points he argues his case fairly, temperately and convincingly. It is a book which will freshen the vision of the historian and renew his insights; and, for the lay reader of history, it will prove an exciting and rewarding experience.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. *New England Quarterly*. June, 1953. pp. 259–60

. . .DeVoto spoke to his fellow Americans, off and on for twenty years. . . .He told them they needn't put up with either shoddy products or shoddy thinking, and, naming names, he attacked the purveyors of both with energy, zest, and skill. No doubt his responses . . . were somewhat disproportionate to the stimuli that evoked them. But considering the craven attitude of most of us in the face of the assorted impositions, shams, discomforts and uglinesses DeVoto denounced, we can only applaud his willingness to call for action against them in tones loud enough, frequently, to get it. . . .

DeVoto wanted the American past the way it was, not the way tendentious critics or historians thought it should have been, because he was deeply stirred by the drama and the greatness that it revealed to him and that he in turn revealed to an ever-growing number of readers. As for America today, he had a lover's quarrel with it. He could and did make frequent suggestions for its improvement, but that was because there was some practical point in doing so. He believed the improvements he advocated would enhance the American future, in which Bernard DeVoto never lost faith and in which, it seems both likely and fitting, he will be remembered for a long time to come.

L.H. Butterfield, *New England Quarterly*. Dec., 1956. pp. 436, 442

DeVoto's histories are an extension of his fiction in that as he grew older his writing moved progressively back into the past, probing for the distinctive causative factors of the present, for one's inheritance. They are in a very small degree an escape from the present. . . . The intuitive understanding in DeVoto came from his own Western boyhood; the intellectual grasp of his subject is, of course, the product of his years in the East—and there is a kind of a tension between the two which is the source of literature.

Robert Edson Lee. *From West to East* (Illinois). 1966. pp. 146–8

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DE VRIES, PETER (1910–1993)

Peter De Vries has pitched *The Tents of Wickedness*, his most recent novel, in the small city of Decency, Connecticut, not far from the large indecent city of New York. Decency, as readers of *Comfort Me with Apples*, an earlier novel of Mr. De Vries's, will remember, is lived in by the kinds of people who are picked upon and apart by sociologists and sociological-novelists as organization men, conformists, and most recently, ''status seekers.'' Mr. De Vries, on the other hand, views them not as easily manipulated statistics but as uneasily struggling individuals trapped in a snare of clichés. . . .

But *The Tents of Wickedness* is only secondarily a novel; it is primarily a vehicle, a sort of circus wagon to transport and display Mr. De Vries's talents as a clown, a juggler, and a mimic. And very considerable talents they are. Mr. De Vries has an extraordinarily accurate ear for speech and for the nuances of literary style. His parodies of Marquand, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Proust, James, and several other novelists are accurate to a fault. (The fault is that they are not always independently funny, which parody, I believe, should be.) But his verses . . . display not only acute understanding of the method and tone of voice of a variety of poets from Emily Dickinson to Dylan Thomas but the real comic spirit as well. His clowning is often pure boffola, but he also contrives comic situations that combine imaginative lunacy with considerable subtlety.

Russell Lynes. *Saturday Review of Literature*. July 18, 1959. p. 14

In recent years the Peter De Vries novel has become almost a subgenre of our fiction. Its archetype is written in an antic spirit, savagely and broadly satirical. Generally it portrays exurbia. Its stock-in-trade includes a miscellany of tricks, japeries, buffooneries and parodies, the net effect of which—even including his addiction to comic names—he manages to make sophisticated. It varies in quality but is invariably fun to read.

The Blood of the Lamb is not that familiar Peter De Vries novel. This could be much to his credit as a demonstration of range and versatility. I wish I could call it an unqualified success but cannot do so. It does not seem to be all of a piece, to have assimilated its many elements and found its own nature. It shifts erratically, being now one kind of book and now another, its narrative sometimes interrupted simply to tell jokes. It does not have the effect of steady flow and progression, but lurches along.

On the other hand, the book is interesting and frequently funny. It keeps the reader's attention (partly hanging on unfulfilled hopes), and the closing section is painfully moving. . . . Questions of faith haunt the whole book.

Edmund Fuller. *New York Times Book Section*. March 18, 1962. pp. 4, 37

Peter De Vries began as a *New Yorker* writer, a superior gagman whose comedy had an ambling and self-deprecating resemblance to the novel. His development has been steady and continuous; and in *Reuben, Reuben* . . . he is not only a very funny writer, but a serious novelist with very troubling themes behind all the laughter. . . . Mr. De Vries's title is taken from the old ballad in which Reuben and Rachel consider the prospect of transporting men and women as far from each other as they can get. Though sex is rampant all over the local landscape, men and women are unable to come to terms with each other. . . .

Mr. De Vries may have created a new genre of fiction, which could be labeled tragifarce. While he amuses us with his clowning, throwing away gags that a lesser writer would have to hoard, he is a disturbing moralist with a sharp and uncomfortable perception of things as they are.

William Barrett. *Atlantic Monthly*. March, 1964. pp. 180–2

Next to Peter De Vries most of our comic writers look like bumpkins. . . . Yet there are stretches in this [*Let Me Count the Ways*], as in his other recent novels, which suggest De Vries is wearying of a routine brought to perfection so long ago and has since had nowhere to go but down. He has, for one thing, neutralized some of the off-characters and off-scenes, so that every police sergeant, every waitress, is not one more daffy bearer of the De Vries point of view. The surface is inching closer to reality and De Vries is inching closer to a straight novel. . . . This final sequence of the book has a kind of somber charm, as the author's two muses, low farce and a sort of dandified melancholy, sing in sustained harmony for once. . . . But in the sickroom he really comes to the edge of great tragicomedy: and one wonders whether here, in the freakish disorder and the farcically helpless patient, this admirably restless writer may not find the key that he has been looking for to the serious novel. *Let Me Count the Ways* seems to mark a step in that direction, as well as being the most stylishly funny novel since Mr. De Vries' last one.

Wilfred Sheed. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. July 25, 1965. pp. 3, 13

De Vries is fun, and the humor is the most obvious element of his work. I have neglected this more obvious element to get at other sides of his characters, their individuality, sensitivity to human need, and moral self-consciousness. I have tried to point out that the atmosphere of his work changed so that these personal qualities in the second half of his corpus are grounded not on some transcendent power which supports human life but are established against transcendent powers which are impersonal and disruptive. . . .

In the later fictions, De Vries's characters see evil occurrences as not such singular, isolated events. They suffer so many losses that they give up God's world of deprivation and death and opt for

the human world of joy and intimacy, a world which stands opposed to the world of change or decay. God is associated with evil; mirth and human beauty, holy moments which redeem life from sadness, are human creations.

Wesley A. Kort. *Shriven Selves* (Fortress). 1972. pp. 55, 61

Perhaps it is because [De Vries's] unrestrained use of outrageous puns and similar verbal low comedy is so dazzling that we tend to slight his other talents as a humorist. But the range of his performance is hard to equal.

His phrasing, for instance, can be as deft as Waugh, Benchley or any of the other great comic manipulators of English, where the fun lies principally in the precise choice of words and their precise order in a sentence. He is a master of booby-trapping paragraphs. He will come on in a style as elegant as Edward Villella in a *pas de deux* and shift abruptly into some verbal pratfall in the Groucho Marx manner. He strings together narrative sequences, novel length as well as short pieces, that are as happily zany as anything Wodehouse or Mack Sennett ever dreamed up. . . .

His parodies never miss a note of the originals, and they are funny as well as accurate, which is not always the case with well-wrought parodies. The samples in this book [*Without a Stitch in Time*] run from Faulkner and Waugh to Katherine Anne Porter and Ring Lardner. He long ago showed us how to turn out the classic short piece on a light subject, with the theme stated clearly in the first sentence or two and a snapper at the end echoing back to the beginning.

Yet with all this virtuoso clowing, De Vries produces something that is more than brilliant entertainment. Like the Elizabethan fool and like all great comic writers, he is continually presenting us with the sharpest, wholly unillusioned insights into the intricacies of human relationships.

Paul Showers. *New York Times Book Section*. Dec. 24, 1972. p. 3

Amongst most American novelists, even those who urgently foster a sense of the ridiculous, there exists an undermining inability to question the tenets of bastardized and expensive Freudianism. These writers, who occasionally and heroically manage to be funny in spite of it all, are in the situation of snobbish members of the English ruling classes who think to satirize the things they love and only make them shine. De Vries has evidently approached the knotty topic of analysis from the point of view of an outsider who knows that it has a certain amount in common with the devout notion of warfare between the flesh and the spirit, though it lacks the tetchily august presence of the Godhead, which is not replaced by journalism about dreams or by paperbacks about experiences on the couch. It is De Vries' Dutch Reformed background in the Christian form of the conflict, mixed with an exquisite knowledge of what everyone doesn't know about Freudian theory, that helpfully makes him an onlooker in this land.

Penelope Gilliatt. *New Yorker*. July 16, 1973. p. 78

The opening chapter of *Madder Music* . . . is as sustained a piece of comedy as anything De Vries has ever achieved. His effects cannot properly be conveyed by quotation since the dazzling edifice he builds depends upon his unique capacity to pile on witticism precariously on top of another. Like Oscar Wilde he believes a good remark is worth repeating, but there is enough fresh material for the reader to overlook such lapses as ''she was one of those women you don't give a book because they've already got one.'' Just occasionally he reveals too much of the stage machinery; a character called Betty Tingle remarks to the hero as he fondles her breasts ''You're making Betty Tingle''—worth it for the triple entendre?

Madder Music is the story of the events that forced the hero to escape into the character of Groucho Marx. De Vries makes play with those reversals of the natural order of things that occurs so often in everyday life. In his own house, the hero chances upon his wife making love to someone else. He desperately tries to hide and to his everlasting shame is discovered by the lovers crouching in a cupboard: ''He had been caught in the act of catching in the act lovers who were rendered thereby vastly less guilty than himself, since his offense was the pettier though theirs the graver.'' As in his previous novels, De Vries delivers numerous homespun insights of this sort into the curious workings of the human mind: they are always expressed with deft economy—''Nothing will make a man a model husband faster than infidelity.''

De Vries's satire is as accurate as ever: he successfully derides many contemporary American institutions, including modern art, psychiatry, and real estate business and of course current sexual mores. But his satire lacks passion—and one suspects he would not really wish the world very different from the way it is for then there would be less to laugh at.

In some of the novels of his middle period, such as *Reuben, Reuben*, Peter De Vries combined a feeling for the comedy of the human situation with genuine feeling for its victims. *Madder Music* and its immediate predecessor, *I Hear America Swinging*, revert to the style of earlier novels such as *Mackerel Plaza*. The characters are mouthpieces for De Vries's own witticisms—a nice device for disclaiming a bad joke. He has moments of sympathizing with them, but even then he holds them at a considerable distance: his hero is ''unfit for either marriage or adultery, being restless in the one and remorseful in the other.'' When De Vries's verbal inventiveness flags, his lack of serious interest in his characters makes for the occasional dull page, but he remains one of the most stylish of living novelists and much, much the funniest.

Stuart Sutherland. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. March 24, 1978, p. 337

Nineteen eighty marks the publication of Peter De Vries' twenty-fifth book, *Consenting Adults*, and his seventieth birthday. A retrospective is in order for one of our most gifted but neglected comic writers. . . .

A little religion, a good deal of sexual warfare and then victory-making, a cast of unbelievable but effective satiric characters all go toward fleshing out *Consenting Adults*. De Vries' major theme remains constant too. One of the characters says ''We must sooner or later be trundled into surgery for . . . an illusionectomy,'' and in investigating human relations and the relations the individual must have with those institutions around him, De Vries has composed his latest novelistic lesson on the text of growing up in modern America, on the necessity of separating workable illusions from those that defeat the individual. . . .

The book ends touchingly, perhaps forewarningly, as Peachum envisions his deathbed scene. The elegiac note here might remind

us that De Vries is himself seventy years old, that perhaps here in Peachum's comic acceptance of the cosmos with all of its flux and paradox is also De Vries' own, that De Vries, like Prospero, may soon be ready to give up his particular brand of magic. Like the world of De Vries' early and masterful fictions, the world of Peachum is comic and positive rather than darkly absurd as in De Vries' later novels, a world that, with all its confusion and chaos, as Peachum learns, beckons commitment, not avoidance.

Taken together, the novels of Peter De Vries form a fascinating investigation into the mores of America over the last thirty years. We tend to neglect De Vries' artistry and insight because of the sheer wealth of his comic virtuosity—a typical De Vries novel contains enough wit for other authors to salt judiciously throughout their canons. But the exuberant comic display masks the unity of comic vision and technique. De Vries' most serious comic devices—fallible narrators, character role-playing, stylistic parody and burlesque, and word play—typically serve dual purposes. They entertain—at times almost overwhelmingly so—but they also reinforce and support his major theme of the illusion-making propensities of the individual, especially when rebelling against tradition or institution. There is a purposeful confluence, then, between idea and form in De Vries' work, a deft union of language, style, wit, and theme that creates an enduring comic vision of the way we live.

T. Jeff Evans. *American Humor*. Fall, 1980, pp. 13, 15–16

Peter De Vries . . . is a dedicated Puntheist, which is why he is rightly shameless. There is a character in this latest novel [*Slouching towards Kalamazoo*] who nudges his listener so violently every time the point of a joke comes looming up (''She was disappointed in love. She got married.'') that the hero is jested black and blue: I'm sure we are meant to notice that the author does the same. It will come as no surprise to De Vries's admirers to be told that in this novel someone does slouch to Kalamazoo, Michigan, and there is a birth there; the baby is named Ahab, after one of the rougher beasts in American Literature, which this novel continuously and joyously celebrates.

It isn't just a baby that gets born either. The baby is the product of a brief liaison between Maggie Doubloon, a spirited English teacher, and the eighth-grade, thirteen-year-old, hero, the ''star underachiever'' of the town they agree to call Ulalume, North Dakota. The lad, Tony Thrasher by name, has a rash which reveals not only that he is itching to get out of town but also that his mother is taking a prurient interest in a dermatologist.

Class has been studying Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, and when Maggie discovers that she is pregnant with meaning (and Tony is unhelpful: sent off to the chemist to get hold of some pills to get a girl out of trouble, he comes back with the Pill, woefully confusing cause and effect) she defies the overly virtuous townsfolk by appearing on a public balcony wearing not a scarlet A, but a scarlet A+, the sexual grade her pupil has accorded her. She thereby gives birth, De Vries suggests, to additional offspring: the sexual revolution and the modern tee-shirt. . . .

There is a subplot, of course. Tony's father, a silver-tongued preacher, given to reading the great monuments of American literature at length to his cowering wife and son (''If you just wouldn't read with expression,' she blurted out'') takes on in public debate the dermatologist, his rival and the town unbeliever, the subject the existence of God or sense in the universe. The debate is a draw, each convinces the other, and they exchange extremisms. The Preacher leaves his church and takes up television commercials; the infidel becomes a born-again knocker-on-doors and utterer of texts. Concerned relatives manage to stage a rematch, after which both speakers are converted to Christian Atheism, which I take to be De Vries's own theological stand. If there is a meaning in the scheme of things it is a double meaning.

There is a certain quality of homogeneity in Peter De Vries which his fans welcome, though non-fans, and I can imagine with an effort that such people might exist, would regard it as a certain sameness. This is the reliable product once again, the real McCoy; and if it must be said—and it must—that the whisky is a little watered to make a longer drink (some of his neater books would have had a dozen subplots) there is still enough to quench one's thirst. And there's still an artesian outpouring of parodistic and mimetic felicities, of literary nudges and verbal and nominal wheezes.

Eric Korn. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. Aug. 26, 1983, p. 898

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DEXTER, Pete (1943–)

''A picture is the beginning of misstatement and misunderstanding. You got people looking at it with all different opinions, and they make up stories to go with them.'' These are the words of Pete Dexter's Wild Bill Hickok, who, like a good western hero, realizes that to be famous is to be public property and prefers to move along the trail ahead of his reputation. Historical figures from the Black Hills pioneer days people the novel; Dexter claims that the events and all the characters, save one, are ''real.'' The assassination of Wild Bill occurs halfway through the book, but the momentum of the narrative continues as those who loved him and thought they knew him—Charley Utter, Agnes Lake, Calamity Jane Cannary, and others—wrestle with their memories and learn about Bill from each other.

The tale unfolds mostly through the perceptions of Bill's best friend, ''Colorado Charley'' Utter. Like Gatsby's Nick Carraway, Charley judges people and considers events in a way that sets him apart from the rest of Deadwood's denizens. In a move that does *The Virginian*'s narrator one better, Charley is forced to confront his deep love for Bill when Bill saves his life, and the complexity of Charley's reaction reveals hitherto unexplored emotion beneath the

surface of a macho gunman. Charley is pained that while he has to admit what he feels, Bill, because he has ''as much feelings as a hawk,'' is ''incomplete. One half of a perfect man.''

Throughout the novel run intertwining images of bottles and themes of drinking (people never eat, but they guzzle brown whiskey and pink gin all day in a quest to release the personality and alter perception) and the liberty of the human soul. As much as Charley wishes to preserve the Bill that he knew from fiction-mongers in the press, he realizes that what's set in stone hereafter—his perceptions or anybody else's—is not Bill at all, and that Bill ultimately has his freedom. Thus Dexter releases himself from the onus of ''truth'' in a historical narrative, using fact to create a superbly entertaining and thoughtful novel about how fact necessarily becomes fiction.

Margaret A. Lukens. *Western American Literature*. Winter, 1987, p. 360.

[The title character of *Paris Trout*] was only taking care of business, trying to collect on Henry Ray Boxer's debt. That little black girl, Rosie Sayers, who got shot and killed in the scuffle, shouldn't have got in his way, or the woman with Rosie, who still walks around with Trout's bullet in her chest.

''I did what was right as rain,'' Trout tells his lawyer, and believes it. When the eye-for-an-eye rule is mentioned, Trout says, ''Those ain't the same kind of eyes and they ain't the same kind of rules.''

Mr. Dexter has created a character whose racism is a blunt, unregenerate fact, as primitive and willful as an earthquake or a rainstorm—and just as sealed off from argument, examination or questions of mercy. What the town's polite society takes care to disguise in Sunday-go-to-meeting euphemisms, Paris sets in defiant, ugly relief; he makes it easy for them to believe they are innocent of racism.

Trout's stubborn assumption that what he calls ''the real rules'' will eventually free him is, at first, simply an embarrassment to Cotton Point, an ostensibly enlightened Eisenhower-era Southern town. As Trout presses his claim more ominously, the townspeople come to fear him: he is dragging out into the air and light their own elaborately camouflaged prejudices. And still they excuse him because they have to excuse themselves.

Three years after a jury has found Trout guilty of second-degree murder, he remains free—but his inner corrosion has brought paranoia and derangement. When Mr. Dexter describes Trout's increasingly erratic behavior, he often comes perilously close to losing his bearing and turning the book into a thriller, using Trout's outcroppings of brutality and growing arsenal of guns to titillate rather than to advance the plot. It's as if he has to sell us on Trout's total depravity: being a racist killer isn't enough.

Mr. Dexter's strongest suit is his exquisite understanding of the finely meshed engines of greed, appetite and self-interest that drive a small town. . . . Mr. Dexter draws [Cotton Point's inhabitants] with precise and detailed conviction—their giddily adolescent parties and casual infidelities, their utterly utilitarian disparagement of blacks. When Trout's lawyer, Harry Seagraves, tells his wife that Trout has shot two black women, her first question is, ''Did they work for anyone we know?''

Mr. Dexter's characterization of Seagraves is particularly persuasive—no glib paraphrase of the all-purpose, rumpled, hard-drinking, conscience-torn Southern lawyer. True, Seagraves is rumpled and hard-drinking, but his steely assessment of his own interests when he takes on the case makes his slow, agonizing waking to the horror of Trout's actions and his own complicity all the more affecting.

The primary agent of Seagraves' conversion is Hanna Trout, Paris's wife, a plain-spoken, bluntly sensual middle-aged woman—a former schoolteacher. You sense that Mr. Dexter, who writes regularly for *Playboy* and *Esquire*, is at pains to show that he can create a strong, resonant female character. For the most part he succeeds, although Hanna's assigned role of primal woman and conscience of Cotton Point occasionally gets on your nerves.

Trout's private victimization of Hanna by sexual abuse and corrosive disregard is analogous to his public victimization of Rosie Sayers, and there are lingering suggestions that each woman asked for what she got from Trout. Rosie never gets the chance to defend herself against this accusation. But Hanna, as it turns out, is one of the few people in Cotton Point who refuses to yield to Trout. She is the only white person to go to Rosie's funeral; she later refuses to appear at her husband's trial. And Hanna is the only character to escape the grotesque outcome of Cotton Point's three-year collaboration with the killer of a 14-year-old child.

At a time when virulent racial incidents can no longer be conveniently fenced off in small Southern towns, Mr. Dexter's great accomplishment is to remind us, with lucidity and stinging frankness, the lengths to which we will go to deny our own racism and to reassure ourselves that we are innocent.

Deborah Mason. *The New York Times Book Review*. July 24, 1988, pp. 7–8.

Although he was born in Michigan and has subsequently lived in—and written about—other parts of the country, Pete Dexter spent part of his boyhood in Georgia and has been able to re-create convincingly [in *Paris Trout*] the mores of an era when blacks were still referred to (formally) as Negroes and when the notion that they deserved equal justice with whites in a court of law had barely begun to take root in the rural South.

We meet first a severely deprived and possibly retarded fourteen-year-old black girl, Rosie Sayers, who, in the opening pages, is bitten on the leg by a rabid fox. We also meet a harsh-mannered white man in his sixties, Paris Trout, who keeps a general store and lends money to the local blacks in the small, central Georgia town of Cotton Point. . . .

The novel moves back and forth between the major characters—poor Rosie, whose story is soon told; Seagraves, whose behavior and attitudes reflect the prevailing ethos of the town's establishment; Trout's pathetically abused wife, Hanna, who had once befriended Rosie; and the eager young lawyer, Carl Bonner, whom Hanna hires to help her get a divorce from Trout. It is through their eyes and the eyes of a great many minor characters that we see Trout as he pursues his obsessed and threatening course through the novel.

We watch with revulsion as he sodomizes Hanna with a bottle of mineral water, as he forces unwanted food into her mouth, as he holds her head under water in the bathtub. We follow him through his trial, hear his self-justifications (which never include a moment's remorse for the murder of Rosie) and his lies. To the surprise of nearly everyone, he is convicted and given a ridiculously short sentence. Then, three years later, after all his appeals have

failed, we accompany Trout (still flagrantly carrying a pistol) and the wary sheriff to the state prison farm where he is supposed to begin serving his sentence—only to watch him bribe a local judge to free him on a writ of *habeas corpus*. By this time he has so intimidated Cotton Point that nothing is done to bring him back to jail—and the novel plunges ahead to an apocalyptic shoot-out involving most of the main characters that the reader will have anticipated many pages beforehand.

Only rarely are we told directly what Trout is thinking. The picture we get from Dexter's description of him is that of a full-blown paranoid case, a shabby, unkempt, violent man reeking of urine who thinks that his wife is poisoning him. . . . By making his central character an out-and-out psychotic, Pete Dexter has, I think, run afoul of what seems to approach being a literary axiom: that while neurosis may lend itself to fictional treatment, psychosis generally does not. A character wholly given over to mad obsessions and thus entirely cut off from other people tends to arouse in the reader only a clinical curiosity or—if the madman's deeds are horrific enough—a sensationalist thrill. The descent of a person into madness may be fascinating, moving—even tragic; but madness itself is essentially dull once all possibilities of interesting conflict with others or any sense of conscience have been removed.

The effect of madness upon others can of course be made interesting, and Dexter attempts to do so in the case of Seagraves and Hanna. The experienced, rather jaded lawyer who must defend a repellent client while nursing pity for his victim is a nicely conceived character. Similarly, one can respond with sympathy to the plight of the wife, who married late to escape spinsterhood only to find herself captive of a brute determined to terrorize, humiliate, and possibly murder her. When the lawyer and the abused wife are brought together, Seagraves urges Hanna to keep up the appearance of a normal marriage with Trout in order not to prejudice his coming trial. Hanna refuses, saying that her husband is an ''aberration'' and that she will not be a party to the shooting of children. . . .

[A] love affair soon develops between the two in the ominous shadow of Paris Trout, with much closely described activity in bed.

These characters and this relationship are convincing—up to a point. Unfortunately, Pete Dexter never takes his material beyond what is journalistically plausible. His characters stay on the surface, lacking distinctive voices or personalities. Where he is most successful is in evoking a southern community of that period, ranging from the blacks who live in such places as Damp Bottoms and Indian Heights to the substantial folk like Seagraves and his wife who live on Draft Street. There is a wonderfully funny account of the town's celebration of its sesquicentennial—in which every man in town is required to grow a beard and stocks are put up to punish those still beardless after a certain date.

Mr. Dexter's prose is lucid and efficient, but without much color or individuality. The story gets swiftly told; it is an interesting story, though not one that I found engrossing or of much moral weight. *Paris Trout*, . . . will, I expect, fade rather quickly in the memory of most of its readers. . . .

Robert Towers. *New York Review of Books*. February 16, 1989, pp. 18–19.

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DICKEY, James (1923–1997)

Going into this book [*Helmets*] is like going into an experience in your own life that you know will change your mind. You either go in willing to let it happen, or you stay out. There are a lot of good poems here. . . . I realize to what an extent sympathy is the burden of this book, how much there is of seeing into the life of beings other than the poet. The reader is moved imaginatively and sympathetically into the minds of horses at nightfall, of farmer and animals divided and held together by fences, of a young girl scarred in a wreck, of bums waking up in places they never intended to come to. . . . But I think that Mr. Dickey is also capable of much less than his best. There are poems that seem to have been produced by the over-straining of method, ground out in accordance with what the poet has come to expect he'll do in a given situation. . . . But I want to end by turning back to the goodness of the book. There are poems here of such life that you don't believe they're possible until you read them the second time, and I've got no bone to pick with them.

Wendell Berry. *Poetry*. Nov., 1964. pp. 130–1

I have been drawn to the poetry of James Dickey by two poems, ''The Being'' and ''Drinking from a Helmet,'' which tell of seizures or psychic invasions—''as if kissed in the brain''—where the erotic and the spectral seem to advance an initiation, as if he had passed a shadow-line that gave him a secret commission in poetry. . . . Wherever the thought of the dead, of animal, human or demonic hauntings—the theme of popular spiritism—comes to him, James Dickey's imagination is stirred. . . . I am moved by the suggestion throughout of the mysteries of Orpheus, the poet as hero who would charm the dead and the animal world with his music. . . . In these *Two Poems of the Air*—''The Firebombing'' and ''Reincarnation''—James Dickey continues in his fascination with the spectral, but he has shifted from the tense verse and concentrated stanza sequence, the direct mode of a poetic experience and commitment, towards a more casual verse following a set story line, allowing even clichés of the supernatural tale. . . .

Robert Duncan. *Poetry*. Nov., 1964. pp. 131–2

Though Dickey will always retain, for strategic use, the rhythms he had early developed to be those in which he most naturally addresses himself, entrusts his consciousness to the language, it is evident that a formal metamorphosis must occur, after *Helmets*, to accommodate the other change, the transformation of ritual into romance, which Dickey has effected in his poetry. . . .

That metamorphosis has occurred in Dickey's latest book, *Buckdancer's Choice*, . . . and occurred with such a rush of impulse that the reader of the earlier collections, having come to expect the somnambulist forms of Dickey's imagination of recurrence, will be jarred by the immediacy, the brutality of disjunct actions, performed once and, however celebrated, done away with. . . . [F]or the most part, Dickey's universe, and the measures which accommodate and express his phenomenology of exchange, has ceased to be one of eternal return, of enchantment. Instead, once out of eternity, the poet confronts and laments (exults over) the outrage of individual death, of a linear movement within time—each event

and each moment being unique, therefore lost. . . . Obsession, madness, excess: the burden of *Buckdancer's Choice* is altogether new in this poet, and crowned, or ballasted, by a pervasive terror of extinction.

Richard Howard. *Partisan Review*. Summer, 1966. pp. 480–1

An attempt to be guided by afflatus marks James Dickey's work. He is the most expansive and energetic of these poets, and his poetry is alive with fugitive notes of compassion, fantasy, empathy with personalities that sometimes hold, sometimes flicker in a poem and then disappear. He seems capable of great compression, of an economy that could hold within deliberately contrived limits diverse elements working together. But language for Dickey is a form of energetic action that does not necessarily allow him to work his materials into achieved formal shape and meaning. The poems tend to grow more than to be shaped; their expansion is a necessary aspect of his discovery of what he wishes to say and to release through them.

M. L. Rosenthal. *The New Poets*. (Oxford). 1967. pp. 325–6

The persona in James Dickey's new poems, those that appear in the final section (''Falling'') of his new book [*Poems 1957–1967*], is a unique human personality. He is a worldly mystic. On the one hand, a joyous expansive personality—all candor, laughter and charm—in love with his fully conscious gestures, the grace and surety of moves of his body. An outgoing man. An extrovert. On the other hand, a chosen man. A man who has been picked by some mysterious intelligent agent in the universe to act out a secret destiny. . . . How does a man re-connect with common unchosen humanity when he has just returned from the abyss of nonhuman chosen otherness? That is the chief problem to which the final volume addresses itself. How to be a man who feels perfectly at home, and at his ease, in both worlds—the inner and outer. A man who can make of himself and his art a medium, a perfect conductor, through which the opposed worlds—both charged with intensity—can meet and connect, flow into each other. The worldly mystic. It is the vision of a man who for years has been just as committed to developing his potential for creative existence as for creative art. All discoveries and earnings, spiritual or worldly, must carry over from one universe to the other.

Laurence Lieberman. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1967. p. 513

At the core of James Dickey's *Deliverance* is a primal fable of intense power. The four unlikely city slickers who ride down the wild Cahulawassee River learn, in horrifying detail, what survival means and how cheap and expensive life can be. While it stays with these men and their journey, *Deliverance* partakes of the bardic magic that has held audiences in thrall for thousands of years, the magic of a narrative more insistent, while it lasts, than the concerns of life itself. When its battered canoe touches shore and civilization, though, Dickey's novel raises questions that cannot be ignored.

Chief among these is the retrospective attitude of the narrator, Ed Gentry, toward his experience. At the outset, the trip holds the brief promise of ''another life, deliverance'' from his soft urban life, from his job as art director of a commercial photography studio; it also promises Gentry another chance to study the challenge of Lewis Medlock, an intense, compelling fanatic who believes that ''the whole thing is going to be reduced to the human body'' and who lavishes a lover's care on his own body so as to ''be ready.'' The disastrous journey downriver fulfills both of these promises, but it also introduces a new factor [the meaning of survival] that obliterates their importance. . . .

Paul Edward Gray. *The Yale Review*. Autumn, 1970. p. 104

For all his collections of poetry, James Dickey came closest to capturing his personal mythopoeic vision in the controversial novel *Deliverance*. That his vision was admittedly masculine seems unnecessary to justify, and that the novel was filled with violence, gore, and sport imagery is also defensible. For what Dickey was creating in his novel was a *Pilgrim's Progress* of male egoism, complete with all varieties of masculine fantasy—physical power and prowess, sexual expectation and satisfaction, and above all, contest, competition. What he achieved in the execution of the novel was a resolution far different from his characters' expectations—whether those of Lewis Medlock, the greatest achiever, or those of Ed Gentry, the follower. Dickey's resolution was an understanding beyond fantasy, an understanding of the reality of life, and an acceptance. . . .

Perhaps the chief weakness in *Deliverance* is the fact that all its parts do mesh so well. The explicit leads of the opening—with the charged dialogue between Ed and Lewis, even though it may be ironic dialogue, speech that we as readers understand as naive and indulgent—leave very little for the reader to come to alone. Once into the story, however, the demands of the plot keep Dickey from repeating his theme excessively; the movement of the book is apt for this twentieth-century river story. Dickey's is an incremental yet never leisurely rhythm, based on moderately long sentences which often branch with unexpected modifiers, and come up short in a simpler structure. . . .

Viewed as a masculine initiation story, set on a river, *Deliverance* can be considered a kind of gothic, even bitter, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. That the story is no idyll is part of Dickey's theme: the simple tests, the primitive encounters, may be almost beyond civilized people—not out of their own deficiency, either physical or moral—but from the exigencies of common sense. Just as Dickey's comments on the seemingly pastoral life are scathing in their satire, and the doctor echoes them, so his notion that civilization *has* brought humanity pervades the ''After'' section. . . .

The three days of Dickey's *Deliverance* have seemed like an eternity, and in some ways they are. But they give Ed, and Lewis, and perhaps Dickey himself, the kind of freedom from the stereotyped male image, and from the pride, that blinds so many would-be powerful men. It is no simple journey; rather it is a contemporary descent into hell, modeled on the exploration-of-self through exploration-of-river that images a peculiarly American, masculine quest for identity. . . .

Linda Wagner. *South Carolina Review*. April, 1978, pp. 49, 52–55

[James] Dickey's treatment of the evolution of the Self has generated a set of repeated symbols, most of them associated with nature. Because the action of many of his poems occurs at night, the

moon plays a special role in endowing his speakers—as in ''The Owl King''—with unique visionary powers denied them during their rational, daylight hours. (Indeed, sight/blindness is a major motif throughout Dickey's work.) The urge toward celestial beings and powers also appears in ''For the Nightly Ascent of the Hunter Orion'' (and *The Zodiac*) and of magically endowed birds of prey (the sea bird in ''Reincarnation (II),'' the owls in ''The Owl King'' and *Deliverance*). Water, traditionally associated with rebirth, assumes additional complexity in Dickey's work. In *Deliverance* . . . it functions as both a renewing and a destructive element; in the latter capacity it shows some of the features of the shark and the snake, the poet's persistent emblems of impersonal, unyielding malevolence.

The most complex of Dickey's symbolic creations is his underworld of the dead, to which water often leads. For him the dead have a physical reality, and they involve themselves with the living as sometimes helpful, sometimes hostile intruders; the godlike specter of Eugene in ''The Other,'' for instance, both inspires and intimidates the speaker. In his interview with William Heyen, Dickey states, ''I tried to fathom what it [death] was, what death is essentially. I finally decided that it's being in the ultimate strange place, the thing that's most completely different from what you're accustomed to.'' In his underworld the dead reside in a Hades-like location ''Below the surface of thought/Below the ground,'' as he describes it in ''The Signs.''. . . Because the dead embody the causes for a speaker's guilt, they serve as haunting presences impelling the poet's attempts to break away from or transform the Self. . . .

It should be apparent that in defining what is suspect from what is genuine in poetry, Dickey's criticism outlines his own poetic theory. His honesty may cause him to be perceived by some as a ''hatchet man,'' but in fact it suggests the seriousness with which he approaches his task. He is a poet who cares deeply about his art, who consequently insists on the highest possible standards. Richard Kostelanetz's 1965 statement calling Dickey America's finest critic of poetry may be even more accurate now than it was over 20 years ago.

> Ronald Baughman. *Understanding James Dickey* (Univ. of South Carolina Pr., 1985), pp. 14–15, 153

We find in Dickey one of those hybrids that blooms from time to time. As in William Carlos Williams and Dannie Abse, in whom physician and poet converge to produce superior poetry (and, arguably, more humane medical care), Dickey's skills as a commercial writer combine with his poetic interests to make him, if not a better poet, then the particular kind of poet he is. In a profession sometimes noted for its detachment from the everyday world, Dickey stands out as a writer not content to let the poem survive ''in the valley of its making,'' but chooses to carry it out into the world, even into the corridors of the busy executives.

During the years Dickey worked in the advertising business, he took a book of poetry to the office each day, carrying it or the manuscript of one of his own poems ''as if it were a bomb'' ''through the acres of desks where typists typed five carbons of The Tony Bennett Record Promotion.'' His was a subversive act, taking what mattered most to him into a place where it mattered not at all. But when he left at day's end, with his poetry under his arm or tucked away in his briefcase, Dickey may not have been aware of intrusions in the other direction. If poetry can help, however privately, to humanize the business office, how might the office operate on poetry and, in Dickey's case, on the poet?

I want to answer that question by considering James Dickey as a poetic ''pitchman,'' but I do not intend that term to be pejorative. In particular, I do not suggest that Dickey's motives for writing poetry were not artistic. However, the same abilities that made him such a successful young advertising executive contributed to his success as a poet. He understood that to get ahead in the marketplace the poet must know how to promote his product, and he combined the businessman's pragmatic view of the world with the artist's sensibility. Dickey knew, better than his contemporaries, how to sell the things he had to offer: himself, the poem, and (in his own view) God.

> Neal Bowers. *James Dickey: The Poet as Pitchman* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Pr., 1985), pp. 5–6

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DIDION, Joan (1934–)

First novels are the occasion of hope and prophecy. A new talent must be assessed, pigeonholed, labeled. Miss Didion [in *Run River*] writes superbly; her prose is her servant; she has an uncommon grasp of place and character. All is suavely understated, preventing melodrama, the pretense of epic dimensions, and tedious symbolism. The novel is reasonable and true. The landed gentry in California are like that. Yet—. . .

A big *yet* indeed. . . . The book is *too* even, *too* smooth. It sticks to its business with the determined regularity of minor art. All humor, all irony have been pared away. And where is invention? Must realism with all its sincerity be so flat? The English novel is eccentric, irregular, at once pathetic and ridiculous. Miss Didion has polished her prose too well for her own good. She should have put in some touches with her left hand, or attempted some little

impossibilities here and there, so that we could appreciate the smudges.

Guy Davenport. *National Review*. May 7, 1963. p. 371

To read Joan Didion is to worry about her. There is in most of her work the terrible feeling that this latest pained and painful examination of whatever is on her mind right now is only the freshest installment in some epic suicide note to the world. The premonition of personal loss is apocalyptic. . . .

Here, in her second novel and first departure in almost a decade from the first-person reportage she does so excruciatingly well, are both disappointment and relief. Disappointment, because [*Play It as It Lays*] is nothing like the gorgeous caterwauling tour de force that might have been expected; relief, a personal relief, because at the end she explicitly rejects suicide as an alternative—for her—to the miserable goings-on so sparely chronicled. . . .

Familiarity with her autobiographical work makes it impossible to read this novel without recalling on almost every page the other memories, the real ones.

It doesn't seem important finally, whether this is a good book or not. Those who care about Joan Didion will have to read it. For one thing, it is a compelling exercise in literary pathology; but, most of all, it is a matter of devotion.

Nicholas A. Samstag. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 15, 1970. p. 27

Nullity, nothingness, human negation, *nil*—these are merely variants of the same phenomena, the essential emptiness of experience, that great hole at the middle of things. Single as the phenomena may be, the characters in novels can make varying approaches to it, as novelists themselves can have various feelings about it. It can be seized in a kind of hungry embrace, in the fashion of the moral idiots who people the world Miss Didion creates in [*Play It as It Lays*], a novel written with such bitter wit that the reader feels at the end that it must have been acid that he has been drinking. . . .

I am tempted to say that this novel is a triumph not of insight as such but of style, meaning by *style*, of course, the linguistic embodiment or, rather, actualization of imagination. . . . If Miss Didion had made one false move, the whole thing would have collapsed like a pricked balloon. But she didn't.

Mark Schorer. *American Scholar*. Winter, 1970–1. pp. 168, 174

Play It as It Lays depends upon an intimate connection between setting and theme; but also . . . its overriding thematic concern is man's relationship with himself and with existence in general. Didion's novel is neither primarily a sociological commentary on the values of contemporary American society nor a psychological case study of its heroine. It is, rather, a picture of personal dread and anxiety, of alienation and absurdity lurking within and without. For although Hollywood is her setting, nothingness is Didion's theme. . . .

The facts of Maria's life are the basic material of thousands of soap opera situations. What saves *Play It as It Lays* from degenerating into banality is Didion's control over her material, her skill in focusing attention not on the events in Maria's life so much as on her cumulative response to them. The real action of the novel takes place in the mind and heart of Maria as she is forced to deal with her experiences. Viewed from a medical point of view, she might well be classified as a near schizoid personality whose experiences have precipitated a severe emotional crisis resulting in the loss of an integrated personality. In a more profound sense, however, her sickness is neither emotional nor psychological; it is ontological. She is suffering not from a nervous breakdown, but from the breakdown of a world around her which threatens to engulf her whole being with nothingness. . . .

With relentless attention to telling detail, a perceptive eye for sharply-etched characters, an unerring ear for the absurdities and non sequiturs that pass for daily conversation, and a diamond-hard unsentimental style, Joan Didion has fashioned a remarkable novel which never misses in its portrayal of a modern woman caught in a mid–twentieth-century crisis. She has cast anew, in her unique idiom, one of the prevailing concerns of modern literature: confrontation with the void. Despite its preoccupation with death, suffering, boredom and despair, *Play It as It Lays* is always fresh and alive. The novel not only touches the heart of its reader through its sensitive treatment of Maria Wyeth but also assaults the mind in its investigation of the heart of darkness too often discovered lurking behind the fundamental questions about existence in the modern world.

David J. Geherin. *Critique*. 16, 1, 1974. pp. 64–5, 78

[John Gregory] Dunne and his wife, Joan Didion, both best-sellers in a community that respects only the numbers, are the Lunts of the Los Angeles literary scene. Each in his own way celebrates the sights and symbols of California, a vacuum making its emptiness sensational. Their writing is typical of California insensibility.

As with the rest of the California middle class who jog, exercise, diet, sunbathe, and search for inner peace and self-awareness, Dunne and Didion are obsessed with themselves. . . .

''We tell ourselves stories in order to live,'' Joan Didion writes in the much-quoted first line of *The White Album*, essays that span the upheavals of the late 1960s and the becalmed 1970s. But the real story she is telling is that of her own suffering. She has the Brentwood Blues. She meditates on her desolation and makes it elegant. She puts herself in the vanguard of suffering and uses this to set herself apart from the rich, successful, and decadent Los Angeles life she enjoys. She needs the fiction to rationalize the fact that she is part of the problem she analyzes. . . .

In 1982, having exploited her private terror in print, Joan Didion was sent for two weeks to El Salvador to exploit other peoples'. Didion had used the fictional Central American country of Boca Grande as an exotic locale in her pretentiously arch novel *A Book of Common Prayer* (1973). But with the possibility of real and not imagined death in El Salvador. Didion finds new ways to make fear pay. It concentrates her mind wonderfully. . . .

Face to face with mayhem, Didion's detachment from life is dramatized as the inevitable, even essential way of negotiating the situation. With the adroit use of an impersonal pronoun, she can stage her affectlessness and the death she seems to abhor and make them both sensational.

John Lahr. *Automatic Vaudeville* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), pp. 205–6, 213–14

''We tell ourselves stories in order to live,'' Joan Didion says. The stories she tells in *After Life*, her third book of collected essays, like

those in *The White Album* and *Slouching towards Bethlehem*, are razor-sharp analyses of American popular and political culture that show American life to be contradictory, unsettling, and bizarre. Didion tells these stories in a deadpan, understated style that has the deadly impact of a concealed weapon. She could make a grocery list sound significant and sinister. And so she does in accounts of the press and politics in Washington, New York, and California—the exception being the title essay, ''After Henry,'' a eulogy to Didion's editor and mentor, Henry Robbins, who died at fifty-one in 1979.

Her two most memorable pieces illustrate Poe's ''poetic principle,'' that the most compelling narratives focus on the lingering death of a beautiful young woman. In Didion's version, dramatic interest is concentrated on the near death and lingering revival of Patty Hearst, in the essay ''Girl of the Golden West,'' and on the unnamed 1989 Central Park rape victim in ''Sentimental Journeys.'' Characteristically, Didion weights each victim, event, and context with portentous symbolism that assumes far greater significance than the individual to whom it is attached; each becomes the heroine of a significant story of America, past, present, and future. . . .

In calling attention to the narrative elements of the news, Didion is telling her story about their stories. We read these dozen pieces for Didion's story, sinister rather than sensational, and Didion's wry, dry style.

Lynn Z. Bloom. *Belles Lettres*. Fall, 1992, p. 14

Didion can only be fully understood as a regional writer—more particularly, as a middle-class Anglo Californian who came of age in a place nobody recognized as having a legitimate culture of its own. . . .

This wasn't to say our culture [Northern California, Sacramento] lacked definition, even continuity. If there was less demonstrable commitment to ideas in Sacramento than in, say, Boston, there was at least a comparable and equally complacent order—racially prejudiced and oblivious to lives lived two and ten rungs below it. Filipinos, Japanese, and Latinos did not figure in this Anglo world except as household and garden workers.

This was the world Joan Didion grew up in. Scarcely altered, it continues to this day in East Sacramento and Old Land Park. . . .

To have grown up in such a world is to be more than ordinarily struck by the sea-changes that followed. Old Sacramento's outward fixity, its seeming timelessness, make encounters with the surrounding world almost traumatizing, a form of culture shock. It's not that life inside these purlieus isn't stifling: it's that the alternatives—so exciting, so foreign—are also clearly annihilating. . . .

To suggest, as Didion has repeatedly done, that ''story'' or ''narrative'' is nothing more than the imposition of the individual writer's self-interest on events creates a curiously hermetic universe—the moral equivalent of the Donner Party (to choose one of Didion's favorite bits of local history), which in fable at least survived only through autoingestion. In *Slouching towards Bethlehem* Didion remarked that her decision to keep a notebook was not motivated, as she had at first believed, by her interest in other people: ''My stake is always, of course, in the unmentioned girl in the plaid silk dress [Didion]. *Remember what it was to be me:* that is always the point.''

To take Didion at her own word here means recognizing that her often magnificent reportage, her ''narratives,'' are in the end only her own. Their metanarrative—the story running like a river through all her essays and novels—is about a writer who grew up in a lost and irretrievable California, lived for a while after college in a New York just as lost, and who writes now about the cultural flashpoints lying at extremes from where she started. At bottom, Didion's metanarrative despairs of collective solutions to social problems, concentrates on incidental horrors at the expense of structural ones, selects grisly details that annihilate hope. . . .

Joan Didion [is] a self-professed outsider operating from within the heart of institutions but a lifelong Turnerian nonetheless, in perpetual mourning for the passing of an older West. Hanging over discovered landscape of public records in *After Henry*, *Miami* and ''Eye on the Prize'' [published in *New York Review of Books*, September 1992] is that old Westering metanarrative: action is deeply compromised, absurd, futile; politics is too corrupt to participate in, save as a ''sensitive'' observer; only the outsider can make a positive difference, and all such differences are too fine for politics. In these convictions, Didion strikes me as a peculiarly Western writer, depending on the authority of her own long suffering to confer meaning, make history. *O, Pioneer!*

Jan Zita Grover. ''Girl of the Golden West.'' *Women's Review of Books*. March, 1993, pp. 8–9

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DILLARD, Annie (1945–)

''I am no scientist,'' says Annie Dillard, ''but a poet and a walker with a background in theology and a penchant for quirky facts.'' In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* she offers ''what Thoreau called 'a meteorological journal of the mind.'''

The book is a form of meditation, written with headlong urgency, about *seeing*. A blind child the author happened to read about saw for the first time after cataracts had been removed from her eyes. ''When her doctor took her bandages off and led her into the garden, the girl who was no longer blind saw 'the tree with lights in it.''' Annie Dillard had found the central metaphor for her book; it is the vision, the spiritual conception, that she will spend her days in solitude tramping the Roanoke creek banks and the Blue Ridge mountainside in search of herself.

A reader's heart must go out to a young writer with a sense of wonder so fearless and unbridled. It is this intensity of experience that she seems to live in order to declare.

There is an ambition about her book that I like, one that is deeper than the ambition to declare wonder aloud. It is the ambition to feel. This is a guess. But if this is what she has at heart, I am not quite sure that in writing this book she wholly accomplished it. I don't say this, though, to detract from her declared intention in laying herself open to the experience of seeing. It is a state she equates with innocence: ''What I call innocence is the spirit's unself-conscious state at any moment of pure devotion to any object. It is at once a receptiveness and total concentration.''

But apparently it is an unself-consciousness that can be consciously achieved and consciously declared. And part of her conception of seeing is that in the act of doing it she is herself, in turn, being seen.

''I walk out; I see something, some event that would otherwise have been utterly missed and lost; or something sees me, some enormous power brushes me with its clean wing, and I resound like a beaten bell. I am an explorer, then, and I am also a stalker, or the instrument of the hunt itself. . . . I am the arrow shaft, carved along my length by unexpected lights and gashes from the very sky, and this book is the straying trail of blood.''

What happens to that paragraph is what happens to her book. As the episodes begin, we can imagine an appealing young woman standing alert in a meadow, dressed in shirt and pants, holding her field glasses and provided with a sandwich: she is waiting to see, being very patient and still. By the chapter's end, we realize or suspect we are watching a dervish dancing. Receptivity so high-strung and high-minded has phases of its own. The author shows us that it has its dark side too.

''The world has signed a pact with the devil; it had to. . . . The terms are clear: if you want to live, you have to die; you cannot have mountains and creeks without space, and space is a beauty married to a blind man. The blind man is Freedom, or Time, and he does not go anywhere without his great dog Death. The world came into being with the signing of the contract. . . . This is what we know. The rest is gravy.''

I honestly do not know what she is talking about at such times. The only thing I could swear to is that the writing here leaves something to be desired. ''What's going on here?'' is one of the author's refrains. ''The creator loves pizzazz,'' she answers herself.

She is better at stalking a muskrat: ''Stalking is a pure form of skill, like pitching or playing chess. Rarely is luck involved. I do it right or I do it wrong; the muskrat will tell me, and that right early. Even more than baseball, stalking is a game played in the actual present. At every second, the muskrat comes, or stays, or goes, depending on my skill.'' This is admirable writing.

So is her account of the polyphemus moth—first in its cocoon, then emerging, then crawling away in the presence of a roomful of schoolchildren. It has been directly experienced at what I should say is eye-level. Her account of the migration of the monarch butterflies, which makes the reader see what they looked like coming, how they went over, what they left behind them, what the author learned from the whole event, is precise and memorable.

She can also write straight narrative, showing what the book would have gained in point, direction, and shape from being given a little more of it. . . .

Annie Dillard is the only person in her book, substantially the only one in her world; I recall no outside human speech coming to break the long soliloquy of the author. Speaking of the universe very often, she is yet self-surrounded, and, beyond that, book-surrounded. Her own book might have taken in more of human life without losing a bit of the wonder she was after. Might it not have gained more? Thoreau's wisdom had everything to do with the relationship he saw between nature and the community of man. She read Thoreau, including of course his own meteorological journal of the mind. . . .

[The] author is given to changing style or shifting moods with disconcerting frequency and abruptness. ''Thanks. For the Memories.'' ''This oft was thought, but ne'er so well expresed as by Pliny.'' ''The cottage was Paradise enow.'' You might be reading letters home from camp, where the moment before you might have thought you were deep in the Book of Leviticus.

The relationship between the writer and the reader is fully as peculiar and astonishing as the emergence of the polyphemus moth. It too has got to leave the cocoon, has got to draw breath and assume every risk of being alive before the next step, real understanding, can take place.

But a writer writes as a writer sees, and while the eyes are rolled up, what appears on paper may be exactly what it sounds like, invocation. ''Mystery itself is as fringed and intricate as the shape of the air in time.'' This is a voice that is trying to speak to me out of a cloud instead of from a sociable, even answerable, distance on our same earth. . . .

She concludes her book by saying, ''And then you walk fearlessly . . . like the monk on the road who knows precisely how vulnerable he is, who takes no comfort among death-forgetting men, and who carries his vision of vastness and might around in his tunic like a live coal which neither burns nor warms him, but with which he will not part. . . . The giant water bug ate the world. And like Billy Bray I go my way, and my left foot says 'Glory,' and my right foot says 'Amen': in and out of Shadow Creek, upstream and down, exultant, in a daze, dancing, to the twin silver trumpets of praise.''

And that's the way Annie Dillard goes. Is the Pilgrim on her right road? That depends on what the Pilgrim's destination is.

But how much better, in any case, to wonder than not to wonder, to dance with astonishment and go spinning in praise, than not to know enough to dance or praise at all; to be blessed with more imagination than you might know at the given moment what to do with than to be cursed with too little to give you—and other people—any trouble.

Eudora Welty. *New York Times Book Review*. March 24, 1974.

Think, for a moment, of writing about your own early years—say from age 5 to 15—and consider the problem of getting, first, a grip on all that material, and then organizing and writing about it coherently and in such a way that readers will hang on every word. . . .

[*An American Childhood* does] this so consumately with Annie Dillard's '50s childhood in Pittsburgh that it more than takes the reader's breath away. It consumes you as you consume it, so that, when you have put down this book, you're a different person, one who has virtually experienced another childhood. You have been with this child on her summer visits to her grandparents' river house and on the boat trip she took (as an adolescent of the opposite sex did on the Mississippi) down the Ohio River with her dad. You have been inside her head as she watches her younger sister materialize. You have gotten a microscope on Christmas and discovered moving protozoa in a drop of water. You have gone to dancing class to learn, not just the fox trot, but a certain social ease. You also have discarded the ridiculous notion of religion in a fit of adolescent agnosticism.

Autobiography by definition would seem to require a singular subject. In *An American Childhood*, we get both more and less: Those people who figure large in her early life assume almost mythic proportions, but the author wisely spares her reader the undifferentiated, and what could be trivial, aspects of her childhood. Somehow, we experience the sensation of a summer's droning tedium without being bored for a second. . . .

Dillard follows a straightforward chronology in *An American Childhood*. This is not to say the writing is simple or unadorned. Like the river she uses as a unifying metaphor, each mile forward brings with it several more of meandering among serendipitous associations. In one, Dillard does the impossible: explaining the family private jokes without deadening their infectious good humor. There are meditations on the family's linguistics, on the portents of the nearby branch library, on the day of a huge snow, on the character of solid Presbyterianism, on an insect collection, on the dancing class's final exam.

In elaborations and playful, poetic digressions lie high stakes and heavy risks. Only a self-assured writer dare intentionally violate the commandment ''Thou shalt not digress.'' Dillard does it, and manages to induce the reader not to get impatient. And to feel sad that it must come to an end.

An American Childhood is neither an adult's paean to romanticized memories nor the opposite sort of retributive memoir most readers would wish the writer never committed to paper. Dillard has not flinched at capturing the private fears alongside the rapturous joy, the humble alongside the grand the comforting rituals alongside the bedeviling puzzlements, the intellectual alongside the sensual. For an autobiographer to comprehend such a wealth of memory with such balance and understanding shows remarkable maturity, and for a writer to share it is an act of singular generosity.

Catherine Petroski. *Chicago Tribune—Books*. September 13, 1987, pp. 1, 12.

[In] *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard wrote that she had ''no intention of inflicting all my childhood memories on anyone''; in her last book, *An American Childhood*, she did exactly that. She wasn't wrong, really, to break that promise—*Childhood* was a very good book, almost a great one—but still, it indicated how attenuated and self-obsessed her work was becoming. Now, in *The Writing Life*, Dillard has gone one step farther down that path: She has moved from writing about herself to writing about writing about herself.

The Writing Life isn't a bad book, exactly—I don't think Dillard is capable of writing anything awful—but it's thin and fragmented, and self-pitying. Nothing comes more easily to a writer than moaning about the creative agony of the artist, but Dillard has always had such perfect, poetic taste and such a fine sense of the ridiculous that I would never have expected it of her. Though her work has probably never sold in proportion to its merit, she does have a Pulitzer Prize and at least one best seller under her belt. So it's just plain embarrassing when she whines that writing is ''work . . . so meaningless, so fully for yourself alone, and so worthless to the world, that no one except you cares whether you do it well, or ever.'' Ten minutes at a job that really is meaningless might change her mind. . . .

Even on a subject as barren as this one, though, Dillard's prose style remains amazing. Reviewers tend to use adjectives such as ''luminous'' and ''radiant'' in describing her writing. That usually means vague and sentimental and pseudopoetic—but she's not. Her prose is rich when it needs to be, but she never merely assembles conglomerations of syllables for their own sake. The nature writing in Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* can take the reader's breath away with its beauty, but she never yields to the temptation to be falsely pretty. . . . More important, everything in that book, and in most of her others, has a meaning beyond the literal. I sometimes believe that Dillard took Blake's ''To see a world in a grain of sand/and a heaven in a wild flower'' as her job description.

Most of Dillard's books have moments of immense beauty and power—that is why it is so jarring how silly some of the metaphors in *The Writing Life* are. Writing desks hover ''thirty feet from the ground''; the writer, she says, must crank ''the engine of belief that keeps you and your desk in midair.'' (Trust your feelings, Luke. The Force will be with you.) A two-page chapter is devoted to a typewriter that turns volcanic, ''exploding with fire and ash.'' It shakes the walls and floor of her house in its fury; she grabs a bucket of water to douse it, but decides to leave it be, though the eruptions recur randomly through the night. A couple of days later, it works just fine. I know Dillard wants us to think deep mystical thoughts about creative fire, but the only deep thought I had was this: Could one of the most brilliant writers of our time be dumb enough to want to pour water in a burning electrical appliance?

One could be cynical and argue that there's a reason *The Writing Life* seems mostly self-obsessed: that Dillard has been navel-gazing so long that her chin has become permanently attached to her chest. But I don't really think that's the problem. Yes, most of her books are ultimately about herself, but they are really about how she transforms what she perceives. . . . Dillard's books, whatever their nominal subjects, constitute her spiritual autobiography, and that's the riskiest kind of writing—her books work only if every sentence is an epiphany. That's a word critics have debased beyond recognition, but Dillard's best work honestly provides something that can only be called revelation, and that something cannot be faked. So there may be a good reason that her last couple of books have been merely about the inside of her head: What else can you write when the epiphanies don't come?

Michael Edens. *The Nation*. October 16, 1989, pp. 435–36.

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DIXON, Stephen (1936–)

Conventionally realistic stories are *about* something. What makes Stephen Dixon's work so different is that it is that thing in itself, though not in the sense of stylistic opacity Samuel Beckett appreciated in James Joyce's fiction when he made this same formulation in 1929. *Finnegans Wake*, the work in progress Beckett had in mind, would be opaque nearly to the point of impenetrability. Dixon's novels and short stories are clear as a bell, with never a question about what's going on. His characters are familiar to the point of banality, and their actions never reach beyond the scope of what can happen to any American city dweller at any moment of any given day.

The difference is that these happenings are not reported by observing the outside world, but generated internally by the key elements set in place at the story's beginning. A social mannerist like John Updike will ask you to believe in not just his characters but the larger world they live in; their fortunes will be to interact with the sign system we all share (or at least can read), to the point that a protagonist introduced on page one may sharpen into focus as late as page ten or fifteen, when he or she interacts with a product taken down from the supermarket shelf. What happens in a Dixon story is predicated entirely by what's squarely before you on the first page; whatever follows must be created by the interaction of those elements fully apparent from the start. Dixon's genius is in generating so much action from so little initial material. Whereas conventional realists demand a literacy of the entire world, all Stephen Dixon asks is that we accept the flat statement of his story's first sentence. From there on, his narrative momentum will carry on virtually by itself.

Jerome Klinkowitz. *American Book Review*. September–October, 1989, p. 7

In spite of the fact that Stephen Dixon has published at last count 225 short stories, he is a terrific writer and *Garbage* is a superb novel.

Garbage is a story about a bar owner, Shaney, who goes one-on-one with a Mafia-style garbage hauler—Stovin's—because of a sense of loyalty to his present trash hauler, Eco. He is also concerned about what his deceased father would think if he were to cave in to Stovin's extortionate demands. But in the final analysis Shaney is simply a guy who doesn't like to get pushed around. Because of his commitments, he is obliged to endure a torched apartment, scorched parrot, busted head, jail, and general destitution. At this level, *Garbage* is like [the movie] *Prince of the City*, only funnier. One man's fight against all odds in the big city.

Curtis White. *American Book Review*. September–October 1989, p. 6

A Dixon story is almost immediately recognizable. . . . His prose has an edgy, jerky quality, reminiscent of, well, Dixon's own speech. Events are described minutely or telescoped alarmingly. And at the beginning of a Dixon story, you are plopped right into the middle of the action. For example, ''The Parting,'' in *The Play and Other Stories* (1988) begins: ''Then her new boyfriend showed up at the door, and I said, 'I guess it's time for me to go.'''

Recently, Dixon's distinctive style paid off. *Frog* (1991), his latest book, earned him long-deserved national attention. . . .

How did he develop his voice?

''Well, I started off the way I guess most writers start: I was writing a naturalistic story with good English and punctuation where it should be. Then I found that to be kind of dull after a while and that if I wanted writing to be as exciting as it had been when I first discovered writing fiction, I had to go off into something new. . . . That's why I think most other writers' work is so boring and dull, dead: because they're writing, rewriting, in the same way, usually the same stories. But if you're open to it, it'll come. Does that make any sense? See, even now I'm writing a new novel called *Interstate*, and it's very exciting because it sort of takes off where *Frog* left off, and I'm having a whole bunch of fun. . . . If it isn't exciting I don't see the point of writing.''

It's this freshness of perspective, characterized by some as experimental realism, that is so engaging about Dixon's work.

Sono Motoyama. *Poets & Writers*. September–October, 1993, pp. 42, 43, 45

''What do you do the moment you know your kid's dead?'' writes Stephen Dixon in *Interstate*, his first novel since *Frog*, a finalist for both the NBA and the PEN/Faulkner Award. It is a question that permeates *Interstate*. . . . The novel's eight sections retell, in eight different ways, the consequences of a drive-by shooting in which two men in a minivan pull up alongside a man driving with his two young daughters on an interstate highway and open fire, killing one of the girls.

For more than two decades, the prolific Dixon has published highly innovative novels and short stories, mostly with literary journals and small presses, exploring the frantic inner lives of ordinary individuals. Yet this novel's themes of memory, guilt, and trauma proved to be especially disquieting for him. ''I have never written anything that possessed me so much,'' he says. . . .

Dixon has now published more than four hundred short stories in magazines from the *Atlantic* and *Esquire* to *TriQuarterly* and *Partisan Review*. His books comprise eleven story collections, including last year's *The Stories of Stephen Dixon*. . . .

Dixon began writing fiction in the 1960s, when he was a Wallace Stegner writing fellow at Stanford University. His first published story was taken by George Plimpton for the *Paris Review* in 1963. . . . Soon he was placing stories in *Confrontation*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *Mississippi Review* and many of the other little magazines in which he continues to publish to this day.

Joseph Barbato. *Publishers Weekly*. June 22, 1995, p. 40

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DOCTOROW, E.L. (1931–)

Doctorow [in *The Book of Daniel*] has written the political novel of our age, the best American work of its kind that I know since Lionel Trilling's *The Middle of the Journey*. . . . This is an artwork about the idea of the Rosenbergs and the people like them, how they came into being in this country, why their trial was needed, what their legacy is, and the intertexture of that legacy with the social-political climate today. I haven't looked up the facts of the Rosenberg case; it would be offensive to the quality of this novel to check it against those facts. This is a work of historic and psychic currents.

Stanley Kauffmann. *New Republic*. June 5, 1971. p. 25

[*The Book of Daniel*] seems to me extraordinarily sensitive both about the past that his narrator-protagonist, Daniel Isaacson, shared with his parents and about the present in which he searches for further clues to their true identities and his own. The book begins and ends in ambiguity, with Daniel refreshingly unsure about the meaning of anything. All we know for sure is the agony of his quest—and its importance. The book jumps madly, constantly from the first to the third person and back again, pauses for quiet, scholarly little dissertations on political and social questions, catching more truly than any fiction I have ever read the quality of the Stalinist mind, voice, and life-style, without sacrificing our human sympathy for the elder Isaacsons. . . .

[This] is the work of a novelist trying desperately to catch hold of at least a fragment of the truth of our time and succeeding in getting hold of more than most have lately managed to capture.

Richard Schickel. *Harper's Magazine*. Aug., 1971. p. 94

A method for giving us the *feel* of a historical moment—as distinct from information about it—is something that more and more of our novelists may soon be after, now that Thomas Pynchon and Doctorow have shown us how it is done, now that the millennial sixties are over and we are looking back to see what happened rather than forward to see what next. . . . The method of [Doctorow's] new novel [*Ragtime*] is dictated by the lives and times of America during that moment between the turn of the century and World War I, the moment of the arrival of the Model T, the assembly line, the moving picture, and Scott Joplin's rags. *Ragtime* succeeds entirely—as his three earlier books did not—in absorbing rather than annotating the images and rhythms of its subject, in measuring the shadows of myth cast by naturalistic detail, in rousing our senses and in treating us to some serious fun. . . .

It incorporates the fictions and realities of the era of ragtime while it rags our fictions about it. It is an anti-nostalgic novel that incorporates our nostalgia about its subject. It is cool, hard, controlled, utterly unsentimental, an art of sharp outlines and clipped phrases. Yet it implies all we could ask for in the way of texture, mood, character and despair.

George Stade. *New York Times Book Section*. July 6, 1975. pp. 1–2

Ragtime is blandly and confidently assertive, laying its short sentences like steps on the road to nowhere, so we can't see ahead, anticipate; the characters are rhetorical ploys, but splendid. Doctorow is never confused by life, though he is often dismayed, and his impudence is both witty and grave, so we can be pleasantly caught between feeling that he is only a novelist on holiday and that all other visions of the period before his may be the really irresponsible ones. Even the ironic juxtapositions that Doctorow loves almost sentimentally may be right, necessary. Because so many of the juxtapositions are of nasty rich and suffering poor, his politics tend to seem leftish, but Doctorow tells with amusement and affection the story of a radical starving Jewish artist on the Lower East Side who becomes Baron Ashkenazy, movie maker and millionaire. His vision is of the Seventies more than of the Sixties, and the juxtapositions themselves entrance him more than any political view of history. . . .

It's hard to make a whole book out of what Doctorow does best here; it's excellent in vignettes and short passages but unsuited for plots where we come to know the characters too well. . . . Still, no one has written a book quite like *Ragtime*, just as no one had written one quite like *The Book of Daniel*. Doctorow's restless and witty thoughtfulness seems like some combination of Pynchon, Edward Gorey, and William Appleman Williams, and certainly no one ever was *that* before.

Roger Sale. *New York Review of Books*. Aug. 7, 1975. pp. 21–2

Doctorow reminds us that writing history is a very creative activity, and that the professional historian would not claim that it is possible to write history *objectively*. . . . Doctorow's own brilliant imagination has given us not only some rather compelling—and disturbing—versions of America's past, but in addition his skillfully crafted narratives confront us with the terrible wisdom of great art, altering us in a manner that perhaps even the best historical discourse cannot do.

Doctorow points out that history exists for most of us as sets of images—the more remote in time, the fewer the images. The images in Doctorow's novels often clash violently with those that have seized the popular mind. *Welcome to Hard Times* demolishes the romantic view of the Wild West and its adulation of the ''social bandit,'' reminding us that we have lionized individuals whose only mark of distinction was plunder and murder. In the nineteenth century the American West functioned as the nation's ''safety valve,'' promising a new start for those fleeing from failure or personal tragedy in the East. Aggressively promoted as Arcadia, the frontier enticed many with its lure of ''free land''; ''the myth of the garden'' even suggested that rainfall would follow the plow. Unfortunately the harsh and unrelenting climate of the arid Great Plains refused to yield to the myth, and many who journeyed West, faced with the lack of timber and water so bountiful in the East, found the American Dream a mere mirage, their hopes evaporating into disappointment, failure, or disaster.

No one who reads *The Book of Daniel* will succumb to the recent nostalgia for the ''Fabulous Fifties.'' . . . Like Doctorow's earlier novels, *Ragtime* indicts our complacency and admonishes us that we continue to indulge in an uncritical nostalgia at our peril. Doctorow's novels suggest that by refusing to analyze our own responsibility for our past failures—not infrequently projecting evil outward onto other nations—we ensure that periods of mass hysteria like the McCarthy era or the burning of the nation's cities in the sixties will haunt us again.

Daniel L. Zins. *Hollins Critic*. Dec., 1979, pp. 2–3

The excitement caused by *Ragtime* five years ago was so great that, long before its European publication, we who live on the Mediterranean were itching to get hold of a copy. Summoned to Hollywood for a script conference, I made straight for a Los Angeles bookstore and bought one. Jet lag abetted my decision to read the book before even making amicable contact with my temporary masters at Universal. I was, of course, disappointed. Literary reality has never yet lived up to literary expectation. But that E.L. Doctorow was a genuine experimentalist I did not doubt. The aim of *Ragtime* was as purely aesthetic as that of *Ulysses*: The joy lay in the manipulation

of the crass elements of history. Houdini and Scott Joplin and Freud and Jung and certain of their less reputable contemporaries were drawn into a kind of ballet. Bernard Shaw had done something similar in his *In Good King Charles's Golden Days*, but Doctorow's achievement didn't seem derivative.

Rereading *Ragtime*, I find that most of the initial impact has been blunted: Literary shocks are subject to the law of diminishing returns. I find, too, a certain vacuity of literary display. What once seemed verbally startling is now revealed as mostly tinsel. But that Doctorow was superior to most of his American fellow-novelists in his concentration on fiction as form, not as a vehicle for special or ethnic preaching, is made very clear. A rereading of *Welcome to Hard Times* and *The Book of Daniel* has confirmed Doctorow's special status. *Loon Lake* exhibits a new formal direction. It is a difficult book and I don't think it is a successful one. But it is a very honorable attempt at expanding the resources of the genre. . . .

I am happy to learn that *Loon Lake* is already a popular book, in that it is a Book of the Month Club choice and eighty-odd thousand copies have already been printed. Happy because, whatever the faults of the work (nearly always the admirable faults of the overreacher), serious students of the novel must recognize here a bracing technical liberation, and such a recognition is being forced upon a readership probably happier with *Princess Daisy*. The bulk of our popular fiction is the work of either cynics or simpletons. The serious novelist's problem is to be uncompromising and yet to find an audience. Doctorow has found an audience and nothing could be less of a fictional compromise than *Loon Lake*. Like most writers who consider the craft to be primarily an exploration of the nature of human consciousness, he is brought up against such damnable problems as the validity of memory, the truthfulness of the senses, and, more than anything, the ghastly dilemmas of style. And, behind the epistemological agonies, there rests that basic obligation of all but the French antinovelists—to invent living personages and a convincing space-time continuum to hold them. Doctorow's characters—Joe, Penfield, Clara, even the grotesque Fat Lady of the carney—are alive, unrefracted by the often wayward medium. That *Loon Lake* breaks new technical ground and yet possesses so many of the traditional virtues of fiction must be accounted its peculiar distinction.

Anthony Burgess. *Saturday Review*. Sept., 1980, pp. 66–67

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DONLEAVY, J. P. (1926–)

Mr. Donleavy doesn't care in the least why Sebastian [*The Ginger Man*] is what he is, what disorders in the world or, for that matter, what frustrations in the nursery have shaped him; he simply gives us Sebastian, and we may take him or leave him. If we take him, if we read about him with some pleasure, that can only be because we envy his arrogant self-indulgence even while we disapprove of it. We, of course, are far too civilized to behave in any such outrageous fashion, but perhaps we sometimes wish we weren't. . . . Mr. Donleavy's [writing] is distinguished by humor, often inelegant, even coarse, but explosive and irresistible. Humor and poetry are his weapons. The whole novel is a wild and unpredictable outburst. Yet Mr. Donleavy is anything but an artless writer. Observe, for instance, the adroitness with which he moves from outside Sebastian's mind to inside it, from writing in the third person to writing in the first, and you realize how much control has created this image of chaos. *The Ginger Man* is a disturbing book, not because of its occasional vulgarity but because of its fundamental nihilism; it is also a powerful and original one.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. May 10, 1958. p. 31

Portions of this book [*The Ginger Man*] are obscene and/or blasphemous; other portions may give offense to those who are Irish by birth or sentiment. . . . Mr. Donleavy, a New York Irishman now living in London, reads at first sight like Henry Miller turned loose in James Joyce's Dublin. Soon, however, we realize that he possesses what Miller lost long ago—a sense of humor. . . .

Mr. Donleavy has been classed with England's ''Angry Young Men,'' and his hero's revolt-against-society-without-social-revolution attitude certainly resembles that of Lucky Jim and his successors. But right there all resemblance stops. Mr. Donleavy's Irish eloquence and American drive make him a Don Juan among the eunuchs. . . . Sebastian Dangerfield may not fully realize what a prize s.o.b. he is, but his creator does—and yet Donleavy finally makes us feel affection for him.

Vivian Mercier. *The Nation*. May 24, 1958. p. 480

A novelist must not simply abandon himself to every mood and every crazy idea that occurs to him as he writes. This is exactly what Mr. Donleavy appears to have done. . . . There is a lot of Joyce in the style: indeed, the presentation of much of the story through the consciousness of the hero is done in short, jerky sentences, so that we begin to weary of them. The writing is, in fact, rather slovenly, with many sloppy sentences and some confused grammar which I don't think are meant to represent the hero's way of putting things but simply represent Mr. Donleavy's way of writing. They can be found in *The Ginger Man* too.

This is an amusing and intriguing novel [*A Singular Man*], and it lacks the aimless cruelty that I for one found offensive in *The Ginger Man*. Its exuberance, comic imagination and sheer inventiveness make it easy and pleasant reading. But it frustrates the reader at the same time as it amuses him. A writer who can do this can surely do more, we feel, if he would both deepen and discipline his imagination.

David Daiches. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Nov. 17, 1963. p. 6

Where did mad Dangerfield go and madder Mac Doon? What happened to Cocklan, Malarkey and O'Keefe, that fantastic host of *The Ginger Man*? . . . Where a Joycean prose was so richly befitting to Dangerfield . . . the same device when employed by

George Smith [of *A Singular Man*] comes out in a voice flattened like a ventriloquist's. . . . Dangerfield, a tragic yet dangerous clown, asked questions worthy of a saint. . . . But Smith has no questions to ask. . . .

For such a falling-off only the author may account. Yet one wonders whether, in a civilization so affluent that it is no longer necessary to think, there may not be an indication here that, to be a writer, it has become equally inessential to write.

Nelson Algren. *The Nation*. Dec. 14, 1963. pp. 422–3

Nihilism is given its full head in . . . J.P. Donleavy's *The Ginger Man*. . . . it comes as a momentous shock when we begin to realize that Dangerfield is not an endearing ''Rabelaisian'' rascal. Not only does he treat his wife with appalling cruelty, but we learn that because he has been stealing their baby's milk money, the infant has developed a case of rickets. This is no joke, and it jolts us right out of the realm of pleasant fantasy into the most sordid of realities—which, of course, is exactly what Donleavy wants it to do. Why, then, do we continue to feel the attraction of Dangerfield? What claim does he exert on our sympathies? The decisive factor, I think, is his honesty. Unlike almost everyone else in the book (and incidentally unlike Kerouac's heroes, with whom he has been foolishly compared), he never simulates feelings that he does not in fact feel, he refuses to make excuses, and he will not hide behind empty pieties. He is not a burn and a scoundrel out of ill will or malice or insensitivity. On the contrary, he strikes us as a man who has looked into himself and found nothing, and then looked about the world and found no set of values (neither ''traditional'' nor ''liberal'') in sufficiently robust condition to exert any pull over his soul. Dangerfield, in short, is not exacting a fantasy of release, he is living by the truth of his times. Nor is he a rebel, for there is nothing to rebel against, everything gives way before him.

Norman Podhoretz. *Doings and Undoings* (Farrar). 1964. pp. 168–9

Compared to *The Ginger Man*, *A Singular Man* is an extremely neat presentation of the hero consenting to the trap of his society. For all of its incidental invention, however, it is a repetitive and finally rather dull book. *The Ginger Man* shows some of the same tendencies, but, in it, the style has not yet become mannered. The rhetoric, hovering between bathos and mockery, is suitable to Sebastian. The stylistic device—and a very clever one—which allows sudden shifts from first to third person within a paragraph suggests that Sebastian speaks as himself and then steps back to see himself, that he is always both sufferer and observer. The interplay between Sebastian's reality and his fantasies give a richness to the novel which is diluted only by the recognition that, in fact or in fancy, he is a somewhat tiresome man to spend much time with.

Gerald Weales in *Contemporary American Novelists*, edited by Harry T. Moore (Southern Illinois). 1964. p. 153

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DOOLITTLE, Hilda (H.D.) (1886–1961)

The poems of H.D. do not lend themselves to convenient classification, as Poems of Passion and Emotion, Poems of Reflection, Poems of the Imagination, and Poems Descriptive, and so on. In all of them, passion, emotion, reflection, and the image, the sharp, vivid image that does the work of description, are fused together in the burning unity of beauty. . . . H.D. invariably presents her subtlest, most metaphysical idea under some living sensuous image solid enough to carry the emotion. The air we are given to breathe may be rarefied to the last degree, yet we are moving always in a world of clear colours and clear forms.

May Sinclair. *Dial*. Feb., 1922. p. 203

H.D.'s thoughts were not often concerned with the world she lived in; another one, to her far more desirable, filled her mental vision almost completely. . . . She often sat with us, chatting of everyday things, when I am sure her spirit was somewhere near the shores of the Aegean. . . . I think a large part of her peculiar charm lay in the fact that she was always coming back to us; and she never came back reluctantly. . . . We had . . . the idea that she found us satisfying in our way and that her preoccupation with an ancient world only made her the more pleased with her own when she was in it. Her sudden entries into our talk and her effortless domination of it filled us with elation because she brought with her such disarming enthusiasms and delivered herself with such amazing speed and clarity on any subject that might be uppermost.

James Whitall. *English Years* (Harcourt). 1935. pp. 55–6

There was about her that which is found in wild animals at times, a breathless impatience, almost a silly unwillingness to come to the point. She had a young girl's giggle and shrug which somehow in one so tall and angular seemed a little absurd. She fascinated me, not for her beauty, which was unquestioned if bizarre to my sense, but for a provocative indifference to rule and order which I liked.

She dressed indifferently, almost sloppily and looked to a young man, not inviting—she had nothing of that—but irritating, with a smile.

William Carlos Williams. *Autobiography* (Random). 1951. pp. 67–8

Her special form of the mode of Imagism—cold, ''Greek,'' fast, and enclosed—has become one of the ordinary resources of the poetic language; it is a regular means of putting down words so that they will keep; and readers are mistaken who confuse familiarity with flatness or who think facile imitation of the form emulates the perception that goes with the mode. She has herself made sharply varied use of her mode, but she has not exhausted it; she has only—for present changing purposes of a changing mind—partly broken it down into the older, perhaps primary mode of the distich. The relatively long uncoiling of a single spring of image, unpredictable in its completeness, now receives a regular series of impulses and arrests, of alternations and couplings.

R.P. Blackmur. *Language as Gesture* (Harcourt). 1952. p. 352

H.D. has herself abandoned the ''Imagist'' effects of her early poems, the best of which suggest the clean line of Greek vase-paintings and, for all the passion they assert, have a lapidary quality about them. In her later work the old vehemence, if subdued, is present, and the phrasing recalls the familiar cadences. Yet it differs from what went before in carrying a far heavier weight of symbolic meaning and in being overtly subjective. . . . Again and again, turning the pages of this quondam Imagist, the reader hears a melody not only in the lines themselves but suggested by them, as it were, hovering just beyond the expressed sounds for some musician, not a maker of verse, to capture and realize.

Babette Deutsch. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 22, 1957. p. 37.

''Invisible,'' ''most proud,'' in love: these are the strength of the poet throughout the work of H.D. Ardent and clear, her lyrics show us that an everpresent devotion to the art of the poem sustains passion. The strength of the poem lies in her command of words so that they call up sensual immediacies (as images) and are themselves sensual immediacies (as elements of a most skilled tonal structure), and, increasingly in the later work, in her knowledge of words, their roots and histories, their lore and powers. Her trilogy written during the Second World War *The Walls Do Not Fall, Tribute to Angels*, and *The Flowering of the Rod* stands with Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, Eliot's *Four Quartets*, and William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* as a major work of the Imagist genius in its full.

Robert Duncan. *Poetry*. Jan., 1958. p. 256

H.D. in her perceptions of timelessness, and in her search for the ''real,'' has always seemed to be writing in advance of her times. In that respect the present generation might well regard her as ''a poets' poet.''

To be ''a poets' poet'' has few tangible rewards, for this means that the poet who holds that title must often wait upon the future for true recognition. Yet the poems of H.D. have acquired a life, a being of their own; at this date one need not argue that they should be read. Of contemporary poets H.D. is among the few whose writings are likely to endure.

Horace Gregory. *Commonweal*. April 18, 1958. p. 83

H.D.'s strength lies in her rendition of detail: her weakness is in structuring those details into a poetic, characterological, or, still more acutely, fictional whole. Poems, fiction, even essays like *Tribute to Freud* or *By Avon River* become a series of isolated images or events linked by free associations, often through mythological themes. At the very sentence level, her boundaries tend to be ill-defined. A sentence modifier from one sentence will seem to apply to the next. Lists (of which H.D. uses many) will be oddly broken between sentences. The word to which a pronoun or adjective refers may be one or two sentences back; the reference itself may be twinned or multiple. Often, for structure, she will resort to a series of parallel structures to be summed into a totality. Sometimes she will use negations—a series of *not*'s or *nor*'s to strip off the extraneous and come to the final, finely rendered residue as a climax.

Doubtless no small part of H.D.'s propensity for myth is a quest for similar organizing structures. If one can see present people, events, and feelings as projections or continuations of a simpler, more structured mythic past, they become more manageable and, for H.D. at least, somehow more real. She uses for living people the image of a palimpsest or a series of old photographic negatives on top of one another; the sign one sees on the surface implies a deeper reality underneath. She seeks to turn herself, her very body, into an hieroglyph or emblem—as in the use of her initials for a seal or sign. Her poetry, like the myths she emulates, manifests that which is spiritual, abstract, and timeless by the hard, the real, the objective, the exact.

Norman Holland. *Contemporary Literature*. Autumn, 1969. p. 475

The poems in this new book [*Hermetic Definition*] date from circa 1960, when [H.D.] was 74. She had been inserted into literary history at 26, when Ezra Pound invented ''Imagism'' to supply a context for five poems of hers. A normal context would have been a book of poems, but Pound sensed that a book's worth would be a long time getting written. He had didactic uses for a ''movement'' anyhow, and ''Hermes of the Ways,'' ''Orchard,'' a few others might as well exemplify it as wait for an *oeuvre*.

Unhappily the invented movement that was meant to float her reputation encapsulated it, and though she lived many more decades and extended her self-definition through many volumes, she has remained totally identified with the very little she had done when she was first heard of. It is as though five of the shortest pieces in *Harmonium* were to stand for the life's work of Wallace Stevens.

Her psychic life was contorted. Freud himself analyzed her, and she lived her last years at Küsnacht on Lake Zurich under care that was partly psychiatric, partly directed toward the corporeal needs of an old woman who had broken her hip and walked only with

difficulty. She kept resin and pine-cone burning in her room, and pondered books of hermetic symbolism. . . .

These poems are ''about'' her phantasmagoric self, in part her sense of having become a myth prematurely. . . .

Hugh Kenner. *New York Times Book Section*. Dec. 10, 1972. p. 55

In short, writing under the pressure of war in London, the bombs falling around her, H.D. brought together all her powers in one marvelous synthesis [*Trilogy*]: her verbal power in its superbly workable maturity, her spiritual and cognitive powers, the power of her concern for the humanity of the world. If she said things about the ''holiness'' of the ''scribe'' which I as a young man in that same war learned to distrust and fear, she nevertheless grounded them firmly in the actuality of the human condition; and in doing so she created one of the great works of her time in poetry. It has been out of print for many years. Now its publication in one volume is an event to be celebrated by us all.

Hayden Carruth. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1974. p. 311

Why is her poetry not read? H.D. is part of the same literary tradition that produced the mature work of the ''established'' artists—T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, D.H. Lawrence. She in fact knew these artists well; she had known and almost married Pound while the two were students in Philadelphia (H.D.'s intensely absorbing recreation of their lifetime friendship, *End to Torment*, is being prepared for publication); her friendship with Williams goes back to those student days; but most important, she was an active member of the London literary circle that spun out the dazzling succession of artistic ''isms''—imagism, dadaism, vorticism, futurism—before the catastrophe of the First World War smashed this coterie into the confusion of a spiritual wasteland. Like these artists, H.D. began writing in the aestheticism and fascination for pure form characteristic of the imagists; and like them, she turned to epic form and to myth, religious tradition, and the dream as a way of giving meaning to the cataclysms and fragmentation of the twentieth century. Her epic poetry should be compared to the *Cantos*, *Paterson*, the *Four Quartets*, and *The Bridge*, for like these poems, her work is the kind of ''cosmic poetry'' the imagists swore they would never write.

The pattern of her poetic development not only paralleled that of more famous artists, but it was also permeated by major intellectual currents of the century. In 1933 and 1934 she was psychoanalyzed by Freud, an exploration deep within her own unconscious that ultimately linked for her the personal with the universal, the private myth with the ''tribal'' myths. At the same time that she studied with Freud, the convinced materialist, she was a student of comparative religion, of esoteric tradition, and, like Yeats, of the occult. The forces perpetually at work to bring a directionless century to war were a constant preoccupation in her work. Consciously rejecting the mechanistic, materialist conceptions of reality that formed the faith of the empirical modern age, H.D. affirmed a ''spiritual realism'' and the relevance of a quest for intangible meanings. Her growth into a poet exploring the psyche or soul of humanity and reaching out to confront the questions of history, tradition, and myth places her squarely in the mainstream of ''established'' modern literature. But still, outside of a few poets like Denise Levertov, who wrote ''An Appreciation'' of H.D., Robert Duncan, and the aficionados who circulate a pirated edition of *Hermetic Definition*, few people read her poetry. . . . H.D. was a serious prolific poet exploring the same questions as her famous counterparts and thus inviting comparison with them. It is something of an understatement, I think, to say that in our profession artists do not have to wear the badge of greatness in order to have articles and books written about them. The simple relevance of her work to the issues and experiments of modern poetry demands that it be studied. . . .

The answer is simple enough, I think. It lies biographically and factually right in front of our critical noses—too close perhaps to be seen easily. It lies in what makes H.D. and her work different from a long string of more studied poets like Eliot, Pound, Crane, Williams, and Yeats. And it lies in the response of her critics. She was a woman, she wrote about women, and all the ever-questioning, artistic, intellectual heroes of her epic poetry and novels were women. In the quest poetry and fiction of the established literary tradition (particularly the poetic tradition), women as active, thinking, individual human beings rarely exist. They are instead the apocalyptic Pocahontas and the demonic prostitute of *The Bridge*, the goddess in the park sought by the poet Paterson, the superficial women walking to and fro talking of Michelangelo. They are the static, symbolic objects of quest, not the questors; they are ''feminine principles,'' both threatening and life-giving, and not particularized human beings. Women are dehumanized, while the quest of the male poet is presented and understood as the anguished journey of the prophet-seer for the absolute on behalf of all humankind. For ''mankind'' they may be the spokesmen, but for ''womenkind'' they are not. As a woman writing about women, H.D. explored the untold half of the human story, and by that act she set herself outside of the established tradition.

Susan Friedman. *College English*. March, 1975, pp. 802–3

Helen in Egypt is an epic poem of great depth and beauty; it is H.D.'s finest achievement. . . . As an impersonal poem *Helen in Egypt* is a meditation upon the cause of war. War takes place, says H.D., because someone (or some group or culture) will not bend to the will of someone else (or some other group or culture).

H.D. sees the war between the sexes as primal and believes all wars follow the same logic. A person or culture attempts to enforce his will on another person or another culture. Who, then, is to be blamed? The one who attempts to force his will on another or the one who refuses to submit? In H.D.'s experience men had attempted to force their will upon her; resistance leads to strife. Do we then blame the woman for resisting? Or do we blame her for provoking the attack? Or, suggests H.D., is it not the case that men ought to take responsibility for war? They are, after all, the aggressors. Why should women be blamed for simply existing? These are some of the larger questions that prompt the strophes of *Helen in Egypt*. . . .

While it is true that H.D.'s vision was informed by far more than Aldington, Pound, and Lawrence, she was always deeply aware that the particular traumatic events involving them had precipitated her coming to consciousness. Her work with Freud enabled H.D. to bring these events into consciousness on an epic scale and to understand the transpersonal nature of her experience. The Helen-Iphigeneia realization is not a mere metaphor for a personal event; rather, the event was the efficient cause, the precipitating occurrence from which the conception was realized. But the efficient

cause is not the sufficient cause. The conception was informed by the entire body of circumstances of the poet's life and mind.

Janice S. Robinson. *H.D.: The Life and Work of an American Poet* (Houghton Mifflin, 1982), pp. 362, 369, 378–79

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DOS PASSOS, John (1896–1970)

Dos Passos *may* be, more than Dreiser, Cather, Hergesheimer, Cabell, or Anderson the father of humanized and living fiction . . . not merely for America but for the world.

Just to rub it in, I regard *Manhattan Transfer* as more important in every way than anything by Gertrude Stein or Marcel Proust or even the great white boar, Mr. Joyce's *Ulysses*. For Mr. Dos Passos can use and deftly does use, all their experimental psychology and style, all their revolt against the molds of classic fiction. But the difference! Dos Passos is *interesting!*

Sinclair Lewis. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 5, 1925. p. 361

If we compare Dos Passos with other of our leading novelists, we find no one who is his superior in range of awareness of American life. In his tone, he most nearly approaches Hemingway. He can be as ''hard-boiled'' as the latter, particularly when he is dealing with hard-boiled characters; his freedom of language is, if anything, greater; his viewpoint, also, is nearly as external and behavioristic. But he has a greater range of sympathy. . . . And his social sympathies, one might almost say his class passions, give a drive to his work that Hemingway's, with its comparatively sterile point of view lacks. In its social implications Dos Passos' work is more nearly akin to that of Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis, and still more to that of Upton Sinclair. But where Sinclair's people are wax dummies, Dos Passos' are alive and convincing.

Henry Hazlitt. *The Nation*. March 23, 1932. p. 344

Dos Passos will perhaps be remembered more as the inventor or at least the early practitioner of a technique in fiction than for the lasting significance of his novels. . . . Dos Passos attempts to catch in fiction the inventions of the day, the camera eye, the movie, the newspaper headline. He conveys dates and the background by flashes of contemporary events. The effect on the unity of the novels is confusing but the representation of confusion is evidently one of the author's chief aims. The ''hero'' of the novels is the contemporary scene rather than any individual. He attempts to crowd an era, a whole cross-section of a city or a period of economic development into a novel.

Halford E. Luccock. *Contemporary American Literature and Religion* (Willett). 1934. p. 148. Courtesy of Harper and Brothers

In Dos Passos. . . there is a beautiful imaginative sympathy which permits him to get under the skin of his characters, but there is no imagination, and no Don Quixote. Dos Passos testifies to all this by his use of newsreels, just as he seeks the full sensibility in the impressions of the camera eye and the heroic character in the biographies; but in his central narrative the standpoint is always narrowed to what the character himself knows as the quality of his existence, life as it appears to him. And this leveling drags with it and tends to make rather crude and sometimes commonplace the sensibility shown in the other panels. . . . The whole truth of experience (if past literature is not wholly nonsense) is more than the quality of most lives. One is sure that Dos Passos knows this, since it is the reason for his four forms and his discontinuity. His novel is perhaps the greatest monument of naturalism because it betrays so fully the poverty and disintegration inherent in that method. Dos Passos is the gifted victim of his own extraordinary grasp of the truth. He is a victim of the truth and the whole truth.

Delmore Schwartz. *Southern Review*. Autumn, 1938. pp. 364–7

The philosophy of *U.S.A.* was taut, as the book itself was taut. Everything in it echoed its mass rumble, and the far-reaching tactile success of the book came out of that massed power, the heaping together of so many lives in symmetrical patterns of disaster. Dos Passos' effects have always depended on a violence of pace, on the quick flickering of the real, the sudden climaxes where every fresh word drives the wedge in. No scene can be held too long; no voice can be heard too clearly. Everything must come at us from a distance and bear its short ironic wail; the machine must get going again; nothing can wait.

Alfred Kazin. *New Republic*. March 15, 1943. p. 353

Certainly he is not a Tolstoy or even a Zola, to mention two masters of the panoramic form. In America today he ranks below Hemingway and Faulkner for many reasons, but principally because he seldom feels his way deeply into his characters. As a novelist—and in life, too—he is always moving, always hurrying off to catch a taxi, a bus, a train, a plane or a transatlantic steamer; and he tells us as much about people as a sensitive and observing man can learn in a short visit. That leads to his writing a special type of novel, broad and wind-scarred into intricate patterns like the Aral Sea, not deep

like Lake Baikal, that gash in the mountains which is said to contain more water than all the Great Lakes together.

There is, however, a converse to this statement. To achieve breadth in a novel is a difficult art in itself and it is one in which no other American writer—not even Frank Norris—has ever approached Dos Passos.

Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*. Feb. 28, 1949. p. 21

Nothing is deeper in the man than his fear of power. To begin with, he feared the power of the military, as he had experienced it in the first World War, and the power of men of wealth. The hatred of war and exploitation grew so acute that he accepted for a time the tempting radical doctrine that only power can destroy power. But what he saw of communism in Russia, in Spain, and at home convinced him that the destroying power could be more dangerous than the power it overcame. . . . His sympathies are wholly with the people who get pushed around, whether it is Big Business or Big Government that does the pushing. His trouble is simply that he has not found the ''better than that,'' the alternative to both bignesses, and hence his growing fear of government can only be accompanied by a growing toleration of business. . . . He has allowed himself to be forced into choosing one horn of the dilemma, and he is nicely impaled.

Granville Hicks. *Antioch Review*. Spring, 1950. pp. 95–8

Dos Passos. . . knows the everyday world of the ordinary apprehension—in which the essential Dos Passos appears to be so self-consciously not at home—as the movement of whole groups and classes and the clash of group prejudices. He is so preoccupied with representing these movements by newspaper headlines, historical figures, and, above all, by type characters that he reduces the movement of awareness in his characters to the simplified pattern we ascribe to the imaginary average man. You do not know his people except as you know the journalist's average businessman, Vassar girl, or labor leader; nor can you believe that the drama of their lives represents Dos Passos' full awareness of experience; the stifling personal and sensory awareness of the ''Camera Eye,'' so completely isolated from any larger context, is the Dos Passos who is omitted from the narrative: it is his Mallarmé, as the narrative is his Lenin.

Arthur Mizener. *Kenyon Review*. Winter, 1950. pp. 16–7

Chronic remorse, most moralists agree, is an unsalutary sentiment—the sinner who has genuinely repented does not become any the cleaner by rolling interminably in the mud; and chronic remorse is peculiarly disastrous where novelists are concerned. The novelist obsessed with the errors of the past—John Dos Passos is a case in point, since his political switch from far left to far right—is irresistibly drawn to revenge himself on his past by rewriting it, by showing that what he found good was disgusting. And the literary results of such an enterprise are apt to resemble a dredging operation: the principal yield is mud.

Charles J. Rolo. *Atlantic Monthly*. Oct. 1954. p. 98

Dos Passos' hate, despair and lofty contempt are real. But that is precisely why his world is not real; it is a created object. I know of none—not even Faulkner's or Kafka's—in which the art is greater or better hidden. I know of none that is more precious, more touching or closer to us. This is because he takes his material from our world. And yet, there is no stranger or more distant world. Dos Passos has invented only one thing, an art of story-telling. But that is enough to create a universe. . . . Dos Passos' world—like those of Faulkner, Kafka, and Stendhal—is impossible because it is contradictory. But therein lies its beauty. Beauty is a veiled contradiction. I regard Dos Passos as the greatest writer of our time.

Jean-Paul Sartre. *Literary and Philosophical Essays* (Criterion). 1955. pp. 89, 96

In retrospect, the work of Dos Passos falls into three periods. There is first the expression of the lonely dissident, the esthetic recluse. . . . Almost alone among the high individualists of the 1920s, those gifted expatriates and exiles, Dos Passos had, by the end of the decade, found a cultural base for his literary work.

This base was a theoretical rather than strictly political Marxism. The product of the second period included *Manhattan Transfer* in 1925 and the major trilogy, *U.S.A.*, published from 1930 to 1936. These are still the core of Dos Passos' fiction; they are persuasive and penetrating novels; and their description of American civilization, which hardly applied in the 1930s, may seem all too prophetic in the 1950s. But the crux of the Dos Passos problem is right here, too. The collapse of his belief in the Russian Revolution, the disillusionment with the methods of the Communist Party, led not only to a major revision of his thinking, but, apparently, to a complete cessation of his creative energy and his human emotions. There was a psychic wound that has never stopped bleeding.

Maxwell Geismar. *The Nation*. April 14, 1956. p. 305

John Dos Passos writes with great ease and he is technically inventive. He has conceived various means to write the story of his times as he sees it. *The Great Days* is a well and even an ingeniously constructed book. It is remarkable to think of how much it takes in, because the novel is only of normal length. Dos Passos has always been best at establishing scenes, rather than in portraying characters with depth and strong individuality. The characters reflect a world that is constantly changing, bringing failure and defeat. . . . The broken hopes of youth and of the days when this century was young have never been repaired. The expectations of the Wilsonian period have never been recovered. The later disappointments of the New Deal and the Second World War and the post-war era arouse less anger and, in the end, there is resignation. This is the sense of Dos Passos' writing as I can gauge it. He has honestly recorded the play of hope and disappointment over four decades. He has done this with dignity and seriousness.

James T. Farrell. *New Republic*. April 28, 1958. p. 18

With the change in emphasis since *U.S.A.* from the novel to history, there has been a corresponding change in the content and stimulus of Dos Passos' writing: from the imaginative toward the intellectual, from the need to create toward the need to understand and to

preserve, from synthesis toward analysis. Dos Passos has not lost sight of his original twin goals of life, art and thought, ''the desire to create'' and ''the desire to fathom''; and the writing of history is still *an art*. But it is not art (no great historian has been accused of artistic genius), and Dos Passos has simply moved nearer one guidepost than the other. He has been less concerned to produce lasting works of the imagination—art—and more concerned to devote his efforts to maintaining a civilization in which art is possible. . . . In his recent novels and reportorial commentaries, Dos Passos is too oppressed by the immediate and also too conscious of the writer's duty to inform and to teach before it is too late. Only in the histories, in which he is looking back a century and more, does the reader feel the aesthetic distance of the artist from his materials: the possibility of a view broad enough to be comprehensive and meaningful, and of a serenity permitting him to be wise and undidactic.

John H. Wrenn. *John Dos Passos* (Twayne). 1961. pp. 170, 175

Dos Passos' external devices are so obtrusive as to make us suspect that they are a mechanical attempt to establish a unique style and language not otherwise forthcoming. Clearly Dos Passos has *wanted* to discover a language which would be *internal*, in the sense of being an organic quality of his fiction, informing the whole with its tonality and structure. This quest for a language is suggested in the prologue to *U.S.A.* Here we have the familiar theme of the homeless young man on the road, and after a Whitmanesque catalogue of the places he has been to, the young man muses ''it was the speech that clung to the ears, the link that tingled in the blood; U.S.A. . . . mostly U.S.A. is the speech of the people.'' This may remind us of other writers who are in the Whitman tradition: Thomas Wolfe—''Remembering speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language''—and William Carlos Williams—''What common language to unravel?'' And it reminds us of Whitman himself, the Whitman of *Democratic Vistas*, who says that it is the duty of American writers to find a language which is at once a personal style and an archetypal expression of the culture. Lacking the thaumaturgic power to turn this difficult trick, Dos Passos has manufactured over the years a style that is energetic, efficient, and mostly anonymous.

Richard Chase. *Commentary*. May, 1961. pp. 398–9

Dos Passos' theme might be described as the capture of the nation by ''strangers'' who have penetrated the American Eden as insidiously as the tribe of the Snopeses infiltrated into William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. To the Puritan ''Saints'' of the seventeenth century, the ''strangers'' were merely the unsanctified or unregenerate portion of the community. To Dos Passos, who ferociously memorialized them in a famous passage in *U.S.A.,* the ''strangers'' are the subverters of the American dream, spiritual parricides of the Founding Fathers. They might be old-stock Americans—college presidents, judges, statesmen, clergymen, labor czars—anyone in short who, as Dos Passos once wrote, ''turned our language inside out'' and ''took the clean words our fathers spoke and made them slimy and foul.'' They scored terribly in 1927 when they electrocuted two Italian anarchists, but during the intervening years, according to Dos Passos' novelistic history of the Republic, they have infected the entire body politic, corrupted the labor movement, corrupted the values of the nation, and reduced the ''Saints'' to a tiny embattled minority of libertarians.

Daniel Aaron. *Harper's Magazine*. March, 1962. p. 55

. . . Dos Passos has always been a negative function of power; that is, one finds him always at the opposite pole of where he conceives power to be. In this sense, he is more an anarchist, and always was, than a socialist or a conservative.

What Dos Passos achieved in *U.S.A.* was the creation of a form appropriate to the theme of the overwhelming, impersonal force of society, a structure which would carry the meaning of the primacy of society and make the anonymous processes of society the very stuff of a fictional world. . . .

The ultimate despair we confront in *U.S.A.* relates closely to what happens to language in the book. From the preface where the voice of the Camera Eye sections first identifies the meaning of America with American speech and the meaning of words, there is a constant concern, dramatically as well as explicitly, with the corruption of language. As we have seen, the betrayal of the promise of America is that words have grown slimy in the mouths of the ruling classes who have perverted old ideals. . . . Power superpower finally overwhelms even the language which creates the identity of America and if Dos Passos could say ''we stand defeated,'' the defeat was particularly keen for the writer, the man who depends on words and his belief in the efficacy of language to sustain his personal identity. I would even speculate wildly and suggest that the vision of society Dos Passos presents in *U.S.A.* was a defeat for him personally and that is perhaps why he seems, to me at least, less estimable a writer after *U.S.A.* than before it. He had ceased to believe in the power of words.

John William Ward. *Carleton Miscellany*. Summer, 1965. pp. 26–7

Critics who have written about Dos Passos's journey to Spain during the Civil War, and who point to his shocking discovery while there of how ruthlessly the Communists were undercutting their supposed allies within the Popular Front as the operative cause of his disillusionment with radicalism, miss the point; the central experience in Dos Passos's political education in the early 1930s was the titanic labor of creating *U.S.A.* The trilogy changed the man who wrote it, inducing in him a new respect for ''the ground we stand on,'' a new awareness of historical continuity, a new appreciation of the complexities of human motivation. History was not escapable, after all, nor was it as simple as it had seemed. . . . The battle-cry of *U.S.A.*—''all right we are two nations''—evokes the certainty of the younger author's mind, while the title Dos Passos gives to his Midcentury sketch of J. Robert Oppenheimer—''The Uncertainty Principle''—indicates the older writer's state of mind.

Kenneth S. Lynn. Introduction to *World in a Glass*, by John Dos Passos (Houghton). 1966. p. xv

The heroines, lost girls all, as well as the heroes of *U.S.A.* rest on 19th century types and naturalistic techniques which culminate in our standard cinematic images. Inadequately individualized and

lacking complex and subtle development, the stereotypes nonetheless merge into a revealing vision of this country. The sordid patterns of defeat and the harsh cadences of the style, with their hypervisuality of place, poeticize the U.S.A., providing us with an America as recognizable and painfully endearing as an old movie. The experience of reading *U.S.A.* represents just this poetic and cinematic image of America, and in this Don Passos does not fail.

Eleanor Widmer in *The Thirties*, ed. Warren French (Everett Edwards). 1967. p. 19

In functioning as an ''architect of history'' and attempting by means of the work of art to mold the course of social history, Dos Passos turned his fiction into a series of critical documents on the age, confronting contemporary problems from the time of his attack upon war in *Three Soldiers* to that of his assault upon labor in *Mid-Century*. His ''documents'' have been based upon a firm set of principles, sustained from first to last. Contrary to popular opinion, which has labeled him a political apostate, a liberal-become-conservative, his values have remained constant. Simply put, they comprise a hatred of ''collectivisms,'' with their concomitant of centralized power, an admiration for the ''proletarian soul,'' and a persistent desire to protect this ''soul'' from the aggregates of power.

If Dos Passos were willing to accept any label for himself, it might be that of an ''independent seeker,'' a nebulous term, to be sure, but one that suggests his perpetual focus both on individualism and on searching, with its implications of change. The various stereotypes that have been attached to him—the lost-generation aesthete, the fellow traveler, the ex-radical—have fitted only for a time. Underlying the ''phases,'' however, has been an unflagging credo, a faith in the individual sturdiness of the plain people. ''Individuality is freedom lived'' (*Occasions and Protests*, p. 52).

W. Gordon Milne in *The Politics of Twentieth-Century Novelists*, ed. George A. Panichas (Hawthorn). 1971. pp. 264–5

Dos Passos went on producing—many novels, reportage of the World War II period, and long semi-popular histories of the growth of American democracy. But he felt isolated; he had lost his faith in people. This is even more striking a change than the long swing to the political right that went with it. . . . At the same time that he had, so to speak, come back to ''The American Way'' politically, he lost the openness, inventiveness and optimism that had made him so American when he was still a rebel. . . .

Dos Passos was one of the key figures in a literary lost generation that found itself and then lost itself again. It is a story still not fully told or understood, but these letters [*The Fourteenth Chronicle*], with their glimpses of an entire man who was so much more complex than his political notions or even his fiction, take us imaginatively and morally closer to understanding it.

Robert Gorham Davis. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 14, 1973. p. 4

By its intricacy and by its comprehensive sweep the trilogy *U.S.A.* comes close to being the great American novel which had been the aspiration of writers since the turn of the century. It is one of the ironies of our times that when the great American novel did arrive, it turned out to be condemnatory and pessimistic rather than a celebration of the American way. Yet there is an underlying affirmation in Dos Passos' denial. The American dream, battered and corrupted by men of ill will, or little will, still manifests itself—though in anguish—not completely stifled by the trappings of empire and the machinations of self-interest that the author describes.

What first aroused the enthusiasm of readers and critics was the technical virtuosity of the work. Dos Passos was clearly the heir of Balzac, Zola, and Galdós in his attempt to mirror contemporary society—as he was the competitor of Jules Romains, whose *Hommes de bonne volonté* was appearing during the same span of years. It is equally evident that the idea of multiple perspectives is something he owed to *Ulysses*. But the techniques he employed and the balance of elements he achieved are his own and stamp him as the last of the great inventors in the field of the social novel. He welded together four separate, even disparate, types of material, each of which is necessary to the statement the novel ultimately makes.

George J. Becker. *John Dos Passos* (Ungar). 1974. p. 58

Century's Ebb may be unfinished, or at least unpolished, but it deserves to be published. It contains some good Dos Passos writing: the first, moving lyric about Walt Whitman, several impressionistic passages like one entitled ''Turnpike'' and another about George Eastman and his Kodak camera, and parts of the long narratives. But, finally, whether *Century's Ebb* is complete and whether it stands with Dos Passos' best fiction are not the main points to be made about the book. It is the last work of one of the major American writers to emerge during the 1920s. Most important, it brings down the curtain on Dos Passos' remarkable effort throughout his literary career to convey the panorama of 20th century society. His later novels are partly right wing polemics, but anyone wanting to dismiss Dos Passos should remember that he was not a crank, a Westbrook Pegler, but an intelligent, thoughtful man of letters who agonized about his politics.

Townsend Ludington. *New Republic*. Nov. 22, 1975. p. 24

After his long and controversial career, John Dos Passos's literary politics remain a matter of some dispute. Starting out on the far Left and ending on the far Right, he has been called everything from agrarian to radical republican, rebellious neurotic to arch conservative. But the term most often applied to his fiction is ''anarchist''. Dos Passos, numerous critics have argued, was faithful to the individual alone, defending him in the early novels against the army, big business, and liberals, and in his later novels against the New Deal, big labor, and communists. . . .

Yet the novels themselves cannot be so neatly classified, for it is difficult to find in them any radical individualist who thrives. From the early aesthetes like John Andrews, crushed by the senseless machine, to the noble failures like Jasper Milliron and Blackie Bowman of the later novels, Dos Passos's individuals fare badly indeed. Even during the writer's more militant phase, his characters never find that bliss in unrestricted freedom that an anarchist philosophy would suggest. Instead, Dos Passos seems to be doing something else in his fiction—portraying the world in the dark, ''acid'' manner he discovered in Pio Baroja, a manner that can only be called ''picaresque.''

Although critics have occasionally noted a picaresque element in Dos Passos's fiction, none has applied the term consistently. Often the term ''picaresque'' has been used to mean ''tale of the road,'' as in Linda Wagner's study, or to describe, by implication, Dos Passos's desperate vagabonds. Most careful has been Arthur Mizener, who called attention to a ''characteristic novel form'' in which a lone hero experiences ''a series of socially representative adventures'' that expose ''the institutionalized corruption'' of industry and politics. In a word, Dos Passos was a satirist—his target, the manifold threats to individualism. But to leave the matter there is to miss the most subtle and difficult aspects of Dos Passos's art. For the picaresque form inherently suspects individualism: it ruthlessly detaches its protagonists from all communal support, and then punishes them for their sins. Solitude *is* the picaro's sin: he wanders through a fallen world without church, saints, or God. For Dos Passos, this was the twentieth-century world, with its devastating wars and state terror, its rejection of those communal values he found in Federalist America. And yet it was the Federalists who preached freedom, the unrestrained inventiveness of a Franklin, whose ''full career'' had been ''enough . . . for four men,'' the stout populism of a Jefferson. All his life Dos Passos sought to balance these conflicting needs for unrestricted freedom and visionary community. That balance was impossible in modern America, for the nation that so cherished restless enterprise had found the means to crush its visionaries—had turned its idealists into picaros and its picaros into millionaires. In his fiction Dos Passos explored the paradox; only in his histories could he master it.

> Joseph Fichtelberg. ''The Picaros of John Dos Passos.'' *Twentieth Century Literature*. Winter, 1988, pp. 434–35

Like many twentieth-century fictional masterpieces—*Ulysses*, for example, or Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha saga—*U.S.A.* seeks to portray a culture in both historical depth and social breadth by means of modernistic techniques. There is thus a modern epic convention, to which *U.S.A.* belongs, in which the traditional aim of the epic to make manifest the history and values of a culture is achieved, not by conformity to a prescribed set of epic rules, but by the author's individual adaptation of the complex fictional devices that have arisen in the twentieth century for the depiction of the interaction of self and society. The success of works in this convention derives not only from the depth of the author's insight into his culture but from the appropriateness and effectiveness of the modernistic fictional forms that he has chosen to render his vision.

Which is to say that *U.S.A.* can be discussed meaningfully in a number of ways but that the final test of its value and centrality in twentieth-century art lies in its nature and quality as a modernistic epic American novel. Dos Passos's model for the epic was principally Whitman as *U.S.A.* seeks to depict in full detail the ''varied strains'' that are the American experience. To Whitman, too, can be attributed Dos Passos's belief in a semimystical oneness in the multiplicity of America, a oneness that to Dos Passos was above all the nation's history of democratic idealism. There is also of course a Whitmanesque element in the deep exploration of self in the Camera Eye, an exploration that, in the end, is an exploration of what America should be and isn't. Thus, one of the most pervasive and central sources of relatedness, of unity, in *U.S.A.* is in its character as a self-reflexive novel in which the Camera Eye persona's search for identity and role results simultaneously in a vision of self and a vision of America that is the remainder of the trilogy.

As an epic novel, *U.S.A.* is also a historical work, with history—like autobiography—simultaneously both a subject matter and a source of experimental form. In the pseudochronicle modes of the Newsreels and biographies Dos Passos consciously shapes a documentary base, through impressionistic selection and surreal juxtaposition, into an indictment of twentieth-century American life. . . .

U.S.A. is a kind of cubistic portrait of America—one in which the effect is of a multiplicity of visions rendering a single object, with every angle of vision related both to the object and to every other angle of vision. It is Dos Passos's relentless pursuit of juxtapositional relationships in the seemingly disparate and fractured modal ordering of the trilogy that is largely responsible for the integral vision of American life in *U.S.A.*

> Donald Pizer. *Don Passos's U.S.A.* (Charlottesville: Univ. Pr. of Virginia, 1988), pp. 184–85

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DOVE, Rita (1952–)

Reading Rita Dove's first novel, *Through the Ivory Gate*, I get the sneaking suspicion that I'm back on my weekly fourth-grade trip to

the library, this time with Ntozake Shange's ''woman in yellow''—and she gets Toussaint L'Ouverture, adventure, resistance, and the Adult Reading Room, while I get Dove's puppeteer heroine, Virginia King, instead.

I group Dove and Shange together for more than the reference to the vignette from *for colored girls*. . . . They are both consummate poets in a line of African American women—Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker, for instance—who begin with verse and reach out to prose. Dove, Shange, Brooks, and Jordan belong to a smaller subset still: Jordan's *His Own Where* (1970) is an adolescent love story, while Brooks's *Maud Martha* (1952), Shange's two novels, *Sassafrass, Cypress, & Indigo* (1982) and *Betsey Brown* (1985), all are coming-of-age stories of memory, pain, and discovery with young Black girls at their centers.

Dove extends Brooks's legacy even further: *Thomas and Beulah* (1987) made Dove the second African American poet ever to win a Pulitzer Prize; Brooks was the first (1949). *Through the Ivory Gate* arches back to revise Brooks's *Maud Martha*, and to give its heroine more flexibility and independence, while at the same time it highlights their protagonists' surprisingly similar fluster and angst. Imploded, almost claustrophobic spaces, narrative snatches that show Black women dealing with regular, ordinary, everyday troubles of color, childhood, and romance—nothing magical, nothing loudly tragic or grand—this is what the two novels share.

Dove's story is the story of Virginia King as she rattles ''around the emotional furniture of her childhood.'' With drama degree in hand and stint with a political troupe called ''Puppets & People'' just folded, she comes back to the Ohio city of her youth as ''Miss Puppet Lady,'' a visiting artist in the Akron primary schools. Through flashbacks we get glances of Clayton, her college friend and lover, who turns out to be gay; her distanced and dehydrated parents Ernie and Belle, who move the family out to Arizona to save their marriage; selected family stories and secrets; her childhood racial and romantic traumas; her ''majorette days'' and her love of the cello and mime. In the narrative present Dove describes Virginia's interchanges with the fourth-grade class she teaches and their parents, including an affair with a too well-groomed and scented Black single father who, in her Grandma Evans's words, is ''too good-looking to do good'' but tries nonetheless.

Dove's strengths come through most forcefully when she describes, or when the narrative is in the mouths of, its older characters. Her father's impulsive, family-minus-mother jaunts out of the stultifying heat of his home, their drives to Hopi mesas and his lectures about Papago and Pima culture, bring him to life. . . .

One might argue that Dove patterns her narrative structure after a collage; she chooses bits and pieces that come together, not to make a whole but to make an impression. Flashes from present to past and vignettes made of memories (one could go on) work like pregnant pauses, inviting us to fill in gaps and become participatory readers. Yet most of her breaks act more like interruptions. . . .

Nineteen ninety-two was a rich year for African American women writers—*Jazz*, *Bailey's Cafe*, *Possessing the Secrets of Joy*—all deal with memory and highlight form; and God knows *Waiting to Exhale* adds pace to the everyday trials and tribulations of Black women not much older than Virginia King. Some might find *Through the Ivory Gate* charming, its structure challenging, its treatment of Black men unimportant or inoffensive, and its musings and memories the stuff of our literary tradition. Rather, I see this as the first novel of an accomplished poet whose second novel might take off from *Through the Ivory Gate*'s stronger moments.

Gabrielle Foreman. *Women's Review of Books*. March 1993, p. 12

Mother Love is an unsparing book. It observes both the vanity of mother love (''duty bugles and we'll / climb out of exhaustion every time'') and the cliché of its appeal (''Any woman knows the remedy for grief / is being needed''). These sardonic remarks appear in the title poem of the volume, which tells the story of Demeter's transmutation into a monster. What, Dove asks, must have happened inwardly to Demeter as a result of [her daughter] Persephone's abduction? . . . In Dove's poem, a woman, pitying the bereft Demeter, offers her a male child to nurse, thinking that it will console her. Instead, Demeter decides to ''save'' the baby from the vicissitudes of experience by burning him to death. This is Dove's gothic tale of maternal grief gone wrong. . . .

If this is mother love, it is a force that distorts personality like few others. A book taking on such a subject is not neat—for all Dove's wish to be neat—nor can it be, in an ordinary sense, beautiful. It is often harsh and often lurid. It is at times sentimental in wanting to be lurid. But it is an energetic book—one that throws motherhood into the arena of the mind and says, ''Look at it.''

It is typical of Dove's moral even-handedness that, having thought so much about the relation between mothers and daughters, she has also explored the subject of sons. In a play called *The Darker Face of the Earth*, which will have its premiere in 1996, she has moved the Oedipus myth into a Southern slave setting. And it is typical of Dove's literary restlessness that, after writing poems, stories, and a novel, she decided to try her hand at a play. She is not the first writer to refresh poetry at the wells of fiction and drama; but Rita Dove is first and foremost a poet, one whose laser glance exposes and cauterizes its subject in new and disturbing ways.

Helen Vendler. *New Yorker*. May 15, 1995, p. 92

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DREISER, Theodore (1871–1945)

In his muddled way, held back by the manacles of his race and time, and his steps made uncertain by a guiding theory which too often eludes his own comprehension, he yet manages to produces works of art of unquestionable beauty and authority, and to interpret life in a manner that is poignant and illuminating. There is vastly more intuition in him than intellectualism; his talent is essentially feminine, as Conrad's is masculine; his ideas always seem to be deducted from his feelings. . . . He gets his effects, one might almost say, not by designing them, but by living them.

But whatever the process, the power of the image evoked is not to be gainsaid. It is not only brilliant on the surface, but mysterious and appealing in its depths. One swiftly forgets his intolerable writing, his mirthless, sedulous, repellent manner, in the face of the Athenian tragedy he instills in his seduced and soul-sick servant girls, his barbaric pirates of finance, his conquered and hamstrung supermen, his wives who sit and wait.

H.L. Mencken. *A Book of Prefaces* (Knopf). 1917. pp. 95–6

I admired the things which he could do in writing which nobody else could do—the simple and poignant truths of life; and I thought his philosophic notions bosh and his historical truths mere uneducated ignorance. I found that he did not agree with those critics who praised him for the immense amount of bricks and mortar that were visible in his towering structure of fiction—the multiplicity of details which such critics called ''realism.'' He was not especially interested in the details, but was using them, and perhaps overusing them, earnestly in trying to achieve beauty. He once told me with honest tears in his eyes that a novel had no excuse for existence unless it was beautiful. And by beautiful I knew that he meant true to the deep emotions of the human heart, not to the mere visible surface aspects of life.

Floyd Dell. *Homecoming* (Farrar and Rinehart). 1933. p. 268

It is because he has spoken for Americans with an emotion equivalent to their own emotion, in a speech as broken and blindingly searching as common speech, that we have responded to him with the dawning realization that he is stronger than all the others of his time, and at the same time more poignant; greater than the world he has described, but as significant as the people in it. To have accepted America as he has accepted it, to immerse oneself in something one can neither escape nor relinquish, to yield to what has been true and to yearn over what has seemed inexorable, has been Dreiser's fate and the secret of his victory.

Alfred Kazin. *On Native Grounds* (Reynal). 1942. pp. 89–90

Theodore Dreiser . . . suggested to me some large creature of the prime wandering on the marshy plains of a human foreworld. A prognathous man with an eye askew and a paleolithic face, he put me in mind of Polyhemus . . . a Rodinesque figure only half out from the block; and yet a remark that someone made caused him to blush even up to the roots of his thin grey hair. Dreiser was hypersensitive, strangely as one might have thought,—he was a living paradox in more than one way; but a lonelier man there never was.

Van Wyck Brooks. *Days of the Phoenix* (Dutton). 1957. p. 20

There is little question that Theodore Dreiser is the most distinguished member of the whole group of modern American novelists. . . . He was a realist. . . . Yes, he, partly through his own innocence, perhaps, and early origins, told the truth about life when he could discover it. Probably no one else in our literature has had such a direct and intimate feeling for the common forms of experience, pleasant or disgraceful. But he was also, like Balzac, who is the closest European counterpart, one of the high romantics of literature.

What gave his work its remarkable texture, its glamour, really, was his simple sense of the variety and mystery of life on all its levels.

Maxwell Geismar. *American Moderns* (Hill and Wang). 1958. p. 50

He was not, by and large, an attractive figure, and the letters present his unattractive qualities more relentlessly than the books that have been written about him have done. One notes, for instance, his dependence on other persons, particularly women, and his offhand acceptance of their services to him. One notes his arrogance and his greed. But at the same time one feels in the letters, as in the novels, that this was a man who was utterly faithful to his own vision of life.

As he wrote Mencken, he was born with a bias, a bias not so much in favor of the common man as a bias in favor of men and women as victims—of the economic system, of their own impulses, of life itself. This bias led him into ridiculous contradictions, but it also gave him insights that have made his novels, with all their many faults, a permanent part of our literature.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. April 4, 1959. p. 16

Dreiser was the first American to portray with truth and power our modern world of commerce and mechanization, the first to portray the dismal depersonalization of the individual which results from urbanization and intensifying societal pressure to conform, the first to draw us frankly and grimly as a nation of status-seekers. . . . *Sister Carrie* of 1900 and *The Bulwark* of forty-five years later, aside from particulars, tell the same story about America. Man is a mechanism, his pitiful existence determined by factors of biology and social environment which Dreiser, for want of a better term, labels ''chemisms.'' The cosmos operating in his stories is uncaring, unfeeling; at bottom it is an unfair universe, controlled by gods who disdain involvement in their creation. We can nod in agreement with the writer or cavil at the darkness of his pessimism, but we are forced above all to stop, to consider, to think. . . . Probably because of his philosophy—we are all companions in the same sinking ship—Dreiser feels keenly the plight of each individual human soul at the mercy of chance and of forces beyond his control. It is significant that, though failures abound in his novels, there are no villains, only human beings who are more or less fortunate than their neighbors. In the Dreiser world, each life, is necessarily a tragedy.

Philip L. Gerber. *Theodore Dreiser* (Twayne). 1964. pp. 173–5

I soon found that Dreiser did straddle two worlds of time, our own and the past. His first novel, *Sister Carrie*, was begun in the nineteenth century and finished in the twentieth—a fact of which Dreiser was highly conscious. His masterpiece, *An American Tragedy*, was published at the midpoint of the 1920s, the decade when American writing assumed an importance on the international scene that had been unimaginable when Dreiser began. He was one of those—in America, the most important of those—who put

their shoulder to the wheel turning past into present; one of the great international company of *survivors*, men formed before the turn of the century but dominant after the First World War—among them Mann, Gide, Stravinsky, Joyce, Wright, Valéry, Yeats.

For someone like myself, brought up in New York, the world of Dreiser's fiction is immediately familiar, and for all of us his subject matter remains the most important. He wrote about the child who comes alive in the American city, that ugly, intoxicating center of the modern world. Yet when I first read Dreiser I found him quite unlike any American novelist before him (and most after), in his rooted urbanism first of all. He seemed to accept the American situation as the norm—an unusual state of affairs for an American writer—and his style was peculiar. He handled words, sometimes brilliantly, sometimes wretchedly, without the sound of pebbles in the mouth—the nervous rattle of insecurity that makes much American fiction, for me at least, a provincial phenomenon even at its most brilliant. The publication of *Sister Carrie* in 1900 marks the boundary line not only between the old and the new, but between the European and the American century.

Ellen Moers. *Two Dreisers* (Viking). 1969. p. viii

We have been speaking as though *Sister Carrie* were important primarily as an historical and social document and as a record of the psychology of Dreiser. But it is more than a document, it is a vivid and absorbing work of art. In dealing with a novel, the most obvious question is what kind of material the author has thought worth his treating, what kind of world stimulates his imagination. For Dreiser this was the world he lived in and the world he was, and by accepting as fully as possible this limitation, he enlarged, willy-nilly, by a kind of historical accident if you will, the range of American literature. The same kind of compulsive veracity that made him record such details of his own life as masturbation and theft, made him struggle to convert into fiction the substances of experience at both the social and personal level that had not been earlier absorbed. The kind of realism that is associated with William Dean Howells had little relation to the depths that Dreiser inhabited, and even if Frank Norris had shocked the country with the realism of *McTeague*, he had, in the end, gratified the moral sense of America by converting the novel of greed and violence into a cautionary fable. But *Sister Carrie* was different from anything by Howells or Norris. What was shocking here was not only Dreiser's shamed willingness to identify himself with morally undifferentiated experience or his failure to punish vice and reward virtue in his fiction, but the implication that vice and virtue were, in themselves, mere accidents, mere irrelevances in the process of human life, and that the world was a great machine, morally indifferent.

Robert Penn Warren. *Southern Review*. Spring, 1971. p. 359

Dreiser's basic tendency as a novelist was to establish a clear central structure (Hurstwood's fall and Carrie's rise; Cowperwood's alternating business and love affairs; Clyde's parallel life in Kansas City and Lycurgus; Solon's double life as businessman and Quaker), to pursue this structure to its seeming conclusion (death or an emotional stasis), yet to suggest both by authorial commentary and by a powerful symbol within the narrative (a rocking chair, deep-sea fish, a street scene, a brook) that life is essentially circular, that it moves in endless repetitive patterns. Frequently this circular pattern involves a seeker or quester—sometimes driven by desire, sometimes by other motives—who finds at the end of the novel that he has returned to where he started: Carrie still seeking beauty and happiness; Jennie once again alone despite her immense capacity to love; Cowperwood's millions gone; Clyde still walled in; Solon returning to the simplicity of absolute faith. It is possible to visualize Dreiser's novels as a graphic irony—the characters believe they are pushing forward but they are really moving in a circle. . . .

Another pervasive structure in Dreiser's novels is best illustrated by ''Butcher Rogaum's Door.'' The three principal figures in the story—Rogaum, Theresa, and Almerting—can be characterized as a well-meaning but ignorant and authoritarian parent, a youth seeking the wonder and excitement of life, and a seducer who takes advantage of the conflict between parent and child. Rogaum, blind to the needs of youth, drives Theresa to rebellion, and she is almost seduced by Almerting. This triangle and the narrative which derives from it constitute an archetypal structure within the world of Dreiser's novels, though it is a structure which appears in increasingly complex and displaced forms. . . .

A third significant characteristic of the form of Dreiser's early stories is their tendency toward the parody of sentimental or hackneyed narrative patterns. . . . Throughout his career as a novelist Dreiser was to rely on similar formulas, particularly those of the seduced country girl in *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt* and the Horatio Alger myth of success in the Cowperwood trilogy, *The ''Genius''*, and *An American Tragedy*. In most instances, he both used the myth and reversed some of its traditional assumptions. Carrie ''rises'' not only despite her seduction but also because of it, and Clyde finds neither luck nor pluck in his attempt to succeed. Like many major American novelists. Dreiser used the mythic center of American life as a base from which to remold myth into patterns more closely resembling experience as he knew it.

The various overlapping structures which I have been discussing constitute in their totality the formalistic expression of Dreiser's basic cast of mind, a cast which can best be called ironic. For though Dreiser seldom engages in verbal irony, he habitually relies in his fiction on an intricately interwoven series of narrative or structural ironies. That is, he constantly juxtaposes the true nature of a situation and a character's estimation of it in order to reveal the weaknesses either in the character's values or in ours, a revelation which is at once theme and form in his work. . . .

On the one hand, these are the conventional ironies of all fiction. Fiction—because it is a temporal rather than a spatial art, and because it dramatizes the difference between what characters believe and what the author knows—is inherently ironic. On the other hand, Dreiser's ironic formulas in his short stories look forward to a bolder and more intense reliance on this particular characteristic of fiction than is usual in most novels. Like Stephen Crane, Dreiser translated an uneasy mixture of iconoclasm and unconventional belief into a structural principle. But whereas for Crane this principle was a subtle and complex modulation in authorial tone, imagery, and diction, for Dreiser it was an equally sophisticated ordering of events within an extended narrative. Dreiser labored to perfect this technique throughout his career as a writer of fiction, and after some twenty-five years he achieved in *An American Tragedy* a novel whose structural approximation of his deeply ironic view of life results in a work of complex beauty.

Donald Pizer. *The Novels of Theodore Dreiser* (Univ. of Minnesota Pr., 1976), pp. 25–27

To the end, Dreiser made no compromises with popular taste, and wrote as honestly, if not as well, as he always had. But his search for philosophical answers and his advocacy of social change had carried him beyond the novel to a more urgent vision of science and politics. His style and his fictional imagination could not keep up with his speculations. The mysteries of character, the ironies of fate, and the hidden workings of the social system ceased to interest him, at a time when the social system's failure dominated literary consciousness. In the end he had moved beyond the passions that drove his characters and novels, beyond the gropings of individuals toward a higher realm of meaning; he had stepped out from behind the scrim of fiction and confronted the great questions directly.

He had an enormous influence on American literature during the first quarter of the century—and for a time he *was* American literature, the only writer worth talking about in the same breath with the European masters. Out of his passions, contradictions, and sufferings, he wrenched the art that was his salvation from the hungers and depressions that racked him. It was no wonder that he elevated the creative principle to a godhead and encouraged by word and example truthful expression in others. If one were to identify the central, unifying theme of his contradiction-riddled life it was that he was totally subsumed in the role of author. Like many novelists, he was a congeries of different selves, from Hurstwood and Carrie to Cowperwood and Clyde. Moreover, he saw himself and all human beings as characters in the great, shapeless novel of life manipulated by the Author/Creator behind the veil.

He was the most ''American'' of novelists. His hungry curiosity probed the nooks and crannies of the national life, as he sought to perform what he saw as his mission—understanding a large, youthful, dynamic country that had no deep roots in the past and that was in a perpetual state of change and becoming. He retained a deep compassion for the voiceless mass of individuals in this land: their tawdry dreams and desires had for him the beauty of prayers.

His journey ended, ironically, in Hollywood, a factory town of dreams, beneath the expensive soil of Forest Lawn. He had frequently written of the lure of illusion and how it betrays the seeker. But art and beauty and love were themselves illusions. Or were they? In the end, he discovered, perhaps, that they were part of the greater Reality.

> Richard Lingeman. *Theodore Dreiser: An American Journey, 1908–1945* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1990), pp. 481–82

One must wonder whether Dreiser, always hostile to orthodox Christianity, would have resorted to those thinkers whose primary concern was the defense of orthodoxy, even had he been aware of them. Instead, Dreiser, who considered himself ''more of a romanticist than a realist,'' simply evolved independently a personal rationale for belief that paralleled the primary defense of belief of the Romantic Era. Like the thinkers of that earlier age who ironically transformed science from the cause of doubt into the bastion of faith, Dreiser utilized science to escape a hopeless conception of the universe as a godless, self-operating mechanism and to secure a spiritual vision of the cosmos as a divine creation. Both in exploiting the authority of science for spiritual purposes and in interpreting the complex processes and order of nature that science revealed as a proof of the deity's existence, Dreiser's philosophy was a curious twentieth-century reoccurrence, independently evolved, of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Romantic thought.

Secondly, one might be tempted to dismiss Dreiser's final philosophical beliefs as intellectually shallow. Perhaps the lack of scholarly attention to Dreiser's philosophical writings lies in his reaching a philosophical conclusion that was in vogue over two centuries earlier. There may be a lack of intellectual sophistication in Dreiser's inability to go beyond his factual knowledge of Darwinian evolution to realize that the philosophical implications of evolutionary theory undercut the use of design as a proof of a supernatural designer's existence. One should recall, however, that Dreiser's responses to life and nature were always more importantly emotional than intellectual, that his philosophy was built more on intuition and faith than on logic and reason, and that he was, after all, an artist and not a philosopher or scientist. The real value of his final philosophy lies not in its originality, its intellectual sophistication, or its contribution to the canon of American philosophy, but in the personally satisfying closure that it gave Dreiser's troubled and confused, lifelong quest to know the unknowable.

> Louis J. Zanine. *Mechanism and Mysticism: The Influence of Science on the Thought and Work of Theodore Dreiser* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Pr., 1993), p. 212

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DREXLER, Rosalyn (1926–)

This vital, intense ''diary'' [*I America the Beautiful Stranger*] of one Selma Silver, who was growing from ages 13 to 16 in the 1930's, is swift, complete, individual, and universal. You can mock its occasional sillinesses, but you're left holding its truths. For Selma is wholly convincing even when you can hardly believe her. . . . Back then, when ''teenager'' hadn't yet been invented, I don't think anybody talked the way Selma sometimes does. But

nobody back then (except maybe Saroyan) wrote as spiritedly as Mrs. Drexler does, either.

Maggie Rennert. *Book Week*. June 27, 1965. p. 22

Rosalyn Drexler's plays suggest, more than anything else, the early Marx Brothers. Wayward, full of lip, fantastic yet anchored in domesticity, they work at reordering all those matter-of-fact details, from the date on the calendar to the necessity of putting on one shoe after another, which obstruct us in our pursuit of significant whim and appetite. . . . All her dialogue issues from an imagination which has previously discovered the uses of language for new guise, for bluff, feint, decoy and red herring—all necessary properties and instrumentalities of the crucial game that goes on in most of her work. The game might be called ''keep them guessing'' or ''never give a sucker an even break.'' For Mrs. Drexler's imagination holds that the world is forever trying to impose roles and identities upon us which it is our duty and pleasure to resist and repudiate by outwitting the identifiers and the casting directors.

Richard Gilman. Introduction to *The Line of Least Existence* by Rosalyn Drexler (Random). 1967. pp. ix–xi

In addition to writing plays, the libretto for *Home Movies* which won the off-Broadway award known as the ''Obie,'' and two successful novels, Rosalyn Drexler is a successful painter. This visual orientation may explain her highly untraditional view of theatrical language, a quality evident in all her plays. Like Koch, she conceives of language as most engaging when least eloquent, and closest to a state of pure ''flatness.'' In *Hot Buttered Roll* the dialogue is in the prose style of the girlie magazine. The play is about a certain Mr. Corrupt Savage, whose most passionate wish is to go on spending his days in contemplation of the supposedly inspiring pictures and text characteristic of this genre. . . . In Drexler's reality, the eternally flesh-contemplating Corrupt Savage is the nearest thing to a true saint, or hero. It is the cold calculators who surround him, those contemptuous of human fantasies however odd or pathetic, who are the real villains of the piece.

Michael Benedikt. *Theatre Experiment* (Doubleday). 1967. p. 197

The Line of Least Existence is a joy to read, as are all Rosalyn Drexler's plays in the collection recently published by Random House. Few contemporary playwrights can equal her verbal playfulness, fearless spontaneity, and boundless irreverence; few in fact, share her devotion to pure writing, preferring their language functional, meaningful, or psychologically ''real.'' Whether her plays amount to anything, whatever that means, is hard to say: hers is obviously an up-to-date sensibility, and I read considerable offhand, tough, supercool wisdom about human relationships into her fantastifications, knowing all the time that they may be as frivolous as they look.

Michael Smith. *The Village Voice*. March 28, 1968. p. 50

The new literary voice comes from some odd and perilous psychic area still being charted, some basic metabolic flashpoint where the self struggles to convert its recurrent breakdowns into new holds on life and reality. It is the voice of writers like Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, and Rosalyn Drexler. In her new book [*One or Another*], Mrs. Drexler monitors the voice of Melissa . . . married to Mark. . . . In these lives madness is no longer a possibility—it is a note in their chord of being that automatically sounds with every breath they draw. . . . What counts now is the delicate new apotheosis, a new transcendence that accepts the mad world as the only human habitat, while plotting shrewdly against its madness. Few writers have been able to suggest this new transcendence. Mrs. Drexler is one of them: funny, scary, preternaturally aware, she is at the exact center where the new sensibility is being put together cell by cell.

Jack Kroll. *Newsweek*. June 1, 1970. p. 87

One or Another is a very funny book; moreover, it is both funny ''ha-ha'' and funny ''weird,'' an observation Melissa Johnson, the novel's heroine-narrator, would be likely to make herself. In *One or Another* reality and unreality are merged; the borderline between dreams and actual events has been erased; shadows are indistinguishable from substance. Obviously, a novel of the interior is not concerned with plot. Mere sequences of events hold no interest. Style alone sustains *One or Another*. With careful economy and wit (that rare commodity bludgeoned out of so much of contemporary literature), Miss Drexler guides the reader through the tortured dreamscape in which Melissa Johnson finds both refuge and exile.

William Hjortsberg. *New York Times Book Section*. June 28, 1970. p. 5

[In *To Smithereens*] the relaxed sleaziness and community of the lady wrestling world alternates with the frantic, tired chic of the plastic New York art scene, in which here-barely-disguised New York artists and hangers-on act out their own fantasies of power, success, and grandeur. Does it all sound slightly sick, weird, ugly/sad, and obsessed-with-violence? It's exactly the opposite. . . . [Rosalyn Drexler] has a marvelous talent for taking this kind of material and imbuing it with qualities of great warmth and wicked satire, pathos, and a haunting aura of nostalgia for a world most of us have never known. . . . She's an absolute original who can take all the ingredients that usually characterize ''serious fiction'' . . . and use them with inventiveness, playfulness, and even hilarity.

Sara Blackburn. *Book World*. March 19, 1972. p. 5

The scene of [*To Smithereens*] is less a time and a place—New York, mainly in the late Sixties and early Seventies—than a condition of consciousness. New York becomes a name for a brand of hysteria, for a circus of crazies, comically seen and perfectly human and manageable as it turns out. Paul and Rosa, individual and well-defined as they are, tend to disappear into this collective portrait. Paul is the twitchy, ruined modern male from an R. Crumb comic (''the *universal* Paul,'' Rosa thinks), and Rosa is the resurgent female, all immediacy, innocence, and half-nelsons.

''You're not as crazy as you seem, are you?'' a character says in Rosalyn Drexler's play *The Line of Least Existence*. ''None of us is. We're all rational people.'' The specific context of the words makes them sound like a desperate pleading lie; we are just as crazy as we seem, if not crazier, but please let's not admit it. But the play

itself, and in particular the character of the woman speaking the lines, suggests that what the words say is literally, drably true. We are dull people, and any semblance of vivid craziness we may present is an illusion. Mrs. Drexler knows that we really are crazy, and in very bad shape; but she also knows that the forms of our craziness have a conformity, a banality all of their own. Between madness and grayness, or out of a gray madness, we have to put something together.

> Michael Wood. *New York Review of Books*. Aug. 10, 1972. p. 14

The raunchy and the ridiculous are Drexler's home territory—you feel she spends a lot of time in all-night cafeterias. Her word-play is like sword-play—with rubber swords that still deliver a stinging slap. Her set-pieces—newspaper clippings, radio interviews, beauty advice—are among the delights of [*The Cosmopolitan Girl*]; her one-liners are memorable. . . . She weaves a seamy web of parodies that covers the situation perfectly. Moving back and forth between the absurd and the everyday Drexler puts both in their place—on the same plane. *The Cosmopolitan Girl* is a send-up and send-off for the New Woman.

> Sara Sanborn. *New York Times Book Section*. March 30, 1975. p. 4

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DU BOIS, W.E.B. (1868–1963)

What Henry James wrote of Nathaniel Hawthorne is equally true of W.E.B. Du Bois: ''our author,'' James wrote, ''must accept the awkward as well as the graceful side of his fame; for he has the advantage of pointing a valuable moral.'' Hawthorne's moral was that ''the flower of art blooms only where the soil is deep, that it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature, that it needs a complex social machinery to set a writer in motion.'' Du Bois's reputation as a man of literature is surely the ''awkward'' side of such fame as he possesses, and one meaning of his awkward side is essentially the same as Hawthorne's (as James saw it), with an important difference. The flower of art will bloom only where there is liberty or the memory of liberty. Du Bois understood the need for justice in the growth of the flower of art: ''The time has not yet come,'' he wrote in 1913, ''for the great development of American Negro literature. The economic stress is too great and the racial persecution too bitter to allow the leisure and the poise for which literature calls.'' Or, as James went on in the famous passage about Hawthorne, ''American civilization has hitherto had other things to do than to produce flowers. . . .''

The other, more graceful sides of Du Bois's reputation vary with the attitude of each observer but rest somewhere in his pioneering and persisting works of history and sociology and his decades of crusading journalism against neoslavery in the South and in some respects similar oppression in the North. Trained at Fisk, Harvard, and the University of Berlin, he produced essays, monographs, and books of history and sociology that gave him by themselves the most prominent place among black American thinkers, so that the NAACP could write with justification in 1934 that ''he created, what never existed before, a Negro intelligentsia, and many who have not read a word of his writings are his spiritual disciples and descendants.'' Certainly of Afro-American writers and the Afro-American theme one may claim of Du Bois what has been written of the English sociologists Sidney and Beatrice Webb—that every creative writer who has touched on the field of sociology has, directly or indirectly, been influenced by them.

But Du Bois ventured into the field of belles-lettres. And not by accident but as part of the plan of his life. On his twenty-fifth birthnight (1893) he confided solemnly to his journal that ''these are my plans: to make a name in science, to make a name in art and thus to raise my race.''

A bibliography of his writings runs to some two thousand entries, out of which it is difficult to separate those completely untouched by his love of art. But there are poems enough for a slender volume, a multitude of partly personal, impressionistic essays, some verse drama, autobiographies, five novels—including a trilogy composed near his ninetieth birthday. Great reputations have been made of a smaller volume of writing, but most of this work has contributed little to Du Bois's fame. Indeed, his basic competence as a man of literature has been challenged. An angry Claude McKay, singed by a Du Bois review of his first novel, informed him that ''nowhere in your writings do you reveal any comprehension of aesthetics.'' The poet, novelist, and critic Arna Bontemps thought Du Bois unimaginative in that he leaned toward ''the tidy, the well-mannered, the Victorian'' in his choice of literature. His first biographer Francis Broderick barely mentioned this belletristic writing and declared that Du Bois wanted ''a literature of uplift in the genteel tradition.'' His second biographer, Elliott M. Rudwick, mentions the creative work not at all. And though Du Bois called his second novel ''my favorite book'' among the two dozen or more he published, a major historian of the black novel in America dismissed him as a ''Philistine.''

Du Bois himself did not show great pride in this aspect of his work; he was apologetic on the very few occasions he wrote of his efforts in literature. His first novel was ''really an economic study of some merit''—the sum total of his commentary on the work; he was hesitant to write ''mere'' autobiography; *Dark Princess* was his favorite book but that remark is all he ever ventured about the novel; his poems were ''tributes to Beauty, unworthy to stand alone.'' Nor was he always complimentary about actual achievement in black literature. In 1913 he saw the body as ''large and creditable [though] only here and there work that could be called first-class.'' In 1915 a five-point plan for the future of the race included ''a revival of art and literature,'' presumably moribund. In 1926, surveying the field for the *Encyclopaedia Brittanica* he judged that ''all these things are beginnings rather than fulfillments,'' though they were certainly significant beginnings. In 1933 he mourned that the so-called ''Harlem Renaissance'' had ''never taken real and lasting root'' and that ''on such an artificial basis no real literature can grow.'' Somewhere around 1960 one of his fictional characters looked in vain for recent work of major artistic quality: ''In the last decade we have not produced a poem or a

novel, a history or play of stature—nothing but gamblers, prizefighters and jazz. . . . Once we could hear Shakespeare in Harlem.''

But with these splashings of cold water there was an equally cool and lucid sense of the potential of black writing, so that Du Bois could write in April 1920 that ''a renaissance of American Negro literature is due,'' and observe in the decade that followed, almost from the day of his prediction, the accuracy of his insight. Nor is there any lack of evidence that Du Bois was highly regarded as a man of literature, from the early praise of William and Henry James and the reverence in which he was held by black poets such as James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes, to the radical socialist magazine *The Messenger*, which in 1919 damned Du Bois with praise of him as ''the leading litterateur of the race.'' But more important than testimonies is a survey of his somewhat motley collection of essays, poems, novels, and other work for the ways in which he helped to shape modern Afro-American writing. For Du Bois, maturing in the most repressive period of black American history, took unto himself the primary responsibility of the would-be mythmaker, applying a luminous imagination and intelligence to ''Adam's task, of giving names to things.'' It is only slight exaggeration to say that wherever the Afro-American subsequently went as a writer, Du Bois had been there before him, anticipating both the most vital ideas of later currency and the very tropes of their expression. Some of these anticipations are slighter than others, but none is trivial to anyone who knows black literature. Collectively they underscore Du Bois's significance and raise challenging questions about the relationship of politics, art, and the individual imagination. . . .

Arnold Rampersad. *American Literature*. March, 1979, pp. 50–68.

During the course of his long career, W.E.B. Du Bois produced superb work in many genres. His Harvard dissertation *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade* (1896) was a pioneering, minutely detailed analysis of the growth and eventual elimination of the slave trade to the Unites States; his absorbing rendering of African culture and African-American history *The Negro* (1915) served as ''the Bible of Pan-Africanism''; and his later historical book *Black Reconstruction* (1935) bitingly challenged the traditional view of the post-Civil-War period as a time of white suffering and Negro abuses and abominations. His studies of the black family and community, especially *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), remain valuable; his countless essays and reviews, not only in *The Crisis* but in other academic journals and popular magazines and newspapers, are impressive in their scope and virtuosity; and his numerous articles on education, labor, and the Pan-African movement further testify to his national and international vision of the development of colored people. He also wrote novels, stories, and poetry, and invented mixed gênres of his own, as the sociologically acute and lyrical *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) demonstrates.

Du Bois's many autobiographical writings, notably *Dusk of Dawn* (1940) and his posthumous *Autobiography* (1968), are also rewarding texts that situate the life of the writer within the complex trends of the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

As a premier man of letters, Du Bois has few rivals in this century. Yet with the exception of *The Souls of Black Folk*, his writings are infrequently taught and rarely accorded in literary history the credit they deserve. In part this results from the fertile ways in which Du Bois's writings cross and exceed generic and disciplinary categories. Who should teach him? Where should he be taught? Du Bois's astonishing range has possibly worked to his disadvantage, particularly in the academy, leaving the majority of his books unstudied because it is unclear to whose departmental terrain they belong. ''His contribution,'' concludes Arnold Rampersad, ''has sunk to the status of a footnote in the long history of race relations in the United States.''

Another, more commanding reason for Du Bois's uneven and troubled reputation is that he wrote politically: He always perceived his writing, in whatever form or forum, as having political point and purpose. As he noted in a diary entry on his twenty-fifth birthday, '''I . . . take the world that the Unknown lay in my hands and work for the rise of the Negro people, taking for granted that their best development means the best development of the world''' (*Autobiography*). Du Bois assembled knowledge, fired off polemics, issued moral appeals, and preached international brotherhood and peace in the hope of effecting differences in the lives of the lowly and oppressed. He stood for equality and justice, for bringing all men and women into ''the kingdom of culture'' as co-workers (*Souls*). So much was this Du Bois's intention that he was willing to use the explosive word *propaganda* to accent it. Viewing himself as, in everything, a writer and an artist, he affirmed that ''all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy'' (''Criteria for Negro Art'').

Du Bois's blunt deployment of art as ''propaganda'' makes plain the reason that he has proved an awkward figure for literary historians, yet it still remains curious that he is undertaught and undervalued. William James, Nathaniel Shaler, Albert Bushnell Hart, George Santayana, and others praised Du Bois during his student days at Harvard. Hart later said that he counted him '''always among the ablest and keenest of our teacher-scholars, an American who viewed his country broadly''' (cited in *Autobiography*). Some of America's most gifted novelists, poets, and playwrights admired him. Eugene O'Neill once referred to Du Bois as ''ranking among the foremost writers of true importance in the country.'' Van Wyck Brooks commended him as ''an intellectual who was also an artist and a prophet,'' a man ''with a mind at once passionate, critical, humorous, and detached'' and ''a mental horizon as wide as the world.'' Even earlier, no less an eminence than Henry James termed him ''that most accomplished of members of the Negro race.'' It was William James who sent his brother a copy of *The Souls of Black Folk*, referring to it as ''a decidedly moving book.''

The Souls of Black Folk is indeed a landmark in African-American culture. James Weldon Johnson, in his autobiography, stated that the book ''had a greater effect upon and within the Negro race in America than any other single book published in this country since *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.'' Rampersad has summarized its significance even more dramatically: ''If all of the nation's literature may stem from one book, as Hemingway implied about *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, then it can as accurately be said that all of Afro-American literature of a creative nature has proceeded from Du Bois's comprehensive statement on the nature of the people in *The Souls of Black Folk*.''

William E. Cain. *Black American Literature Forum*. Summer, 1990, pp. 299–313.

At the age of 35, in 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois took intellectual leadership of those within the Afro-American world who preferred liberal idealism to compensatory realism. Du Bois was prepared for his role by rigorous training in the traditional liberal arts as well as the newer empirical social sciences. But it was confidence in the moral absolute of truth and a poetic imagination that were to prove the sources of his effectiveness.

Souls of Black Folk, the book in which Du Bois publicly announced his differences with Booker T. Washington, is constructed from first-hand observation, historical research, and reasoned analysis. Its power, however, derives from the images of divided consciousness (souls), a culturally united black nation (folk), and the veil behind which black remained nearly invisible. In a time when Jim Crow shaped perception as much as policy, Du Bois's metaphors represented intellectual liberation, giving blacks a profoundly dignified way of conceiving their own lives and history. The cultural nationalism of *Souls of Black Folk* had been implicit in the earlier study *The Philadelphia Negro,* in which Du Bois documented class structure and shared institutions. It reappeared as motivation for the utopian vision of agricultural cooperatives in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* and the romantic narrative of worldwide organization for colored people in *Dark Princess.*

Du Bois's well-known commitment to the idea of leadership by a talented tenth has its counterpart in the learned rhetoric of his essays and the grandiose design of his novels. It is no wonder that writing as a critic in *The Crisis* he was unsympathetic to the experimentation and modern realism of the younger generation in the Negro Renaissance. Still, he made his own characteristic contribution to the ''new Negro.'' His book *The Negro,* anticipating anti-colonial conferences organized after World War I, corrected popular impressions that American blacks were without roots by celebrating the African past. Then *Black Reconstruction in America,* written out of Du Bois's new enthusiasm for Marxism in the 1930s, recovered the significance of black people in the history of the south. Despite limitations of style, these historical re-evaluations initiated a scholarly revisionism comparable to the re-direction of thought in the book *Souls of Black Folk.*

Nearing the end of his life, Du Bois published his most comprehensive treatment of America, *The Black Flame,* a trilogy binding into one narrative an historical account of the years corresponding roughly to his own life and a fictional account of Manuel Mansart. That the plots are meant to inter-relate goes without saying. More to the point is the observation that Du Bois's career, capped by the trilogy, was his most important dialectical demonstration. Seeking to write as truthfully as possible, he became not only a scribe of history but its maker.

John M. Reilly. In *Reference Guide to American Literature, 3rd edition,* ed. Jim Kamp (St. James Press, 1994).

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DUGAN, Alan (1923–)

Alan Dugan in his *Poems* . . . takes the role of a soldier, an infantryman, the dogface of Bill Mauldin's cartoons. So many of the controlling images in Dugan's first book emerge from the knowledge of the squalor and confusion of war, from the self-absorption of the captive, from the inner suffering of the tortured prisoner, that it is not, perhaps, surprising that the poems dealing with other themes often lapse into wordiness and contrivance. When Dugan is at work in his favorite role, the language simplifies itself, the verse takes on a crestfallen irony, and the lines speak in a straightforward earthy rhythm.

Peter Davison. *Atlantic Monthly*. Nov., 1961. p. 172

It isn't that you have to really throw away the usual poetic flap when discussing Alan Dugan's work, but it helps. Nothing is here ''in the old combinations,'' and this second book of his isn't going to make him any more friends in some centers of literary orthodoxy south of the Ohio River. But then, he is a great gambler: he takes chances on variations of tone, on in-and-out relationships in his imagery, on rhetorical effects that double back on the structure of what he has written, on bald profanity and ludicrous irony. . . .

I think the most exciting aspect of Alan Dugan's work is that all the gambles arise from his predisposition, his insistence, on portraying what he sees from a bluntly personal point of view, and Dugan has a sensibility a hemisphere removed from the involutions of American Calvinism: his is the immediacy and heat of a Celtic temperament, and some of his best poems are those in which he takes a classical subject and ignites it with his own acid diction. . . . [H]e is a riverboat gambler, a weather-cock, a gadfly, and a painfully honest moralist. What can one say? He is exactly what we

need, but I am not sure we know what he is. He is good for us; I hope in the long run we will be good for him.

Bruce Cutler. *Poetry*. March, 1964. pp. 390–1

He is complex, cantankerous, and middle-aged. Also very American. Yet he seems to possess that true weather-beaten eye, that bardic appetite that looks for nothing, accepts nothing without a fissure in it, the ''lewd scratches'' which ''mar design.'' Dugan has few themes and few variations, but all of his poems have a grudging pathos or jaunty comic eloquence, and all run true to form or character. His is the truth that there is nothing so tragic that someone somewhere will not think of as comic. What he has seen he gets down, and what he has experienced he lets you know about. . . . What is striking in the poetry of Alan Dugan—the rancorous insights, the self-mocking wit—is paramount in the literature of today, a literature of limitations, an all encompassing grinding down, one that knows you test the strength of a man's character less by what he denies himself, than by what he's been denied. ''*'Be alive', they say, when I/ am so alive I ache with it . . .*'' But the ache is energy struggling with emptiness.

Robert Mazzocco. *New York Review of Books*. Nov. 23, 1967. pp. 20, 22

The poems of Alan Dugan come nearer [than those of Howard Nemerov] to a deep bitterness. They are enormously skillful and terse, and have been carved out in an idiom which Dugan has made entirely and identifiably his own. It is a strange but effective juxtaposition of lofty poetic diction and straight, unpolished, low-down vernacular. When his aim is satiric, as, for example, in ''Self-Exhortation on Military Themes,'' this double-tone can obviously be used ingeniously to exhibit the cheapness and transparency of Noble Postures. But this is not the only way he uses it, and this book [*Poems 3*] is by no means a simple confrontation of ''poetic'' shams and ugly truths. Dugan is at least as much attracted by the possibilities of grandeur as by the need to confess disappointment; and I would be willing to bet that there's not a poet writing today who uses the exclamatory ''Oh'' more frequently.

Anthony Hecht. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1968. pp. 214–5

The poet Robert Graves in a memorable lecture series once criticized Ezra Pound's unabashed ambition of writing great poems. For Graves, it is more than enough simply to try to write good poetry. Such a view may perhaps be too easily explained by the fact that it represents the advice of a minor poet to a great poet. Alan Dugan is a good poet who has in his own peculiar way proven what Graves was getting at. By cultivating what is by any standard a confining style, and by exercising his caustic intelligence on a relatively narrow range of subjects, Dugan has created a significant body of work that speaks with authority to a variety of modern readers. One does not get terribly excited about Alan Dugan's work, but one nevertheless returns to it with increasing regularity, for it successfully inhabits that middle ground of experience which our best poets today seem loathe to admit, as though to do so would somehow in itself constitute a denigration of their talents and a disavowal of intensity. . . .

His predictable low-keyed humor, so often remarked upon by others, does little to mitigate the stinging venom of self-contempt that courses through so much of Dugan's work. His is a bitter eloquence. If the cadence is austere, it is rarely impoverished, and the muscular flow of his terse diction is rarely purchased at the expense of complexity. Dugan invites us to witness with him, without any redemptive qualification, the sordid spectacle of our common humiliation.

Robert Boyers. *Salmagundi*. Spring, 1968. pp. 43, 52

Days like these, to take Alan Dugan from the shelf is like finding another grownup at a birthday party for kiddies. An intelligent being! You want to fall to your knees in gratitude. Warfare versus Peace, for example, is a major theme in *Collected Poems*; unlike other writers who have been to the wars, Dugan neither boasts nor sobs, but like a man suckled on Virgil, Horace and Tacitus, he is businesslike and undeluded: war is interesting, but it is still hell. . . . There are no hawklike or dovelike answers in Dugan. He merely pays grim and merry attention to basics, whether he sings of childhood, lust, liquor, the dusty life of offices, city streets, domestic tranquility, birth, as in ''Coat of Arms.''. . .

As a craftsman, Dugan is extraordinary. He loads every rift with concrete; he makes a hard, crunching music; and his control of momentum is peerless: the poems, one after another, come barreling down the alley like big black bowling balls and down you go.

Alicia Ostriker. *Partisan Review*. Spring, 1972. pp. 272–3

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DUNBAR, Paul Laurence (1872–1906)

[Mr. Dunbar] is a real poet whether he speaks a dialect or whether he writes a language. He calls his little book *Majors and Minors*, the Majors being in our American English, and the Minors being in dialect, the dialect of the middle-south negroes and the middle-south whites; for the poet's ear has been quick for the accent of his neighbors as well as for that of his kindred. I have no means of knowing whether he values his Majors more than his Minors; but I should not suppose it at all unlikely, and I am bound to say none of them are despicable. In very many I find the proofs of honest thinking and true feeling, and in some the record of experience, whose genuineness the reader can test by his own. . . .

Most of these pieces, however, are like most of the pieces of most young poets, cries of passionate aspiration and disappointment, more or less personal or universal, which except for the negro face of the author one could not find specially notable. It is when we come to Mr. Dunbar's Minors that we feel ourselves in the presence of a man with a direct and a fresh authority to do the kind of thing he is doing. . . .

One sees how the poet exults in his material, as the artist always does; it is not for him to blink its commonness, or to be ashamed of its rudeness; and in his treatment of it he has been able to bring us nearer to the heart of primitive human nature in his race than any one else has yet done. The range between appetite and emotion is not great, but it is here that his race has hitherto had its being, with a lift now and then far above and beyond it. A rich, humorous sense pervades his recognition of this fact, without excluding a fond sympathy, and it is the blending of these which delights me in all his dialect verse. . . .

Several of the pieces are pure sentiment, like ''The Deserted Plantation''; but these without lapsing into sentimentality recall the too easy pathos of the pseudonegro poetry of the minstrel show. . . .

Mr. Dunbar's race is nothing if not lyrical, and he comes by his rhythm honestly. But what is better, what is finer, what is of larger import, in his work is what is conscious and individual in it. He is, so far as I know, the first man of his color to study his race objectively, to analyze it to himself, and then to represent it in art as he felt it and found it to be; to represent it humorously, yet tenderly, and above all so faithfully that we know the portrait to be undeniably like. A race which has reached this effect in any of its members can no longer be held wholly uncivilized; and intellectually Mr. Dunbar makes a stronger claim for the negro than the negro yet has done. . . .

I am speaking of him as a black poet, when I should be speaking of him as a poet; but the notion of what he is insists too strongly for present impartiality. I hope I have not praised him too much, because he has surprised me so very much; for his excellences are positive and not comparative. If his Minors had been written by a white man, I should have been struck by their very uncommon quality; I should have said that they were wonderful divinations. But since they are expressions of a race-life from within the race, they seem to me indefinitely more valuable and significant. I have sometimes fancied that perhaps the negroes *thought* black, and *felt* black; that they were racially so utterly alien and distinct from ourselves that there never could be common intellectual and emotional ground between us, and that whatever eternity might do to reconcile us, the end of time would find us as far asunder as ever. But this little book has given me pause in my speculation. Here, in the artistic effect at least, is white thinking and white feeling in a black man, and perhaps the human unity, and not the race unity, is the precious thing, the divine thing, after all. God hath made of one blood all nations of men; perhaps the proof of this saying is to appear in the arts, and our hostilities and prejudices are to vanish in them.

Mr. Dunbar, at any rate, seems to have fathomed the souls of his simple white neighbors, as well as those of his own kindred; and certainly he has reported as faithfully what passes in them as any man of our race has yet done with respect to the souls of his. It would be very incomplete recognition of his work not to speak particularly of the non-negro dialect pieces, and it is to the lover of homely and tender poetry, as well as the student of tendencies, that I commend such charming sketches as ''Speakin o' Christmas,'' ''After a Visit,'' ''Lonesome,'' and ''The Spellin' Bee.'' They are good, very good. . . .

W. D. Howells. *Harper's Weekly*. June 20, 1896, p. 630.

[The] sparkling wit, the quaint and delightful humor, the individuality and charm of Dunbar's poetry are not excelled by any lines from the pen of a Negro. No person can read his verse without being forcibly impressed that he is a remarkable man, a genius demanding attention. The New World has not produced a bard like him. Although distinctively American by birth and education, as well as a Negro, yet his prototype is on the other side of the Atlantic. Robert Burns and Dunbar, in many important particulars, are parallel poets. They seem to have been cast in the same mould; with limited educational advantages, both struggled up through poverty, and each wrote largely in the dialect of his clan. He is strong and original, and like Burns, lyrical in inspiration. Probably there never were two men of opposite races, so widely separated by time and distance, and yet so much alike in soul-qualities. With no desire and no doubt unconsciously, he has walked complete in the footprints of the eminent Scottish bard; has the same infirmity, animated by the same hope, and blessed with the same success. . . .

In Dunbar there is no threnody, not even distant clouds arch the sky. Hope and joy are the dominant notes of his song. No poet more effectively warms the cold side of our life and sends sunshine into grief-stricken souls than he. He laughs sorrow away; he takes us into the huts of the lowly and oppressed. There we find, amidst poverty and illiteracy, unfeigned contentment and true happiness; a smile is on every face, and hope displays her brightest gifts. No matter how sorrowful, who can read without considerable emotion ''When de Co'n Pone's Hot,'' ''The Colored Band,'' ''The Visitor,'' ''The Old Front Gate,'' ''De Way Tings Come,'' and ''Philosophy.''

But not all his poetry bubbles with fun, at times he is a serious poet, and appeals strongly to the serious side of life, as does his ''Weltschmertz.'' It is full of tender sympathy; it touches chords which vibrate throughout the poles of our nature; he makes us feel that he takes our sorrows and makes them his own, and helps us to bear up when burdened with woe. ''The Fount of Tears,'' ''Life's Tragedy,'' ''The Haunted Oak,'' and the fifth lyric of ''Love and Sorrow'' reveal a high order of poetical genius; he reaches the deepest spiritual recesses of our being. . . .

I prefer ''The Rugged Way'' to Lowell's ''After the Burial.'' ''The Unsung Heroes'' has all the imagination and pathos of Bryant's ''Marion's Men''; ''The Black Sampson of Brandywine'' will live as long as his ''African Chief.'' Read Bryant's and Dunbar's ''Lincoln''—the black poet does not suffer by comparison. I do not in the least wish to convey the impression that Dunbar is a greater poet than Bryant; they move in different parts of the poetical firmament. Each is a master in his respective sphere. As a writer of blank verse Bryant has no equal in America; and as a lyrical poet with a large vein of rich humor Dunbar is without a peer in the Western Continent.

Joseph G. Bryant. *The Colored American Magazine*. May, 1905, pp. 254–57.

Paul Laurence Dunbar stands out as the first poet from the Negro race in the United States to show a combined mastery over poetic material and poetic technique, to reveal innate literary distinction in what he wrote, and to maintain a high level of performance. He was the first to rise to a height from which he could take a perspective view of his own race. He was the first to see objectively its humor, its superstitions, its shortcomings; the first to feel sympathetically its heart-wounds, its yearnings, its aspirations, and to voice them all in a purely literary form.

Dunbar's fame rests chiefly on his poems in Negro dialect. This appraisal of him is, no doubt, fair; for in these dialect poems he not only carried his art to the highest point of perfection, but he made a contribution to American literature unlike what any one else had made, a contribution which, perhaps, no one else could have made. Of course, Negro dialect poetry was written before Dunbar wrote, most of it by white writers; but the fact stands out that Dunbar was the first to use it as a medium for the true interpretation of Negro character and psychology. And, yet, dialect poetry does not constitute the whole or even the bulk of Dunbar's work. In addition to a large number of poems of a very high order done in literary English, he was the author of four novels and several volumes of short stories.

James Weldon Johnson. *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1922.

How tenacious, demanding, and circumscribing the dialect tradition and its concomitants had become before the turn of the century is illustrated in the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. No Negro of finer artistic spirit has been born in America, and none whose fierce, secret energies were more powerfully directed toward breaking down the vast wall of emotional and intellectual misunderstanding within which he, as poet, was immured. . . .

[Dunbar is often noted as a poet of dialect.] Not so well known is the fact that his most serious efforts in *Oak and Ivy* and *Majors and Minors*, his second book, are given to the pieces in pure English. Scarcely known at all is the fact that all of his life he fervently sought to win recognition as a master of the pure tongue. . . .

If there are times when his English pieces achieved only a sentimental pathos, there are other times when he wrought lyrics of delicate beauty. Primarily a lyrist, the music of words is one of his chief charms. . . .

Not only did Dunbar use pure English for more than half his poetry, he used it for all his novels and most of his short stories. Perhaps this was a mistake. It may have been that he could have done as fine a work in the dialect short tale as Charles Chesnutt was to do. ''The Case of 'Ca'line,'' a story in the folk tradition, helps support this view. Excepting only a few of his short stories, Dunbar invariably falls short in prose fiction. His failure is twofold: he did not understand fully the extreme adaptability of folk material; and he did not study the art of prose fiction. The result of the first is that nearly all the folk stories are limited to burlesque, while the result of the second is that some very fine story stuff is hopelessly bungled.

It is, however, in his prose that Dunbar more nearly expressed the Negro, though rather as champion than as an artistically objective creator. . . .

But champions are notably more effective in poetry than in prose. . . . [When] propaganda enters into prose fiction it acquires necessarily some of the broad solidity of the prosaic medium, and this firm quality immediately puts the reader on the defensive. The reader's reaction is as of one being gulled, being shown a thing for the good of his soul. These are the things one comes to feel in too many of the stories of Dunbar. Like a leaden ghost, Purpose treads the print of ''Silas Jackson,'' ''The Ingrate,'' ''One Man's Fortunes,'' and ''Shaft II.'' Not only is the technique of the stories faulty, but plausible, character-derived motivation and convincing situation are lacking. The story that brushes aside esthetic ends must be faultless in construction and style in order to succeed. It must captivate by sheer perfection of form. Dunbar was not aware of this. He brought to this difficult art only a zest in the message of his serious tales, and an instinctive sense of the humor inherent in certain situations in his burlesque stories. The latter are saved from failure; but a story representative of the former, ''The Strength of Gideon,'' with its powerful theme and well-defined plot, boils off in the end to a watery pottage.

The gem of Dunbar's stories is ''The Trustfulness of Polly.'' In it Dunbar did not seek to express the Negro, but to recreate him. It was written in 1899, five years before his writing career ended, but he never again found such perfect focus of characterization, motivation, theme, plot, and style. It is a story of the low-life school, a type that was not to become popular until twenty years after Dunbar's death. . . . ''The Trustfulness of Polly'' is the first story of Negro low-life in New York written by a Negro. Not only is it significant as the forerunner of the long list of low-life stories from *Home to Harlem to Beale Street*, but it presaged the courageous, if misled, objectivity with which the post-war Negro artist was to see the life of his people.

With the exception of *The Sport of the Gods*, Dunbar's novels are as different in tone, treatment, and ideas from his short stories as it is possible for them to be. In them he carried his rebellion against the minstrel tradition to the extreme of repudiating race. But he came face to face with bitter irony. He saw clearly that even his own life story—the unfolding of his youthful spiritual struggles, his yearnings and ambitions—would not seem true to a people who knew the Negro only as a buffoon. There had been Negroes generally known to America as anything but buffoons, but they were oddities, ''exceptional because of their white blood.'' The story of a Negro boy living through Dunbar's experiences would not win credence. Negroes simply could not have certain emotional and spiritual things happen to them. So, in the novel *The Uncalled*, Dunbar, for the sake of plausibility (so little does realism have to do with truth), characterized himself as Frederick Brent, a white youth.

In two other novels, *The Love of Landry* and *The Fanatics*, he went even further. He drew white characters in typical white environment and sought to inspire the whole with the breath of living truth. He worked on an assumption which the minstrel tradition had consistently denied. He took forcibly the stand that Dumas and Pushkin, products of entirely different milieus [and both mulattoes], had come into naturally. Fundamentally, he said, there is no difference between Negro and white: the artist is free to work in whatever material he wishes. This was more than letting an imaginary white character stand for him; this was standing for white characters. This was exchange—and of a most equalizing kind. He did not say that he was looking at white characters from a colored point of view. He simply assumed inherent emotional, intellectual, and spiritual identity with his characters. It had not been done before: except for a few scattered instances it has not been done in exactly this way since. . . .

That Dunbar's white novels are faulty proves only what is suggested by the faults of *The Sport of the Gods*: Dunbar was not a novelist. Because it deals with Negro characters, and because it was written after the discipline of the three other novels, *The Sport of the Gods* might be expected to be his best novel. But it is not. It is only his most interesting. As a blood and thunder tale of crime and retribution and as an analysis of the elements in the urban life of the

Negro it does very well. As an artistic accomplishment it ranks below both *The Love of Landry* and *The Fanatics*.

But we must go back to Dunbar's verse, his dialect pieces, for though the necessity that drove him to dialect was bitter to him, he did his best work in this medium. His dialect pieces are not, however, most representative of his creative temper: they are merely what he had to do to win and hold his audience.

The comparison which is made so often between Paul Dunbar and Robert Burns, the Scottish poet, cannot fairly be taken further than to say that they were both singers. Burns's dialect was standard, a native tongue, understood by all the Scots, representative of them and, therefore, broad enough to give full expression to the people to whom it belonged. Burns's medium did not impose upon him the limitations to which the Negro poet was confined. On the other hand, Dunbar's dialect was not native. It was not even representative of a few Negro communities. Had he imitated the speech of the north Georgia Negro and uttered it among the Geechees of south Georgia or the Gullahs of South Carolina he would not have been understood. Dunbar, from scant knowledge of many dialects, made a language, a synthetic dialect that could be read with ease and pleasure by the northern whites to whom dialect meant only an amusing burlesque of Yankee English. Through such a bastard medium it was (and is) impossible to speak the whole heart of a people. . . .

At [dialect verse] Dunbar was a master. His sense of rhythm and harmony, evident in whatever he wrote, makes all the difference between his dialect pieces and the dialect of dozens of his imitators. While he was sentimental, they were vulgar and maudlin. While they bent at the knees with coarse laughter, he was content with a gentle and pathetic smile. While they blundered with dialect, he knew what could be done with it and how far it could be made to go as a poetic medium. He knew the subjects it would fit—the sweet delight of calf love, the thrill of simple music, the querulousness of old age, the satisfactions of a full stomach, the distractions of an empty one, the time-mellowed pain of bereavement. He brought to these subjects a childlike quality, a hushed wonder that is the secret of his charm in them. At times, though, something sterner crept into the dialect pieces. He was not above touches of satire, cries of reproach, and even weary resignation to a life that at its best was extremely hard.

More often, however, he reserved the firmer tone for his pure English, going the way of challenging comparison in poetry that William Wells Brown had gone in prose, but doing it more effectively. Ignored by contemporary critics as this work was, it is principally by virtue of it that Dunbar holds the place of reverence in the hearts of Negroes. . . .

Such a poem as ''The Colored Soldiers'' marks him as being in one sense the spiritual father of James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, and a number of younger poets. But in these, as in his dialect pieces, Dunbar did not feel that he had fulfilled his larger self. He did not marvel, as does Cullen, that God had made a poet black and bade him sing. He was more concerned with singing than with blackness. He wanted to be known and remembered not as a black poet, but as a *poet*. The price he paid made his popularity among whites as dross to him. The tribute he paid to his race was in kind no different from that paid by Tennyson as poet-laureate to his queen. Time and again he expresses his disappointment at ''the world's disdain'' of the work which he himself held in the highest estimation.

The best of these pieces show a morbid concern with failure and death. He could not have been concerned with failure as a dialect poet. His success in that line was assured. It was the other failure he feared—and foresaw. . . .

How right was Dunbar's judgment as to the worth of his own poems is only partly our concern. It may be said, however, that if the poet is to be judged by his hold on the consciousness of his audience, Dunbar must rest content with the appeal of his dialect to his white audience and the grip of his eulogies on the hearts and minds of his Negro audience. Though certain of his pure English lines are frequently quoted, in general they are overlooked; not because they are poor, but because they do not distinguish him from dozens of other poets. And a poet, to succeed, must be distinguishable. Such poems as ''Life,'' ''We Wear the Mask,'' ''Who Knows,'' and a half dozen others must be excluded from this general criticism.

J. Saunders Redding. In *To Make a Poet Black* (University of North Carolina Press, 1939; reprinted by McGrath Publishing Company, 1968).

Paul Laurence Dunbar is a natural resource of our people. He, like all our old prophets and preachers, has been preserved by our little people. Those who could command words and images, those whose pens thundered across the pages, those whose voices boomed from lecterns, those who set policy for our great publications then, as now, were quite silent. Not ever quite knowing what to do about one of America's most famous poets, when they spoke his name it was generally to condemn his dialect poetry—as if black people aren't supposed to laugh, or more as if Dunbar's poems were not the best examples of our plantation speech. One gets recitation after explanation of Dunbar's poetry, his love of his ''white poems,'' his hatred of his need to please the white critics, but something rings quite hollow to me. I refuse to believe Paul Dunbar was ashamed of ''Little Brown Baby, come sit on my knee.'' The poem has brought too much happiness to me. I categorically reject a standard that says ''A Negro Love Song'' should not make me feel warm inside. If Dunbar is only a poet with a gift in jingle tongue then there is no need for a critique. He is clearly much more. . . .

Dunbar preserved a part of our history. And accurately. It would be as foolish to say all blacks struggled against slavery as it would to say all acquiesced to it. The truth lies somewhere in the blending. Perhaps Dunbar's greatest triumph is that he has survived all those who would use his gift for their own dead-end purposes.

Every artist, should he create long enough, will come full cycle again and again. The artist is a political animal as well as a sensitive being. Like any person the artist is a contradiction. Dunbar will speak of the good ole days, then say ''We Wear the Mask.'' The message is clear and available to us if we invest in Dunbar the integrity we hope others will give us.

It seems somehow strange to me that critics are so colorless—despite claims to deeper insights should they share an ethnic or religious background with the subject. . . . [In] Dunbar's case, he was black enough for the white but not white enough for the blacks. . . .

Dunbar . . . is peerless. There is no poet, black or nonblack, who measures his achievement. Even today. He wanted to be a writer

and he wrote. He survived, not always well, by his pen. He probably did not want to be hassled by his peers, who through Dunbar's efforts were enjoying greater attention. He probably was plagued by as many doubts as any other person. Yet he dared to persist in hope.

Nikki Giovanni. In *A Singer in the Dawn: Reinterpretations of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, ed. Jay Martin (Dodd, Mead & Company, 1975); pp. 243–46.

There were, in truth, two Paul Laurence Dunbars. One was the writer supported by the interest of white Americans because some of his work was sufficiently faithful to black stereotypical images designed and demanded by white Americans. The other, in a sense the more ''real'' Dunbar, was the writer of genuine literary talent and dramatic sensibility, whose true literary worth could not be widely assessed until a wide range of his work was gathered and published as late as 1975 in *The Dunbar Reader.*

In his first manifestation, that of dialect poet, Dunbar was not so much pandering to the demands of white editors and a white reading public as indulging his own natural affinity for the rhythms of common speech and often for comedy; dialect in literature was, after all, very much *à la mode* with the interest in local color in late 19th-century America. That he had a gift as a dialect poet is undeniable, but it is rather too bad that his white audience could not accept him as anything more.

Much more he was, as William Dean Howells recognized early. As a writer of fiction and essays, he used the stuff of black lore to greater effect than any previous black writer, and at least as well as such whites as Joel Chandler Harris had done. Particularly noteworthy in his work is the reflection of religion in black American life and of the implications of the black migration to American cities. As a poet, Dunbar often superbly starched his ready lyricism with a keen sense of drama. It is a truism to say that while his material was mainly black, his insights were universal.

Dunbar did not choose to be the exemplar of the white view of black America in his time—but he was, and he made a sturdy pivot. He managed to entertain and enlighten whites while helping to imbue fellow blacks with a sense of history and importance, making him a close spiritual ancestor of Countée Cullen, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, and the other powerful 20th-century black American voices.

Alan R. Shucard. In *Reference Guide to American Literature, 3rd edition,* ed. Jim Kamp (St. James Press, 1994).

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DUNCAN, Robert (Edward) (1919–1979)

His poems are illustrations, objectifications of the interchange between order and disorder, accompanied by appropriate emotions, which are more nearly suggested than realized, of amazement and love at the sight of perfect order, awe and fear at the possibilities of new forms (sometimes monstrous) arising from disorder, and grief at the processes of decay, disintegration, and return. Art—specifically, poetry—is a part of this large concern, and references to poetry or to the poet occur in nearly every poem. Duncan's relationship of poetry, to the creation of form, becomes the symbol of order and change operating in all aspects of reality. . . .

Every *possibility* of the outstanding poet exists in this work: development of the poem's total form (as opposed to a few flashy lines), excellent sonant quality and movement, conservation of statement, and intensity of rendered image, and a commanding point of view. It is because Mr. Duncan is already an accomplished poet that I ask more of him: more immediate experience, less comment and explanation.

A.R. Ammons. *Poetry*. April, 1960. pp. 53–5

Robert Duncan is another excellent poet whose work is measured and spare, although many of his poems are long. The diction is uncluttered, like that of Mr. Creeley; but whereas the sound of the latter's verse is like that of a human voice speaking, Mr. Duncan's considerable talent most often assumes the form and measure of a human voice singing. He is a lyrical poet in the most traditional sense: that is, he is a musician. I do not mean that his poems, as such, need to be set to music. And I do not mean that they drip like Swinburne. At his best, he is a master of rhetoric in the Elizabethan sense of the word. Employing the simplest diction and rhythm, he can lead the reader to expect a certain pattern of sound, and then he varies it, so that the music of his verse produces a fusion of fulfillment and surprise which is one of the chief delights created by such a great lyric poet as, say, Thomas Campion.

James Wright. *Minnesota Review*. Winter, 1961. p. 251

Robert Duncan has that special quality of temper which he shares with Edmund Wilson or Pandit Nehru. He is a Good European. Although Duncan has been singularly open to all the influences of all times and places, and has learned from all the Old Masters of Modernism, from Reubén Darío to Yves Bonnefoy, his distinguishing characteristic is not the breadth of his influences, but the depth and humanness of his heart. Now that he is approaching early middle age he has begun to take on something of the forgotten grandeur of the great nineteenth-century ''men of the world'' of

letters—Monckton Milnes or Walter Bagehot. I can think of no other poet of my time of which anything like this could be said—with most, the very idea is ridiculous. As mentor and example, Duncan's influence on the younger men of the new New Poetry has been incalculable.

The now widely publicized San Francisco Renaissance owes more to Duncan than to any other one person.

Kenneth Rexroth. *Assays* (New Directions). 1961. p. 192.

All of this power has come to him only gradually. Reading his *Selected Poems* of 1942–1950, one felt at times that Duncan, though entitled to experiment, didn't have to print so many tentative jottings from his laboratory. As the fifties went on, his work grew firmer and more sure, resulting in the very good collection, *The Opening of the Field*, which the present book *Roots and Branches* surpasses. Containing his work of the past four years, it is a hefty book with little chaff in it.

In approaching Duncan's poems, the reader may find a bit of blind faith useful. With it, he may surmount a few private allusions, mysterious gaps in syntax and quirky spellings (meant to distinguish the sounds of -ed endings: *calld, many-brancht*). . . .

Duncan's themes are the changes that take place in the self, the search for love, the decline of faith in the supernatural. . . . One of that large clan of poets who emerged in the fifties from Black Mountain College and the cafes of San Francisco, Duncan in this book stands as the most serious of them all, the most capable.

X.J. Kennedy. *New York Times Book Section*. Dec. 20, 1964. pp. 4–5

Only Duncan will ever know why the words are arranged and spaced as they are or how precisely one can or should read an image like ''stars flew out into the deserted souls.'' No amount of sympathetic reading can dispel the overwhelming sense of arbitrariness. But after a while it is reassuring to discover that Duncan does not care how good his poems are. They follow the patterns of his mind, nothing else, and anyone who writes this way is cheerfully oblivious of all who are not kindred spirits. Nothing is more serious than a Duncan poem, yet little asks so completely to be read as a kind of sport. Every reader will probably be able to follow along his curious paths for a passage or even a whole poem, and then the shout becomes a kind of song. To read Duncan in bulk is to become oneself an action painter, and for that process to work, nothing can be very clear. To believe in him, I should think, is to be quite mad.

Roger Sale. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1965. pp. 302–3

. . .Robert Duncan is probably the figure with the richest natural genius among the Black Mountain poets. His work lacks [Robert] Creeley's consistent surface simplicity and [Charles] Olson's familiar cluster of localist and radically critical attitudes, and is consequently less well known than their writings. Also, it is cluttered by certain 'interferences,' partly stylistic and willful, partly related to his mystical and private attitudinal assumptions. . . . Though it seems clear now that Duncan's art is to some degree self-defeating, one has only to leaf through these books to find poems and passages that mark him as a modern romantic whose best work is instantly engaging by the standards of the purest lyrical traditions.

M.L. Rosenthal. *The New Poets* (Oxford). 1967. p. 174.

The publication of Duncan's book, *Bending the Bow*, is an event exceeding questions of quality. I cannot imagine my friends, the poets who gather to dismember each other, asking of this book, as they would of the others in this review, those narrower in scope, smaller in style, ''Is it good or is it bad?'' The question doesn't arise; not because Duncan is a good poet, though he is superb, but because the comprehensiveness of his imagination is too great for us. Here is an event; for the present our only question is, can we respond to it?—can we respond adequately to its most important feature, a new open sequence called *Passages*? We are given the first thirty sections of it, from which we see immediately resemblances to Pound's *Cantos*, but also differences, and the differences are the more salient. Duncan has learned from Pound's failures. . . . For the present I read the *Passages* not only with admiration and envy, and not only with a responsive depth of feeling, but with a wondering intuition that new force and clarity have come into the poetic imagination of America. When I reflect that Duncan, although he has already written a great deal, is only now, at age 49, riding the crest of his power, and that he still has years to go, the future of our poetry looks much more attractive to me than it has at any other time since the generation of the elders desisted.

Hayden Carruth. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1968. pp. 402–3

The Opening of the Field had announced the birth of a surpassingly individual talent: a poet of mysticism, visionary terror, and high romance. Duncan's work is outstanding among his contemporaries' in having rehabilitated from three hundred years of relative disuse and stagnation the emblem—not the image, or the symbol—as the central vehicle of the poem's drama. Duncan's emblems are populated by flaring presences, who, like crucified angels, blazingly dance out of the ''black pit'' of blindness, and into ''the beginnings of love.'' But in his recent books he has produced numerous exercises—lacking all vividness—while he waits for the return of his demon. These many autotelic performances are like prayers to the absent spirits urging their return: they may serve, for us, as a record of soul-priming, the readying of fallow poetic ground for the next major theme, whenever it may strike.

Laurence Lieberman. *Poetry*. April, 1969. p. 43

Where most postmodern poets are content to render dramatic instances of the mind satisfied in process, Duncan has grander ambitions. His aim to reinterpret the aesthetics of presence in terms that can recover the contemporary significance of the Romance and hermetic imaginative traditions. . . .

When critics notice [Duncan] at all, they comment on his weaknesses as a lyric poet, for his verse is often diffuse, boring, and without vitality in language or imagery. Moreover, like Olson, his

work is often difficult and apparently remote from contemporary concerns because his mythic enterprise requires that he incorporate a good deal of abstruse learning into his work. Yet once one accepts him as a poet whose primary task is to reflect on what others express directly, one can, I think forgive some of the lyric weaknesses and learn to read him for his intellectual interest and for those moments when he develops those interests into intense lyrical passages. Duncan is at the least a very important influence on other poets like Creeley and Levertov and at best he rivals his stylistic master, Pound, in integrating historical and mythic meditations with lyrical exaltation. . . .

Sympathetically read, Duncan's work then has greater imaginative scope than that of his peers. By reflecting on what other poets are reflections of, he achieves a generality and abstractness that articulates the value schemes shared by most postmodern visions of Romanticism. He makes self-reflexive and systematic the analogical nature of [much of his poetry] . . . , and he defines the analogical process in a rich restatement of the Romantic dialectic between creative mind and creative nature. But his ambitiousness creates serious aesthetic problems, exacerbated by the fact that he is more deductive and allegorical in his use of myth than the great moderns and consequently exhibits little doubt or struggle. One cannot simply read Duncan dramatically: one must understand and work to share the beliefs before one can really participate in the poetry. In this skeptical age. . . readers find it difficult to pursue abstractions they see as hard to understand and impossible to trust—especially when Duncan's immediate surfaces are so thoroughly conceptual and remote from ordinary existential problems and needs.

Charles Altieri. *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s* (Bucknell Univ. Pr., 1979), pp. 150–51, 163

In his poetry and prose, Duncan grapples (much as Whitman did) with the meaning of America, not as political entity alone, but as the generative source for poetic and personal endeavor. It is undoubtedly the native American literary line to seek the basis of poetry in antipoetic or unpoetic material and to redeem the creative potentiality of mundane subjects. Emerson had invited poetic expression equal to the qualities and characteristics of the evolving nation. Whitman answered the invitation repeatedly. In his essay ''Slang in America'' he found an inherent piquancy in socially nontraditional language which captured his imagination and provided intimations of a mythic past. . . .

Duncan holds a far less sanguine view of America than Whitman, but his desire to call up its presence, despite inherent contradictions, is equally imperative. At the political level Duncan can work less on faith than Whitman, and he is too honest to fool himself that Whitman's egalitarian optimism remains viable for *all* men in the twentieth-century. . . .

Whitman is as much a formative influence on Duncan's work as Dante or Blake, providing him with a special legacy that answers Duncan's imaginative needs. . . . Duncan has called the Romantic movement in poetry ''the intellectual adventure of not knowing''. . . and he is firmly grounded in that tradition. Striving to extend the thematic and formal boundaries of the poem, Duncan goes beyond a concern for the poem itself into a total and often mystical participation in the rites of the ''evolving and continuing work of poetry [he] could never complete—a poetry that had begun long before [he] was born and that extended beyond [his] own work in it.'' His most characteristic poem in this vein, ''Passages,'' can end only with his life—the process of the entire venture more important than the product. Again we hear Whitman, this time from the 1872 preface to *Leaves of Grass*: ''But what is life but an experiment? and mortality but an exercise? with reference to results beyond. And so shall my poems be. If incomplete here, and superfluous there, *n'importe*—the earnest trial and persistent exploration shall at least be mine, and other success failing, shall be success enough.''. . . The premise of incompleteness, the weight of the ''never achiev'd poem''. . . is a heavy burden indeed, but one which Robert Duncan, of all our contemporary poets, is best able to carry to fruition.

Mark Johnson and Robert DeMott. *In Robert Duncan: Scales of the Marvelous*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf and Ian W. Reid (New Directions, 1979), pp. 228–29, 231, 239–40

If the sublime comes to be regarded as an increasingly less viable mode of poetic discourse in New York in the Fifties and Sixties, then an attempt to revive it takes place at the same time across the country in Berkeley. Robert [Edward] Duncan stands at the center of the so-called San Francisco Renaissance; and along with such firmly established figures as Charles Olson and Allen Ginsberg, he represents a deliberate return to the poet's vatic role, based on an unprecedented synthesis of Romantic and Modernist strategies. Duncan in particular has declared himself derivative in his craft, thus affording himself ''permission'' to create the frequently outrageous totalities that mark his poetry as one of the most ambitious bodies of work in our time. For Duncan's poetic is totalizing: to an even greater extent than Pound or Olson, he seeks to in-form the ''orders'' or ''scales'' of reality in an open-ended tapestry or collage of language. In this regard, he operates in exact antithesis to Ashbery and O'Hara: he seeks to establish, or rather, prove, that the interrelated networks of material, psychological, and spiritual realities are all coordinated hierarchies that function under the force of universal Law. Rather than level modes of perception, value systems, and forms of knowledge, Duncan would place them all within their proper contexts, so that an awareness of overarching Form allows the reader to perceive a previously hidden totality. Poetry, of course, is the most significant medium for such a process; hence the poet holds a privileged place within the orders of language. Duncan's thought is transparently utopian in regard to matters of creativity and tradition, as well as in relation to immediate political concerns; and while sometimes problematic in its applications, its insistence on infinite human potential within a communal identity is, as [Georg] Oppen would say, ''ennobling.''

Duncan's insistent metaphors are often so compelling that they seem to obviate criticism, and therefore it is important to observe that at the same time Duncan's totalizing project is getting under way, a related but in some ways radically dissimilar poetic is being formulated by his old friend—and critic—Jack Spicer. Cranky, admonitory, haunted, Spicer's work presents as unified a poetic as Duncan's, but carefully avoids sweeping gestures of order and coherence that have become the distinguishing mark of even the most open of Duncan's poetic fields. Spicer's sincere distrust of the totalizing impulse in both Romantic and Modernist poetry leads him to a poetic of disruption and difference, of radical otherness

and possession, in which the poet is far less the willing spokesman for the sublime than its unsuspecting victim. Whereas Duncan celebrates the ''Lasting Sentence'' in his *Structure of Rime*, Spicer warns us, in *The Heads of the Town up to the Aether*, that ''words / Turn mysteriously against those who use them.'' In fact, it could be argued that Duncan and Spicer draw upon the same poetic precursors and philosophical systems and create complementary views of the poetic act. For Duncan, Romantic mythmaking and theosophical doctrine combine with Modernist explorations of history, anthropology and phenomenology to confirm Yeats's old dictum that ''The things below are as the things above.''

Norman Finklestein. *The Utopian Movement in Contemporary American Poetry* (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Pr., Rev. Ed. 1993 [1988]), pp. 68–69

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EASTLAKE, William (1917–1997)

This witty, exhilarating novel [*Go in Beauty*] displays some remarkable powers. Perhaps its major achievement is that William Eastlake's hilarious sense of irony allows him successfully to bathe a story that is essentially tragic in a calmly majestic humor. In the book's course he illuminates in passing the problems of sibling psychology, expatriation, primitivism, the artist's fidelity to truth, distributive justice (Emerson on the mesa!), the nature of integrity and a few others. . . .

Since somebody is bound to point to Eastlake's debt to Hemingway, let us say the mimicry has been metamorphosed here into mastery. The story is coherent, readable and told with a precisely right sandpapered style.

Lon Tinkle. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 21, 1956. p. 4

After reading [*Go in Beauty*] once, one is impressed and puzzled; after reading a second time, one is still impressed but less puzzled. I think this is an important first novel. The author has written distinguished short stories; he has a definite style; and if he is not yet at home with the novel, he is perfectly at ease with each chapter. Instead of hanging out a list of complimentary adjectives, let's say that he is a writer worthy of close reading. . . .

The action is powerful, the conception is serious and the prose is lean and clear. . . . The sad beauty of Mr. Eastlake's tale is that reality, whether of the world or of the self, may be ignored or defied, but never thwarted.

Thomas F. Curley. *Commonweal*. Jan. 4, 1957. pp. 363–4

William Eastlake's second novel [*The Bronc People*] makes definite the arrival on the scene of a new, hard, dry, tender, very contemporary talent. Eastlake has been writing about cowboys and Indians and the Southwest for several years; a small group of readers has noticed him, some of them puzzled by the kidded debt to Hemingway and a subject matter which edges up against that beer-and-pretzels category, ''the adult Western.'' Now, however, the Hemingway trick is bared for a joke and the proximity to the portentous teevee or movie Western is made a part of the comic action. A free-swinging playfulness and a deep nostalgia for the truths of sensual experience give us something we always need—a storyteller of wit, compassion and venturesomeness in both language and fantasy.

Herbert Gold. *The Nation*. Sept. 20, 1958. p. 158

I do not really know how to describe Mr. Eastlake's new book [*Portrait of an Artist with Twenty-six Horses*]. . . . His characters seem to me small, remote, yet very clear, presented through a reversed telescope that yet brings them right to the reader. Their motives, on the other hand, are a trifle larger than life size. . . . The plot is developed into a masterpiece of the kind of suspense that makes the reader want to reach into the story and yell at the oblivious characters on whom the outcome depends. . . . At another level, we have a second story. . . . It develops almost surreptitiously. As the story ends its resolution and the young man's fate become parts of one another. This is technically a neat trick, a nice job of construction. . . . Discard any thought of realism and accept this book for what it is, and it will give you real pleasure.

Oliver La Farge. *New York Times Book Section*. April 28, 1963. p. 5

In a sense, it is unfortunate that all three of William Eastlake's novels have been set in the West, more specifically the Southwest, even more specifically New Mexico and the surrounding areas. *Go in Beauty* and *The Bronc People* have gone the way of all ''Westerns'' and are at present out-of-print. Eastlake's most recent novel, *Portrait of an Artist with Twenty-six Horses*, also is set in New Mexico and unfortunately may follow the same pattern despite its delightful title—unfortunately, because Eastlake's novels are neither the stereotyped ''Westerns,'' nor are they regional Southwestern novels any more than William Faulkner's novels are ''Southern'' or regional novels of the South.

Just as Faulkner created his Yoknapatawpha County out of the area surrounding Oxford, Mississippi, William Eastlake is creating a fictional area in the ''Checkerboard'' region of the Navajo reservation and its adjacent areas in northern New Mexico. His characters live and die in a physical setting that often has dominated the works of lesser writers, turning their expressions into regionalistic descriptions. . . .

Eastlake is a writer who, like the Ernest Hemingway of *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*, keeps a tight rein on his materials, using physical descriptions to suggest or enlarge ideological content. He *uses*, then, the New Mexico landscape, history, and people not for ornament but for the enhancement of meaning. Reading Eastlake, one is always aware of the desert, the mesa, the mountain, the sky, in all their color and beauty, their proudness and mercilessness, but one is also aware that they may be the symbol of ''home,'' or of the ''cradle'' or the ''coffin'' of civilization.

Delbert E. Wylder. *New Mexico Quarterly*. Summer, 1965. pp. 188–9

I find *Castle Keep* impressive, though sometimes difficult. William Eastlake tells his story of American soldiers, defending a castle in the Ardennes in 1944, with a multiplicity of narrators. Get used to one and it's time to change over. But there's something appropriate in this guard-duty approach; it also gives one a kind of castellar impression, as though each narrator were a wing or wall. The big question is: what are they all defending? Abandon the stronghold and you preserve the fragments of civilization it guards; hold it, and you risk a sort of destruction of history. The interweaving of opposed attitudes is intricate, and, for a tale which involves so much sheer waiting, there is an unfailing sense of movement. Mr. Eastlake is strong on the dialectic and, eventually, on the action,

and he has a considerable mastery of diverse American speech-rhythms. I think this is one of the really good American war-books. Soldiers' talk is sweetened by tapestries.

Anthony Burgess. *The Listener*. March 3, 1966. p. 325

William Eastlake writes as though Vietnam could still be explained. *The Bamboo Bed* makes *Catch-22* look like a comic strip. One suspects that Vietnam, a war conceived and illustrated by Chester Gould, makes *The Bamboo Bed* look like a comic strip. But Eastlake went over there to see, and came back and wrote *The Bamboo Bed*. If he left anything out, it was because he didn't think our civilian credibilities could stand any more. He is one of the best American novelists writing today and if he thinks that we can't stand more absurdity than he has written into *The Bamboo Bed* he is probably right. Even though there was probably more to tell. He tells enough.

Richard Rhodes. *Book World*. Nov. 9, 1969. p. 5

The Bamboo Bed is not a political novel, hardly even a war novel. It is neither realistic nor (in the ordinary sense of the term) hard-hitting. A brilliant, strange, wondrous performance: it is the kind of feather that knocks you over. It has something of the black humor of *Catch-22* which it superficially resembles. But Eastlake has done something more than spawn a sequel to Joseph Heller's novel. *Catch-22* is set in World War II—*set in*; any conflagration could have been used as the backdrop to its madness. *The Bamboo Bed* is the war in Vietnam. . . .

A myth is a fiction that makes it possible to deal with the ineffable. Some myths are pernicious, which is why, as Mailer tells us, we are in Vietnam. *The Bamboo Bed*, a mythic exercise in its own right, deflates the myth behind our involvement in Vietnam by mythologizing that war out of existence.

Beverly Gross. *The Nation*. Nov. 24, 1969. pp. 576, 578

Most of [the poems in *A Child's Garden of Verses for the Revolution*] are introduced by skillfully written prose passages that establish the contexts. Eastlake . . . is deeply concerned about our time of violence, hatred, ignorance, and war—foreign and domestic. . . . For observation, detail, scope, and shattering insight into social ills, his poetry is among the best. Yet I think he is a better prose writer than a poet; the brevity of his language, the sense of detail, and the rhythm of his narration have the impact of engrossing journalism, not poetry.

Jon M. Warner. *Library Journal*. Nov. 1, 1970. p. 3785

If Eastlake is—though he wastes no time making a show of it—a deeply intellectual writer in that he confronts serious ideas with both depth and wisdom, he is also a most unusual intellectual, for he actively applies a tempering modicum of myth and magic to his work, thus achieving a dimension of ken unusual midst the single-minded technological thought patterns so widely praised today. And all these things are manifest in an impressionist manner that suggests rather than gouges. Eastlake's major triumph as a writer has been, at his best, to instill in his readers his own unique sense of life, a sense just different enough from their own to create important questions concerning man and the direction of contemporary life. His reintroduction of myth and magic may seem a step into the past, but these aspects of human experience are perpetually modern; Eastlake differs from many contemporary thinkers in his rejection of an all-or-nothing philosophy—all reason or all magic—in favor of a balance of both.

By presenting unusual perspectives and stimulating questions, Eastlake has triggered new feelings and new insights. In exploring the fictive world of William Eastlake, one confronts a portrait of the artist as shaman.

Gerry Haslam. *Western Review*. Spring, 1971. p. 12

William Eastlake is the funniest, most profound, most musical writer I have read in years. He has the greatness of soul not only to kid the characters in his book [*Dancers in the Scalp House*] (Navajos, semi-Navajos, quasi-Navajos, lunatic-fringe Navajo-sympathizers and anti-Navajos) but also to kid himself and his own style and thought as a writer. He has the confidence, in other words, of a man half-bard and half-bum, yet undeceived as to the truth in all the confusion. Eastlake is wise: a poet in the best sense. . . .

His mind is tough, reasonable, and crawls simply everywhere in the connections he makes. Funniness, last resort of the Indian, he has aplenty. . . . Eastlake is a fine American humorist, and he is wise. The last beautiful passage strikes in no uncertain tones one of the finest dirges I've seen.

Barry Hannah. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 12, 1975. p. 43

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EBERHART, Richard (1904–)

Mr. Eberhart, either because his ear is defective or because he is over-anxious to avoid the merely smooth, makes the not uncommon mistake of establishing violence and perversity as his norm, with the inevitable result that where everything shrieks and clashes, the uproar at last cancels itself out, and it is as if nothing had been heard at all. This is a great pity, for he has a wonderful energy of vision, together with a fine gusto in phrase and an enviable muscular capacity for compressed statement; if he could only be severe with himself, and canalize his gifts, instead of simply going hell-for-leather at his Idea, with capitals, he could be one of the very best of contemporary poets, as he is already one of the most exciting.

Conrad Aiken. *New Republic*. Apr. 2, 1945. p. 452

In the manufacture of malt whiskey the barley is soaked, then dried, and then the malt thus obtained is brewed into a beer-like liquid. This liquid, when distilled, produces the raw whiskey. It has to lie mellowing a long time in sherry casks. Mr. Eberhart is always a good brewer but he does not always bother with the further processes of distilling and maturing—or rather, he often matures without distilling, Let him distil his poetry more often: the finer, subtler, stronger and more profound flavor of pot-stilled malt whiskey (now almost unobtainable, alas) is more exciting to the discriminating palate than the pleasantest of beers.

David Daiches. *Poetry*. May, 1945. p. 95

His trouble has always been that his faults are very obvious and easy to feel superior to, because they are as unmodish as it is possible for fault to be; they are Victorian faults. That Mr. Eberhart has also the Victorian virtues is easy to overlook. . . . When Mr. Eberhart succeeds, he achieves kind of direct rightness of feeling towards central experiences which is about the rarest thing there is in contemporary verse; and he does it in a language as simple and perfect for its purpose as you could ask.

Arthur Mizener. *Poetry*. Jan., 1949. pp. 226–7

His mysticism is self-aware and a little humorous. He writes in a good grainy language that puts him squarely in the most attractive tradition of American verse, and he reveals, in some of his poems at least, a marvelous control of stress and pitch, the play of the spoken language within poetic forms. Moreover, like Emily Dickinson, he possesses the ability to hit sometimes upon the absolutely perfect image, startling and simple, lustrous against the setting of the poems.

Hayden Carruth. *Poetry*. Oct., 1954. pp. 55–6

Whatever it is that makes a ''true'' poet, in the old platonic or the new subliminal sense, Richard Eberhart has it. When the god's hand is on him, the language pours forth, powerfully channeled, alive without bombast, rhetorically true. . . . Too many of his poems do begin in brilliant fashion, then fade into some forced paradoxical turn, or into the thick, guttered out language of a conventional and semi-mystical piety, or even into tautology. . . . But though we should not quite forgive him his failures of self-criticism, it is quite likely that Eberhart needs to work as he does; that if he allowed himself certain kinds of ''doubts,'' the greater successes, those poems in which we sense the god's presence at every moment would be impossible.

M.L. Rosenthal. *The Nation*. Dec. 21, 1957. p. 480

Eberhart is a romantic poet in the old style. I don't mean that he imitates particular poets or poems, but that his ideas of poetical structure, and of effective combinations of words resemble the ideas of poets in the early years of the last century. Often he tells an anecdote and follows it with an ecstatic moral. But where Wordsworth moved toward speech and away from poetic diction, Eberhart's direction is characteristically the reverse. Wordsworth's capitalized abstractions are involuntary survivals of the old style; but Eberhart's predecessor was T. S. Eliot, and when Eberhart uses grammatical inversion he is in effect renovating poetic diction. His language is a rhetoric which constantly approaches rhapsody.

Donald Hall. *Saturday Review*. Feb. 11, 1961. p. 65

Richard Eberhart's poetry is excellent only when it is religious in theme and tone, and not always then. In an interview with Denis Donoghue (*Shenandoah*, Summer 1964) Eberhart says that over the years many of his most successful poems have been god-given. I believe him, for those poems have an elevation and intensity quite incommensurate with most of those he has published. When the god speaks through him, the words come out right; sometimes when he meditates on religious subjects, he entrances himself, as it were, and the words come out mostly right; but a lot of the time, when he is being occasional or playful, everything goes wrong. No highly self-critical craftsman would write, much less publish, poems as embarrassing as ''Father and Son'' and ''Father and Daughter''; but then, highly self-critical craftsman are much less likely to be seized by the god, whose taste is not always impeccable; and what a poet gives the world importantly is his good poems, not the average of his good and fair and bad. None of the poems in *The Quarry* is of the high, inspired kind. The three best ones are meditative: a very long parable called ''The kite,'' and the two long concluding Meditations. In these the poet talks himself up to a pitch such that the big abstract nouns and ideas which are a source of gas in his bad poems here become sources of elevation.

George P. Elliott. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1964. p. 459

Poetry as knowledge, poetry as power—between these two tendencies Eberhart has divided his art. The poems that capture in all their suddenness and gratuitousness moments of illumination do not in any way contradict those moral essays that call to account human motives and actions. Each aspect of his verse complements and enriches the other. What counts in both is the instantaneous, sharp, and piercing vision, and its expression: the words which create an experience because they are of its essence and are not an afterthought.

Ralph J. Mills. *Contemporary American Poetry* (Random). 1965. p. 29

[Eberhart] continues after forty years, two *Selected Poems* and one *Collected Poems*, to be the vigorous, idiosyncratic visionary his many admirers have come to cherish. As Kenneth Rexroth remarked, Eberhart always *appeared* to be a poet of the academies, perhaps because of his long teaching career, while his work has actually been the articulation of a quite independent intelligence and imagination, fascinated by physical nature and metaphysical speculation, by the contrariness of human behavior and the elusive traceries of the Divine. Stylistically, Eberhart has developed after his own fashion as well, early absorbing Hopkins, Donne, Blake and others, but always putting what he learned to his own uses. As a poet of inspiration, one who often relies on the moment of perception and its rapid dictation, he has taken risks which more polished poets would avoid, yet the uniqueness of his poetry resides in this visionary intensity that throws caution to the winds in order to seize the given insight.

Fields of Grace, his poems of the past four years, shows that Eberhart has lost none of his power and exuberance; his imagination ranges widely and with keen receptivity over the surfaces, declivities, the abrupt transitions between life and death in the natural world. . . .

Ralph J. Mills, Jr. *Parnassus*. Spring–Summer, 1973. pp. 215–6

Richard Eberhart . . . is perhaps the most distinguished survivor of a tradition that remained potent well into this century but that has been partially eclipsed by the nihilist tendencies of the day, the tradition of religious romanticism whose greatest modern exemplars are Yeats, D. H. Lawrence, Dylan Thomas, and Roethke. If Eberhart sometimes strikes readers as an anomalous figure, it may be because his closest affinities have been not with his contemporaries, whatever their stripe, but with earlier Romantics—Wordsworth, Blake, and Hopkins in particular. I shall seek . . . to indicate the direction of the poet's spiritual development and to probe critical stages of it as they become manifest in representative poems.

[Eberhart's] most impressive early meditation on mortality is ''The Groundhog.''. . . Indeed most of the verse initially collected in *Reading the Spirit* (1936) seems important now mainly as evidence of his struggle to find the voice and point of view perfected in that poem. The question he poses is whether the animal's demise represents, not just physically but also spiritually, a ''senseless change.'' Eberhart treats death most effectively when he is able to gain a certain, though not too great, distance on it.

One finds a characteristic instance of Eberhart's recoil from transcendence in ''I walked out to the graveyard to see the dead.''. . . With a wryness not much evident in the earlier poems but fairly common in the later work, he rejects the golden pheasant's invitation to contemplate the mysteries.

Richard K. Cross. *Concerning Poetry*. Spring, 1979, pp. 13–15

At seventy-six Richard Eberhart stands apart, as ever, belonging to no school of poetry, going his own way without apology. An irrepressible voice in American poetry for more than five decades, in *Ways of Light* he remains ebullient, quirky, brilliant and uneven. Not counting his large *Collected Poems* of 1975, this is his first book of poems since *Fields of Grace* (1972); readers familiar with his work will find Eberhart reworking his usual themes: the fragility of existence, the finality of death, mutability in its various aspects and guises. These are subjects which found their classic expression in his early work: ''The Groundhog,'' ''The Fury of Aerial Bombardment,'' ''For a Lamb,'' and ''Cancer Cells'' come to mind, all widely anthologized. What is new in this book, or freshly seen, is the central but intractable nature of love; Eberhart rejoices in his love, not only of humankind, but of the earth as well, ''The wildness of the thicket, the order of the garden,/And the apples, O the red apples of the orchard.'' He writes with poignancy, and with the peculiar angle of vision characteristic of his work.

Eberhart is perhaps the last genuinely Romantic poet not to suffer unduly from what Harold Bloom calls ''belatedness.'' He is unabashedly vatic, believing in ''inspiration'' as innocently as any poet ever has. His work contains little of the ironic distance so common in American poetry in the past decades. This allows him to confront his subjects with an oddly affecting naiveté. . . .

Eberhart sounds [an] astringent, elegiac note throughout the volume. The mood of a New England autumn, with its traditional associations of brilliance in decline, predominates, this ''Season of bliss and yellow wistfulness,/The corn going down with the sun late afternoon.''. . .

It would be wrong to suggest that *Ways of Light* is a gloomy book because of Eberhart's fascination with mutability and decline. The second elegy for Lowell, ''Stone Words for Robert Lowell,'' ends with defiance in the face of Death, personified as Goliath. And in a central poem, ''Survivors,'' the poet celebrates the ancient ladies of the Maine coast who, in their nineties, can still ''Drive from Boston to Maine,'' and who are ''clear/In mind and body,'' sharp-tongued, sporting, very much alive. . . .

To praise what remains mysterious, to fight back at death, and to acknowledge decay with a certain sorrow but no final bitterness, requires both an autumnal serenity and in indomitable spirit. Eberhart has come upon both honestly, and their mixture informs this late product of a life dedicated to the art of poetry.

Jay Parini *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. Sept. 26, 1980, p. 1060

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EDMONDS, Walter (1903–1998)

Rome Haul would be a notable book in any season. As the first novel of a man born in 1903 it is extraordinary. There are men and women here, of course. But not one of them bulks so large, in the completed tapestry, as the Erie Canal on which they live. . . . Mr. Edmonds undoubtedly set forth to make this a chronicle of the Erie Canal. In this he has succeeded most admirably. . . . Great deeds were done and great lives lived along the canal, *Rome Haul* is a fitting, if somewhat belated, monument.

William Vogt. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Feb. 17, 1929. p. 5

One need hardly say more than that *Erie Water* is as good an historical novel as was Mr. Edmonds's first, *Rome Haul*. It is full of accurate detail and incidents recreated with all the stress and drama of the moment. The conversations, the expletives, in fact, the complete scene of that period and region are utilized with a mastery which points to the author's special study and love of his subject. The romance with which he flavours his story has not the virtue of

originality, but its sincere emotion and suspense adequately serve the purpose of narrative interest.

Archer Winsten. *Bookman*. March, 1933. pp. 295–6

Whether the mood is light or dark, you will find in these stories (*Mostly Canallers*) a freshness of characterization which goes far to explain their eminent readableness, and which itself calls for some explanation. It seems to be founded not merely on quick imagination and the shrewd sense of where one man differs from another but in the author's solid admiration for these rough people of his, on the humor and sympathy with which he draws them out. . . . He has. . . given them an idiom and a relation to environment which give them individuality as a group. When they are lounging or storming about in their own peculiar attitudes they are honest-to-God, and vary satisfying to know.

Otis C. Ferguson. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Feb. 25, 1934. p. 2

Drums Along the Mohawk is crowded with people and with incidents. And they all. . . are convincing. Mr. Edmonds is obviously not a born novelist. He cannot create clearly individualized characters who dominate a book and walk away with the reader's emotions. But he can do very well in painting a society, a countryside full of people. He did it expertly enough in his stories of the building of the Erie Canal; he has done it still more expertly and vigorously in this full book of the Valley in the days of Tories and hostile armies.

Allan Nevins. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 1, 1936. p. 5

Because he is primarily an artist, the work of Walter D. Edmonds goes beyond a local realism. Beneath his faithful use of local color he attempts to express the essential truths of human experience. His novels and stories have been compared to the folk literature of a region, for he treats innocence, courage, the home, as the ancestral virtues of our national birthright. . . . In style as a device for literary experiment he is not at all interested; he holds firmly to the story-telling tradition of the Anglo-Saxon novel. He has a story to tell as well as characters to present, and from characters against a definite background come the outlines of plot.

Dayton Kohler. *English Journal*. Jan., 1938. pp. 10–11

Mr. Edmonds does not content himself with going up into the attic and fetching down a beaver hat and a hoop skirt. He fetches in a whole lost age and makes it so natural that soon one is living in it. He is almost as much at home in Northern New York in the Eighteen Thirties as Mark Twain was with life on the Mississippi. He catches the incidental things. . . . The reader need not look for social significance (in *Chad Hanna*), for this is a yarn of local color, romance, and adventure. . . . This book is a vacation. It is an escape book. It pictures a land and time in which one would like to be for a change, and experiences not too painful to live through—and certainly not too dull!

R. L. Duffus. *New York Times Book Section*. April 7, 1940. p. 1

His outlook is almost exclusively masculine; his best portraits of women are those of women who might as well have been men, and he shows little delicacy of insight regarding the other sex. Against this objection if it is one, we may set the fact that he has great delicacy of perception regarding natural beauty, animals of all sorts, and children. He has not yet exhibited the highest type of constructive imagination, and his invention is in general short-breathed. But on the other hand few writers can excel him in straight story-telling or in the brilliancy with which he can flash a scene. His historical perspective has seldom achieved grandeur and his portrayal of the past lacks both latitude and altitude. He has, however, chosen to cultivate a restricted field intensively and he may have no ambition to extend it.

Robert M. Gay. *Atlantic Monthly*. May, 1940. p. 658

Mr. Edmonds is a romantic realist, he enjoys spinning a yarn for the yarn's sake, but he likes people for themselves rather than—as is the way of so many yarn-spinners—for the function they may be made to perform in the unfolding of the story. So his characters, whom one gets to know slowly, and likes better and better as one knows them, are a refreshingly genuine collection of characters from an America that is gone.

The words that Mr. Edwards puts into their mouths are particularly admirable. This, one says to oneself, is the way Americans must have talked in those days.

Robert Littell. *The Yale Review*. Summer, 1940. p. vi—viii

Like all Mr. Edmond's historical novels, *In the Hands of the Senecas* plays tricks with your calendar. It projects a more dangerous, headier age plump in your living room, and for a few hours you find yourself battling flames and hostile savages with no aid available from fire department or police; none, either, from your immediate neighbors, for in all likelihood you have none. You have become a rugged individualist, not from choice but in order to survive. . . . Mr. Edmonds takes advantage of every opportunity offered by his material and often creates breathless suspense by such devices as escapes, pursuits, and the like. But a different, more organic type of suspense also pervades the story, one's natural anxiety to know what will happen next to a group of always believable characters.

Jennings Rice. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Jan. 26, 1947. p. 8

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ELDER, Lonne (1931–)

It is a difficult time for those of us who look forward to an America in which mutual respect, warm friendship, and socioeconomic justice will prevail in all relationships between those of differing racial ancestry. Therefore, it is most heartening to visit the Negro Ensemble Company at their small St. Mark's Playhouse and find a play such as *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*. For this work by Lonne Elder, 3rd, deals most realistically yet unrancorously with today's Harlem.

Furthermore, it never lets fear of possibly contributing to the perpetuation of a racist-held stereotype force it into a well meaning but patently false distortion of the characters it has chosen to depict. It is as if Mr. Elder is trusting us to think of these characters as the understandable victims of a racist society that has deprived them of virility and the incentive to become educated or even industrious. They are what any of us might be, if we had faced the same negative conditions.

Henry Hewes. *Saturday Review*. 22 February 1969, p. 29.

The only new play which has genuinely interested me for some time is Lonne Elder's *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*, as given by the Negro Ensemble Company. When I say ''play'' I refer to the whole phenomenon of stage presentation: ''words'' in the ''music'' of an acting team perceived as a single experience. (*Tango*, in contrast, contains a vital text damaged by inadequate acting.) With *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* I did not think to evaluate any of its parts (script, acting, setting, direction) separately. That is *theatre*. With Elder's play the Negro Ensemble has achieved its own proper pitch.

One may note some repetitiousness in the text and there were overfacile strokes for comedy effect. The total impression, however, is without blemish. Even the crudities in the play's texture are of a kind which appear organic with the material, part of its reality.

There is no special pleading: it proclaims no thesis, espouses no cause, appeals for no largess. *Ceremonies* is a family play whose characters are foolish, fallible, sweet, stupid, lovable, always understandable folk. They are richly human and as such not easily subject to petty compromise in humdrum jobs at paltry wages.

Russell Parker was a pop dancer till one day he no longer had the strength. He became a barber, but without any aptitude for the work, earned little in his Harlem shop and allowed his faithful wife to support him till she died of the burden. Their daughter took over her mother's task; now she supports her father who spends most of his time playing checkers with a kindly friend and recounting tall tales to the delight of his two sons, who also find indolence more convenient than work. One day the hard-driven girl, fed up with the situation, announces that either they get jobs or she will refuse to contribute her earnings to their further maintenance. Crisis!

The younger brother has already begun to amuse himself by larceny; the older one has hit upon a scheme suggested by a local racketeer, Blue Haven. Since the young idler has a talent for making bootleg whisky on the premises, they will arrange to convert the barber shop into a speak-easy. Parker balks at the proposal but, faced with the alternative humiliation of finding work ''downtown,'' agrees to the plan.

It all ends disastrously, though the play cannot be said to have an ''end.'' We know at the last fade-out only that the family will abandon their illegal trade after (but not because) the young brother has been killed during a robbery which is one of the activities into which he had been led by Blue Haven.

None of this gives any idea of the humor, the oblique pathos, the unsentimental pain—affecting the racketeer himself—with which the story is told. If the play were to be summarized in a bald reduction of its theme, it might be stated as an account of how poverty and other wretched circumstances in the lives of a black family force them into a tragic mess, for which there is no base motive, but only the wish to enjoy life, freely and fully. But such a summation lacks the savor of what I felt while observing the characters through what, despite elements of violence, are really little more than casual happenings in a poor black neighborhood. There is no sensationalism, not even a ''problem''—only the warp and woof of ordinary living: funny, crazy, frightening and somehow strangely innocent, heartwarming as much as heartbreaking. The play, the first by a writer of 30, is a ''little'' comedy—much more telling than many that are ambitiously ''significant.''

What makes it altogether delightful and arresting is the unadorned, exciting, joyous and entirely devoted nature of the acting—the kind which not only makes one believe that he is *there* (yet happily in the theatre), but that the actors have invented their own lines, on the spur of the moment. Speech and flesh are one. It all seems so artless as to constitute the truest art.

If only one member of the cast were to be singled out, it would have to be Douglas Turner in the central role. His passion, his raciness, his vigor, his total commitment to the essence of each moment make his performance one of the memorable occasions of the year: far more expressive and *useful* than some of those exuberantly touted elsewhere in town. There are few more hilarious scenes in recent days than the one in which Turner, as Parker,

tells of his travail on a chain gang—a yarn which ain't necessarily so but which he makes more vividly to the point than truth itself.

It would be a critical misdemeanor to pass over Arthur French. Parker's companion in fun, games and sorrow; he is inescapably winning. And William Jay as the older son, David Downing as the younger, Rosalind Cash as their doughty sister, Samual Blue, Jr., as the racketeer, and sexy Judyann Jonsson as Parker's fling all contribute more than honorably to the evening's success.

Harold Clurman. *The Nation*, New York. February 24, 1969, p. 253.

[Compared to Ed Bullins's *Clara's Old Man* there is] a slight drop in the quality of working-class reality in *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*. In Bullins it is as if he were using black working-class folk themselves as the brushes with which to paint his canvas, while in Elder there seems to be greater distance than in Bullins between the artist and his black working class. Bullins is the effortless artist, so total the artist that, in his best work, one rarely senses contrivance; the naturalness, the grimness are so complete that they do not seem to be plays at all but rather the rakings of life dropped down before our eyes and our ears by the hands of some black god of life whose woolly head brushes against the clouds. Aretha has this total naturalness and the seeming absence of effort, the absolute spontaneity, and Bobby Blue Bland and Stevie Wonder have it, and Bird, and Coltrane, Sidney Bechet. But though there is a drop in the quality of working-class reality in *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* we still have magnificence, and there is a reason. The reason is that Elder is wise enough to do as Bullins has done: to focus on his own people—neither to sickly include nor to sickly exclude the white man. In Bullins and Elder there is no sick sense of an omnipotent and ubiquitous oppressor, and of course the fearful sense of an omnipotent and ubiquitous oppressor means that the writer himself then must be to a degree impotent. And inasmuch as any sense of the omnipotence of the oppressor is not in these works, the writer himself, a reflection of his people, suffers from no impotence. The writer himself is victor: there is the sense of the black people themselves, as a people, as implicit victors; their very vigor, the fire of their style, the pride of their poetry, the flow of the music and poetry of their language, their vigorous and unashamed sexuality: these are implicits of an undefeated people: and more: their thrust and vigor and poetry and violence are the implicit expression of the potentialities of Man to rise above his present condition and attain a godliness, for in certitude one thing that Bullins does is to express in the lives of the people of *Clara's Old Man* and *In the Wine Time*, a sense of secular holiness, and the primary function of literature above all is to reveal to man that in his complexity and confusion there exist his potentialities of godliness, his destiny of grandeur.

Lance Jeffers. *CLA Journal* 1, September, 1972, pp. 32–48.

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ELIOT, T.S. (1888–1965)

By technique we . . . mean one thing: the alert hatred of normality which, through the lips of a tactile and cohesive adventure, asserts that nobody in general and some one in particular is incorrigibly and actually alive. This some one is, it would seem, the extremely great artist: or, he who prefers above everything the unique dimension of intensity, which it amuses him to substitute in us for the comforting and comfortable furniture of reality. If we examine the means through which this substitution is allowed by Mr. Eliot to happen in his reader, we find that they include: a vocabulary almost brutally tuned to attain distinction; an extraordinary tight orchestration of the shapes of sound; the delicate and careful murderings—almost invariably interpreted, internally as well as terminally, through near-rhyme and rhyme—of established tempos by oral rhythms.

E.E. Cummings. *Dial*. June, 1920. p. 783

It is true his poems seem the products of a constricted emotional experience and that he appears to have drawn rather heavily on books for the heat he could not derive from life. There is a certain grudging margin, to be sure, about all that Mr. Eliot writes—as if he were compensating himself for his limitations by a peevish assumption of superiority. But it is the very acuteness of his suffering from this starvation which gives such poignancy to his art. And, as I say, Mr. Eliot is a poet—that is, he feels intensely and with distinction and speaks naturally in beautiful verse—so that, no matter within what walls he lives, he belongs to the divine company. . . . These drops, though they be wrung from flint, are none the less authentic crystals.

Edmund Wilson. *Dial*. Dec., 1922. p. 615

The writer of ''The Waste Land'' and the other poems of that period appeals to us as one struck to the heart by the confusion and purposelessness and wastefulness of the world about him. . . . And to that world his verse will be held up as a ruthlessly faithful mirror. The confusion of life will be reflected in the disorganized flux of images; its lack of clear meaning in the obscurity of language. . . . And now against this lyric prophet of chaos must be set the critic who will judge the world from the creed of the classicist, the royalist, and the Anglo-Catholic. . . . I think . . . that a sensitive mind cannot read ''Ash Wednesday'' without an uneasy perception of something fundamentally amiss in employing for an experience born of Anglo-Catholic faith a metrical form and a freakishness of punctuation suitable for the presentation of life regarded as without form and void. . . . He is a leader and a very influential leader. Our difficulty is that he seems to be leading us in two directions at once.

Paul Elmer More. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 12, 1932. p. 235

Eliot not only follows the classical dogma because he cherishes classicism; he follows it also because he cherishes dogma. . . . He loses much by being fastidious. He loses much by having no humor whatever, but he is capable of something else by having splendid wit. And the presence of wit and the absence of humor in Eliot argue his possession of great intellect and egoism, his lack of

humanity, his lack of modesty and unselfconsciousness. He rests with those men who have chosen to see life distantly, from a single vantage-point; and had he, in the absence of warmth and sinew, a great intensity, he might possess permanent value for us. . . . But he is not intense, he is merely correct.

Louis Kronenberger. *The Nation*. Apr. 17, 1935. p. 453

Eliot's own opinions are not merely related to his poetry. They qualify his whole critical attitude, and they make him to some extent a preacher. His aim as a writer has been to be a traditionalist: the tradition which he has adopted, being derived from the Church, has also sociological and educative implications. It is his object to show that the application of these principles in social life is as just as it is correct to apply them to literature. He seems to feel that unless he can prove this, he is, in his work, an individualist: not a traditionalist radically connected with the historic process: but isolated, original, personal, in the sense that he is writing about his own beliefs which are ''home-made,'' and so make him eccentric and different from the people around him.

Stephen Spender. *The Destructive Element* (Houghton). 1936. pp. 164–5

When Eliot stood isolated and dispossessed amid the ruins of a familiar universe, every nerve and sensation quivered with its own life. The antennae of his intelligence were alive with nervous vitality. This resulted in images and allegories of great focal sharpness. In more recent years, approaching a stranger territory, this grip on identity is no longer held, and with its relaxation the nervous sensibility of his diction and cadence has lessened. He writes either a more relaxed and speculative verse, or a sort of argument which attempts to extend his intellectual problems beyond their own limits. He has become a poet of more public qualities, of religious responsibilities, and even (in *The Rock*) of social concerns. These have entailed a change from a style of cryptic historical reference and erudition to one of dialectic lucidity, or even of popular simplification.

Morton Dauwen Zabel. *Southern Review*. Summer, 1936. p. 170

If there is a metaphysical distinction between the poetry and the prose of T.S. Eliot, it is this: that in the former he is sceptical of his own knowledge of truth, and in the latter he is indicating the path along which he hopes to find it. In the poetry he sees things through a glass darkly; in the prose he is proclaiming the truth that will make us free. Both these activities, however, are offshoots of a unified intelligence, of a man who is singularly whole in his conception of the dignity and importance of his art. There is no real divergence between his theory and practice, no matter how lucid he may contrive to make his criticism, or how obscure his poetry.

A.C. Partridge. *T.S. Eliot* (Pretoria). 1937. p. 3

He will soon make ordinary drama look cheap because of its lack of metaphysical interest, just as he had part in making the ordinary shallow poetry of twenty years ago look the same way, and for the same reason. . . . On the realistic level Mr. Eliot is superb in his mastery of characterization (both the satiric and the sympathetic), handling of plot sequence, exposition of background through dialogue, and, I imagine, such other techniques as belong to an oral form like drama. It is comforting to think that an intellectualist, so strict and unconceding that he has been accused of living in a tower, has picked up without any fuss the knack for the close structural effects of drama.

John Crowe Ransom. *Poetry*. Aug., 1939. pp. 264–6

It is to him, together with Ezra Pound, that we can trace the awareness of the urban scene, the employment of anti-poetic imagery, conversational rhythms, cinematic transitions and close-ups, which make contemporary verse deserve the adjective. And even the most vigorous and provocative of the younger men have not shown an ''auditory imagination'' equal to Eliot's. . . . What his ''feeling for syllable and rhythm'' has brought back, in its curious workings, has been chiefly a sense of disorder, of frustration and waste, an intimate and horrifying vision of death.

Babette Deutsch. *American Scholar*. Winter, 1939. p. 30

Eliot, in brief, has surrendered to the acedia which Baudelaire was able to judge; Eliot suffers from the delusion that he is judging it when he is merely exhibiting it. He has loosely thrown together a collection of disparate and fragmentary principles which fall roughly into two contradictory groups, the romantic on the one hand and on the other the classical and Christian; and being unaware of his own contradictions, he is able to make a virtue of what appears to be private spiritual laziness; he is able to enjoy at one and the same time the pleasure of indulgence and the dignity of disapproval.

Yvor Winters. *Kenyon Review*. Spring, 1941. p. 238

Eliot seldom involves himself steadily with the world about him. Instead he makes brief and startling sallies into the world and hence his poetry sometimes strikes us either as a discontinuous anthology of images or as an imitation of involuted psychological or biological processes which remain purely verbal. . . . Another result of this nervous intermittence is that Eliot's criticism of other poets—such as Donne, Marvell, or Dryden—makes the excellence of their poetry depend too much on their surprising success in image-making and too little on their steady sense of life. Eliot tends to give us what is occasional and spasmodic in a poet, rather than the poet's normal excellence.

Richard Chase. *Kenyon Review*. Spring, 1945. pp. 220–1

The reconciliation of opposites is as fundamental to Eliot as it was to Heraclitus. Only thus can he envisage a resolution of man's whole being. The ''heart of light'' that he glimpsed in the opening movement of ''Burnt Norton'' is at the opposite pole from the *Heart of Darkness* from which he took the epigraph for ''The Hollow Men.'' Essential evil still constitutes more of Eliot's subject matter than essential good, but the magnificent orchestration of his themes has prepared for that paradisal glimpse at the close, and thereby makes it no decorative allusion, but an integrated climax to the content no less than to the form. Such spiritual release

and reconciliation are the chief reality for which he strives in a world that has seemed to him increasingly threatened with new dark ages.

F.O. Matthiessen. *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot* (Oxford). 1947. p. 195

In spite of everything, Eliot *has*, in his critical essays, said many of the things that most needed to be said in our time. He has documented with appropriate *dicta* the final ebb of the romantic movement, the reversal of the trend which saw poetry as the expression of the poet's unique personality, the rediscovery of the glories of the metaphysical poets, and the parallel reintroduction into English and American poetry of wit *and* passion. In some of his best essays—those on Dante, for example—he is often rearranging (as Mario Praz has shown) the ideas of Ezra Pound or others; in some of his worst, he is merely perverse or pigheaded or exhibitionistic. But his critical ideas are in themselves full of interest and excitement, and have become part of the intellectual atmosphere of our time.

David Daiches. *The Yale Review*. Spring, 1949. pp. 466–7

To my notion T.S. Eliot is the greatest of all literary critics. . . . Eliot's merit lies almost equally in his ability to raise the pertinent problems and in the fineness of his taste. He gave himself a rule of cogency early on and has had the strength of mind to obey it without evasion. This is the first critic of whom we can feel sure that the most important question will always be answered—namely, how successful *as art* is the work of art in hand? Eliot is no philosopher of aesthetics or criticism; he is both more and less than that: his critical practice demonstrates the right principles in action and we recognize them by their fruits rather than their definition.

Clement Greenberg. *The Nation*. Dec. 9, 1950. p. 531

Eliot's mind, let us say, is a mind of contrasts which sharpen rather than soften the longer they are weighed. It is the last mind which, in this century, one would have expected to enter the Church in a lay capacity. The worldliness of its prose weapons, its security of posture, its wit, its ability for penetrating doubt and destructive definition, its eye for startling fact and talent for nailing it down in flight, hardly go with what we think of today as English or American religious feeling. . . . However that may be, within the Church or not, Mr. Eliot's mind has preserved its worldly qualities. His prose reflections remain elegant, hard (and in a sense easy—as in manners), controlled, urbane (without the dissimulation associated with ecclesiastical urbanity), and fool-proof.

R.P. Blackmur. *Language as Gesture* (Harcourt). 1952. pp. 176–7

More than one critic has remarked that in Eliot the over-all organization of the poem as a whole is not lyrical in any recognizable and traditional way; nor is the poem organized in terms of narrative; nor is it dramatic in the literal theatrical sense; and it is certainly not logical, argumentative, or expository. . . . Where poets in the past would have used a logical, emotional, dramatic, or narrative basis for the transition from part to part, Eliot uses some one of these kinds of transition freely and alternatively and without committing himself to any one of them or to any systematic succession of them; or he omits the connection between one passage and the next, one part and the part which succeeds it. . . . The characteristic over-all organization of the poem—of which ''The Waste Land'' is the vividest example—can be called, for the lack of a better phrase, that of sibylline (or subliminal) listening.

Delmore Schwartz. *Poetry*. Jan., 1955. pp. 236–7

[F.H.] Bradley, of course, didn't solve Eliot's initial poetic problem; there is no evidence that Eliot paid him any attention until after he had written *Prufrock* and *Portrait of a Lady*. (He did not buy his own copy of *Appearance and Reality* until mid-1913.) The study of Bradley, however, may be said to have done three things for a poet who might otherwise not have passed beyond the phase of imitating Laforgue. It solved his *critical* problem, providing him with a point of view towards history and so with the scenario for his most comprehensive essay, ''Tradition and the Individual Talent''; it freed him from the Laforguian posture of the ironist with his back to a wall, by affirming the artificiality of *all* personality including the one we intimately suppose to be our true one; not only the faces we prepare but the ''we'' that prepares; and it released him from any notion that the art his temperament bade him practice was an eccentric art, evading for personal and temporary reasons a more orderly, more ''normal'' unfolding from statement to statement.

Hugh Kenner. *The Invisible Poet* (McDowell, Obolensky). 1959. p. 55

What most critics of Mr. Eliot's plays seem to ignore is that he is writing a new kind of drama. Whereas most plays appeal to the passions—pity, terror, the glamor of love—or to the intellect, or would stir our zeal for political reform, his plays are based on an appeal to the conscience, or the consciousness of self. Here is this person, he says in effect, guilty of this or that; how far are you, dear spectator, in the like case? Our response comes from a different center. That is why some people do not applaud his plays; nobody likes to be made to think about his weakness, his failures, or his sins. Not that many of us have committed crimes: but then crimes, as we are told in this play (*The Elder Statesman*) are in relation to the law, sins in relation to the sinner. . . . In all the plays about conscience, from Sophocles to Ibsen, we are detached spectators. . . . Here, however, we are forced to ask ourselves: ''Have I never run away from myself? Have I never tried to blot out incidents from my past?''

Bonamy Dobrée. *Sewanee Review*. Winter, 1959. pp. 109–10

Eliot's poetic craftsmanship has been praised by very diverse critics, who agree that everything that he has to say, he says extremely well. We never get the feeling that he cannot quite say what he means, or that the felt significance is too big for the poem which has been used to express it (a feeling we experience with some of Dylan Thomas's poetry). The limitation of Eliot's poetry is in the subject matter. Only a narrow range of human experience seems to be subjected to the poetic process, a range which deals almost entirely with states of mind and soul, and which looks over a lonely territory where the poetic protagonist stands isolated from

other beings. To adopt an expression of Eliot's, which he uses to describe Dante's poetic power, this is a poetry which comprehends the height and the depth of experience but is limited in breadth. This leads in Eliot's poetry to that unity of development of which we have spoken, but it also leads to a very *personal* poetry, for the states of mind and soul which he deals with are *his own:* he is his own subject matter.

Sean Lucy. *T.S. Eliot and the Idea of Tradition* (Barnes and Noble). 1960. p. 160

In poetic form and imagery Eliot avoids all kinds of overloading, unless he is out for very special effects. Generally he finds a middle way between intellectualism and lyricism, or he balances the two in alternate lines and stanzas. The difficult and involved is continually set off by the simple and translucent, a fact which immediately emerges if his poetry is compared with the far opaquer medium of W.H. Auden. And Eliot's symbolism is supported and made accessible by naturalistic imagery, as a comparison with Yeats will bring out.

Eliot is not the arch-intellectualist in poetry that many people think. But, of course, his intellectual habits are mirrored in his poetry, so that the latter presents the attitudes of one accustomed to reflection. He may have had good reasons for the anti-emotionalism expressed in ''Tradition and the Individual Talent'', but it is impossible to refine emotion out of poetry altogether; and this Eliot has recognized, for he has told us repeatedly that his poetry expresses what it *feels* like to believe in something.

Kristian Smidt. *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T.S. Eliot* (Humanities Press). 1961. p. 233

The origin of his attempt to develop a new theater is to be seen in his view that, just as man's nature needs to be guided by discipline and order, so dramatic art needs to be given a form which can draw a circle of abstraction around experience in order to make drama conform to the standard of all art—the ordered relationship of the parts to the whole. Believing that of all literary forms drama has the greatest capacity for recreating a complete and ordered world, Eliot developed a dramatic structure which was intended to lead the audience to a sense of religious awareness by demonstrating the presence of the supernatural order in the natural world. His dramatic theme is also the product of his religious concern to integrate the real and the ideal. In each of his plays he has portrayed the plight of the individual who perceives the order of God but, forced to exist in the natural world, must somehow come to terms with both realms.

Carol H. Smith. *T.S. Eliot's Dramatic Theory and Practice* (Princeton). 1963. p. 31

Eliot wrote the work [*The Waste Land*] under the stress of illness. Six years of strenuous double-living—wage-earning faithfully and efficiently pursued, intellectual conquests pursued at the same time—had exhausted him. But a poet's breakdown is often the moment of creation. To let slip his hold on the day is to slip free of the day's hold on him; he gathers all that he has experienced into an innovative act. . . .

The Waste Land is a work in which the poet, like some of his predecessors, writes simultaneously about his own illness and the world's illness, of which his own is a reflection. He records and condemns his own ''despairing'' state and prescribes a discipline for his cure and for the healing of the city civilization of which he is the representative.

Herbert Howarth. *Notes on Some Figures behind T.S. Eliot* (Houghton). 1964. pp. 234, 237

The image of structural unity pervades Eliot's social and literary criticism. What of his own poetry? Is he able to reach his goal of organic unity and write poems which live because they share the life of the European mind?

Most of Eliot's poems depend on the assumption that the poet can enlarge his private consciousness to coincide with a collective consciousness. This assumption is so easily and persuasively sustained that it is easy to forget what an extraordinary arrogation of power it is. Only a few early poems, such as ''Prufrock'' or ''Portrait of a Lady,'' are limited to the perspective of a single ego. In most poems the reader is placed within everybody's mind at once. An act of self-surrender has expanded the private mind of the poet into the universal sphere of the mind of Europe.

J. Hillis Miller. *Poets of Reality* (Harvard). 1965. p. 172

In between his visits we used to call upon him in London—once on Good Friday, when his precision occupied itself much with the exactly right temperature at which hot cross buns should be served. What was peculiar to TSE in this sort was the delicately perceptible trace, the ghostly flavor of irony which hung about his manner as though he were preparing a parody. For example, when we went to Peking in 1929, we wrote pressing him to come to stay with us in that enchanting scene. His reply: ''I do not care to visit any country which has no native cheese.'' Not too much, I think, should be made of these ''deliberate disguises'', but he did have a repertory of more or less confessed poses which his friends were not debarred from seeing through.

I.A. Richards. *Sewanee Review*. Jan.-March, 1966. p. 26

Sir Herbert Read tells me that the English poet for whom Eliot felt a conscious affinity, and upon whom he perhaps in some degree modelled himself, was Johnson. All the same it seems to me that the more we see of the hidden side of Eliot the more he seems to resemble Milton, though he thought of Milton as a polar opposite. As we look at all the contraries reconciled in Eliot—his schismatic traditionalism, his romantic classicism, his highly personal impersonality—we are prepared for the surprise (which Eliot himself seems in some measure to have experienced) of finding in the dissenting Whig regicide a hazy mirror-image of the Anglo-Catholic royalist. Each, having prepared himself carefully for poetry, saw that he must also, living in such times, explore prose, the cooler element. From a consciously archaic standpoint each must characterize the activities of the sons of Belial. Each saw that fidelity to tradition is ensured by revolutionary action. (Eliot would hardly have dissented from the proposition that ''a man may be a heretic in the truth''.) Each knew the difficulty of finding ''answerable style'' in an age too late. With the Commonwealth an evident

failure, Milton wrote one last book to restore it, and as the élites crumbled and reformed Eliot wrote his *Notes* [*toward the Definition of a Culture*]. If Milton killed a king, Eliot attacked vulgar democracy and shared with the ''men of 1914'' and with Yeats some extreme authoritarian opinions.

Frank Kermode. *Sewanee Review*. Jan.-March, 1966. pp. 228–9

It won't be easy to reclaim his work from the conceptual and scholarly currency already invested in it. It will mean forcing ourselves to forget most of what exegesis has burdened us with, and it will mean returning for help to those very few difficult critics I've mentioned [Leavis, Blackmur, Kenner], all of whom have insisted, to almost no effect, on Eliot's deliberate irrationality. In trying to release Eliot from schematizations contrived mostly for the clarification and boredom of undergraduates, these, and a few others, direct us away from the seductions of neatness and into the wonderful mystery at the center of Eliot's poetry and criticism. What we find there, if we stay long enough, is that for Eliot ideas have no more organizational power than do literary allusions and that neither is as preoccupying as are the furtive memories and hallucinations, the sensuous images that stimulate a poem like ''Preludes'' but which remain at the end as unassimilated to any design as they were at the beginning.

Richard Poirier. *New Republic*. May 20, 1967. pp. 19–20

For me, the poetry [of *Four Quartets*] is saved by the scruple. The way in which it is saved may be indicated, perhaps, in a passage from *Varieties of Religious Experience*, where [William] James discusses the character of sanctity, particularly its ascetic quality. He remarks that while it is normal and, apparently, instinctive for us to seek ''the easy and the pleasant,'' at the same time it is also normal ''in moderate degree'' to seek the arduous: ''Some men and women, indeed, there are who can live on smiles and the word 'yes' forever. But for others (indeed for most) this is too tepid and relaxed a moral climate. Passive happiness is slack and insipid, and soon grows mawkish and intolerable. Some austerity and wintry negativity, some roughness, danger, stringency, and effort, some 'no! no!' must be mixed in, to produce the sense of an existence with character and texture and power.''

Perhaps this is how *Four Quartets* lives, and how it communicates with those readers who do not share its Christian belief; by giving us the sense of an existence with character and texture and power. This is the tone of its ''approach.'' Eliot has always implied, incidentally, that the satisfactions of poetry are in this tone. The great poet helps to purify the dialect of the tribe by making our stupidity unendurable.

Denis Donoghue. *The Ordinary Universe* (Macmillan—N.Y.). 1968. pp. 265–6

Those who are put off by Eliot's religion unconsciously agree with the pharisaical among churchgoers, for they, too, adopt the heretical opinion that the faith is a set of lucid propositions and the God of the faithful fully known. Their objection is not really to Eliot's idea of reality but to his calling this reality ''God.'' They have in this a confidence about the meaningfulness of words which Eliot is innocent of. He supposes that all languages are approximations, imperfect versions of reality, so that words are proved true only pragmatically, by their power to order experience. His is the least dogmatic and the most skeptical of religious poetry. To judge it fairly, one must ask not whether in the abstract the Nicene Creed is a true statement, but whether the experiences Eliot depicts hang together as credibly consistent.

The conversational tone of most of Eliot's work invites the reader to accept the persona in a more or less equal relationship. The persona does not speak down to the reader—even in *Four Quartets* he addresses the reader as a friend except in a few falsely humble, rather patronizing lines that tend to weaken the equal relationship. But while the conversational base defines the rapport between reader and persona, within the conversational tone the persona reveals a pattern of emotional response appropriate to his role as questing man. The talk of *The Waste Land* reflects in turn the speaker's aspiration and despair, his capacity for ecstasy and humor, his union of sense and sensibility which makes him a representative man.

George T. Wright in *Modern American Poetry*, ed. Jerome Mazzaro (McKay). 1970. p. 237

In Eliot's ''The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'' and *The Waste Land*, myth discloses the personal terror and the feelings of impotence and despair which the protagonist objectifies in relation to society and history. Like Yeats and Auden, Eliot is ever aware of the seeds of death within the experience of love, but for Eliot there is no contest between the two; in *The Waste Land*, love retreats before its enemy as the protagonist takes on the role of the passive and maimed mythical king. Perhaps the most significant disclosure of unconscious feelings lies not in the actual myths Eliot uses in *The Waste Land*, but in the way mythical figures merge into each other. Like creatures in a dream, they depict the conflict and suffering of the protagonist and his distaste for the self which is finally defined by all of them. No doubt Yeats was correct in placing Eliot among those who attempted to exclude ''the personal dream'' from their work; certainly Eliot avoided the deepest psychological revelations of the very myths he employed. The conflicts and terrors that dream reveals, however, and indeed its very methods of condensation and merging, of disguising the self in a variety of forms, are present in his use of myth.

Lillian Feder. *Ancient Myth in Modern Poetry* (Princeton). 1971. p. 347

From first to last in Eliot's poetic career, from the undersea vision of Prufrock through the Hyacinth garden of *The Waste Land* to the rose garden of ''Burnt Norton,'' it is a quintessentially Jamesian experience which lies at the heart of his work. The tragedy is that of one who can perceive but cannot act, who can understand and remember but cannot communicate. ''I could not/Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither/ Living nor dead . . . /Looking into the heart of light, the silence.'' At one time Eliot thought of titling the second part of *The Waste Land* ''In the Cage,'' an obvious reference to [Henry] James's novella where the little telegraph girl, shut into her wire cage, can only live vicariously through the communications that pass across her desk. She knows everything, and can act upon nothing: she is like Tiresias, who knows all, foresuffers all, and can prevent none of it.

This is the vision of personal isolation that Eliot shares with James, and that lies at the deepest reaches of all his works. And yet, like James, Eliot was possessed with the complementary ''vision of an ideal society''; the result was an art aware at every turn of the ''disparity between possibility and fact.'' In his later works Eliot does explore ways of breaking the ''closed circle of consciousness,'' through discipline or through grace.

A. Walton Litz in *Eliot in His Time*, ed. A. Walton Litz (Princeton). 1973. p. 21

No other poet in the history of the language, with the possible exception of Pound, has revalued so many reputations, or domesticated so many foreign poets in English taste. In accepting Eliot as my generation did, wholesale, we accepted not only ''The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'' and *The Sacred Wood*, but an attitude toward the entire European past, a modification of its ''pastness,'' and a spirit of inquiry that seemed to us life-giving. Perhaps that was only one of his two or three ideas, but it was a big one—too big, the critics now seem to feel, to have been expressed with full success in Eliot's first go at expressing it (''Tradition and the Individual Talent''); but with the passing of the years, it has been worked out to really enriching and liberating conclusions.

Robert M. Adams in *Eliot in His Time*, ed. A. Walton Litz (Princeton). 1973. p. 135

Yeats and Eliot made opposite public uses of romanticism to define their own poetic stances. While Yeats projected himself as the last romantic, Eliot posed as an anti-romantic modern; and whereas Yeats strove to rescue romanticism from its own defects, Eliot worked to purge literature as a whole of the contamination of romanticism. Both these postures exaggerate, for Yeats' rescue meant transformation and Eliot's overt wreckage masked covert salvage. Like the speaker of Stevens' ''Man and Bottle,'' Eliot destroyed romantic tenements only to clear the ground for new pleasure domes. To have been told this in his youth would have horrified him; by old age it might not even have surprised him.

In one important respect the patterns of Eliot's and Yeats' long careers share the same relation to the romantics: a tripartite division of strong initial attraction and identification (a theme little heard of among Eliot's more devout admirers), violent rejection in order to form an independent identity as poet, and final if incomplete reconciliation. But here the parallel ends, for three main reasons. First, Eliot's romantic phase stops with his teens rather than with the onset of middle age. . . . Second, Eliot's grasp of romanticism was superficial compared to Yeats'. He never studied Shelley or Blake as intensely as Yeats and never understood them as well. . . .Finally, Eliot did not reconcile himself to the romantics while still primarily a practicing poet. His rapprochement coincided with his emergence as dramatist, Christian sociologist, and institution; in none of these identities did the romantics threaten him, and in some of them Coleridge was a positive help. . . .

Eliot unmistakably adopted a world view not just dependent on unhuman powers but requiring repudiation of both nature and imagination, as *The Cocktail Party* elsewhere makes clear. Blake repudiated all hypostatizations, Shelley adhered to a visionary skepticism, Keats was certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affections and the truths of imagination, and even the more orthodoxly religious Wordsworth and Coleridge saw both nature and imagination as positive. Eliot did not, and his refusal generated the conflict between the overt and covert mental action of his poems. Unlike Shelley, who equally recognized the dangers of imagination, Eliot could never see ''all that faith creates, or love desires'' as ultimately human, although he, too, perceived ''Terrible, strange, sublime and beauteous shapes.'' He was romantic against the grain, illustrating in his own career the contention of his essay on Baudelaire that in a romantic age a poet could not be anti-romantic except in tendency. The saint repudiated the swordsman, although not without subterranean vacillation.

George Bornstein. *Transformations of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens* (Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1976), pp. 94–95, 161–62

The Waste Land has seemed to be from the beginning a kind of incredibly complicated ink blot designed for a Rorschach test, confirming whatever is already present in the eye of the beholder. Whether Marxist, Christian, or merely aesthete, readers could hail the poem as summing up the attitude of a generation. And the poem's ''meaning'' became embodied not only in criticism, sociology, and history, but also in other works of art. Take, for example, three American novels: F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) presents a waste land in miniature in the valley of ashes that lies between West Egg and New York; Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) presents an impotent hero as spokesman for a lost generation living meaningless lives; William Faulkner's *Sanctuary* (1931) presents still other impotent (both psychically and physically) characters living and dying in a world of purposeless, pointless violence. These are but three instances that could be multiplied endlessly of works directly or indirectly influenced by *The Waste Land*—and the very influence suggesting an interpretation of the poem.

Thus making *The Waste Land* mean has been a task pursued with determination over a half-century by critics, poets, and novelists, with a conspicuous lack of unanimity as to what that meaning is—and with the bemused dismay of the poem's author. It would be difficult to find in all literary history a poet whose poem appeared abandoned so completely to others for revision and interpretation. It is almost as though it were snatched from the author's hands and cut, shaped, and read to fit the needs of an ailing modern age. And before his very eyes, his poem was metamorphosed into another identity, another existence, with which he himself would eventually need to come to terms.

James E. Miller, Jr. *T. S. Eliot's Personal Waste Land: Exorcism of the Demons* (Pennsylvania State Univ. Pr., 1977), p. 159

The poetry concerns us all, not because it is true or false, but because Eliot's mastery of our language makes his life-work a potent fact in the culture of the English-speaking world. His poetry has a power in our minds, through the authority of its diction and rhythms and images, to enforce certain meanings and feelings, and to suppress others. It has this power, of course, only because it is drawing upon meanings, and habits of feeling and perception already established in the language, and so in our mentality. Its potency is for animating a deep-rooted tradition of the common

mind. We may like to think that Eliot's Mind of Europe is not ours; but very few of us can call our minds altogether our own. When Eliot writes of ''heaven and damnation/Which flesh cannot endure,'' we know immediately and inwardly what he is saying whether we share his beliefs or not. It is the same with his ''spirit'' which he would have enter ''that refining fire/Where you must move in measure, like a dancer'': we may prefer Yeats' (and Valéry's) vision of the unified being of the dancer; but I suspect that Eliot's lines impose themselves upon us with weightier authority. We can become free of him—free to accept his vision, or to seek another—only by seeing his poetry as in itself it really is. . . .

Because he was a master of the actual experience of the ideal, Eliot's poetry can speak for and to this civilization. His poetry articulates the woe that is in the marriage of alienated neurotic egos; the atrophy and perversions of spirit in the crowd that flows over London Bridge; the pitifulness of its recreations, and the depressed resignation of humble people who expect nothing; the waste of living and partly living, of loving and partly loving; the sense of life turning to dust and ashes in the mouth; the anxiety, and fear, and sick loathing; the conscious impotence of rage at human folly, and the consequent self-contempt; and the death-wish. He had a certain real knowledge of the world. . . .

The essential experience of Eliot's poetry is the essential experience of an actual state of civilization, but in an extraordinarily refined and intelligent form. The interpretation he put upon it, and the cure he recommended, may seem out of touch with the common way of thinking. Yet by thus connecting the current form of the drive for the absolute and ideal with its relatively recent origins, and with a traditional form, he has rendered it the more intelligible. He is a true voice of our Western world.

A. D. Moody. *Thomas Stearns Eliot, Poet* (Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1979), pp. xv, 298

The shape of Eliot's life is one of paring down, concentration. Much had to be discarded to make his life conform to the pattern of the pilgrim, and there is a constant tension between an idiosyncratic nature and an ideal biography. His early years turned on his acceptance of this pattern, his later years on the question of its fulfillment. Its drama lay in efforts to close the gap between nature and perfection at whatever personal cost, reveling to some degree in that cost, and inspecting his torment as the distinguishing brand of his election. To be chosen, he had to purify the very ambition that set him off. And so the moral drama of the later years, from *Murder in the Cathedral*, centers not on the earlier festering of primitive violence, epitomized by lust, but on the subtler taints of public dignitaries, epitomized by pride. Eliot always calls for judgment but, we can never forget, for divine not human judgment.

Eliot was an expert on election. Like the divines, his ancestors, no one knew better the stages and signs of salvation, but he had limited spiritual gifts. He had diagnostic self-insight, strength of will, endurance, and a readiness to recognize the reality of the unseen, but he had not much gift of vision. He craved a lifetime burning in every moment, but had to accept a lesser course of ''trying.'' Yet it was this acceptance of the common lot that made his mature poetry more accessible than the merciless clairvoyance of the early verse. He strove to content himself with right action, and not to hope too hard that saving grace would come to fill the waiting vessel of perfected conduct. But Eliot's was a God of pain, whose punishment, until the last eight years, was almost the only sign of the absolute paternal care.

The irony of Eliot's life was that he was unsuited to the model life of saints. He was simply too self-conscious to be a saint. Yet his struggle to subdue intellectual pride, his almost savage intolerance, proved the fertile matter of his poetry. There remains the paradox of a man who wished to be saint above poet, but who became all the greater as poet for his failure to attain sainthood. He fell back on another goal, to be God's agent, and as public spokesman he achieved an extraordinary authority. His pronouncements are still repeated as truths from on high. The prophetic role, like the Puritan rigor of introspection, came most directly from America, as well as the challenge of a terrifying nature where man measures himself in the face of an immeasurable power that is and was from the beginning.

Eliot's career circled back so that the sources of his own life, the Mississippi and Cape Ann, became the source of all life. Despite his adaptation to England, his adoption of English religion, manners, and clothes, and despite his marriages to English women, his poetry led him back to ''the source of the longest river,'' and to the silence the child heard between two waves of the sea.

Lyndall Gordon. *Eliot's New Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), pp. 268–69, 272

The unresolvable tension of *Four Quartets* is that Eliot, a reluctant experimentalist, who wanted to (but did not) inherit viable traditional form, who wanted to (but did not) bury isolate selfhood in a community (''which is more valuable''), who could not finally hide his life entirely in Christ, nevertheless committed himself in this poem to the most uncompromising implications of avant-garde aesthetic. Knowledge of the past, he tells us, imposes falsifying pattern onto the present. Knowledge of one's craft, likewise, imposes falsifying pattern. The triumph of literary form and language is its radical mimesis is of the new and shocking moment. It is a triumph over literary history, over the falsity of received pattern, over convention. What we have already perceived, yesterday's perception caught in yesterday's poem, yesterday's triumph—good only for yesterday and who we were yesterday. Today we are dumb, and every effort to write and live freshly is necessarily a ''raid on the inarticulate/with shabby equipment always deteriorating.''

Yesterday's equipment is shabby, and so is yesterday's self. Shabby but comfortable, comfortable but a lie. Old men, or older men, as he should have written (the *Quartets* were composed between his forty-seventh and fifty-fourth years), would rather not be explorers. They would rather repeat themselves as writers. repeat themselves as selves. They would rather repeat than create; rather not chance possession because they do not wish to bear any Reality, or be borne by it. The courage to ''make it new'' as a writer is not a metaphor: it is Eliot's path to regeneration.

The other side of Eliot is never avant-gardist, is the very antithesis of the spirit of the avant-garde. The two sides coexist, always uneasily but always through necessity, in Eliot's writing, life being a truncated travesty if imagined otherwise. I refer, of course, to his commitments to tradition, literary history, the past. The urgent way to put it is the best way: his life, and ours, with the dead. Not the dead letters of texts, but those familiar, compound ghosts haunting texts.

The Waste Land will remain the singular aesthetic event of modernist poetry in the English language; and its stance, however

we construct it, seems one we can live with because, however we construct it, it seems one that suits our sense of ourselves. But Eliot after *The Waste Land* will continue to be another matter: an event unabsorbed because, in the context of advanced Western values, it is unabsorbable.

Frank Lentricchia. *Modernist Quartet* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1994), pp. 285–86

The past decade has seen Eliot's reputation recede to its lowest ebb of the century. The postmodern attack on the pillars of modernism has managed at times to spare Virginia Woolf for her blurring of traditional gender roles, Joyce for his delight in sheer wordplay, and even, in critical tours de force, the unlikely pair of Pound and Lewis on the shaky basis of their disruptive styles. Eliot, however, as the primary spokesman and symbol of that against which literary post modernism has defined itself—modernist high culture—has been refused almost all amnesty. His claim to establish enduring criteria of value was, to pose the complaint in the language of these antagonists, a futile attempt to legitimate his narrative by reference to a metadiscourse. Further, as one of the progenitors of the New Criticism, the primary theoretical whipping boy of deconstruction, he had been systematically indicted on the related charge of being a particularly unabashed advocate of ''logocentrism.'' Indeed, he seems at times to have been doubly annoying to such critics precisely because he is so obviously self-indicting. . . .

The case against an elitist, absolutist Eliot has been carried on most recently in the name of a multiculturalism that takes issue sharply with him as the chief modern apologist for a hereditary canon of Western literary classics. A growing cultural diversity in England and even more obviously in the United States, coupled with the perceived need to amplify the voices of long-standing marginalized groups, made Eliot's insistence on the tradition seem an obvious exercise in oppression. . . .

The one merit of the cases against Eliot, misguided and overstated as they often are, is that they at least are open to the idea that extraliterary concerns might have shaped his work in ways generally unacknowledged previously. Typically, almost all attempts to place the work of Eliot in a larger intellectual context have looked to the poetic tradition. In his immediate past, affinities are found with Laforgue, Baudelaire, and various other French symbolists; earlier, with the Metaphysicals, whom he revived, or with Dante, whom he regarded as Christian Europe's culmination. His critical writings are taken to be epiphenomenal of the poetry (Eliot himself, late in life, said they were no more than this), colored perhaps by his ambivalent relationship to Matthew Arnold's essays on poetry and culture. But such studies, even when valuable, as they often are, tend to obscure what I perceive to be the thoroughgoing nature of Eliot's political commitment.

Simply put, it seems to me that from beginning to end, Eliot's work, including both the poetry and the prose, was shaped by a political vision inherited from French reactionary thinkers, especially from Charles Maurras. . . .

Where, then, do these revaluations leave Eliot studies? How will his reputation endure the change in century? First of all, it seems to me that whatever we may think of Eliot's solutions, he merits continued attention for the fullness of his response to a central problem of modernity: what sort of commonwealth is possible in a society held together only by procedure? In this regard, his continual, pointed insistence that social laissez-faire may be every bit as disastrous as economic laissez-faire was a salutary corrective to glib liberal pieties. No less than [D. H.] Lawrence, he was painfully aware of the thinness of modern life. The difficulty with Eliot, though, is that to create community he excludes too much. Those outside the Latin tradition, the lower social orders, and women whenever they dare display their sexual nature are all denied full participation. Though neither before nor after did he make the case as intemperately as he did in *After Strange Gods*, the call for homogeneity voiced there never ceased to be a given for his conception of the social whole. While Denis Donoghue is right to insist, as he recently did, that Eliot's reputation ought not to hang on the social criticism, he is wrong to claim that the criticism has nothing to do with the poetry. As I have tried to demonstrate, there is a systematic lack of generosity, finally, of humanity, in Eliot's work—both prose and poetry—and, in the last analysis, it is this that will exclude him from the classical company to which he devoted so much of his life.

Kenneth Asher. *T. S. Eliot and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1995), pp. 1–3, 164–65

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ELKIN, Stanley (1930–1995)

Gutsiness, let me say, is just about all [*Boswell*] has in common with *Catch-22*. That, and a sense of satirical fantasy. In point of style and of intellectual grace, the author of *Boswell* is to the author of *Catch-22* as a jeweler to a primitive potter. Nor have I any basis other than happenstance on which to justify this ramble from the old master to the late arrival as if they did in fact belong in the same box. The thing about happenstance, however, is that it does happen. I did find myself thinking of the two together. And what I found myself thinking was that I remain at least as grateful to *Boswell* for its wacky satire as I am to the [John] O'Hara shelf for its memory banks. . . .

Boswell, as it turns out, is nothing less than a satirist's diary of the ego. Have we not all sat with kings and captains inside our own reveries?—sat with them and found them wanting? This world is the ego's oyster and Jim Boswell is time's shucker.

From Stanley Elkin, moreover, Jim Boswell has an intellect both learned and honed, a perception forever ready to burst into its own sort of wild and wacky poetry and a well-mastered pen with which to keep his diary. It is a mad fantasy that rises from the pages of that diary. But in Boswell's world only fantasy can begin to describe reality.

As for the poetry, let me recommend to any reader that he turn first to pages 137–52, to the account of Boswell's wooing of William Lome, ''a rich man.'' And especially to the final encounter with Lome, in which he turns pitchman and sells bits of colored clay on the sidewalk. Elkin, to be sure, does not maintain an equal altitude throughout. I suspect the reader would die of anoxia on such a sustained flight. But glory to the heights in such moments as we can reach them.

Or it may be that *Boswell* is the hoax of the year, though if it is, it would be so only as one more semblance of the world as Elkin sees it. For the essence of this world, as seen, is exactly in the fact that it is a contrivance. But it is still that sort of contrivance we all more than half suspect our own world may turn out to be. A city of paper dragons. But add, too, that at its best it crackles around those weaving and bobbing grotesques like a Chinese New Year.

John Ciardi. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 15, 1964, p. 6

After finishing this zany, experimental short-story collection [*Criers and Kibitzers, Kibitzers and Criers*], one will probably be able later to recall a few ticklishly funny lines. . . .

If Elkin has the good grace to avoid ritual dramas stressing the ''need for love'' and the ''essential brotherhood of all mankind,'' he compensates for it by playing back to the reader another unconscionably overworked literary theme and such institutionalized ideas as the downtrodden shopkeeper in his waning little store (the title story), tragedy at a New York mountain resort (''Among the Witnesses''), a teenage gang of mediocre misfits in the Bronx (''Cousin Poor Lesley and the Lousy People''), a petit bourgeois trying to cope with a terminal illness (''In the Alley''). Elkin, the dust jacket avers, is ''a deadly serious satirist.'' Often, indeed, he actually seems ready to belittle the cant phrases and stances of our climby, commerce-ridden society, as only a Bruce Jay Friedman at his best is capable of doing. Then, like a driver's license candidate using someone else's car in heavy traffic, he loses control, and there's rather a nasty mess.

The Elkin protagonist is lonely and isolated because he is bereaved or abandoned and has nowhere to turn. Greenspahn, the desolate merchant in the title story, mourns his recently-dead son Harold, who had not yet even married or settled down; after a period of unappeasable grief for his beloved son, he discovers that Harold had stolen from the store's cash register. Ed Wolfe, a cruel, self-centered orphan (''I Look Out for Ed Wolfe''), withdraws entirely from society, hoarding all his money; one night he meets a Negro at a bar, forces him to be sociable, and winds up with him at a Negro key club, where he insults a girl and offends everyone else, finally throwing his remaining money away at the audience. The dying Mr. Feldman (''In the Alley''), who didn't know how to spend his last days, ends up annoying two women at a bar. In the weirdest, least successful story, ''On a Field, Rampant,'' a fairy-tale prince of obscure origin tries vainly to establish his identity in the great world outside; finally even his talismanic medallion can't help him and the mob closes in for the kill.

Perhaps the most disappointing features of Elkin's tales are the monotony of his ''inability to communicate'' theme and his straining for effect by means of unreal, unsuitable settings and plots. Often the perverse protagonist winds up addressing an assembly so alien to him that his message is ludicrous and pointless. . . .

So pitifully ill is the ego of the Elkin protagonist that he must do or say some hideous thing just to compel the proper kind of attention from his ignorers. . . . To Elkin himself, one wants to shout: ''Be more natural and stop speaking your own private language. What's the matter with you? The writer must serve!''

Samuel I. Bellman. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 15, 1966, p. 41

''Though hypocrisy can take you far, it can only take you *so* far,'' says Dick Gibson, the protean-enriched radio personality of Stanley Elkin's third novel [*The Dick Gibson Show*]. It is one of those ebullient statements that instantly sprouts provocative questions: How far do you want to go? Who will you be when you get there?

The Dick Gibson of the title, a seriocomic straight man in a burlesque mythology of mass culture, wants to go all the way. But not vertically (to a network presidency), or even horizontally to become one of those tympanic coast-to-coast voices that always ''seem to speak from the frontiers of commitment.'' Instead, like the wrestler in Elkin's first novel (*Boswell*) and the department store owner in his second (*A Bad Man*), Gibson craves the all-points dimension of human need.

An itinerant early media man, he has worked for dozens of small-town radio stations. As the perpetual apprentice, whetting his skills and adopting names and accents to suit geography, he evolves into part of American folklore. As Dick Gibson, the paradox of his truest identity is that he is from Nowhere, U.S.A. . . .

Gibson hits his peak as the star of *Night Letters*, a telephone participation show. Audience feedback creates a web of involvement and expands radio to almost mythic proportions. Spinning his dials and monitoring the tape delay device that censors callers' obscenities, Gibson is a McLuhan obfuscation made flesh—a benevolent witch doctor in an electronic village of the lonely, the sick and screwed up.

The Dick Gibson Show, like *Portnoy's Complaint*, contains enough comic material for a dozen nightclub acts. Yet it is considerably more than an entertainment. The banal and the profound, the vulgar and the touching, are humanely juggled into a

vital blur—a brilliant approximation of what it is like to live with one's eyes and ears constantly open.

R. Z. Sheppard. *Time*. March 1, 1971, p. 82

Elkin's protagonists are ordinary men with extraordinary purposes and singular dreams, men who become obsessed with the improbable possibilities of the self's expansion. Isolated by their obsessions, these manic heroes mount single-minded assaults upon the world and force themselves toward ultimate fulfillments. Although development is their end, plot becomes the compulsive repetition of action and complex situation is reduced to simplicity by their obsessions. Even setting is defined by the radical subjectivity of the obsessive inhabiting it. Sellers of singleness, pitchmen of transcendence, Elkin's narrators and heroes have a high-energy, repetitive rhetoric, an exclamatory prose that intensifies the ordinary, presses the impossible, and registers the urgency of their fixations. The result is a unity of effect, a Siamese connection of substance and style.

It is probably a truism that characters in contemporary American fiction are obsessional, but Elkin's heroes, unlike those, say, of Mailer, Hawkes, or O'Connor, develop their obsessions from natural authorities, common needs, or the promises of a popular culture rather than from some social, psychological, or religious ideology. Elkin's are not the exotic products of a subculture nor the constructs of an experimental theory but the distortions of the American almost-ordinary. Because their obsessions arise from areas of mass fascination and because they expend their energies within recognizable—if sometimes dislocated—systems of value, their private thoughts and public careers reveal truths particularly relevant and available to the American present. Theirs is the singleness that illuminates multiplicity, the focus that creates perspective, and Elkin uses them to examine both the normalities and aberrancies of our time. . . .

Elkin's favorite performances are oral—tales, reminiscences, speeches, harangues, directives, lectures, routines, jokes, patter—and singular, repartee and dialogue somewhat detracting from the rhetorical effect of monologue. Elkin loves to let his obsessed characters, major and minor, talk, and since the qualities of their voices carry over into the style he uses to describe, analyze, and narrate, this style may also be called obsessive. Although Elkin's narrational style has the individuality, exuberance, and extremity of his obsessives, it is not experimental (or obsessive) the way Beckett's or Burroughs' is. Because Elkin's purposes are the pressurized expansion of sense and the executed appeal to a felt audience—not the music of randomness or song of solipsism—he mixes high and low elements, vernacular and literary, to achieve a charged communication.

Thomas LeClair. *Contemporary Literature*. Spring, 1975, pp. 146–47, 156

All of Elkin's novels have dealt with the by-now familiar modern issues of isolation, alienation, and the existential construction of value systems to help fill the void, pass the time in the face of mortality and an absurd but potentially destructive exterior environment. Like many modern characters, Elkin's heroes all have the same primitive need to say, like Bellow's Henderson, *I want, I want*, but unlike Henderson or Huck or Hemingway's characters, and unlike Nabokov's Kinbote and Humbert, Coover's J. Henry Waugh, or Kesey's McMurphy, Elkin's characters find their transcendence and freedom not in lighting out for some literal or imagined territory, but in seeking out the familiar, in filling themselves with the drek and ticky-tack of modern America. . . . Elkin's heroes are moved by these kinds of excesses because they are obsessively aware of death and because they are isolated in the midst of a world of plenty. . . .

Elkin's heroes are also outcasts and outsiders, men who typically operate on the fringes of society even as they control it, and who even prefer it that way for fear that they will have to share their bounty with others. Such basic selfishness may help explain why no truly significant women or satisfying love affairs occur in Elkin's fiction. . . .

Elkin's claims that his novels have a ''well-defined structure'' are rather misleading and were probably induced by his simply getting tired of critics blaming him for something that does not have anything to do with the success of what he is aiming for in his novels. When we examine the way his books work, they really *do not* have a tightly woven structure, at least not in any usual notion of plot. Oh, they have a development of a sort, although Elkin's books develop more by a principle of repetition than by subtle shifts in personal motivation or by the gradual introduction of narrative complexities; and they usually have a sense of progression . . . although even it is created more by accretion than anything else. If we really take Elkin's books apart paragraph by paragraph, we hardly find the carefully balanced blend of elements and subtle interrelationships among significant details that we would find, say, in Nabokov's novels. Quite the contrary, we find constant digression, tall tales, jokes, and descriptions, none of which seems to lead anywhere. Above all, we discover that Elkin loves to stop the action of his novels to present what is his most singular and successful stylistic feature: his catalogues and lists. These catalogues do not contribute to the action nor even directly assist in illuminating anything related to the plot except insofar as they demonstrate the incredible vitality of the characters' rhetoric and imaginations. If we complain that Elkin has stopped the action ''merely'' to create a catalogue, tell a joke, or make a sales pitch, we are missing the point.

Larry McCaffery. *Critique*. 21, 2, 1979, pp. 40–42, 47

The Living End is Stanley Elkin's comic fable of Heaven, Hell and the Last Days, a small book big in every way but length. And I should say at once that this ''triptych,'' as Elkin calls it, composed of three sections entitled ''The Conventional Wisdom,'' ''The Bottom Line,'' and ''The State of the Art,'' is the work of a master, a story eloquent in its gestures and amazing for the ease with which it moves from a liquor store hold-up in Minneapolis to the ''wall-to-wall Wall'' of damnation, from Heaven as a ''theme park'' to Hell as ''the ultimate inner city.'' Half farce, half morality play, *The Living End* puts God himself on trial, the Lord faced off against the damned who in their countless number equal Everyman. Quite possibly only Stanley Elkin possesses the exact blend of irreverence and care, of hardcore realism and fabulous invention, to have pulled this off.

Elkin knows that clichés are the substance of our lives, the coinage of human intercourse, the ways and means that hold our messy selves and sprawling nation intact. To exploit their vigor and set them forth with unexpected force has been the basis of his

success as a novelist; no writer has maneuvered life's shoddy stock-in-trade into more brilliantly funny forms. Long before he wrote *The Franchiser*, Elkin appropriated the notion of the franchise—the idea that we Americans borrow our being from the staples of quotidian culture, the banal, the vulgar, the cartoon like and mean, all our packaged dreams and gaudy perks, accumulating thereby some concoction of clichés which, for each of us, constitutes our ''story.''

But if our stories are private they are in no way new. Our predicament, as a nation dedicated to exploring frontiers and starting fresh, is not only our rising sense of limits, but our fear of predictability, of stuckness, of *old* wine in old bottles, as if sameness were inherently ridiculous. And maybe it is. Originality is at best displacement of the ordinary. Our most outlandish moments are the stuff of public domain. In *The Bailbondsman*, Elkin's protagonist judges the jailed, sizes up the risk of posting their bail, merely by listening to their stories. At the end of *The Dick Gibson Show* the MC of a late-night talk program cannot bear to listen to yet *another* ''story of my life'': he knows by heart their silly pathos, their ludicrous outcomes, the garbled grief of options foreclosed.

Something of this desperation, relieved by raucous humor, slips into *The Living End*, where Elkin takes on the ultimate cliché, death and the preposterous protocol of Hereafter. To see how the mighty are fallen, to bring high things low, is a comic ploy as old as Aristophanes, accomplished in Elkin's case by setting standard myths of immortality within the low-rent clutter of ordinary life. So the angel of death talks ''like a cabbie with an out-of-town fare.'' The crowd around the Lord's throne looks like the snapshot of a summit conference. Christ and his Dad don't get along, and the Virgin Mother never liked sex in the first place. As for sudden death, ''all that wrath, those terrible swift sword arrangements, that's the M.O. of God Himself!''. . .

There is a kind of vulgate glory to Stanley Elkin's prose, and much of the power of *The Living End* depends on how things are worded. Elkin is the *magister ludi* of American vernacular, and for sheer stylistic brilliance no other writer can top him. The American novelist he most resembles is Nathanael West, but whereas West allowed us to feel superior to life's lunacy through savage irony, Elkin refuses us this distance, this illusion. And unlike others of his generation, Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis for example, Elkin does not identify with the laughter of the gods, he does not dissociate himself from the human spectacle by taking out a franchise on the cosmic joke. Hard and unyielding as his comic vision becomes, Elkin's laughter is remission and reprieve, a gesture of willingness to join the human mess, to side with the damned, to laugh in momentary grace at whatever makes life Hell.

Terrence des Pres. *Book World*. July 1, 1979, pp. 1, 4

In seven volumes of fiction published since the mid-Sixties, Stanley Elkin has made clear claim, by reason of the quality inherent in his work, to consideration as a major contemporary American writer. Yet though his books have inspired a following of devoted readers—both in and outside of the academic community—Elkin can be said to have largely missed out on the recognition due him. I should like to make a gesture towards righting that wrong by attempting a necessarily brief survey of Elkin's fictional works, and by making some general observations about his style and themes. For if Elkin seems to be some sort of spiritual descendant of Nathanael West in the ways in which he attaches out-loud, falling-on-the-floor humor to reflections on the human state as a steady downward plunge to death, he is nevertheless very much his own man in the manner in which he explores and develops that tradition. . . .

Stanley Elkin's characters' contemplations of their situations have always been informed by the inevitable facts of their own deaths and those of others, giving his fiction an eschatological emphasis uncommon in contemporary letters. In *The Living End* (1979), Elkin moves beyond the point of death in an assault on received notions of theological order. That a lonely author of the universe should find confirmed by the behavior of his creatures the notion that his ways are not our ways, nor ours his, seems the suggestion of this short volume described on its cover as a ''triptych.'' The allusion to paintings in panels of three, particularly altar panels, is fitting. The book is as crowded with scenes from the far side of the grave as something by Bosch or Grünewald. . . .

What next for Elkin? He is nearly through with a novel to be called *George Mills*—from excerpts I have heard, another *Bildungsroman*—which is to be published in 1982. It promises to be long, perhaps the most ambitious product of Elkin's career. One wishes him well with it, expecting full well that like its predecessors, it will be wrought with extraordinary care and love for the unleashed English tongue, and that like them it will also confront the human species trying to fast-talk itself into an understanding in the face of pain and of mortality. Most certain of all is that it will be, like them, full of the sound of a savage and infectious laughter. ''So grotesque,'' concludes a woman newly risen from the dead in *The Living End*; ''death grotesque as life. All, all grotesque.''

John Ditsky. *Hollins Critic*. June, 1982, pp. 1–2, 10–11

Elkin's taste . . . is not as lowbrow as he claims. His greatest strength is the ability to combine high art and pop culture without shortchanging either one. His frequent subject is the regular guy with an all-American dream of making it big, but his sentences are often convoluted enough to give a Jamesian pause. This density of language may have kept Elkin off the best-seller list, but his natural audience is the one that appreciates John Irving and Kurt Vonnegut.

George Mills is not his most affecting book, and certainly not his funniest, but it is quintessential Elkin in style and substance. His five previous novels and two story collections not only capture Middle America; they embrace it. . . . Elkin deflates intellectual pretensions by recognizing that most people are perfectly comfortable in a fast-food world.

The Living End, Elkin's last novel, sets us up for *George Mills*. God puts in an appearance, and even he turns out to be a regular guy—part storyteller, part stand-up comic, part practical joker. *George Mills* takes this idea even further: it is about 1000 years of guys who are so ordinary they hand it down from father to son as a family tradition. From the first George Mills, servant to a nobleman during the Crusades, to the last, a working stiff in contemporary St. Louis, these are men who live under the curse of their ''blue collar blood,'' pass on to their sons the story of this heritage, and always seem to be the butts of God's practical jokes. . . .

George's rejection of history is not necessarily a triumph. Faulkner's stylistic influence on Elkin suggests their common concern with the power of history and myth. (Elkin's Faulknerian

voice runs through the novel, at times overwhelming his characterization of George. Learning that a brother and sister live in a car parked outside the Glazers' house, George thinks of ''the poor's special charters and manumissions, their little license and acquittals, all law's exonerate laxity and stretched-point privilege.'') Elkin substitutes Middle America for the South and one-liners for Gothic darkness; the Millses are ironic equivalents of the Compsons. George is like Quentin, reconciling himself to his family history by sifting through its legends. *George Mills* suggests that however inflated and distorted its history, the past cannot be dismissed. . . . For Stanley Elkin, the greatest curse is not having a sense of humor.

Caryn James. *The Village Voice*. Oct. 26, 1982, p. 52

The argument that [Stanley Elkin's] work is marred by its episodic nature assumes that Elkin is trying—and failing—to write plot-centered fiction, that his attempts at conceiving consonant, resonant stories and novels possessed of beginning-middle-end sequentiality and solid, satisfying narrative-level resolutions are somehow constantly going awry. *The Franchiser* clearly demonstrates how little Elkin is concerned with cohesion of this narrative-level sort. The chapter [in this book] dealing with that novel sets out to show that it is rendered coherent more through metaphor and analogy than through plot, its consonance achieved through the convergence of parallel scenes and the intertwining of patterns of reduplicative imagery. Implicit in this book and informing its every page is my assumption . . . that, although his earlier work seems to align itself naturally with the plot-centered fiction of contemporaries like Philip Roth and Saul Bellow, there has always been an antirealist tendency in Elkin's work, a tendency that ties it more closely to the fiction of Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, and Donald Barthelme than to the tradition of social realism that underlies the American Jewish novel. To perceive the evolution of Elkin's fiction in any other way obliges one to declare *The Living End* an inexplicable divergence from Elkin's habitual mode, rather than to see it . . . as an extension and culmination of tendencies discernible in his work from *Boswell* and *Criers & Kibitzers, Kibitzers & Criers* forward.

Peter J. Bailey. *Reading Stanley Elkin* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Pr.), 1985, p. x

It may appear that there are few connections to be made between the metaphor of writing Elkin constructs in [his essay] ''What's in a Name?'' and his own writing as I have described it. Yet there are, indeed, links between the allegory of writing and its productions, for all writing, Elkin concludes, is a form of ''connection'': ''What I suppose I've been talking about is connection. Connection, invention, and all the enumerate, lovely links, synapses, and nexuses of fiction.'' There is some relation, Elkin suggests, between historical events, the aesthetics of fiction, and the names of characters, just as there is the connection Elkin makes *in writing* between slavery in the North, an absurdist tale portraying a domestic revolt, and the name of Paul Louis Pelgas. Thematically, Elkin's work reveals a concern with ''connection'' as the sign of genetic determinism, or paranoia, or the labyrinthine intricacies of a system of communication. The elaborate descriptions of a dry-cleaning shop, a cosmetic counter, a pharaoh's tomb, a power grid, or a radio network all convey the sense that ''what Elkin is talking about'' is connection—that his fiction assumes the task of making the connection between the manifestations of a disparate, heterogeneous reality and the artful metaphors by which it may be assimilated. Writing, then, is the tracing out of these connections, almost as if the pen strokes themselves (or the printed characters) signified the ''synapses and nexuses.'' Yet the allegory of writing presented in ''What's in a Name?'' suggest the fragility of connections and suggests further that, even while making them, writing fractures ''these lovely links,'' even as the ''cat's cradle'' construction of the wall in Norbiton is consumed by the act of arson in the thicket. ''Detail,'' Elkin writes, can be seen ''as a kind of noun, and a menu of proper names . . . a register of fact.'' So the ''fact'' of fiction resides in its assemblage of name and detail into recognizable shapes or venues. Yet the edifice of this fact is built on shaky ground, for it is equally the work of the language of fiction to skew the facts, pervert its own history, and rob its own treasury when it scatters names across texts, or becomes opaque, or breaks form. This is the dialectic of fiction which, I believe, Elkin finely perceives.

The caves of Marabar that Elkin refers to in the last line of ''What's in a Name?'' are, in Forster's novel, a place of defamiliarization, where the ordinary is converted into the strange. ''Esmiss Esmoor'' (the proper name of Mrs. Moore skewed and echoed) understands these caves only because she can accept them as utterly alien, then escape them, then die at sea. Elkin, too, hollows out the language of the commonplace—the jingo, the sales pitch, everyday speech—in order to reveal the deformed estrangements that lie hidden beneath forms of convention. Just as often, Elkin's fiction reverses itself when the exotic is made into the ordinary. . . .

Ultimately, this movement of language is the sign of the comic writer, who uses his language to parody the forms and intonations of conventional discourse while, at the same time, preserving these altered forms and accents in metaphor, catalogue, and speech. But this characterization of Elkin's writing does it justice only in the most general sense, from the overview provided by the critic's place on the parapet. There remain the discontents of analysis that only a plunge into the thicket, itself, will absolve.

Patrick O'Donnell. ''The Thicket of Writing.'' In Heide Ziegler, ed. *Facing Texts: Encounters between Contemporary Writers and Critics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Pr., 1988), pp. 42–43

Van Gogh's Room at Arles is, I think, Stanley Elkin's best book. It's certainly the easiest to read—it moves right along, it asks nothing. The title novella is so well constructed that when you realize (or *think* you realize) where it is going, you feel a shiver at the back of your neck that intensifies when you see what turn the book is *actually* taking: toward a sudden, illuminating glimpse of the accidental, visionary, and (for lack of a better word) religious nature of art. What Stanley Elkin has always done well he does even better here. No one is more deft at pacing a scene for comic timing, and these fictions include scenes (a foundation social event at which grantees describe their silly projects, Schiff's monster of a party) which build to stunning heights of comic humiliation. Throughout these novellas, everything builds; their cumulative power is astounding.

Francine Prose. *The Yale Review*. July, 1993, pp. 123–24

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ELLIOTT, George P. (1918–1980)

Mr. Elliott has published short stories that I greatly admire, and in his novel [*Parktilden Village*] there is much firm, perceptive writing of the kind I anticipated, but I feel I have been let down by the book as a whole. . . .

The situation suggests that this is to be a comedy of manners; so does the title; so, most emphatically, does the style. . . . His whole air is that of a man who hopes the reader will be as amused by what he is writing about as he himself is. . . . People are behaving rather badly, to be sure, but they are behaving no worse than people the reader knows, and he can afford to be amused by them.

Suddenly, however, . . . the tone changes. . . . One could say that there are precedents for so great an alteration of tone. T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, for instance, begins as comedy but develops the most serious religious implications. The play, however, moves gradually from the trivial to the serious, and the comic framework is retained. *Parktilden Village*, on the other hand, promising one thing and delivering another, leaves a bad taste in the mouth.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. May 31, 1958. pp. 10, 26

Now the subject of *Parktilden Village* is a genuine one: surely there can be few more interesting matters these days than the terrifying distance between the generation born after 1940 and the rest of us. Mr. Elliott is a naturally gifted writer who keeps things moving nicely, cleverly. But in the end one feels cheated. The material has been set up to serve a case: it all seems too neat, everything bends too conveniently to the writer's preconceptions, and what should have been an imitation of life comes to read like a fictional gloss on an essay in *Sewanee Review*.

Irving Howe. *New Republic*. Nov. 10, 1958. p. 17

Within the confused contemporary American literary scene, in which many writers seem to strive for attention as the classical starlet strives for parts—by pan-fried personal lives immediately translated into the negotiable currency of the news item—George P. Elliott has managed to make his reputation in a curious way. As poet, critic, essayist, short-story writer, and novelist . . . he has quietly assumed the burden of the old-fashioned man of letters. The odd and effective method by which he has sent his name into the busy world is this one: Beneath all the demand for brilliance in a ''young writer,'' he has kept his gaze upon the need for truth.

Among the Dangs, a collection of ten of his stories, shows a thickly questing imagination at work. Many of the stories have that density of feeling and character, and complexity of event, which only a generous mind dares to employ in the story form. . . . Increasingly, especially in the later stories, Elliott has learned to recognize the humor of his horrors, and with his wit, he has increased his powers.

Herbert Gold. *New Republic*. Jan. 16, 1961. p. 19

David Knudsen purports to be an autobiographical account of the hero's quest for meaning. . . . Elliott is good at portraying the horror beneath the skin of modern society. . . . It is part of the virtue of this novel that it can make us think about metaphysical questions without being heavy or pretentious; every question is adequately embodied. Elliott is clearly to be one of the important writers of this decade, and this is an example of the quest-novel that one can be thankful for.

Wayne C. Booth. *The Yale Review*. Spring, 1962. pp. 635–6

He writes with that air of cool judicious detachment that is now universally recognized as one of the signatures of serious fiction in this period, but after reading a few pages of *Parktilden Village*, you become pleasantly aware of the absence of portentous solemnity in the tone, and you begin to see that for once the cool judiciousness is doing something more than calling your attention to the author's subtlety and good taste: it is working to define a critical attitude toward the main character.

Norman Podhoretz. *Doings and Undoings* (Farrar). 1964. p. 166

Mr. Elliott's anecdotes [in *A Piece of Lettuce*] are all of seemingly inconsequential sort. . . . He insists upon his provinciality, using it as a kind of surprise weapon against those who would dictate what life and literature are supposed to be like. His hidden argument seems to run: if I can be loyal to my ordinary background, if I can be spontaneous and frank even when this entails saying nothing of importance, then I will mirror the truth of things; I will be dealing with reality.

Deliberately rejecting what he calls ''the miniature art of the conscious essay,'' Mr. Elliott weaves together childhood impressions and miscellaneous current opinions, always stressing the way experience never quite comes up to the level of poetry. Correspondingly, his literary taste runs to unpretentious, imperfect, frankly minor works. . . .

Mr. Elliott's low-keyed style does have limitations. . . . I also suspect that his distrust of mere logic serves in part to cover an ambiguous flirtation with Christianity that runs through nearly all his fiction and retains its coyness here. Mr. Elliott would evidently like to believe some things he regards as factually untrue, and his non-rational style enables him to avert a showdown. Nevertheless, the general impression I get from *A Piece of Lettuce* is one of refreshing directness.

Frederick C. Crews. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. March 15, 1964. p. 13

But if there are matters upon which one wants to take issue with Mr. Elliott, it is chiefly for the sake of that greater portion of his work, as a novelist, poet, and essayist, for which one is honestly grateful. Of the fifteen essays in the present collection [*A Piece of Lettuce*], at least ten strike me as first-rate—by which I don't mean to suggest that they are unexceptionable, but rather that they are illuminating. Mr. Elliott's peculiar virtue is an inability to let anyone else do his thinking for him. The defects of that pre-industrial bent are obvious. The advantage is that mostly we get from Mr. Elliott his own opinions, and mostly they have the quality of something made by hand, for a specific purpose, and incorporating the vital force of the man who made them. That is particularly true of the autobiographical essays in this book, six of which figure in my private list of the ten elect. They further persuade me of something suggested already by Mr. Elliott's verse and by his fiction, that he is less interesting as a critic of literature than as the poet of his own experience.

Emile Capouya. *Saturday Review*. April 4, 1964. p. 26

. . . the novelistic virtues of George P. Elliott are precisely those which spring from a kind of equanimity. . . . His first novel, *Parktilden Village*, impressed some readers by the calmness with which it viewed the complexities of love and generation, and his second, *David Knudsen*, was not more objectionable. In these works, as in the essays of *A Piece of Lettuce* and the stories of *Among the Dangs*, one feels that Elliott needs to understand the changing values of our world, values by which he is puzzled and somewhat repelled. The need is honest, firm, consistent; its expression is often tactful if not elegant, and the resources of the moral and artistic imagination behind it are unpretentious.

The judgment, I think, is confirmed by his most ambitious work to date. . . . As for the theme, it's the Modern World. . . . Elliott's intention in this big book [*In the World*] is clear. He wants to portray the moribund world of liberal values and foreshadow another world which the young are still powerless to create. And he wants the portrait to include the jumble of private feeling and public action. How much does Elliott succeed?

Not very much. All the pressing issues are here: religion, marriage, money, eugenics, war, sex, social justice. Yet no issue is projected with the intensity that brings illumination; nothing obeys the original force of insight. . . . But if a kind of softness, a kind of banality really, cripples this work, one feels wonder and sympathy that it can still move so far, impelled by the spirit of human decency, by the conviction that somehow man matters.

Ihab Hassan. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Oct. 24, 1965. pp. 5, 30

It is difficult to pin down with any precision the reasons for Elliott's exceptional independence of spirit, but my own guess is that he enjoys a kind of inward harmony that comes of knowing one's own nature and powers and limitations. Something very much like inward harmony, it seems to me, is reflected in the calm suavity of his prose style, his gentle humor, and his easy authority. Writing out of the center of his own experience, Elliott has become one of America's most engaging essayists; and his criticism, which he frequently blends with autobiographical fragments, is consistently excellent and never dull.

Yet how useful the maxim ''know thyself'' is to the novelist is by no means certain. Although Elliott has now published three novels—in addition to the already-mentioned collection of short stories—his fiction remains the product of a mind most interesting in its analytical and critical, rather than dramatic, aspects.

Joseph Epstein. *New Republic*. Nov. 27, 1965. p. 40

His latest novel, *In the World* . . . is an interesting attempt to raise the novelist's ante by getting back to the nineteenth century. How refreshing it is to find a novelist who still has enough nerve and enough sense of past to take society for granted, to demand of life that it be meaningful. For ours is a time when hysteria and alienation have become as commonplace to novelists as brushing one's teeth. . . . *Who cares?* cries the existential chorus. I *do*, answers George P. Elliott. It is a very protestant refusal to take the world's chaos for granted, an insistence that people behave as if they are in this world by choice, not necessity. . . .

George P. Elliott is almost the novelist the WASP world has been crying for—almost, but not quite. His deficiency, finally, is the other side of his strength, for if he has enough nerve to take society for granted, he does not seem quite able to artistically come to grips with the destructive instincts in modern life. This is not to say that he is unaware of those instincts. . . . But when he is faced with the problem of integrating that aspect of life with the other, his talent seems confused and short of the mark.

Leonard Kriegel. *Commonweal*. Dec. 3, 1965. p. 276

Even stranger is what happens in George P. Elliott's *In the World*. In its demeanor it is not different from his *Parktilden Village* and *David Knudsen*, novels which seemed to demonstrate that the flat heavy American style is even less valid than cool English intelligence. *In the World* is long, over two hundred thousand words. As befits Elliott's efforts to allow his characters all the room they need to make their decisions and to live with them, the book is in the usual sense plotless. It should have been a disaster, adequate reward for someone who really wants to be Tolstoi. But there is great strength in this novel, derived more from Thackeray, really, than from Tolstoi; Elliott is determined to make ''the world'' as resonant a metaphor as ''Vanity Fair.'' Of course it does not work, for Elliott is far less interestingly baffled by his overriding idea than Thackeray was by his.

Roger Sale. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1966. pp. 131–2

Elliott calls himself a writer-critic rather than a scholar-critic or philosopher-critic. He deserves the name, not only because he has published novels, stories and poems as well as another volume of essays [*Conversations*], but also because he writes well. His manner (when not oracular) is attractively informal, neat yet colorful, and he combines cultural-literary comment with a kind of personal reminiscence that offers us a few glimpses into the role his temperament played in the formation of his opinions. But a little more of the philosophic and scholarly spirit might have strengthened his reasoning, and impressed upon him the fact that his dissatisfaction with a present in which he feels alienated, and his

idealization of a past in which the artist enjoyed more sense of community, are fundamental characteristics of the very modernist tradition he deplores. . . .

It is too bad these essays are shot through with an unconvincing social polemic because Elliott does some things especially well. His praise of the art he loves—Dante's, Chekhov's or Tolstoy's—is fine indeed. His comments on teaching, pornography and the novel—subjects on which a sensible position is lent force by radical fashion—are consistently engaging and nicely balanced. Radical fashion also helps to explain why his pages on such extremists as McLuhan, Robbe-Grillet and Genet are exceptionally satisfying.

David J. Gordon. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 6, 1972. p. 29

[*Muriel*] moves along so smoothly that its wisdom, quiet strength and range of inclusiveness pass unnoticed. *Muriel* is alive clear through. Whereas most sagas of farming life are long and burly, *Muriel* needs only 154 pages to release its force. Where, then, does its strength come form? It depicts a small world; its characters do not struggle dramatically; no argument is broached, let alone proved. Like the rich Kansas plains where much of it takes place, the novel epitomizes the archetypal female, who is both motionless and brimming with motion. . . .

The shortness of the novel, finally, reflects the haunting brevity of life; life slips past Muriel before she can make sense of it. And, as in all good primitive art, no authorial intrusion mutes dramatic immediacy. Each character has a mystery life beyond the one presented to his family and friends, a life that Elliott respects too much to codify. Thus the structure of the novel helps shape Elliott's view of life: human existence is both fixed and free; although the whole fits into a (four-part) pattern, the individual parts move at random.

Peter Wolfe. *The Nation*. June 5, 1972. pp. 730–1

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ELLISON, Ralph (1914–1994)

Many Negro writers of real distinction have emerged in our century. . . . But none of them except, sometimes, Richard Wright has been able to transcend the bitter way of life they are still (though diminishingly) condemned to, or to master patiently the intricacies of craftsmanship so that they become the peers of the best white writers of our day. Mr. Ellison has achieved this difficult transcendence. *Invisible Man* is not a great Negro novel; it is a work of art any contemporary writer could point to with pride.

Harvey Curtis Webster. *Saturday Review*. April 12, 1952. p. 23

The reader who is familiar with the traumatic phase of the black man's rage in America, will find something more in Mr. Ellison's report. He will find the long anguished step toward its mastery. The author sells no phony forgiveness. He asks none himself. It is a resolutely honest, tormented, profoundly American book. . . . With this book the author maps a course from the underground world into the light. *Invisible Man* belongs on the shelf with the classical efforts man has made to chart the river Lethe from its mouth to its source.

Wright Morris. *New York Times Book Section*. April 13, 1952. p. 5

Ellison has an abundance of that primary talent without which neither craft nor intelligence can save a novelist; he is richly, wildly inventive; his scenes rise and dip with tension, his people bleed, his language stings. No other writer has captured so much of the confusion and agony, the hidden gloom and surface gaiety of Negro life. His ear for Negro speech is magnificent. . . . The rhythm of the prose is harsh and tensed, like a beat of harried alertness. The observation is expert. . . . For all his self-involvement, he is capable of extending himself toward his people, of accepting them as they are, in their blindness and hope.

Irving Howe. *The Nation*. May 10, 1952. p. 454.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a basically comic work in the picaresque tradition, influenced by the novels of Louis-Ferdinand Céline. The hero of *Invisible Man* just happens to be a Negro, and everything he is and does includes ultimately the experience of all modern men. But this is not accomplished by abstraction; Mr. Ellison has managed to realize the fact of his hero's being a Negro in exactly the same way as nineteenth-century novelists realized their characters being French or Russian or middle-class: by making it the chief fact of their lives, something they take for granted and would not think of denying. Mr. Ellison displays an unapologetic relish for the concrete richness of Negro living—the tremendous variety of its speech, its music, its food, even its perversities.

Steven Marcus. *Commentary*. Nov., 1953. p. 458

Many may find that *Invisible Man*, complex in its novelistic structure, many-sided in its interpretation of the race problem, is not fully satisfying either as narrative or as ideology. Unlike the novel which depends for its appeal chiefly on the staple elements of love or sex, suspense and the dynamics of action, *Invisible Man* dispenses with the individualized hero and his erotic involvements, the working out of his personal destiny. Here we have, subtly and sensitively presented, what amounts to an allegory of the pilgrimage of a people. . . . By means of the revealing master symbol of

vision, Ralph Ellison has presented an aesthetically distanced and memorably vivid image of the life of the American Negro.

Charles I. Glicksberg. *Southwest Review*. Summer, 1954. pp. 264–5

Ellison is a writer of the first magnitude—one of those original talents who has created a personal idiom to convey his personal vision. It is an idiom compounded of fantasy, distortion, and burlesque, highly imaginative and generally surrealistic in effect. It possesses at bottom a certain mythic quality. . . . He was striving, he recounts, for a prose medium ''with all the bright magic of the fairy tale.''

Though not in the narrow sense a political novel, *Invisible Man* is based on a cultivated political understanding of the modern world. The first half of the novel portrays the disillusionment of the protagonist with the shibboleths of American capitalism—a social system which he apprehends through the institutional structure of the Southern Negro college. The latter half treats of his disillusionment with Stalinism, which he encounters through a revolutionary organization known as the Brotherhood. By means of this carefully controlled parallel development, Ellison penetrates to the heart of the two great illusions of his time.

Robert Bone. *The Negro Novel in America* (Yale). 1958. pp. 196–7

Ellison, who has the formal sense of a jazz musician and the instinct of a singer of blues, understands that anger or agony is transient without art. Turbulence, in private or political life, amounts to a denial of the dignity of man. To acknowledge the innate dignity of mankind is also to reconcile the idea of freedom prescribed in the founding political documents of America with the violence of a Harlem race riot. The act of reconciliation is an action of what Ellison calls Mind, a fact of *form*. The ''Negro question'' becomes a question of determining the essence of the human in a way that the questioning and tormented Mind can grasp. This, if any, is the artistic credo of Ellison. The credo is one that requires him to exploit the resources of irony. And it prompts him, as will become evident, to draw upon the healing powers of the American joke and Negro blues.

Ihab Hassan. *Radical Innocence* (Princeton). 1961. p. 169

In the course of these pages [of *Shadow and Act*], the portrait of a strong, reserved and honest man emerges. More, it is when he addresses his attention to his particular experience that what the writer says is of the greatest importance. It is not by means of conceptualizing and abstracting, as he tended to do in the essays written in the forties, that Mr. Ellison gets to the difficult statements; it is by reaching so far into himself that he reaches right through to the other side and fetches forth truths he could have got in no other way.

He accomplishes this by always remaining *a man who*. He refuses to be put into attributive categories, but subordinates the attributes to himself. He does not say, ''I am a Negro, a writer, an American.'' He says, ''I am a man who is a Negro, a writer, an American.'' He is not egotistical; he does not dump personal confession on you, assuming that what happened to him is worth your reading about because he is eminent. He always speaks of his own experience in order to make a larger point; reciprocally, the larger point is valid only as it is supported by evidence from his own experience.

George P. Elliott. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 25, 1964. p. 4

Invisible Man . . . was published twelve years ago and Ellison's second novel has long since taken on that unreal quality that haunted the unpublished *Ship of Fools*. Ellison spent two years in Rome, attended writer's conferences, submitted to interviews, wrote journalism, taught at various universities, and almost inevitably admirers have felt that the second novel, when it did appear, would reflect damagingly the anguish that accrues to a brilliant writer who takes so long to publish a book that nothing less than a masterpiece will justify the years of work and waiting.

Now, perhaps in lieu of the novel, Ellison has published a collection of essays. Such books have a way of quietly announcing the temporary or permanent demise of a novelist's will to imagine, so when *Shadow and Act* was announced, it was hard not to fear the worst. But though it is certainly not a great book, it shows that the fears were groundless. Ellison is still with us—large, impressive, ironic, cumbersome in his own polished way—and he seems to have lost no more faith in himself than is natural in a proud and serious man who finds writing difficult.

Roger Sale. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1965. p. 124

Ellison's hero [in *Invisible Man*] has nowhere to go once he tells us he is invisible. He does indeed, in the Epilogue, say that he intends to rise again and try his hand at life, that he has faith in democratic principles, and that life itself is its own excuse despite the blows it has dealt him. But there is no evidence in the text to fortify his beliefs. The blues singer has depths of feeling to begin with, but Ellison's hero has just begun to learn to feel as the novel ends.

One dwells on these issues because *Invisible Man* is so very nearly a great book. Perhaps Ellison himself, caught somewhere between Negro blues and the symphonic complexities of Western experience, has yet to find his footing. Or possibly his position as an American Negro, an invisible man, will make it impossible for him to find his way.

Edward Margolies. *Native Sons* (Lippincott). 1968. p. 148

Ellison makes greater use of the blues than Baldwin does; he finds them vital and authentic celebrations of Negro experience. More important, though, is the range of his language. No one since Mark Twain is so rich, so varied, or so comic in his re-creation of oral speech. Bracing peals of laughter echo on and under the surface of *Invisible Man*. The whole is an elaborate musical and verbal joke, celebrating love, sacrifice, and self-knowledge as our ultimate resources against the vicissitudes of life.

Richard H. Rupp. *Celebration in Postwar American Fiction* (Miami). 1970. pp. 163–4

If one is a black individual (as the central character [of *Invisible Man*] is, while at the same time emblematic of everyone) in a society whose people denigrate (the pun is intended) blackness, then the institutions, dedicated as they are to the preservation of the status quo, must of necessity be in large measure against him. What, then, does the black person do? Does he support that which thwarts the realization of his potential? Does he seek to destroy the institutions, the only protection from chaos? These are the questions which Ellison's novel poses and in its own way answers. There are no solutions to such questions. One can only withdraw, thus solving the problem privately. No action is possible, for there is no basis for action. This seems to be the implication of *Invisible Man*. He is as invisible at the end as he was at the beginning, and he is invisible because he *feels* he is. The conception of invisibility exists only as a response to a society which tells individuals they are invisible. There may be alternatives different from accepting as fact that one is invisible; at least many people think so, people who believe in the possibility of significant change.

It is in the area designated by the above considerations that *Invisible Man* makes a political statement. Insofar as it suggests that significant changes of a social nature are not possible and in many ways not even desirable, it is a vehicle for a particular political bias, for that sentiment happens to be held by large numbers of people who express it by means of political actions. Hence, despite Ellison's intentions, despite his professions about being an artist and that alone, he expresses ideas and attitudes which, once freed into the world, are likely to have political consequences.

Donald B. Gibson in *The Politics of Twentieth-Century Novelists*, edited by George A. Panichas (Hawthorn). 1971. p. 315

Ellison's artistic sense . . . was far more developed than [Richard] Wright's—he never conceived of his own fiction as a device for exclusively expressing social protest, although protest mars some of his early work. After 1943 he ceased to concern himself primarily with politics and turned to the theme that dominates all of his later work: the need of white Americans to recognize Negro identity in all of its diversity. ''Mister Toussan'' (1941), a short story published in *The New Masses*, had already explored that idea, and later stories approached it from various points of view. Within a few years he had published several stories: ''That I Had the Wings'' (reprinted as ''Mr.Toussaint''), ''In a Strange Country'' (1944), ''Flying Home'' (1944), and ''King of the Bingo Game'' (1944). These stories, together with ''A Coupla Scalped Indians'' (1956), have not yet been collected, but they indicate that Ellison is an impressive short story writer as well as a novelist and essayist.

Theodore L. Gross. *The Heroic Ideal in American Literature* (Free). 1971. p. 159

A kind of critical commonplace has grown up around *Invisible Man* to the effect that it is a novel centering on ''the problem of identity.'' Certainly this seems a valid observation, but too often it serves to terminate rather than to begin a discussion of the book's basic concerns. The result is a battery of statements that would lead one to believe that by the novel's end the narrator knows who he *is*, when in fact it is more accurate to say that at that point he only knows who he *isn't*. His ''state of hibernation,'' we should recall, is simply ''a covert preparation for a more overt action.'' It is by that action that he must finally achieve identity.

The book, then, may be said to deal most essentially with considerations which precede identification; that is, with ontology itself. In making this point Ellison has said that ''*Invisible Man* is an attempt to describe reality as it really exists rather than in terms of what [the narrator] has assumed it to be. Because it was the clash between his assumptions, his illusions about reality, and its actual shape which made for his agony.'' What Ellison's protagonist finally comes to see is that the ''actual shape'' of reality is wholly protean, ambiguous, and chaotic. He realizes—even as his tormentors do not—that any attempt to deal with such essential dynamism in terms of fixed and static phenomena is not only to delude oneself but ultimately to deny the possibility of any genuinely meaningful existence. *Invisible Man* carries its hero to the point of such realization, but not beyond. He comes to grips with the nature of reality; identity will be achieved only when that understanding is put to active use. . . .

The [bulk] of the novel, I believe, is structured around a series of encounters in which that sense of certainty is repeatedly challenged, proven inadequate, and supplanted by yet another. In each case the terms of the encounter are basically the same; someone embodying a particular institution of tradition imposes his fixed and rigid vision of reality upon the usually acquiescent narrator, thereby rendering him at once ''invisible'' and ignorant of his invisibility. Chronically failing to apprehend the basic flux of reality which disqualifies all such prescriptive visions, he is tossed from one set of certainties to another, until his mounting disillusionment finally exposes him to a perception of fundamental chaos and to a recognition of the primary sources of his invisibility. He is helped toward this perception, moreover, by other encounters with individuals who provide—deliberately or otherwise—certain strategic ''clues'' regarding the true nature of reality. The novel can be seen, then, as a succession of episodes which finally strip the hero of his illusions, either through a painful process of trial and error or by providing strategic glimpses of that essential fluidity which erodes and distorts all static formalizations of experience.

Jeffrey Steinbrink. *Studies in Black Literature*. Autumn, 1976, pp. 1–2

Ellison is by no means the first writer to inlay his work with the silver and gold of Afro-American folklore. Mark Twain, Charles Chesnutt, James Weldon Johnson, William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, Sterling A. Brown, and Langston Hughes used it before Ellison, often with supreme skill. But Ellison's case is special, because of the sheer virtuosity of *Invisible Man*, which, replete with its ''inside'' use of black folklore, is also very modern in its technique. In this contemporary novel, the vital transformation from folk item to written literature seems wonderfully complete. The language is consistently astir with actual Afro-American speech, as well as with the tales, songs, and games of folklore. What Ellington and Wagner achieved in music is here achieved in fiction: the transmutation of folk materials into a fully orchestrated masterpiece. . . .

Ellison's artistic vision is always ironical, complex, ambiguous. And easy answers prove troubling. He points out, for instance, that paradoxical as it may seem, blacks are in certain ways the freest of Americans. Living at the bottom of the American social hierarchy, blacks have been left alone to experiment with new styles of expression. Echoing James Weldon Johnson, Ellison has observed that much that the world knows as uniquely American (particularly with regard to language, music, and dance) was created by black slaves and their offspring. . . .

It is ironic that James Weldon Johnson's fictional character, the Ex-Colored Man, retreats from the black world into the white one, but nonetheless narrates one of the most affirmative novels about black life. It is odd that the Invisible Man, who ends by escaping into a dark hole, tells a tale full of hope. In Ellison's fiction, especially from the forties on, the portraits of such strong black characters as Jefferson, Mary Rambo, Trueblood, and Hickman have been diverse and affirming. Characters are cheated, tricked, left for dead, beaten, and even lynched. But certain powerful figures, aware of roots in a sustaining tradition, manage to persevere with heroism and high style. The insistence on the heroic impulse in black life has contributed to Ellison's influence.

He has had a lasting impact on many younger writers, notably Al Young, Ishmael Reed, Leon Forrest, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and James Alan McPherson. His special contribution to the new wave of black writing is his unceasing insistence upon connections between the contemporary writer, and not only the American realistic tradition, but the symbolist tradition that nourished Melville and Faulkner, and the vernacular tradition, rooted in American language and lore.

Robert G. O'Meally. *The Craft of Ralph Ellison* (Harvard Univ. Pr., 1980). pp. 3–5

Although he does not write a historical novel in [any traditional] vein, he uses the career of his protagonist to suggest the history of the southern black who has moved from slavery to Booker T. Washingtonism, to the migrations north, to Marxism, to (it is hoped) a viable position as a free human individual. . . . *Invisible Man* suggests that these experiences offer understandable meanings if we will but see them. Like [Ellen] Glasgow or [Henry] James, Ellison creates a social history that, while not always narrowly realistic, certainly captures satirically—and frequently humorously—the social manners he wishes to attack; and like Faulkner, Warren, Styron, and other southern authors, Ellison uses contemporary novelistic techniques masterfully to body forth the symbolic meanings he sees in his protagonist's experiences. Moreover, he creates a cyclical structure for his novel that in itself is a comment on the nature of man's experience in time. Ellison's evidence of the past's continued presence is embodied in the shadow it casts through folk elements—the songs, the extravagant language, the tall-tale, the evangelical Protestantism—that make up the shared experience of the southerner, both black and white. In [Hugh] Holman's terms, his message is Hegelian. There is meaning in history: the past is revealed through process, not replication. His voice is southern. His *Invisible Man* is worthy indeed to claim a place among the great southern novels of this or any other century.

Ladell Payne. *Black Novelists and the Southern Literary Tradition* (Univ. of Georgia Pr., 1981), p. 98

If folk artists are to turn a profit from their monumental creative energies (which are often counteractive, or inversive, vis-à-vis Anglo-American culture), they must take a lesson from the boss quail and move without moving. They must, in essence, sufficiently modify their folk forms (and amply advertise themselves) to merchandize such forms as commodities in the artistic market. To make their products commensurate with a capitalistic marketplace, folk artists may even have to don masks that distort their genuine selves. Ralph Ellison is a master of such strategies.

Ellison reconciles the trickster's manifestations as untrammeled creator and as god of the marketplace by providing critical advertisements for himself as a novelist that carefully bracket the impoverishing economics of Afro-America. For example, in ''Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke'' he writes, ''I use folklore in my work not because I am a Negro, but because writers like Eliot and Joyce made me conscious of the literary value of my folk inheritance. My cultural background, like that of most Americans, is dual (my middle name, sadly enough, is Waldo).'' What is designated in this quotation as ''literary value'' is in reality market value. Joyce and Eliot taught Ellison that if he were a skillful enough strategist and spokesman he could market his own folklore. What is bracketed, of course, is the economics that required Ellison, if he wished to be an Afro-American artist, to turn to Afro-American folklore as a traditional, authenticating source for his art. Like his sharecropper, Ellison is wont to make literary value out of socioeconomic necessity. But he is also an artist who recognizes that Afro-American folk forms have value *in themselves*; they ''have named human situations so well,'' he suggests in ''The Art of Fiction,'' ''that a whole corps of writers could not exhaust their universality'' (p. 173). What Ellison achieves in the Trueblood episode is a dizzying hall of mirrors, a redundancy of structure, that enables him to extend the value of Afro-American folk forms by combining them with an array of Western narrative forms and tropes. Written novel and sung blues, polysyllabic autobiography and vernacular personal narrative, a Christian Fall and an inversive triumph of the black trickster—all are magnificently interwoven.

It is in such creative instances that one discovers Ellison's artistic genius, a genius that links him inextricably and positively to his invented sharecropper. In the Trueblood episode conceived as a chapter in a novel, one finds not only the same kind of metaexpressive commentary that marks the character's narration to Norton but also the same type of self-reflexive artist that the sharecropper's recitation implies—an artist who is fully aware of the contours and limitations, the rewards and dilemmas, of the Afro-American's uniquely expressive craft.

In the expository, critical moment, by contrast, one often finds a quite different Ralph Ellison. Instead of the *reflexive* artist, one finds the *reflective* spokesman. . . .

Ralph Ellison's identity as a public critic, therefore, does not forestall his private artistic recognition he ''ain't nobody but himself,'' and it is out of this realization that a magnificent folk creation such as Trueblood emerges. Both the creator and his agrarian folk storyteller have the wisdom to know that they are resourceful ''whistlers'' for the tribe. They know that their primary matrix as artists is coextensive not with a capitalistic society but with material circumstances like those implied by the blues singer Howling Wolf.

Houston A. Baker, Jr. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1984), pp. 197–99.

In his essay on Charlie Parker, ''On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz'' (1962), Ellison discusses the satirical aspect of signifying as one aspect of riffing in jazz. . . . Here . . . the parody is twofold, involving a formal parody of the melody of ''They Picked Poor Robin'' as well as a ritual naming, and therefore a troping, of an action ''observed from the bandstand.'' While *riffing* is a term that has several meanings, I prefer that told to Alan Lomax by Jelly Roll Morton. A riff, according to Morton, is ''a *figure*, musically speaking.'' A riff functions as ''something that gives any orchestra a great background,'' by which Morton means ''what you would call a foundation,'' ''something you walk on.'' J. L. Dillard's definition explains that this ''figure'' works ''as short phrase repeated over the length of a chorus, more or less like an *ostinato* in classical European musical notation.'' . . .

Ellison, of course, is a complex Signifier, naming things by indirection and troping throughout his works. In his well-known review of LeRoi Jones's *Blues People*, Ellison defines Signifyin(g) in yet a third sense, then Signifies upon Jones's reading of Afro-American cultural history which he argues is misdirected and wrongheaded. ''The tremendous burden of sociology which Jones would place upon this body of music,'' writes Ellison, ''is enough to give the blues the blues.'' . . .

Ellison in his fictions Signifies upon [Richard] Wright by parodying Wright's literary structures through repetition and difference. One can readily suggest the complexities of the parodying. The play of language, the Signifying, starts with the titles. Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, titles connoting race, self, and presence, Ellison tropes with *Invisible Man*, with *invisibility* as an ironic response of absence to the would-be presence of blacks and natives. While *man* suggests a more mature and stronger status than either *son or boy*. Ellison Signifies upon Wright's distinctive version of naturalism with a complex rendering of modernism; Wright's reenacting protagonist, voiceless to the last, Ellison signifies upon with a nameless protagonist. Ellison's protagonist is nothing *but* voice, since it is he who shapes, edits, and narrates his own tale, thereby combining action with the representation of action and defining reality by its representation. This unity of presence and representation is perhaps Ellison's most subtle reversal of Wright's theory of the novel as exemplified in *Native Son*.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1988), pp. 104–5, 106

Ralph Ellison turned eighty on March 1[, 1994], and his peculiarly modern burden, the burden of a second act, grows heavier with age. The man is far too composed, too regal, to betray the weight of it, but the soul must weary of its persistence. So great was the celebration in 1952 for his first (and only) novel, *Invisible Man*, that the sound of critical applause, rattling medals, and whispered expectations took years to fade. Few novels have entered the canon so quickly. . . .

Ellison did not intend to distinguish his career with such an austerity of publication. By 1955, he had begun a novel set mainly in the South and in Washington, D.C. At the center of the story—as far as we know it from a few published extracts—are the community and the language of the black church and the relationship between a black preacher and a friend who eventually becomes a senator and a notorious racist. After a few years of writing, Ellison was not shy about showing excerpts to friends like Saul Bellow and the novelist and cultural historian Albert Murray. He was not reluctant to publish a piece here and there in literary quarterlies. . . .

[As] he described a fire two decades ago at his old summer house, in Plainfield, Massachusetts, he slumped back in his chair, resigned, his voice lowering into a growling whisper. ''There was, of course, a traumatic event involved with the book,'' he began. ''We lost a summer house and, with it, a good part of the novel. It wasn't the entire manuscript, but it was over three hundred and sixty pages. There was no copy.''

Ellison's friends say that it was years before he went back to work on the novel. . . .

Ellison's readers can be greedy and hope for more novels and essays—come to think of it, a memoir would be nice, too—but what's done is done and, in a sense, is more than enough. On the occasion of his eightieth birthday, it becomes clearer than ever that *Invisible Man* and his two collections of essays, *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986) are the urtexts for a loose coalition of black American intellectuals who represent an integrationist vision of the country's history and culture. Ellison's books are a foundation for talents as various as the novelists Charles Johnson, John Edgar Wideman, Leon Forrest, and James Alan MacPherson; the critics Shelby Steele, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Stanley Crouch; the poet Michael S. Harper. . . .

In Ellison's view, America is not made up of separate, free-floating cultures but, rather of a constant interplay and exchange. . . . What Ellison has called the ''interchange, appropriation, and integration'' of American culture is evident in the music we hear, the games we play, the books we read, the clothes we wear, the food we eat. For him, integration is not merely an aspiration but a given, a fact of cultural and political life.

David Remnick. ''Visible Man.'' *New Yorker*. March 14, 1994, pp. 34–36

Certainly his career is far from being over. In a *New Yorker* article in 1976 Jervis Anderson wrote: ''It might . . . be said of Ellison . . . that his prestige seems to grow with every novel he doesn't write.'' Which is one way of remarking the extraordinary life that *Invisible Man* has had over the past forty-two years. In 1965 about two hundred writers and editors, in a poll taken by *Book Week* (then the literary supplement of the now defunct New York *Herald Tribune* but today the Sunday literary review of *The Washington Post*) registered the judgment that Ellison's was the most distinguished American novel that had appeared during the previous twenty years, and it is not at all unlikely that, were a similar group to be canvassed at the present time, nearly thirty years later, the same valuation would again be rendered. Through the various editions of *Invisible Man* that have been produced in well-nigh twenty languages millions of copies have been purchased across the world, and there is virtually no college or university campus on the American scene where at least one course will not be found in whose syllabus it forms an important element. So the question that is raised in its narrator's famous concluding sentence—''Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?''—has been resoundingly answered in the affirmative by Ellison's countless readers, black and white, who continue to find in the profundity of his metaphor about ''invisibility'' a luminousness that powerfully clarifies the general human condition.

But it is not alone the remarkable continuing life of *Invisible Man* that tells us that Ellison's career is by no means over, for he also left nearly two thousand manuscript pages of the novel on which he had been working for decades and which he had told me a few weeks before his death was ''just about to finished.'' It had been a long struggle, for more than 350 pages of the novel in progress were lost in the mid-1960s in a fire that destroyed the Ellisons' summer home in Plainfield, Massachusetts. And so disheartened was he by this misfortune that not for another few years was he able to resume the project with any real intensity of concentration. But gradually he recovered self-command, and over a long stretch of time prior to his death he, with his characteristic deliberateness, had been steadily working with great joy and with great energy. And I am confident that Joseph Fox, his Random House editor, when he begins really to tackle the manuscript, will find a novel so nearly complete as to be easily publishable.

So, with the two brilliant collections of his essays—*Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986)—and *Invisible Man* and the massive manuscript (as yet untitled) that remains to be posthumously issued, we may safely take it for granted that the career of this prodigiously gifted writer will be a vital part of the American literary scene over as much of its future as can now be foreseen.

Nathan A. Scott, Jr. *Callaloo*. Summer, 1994, p. 360

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ERDRICH, Louise (1954–)

Louise Erdrich is a contemporary writer of German-American and Chippewa heritage. Like many literary works by Native Americans, her novels, *Love Medicine* (1984), *The Beet Queen* (1986), and *Tracks* (1988), reflect the ambivalence and tension marking the lives of people, much like herself, from dual cultural backgrounds. Erdrich's novels feature Native Americans, mixed bloods, and other culturally and socially displaced characters whose marginal status is simultaneously an advantage and a disadvantage, a source of both power and powerlessness. In *Love Medicine*, for example, Lipsha Morrissey, born with the shaman's healing touch, grows up with both Native American and Roman Catholic religious beliefs. His knowledge of both religions is sometimes an advantage, but at other times he is merely paralyzed between contradictory systems of belief. In *The Beet Queen*, Wallace Pfef, marginal as a homosexual in a small Midwestern town, plays an ambivalent role as Karl Adair's lover and as husband-and-father substitute to Karl's wife and daughter. His liminal status is a source of both happiness and grief. In *Tracks*, Erdrich's two narrators likewise struggle with liminality in their efforts to leave behind early lives in favor of others they have chosen. Nanapush grows up Christian in a Jesuit school, but later chooses life in the woods and Chippewa tradition; the other narrator, Pauline, is a mixed-blood raised in the Native American tradition, but she wishes to be white. . . .

All of these conflicting codes in Erdrich's text produce a state of marginality in the reader, who must at some point in the reading cease to apply the conventional expectations associated with ordinary narrativity. The reader must pause ''between worlds'' to discover the arbitrary structural principles of both. This primary value—epistemological insight—which Erdrich's text associates with marginality might then be adopted through a revision of narrativity. Stranded between conflicting codes—deprived of ''a stable point of identification'' within the world evoked by the text—the reader is temporarily disempowered. However, such disempowerment or ''alienation'' leads to another kind of power. The reader must consider a possibility forcefully posited in all of Erdrich's works (as well as in those of other contemporary Native Americans): the world takes on the shape of the stories we tell. Exposure to radically different stories as ways of structuring the world brings the reader to see what Lipsha Morrissey understands when he says, ''You see how instantly the ground can shift you thought was solid. . . . You see how all the everyday things you counted on was just a dream you had been having by which you run your whole life. . . . So I had perspective on it all'' (*London Mercury*, pp. 209, 211).

Catherine Rainwater. ''Reading between Words: Narrativity in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich.'' *American Literature*. December 1990, pp. 405, 422

Erdrich's second novel, *The Beet Queen* (1986), is a tighter and more polished work than *Love Medicine*, with a smooth style that led Leslie Silko to write: ''Erdrich's prose is dazzling and sleek. Each sentence has been carefully wrought, pared lean and then polished.'' In this novel, six narrators share the episodic narrative with a third-person narrator in a chronological sequence shifting over time from 1932 to 1972. The story is one of men and women without reservations, hung out to dry on the flat, dull edge of the Minnesota–North Dakota heartland in a small town that could be anywhere or nowhere. The story is told in a triangulation that zeros in on Argus, a town that seems almost an empty place on the map. Just as water was the primary natural element in *Love Medicine*, in *The Beet Queen* the unifying element is air.

At first or perhaps even second glance, ''Indian'' seems to mean very little in this novel. In the same review in which she praised the style of *The Beet Queen*, Silko criticized the novel for this very point, writing: ''What Erdrich, who is half-Indian and grew up in North Dakota, attempts to pass off as North Dakota may be the only North Dakota she knows. But hers is an oddly rarified place in which the individual's own psyche, not racism or poverty, accounts for all conflict and tension. In this pristine world all misery, suffering and loss are self-generated, just as conservative Republicans have been telling us for years.'' Silko concludes that ''*The Beet Queen* is a strange artifact, an eloquent example of the political climate in America in 1986.''

Oddly, in attacking the book for its refusal to foreground the undeniably bitter racism toward Indians in America's heartland, Silko seems to be demanding that writers who identify as Indian, or mixed blood, must write rhetorically and polemically, a posture that leaves little room for the kind of heterogeneous literature that would reflect the rich diversity of Indian experiences, lives and

cultures—and a posture Silko certainly does not assume in her own fiction.

Louis Owens. *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Pr., 1992), pp. 205–6

Although she has described herself in *Contemporary Authors* as ''anti religion,'' Erdrich in four of her novels explores the family sagas of Native Americans and whites caught in the erosion of both Christian and Native American religious traditions. Her Native Americans suffer the loss doubly: they are alienated from the dogmatic ''Christianity'' imposed on them by the whites who subjugated them, and they are increasingly estranged from the shamanic religion of their ancestors as they struggle to preserve their identity in a secularized America. Erdrich is sharply critical of institutional Catholicism as a force that warps her Chippewa men and women. At the same time, she reveals how many of her own people abandon their native religion for the baubles of a materialistic culture—money, alcohol, cars, and commercial success.

Erdrich, nevertheless, counteracts these destructive forces by using mystical realism to create a world infused with supernatural mystery. Through her lyrical prose and the prophetic voices of her narrators, she breaks down the barriers between the material and spiritual worlds, between linear time and mythic reenactment, between ''real'' and imaginary events. By the power of the word, she affirms an enduring supernatural reality against the soulless liberalism of the hyperrational dominant culture.

John F. Desmond. *America*. May 14, 1994, p. 9

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ESPADA, Martín (1957–)

[Martín] Espada spent most of his childhood in Brooklyn, where he was born in 1957. When he was about thirteen, his family moved to Long Island, which he calls ''my own private Mississippi,'' because of the difficulties he encountered as a Puerto Rican in a white suburb. When he first started writing poetry at sixteen, he did so partially to search for a positive identity in a negative atmosphere. . . .

When he dropped out [of college] after a year, he began what he calls an ''odyssey.'' Many of the poems in Espada's books mention the myriad jobs he has encountered in his life, and this period, when he was between colleges, was rich in poetic material, if not in material gain. He worked as a door-to-door encyclopedia salesman, a clerk, a telephone solicitor for Time-Life Books, a gas station attendant, a bouncer, and a bindery worker in a printing plant. . . .

Espada began to suspect he was able to work as a poet when, in 1984, he received a five thousand dollar grant from the Massachusetts Artists Foundation, while he was still in law school. . . . His first book, *The Immigrant Iceboy's Bolero*, came out in 1982. . . .

Another turning point came when his second book, *Trumpets from the Islands of Their Eviction*, came out in 1987. . . . But it took until his third book. *Rebellion Is the Circle of a Lover's Hands*, published in 1989 . . . for him to feel that his poetry was really taking off. . . .

Over the course of eleven years and four books, Espada says he's become much more critical about his poetry, and much more disciplined and consistent in terms of language. ''My central preoccupations remain the same,'' he says. ''The themes, the identities, the sympathies are essentially the same but I think my ability to use the language and my vocabulary has evolved in a certain direction. For example, I'm much more aware of certain literary devices, and I'm more grounded in the senses than when I first started writing.'' His language may have evolved, but many things remain the same, such as his reliance on imagery.

''My father is a documentary photographer and I think there's a documentary sensibility in my poetry. . . . I think a lot of my imagery is derived from foregrounding and shadow, and there is a starkness in my poetry, a rawness that comes through in the documentary grounding there.'' . . .

Classifications have always been pushed on Espada . . . labeling him a ''Latino poet,'' or an ''advocate,'' or a ''political poet.''

''There are classifications which restrict, which stereotype, and there are classifications that define. I don't mind being defined. I don't mind someone saying I'm a *Latino* poet, I don't mind *political poet*. Those are definitions, they help a reader understand what it is you're about to get. I just wouldn't want to be stereotyped, called a *street poet*. Part of the dilemma we face as Latino writers, Puerto Rican writers, is how do we declare our independence as individuals and still be part of this community?''

Elizabeth Gunderson. *Poets & Writers*. March–April, 1995, pp. 51–52, 53, 54–55

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FARRELL, James Thomas (1904–1979)

Like Proust, Farrell seems to have endured certain personal experiences for the sole purpose of recording them; but he also desired to avenge them, and he charged his works with so unflagging a hatred of the characters in them, and wrote at so shrill a pitch, that their ferocity seemed almost an incidental representation of his own. Like Caldwell, he wrote with his hands and feet and any bludgeon within reach; but where Caldwell's grossness seemed merely ingenuous or slick, Farrell wrote under the pressure of certain moral compulsives that were part of the very design of his work and gave it a kind of dreary grandeur.

Alfred Kazin. *On Native Grounds* (Reynal). 1942. p. 380

Farrell the moralist is all-of-a-piece with Farrell the fiction writer. The one reflects upon the experience the other records. The fiction writer composes canvases depicting frustrated petty hopes and mean defeats, prolix obituaries of the spiritually impoverished, of greenhorns and other outsiders, the anonymous integers that go only to swell the population figures, the devalued people of his time whose fruitless dignity and courage (when these they have) are eternally betrayed by what Thomas Hardy called ''circumstances.'' . . . The writer of fiction may leave us with the impression that his vision is of the drabness and tawdriness of life; and Farrell has indeed been beaten over the head innumerable times for precisely that crime, but the moralist takes a different tack and from the same data draws the conclusion that these things need not be.

C. Hartley Grattan. *Harper's Magazine*. Oct., 1954. p. 93

Mr. Farrell's stories are painful, awful and wonderful.

How can he commute so easily between such extremes? I think the answer proceeds from the fact that Mr. Farrell dispenses with art as well as with artifice. . . . Mr. Farrell is innocent of all the invisible but complicated apparatus now fashionable with the short-story writer—the subtleties of form, the casual but cunning clues for motivation, the deployment of symbol and the planned ambiguities. His language is humble, but never studiedly so. He doesn't make an *outré* elegance out of plainness, as Hemingway sometimes does, or Steinbeck in his portraits of the primitive. Mr. Farrell's simplicity is helpless and genuine. . . . Yet who is better—the slide-rule fictioneer of our day, who frequently refines his short story into a weary and well-tailored void, or Jim Farrell, who reaches out with a rough hand and comes up, quite often, with an authentic fistful of human truth?

Frederic Morton. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 10, 1957. p. 30

The critics are usually bored by his dogged, humorless methods, but they are also surprised by his quality. Farrell has not only gone on doing his chosen job as well as he did in his early years—they keep saying—but does it with deepened insight and humanity. *The Face of Time*, published in 1953, for instance, received the sort of respect which would have stirred general excitement about a new author. Yet even though living writers are being given intensive treatment in a steady stream of studies pouring from the academic presses, Farrell is virtually ignored. Inevitably, by the mysterious laws of literary favor, he will be rediscovered, though not perhaps until one or two books from now. . . .

Sooner or later Farrell will be given his place as a sort of William Dean Howells of Jackson Park in recognition of the scope and faithfulness with which he recorded the day-to-day, almost hour-by-hour suffering, sentimentality, dignity, coarseness and despair of an important part of the nation's population at a time of decisive change in its psyche.

Robert Gorham Davis. *New York Times Book Section*. May 12, 1963. pp. 1, 43

In the midst of a long-overdue assessment of his contribution to American fiction, it is not generally recognized that Farrell's critical writing forms in itself a body of searching and incisive judgments much richer and of wider range than those of his novelist contemporaries. To read this criticism is not only to probe in retrospect the dilemmas of the artist in American life over the past three decades; it is also to visualize Farrell's deliberate involvement in social and political agitation at the cost of precious time taken from his art. In this choice Farrell has nothing in common with Hemingway and Faulkner. Both as writer and social critic he has felt closer to Dreiser and Anderson than to writers born in this century. A refreshing thing about Farrell is that he rejects no vision as alien to his art or his thought. Thus he was profoundly influenced simultaneously by Joyce and Tolstoy, Dreiser and Dostoievsky, Trotsky and Pater. Such a catholic openness to the thought of his great predecessors has given Farrell's critical outlook a richness and perspective unique on the American scene of our generation.

Don M. Wolfe. Introduction to *Selected Essays*, by James T. Farrell, ed. Luna Wolfe (McGraw). 1964. pp. ix–x

If he would persist in his folly, it has been said, the fool would be wise. I am not saying James T. Farrell has been foolish in his persistent and repeated explorations of what is by now his own terrain. But persistent he certainly has been. And that in the face of continued critical and, in recent years, popular neglect. What is interesting in reading his new novel, *Lonely for the Future*, is to realize that with persistence has come distance. The magic of time has transformed Farrell into a historical novelist: his period, the Twenties and early Thirties; his place, Chicago. Now, as a profoundly probing recording angel of the social scene, as exemplified by the lower middle classes (Irish-Catholic variety), Farrell is not the American Balzac he would like to be. However, as a fairly accurate painter of the social and sexual agonies of the young of a more naïve time, he is quite good. . . .

. . .what prevents this book [*Lonely for the Future*], like most of Farrell's work, from having any great substance is that he is perhaps too closely identified with his characters. Their naïveté seems to be his; their awakenings to the possibilities of life that lie beyond the middle-class home seem to be his own awakening of many years ago, obsessively re-enacted over and over again. Just that—and no more.

Daniel Stern. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 22, 1966. pp. 43–4

Farrell's work, like that of other writers, is uneven from book to book and exhibits both weaknesses and strengths, the weaknesses sometimes being the defects of the strengths. For example, it may be said that at times Farrell depends too exclusively on dialogue for characterization, yet that technique dramatically reveals the mentality behind the words and thus carries and verifies the thematic indictment of what city life does to people. His writing can be doggedly repetitive and wordy, but again it is often so for thematic purposes—just as Walt Whitman, Henry James, and William Faulkner can be repetitive and wordy in their ways to achieve their effects. Such flaws of his style, if that is what they are, are in any case minor compared to its virtues in his best work: its overall thematic suitability, its expressive adaptability to the speech patterns of many characters, its frequent attainment of a natural eloquence. . . .

Farrell has not realized the full potential in his vision. But his vision is large and single, and step by step he has created a single world of ample proportions. His cycles of novels with his other fiction approximate a sequence, a rarity in American literature. At its best, the American past he creates is deeply authentic as art and as social history, like Faulkner's South. Farrell's re-created and recorded past is especially meaningful to us because, through its rich details of urban manners, it shows the heavy cost exacted of people and institutions by the modern city. His characters' lives expose social process; time slowly brings change, and the making of personality and the formation of society merge. His Lonigans, O'Flahertys, and O'Neills are deeply immersed in their time and place—interesting contrasts to Hemingway's disengaged Americans—and his work is exceptional in our fiction for the number of its living characters. The contrast between their often blind groping for a better future and the grimness of their present, flowing inevitably out of their past, is a subject with tragic power.

Edgar M. Branch. *James T. Farrell* (Twayne, 1971), pp. 169, 171

If Farrell had not possessed a major talent and a major subject, his feat of endurance would be less interesting if still significant. The inheritor of a largely unscrutinized American literary tradition represented by Dreiser, Anderson, and Lewis, Farrell had both the talent and the subject. He was a master in the creation of mass scenes: raging, hilarious, bitter family quarrels with a cast of dozens, piously organized civic and religious festivities, violent, protracted New Year's Eve parties. Few have been better chroniclers than Farrell of that particularly American experience and subject, the mood: the endless series of frightened adjustments called living, the lunging and inching toward attention by each individual psyche within a hopelessly blurred crowd, the troubled intimacy with which one tentatively fixes and appropriates one's alien *persona*, the confusion in which one haphazardly sorts the fragmented hurtful thoughts one wakes up to and goes to sleep with. No one has equalled Farrell's sustained delineation of second- and third-generation Americans: women who must live too often as stereotypes within the minds of would-be stereotypes, men who are fans and outsiders in their adopted land, incarnations of social anxiety.

With Farrell's death, we have lost our finest literary perspective on the meaning of assimilation and ambition in American life, and a writer uniquely and admirably free from that most malignant form of cultural life: audience dependency. Farrell was always ready to fulminate about the critics' neglect and misunderstanding of him, but in the last analysis, he wrote for himself. Writing for Farrell was only the postponement of the inevitable, a definition that covers most of life as Farrell portrays it that admits what it postpones, and thus genuinely *happens*. For Farrell, writing was still a synonym for self-sufficiency; and this was the most radical self-definition possible to one who believed that America was becoming a nation of consumers and spectators. We possess, as he meant us to, his example and his books. Farrell's work constitutes the last important experiment to date in American literature with what can be viewed as deliberately unedited material. The malice he drew from censors and critics was out of proportion to the boldness, or the awkwardness, of his enterprise. The censorship battle is over; the critical one has barely begun. Others will honor James Farrell; they will read and sort and care for his works if we do not.

Ann Douglas. *Dissent*. Spring, 1980, p. 216

Reading [James T.] Farrell's novels, one is always struck by the persistence of their themes. The making of a self within the story of America as he knew it depends, of course, upon the self he wrote about and the *Americas* he knew. Chicago and New York? Perhaps the obsession he had for his subject and theses should remind us of what used to be called the obligations of the novelist. His insistence upon reinterpreting the past from his changing present circumstances (and what he believed were changing national occasions as well) is part of his distinct perspective. Yet Farrell's major works, and even his later ones that are embarrassing palimpsests to an apparently uncapturable past, transcend their minute fidelity to an area and age of the city. They remain anatomies of freedom made possible by the city itself: Farrell's aspiration that a rational, democratic urban life is shared human history and a commitment to face the contingency of experience.

Farrell's allegiances to the naturalism of [George Herbert] Mead and [John] Dewey, and his exploration of urban ecology could have made his writing more arid and even less contemporaneous. After the Second World War, what novelist acknowledged these thinkers as shaping the literary imagination? In an age in which the concepts of alienation and dread guided American letters, Farrell's intellectual heritage seemed out of place and old-fashioned. Yet he would not turn away from his hope for the democratic community. He did not invert, as did many postwar writers, the liberal, communalizing nature of the city to produce new fables of alienation.

Judging from his critical discussions of [Lev] Tolstoy, of [Theodore] Dreiser, of [Fyodor] Dostoevsky, and of realism,

Farrell would have been at home with a distinctly nineteenth-century audience, one concerned with having the novelist dramatize a new subject or idea. And for him, this subject was, of course, the city as he understood it. His attention to the mundane and seemingly pedestrian is his presentation of how the self grows within the city. His fiction insists that his readers understand this often tedious portraiture as a clue to their own individuality and its *pasts*. In this ethical sense, he is akin to the writers he admired.

Lewis F. Fried. *Makers of the City* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Pr., 1990), pp. 156–57

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FAST, Howard (1914–)

Place in the City is an astonishing novel for a boy of twenty three to have written; but it is astonishing not because it is so good, for most of it is not good at all, but because it is so exasperatingly soft. . . . Despite the superficial toughness the book is really a study in innocence, full of garlands and tears and sighs, and there are passages, in fact, where it reads like a cross between Fannie Hurst and Sherwood Anderson. . . . Mr. Fast has talent and that talent bubbles in this book; but he has not learned that second-hand pathos is the easy refuge of second-hand thoughts.

Alfred Kazin. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 8, 1937. p. 7

Mr. Fast writes with a catch in his breath and sometimes brings tears to his own eyes instead of the readers'. Sometimes his words are less an echo of history than they are of Hemingway. . . . Sometimes he takes his characters from the same casting agencies that are used by other historical novelists. . . . If his book does not belong to the history of American literature, at least it will be important in the history of the popular mind.

Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*. Aug. 17, 1942. p. 203

Once again Howard Fast has taken a figure out of American history and by the intensity of his emotional sympathy and intellectual respect had made him into a living man. Just as in *The Unvanquished* George Washington became under Mr. Fast's austerely glowing art an individual of flesh and blood, beset by doubts and fears of personal inadequacy in the role he had to play, so does Thomas Paine in the novel *Citizen Tom Paine* become a creature known and knowable in his moments of grandeur and his moments of degradation. . . . Mr. Fast's story of this unique character in history is a brilliant piece of fictional biography.

Rose Feld. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. April 25, 1943. p. 3

When a writer of historical fiction is in top form he somehow can suggest that he does not merely re-create the past but rather that he lives there and is reporting on the life around him. Sometimes the author of *Citizen Tom Paine* and *Freedom Road* does this . . . when he is writing well and effectively, in a minor key, and you follow along with him and belong to the world he evokes. . . . His gift in his best work is for a certain reticence—and this is no negative virtue in the historical school, many of whose practitioners would dazzle you by piling up of theatrical ''props'' and are concerned with character only secondarily, if at all.

John K. Hutchens. *New York Times Book Section*. Apr. 8, 1945. p. 6

In half a dozen novels this popular author has dealt with various critical periods in the American past and the last three of his books—*Citizen Tom Paine*, *Freedom Road*, and now *The American*—fit the same pattern. A society full of class tyranny, economic exploitation and political corruption; a proletariat, dumb, yearning, struggling, that plainly waits for a great leader; a hero who rises to struggle against the entrenched forces of Mammon and the dead weight of middle-class complacency; a defeat that gloriously points the way to future victories—this is the general scheme that Mr. Fast uses.

Allan Nevins. *New York Times Book Section*. July 21, 1946. p. 4

In the writing career of Howard Fast we trace the unusually rapid decline of a pleasant fictional talent into dull political servitude. . . . His eye (has) been ever more tightly shutting itself to the kind of truth with which fiction is properly concerned, his heart increasingly hardening under the strain of pumping such a steady stream of practical benevolences until now . . . all that remains of any original creative gift is some kind of crude energy of intention, a

shallow but complex urge to pedagogic power. Mr. Fast has come of literary age in a period in which to be a radical or even a liberal is to feel no need to smile when one says patriotism.

Diana Trilling *The Nation*. Aug. 3, 1946. p. 134

Howard Fast is a historical novelist with a difference. He has always shunned the standard ingredients of that art—sex, saber, and swash-buckling—and he has never permitted the drama on the stage to be obscured by the opulence of the setting. Nor has he tried to retell our history or ancient legends with our modern vision, pouring in (as Thomas Mann has done in the Joseph cycle) the intellectual resources of the twentieth century. Rather has he always been fascinated by the spectacle of those who either singly or in groups gave their powers and their lives for a cause, for the extension of human dignity and for what is perhaps the greatest of all rights, the right to be let alone.

Thomas Lask. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 10, 1948. p. 4

Fast was long considered to be a diabolical Communist, hardly even human; now, as he presents himself as a disillusioned idealist, he seems sincere and very human. If we trust his motive and listen to what he has to say, we must grant his idealism and humanity even while a Communist. . . . It is far better when a man like Fast leaves his party for the reasons he did than because of fear or other opportunistic reasons.

Paul Knopf. *New York Times Magazine*. June 30, 1957. p. 2

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FAULKNER, William (1897–1962)

Faulkner seems to me to be melodramatic, distinctly. All the skies are inky black. He deals in horror as in a cherished material. Coincidence, what he would call ''fate,'' does not stand on ceremony, or seek to cover itself in any fussy ''realistic'' plausibility, with him. . . . A man like William Faulkner discovers fatalism, or whatever you like to call it: it at once gives his characters something to live for—namely a great deal of undeserved tribulation culminating in *a violent death*. That simplifies the plot enormously—it is, in fact, the great ''classical'' simplification, banishing expectation.

Wyndham Lewis. *Men without Art* (Cassell). 1934. pp. 54–5

As a thinker, as a participant in the communal myth of the South's tradition and decline, Faulkner was curiously dull, furiously commonplace, and often meaningless, suggesting some ambiguous irresponsibility and exasperated sullenness of mind, some distant atrophy of indifference. Technically he soon proved himself almost inordinately subtle and ambitious, the one modern American novelist whose devotion to form has earned him a place among the great experimentalists in modern poetry. Yet this remarkable imaginative energy, so lividly and almost painfully impressed upon all his work, did not spring from a conscious and procreative criticism of society or conduct or tradition, from some absolute knowledge; it was the expression of that psychic tension in Faulkner . . . which, as his almost monstrous overwriting proves, was a psychological tic, a need to invest everything he wrote with a wild, exhilarated, and disproportionate intensity—an intensity that was brilliant and devastatingly inconclusive in its energy, but seemed to come from nowhere.

Alfred Kazin. *On Native Grounds* (Reynal). 1942. pp. 456–7

Faulkner believes that individual responsibility is the most important goal for man. Here is his positive answer to his own negative despair. . . . Thoreau based his personal individualism upon his tremendous love of nature. In Faulkner the love of nature is replaced by the love of the land. How much one would want to distinguish between land and nature I don't know. Basically the only difference is . . . the transcendental ideas in Thoreau's concept

of nature. . . . Instead of having Thoreau's leaven of transcendentalism, he has Hawthorne's leaven of the brotherhood of man. Man must love the land that God has supplied to him for his well-being. Through the intimate association with the land, man acquires a sense of loyalty to his family, his immediate social environment, and the all-encompassing land itself. Loyalties, as with so much of man's activities, are governed by what is inherited from the past. By accepting these loyalties and the force of the past, man develops his individuality—the end for which all the other things of man's existence are means.

Ward L. Miner. *The World of William Faulkner* (Duke). 1952. pp. 153–4

Faulkner had what (giving up the attempt to define it more closely) we call genius. It is what Herman Melville had when he wrote *Moby Dick* and rarely manifested thereafter. We know that genius seldom lasts, but we are always saddened when it goes.

On the other hand, if something has been lost (in *The Mansion*), something has been gained. In his note Faulkner says that ''the author has learned, he believes, more about the human heart and its dilemma than he knew thirty-four years ago.'' Indeed he has. He has learned, for one thing, to respect deeply the human capacity for sheer endurance. He has also acquired compassion. . . . The Snopeses, it turns out, are not personifications of greed or anything of the sort; they are poor sons of bitches like the rest of us.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 14, 1959. p. 21

Faulkner is right in assuming that the hope in man's will to endure and prevail has been the subject of his fiction all along; but this will is variously represented, and the degree and quality of context in which we see it vary considerably from the beginning of his career to the present. He moves from what is almost a total lack of awareness to a vague and fleeting insight into human beings—to the point where the meaning of existence is not only seen but overtly defined. Throughout this progress, however, there are many uncertainties which upset the calculation, and his characters are frequently seen missing their chances and blundering badly despite their sense of dedication. This is one among many reasons for the value of Faulkner's work; it appears an endless variety of new experiments in the means to express not only man's worth but the elaborate stratagems he is guilty of using to conceal it.

Frederick J. Hoffman. *William Faulkner* (Twayne). 1961. pp. 117–8

The European reader finds something uniquely American in Faulkner, and obviously no European could have written his books; the few European commentators that I have read seem to me to glorify William Faulkner in a provincial American (or Southern) vacuum. I believe that as his personality fades from view he will be recognized as one of the great craftsmen of the art of fiction which Ford Madox Ford called the Impressionistic Novel. From Stendhal through Flaubert and Joyce there is a direct line to Faulkner, and it is not a mere question of influence. Faulkner's great subject, as it was Flaubert's and Proust's, is passive suffering, the victim being destroyed either by society or by dark forces within himself. Faulkner is one of the great examples of the international school of fiction which for more than a century has reversed the Aristotelian doctrine that tragedy is an action, not a quality.

Allen Tate. *Sewanee Review*. Winter, 1963. p. 162

To the neophyte Faulkner reader, the prose may seem a continual flow of words that obscures the story action rather than developing it. The difficulties should not be minimized. The diction, the syntax, seem designed to obfuscate, not communicate. Faulkner sometimes deliberately withholds important details, and the narrators frequently refer to people or events that the reader will not learn about until much later, making the style seem even more opaque than it actually is. And the long sentences are difficult to follow, with clauses that proliferate, developing not from the main subject or verb of the sentence, but growing out of preceding clauses. As a result, the main thought is often lost in the mass of amplifying or qualifying ideas. Antecedents of personal pronouns are frequently not clear. Faulkner's style does not provide relaxing reading, but forces the reader to participate in the search for understanding and truth. . . . Had Faulkner been a U. S. senator, his speeches would have been squarely in the tradition of Southern oratory. Some of his sentences sound almost like selected passages from a filibuster. Rather than run the risk of interruption and lose the floor, he does not pause; he rolls on, using all the rhetorical devices of the speechmaker: colorful, grandiloquent and emotive words, repetition, parallel structure, a series of negative clauses preceding a positive, delayed climax.

Edmund L. Volpe. *A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner* (Farrar, Straus). 1963. pp. 38–9

If Faulkner feels the past as the repository of great images of human effort and integrity, he also sees it as the source of a dynamic evil. If he is aware of the romantic pull of the past, he is also aware that submission to romance of the past is a form of death. If he finds in modernity a violation of the dream of the ''communal anonymity of brotherhood,'' of nature, and of honor, he does not see it as the barred end of history; it is also the instant in which action is possible, with a choice between action as ''doom'' from the past and action as affirmation. If the Flems and the Jasons drive hard to define a dehumanized future, there are the Dilseys and the Ratliffs who see the future as part of the vital human continuity. In other words, Faulkner's dialectic of time is inclusive, dynamic—and painful.

Robert Penn Warren. *Southern Review*. Summer, 1965. p. 526

And Faulkner himself: did he find the right answers to his problems in life and in the continued production of his works? There are no completely right answers. It had better be said that his later books, in general, had not the freshness and power of the early ones. That is the common fate of imaginative writers (except for a few poets); some original force goes out of them. The books they write after the age of fifty most often lose in genius what they may possibly gain in talent.

Faulkner lost substantially less than others. Though none of his later books was on a level with *The Sound and the Fury* or *Go*

Down, Moses, none of them made concessions to other people's tastes. One hears a person speaking in each of them, not an institution, and a person with reserves of power who may surprise us on any page. Some of Faulkner's best writing is in passages of *Requiem for a Nun*, and *Intruder in the Dust*, and especially—almost at the end—in the Mink Snopes chapters of *The Mansion*. In retrospect I should judge that he solved the problem of keeping alive his genius better than any other American novelist of our century.

Malcolm Cowley. *Saturday Review*. June 11, 1966. p. 26

To speak of greatness with regard to one's contemporaries is dangerous. But if there are any American novels of the present century which may be called great, which bear comparison—serious if not favorable—with the achievements of twentieth-century European literature, then surely *The Sound and the Fury* is among them. It is one of the three or four American works of prose fiction written since the turn of the century in which the impact of tragedy is felt and sustained. Seized by his materials, Faulkner keeps, for once, within his esthetic means, rarely trying to say more than he can or needs to. *The Sound and the Fury* is the one novel in which his vision and technique are almost in complete harmony, and the vision itself whole and major. Whether taken as a study of the potential for human self-destruction, or as a rendering of the social disorder particular to our time, the novel projects a radical image of man against the wall. Embodied and justified, this is an image of great writing.

Irving Howe. *William Faulkner* (Random). 1952. pp. 126–7

If Faulkner was ''a perfect case of split personality,'' it was not as he intended; Faulkner the writer and Faulkner the ''denizen of the world'' were never very far apart. His ''polar'' imagination empathized with the Negro and liberal as he criticized the segregationist, with the Southerner as he criticized the Negro and liberal, maintaining all too often, instead of a firm middle-of-the-road position, a mere political schizophrenia. Faulkner was not the hero who can successfully say, ''This stinks and I'm going to do something about it''—he was no Chick Mallison or Nancy Mannigoe, daring existential action in the face of blind unreason and failed communication. He was not even an Isaac McCaslin, swearing ''at least I will not participate in it myself.'' He was still very much the author of *Go Down, Moses* who found Isaac's stand painfully ambivalent; the author of *Intruder in the Dust* and *Requiem for a Nun* unable to portray heroism except in terms of fantasy and sensationalism. The same endowments which insured his success as a novelist insured his failure as a political voice.

Walter Taylor. *Southern Review*. Fall, 1970. p. 1092

In his prefatory note to *The Mansion* Faulkner comments that '''living' is motion, and 'motion' is change and alteration and therefore the only alternative to motion is un-motion, stasis, death.'' Man must act conditionally, must be adaptive. In the language of ''The Bear,'' man must examine the Grecian urn, acknowledge the truth and beauty of its depictions, and then transcend the static moments captured there. He cannot transport himself into a bygone frieze, into an historic moment like the past hunt for Old Ben or into an artistic design like the Nazarene of messianic teaching. It is important that Old Ben in death ''almost resembled a piece of statuary'' for he resembles both beauty and non-life. Any fixed moment or grand design is contrived, a kind of death; life for Faulkner is in becoming rather than being; ripeness is all. That is why truth for Faulkner embodies intuition as well as intellect and why conceptualization must ultimately give way to the primacy of the heart. . . . Ike McCaslin illustrates that for Faulkner heroism lies not in the vision of a new Canaan nor even in the sacrifice of a corrupted heritage, but in an ability to suffer, in Ike's remarkable capacity to grieve.

Arthur F. Kinney. *Southern Review*. Fall, 1970. p. 1124

In *Light in August* Faulkner had presented individuals who were victimized by history largely without knowing it. But in *Absalom, Absalom*! he advances to a much more complex presentation of history. Before, history had been treated as a static, simple, essentially known quality which finally weighted down its unalert human vehicle. Now, however, history becomes a dynamic, highly volatile quality that presents first an aspect of startling clarity, then an aspect of shadowed obscurity, teasing and confusing the mind it penetrates while at the same time demanding that the mind subdue it. . . . It is the confrontation that is significant in the novel; neither the legend of Thomas Sutpen, which is really a capsule history of the South, nor the meager account of Quentin Compson hearing and then telling the story of Thomas Sutpen provides the final significance of the work; it is the rendering of the process of historical interaction between myth and recipient, a process now vivid and dramatic, now obscure and ambiguous, which causes many readers to regard the novel as Faulkner's best.

Lewis A. Lawson in *The Politics of Twentieth-Century Novelists*, edited by George A. Panichas (Hawthorn). 1971. pp. 288–9

It appears that in his last two novels Faulkner's comedy has lost its satiric edge. His miser, Flem Snopes, was murdered almost gratuitously in *The Mansion*, long after he had been turned from an incarnation of Mammon into the country boy who made good. It is a measure of Faulkner's final reconciliation to human frailty that the most apt exemplars of Snopesism we can find in *The Reivers* are a country farmer who plows mudholes in the Memphis road so that he can use his mule team to pull out mired automobiles for a fee, and a depraved little boy, Otis—Ned calls him ''Whistle-britches''—whose greatest feat is to steal the gold tooth from a sleeping Negro maid in a whorehouse. It's all good fun, but for great satiric comedy, with a Swiftian bite and Rabelaisian pungency, we must still turn back to *The Hamlet*, surely one of the great comic creations of our time. In it Faulkner proved himself a master of the comic mode, as *Absalom, Absalom*! had proved him a master of the tragic.

Robert D. Jacobs in *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*, edited by Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (Rutgers). 1973. p. 318

[Faulkner] had been advised . . . by his mentor Sherwood Anderson, to write about his own Mississippi, and in 1926 he set out to do

that. He wrote *Flags in the Dust*, but the finished manuscript was rejected left and right. Finally Harcourt Brace agreed to publish it on the condition that it be severely cut, a task Faulkner could not bring himself to do; the cuts were made by his agent, Ben Wasson, and the novel was published as *Sartoris*. Faulkner's affection for the original never faded, however, and he preserved the manuscript and typescript; we have it now in an edition edited by Douglas Day and, though he is credited only in the introduction, Albert Erskine.

Obviously *Flags in the Dust* will be of great value to Faulkner scholars (though presumably many of them have already had access to the manuscript), but the book is of broader value. It offers the opportunity to observe, by comparing it with *Sartoris*, what happens to a manuscript when it comes into the hands of an intelligent and demanding editor. Of far more importance, *Flags in the Dust*, because it is much more intricate than *Sartoris*, makes clear that everything that would engage Faulkner for three and a half decades had formed in his imagination at the outset.

Jonathan Yardley. *New Republic*. Sept. 8, 1973. p. 32

Passages of [Faulkner's] prose bubble up in [Joseph Blotner's biography] to frighten and amaze us . . . the sonorous opening chords of *Absalom, Absalom*!, for instance, with their impressive adjectival orchestration, the careful fastening of consciousness to its object, and Faulkner's characteristically increasing rhetorical beat, a precise local observation blown through a metaphor like a herald announcing . . . what? always . . . the palpable appearance of Time. . . .

It is as if remembered things themselves had memories, as if matter *were* memory. The muscles that hoed the garden remember the moves they made. To *see into*—for Faulkner—is to *think back*. . . .

He was rarely among people who understood his achievement, not that this might have lifted his loneliness very much (solitude was the space of more than his imagination), and the needs, sensations, and feelings—the pity, the pure fury—which one time had created those incredible lengths of language, those new and powerful forms, became themselves rhetorical habits, last rites, passionless gestures of passion. . . .

William Gass. *New York Review of Books*. June 27, 1974. pp. 4–5

I interpret Faulkner to be saying that time does not exist apart from the consciousness of some human being. Apart from that stream of living consciousness, time is merely an abstraction. Thus, as *actually experienced*, time has little to do with the time that is measured off by the ticking of a chronometer. Such a conception of time, however, did not impel Faulkner to destroy his own watch as Quentin Compson did (in *The Sound and the Fury*). Though clock time, as an abstraction, might be deemed to be in some sense unreal, Faulkner, like Henri Bergson himself, conceded that clock-and-calendar time had its uses and that no human life of the slightest complexity could get along without constant reference to it. . . .

To come at the problem from another direction: in spite of Faulkner's acceptance of Bergson's conception of time as fluid and continuous (time as ''duration''), it is hard to think of a novelist who exceeds Faulkner in his careful attention to the details of clock time and calendar time. I am thinking here particularly of the chronology of his novels. Each conforms not only to a generally consistent time scheme; the details of the time scheme are often very precise. Indeed, it is a revelation to go through a Faulkner novel, giving special attention to its chronology, and so discover how many unobtrusive but specific time-clues Faulkner has planted. Though such clues often do not call attention to themselves, yet when noted and put together, the chronology that they plot is much too consistent to be unpurposed. Even if Faulkner did not mean for every reader to be aware of these buried chronologies, we may be sure that he was himself in command of the sequence of events. . . .

To sum up, though Bergson may have confirmed some of Faulkner's notions about time and about the ways in which human beings can know reality, and though Bergson may have stimulated Faulkner to experiment with the verbal presentation of motion and action, I find little in Faulkner's narrative treatment that can be certainly attributed to Bergson's influence. Many of Faulkner's techniques turn out to be simply skillful and imaginative adaptations of traditional narrative methods, but if one were to specify particular influences it would not be Bergson's so much as Conrad's, the early Eliot's, and Joyce's. Whatever Faulkner's indebtedness, his handling of time reached perhaps its most brilliant achievement in *Absalom, Absalom!*

Cleanth Brooks. *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond* (Yale Univ. Pr., 1978), pp. 254, 258, 264–65

Like Thomas Hardy's Wessex, William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County originated in the imagination of a young writer reared in a provincial community. In both instances a youthful mind, endowed with literary genius, discovered that the small, remote world of his nativity embodied the major experience of modern Western civilization: the world historical differentiation of a novel society of history and science from a sacramental order of myth and tradition. In either case a youthful writer entered into the knowledge of this phenomenon through an unacademic but intense and sustained process of reading in varied literary and philosophical works; and in either case, during the struggles of his self-education, a youthful writer began to conceive of himself as a member of the cosmopolitan realm of poets and literary prophets that for five hundred years or more has sought to give moral and spiritual guidance to the long process of societal differentiation in Western civilization. . . .

Implied in Faulkner's serene, retrospective vision of Yoknapatawpha as a transcendent autonomy of the artist is all the pathos of the literary myth of modern history—of the drama of the artist and the historical differentiation of the self. The vision reveals what it denies: the unremitting tension between self and history. Yoknapatawpha is in truth no sublimation of the actual but the embodiment of the profoundest reality: the terrifying modern internalization of history—which in its ineffable and pervasive dominion comprises man and nature, God, world, and universe—in the self. Faulkner hid the truth of Yoknapatawpha from himself at times, particularly in his later career. But he acknowledged it all the same—in the term that he used to describe Yoknapatawpha: ''my apocryphal county.'' Sometimes he called the Yoknapatawpha stories ''my apocrypha.'' He meant more than ''my fictions.'' He meant my stories in which there are ''hidden things,'' and notable among the things he hid in the tales is the story of the artist and his struggle against modern history. In this struggle Faulkner followed the defiant Joycean dream of sacramentalizing the role of the artist

by means of grace self-bestowed. But Faulkner knew, perhaps more surely than Joyce knew, that dreaming his biography was only a part of his being as a creature of history. He understood this irony as an American, and especially as a southerner. He grasped it so well that in his final novel, *The Reivers*, subtitled *A Reminiscence*, though trying not to do so, he virtually surrenders to the pathos of history: creating a Yoknapatawpha existing neither in the *was* of Quentin Compson nor in the *is* of Gavin Stevens but in a mingled *is-was* that, transcending all tense, is yet the truest tense for Americans, the tense of nostalgia—the tense Americans use when they speak of America as ''home sweet home,'' the place beyond all grief and sorrow.

Lewis P. Simpson. In *The American South: Portrait of a Culture*, ed. Louis B. Rubin, Jr. (Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1980), pp. 227, 244

Faulkner's fondness for the tall tale or anecdote, humorous or otherwise, has a bearing upon the form of his fiction. Throughout his fiction, the basis of his art is the single episode. As a result, his books seem to divide into brilliant but very loosely unified stories at times ingeniously yoked together. For example, after reading *The Sound and the Fury*, the reader is likely to remember the work not as a single story but as at least four separate stories relating to the Compson family. Such works as *Sartoris*, *Sanctuary*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* similarly contain multiple plots, while there is serious question if *The Unvanquished*, *The Hamlet*, and *Go Down, Moses* may not be more properly called volumes of short stories than novels. In Faulkner's great outpouring of superb fiction during the 1930s, perhaps only *As I Lay Dying* was conceived and written as a single story. . . .

The perspective of literary history today helps Faulkner's reader to grasp the implications of his work far more clearly than they could have been understood in the author's lifetime. Presently, Faulkner's fiction seems more a continuation or logical development from the American nineteenth century than the outpouring of a radical innovator or experimenter. Currently, as in the future his contribution to American literature rests not so much upon his ideas about artistic form, his narrative skills, the devices of his fiction, or even his stylistic accomplishments—important though these matters are—as it does upon the intensity and sincerity with which he has depicted the complexities of human experience measured by the progression of history. No other writer since Henry James has identified so directly and expressed so forcefully as Faulkner the truths that govern man's success or failure in right living.

Like many other Southerners of the 1930s, Faulkner held the Southern economic system based upon tenant farming and sharecropping, legacies of the Civil War and its aftermath, responsible for much of the unhappiness and poverty of the South. When administered by dishonest and unscrupulous landowners, the ''economic edifice'' locked both races into bondage to the land, depressed their living standards, and stifled ambition. Although nominally free, the Negroes (and poor whites) were still bound in a vicious round of debt from which they might never be free. Although Faulkner had great admiration for the endurance and strength of the Negro race, in the 1930s, the decade of the Great Depression, he saw little evidence of immediate change in their prospects for the better.

Harsh and oppressive as the economic system of the South seemed to him and regardless of his awareness of the depths of man's folly and his propensity for evil, Faulkner yet asserted that man could ''prevail.'' Like millions of his countrymen, past and present, Faulkner believed in the possibility of reform and progress. One has only to consider the lives of Jason Compson, Temple Drake, Gail Hightower, Thomas Sutpen, Flem Snopes, and others to understand that Faulkner believed that man's greatest enemy lay within himself and that man must reform himself from within before he can defeat those forces that undermine the quality of his life. Man's pride, hate, self-interest, greed, and willingness to purchase material possessions at the cost of private integrity inhibit his enjoyment of the good life. Insofar as he can, man must replace these traits with the virtues Faulkner names in his Nobel Prize Speech of Acceptance, ''the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past.'' To Faulkner, these are the verities of human experience. More and more, as time passes, Faulkner emerges as an advocate of traditional humanistic values. At the heart of Yoknapatawpha lies Faulkner's vision of man in a moral universe.

John Pilkington. *The Heart of Yoknapatawpha* (Univ. Pr. of Mississippi, 1981), pp. 293, 295–97

The problem of trying to come to terms with [William] Faulkner's female characters has caused a number of critics to seek categories by which to analyze them. Miller finds two categories: earth mothers and ghosts. Kerr concludes that Faulkner's rejection of the southern ideal or what she calls southern gyneolatry accounts for his two attitudes toward women: rejection of those who personify it and sympathy for those who rebel against it or live naturally outside it. Jackson's categories are ''demon-nun and angel-witch.''

Obviously, the question of how Faulkner viewed women will not be answered by arriving at any number of categories, no matter how useful and interesting those approaches might be. Nor is the type of the indestructible woman meant to be used as a touchstone by which to judge Faulkner's attitude toward all women. The women in his works are diverse and his attitudes toward them are by no means monotypic. The delineation of such a type in his works is meant, among other things, to suggest one way in which the articulated optimism of Faulkner's Nobel Prize speech is communicated in his fiction, to identify a type which personifies one of Faulkner's dominant attitudes toward women and to suggest the similarities between his attitudes and those of two of his distinguished peers [Steinbeck and Hemingway].

The character type of an indestructible woman transcends most categories based on antipathies because of the mythic paradigm that underlies her development. It is also derived from the combination of Faulkner's philosophical primitivism and subjective masculinism, an inability to see woman as anything but a different species. The primitivism in Faulkner concludes that that which is simple and natural will survive; those who are more attuned to life's processes will endure. Woman as *other*, as matter instead of mind, as manifestation of the Earth Goddess instead of the individual being, is organically attuned with the motion of life and thereby more enduring. But this primitive being is also of an earthiness and physicality which may offend the fastidiousness of the more spiritually inclined male. The way Faulkner's indestructible females are often characterized reflects an awe that is born of reaction to their awfulness, in both senses of the word. Traditional morality has nothing to do with it, nor has a sense of what is customarily regarded as normal or abnormal. The characterizations

are born of the same kind of fascination and repugnance that one experiences in the presence of many examples of the way that nature insures survival, such as the black widow devouring her mate or larvae feeding off of the bodies of their parents. . . .

Though Faulkner's world is inhabited by men, women, and children, blacks and whites, aristocrats and poor whites, the prevailing perception is that of the white male. The problems of dealing with the past, with race, with the ''slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'' seem essentially his. Other types may be part of his problem or may have already come to terms with life and thereby serve as models. Women play a significant role in the mythic overstructure that the men are trying to cope with, but large as that role might be it is generally presented by a subjective viewer. Often the parts women play in these tales of sound and fury are primarily assigned on the basis of what Faulkner perceived to be an essential characteristic of their womanhood, their ability to endure and prevail, their indestructibility.

Mimi Reisel Gladstein. *The Indestructible Woman in Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Pr., 1986), pp. 38–39, 45

William Faulkner's major novels, written between 1929 and 1942, explored, earlier than most critics did, the systematic paradoxes within the fabric of literary discourse, and exposed, earlier than many Americans, related paradoxes in the institution of American racial segregation, whose statutory divisions began slowly to be dismantled just before Faulkner's death in 1962. In this study, I take up Warren's forty-year-old observation that Faulkner's words scrutinize apparent social polarities, an enterprise that shows conventional oppositions to be a kind of willful linguistic and social error. In Faulkner's novels, ''polarity'' means racial division, racial segregation, and the mythologies surrounding it, which collectively try to outlaw interracial contiguity, cohabitation, and consanguinity. Faulkner's characters, black and white, live under a body of racial barriers and prohibitions that structure the self-understanding of Yoknapatawpha County. The futility of applying strictly binary categories to human affairs is the main lesson of Faulkner's novels, which dramatize the problematics of division through sensitive white characters such as Quentin Compson, Darl and Addie, and Ike McCaslin. By accident, intelligence, or pure stubbornness, these Faulknerian protagonists reject division, discovering instead those social and psychological margins where merging, opposition's opposite, may exist unassailed. Faulkner's narratives utter a truth of merging across social boundaries that his contemporaries found unspeakable. Faulkner himself set this truth in an elusive, complex discourse of indirection, a literary disfigurement of divisive social figures. . . .

Since figures of division are at the same time social and linguistic, Faulkner's novels, as literary texts, can examine their invention and demise on both thematic and stylistic levels of analysis. Particularly germane to Faulkner's novels as an instance of actual and stylistic merging is the issue of *miscegenation*. The system of racial division elicits the desire for racial mixing or miscegenation, the South's feared, forbidden, denied, yet pervasive release from societal division. Notions such as ''white racial purity,'' aimed at underpinning the economic order, underlie figures of division. Southern society typically and publicly abhorred racial mergings by integration, cohabitation, and miscegenation. Yet Faulkner's narratives repeatedly present a world in which blacks and whites eat, live, and often sleep together, despite written Jim Crow laws and spoken categories of racial differentiation. Faulkner's narratives dismember figures of division at their weakest joint, the ''purity'' notion that seems the requirement for white supremacist logic. White skin could never be the certain signifier of the absence of ''black'' blood (white racial purity), because white skin, as Faulkner amply demonstrates, can also signify ''mixed'' blood.

Faulkner's most compelling protagonists do not seek division, but rather its often nonconventional remedies: miscegenation, incest, Edenic refuge in the Big Woods, or schizoid mental mergings. Absolutisms, facing the test of experience, break down under the pressure of the unsystematic real. Faulkner's major novels—*The Sound and the Fury; As I Lay Dying; Light in August; Absalom, Absalom!; The Hamlet*; and *Go Down, Moses*—primarily concern the white mind and its struggles with the systems of division it has created. The stylistic strangeness of Faulkner's novels is not purely post-Joycean experimentalism, as often suggested, nor even a residue of his infatuation with Romanticism and French symbolism. Instead, Faulkner's narratives are accurate reconstructions and dismantlings of linguistic and social classifications, proving that some extraordinary human beings struggle, against overwhelming odds, to reverse a separation that rhetoric has tried to make into a permanent reality.

James A. Snead. *Figures of Division: William Faulkner's Major Novels* (New York: Methuen, 1986), pp. ix-x, xiii-xiv

Much has been written about [the early] period in Faulkner's development, about his decadent, dilettantish persona, and about the pervasive influence of the Symbolists on all of his later verse; but not enough attention seems to have been paid to the remarkable imprint left on the *poète manqué*, to the manifestations of this Symbolist apprenticeship in the body of prose fiction comprising Faulkner's major literary contribution. It is both interesting and illuminating to see just how their aesthetics thrive and evolve when transplanted from the exotic realm of French *poésie* to Faulkner's ''own little postage stamp of native soil.''. . .

Through [Arthur] Symons's [*The Symbolist Movement in Literature*] and the poems themselves Faulkner had full access to the theories and practices of Symbolist aesthetics, the lyrical, elaborate, often synaesthetic verbal imagery designed to evoke and suggest rather than directly state, to capture the mystery and evanescence of experience in language seeking the purity and expressiveness of music. He was a good student. We can see these ideas incorporated in his novelistic style and vision, providing those elements H. E. Richardson refers to in calling Faulkner ''a regional writer with a difference.'' This difference permeates his major work, manifesting itself not only in language but also in content and theme. . . .

Symbolist indirection . . . is much more than a method of handling indelicate matters: the aesthetic of suggestion and intimation is at the very heart of Symbolism; it is the foundation upon which the superstructure of lyricism, symbolism, and synesthesia is built. If any one statement could be called the Symbolist manifesto, it would certainly be Mallarmé's famous dictum: ''To name an object . . . is to suppress three-quarters of the enjoyment of the poem . . . to suggest it, there's the dream. The perfect use of this mystery constitutes the symbol; to evoke little by little a mood, or,

inversely, to choose an object and to disengage from it a mood, through a series of decipherings.'' If Faulkner did not read Mallarmé's *Oeuvres Completes*, he had a distillation of this aesthetic in Symons's book: ''to name is to destroy, to suggest is to create.'' It is a concept he took to heart. . . .

Intimation places strenuous demands upon the reader, forcing participation in the creative processes. In Faulkner these demands are in parallel layers or strata, ranging from the word and phrase to the long, involved, often periodic sentences to the frequently unresolved conclusions, with the reader forced to decipher and contribute each step of the way. It is this complex interaction that renders the novels so inaccessible yet so ultimately rewarding. Irresolution and paradoxical suspensions of meaning tend to deny or subvert interpretation, but the result is the delegation of hermeneutic responsibility to its rightful province: the individual subjective consciousness. The elusive, subjective nature of truth could arguably be called *the* theme of Faulkner's major work, and it is certainly the central concern of *Absalom, Absalom!*, perhaps his greatest achievement. After hearing various and often contradictory versions of ''truth,'' Quentin and Shreve must create their own, a poetic, mythic truth animated by their individual needs and obsessions. Ultimately, however, it is the reader who must sort out, evaluate, and create the final version—it is the perfect achievement of the Symbolists' desire for direct reader experience.

> Alexander Marshall III, ''William Faulkner: The Symbolist Connection.'' *American Literature*. October 1987, pp. 389–90, 400

Faulkner's reputation in this country was created by the academics and literary critics who integrated him into the modernist tradition, who found in his vast, complex, and difficult work the kind of demanding literature that they had been trained to explicate, and who operated in a closed community of enforced conformity where dissent was suppressed and oppositionist literature and criticism were displaced. Given the cultural politics of the Cold War, which worked to eclipse the rebellious tradition of realism/naturalism, there was a general revival of interest in the classic American writers—Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, and James. After 1945, Faulkner quickly became the modernist representative of that tradition, and the quintessential technical and stylistic revolutionary. In short, he was, I believe, perfectly suited to represent the new conservative liberalism and humanitarianism of American democracy. And analogously, Cowley's rediscovery of Faulkner's ''greatness'' was perfectly suited to the prevailing formalist aesthetics of the postwar era which claimed, in part, that literature in its fully realized form was universal and apolitical.

Within a few years of the end of World War II the definition of social responsibility in art was radically transformed. The liberal aesthetics traditionally associated with naturalism and socially conscious literature came to be identified with the ''totalitarianism'' of the Soviet Union and Stalinist politics. Ahistorical art-for-art's-sake formalism was adopted as the aesthetics of postwar America and became redefined as cultural liberalism. Certainly, there were tensions and disagreements within this coalition, but the coalition itself was evidence of the supposed openness and pluralism of American culture.

Once the United States government assumed much of the responsibility for the costs of the Cold War, Faulkner, always the patriot, was enlisted as a state department cultural ambassador and one of Eisenhower's leaders for the ''People to People'' program. However, much of the intellectual ground-work for this public affirmation of American culture was laid in the period immediately after the war.

In sum, the renewed interest in Faulkner coincided with and was related to the heightened Cold War. The Nobel Prize for Literature, which Faulkner won in 1950, was the keystone of this process. But his reemergence had its origins in the cultural upheaval immediately after the war, which required a great new American novelist to represent the dominance of Western humanist values. Ultimately, Faulkner's work was championed and canonized because his often supremely individualist themes and technically difficult prose served an ideological cause. Unintentionally, he produced a commodity of enormous value as a cultural weapon in the early years of the Cold War.

> Lawrence H. Schwartz. *Creating Faulkner's Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Pr., 1988), pp. 202–3, 209–10

What needs to be stressed . . . is that, no matter how massive and inscrutable, the forces we watch at work on [Faulkner's] people are always forces of this world. Whatever his debt to Christianity and his private beliefs, no twentieth-century novelist is in the last analysis less other-worldly than Faulkner; his language presses at the edge of the knowable but never hints at any metaphysical *hinterwelt* beyond the private fantasies or common myths of his characters. We need only to think of his fellow Southerner, Flannery O'Connor, to realize at once how thoroughly secular a writer Faulkner was. Heroism and art were the only possibilities of transcendence he cared about as a novelist, and in his greatest books the stress falls invariably on the limitations and failures of the human mind, not on its powers and achievements. Indeed, nearly all of his work could be read as an illustration of Marx's statement that ''it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but on the contrary their social existence that determines their consciousness.'' Not that Faulkner can be easily fitted into the realist-naturalist tradition and its mechanistic explanation patterns. His involvement with his creatures was far too intense, his feelings about the South, past and present, too much of a passionate love-hate relationship to permit the detached, objective stance of an outside observer, and his ''private cosmos'' is too fiercely idiosyncratic ever to be reduced to a sociological document. Writing the South was Faulkner's way of reading the South, but like the telling of the Sutpen story by Quentin and Shreve in *Absalom, Absalom!* it was always also a vehement imaginative (re)enactment.

> Andre Bleikasten. *The Ink of Melancholy: Faulkner's Novels from ''The Sound and the Fury'' to ''Light in August''* (Bloomington: Univ. of Indiana Pr., 1990), pp. 354-55

There are, of course, moments in Faulkner's fiction in which a character or a narrator (and sometimes a narrator that one strongly suspects reproduces a subject position that Faulkner at a certain moment also occupied) says things that are racist or sexist. It would, I think, be more surprising if such moments did not appear in the writing of a white male who grew up in rural Mississippi

during the first quarter of the twentieth century. What is striking in Faulkner's fiction of the 1930s is the way it confronts racism and misogyny. And although Faulkner's texts operate in a horizon of misogyny, the alternative communities created by marginal couples in those texts provide alternate narratives for rethinking hegemonic myths of love and bourgeois marriage. At any rate, it is not the job of critics to reproduce the racism or sexism of the texts with which they work but rather to think such issues further. . . .

Despite the power of certain of Faulkner's texts to destabilize cultural polarizations of masculinity and femininity, there are limits to the usefulness of his fiction for feminist thinking. Woman often remains the object of male discourse and of the male voyeuristic gaze. . . . If we wish to speak of a failure of vision in Faulkner's fiction, it might be that, while his narratives reconceptualize masculinity rather thoroughly in figures such as Byron Bunch and Roger Schumann, the partner for this new man is less fully developed because she is still viewed externally. Moreover, in Faulkner's later fiction, his alternative communities seem to shift from heterosocial to homosocial bonds, as the all-male world of the hunting camp or the friendship between Gavin Stevens and V. K. Ratliff suggest. The notion of female bonding as an alternative community seems outside Faulkner's imaginative grasp, so that the later texts are more implicated in a significant aspect of patriarchal ideology (i.e., that it is men who matter); thus any critique of the hegemony after *The Wild Palms* proceeds from well within that same hegemony and is of a piece with Ishmael's whaling ship or Huck Finn's lighting out for the territory to escape feminine culture.

Another limitation is that Faulkner seems unable to conceive of subjectivity's genesis outside recurring Oedipal triangles that privilege the role of the father or father surrogate. Does this limitation, then, make Faulkner's texts hopelessly retrograde? Perhaps we are confronted here with the problem of what we can legitimately expect texts to do. If we wish to think about the role of the mother in the formation of the subject, we undoubtedly do better to turn to Nancy Chodorow than to William Faulkner. But this very weakness—the failure of his texts to explore pre-Symbolic subjectivity—returns us to what is available in Faulkner, namely, a recurring scrutiny of the uses and abuses of patriarchal authority through characters warped by the will of the father.

John N. Duvall. *Faulkner's Marginal Couple: Invisible, Outlaw, and Unspeakable Communities* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Pr, 1990), pp. 17, 131–32

Operating by extremes permitted Faulkner to suggest the whole range of human experience—the realism modernists sought—while he worked with some fairly stock characters: the Earth Mother, the hot spinster, the prostitute with the heart of gold, the weak-kneed intellectual, the mean half-breed. They are not stereotypes: they present too many surprises for that. Like many modernist characters, conceived out of their underlying form, they are archetypal, with reinforcing quirks and oddities. But the fact that Faulkner animated these lumps of rage and jest under secret wraps suggests that they were shaped by a fierce sentimentality, an expression of unfulfilled longings. Apparently one of Faulkner's engines was a treacherous tenderness toward his characters, glaringly evident in *The Reivers*. To protect himself from his own pathos, he permitted his characters brutal or ludicrous behavior—behavior which he alone (like the Creator) could explain. . . .

When Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*, . . . his edifice was the transformation of all those bits of glass and stone and mortar into a cathedral. So it is with Faulkner's art. Having studied the principles of giving evidence in a trial in equity, he worked out his ironic nine-part structure for *Absalom, Absalom!* Having fully stocked the lumber room of his brain-attic with John and Frazer, he demonstrated that he could fashion every element—word, metaphor, description, and incident—to fit the grand design of *Light in August*.

Virginia V. James Hlavsa. *Faulkner and the Thoroughly Modern Novel* (Charlottesville: Univ. Pr. of Virginia, 1991), pp. 17–19

Like other writers in the United States during the early twentieth century, Faulkner was an heir less of the dominant culture of the nineteenth century than of its great rebels. Much of the daring, even the headiness, of the assaults that Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—to name only four—mounted against accepted beliefs found expression in the brashness of writers like Faulkner, as they set out to invent literature anew. Faulkner's almost fierce determination to deal with the past on his own terms not only marked him as a rebel; it also shaped his art. Like much modern fiction, his is often pessimistic and violent, even brutal and despairing. He is a poet of deprivation and loss. Affluence and plenty mark his work only in style and imagination. Yet we find other things there: remnants of the good hope of the Lyric Years, which was political as well as aesthetic; the persistence of the exuberance of the twenties, which was experimental as well as escapist; and the difficult hope against hope that sprang to life during the Great Depression, of creating anew an imperfect community, knit together by imperfectly possessed and painfully held memories and by imperfectly shared and practiced values. These things he infused with the same boldness of spirit and moral courage that we see in the striking formal experiments that give his fiction its special place in a great and varied outpouring of innovative, conflicted, and often self-critical expression.

David L. Minter. *A Cultural History of the American Novel: Henry James to William Faulkner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Pr., 1994), p. 229

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FAUSET, Jessie Redmon (1886–1961)

This novel [*There Is Confusion*] is significant because it is the first work of fiction to come from the pen of a colored woman in these United States. It is evidence that we can with assurance look forward in the near future to having our fiction dealing with life among the Negroes written by the Negroes themselves. And this is as it should be. Long the object of burlesque and pitiless satire, it is natural that the Negro in his upward plunge should want to strike back, to write out of his own rich and varied experience, not for the delectation of the whites, but for the edification and enjoyment of his own people.

The mushroom growth of magazines published by the Negroes and the fiction to be found in them, the serialization of stories of obscure colored authors in Negro newspapers, the establishment, even, of reputable Negro publishing houses—all point to this new, up and pushing spirit.

Having as its motif the futility that must not arrest the conquering progress of the Negroes, Miss Fauset's book, however, is not really ''younger generation Negro'' stuff. Toomer's insouciant *Cane* in this respect is miles beyond it. Indeed, it is a sort of bridge between the old and the new Negro generations. For the literature of these strident neophytes is of a shockingly esoteric nature—full of beauty and passion and blackly steering clear of the inferiority complex. Mediocre, a work of puny, painstaking labor, *There Is Confusion* is not meant for people who know anything about the Negro and his problems. It is aimed with unpardonable naiveté at the very young or the pertinently old.

E.D.W. *The New Republic*. July 9, 1924, p. 192

Sir: Your review of Jessie Fauset's *There Is Confusion* is really not worthy of the *New Republic*. It is not a review or even a comment, but a quite gratuitous slur upon a work which, whatever its merits, is at least a sincere and unusual product.

W.E.B. DuBois. *The New Republic*. July 30, 1924, p. 274

For once, a book has been advertised too modestly. *The Chinaberry Tree* has been recommended by its publishers, and by Miss Gale, its sponsor, as a revelation of the life led by educated Negroes. But it is considerably more than that. Though faulty, it is the work of a remarkable psychologist who can be congratulated not simply because her material is interesting but because she has understood so well the human factors involved in it.

The greater portion of *The Chinaberry Tree* is devoted to the love affair of two colored high-school students who do not know that they are brother and sister. This dramatic theme, singularly enough, is the least exciting part of the story. We learn most about Miss Fauset's book as a whole not through Melissa and Malory, or their narrowly averted incestuous marriage; but through Laurentine, the beautiful apricot-colored dressmaker who is the book's real heroine and symbol of the world it depicts; Laurentine, who sat as a child under the Chinaberry Tree and wondered why other children, either white or black, wouldn't play with her.

The best part of the story lies in the background. Colonel Halloway, a wealthy white factory-owner, while still a college student falls in love with his mother's Negro maid. He marries a white woman, but his real love is given to the colored girl, whom he handsomely establishes in a white house with green shutters, a well-kept garden, and the Chinaberry Tree. His daily visits to her are concealed from no one. Their love is a scandal to both black and white inhabitants of the New Jersey town. And Laurentine is their child. She is brought up in comparative luxury, but is a double outcast. And the passion which animates her is closely allied to the passion which animates the book. What does the illegitimate mulatto grow up to want? Respectability. Once she cries: ''Oh God, you know all I want is a chance to show them how decent I am.'' This might serve as the motto for *The Chinaberry Tree*. It is so much the book's real theme that once recognized it helps to explain the striking gentility of certain passages, as well as the exceptional importance attached to small material comforts that most white people would take for granted. . . .

It is a world in which such little things mean much, a touching world, its humility displayed through its pride. The book attempts to idealize this polite colored world in terms of the white standards that it has adopted. And here lies the root of Miss Fauset's artistic errors. When she parades the possessions of her upper classes and when she puts her lovers through their Fauntleroy courtesies, she is not only stressing the white standards that they have adopted: she is . . . minimizing the colored blood in them. This is a decided weakness, for it steals truth and life from the book. Is not the most precious part of a Negro work of art that which is specifically Negroid, which none but a Negro could contribute?

We need not look for the reason for Miss Fauset's idealization. It is pride, the pride of a genuine aristocrat, and it is pride also that makes her such a remarkable psychologist. However many her artistic errors, Miss Fauset has an understanding of people and their motives. I suppose there is no better way to come to understand other than to be extraordinarily sensitive to one's self. . . . Considering the position of [the] educated Negro in America, it is no wonder then that an aristocrat like Miss Fauset has idealized her little world, has made it over-elegant! Inspired by the religious motive which so many Negro writers seem to feel, she has simply been trying to justify her world to the world at large. Her mistake has consisted in trying to do this in terms of the white standard.

''To be Negro in America posits a dramatic situation.'' Yes, and to be one of Miss Fauset's amber-tinted . . . refined Negroes—not having to deal much with whites, but surrounded on all sides by the white standard—posits a delicate psychological situation. It is for

this reason that few white novels have anything like the shades of feeling to be found in *The Chinaberry Tree*. Every moment speaks of yearning. That is why, once it is seen as a whole, even its faults are charming, for the story they tell is poignant and beautiful.

Gerald Sykes. *The Nation*. July 27, 1932, p. 88

Viewing the Negro Renaissance in retrospect, Richard Wright has written caustically of ''the prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America, dressed in the knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human, and that he had a life comparable to that of other people.'' Without a doubt one of the prime offenders whom Wright had in mind was Jessie Fauset. Yet with all her primness, Miss Fauset presents something of a paradox, for in her editorial work on the *The Crisis* she often championed the young rebels of the Harlem School. . . .

Claude McKay writes of Jessie Fauset in his autobiography, ''All the radicals liked her, although in her social viewpoint she was away over on the other side of the fence.'' But if Miss Fauset won personal acceptance among Harlem's colorful Bohemians, in her novels she maintained an irreproachable decorum. . . .From the first. . . .her literary aspirations were circumscribed by her desire to convey a flattering image of respectable Negro society.

Jessie Fauset was the most prolific of the Renaissance novelists, publishing four novels during a ten-year period from 1924 to 1933. But in spite of an admirable persistence, her novels are uniformly sophomoric, trivial, and dull. *There is Confusion* (1924) is nothing if not well titled, for it is burdened with a plethora of characters whose complex genealogy leaves the most conscientious reader exhausted. *Plum Bun* (1928) is a typical novel of passing. . . . *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931) seems to be a novel about the first colored woman in New Jersey to wear lounging pajamas. *Comedy American Style* (1933) is an account of a colored woman's obsessive desire to be white, not unlike the novels which condemn passing in its nationalist implications.

Undoubtedly the most important formative influence on Miss Fauset's work was her family background. An authentic old Philadelphian (known as ''O.P.'s'' in the colored society of that day), she was never able to transcend the narrow limits of this sheltered world. It accounts for her gentility, her emphasis on heredity and genealogy, and her attitude toward race. Miss Fauset's characters are bred to ''rise above'' racial discrimination, to regard it merely as ''an extra complication of living.'' Yet ''the artificial dilemma,'' as she calls it, is always present as an obstacle to gracious living, and is the real antagonist of her novels. Racial protest, be it ever so genteel, is an irrepressible feature of bourgeois nationalism.

Robert Bone. *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958, rev. 1963), pp. 101–2

Bone, Littlejohn, and Gayle, in three of the most popular and simultaneously distorted, partisan and inaccurate critical works on Afro-American literature, have consigned Fauset's work to a very narrow groove and have failed to probe beneath its surface realities. In their disproportionate emphasis on her literary traditionalism, for example, they draw hasty and not totally accurate conclusions about her fictional intentions. To be sure, she was traditional to some extent, both in form and content, but as Gary de Cordova Wintz rightly observes, ''in spite of her conservative, almost Victorian literary habits,'' Fauset ''introduced several subjects into her novels that were hardly typical drawing room conversation topics in the mid-1920s. Promiscuity, exploitative sexual affairs, miscegenation, even incest appear in her novels. In fact prim and proper Jessie Fauset included a far greater range of sexual activity than did most of DuBois's debauched tenth.

When attention is given Fauset's introduction of these challenging themes, it becomes possible to regard her ''novels of manners'' less as an indication of her literary ''backwardness'' and more as a self-conscious artistic strategem pressed to the service of her central fictional preoccupations. Since many of Fauset's concerns were unpalatable to the average reader of her day and hence unmarketable in the publishing arena, the convention of the novel of manners can be seen as protective mimicry, a kind of deflecting mask for her more challenging concerns. Fauset uses classic fairy tale patterns and nursery rhymes in a similar fashion; however, although these strategems are consciously employed, they are often clumsily executed.

In addition to the protective coloration which the conventional medium afforded, the novel of manners suited Fauset's works in that the tradition ''is primarily concerned with social conventions as they impinge upon character.'' Both social convention and character—particularly the black female character—jointly form the nucleus of Fauset's literary concerns. The protagonists of all of her novels are black women, and she makes clear in each novel that social conventions have not sided well with them but, rather, have been antagonistic.

Without polemicizing, Fauset examines that antagonism, criticizing the American society which has institutionalized prejudice, safeguarded it by law and public attitude, and in general, denied the freedom of development, the right to well-being, and the pursuit of happiness to the black woman. In short, Fauset explores the black woman's struggle for democratic ideals in a society whose sexist conventions assiduously work to thwart that struggle. Critics have usually ignored this important theme which even a cursory reading of her novels reveals. This concern with exploring female consciousness and exposing the unduly limited possibilities for female development is, in a loose sense, feminist in impulse, placing Fauset squarely among the early black feminists in Afro-American literary history. . . .

The idea of Fauset, a black woman, daring to write—even timidly so—about women taking charge of their own lives and declaring themselves independent of social conventions, was far more progressive than critics have either observed or admitted. Although what Fauset attempted in her depictions of black women was not uniformly commensurate with what she achieved, she has to be credited with both presenting an alternative view of womanhood and a facet of black life which publishers, critics, and audiences stubbornly discouraged if not vehemently opposed. Despite that discouragement and opposition, Fauset persisted in her attempt to correct the distorted but established images of black life and culture and to portray women and blacks with more complexity and authenticity than was popular at the time. In so doing, she was simultaneously challenging established assumptions about the nature and function of Afro-American literature. Those who persist, then, in regarding her as a prim and proper Victorian writer, an eddy in a revolutionary literary current, would do well to read Fauset's work more carefully, to give it a more fair

and complete appraisal, one that takes into account the important and complex relationship between circumstances and artistic creation. Then her fiction might finally be accorded the recognition and attention that it deserves and Fauset, her rightful place in the Afro-American literary tradition.

> Deborah E. McDowell. In Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers, eds. *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 87–88, 100

Audience was a consideration . . . for Jessie Fauset, the most published Afro-American woman novelist of the Harlem Renaissance. She, together with Nella Larsen, wanted to correct the impression most white people had that all black people lived in Harlem dives or in picturesque, abject poverty. In her preface to *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931) she tells us why she chose to create the heroines she did. Beginning with the disclaimer that she does not write to establish a thesis, she goes on to point out that the novel is about ''those breathing spells, in-between spaces where colored men and women work and live and go their ways in no thought of the problem. What are they like then? So few of the other Americans know.'' And she concludes her preface by identifying the class to which her characters belong: the Negro who speaks of ''his old Boston families,'' ''old Philadelphians,'' ''old Charlestonians.''

Both [Frances E. W.] Harper and Fauset were certainly aware of the images, primarily negative, of black people that predominated in the minds of white Americans. They constructed their heroines to refute those images, as their way of contributing to the struggle of black people for full citizenship in this country. Of necessity their language was outer-directed rather than inwardly searching, for their characters were addressed to ''the other Americans'' who blocked group development. To white American readers, self-understanding for black characters might have seemed a luxury. To the extent that their writers emphasized the gender as well as the race of their heroines they were appealing to a white female audience that understood the universal trials of womanhood. These writers' creations, then, were conditioned by the need to establish ''positive'' images of black people; hence, the exploration of self, in all its complexity, could hardly be attempted.

> Barbara Christian. In Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers, eds. *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 234–35

Jessie Fauset, whose fiction falls to some extent within the romance genre, makes . . . use of the Cinderella Line as narrative strategy. . . . Olivia Cary, the unpleasant central character of *Comedy: American Style*, resembles the ''typical mother'' in marriage novels—Mrs. Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*, for example. The subtext of Fauset's novel follows the Cinderella Line: Olivia dreams her lightskinned daughter Teresa marries a princely (white, rich) husband. The achievement of Olivia's dream, however, is thwarted by the larger racial issue which informs the novel, the issue of passing. Jessie Fauset, whose novels espouse essentially middle-class values, nevertheless offers, particularly in *Comedy: American Style*, a critical perspective of these very values. This ambivalence results in a subversions of the Cinderella Line. Teresa, who has passed at her mother's insistence, marries not a prince but a pauper. At the end of the novel both mother and daughter, defeated in the marriage quest, are left without a culture and without a language, in the threadbare clothing which signifies an unhappy ending.

Clothing and skin are meticulously described throughout *Comedy: American Style*, mirroring as they do the values and attitudes of the various characters . . . [Fauset's] deftness and attention to shades of skin are evident also in her many descriptions of clothing. One might say that, for Fauset's characters, clothing often becomes a second skin, at times meant to enhance the complexion, at other times meant to disguise, to be used as a vehicle for passing.

> Mary Jane Lupton. *Black American Literature Forum*. 20, 1986, pp. 410–11

Issues of race and gender are major concerns in Fauset's fiction. Adhering to principles she adumbrated in her reviews, she claimed that her novels were not propagandistic. Neither, she averred, were they constrained by issues of race. Both claims are false in precisely the same way her observation that McKay did not write propaganda was false. Fauset believed that Afro-American writers had a role to play in the political struggle; they had a duty, as she put it in a wide-ranging interview in 1932, to ''tell the truth about us.'' But she thought Afro-American writers discharged this duty best when they wrote skillfully and truthfully.

Fauset did not find a fictional form conducive to the truth she wanted to tell. *There Is Confusion* (1924), *Plum Bun* (1929), *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931), and *Comedy: American Style* (1933) are all sentimental novels. The plots often strain credulity, and their resolutions are uniformly happy: the still courageous but chastened heroine finds happiness with a protective yet more understanding hero. Yet, as McDowell has noted, Fauset's novels use literary and social conventions partly as a ''deflecting mask for her more challenging concerns.'' The clichés of the marriage plot and the ''passing'' novel notwithstanding, *Plum Bun* reveals a sophisticated understanding about the politics of race and gender. Fauset's protagonist, Angela Murray, is aware of the hierarchical arrangement of race and gender relations, but she is naive about their implications. Her creator was not.

The foreword to *The Chinaberry Tree*, the most cogent statement of Fauset's personal aesthetic, has often been cited and frequently censured as a betrayal of a racial birthright. The weaknesses inherent in Fauset's position are clear; the racial defensiveness is palpable. Yet Fauset's ''breathing-spells, in-between spaces where colored men and women work and love,'' may in fact be comparable to Hurston's renderings of the Eatonville store porch whose ''sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long.'' On the porch Hurston's characters cease to be mules and become men and women. For Hurston such ''in-between spaces'' are inscribed by cultural differences; Fauset emphasizes commonality. Taken in tandem, the fiction of these two women explores the multidimensional experiences of Afro-Americans.

In this regard, Fauset's refusal to write about the kinds of characters and situations white readers expected and her insistence that all the drama in Afro-American life did not revolve around interracial conflict are important. Indeed, they are part of a larger

effort waged by black women writers collectively to create a space in which they could tell their own stories.

Cheryl A. Wall. In Bonnie Kime Scott, ed. *The Gender of Modernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 158–59

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FEARING, Kenneth (1902–1961)

The world of Fearing is nothing if not metropolitan. He is as involved in, and fascinated by, metropolitan existence (with its ''touch of vomitgas in the evening air'') as Frost with his New England landscape, decorated with commonplaces, and Jeffers with his prop boulders and gulls. . . . Held by this life in futile ambivalence that has persisted for fifteen years, Fearing's mood appears to have changed little. . . . although the tone has become increasingly harsh. In the ticker tape, the radio, the tabloid, the pulp magazine and the advertisement he has found an objective correlative that has never deserted him.

Weldon Kees. *Poetry*. Jan., 1941. p. 265

He wants as many people as possible to react with immediate horror or delight; consequently he has dramatized the most ordinary sights and happenings of everyday living. What, then, is added to make it poetry and not mere reporting? Principally, it is Fearing's imaginative viewpoint. He has the double vision of the poet who sees the object we all see and sees at the same time its universal shadow.

Ruth Stephan. *Poetry*. Dec., 1943. p. 164

Mr. Fearing is a poet who can compete in excitement with the journalists and surpass them in that his words have a speed equal to his impressions. He at times seems too closely in competition with them, so rapidly does he pass from a personal anguish to a cold impersonal dismay. What saves him is that, in his approach to what he sees, ''hatred and pity are exactly mixed.'' He is a product of the depression and somewhat limited to its mood. In his America is more despair than hope, and even hope is ominous. But it is a country in which, while he disclaims his ability to bring miracles to pass, he knows that miracles still occur.

John Peale Bishop. *Collected Essays*. (Scribner). 1948. pp. 319–20

Kenneth Fearing has sought and found his permanent level in the range of modern verse, and . . . it lies somewhere between Auden and Ogden Nash, with something of the former's surrealist imagination and a good deal of the latter's urban ability to pillory suburban mediocrity. Fearing does not, of course, derive his style from either. His style (it is a very good one, and by this time wholly his own) originated in Walt Whitman's long and casual line.

Selden Rodman. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 24, 1948. p. 18

Kenneth Fearing's poems are less prosy, more formal, than their appearance on the page would indicate. The long line, the irregular, or not particularly anything stanza pattern invite the risk of sagging; Mr. Fearing is a master of not letting the line down, and he can, with a very slight and deft touch indeed, point up his ironic effects with a brief parenthesis, an apparent afterthought, a single adverb or adjective. . . .Mr. Fearing does what he does so very well that it is all a little exasperating; you wish that he would be a bit more venturesome, inventive, experimental.

Rolfe Humphries. *The Nation*. Nov. 13, 1948. p. 557

As a practiced writer, Mr. Fearing can do a great deal with repeated words that would sound like material for nursery rhymes were it not for the grown-up ideas of change and decay that accompany them. It is readable, often brilliant writing of innuendo, of things seen out of the corner of his eye, of fears and doubts and strange characters in the background.

Eugene Davidson, *Yale Review*. Summer, 1949. pp. 725–6

I don't think a poet can be much more American, in the psychological if not the Fourth-of-July sense, than Kenneth Fearing. He talks the lingo straight, simple, and sardonic and knows the native panic at being lost in the shuffle which has created it. . . .In Fearing's writing, the ''enemy'' gradually becomes the Mob, official and unofficial, that thrives on the regimentation of individual thought and feeling through ever-greater control of the avenues of communication. . . .Fearing is an original, a canny Quixote and—more to the point—a kind of melancholy Jacques of the age, whose writing has often a topical surface that belies its depth of wry compassion and its stylistic purity. Edward Dahlberg once compared him with Corbiére, and the comparison was apt. But there are also American comparisons: He is one of the harder-bitten sons of Walt Whitman, a more mordant Masters or Sandburg, a poetic Lardner of wider scope.

M.L. Rosenthal. *The Nation*. Jan. 19, 1957. pp. 64–5

It is a fighting poetry, thank God, a poetry of angry conviction, few manners and no winsome graces. It is stubborn in its Old Guard attitude, stubborn in its technique: so unfashionable, indeed, in its resistance to the prevalent obsession with metrical vacuity, that a well-bred young neoclassicist might regard it as almost theatrically conservative.

Dudley Fitts. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 17, 1957. p. 4

His tone, for the most part, remains ironic. If he is a revolutionary poet, out of the proletarian tradition of the Thirties, and the best

survivor of that tradition, he is one without a revolution to propose. . . . His art of brilliant surfaces and quick contemporaneity seemed more daring once, as a poetic configuration, than it does today, though the best poems keep their early lustre.

Stanley Kunitz. *Saturday Review*. June 29, 1957. pp. 25–6

The irony sometimes seems dated and callow, despite its honesty and technically accomplished presentation. It is as if Fearing's habitual irony only permitted him to see things by the gross or in generalities (as conventional as the ''finny tribes'' of earlier mannerists). Often, the consequence is too insufficient a discrimination to see a world behind the old stereotypes. For thirty years Fearing has fought the dragons of commercialism and conformity; the effects of the struggle on his poetry have not been altogether good. But there are those poems like ''Five A.M.,'' ''Continuous Performance,'' and ''The Face in the Bar Room Mirror'' that transcend the struggle and comment on it with the ominous and witty power Fearing can achieve at his best.

Leonard Nathan. *Poetry*. Aug., 1957. p. 328

The sense of the ominous is a dominant feature in all of Fearing's books of poems, though the face and shape of the threatening spectres shift. In the 20s his men and women are spooked by the fear that the affluence of the decade, the quick fortunes built on inflated stocks, merely gilded a life that had no moral center or stability. When the great bull market died in 1929, and the era of depression began, the characters of Fearing's poems not only still shake from the reverberations of the economic collapse that toppled both fortunes and the dream of eternal security but also they quake because in some subterranean way they sense the shaping of a new disaster, some second coming of a world war. For those who survived the 1929 crash, as well as the decade of the great depression and World War II, there are still new spectres to threaten them. In the poems of the 40s Fearing makes us aware of brutal and coercive forces and devices: the secret police, the informers and intriguers, the listening devices that monitor the individual man and the society with the purpose of rendering each man faceless and efficient. Any eccentricity of the human mind and heart are corrected or erased in order to make the person smoothly fit and remain faithful to a new totalitarian social order; if the customer proves too tough, he can be eliminated altogether. There is little relief for the Fearing man, haunted by the old disasters of the past and threatened by a new conspiracy of ruthless forces dedicated to the principles of subservience and conformity to the will of the state. For the Fearing man, as the books of poetry define his cosmos, every horizon is ominous, and the big clock strikes the hour of doom twenty-four times a day.

Sy Kahn, in *The Thirties*, edited by Warren French (Everett Edwards). 1967. pp. 134–5

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FERBER, Edna (1887–1968)

. . . although [*Dawn O'Hara*] deals in tragedy, it is a fabric woven from threads of sheer light heartedness, unquenchable courage, warm-hearted understanding of the things which go to make the essential joy of living. There are, for instance, certain chapters in the book picturing a delightful, unique, inimitable German boarding-house in Milwaukee that makes one sigh while reading them, partly from a vague nostalgia for happy bygone days in German pensions, partly also from sheer envy of the subtle touch that penned them. And then, too, there is one portrait of a broken-down sporting editor, a man whose days are numbered, a man vulgar in speech and with many sins upon his conscience, but who, nevertheless, is rich in some of the rarest gifts that human nature knows and whose final tragedy leaves a vacant spot in the heart akin to that of a personal bereavement. For these reasons it seems the part of wisdom to inscribe the name of Edna Ferber in some easily accessible part of our memory whereby there shall be no danger in the future of missing anything that may come from her pen.

F.T. Cooper. *Bookman*. July, 1911. p. 534

Any reader who has hoped that sometime he might have the opportunity to make the *amende honorable* to Edna Ferber has it now. If your have found yourself led along protestingly, however divertingly, through Miss Ferber's previous writings; if you have had an uncomfortable feeling that perhaps your author did not quite respect her reader, her art, or herself, here comes the chance to change your mind, to alter your attitude toward one of the most up-and-coming of our present-day fictionists. *Fanny Herself* . . . is the most serious, extended, and dignified of Miss Ferber's books. . . . *Fanny Herself* is a vivid, vital, full-blooded book; dealing with ''big business'' and the ascent of a forceful and persistent race, it is more successful than some of its kind in avoiding offences of ideality and taste.

Dial. Nov. 8, 1917. p. 463

The stiff plan of her story is forgotten once she begins to let her characters shift for themselves without regard to arriving at any definite point at a given time. There is emotion in *The Girls* and with it a persuasive clear-headedness. It is eloquent in its appeal for the right which the new generation seems to insist upon before all others—the right to be wrong. The book follows the development of a female line from its place in the home out to sunlight. Before we are done we know the chief figures of the novel intimately. Some of the minor sketches are meagre. Miss Ferber has not quite forgotten that she is a writer of short stories and she is inclined to be satisfied at times with fast blocking in of two-dimensional folk. She tries occasionally to make a sentence or so do the work of a paragraph.

Heywood Broun. *Bookman*. Dec., 1921. p. 393

At a time when realism is all but monopolizing literature, one experiences a sensation of delighted relief in encountering *Show Boat*. It is gorgeously romantic . . . romantic because it is too alive to be what the realists call real; because it bears within itself a spirit of life which we seek rather than have; because it makes a period and mode of existence live again, not actually different from what they were, but more alluring than they could have been. *Show Boat* is romantic not because its people and events violate any principle of possibility, but because they express a principle of selection. Miss Ferber has chosen the brightest colors and let the dull ones go. . . . With *Show Boat* Miss Ferber establishes herself not as one of those who are inaugurating first-rate literature, but as one of those who are reviving first-rate story telling. This is little else but an irresistible story; but that, surely, is enough.

Louis Kronenberger. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 22, 1926. p. 5

Miss Ferber's talent, this reviewer is irrevocably convinced, does not lie in the way of the novel at all. She writes a novel as a modern athletic girl might wear a crinoline and a bustle. She manages the trick, but she is self-conscious and filled with secret amusement over the masquerade. Why so many words? Why such a portentous enclosure for a mere story? So I imagine Miss Ferber secretly regarding the novel form. Her forte, I humbly submit, is the short story. She has the gift, and it is my belief she has the predilection, for that form of literary art. But editors and publishers demand novels spun out to serial length and Miss Ferber, who can do it, supplies the demand. That does not vitiate the argument that her short stories are remarkably good stories, while are novels are only remarkably good short stories spun out to novel length and thereby largely spoiled.

William McFee. *New Republic*. Sept. 15, 1926. pp. 101–2

. . . Miss Ferber, practiced writer that she is, could not fail to make a tale [*Cimarron*] that would fire the imagination of a great many thousand readers. But she has done more than draw a brilliant picture of Oklahoma. She has created men and women who go there to live—and in a measure do live there in the pages of her book. I say in a measure because I think Sabra and Yancey Cravat, and certainly Sol Levy and Dixie Lee and Cim and Donna and Felice, have a tendency to be gorgeous painted figures on the back drop of the West. . . . It turns out to be a fairy story. No matter if it really happened. It is the Fairy Story of the Pioneer and the Indian. It delights my eye but, like most fairy stories, it does nothing to my heart.

Dorothy Van Doren. *The Nation*. April 23, 1930. p. 494

Warm, alive, observant, her short stories skim the cream from the surface of modern life and preserve it in all its richness. That is all they do. Depth, subtlety, intensity are beyond Miss Ferber and with the possible exception of *The Girls*, that is as true of her novels as of her short stories.

Edith H. Walton. *New York Times Book Section*. May 14, 1933. p. 7

Reading one of her books gives you the pleasant sense of toil vicariously accomplished. And her novels are always success stories, in spite of the threatening implications she turns up and pats neatly back into place—which makes her popular reading. She squares off at her job in work-manlike fashion and turns out a nationally advertised product that looks as sound as this year's model always does, until next year's model comes along.

T.S. Matthews. *New Republic*. March 6, 1935. p. 107

The public will rush toward the book [*A Peculiar Treasure*] from many directions. Fiction writers will read it like gospel—and well they may for the frank story of developing craftsmanship, for authentic description of ways of writing, moods of writing, rewards of writing, fatigues of writing. They will find that, for all her frankness, she can no more put down the complete reason for her own success than she could give them a recipe for success of their own. Dramatists will read the book. Jews will read it, to uphold their faith and pride in their race, to revive memories of Jewish life in America, to share the exciting courage and warmth and devotion to family and race and work which is so true and apparent. It will be a very tonic book in that respect alone, and its title, with the verse from which it comes, will be quoted widely. The title is a little too heavy, a fine Scriptural phrase which is somehow not quite suited to the modern story of this successful, non-churchgoing writer.

Margaret Culkin Banning. *Saturday Review*. Feb. 4, 1939. p. 5

In *Show Boat* (from which, with the help of Jerome Kern, came the most appealing American opera in existence), in *So Big*, and in *Cimarron*, Miss Ferber has stressed with genuine feeling the exuberance, the fearlessness, and the roving instinct which make us what we are. . . .

The theme [of *Saratoga Trunk*]—as Colonel Maroon, now a millionaire, proclaims it in his opening interview with the press—is honestly American. For he has no false pride about how he got his millions and doesn't forget the scars his kind left on this country. But it is the development of this story that troubles me: in it I miss Edna Ferber's homely knowledge of city and country; I think she lost the chance to play up our special brand to integrity, and at the end I am left wondering if the author really cares deeply for any of the people in this book.

Edward Weeks. *Atlantic Monthly*. Dec., 1941. n. p.

. . . Miss Ferber is at her best when she stays closest to the milieu of her formative years—when she was carving out the raw material of her art as a reporter in the Middle West. Her back-street Chicago is more convincing than her Riviera romances; her prairie mornings will stay in your memory long after you've forgotten her station-wagon repartee. But even the most severely hand-tailored of her stories is much more than merely entertaining; if her matriarchs are terrifying and completely real, her star-crossed women executives, faded ingenues, and freshly lacqered adolescents are no less human under their patter. Sometimes, as in her novels, Miss Ferber's sheer, exuberant talent, her flair for the theatrical, outruns her material—with a consequent loss of realism. But even here, the

emotion is honest. Her effective range is much narrower than these titles would indicate—yet every story is written from her heart.

James MacBride. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 16, 1947. p. 3

Miss Ferber makes it very clear that she doesn't like the Texas she writes about, and it's a cinch that when Texans read what she has written about them they won't like Miss Ferber either. Almost everyone else is going to revel in these pages. . . . *Giant* makes marvelous reading—wealth piled on wealth, wonder on wonder in a stunning splendiferous pyramid of ostentation. . . . This is the Texas Miss Ferber has put into her bitter, brilliant, corrosive, excoriating novel. . . . It requires courage to take all this apart as scathingly as Miss Ferber has done; and in the process of so doing she paints a memorable portrait of that new American, *Texicanus vulgaris*, which is all warts and wampum. . . . For all the slickness of its writing (and Miss Ferber is a past mistress of best seller style), *Giant* carries the kind of message that seldom finds expression in such chromium-plated prose. What's more, Miss Ferber states it with a conviction that carries the ring of sincerity. All this may make it impossible for her to revisit the great Commonwealth without the law at her hip, but at least she has written a book that sets the seal on her career.

John Barkham. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 28, 1952. pp. 4–5

It was inevitable that Edna Ferber should write a novel about Alaska. The magnetic northern land has all the qualities that draw her to a scene—robustness, magnitude, epic tradition, the clash of strong-willed men and their stubborn duel with Nature. In her novel *Ice Palace* she has put more of Alaska between covers than any other writer in its short and crowded history. . . . Here is the difference between Miss Ferber and the ''modern'' novelists, and a reason for the multitude of her readers. She still sees people in large dimensions, strong enough to be actors rather than to be acted upon. This novel contains a whole gallery of them, with Christine Storm in the center. Frankly heightened and exaggerated, they are men and women to match the seas and skies and mountains of the big North Country.

Walter Havighurst. *Saturday Review*. March 29, 1958. p. 26

. . . her accounts [in *A Kind of Magic*] of the slave laborer's crematories at Nordhausen, of her visit to Buchenwald, and of VJ Day in New York City are first-class reportage.

A seasoned, hard-working, and dedicated writer, Edna Ferber is similarly interesting when she tells of the trials and delights of her trade. Moreover, apart from a tendency to overvalue her own fiction, she is worth listening to.

William Peden. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 19, 1963, p. 38

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FERLINGHETTI, Lawrence (1919–)

Owner of the City Lights bookshop (headquarters for the San Francisco literary movement) and publisher of the Pocket Poets Series (most notable entry, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*), Lawrence Ferlinghetti has been a leader in all that Jazz about poetry on the West Coast. He now appears with some verse [*A Coney Island of the Mind*] of his own, which I find highly readable and often very funny. . . . like many writers who keep pointing to their bare feet, Ferlinghetti is a very bookish boy: his hipster verse frequently hangs on a literary reference. His book is a grab bag of undergraduate musings about love and art, much hackneyed satire of American life and some real and wry perceptions of it.

Harvey Shapiro. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 7, 1958. p. 10

Lawrence Ferlinghetti is certainly one of those advocates of universal nakedness, etc. . . . but he differs from most of the others in his high-flying joyousness of spirit and in his stylistic sophistication. He knows he is not the first man to take a peek at Darien and he has learned some useful things, and gladly, from various European and American experimenters. The religion of sex-and-anarchy, like other religions and creeds, starts off with certain simplicities but does not require its communicants to reiterate them monotonously and mechanically. Ferlinghetti can preach a little tiresomely; he proves he can in the seven ''Oral Messages,'' written ''specifically for jazz accompaniment,'' in which he tries to rival the worst of Ginsberg, Corso, et al. . . . Apart from the ''Oral Messages,'' however, and from a few other preachy pieces, Ferlinghetti is a deft, rapid-paced, whirling performer.

M.L. Rosenthal. *The Nation*. Oct. 11, 1958. p. 215

This regional activity had been going full swing for many years when suddenly it received a number of spectacular recruits. First was Lawrence Ferlinghetti. He is a successful book dealer, secretly the possessor of three degrees, one from the Sorbonne, a most imaginative editor and publisher, whose ''Pocket Poets'' series has sold hundreds of thousands of copies, and a genuinely popular poet. His own *A Coney Island of the Mind* nudges *Howl* for first place as the most popular poetry book of the decade, and without the latter's

somewhat dubious publicity. Resident for many years in France, he ''thinks in French''; his verse bears strong resemblance to that of Raymond Queneau, Jacques Prévert and Paul Éluard. Its nearest American analogues are the work of e.e cummings and James Laughlin.

Kenneth Rexroth. *Assays* (New Directions). 1961. p. 193

Reality in this novel [*Her*] is all a fluid jumble and has no center other than the mind of the male protagonist as he searches for his completion, for his Sunday wife, for his Jungian ''anima.'' Paradoxically, the very fact that the censor of this mind has been removed seems of produce a monotonously repetitious sequence of babbling rhyme associations which invariably lead to the hero's affirmation of self through protest and erection. As the protagonist blunders along ''looking for the main character of my life,'' the sustaining image becomes that of the darkened movie house in which the ''celluloid sequence'' seems to be coiling and recoiling both image and existence, and this vision of reality may in part explain the technique with its flowing sentences, its merging of objects and its fuddling of time and space.

Daniel Leary. *Minnesota Review*. Summer, 1961. p. 505

. . . there seems to be nothing in Ferlinghetti's new narrative method that James Joyce didn't discover some time ago, while there is obviously a great deal that Joyce found out and which Ferlinghetti has evidently not yet discovered, such as the use of humor and understatement and irony. What is it that *Her* has to tell us? I have only read it twice, so I am not sure, but it seems to be that the short, fat man wishes he could be like Leda and couple with the godhead, except that the swan would have to be Hera and not Zeus because he, the short, fat man, is obviously not himself divine.

Louis D. Rubin. *Sewanee Review*. Summer, 1962. p. 505

Mr. Ferlinghetti documents his claim to being an oral poet by including, flipped in the back cover of his new book [*Starting from San Francisco*], a 7-minute LP record of himself reading his own poems. . . . Mr. Ferlinghetti's verse is perfectly suited to his style of delivery, and his style of delivery is effective and engaging. Free verse such as his needs plenty of room for its organizational necessities: repetition, listings, a long looping flow that goes back to its beginnings so as to make a rounded form. . . . He has the usual American obsession, asking, ''What is going on in America and how does one survive it?'' His answer might be: By being half a committed outsider and half an innocent fool. He makes jokes and chants seriously with equal gusto and surreal inventiveness, using spoken American in a romantic, flamboyant manner.

Alan Dugan. *Poetry*. Aug., 1962. pp. 314–15

The Beats made a great mistake in permitting a label to be glued on them, especially after they started believing what it said. Every moment Ferlinghetti expends on the hairs of Fidel's ''beat beard'' is snatched from the service of an underdeveloped gift. He is, or could be, a *comic* writer with a curiously neutral idiom. . . . On the predictable themes—Castro, Euphoria, Pot dreams, Journeys across the continent, nausea, Negative sanctity . . . he is portentously dull. But no stereotyped Beat has the wit for ''The Great Chinese Dragon,'' exalting it into the type of the orgiastic apocalypse, but not failing to note that the feet walking beneath it wear Keds.

Hugh Kenner. *National Review*. Aug. 14, 1962. p. 110

Neither Ferlinghetti's plays [*Unfair Arguments with Existence*] nor the hypothetical theater for which he intends them are new. In techniques and the themes of isolation and absurdity, he identifies himself with obvious antecedents: Sartre, Albee, Beckett, Genet, Camus. Most of the time he sounds as though he were giving back to his mentors, in a different idiom, what they have given him.

They would be pleased. Generally, these plays turn back upon and within themselves in miniature labyrinths of irony and pun, at the ends of which squats the same patient, grinning Minotaur. The paraphernalia of waste, the perplexing similarity between waking and dreaming, the potential dead-end of men's use of atomic energy, the tricks and masks of desire are the stuff the inhabitants of Ferlinghetti's insidious sewers grovel through.

Dabney Stuart. *Poetry*. July, 1964. p. 260

Routines comprises twelve ''plays'' which are closer to formalized ''happenings,'' a genre which was given the hipster's kiss of death. I don't know what to make of them. They are not enough. Most of them deal with the miasmal condition of the current culture, but at the same time, they avoid coming to grips with that culture. They are against war, fascism, the bomb, witch hunts, and so forth—Ferlinghetti's heart is in the right place. But again, it's not enough. . . . It is a book which tells the truth, but which skates over the well-springs of that truth.

Gilbert Sorrentino. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Aug. 8, 1965. p. 15

At the end of ''The Sleeper,'' one of twelve brief plays making up *Routines*, Ferlinghetti quotes the etymology of the word, *jazz*: ''jas: jass: jasm: gism.'' Jazz carried back to gism is a lovely analogy for a way of writing plays that wants to get behind established drama, to re-see the beginning, radically, as form, exactly as that etymology lets us re-see jazz. . . . Though Ferlinghetti writes at a secondary intensity, he is, after all, professionally oriented, always with his ear to the ground, listening, smart and talented. He is, I think, clearly a good playwright. The form is proper to him. Additionally, for whatever it's worth, I cannot help feeling—after reading the last piece, ''Bore''—how extraordinarily effective a politician he could be. Whatever he does it is always with, or from, the whole man. And that man is smart.

Richard Duerden. *Poetry*. May, 1966. pp. 125–6

[Lawrence] Ferlinghetti's poetics are functional. Directed toward a ''resocialization'' of art, he creates lasting work that combines realism and revelation in a cry for conscience and change. . . .

It is time to fill the critical gap surrounding his writing. Such an endeavor must, however, be based on the broad foundation of his work, one that goes beyond his associations with movements, writers, or locales and recognizes the poet's originality, diversity, and firm commitment to an international vision of writing as a cultural force, authentically engaged and engaging. Lawrence

Ferlinghetti has produced some of the most powerful and popular writing of our time. As one of the great artistic borrowers of our time (Eliot and Pound being others), he has taken his influences from the gamut of world literature, philosophy, art, and affairs, and yet integrated it all into his own personal vision—genuine and aware. Beyond his function as a literary figure or catalyst in the beat movement and San Francisco Renaissance in poetry he is a truly international artist and publisher, and is a contemporary model of the poet of revolt and affirmation. Exclaiming the injustices and suppression of life and propounding the compassionate unity of all life—earth to man to creature—he is forever that personal and public poet-at-large.

Ferlinghetti's achievement as an artist cannot be separated from his work as a man. Yet, it is essential to recognize both planes of this overlapping development. He has recreated a popular oral poetry, integrated open-form poetics with abstract expressionist theory, created a vital poetry of the streets, molded a rhetorical poetics that embraces the methods of surrealism, filmmaking, satire, and has developed diverse forms and applications of the prose poem. He is a poet of genuine humor and hard-won lyricism. His theater is provocative and engaging, a contemporary amalgam of expressionist, absurdist, existentialist, and surrealist theater. In his journal writing he has developed the poet-journalist perspective and brought about a further synthesis of poetry and prose. For some time he has been America's most outspoken and adept poet of political satire, and his antinovel *Her* stands as a major achievement for its expansion of the fiction techniques of narrative perspective, structural and stylistic devices, deep imagery and symbolism—all directed toward an open exploration of the nature of reality. While his artistic faults are invariably those of daring excess, his most stunning achievements are those of innovation and synthesis within his functional life-art dynamics. Repeatedly he has shown himself to be a craftsman with a broad artistic comprehension, a fine inner ear, and an unfailingly open eye and heart.

Larry Smith. *Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Poet-at-Large* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Pr., 1983), pp. 196–98

Among the radical changes of technique and perspective in the art of the twentieth century, one that is frequently overlooked is the sociological fact that the situation of the artist has been altered by the proliferation of the mass media. Artists have become public to such an extent that their roles and reputations may easily become their major concerns—and their primary themes. The use of the first person in poetry traditionally becomes a device for universalization: an experience or sensation is employed to speak to or reveal a generalized point, embodying Lautréamont's tenet that ''Whoever considers the life of a man finds therein the history of the species.'' However, in much of the poetry of the Beat Generation writers, the personal and subjective elements become distressingly autistic: everyday trivia and personal experiences are described, as is frequently the case in Lawrence Ferlinghetti's poems, to portray and congratulate the writer himself. A chief subject of Ferlinghetti's poetry is often Ferlinghetti himself. The subjective element in the poems seems calculated to reveal the poet to the reader rather than to illuminate the reader. The success of his subjective poems is compromised when Ferlinghetti focuses self-consciously on his role as poet or on nugatory occasions and indulges in mock self-deprecation, but more frequently the genuine wit and comfortable presence of his speakers transform personal observations into significant images of the human condition. . . .

Ferlinghetti is one of the most conspicuous practitioners of a new type of poetry designed as an intentional rebuke to what the Beats considered the sterility of academic poetry. . . . The new poetry demands that the reader engage it, interact with it, rather than study it. . . . Together with the development of a fresh poetics, a new type of subject matter arrives which is intensely personal and which often focuses sharply and clearly on the poet's sensibilities, what Leslie Fielder calls ''the reemergence of the 'I' at the center of the poem.'' However, this poetry is not confessional in the conventional sense. The poet details his everyday actions and reactions so that the poems become a record of his existence.

Michael Skau. ''The Poet as Poem: Ferlinghetti's Songs of Myself.'' *Concerning Poetry*. 1987, pp. 57–60, 69

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FIEDLER, Leslie (1917–)

Mr. Fiedler is a very clever writer; he has an engaging gift of candor, and he learned long ago not merely to accept himself as a Jew, an intellectual, a writer passionately interested in political events and a political critic essentially dedicated to literature, but, wherever possible, to throw his ''tragic'' knowledge at people in such a way as to embarrass them. He tells us that his essay on *Huckleberry Finn* has outraged the homosexuals, and adds—''This, I suspect, is success.'' This may be success, but I'm afraid that it is the only kind of success that can come from such deliberate provocativeness—this air of talking, talking brightly, brashly, penetratingly, all the time, no matter what the subject or whom he embarrasses.

Alfred Kazin. *New Republic*. Aug. 29, 1955. p. 20

A great deal of American fiction, Fiedler says, has been an escape from a society under female domination into an imagined world of male companionship. Much of it has revealed a fear of darker races, which represent wild Nature; and the hero of the novel is often involved in some close relation with an Indian, a Polynesian or a

Negro (Chingachgook in *The Last of the Mohicans*, Queequeg in *Moby Dick*, Nigger Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* and Sam Fathers in the *The Bear*). Fiedler wants us to believe that this relation is ''a homoerotic fable,'' and he adduces a great deal of evidence—sometimes persuasive, sometimes based on a misreading of the text—in favor of his special interpretation. . . . It works pretty well with some of our best authors, including Hawthorne, Melville and Faulkner, but not necessarily with their best novels; for example, Fiedler has fresher things to say about Melville's deplorable nightmare, *Pierre*, than about *Moby Dick*; nightmares are more Freudian. It doesn't work at all with a whole galaxy of novelists whom Fiedler dismisses as ''middlebrow'': William Dean Howells, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Sinclair Lewis, James Gould Cozzens, or anyone else who tries to present normal Americans.

Malcolm Cowley. *New York Times Book Section*. March 27, 1960. p. 1

It is an occasion for very considerable, if wary, satisfaction to have those ideas and countless more like them, jostling one another with a kind of cheery, subversive vigor within the covers of a single text. *Love and Death in the American Novel* is, at the least, an immensely valuable corrective to what, despite everything that has been said, is a continuing misapprehension about our literature and ourselves. But it is a good deal more than that, too. . . .

But the perspective *is* fresh, and what Mr. Fiedler says by means of it is memorable. He is one of the very few literary critics of his generation whose ideas one can actually remember from one day to the next. And if so, it is because his deliberately disturbing habit of seizing literature from the side or from below has not simply wrenched the works he studies into unnatural shapes. It is because, by yanking and pulling, he has also forced some of them back toward their proper shape. It is because this fresh viewpoint has managed to take hold of a serious portion of the truth about the motivations that inform the American novel. ''Truth'' is a strong word, and it is here intended as such.

R. W. B. Lewis. *The Yale Review*. June, 1960. pp. 611, 614

One side of Fiedler's mind seems honestly drawn to Melville's commitment to ''No! in thunder.'' The other side is satisfied only when he can show he's the sharpest and wittiest guy in class. ''I'm Oliver Cool, the cleverest body in school.'' Fiedler has a good eye for pretense, he can worry an idea like a cat toying with a mouse, but he has a terrible need to be a show-off.

The various Fiedlers appear to write in different tones. The treatment of Warren is quire deferential until near the end, that of Faulkner is patronizing, and the article on Kingsley Amis and his contemporaries is fairly sober and well considered. One is never sure what the tone is going to be. But one is never surprised to see Fiedler sitting astride his subject, pressing its nose in the dirt, and saying grimly and gleefully, ''Say Uncle!''

William Van O'Connor. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 19, 1960. p. 46

Leslie Fiedler, a man of learning and intelligence, has composed another of those fascinating catastrophes with which our literary scholarship is strewn. *Love and Death in the American Novel* seems to me destined to become a classical instance of sophisticated crankiness; it rides a one-track thesis about American literature through 600 pages of assertion, never relenting into doubt or qualification, and simply ignoring those writers and books that might call the thesis into question. . . . Most American fiction, suggests Fiedler, falls either into the gothic or sentimental category, neither of which allows a confrontation with the needs of maturity. . . .

In such essays [as *No! In Thunder*] the appearance of Fiedler's writing is all energy and verve, but what lies beneath it is a corrosive knowingness, a void of nihilism. Opinion, the clash of interest, the confrontations of belief—all give way under the pressure of his need to dazzle and display, to thrust his ego between the reader and his ostensible subject, to remain—all else failing—brilliant, brilliant, brilliant to the last bitter and anxious word.

Irving Howe. *New Republic*. Dec. 5, 1960. pp. 17–19

Some of the verbal horseplay is funny, and some of the ideas being mocked deserve Menippean or Huxleyan satire. But the satirist has no position of his own, the exaggerated phrases cancel each other out, and all meaning or possibility of it soon disappears down a particular and often invoked drain. . . . Only four or five paragraphs in the whole novel *The Second Stone*, one of them on Michelangelo's *Pieta*, suggest how much has been omitted in the way of beauty, history, magnanimity, myth and a dozen other elements one might name.

Robert Gorham Davis. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1963. pp. 284–5

In the good old days, Jewish sons faced their fathers and verbally slapped them in order to be men. In these post–D. H. Lawrence times the hero smirks in his Buddha-like shell till he shrieks at the woman beside him he both needs and despises. Fiedler, who as a critic can comment so brilliantly on the psychological inadequacies of American writers, reads here *Back to China* like one of his targets in *Love and Death in the American Novel*.

The reaction to *Back to China* is likely to be intense, if only because one justly expects a great deal from Fiedler. Like Mailer, however, Fiedler is so immersed in his associations that he has not created a whole world, but has presented the undigested world of his vital imagination. Like Bellow, he has not created a structure, or at least a structure that is compelling enough to make the reader forget the constant appearances of literary gratuitousness and autobiographical reminiscences. . . .

Having said all these things, it may seem odd that I also want to praise the book. *Back to China* attempts a large view of society and it is not afraid to reveal its author's feelings. Fiedler grasps for the heavens and stumbles; but the space travelled has been through meaningful places.

Martin Tucker. *Commonweal*. June 11, 1965. p. 388

. . . *Love and Death in the American Novel* is to my mind probably the best single book on American fiction ever written, and it is surely unsurpassed in its definition of Gothicism as a characteristic of that fiction. The book has been most resented for its purported emphasis on sexual perversity in American literature and in its use

of this as an index to certain historical and cultural tensions. Actually Fiedler is altogether less daring and less insistent on this aspect of our literature than was Lawrence in his much earlier study, and he is in no sense as moralistic about sex as a literary component. . . . Fiedler's methods are not essentially different from those of other commentators who are concerned with recurrences of literary motifs and with the elaboration of these into archetypes or myths. It may be more provocative but it is not more or less valid to reduce American literature to certain versions of sexual dislocation than to reduce it to versions of Eden, Christ or the Frontier.

Richard Poirier. *Partisan Review*. Fall, 1966. pp. 636–7

I don't think that Fiedler's way of treating myth is as easily transferable into prescriptive program as he wants it to be. His methods do damage not just to literature, by breaking up whole works to salvage the ''authentic'' fragment, but to life, making it only a kind of *materia mythica* to be arranged and manipulated without entering very deeply into the particular experiences that compose it. He doesn't mean to do this, and his career is a deserved and salutary rebuke to those who would insulate art from its human motives and consequences; but *The Return of the Vanishing American*, for all its admirable intentions and its achieved pleasures and illuminations, is finally bad medicine.

Thomas P. Edwards. *Partisan Review*. Fall, 1968. p. 610

Fiedler has certain subjects—being a Jew in America, American Jewish writers, liberal politics and taste, the mythology of chaste homosexual relations at the center of classic American literature—to which he returns over and over, and about which he has had, essentially, one idea. He has gone on liking the idea, and gone on giving himself contexts in which it can be used. . . .

The real point about Fiedler, which we can make praise or blame as we choose, is that he is always a political writer, always putting himself into situations where he is speaking against this fashion or that obsolescence, deriding some official line, jockeying for some new position. He always acts as though we might be deceived by some other hawker of myths and contexts if he did not set us straight, and he loves doing this so much that he will take any opportunity that presents itself to keep us informed, protected, reminded. But he also just plain loves to hear himself talk, too, and as long as he is excited by an idea he will go on saying it.

Roger Sale. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 10, 1971. p. 10

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FIERSTEIN, Harvey (1954–)

Arnold Beckoff, the lonely but far-from-forlorn hero of Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy*, is a die-hard romantic who takes his heart, soul and fatalism from the 1920's ballads that give the work its title and its tone. At the end of a long, infinitely rewarding evening in the company of . . . his family and friends, [Arnold] confesses with a sigh that he has always wanted exactly the life that his mother has had— ''with certain minor alterations.''

Those alterations—Arnold is a homosexual and a professional ''drag queen''—are the substance but not the sum of Mr. Fierstein's work, three plays that give us a progressively dramatic and illuminating portrait of a man who laughs, and makes us laugh, to keep from collapsing. The evening is a double tour de force for Mr. Fierstein, who, with his throaty Tallulah voice and manner, stars in his own touching triptych.

We first met Arnold in *The International Stud*, produced Off Broadway in 1978. At the time, I felt it was a sincere but sentimentalized view of a transvestite in extremis. Seeing the play again, in a carefully abridged version in a vastly superior staging by Peter Pope, I found myself enjoying Arnold's wit—he has the pithy humor of a Fran Lebowitz—at the same time that I was moved by his dilemma. He is a man of principle who compulsively plays the fool.

[In *Torch Song Trilogy*], *The International Stud* becomes the first chapter in a cycle of tales about Arnold. . . .

The current evening is designed as a trilogy of related plays, but it turns out to be one cohesive three-act play.

Each succeeding ''act'' adds to our understanding and fully justifies what has gone before. Instead of reiterating positions, Arnold's story becomes richer as it unfolds. There are still flashes of sentimentality in Mr. Fierstein's performance as well as in the text. The author is so accomplished at playing Arnold that he cannot resist an extra flourish or an easy wisecrack, and the ending is too neatly symbolic. But the cumulative event is one to be experienced and savored.

Among other things, it deals fairly—without any attempt at exploiting the situation or manipulating our emotions—with varieties of sexual orientation. For example, Arnold's lover is a bisexual who is caught between two magnets: what he thinks he needs and what he feels. The evening studies self-love and self-hate, headstrong passion and heartfelt compassion.

In the first part, the two men meet—to a counterpoint of torch songs, sung pensively—and after a sequence of on-again, off-again encounters, many of them humorous, they separate. In the second part, *Fugue in a Nursery*, Arnold and his new lover, a male model, visit Arnold's ''ex'' and his new girlfriend at their farmhouse. The tinseled cynicism of the first play sweetens as the quartet conducts a roundelay that is both fanciful and immensely civilized. The four switch partners, conversationally as well as romantically, with the irrepressibly sympathetic Arnold trying, but not succeeding, in turning a deaf ear to the problems of others.

In the third and best play, *Widows and Children First!* we meet Arnold's past and present family. First there is his Jewish mother, fresh from Miami with an archetypal self-salute, ''I'm the mother,'' and an unextinguishable hope that her son may yet blossom into heterosexuality. The final addition is a troubled teenager whom Arnold has rescued from the streets and wants to adopt. The sociological implications are complex and the author treats them

with equanimity, demonstrating that the flamboyant Arnold is truly a reflection of his assertive mother, which is why they are destined to spend their lives at logger-heads. . . .

All of the characters are of course subsidiary to Arnold's dominant personality. He is his own torch song, and the role is inseparable from the actor-author. Mr. Fierstein's self- incarnation is an act of compelling virtuosity.

Mel Gussow. *The New York Times*. November 1, 1981, p. 81.

[In *Torch Song Trilogy*, the] rambling and, because it can only move in circles, repetitive plot might do well enough. . . . But that self-mockery Mr. Fierstein delights in begins to pose problems as the performance now stands. It tends to become a permanent shield, concealing the man beneath it. Sometimes it is simply playful: two men on a telephone cooking up names for female singers, Kitty Litter, Bertha Vanation. Sometimes it is waspishly knowing: ''I'm aging about as well as a Beach Party movie.'' Sometimes it makes ''in'' use of its homosexual background: ''What's the matter—you catch your tongue on the closet door?'' And sometimes it collapses of its own effort: speaking boastfully of all the ''Hims'' he knows well, Mr. Fierstein includes ''The Battle Him of the Republic.''

The quality of the jokes varies, but that's not the point. The point is that there's no knowing the joker. His defenses are, and remain, impenetrable. The author-actor is adding to this . . . by making certain of his gestures and reactions Road-Runner-broad: trying to arrange a date by telephone, he squirms in the armchair as though it had been invaded by red ants. Since none of the evening's other characters behave in this fashion (including two homosexuals and one bisexual), the excesses cannot be ascribed to his sexual patterns; neither can they be fitted into an over-all style that legitimately embraces the balance of the company. . . .

''I feel like freeze-dried death'' isn't an unimaginative phrase; yet it is too self-conscious to make us think about, or feel for, the man uttering it. The phrase seems to be listening to itself, which makes it quite impersonal. Does this matter? I think it does. I found the constant tattoo of attempted left-field laughs ultimately wearing; and the barrage did get between the actor and any feelings I might have had for him. How much of this, I wondered, has come about during the weeks since the play opened downtown? Has that hard, ready-made laughter from out front hurt the complexity of the leading performances, helped turn it into a grab for the next guffaw?

The laughter—at least at the performance I saw—is peculiar because it is so unvaried and so unselective. Normally, audiences like to choose what they will laugh at. Perhaps a little laugh, a kind of chuckle of recognition. Or a medium size one, to indicate that the friendship is growing but the commitment is not yet permanent. Then, when surrender does come, the boffs. Here it's all boffs, which means that some of them simply cannot be genuine. For instance, I doubt that Mr. Fierstein makes a single campy gesture—or what a straight parodist would consider a homosexual gesture—that isn't greeted with instant hilarity. But this surely cannot be what Mr. Fierstein, as playwright, must once have had in mind. *Torch Song Trilogy* is certainly not a play meant to poke fun at homosexuals minute by minute. Laughter is legitimate, but other responses are called for. . . .

It's strictly gag-time as things now stand. Has playing the show for some weeks or more, and finding new ways to nudge the audience's funny-bone nightly, finally hollowed out the play, erased variety and nuance, robbed it of its possible range of moods? The play's director, Peter Pope, might be well advised to take another, sterner look at it.

Walter Kerr. *The New York Times*. June 27, 1982, pp. H3, H16.

''La Cage aux Folles'' is the first Broadway musical ever to give center stage to a homosexual love affair—but don't go expecting an earthquake. The show . . . is the schmaltziest, most old-fashioned major musical Broadway has seen since ''Annie,'' and it's likely to be just as popular with children of all ages. Were you hoping for a little more? I must confess that I was. The glitz, showmanship, good cheer and almost unflagging tunefulness of ''La Cage aux Folles'' are all highly enjoyable and welcome, but, in its eagerness to please all comers, this musical is sometimes as shamelessly calculating as a candidate for public office.

Sometimes, but, happily, not always. There are more than a few startling occasions in this rapaciously busy extravaganza when the vast machinery comes to a halt—when David Mitchell's glorious pastel-hued scenic visions of St.-Tropez stop flying, when the transvestite dancing girls vanish, when the running gags about whips and wigs limp away. . . .

[Albin], as Zaza, is the headline attraction at the nightclub that gives the musical its title. For 20 years, Albin has had a tranquil domestic life with Georges . . . , the club's impresario. Albin is the more flamboyant of the pair. It is he who must dress up in drag every night to entertain the customers and who has the most to fear from growing old. . . .

Whether in his female impersonations or in civilian guise, [Albin] is neither campy nor macho here: he could be any run-of-the-mill nightclub entertainer in midlife crisis. But it is precisely his ordinariness that makes him so moving. When [Albin] sits in front of his dressing-room mirror to sing plaintively of how he applies ''a little more mascara'' to make himself feel beautiful, we care much more about what the illusion of feminine glamour means to the otherwise humdrum Albin than we do about the rather routine illusion itself.

That's how it should be. By making us see so clearly how precariously his self-esteem is maintained, [Albin] makes it all the more upsetting to watch what happens when that identity is attacked. And, as in the French film of ''La Cage aux Folles'' . . . , that shock quickly arrives. Albin and Georges's ''son''—fathered by Georges in a long-ago, one-night heterosexual fling—announces his intention to marry the daughter of a bigoted politician. To help the young man perpetuate the fiction that he had a standard upbringing, Georges cruelly asks Albin to disappear when the prospective in-laws come to call.

What follows, at the end of Act I, is the evening's moment of triumph. [Albin] rushes on the stage of La Cage to perform as Zaza—only to stop in midstride and let loose with his real feelings of rejection and betrayal. In drag though he may be, the actor sings in a full-throttle baritone—with a pulsating force that induces shivers. The song, titled ''I Am What I Am,'' is full of rage but, better still, of pride: even as Albin defends his right to live as he wishes, he pointedly asks not for either ''praise'' or ''pity.''. . .

When the stars aren't delivering . . . [their] songs, ''La Cage aux Folles'' can be as synthetic and padded as the transvestites' cleavage. . . . Harvey Fierstein, writer of the book, has misplaced his craftsmanship and bite on this outing; he's exercised few of his

options to bolster a property that was thin and coarse to begin with. The tiny plot of ''La Cage'' is dribbled out with painful lethargy in Act I, then resolved chaotically (and confusingly) for the final curtain. Worse, there is a homogenized, sit-com tone to the script, which suggests that Mr. Fierstein is pandering to what he apparently regards as a squeamish Broad-way-musical audience.

The ostensibly tart backstage wisecracks of Zaza's fellow transvestites are so tame and tired that they make the equivalent jokes of, say, ''Victor/Victoria'' or Mr. Fierstein's own ''Torch Song Trilogy'' sound like hardcore porn. . . . In the book scenes, unlike the songs, Georges and Albin are so relentlessly square that they become homogenized homosexuals in the manner of the scrupulously genteel black people of Hollywood's ''Guess Who's Coming to Dinner'' era. The lovers' turncoat son . . . is too wanly characterized for us to understand his casual callousness; the parents of the bride are such caricatured villains that even the more zealous homophobes in the audience can feel morally superior to them—and thereby escape the reach of the show's plea for tolerance. . . .

[Even when Fierstein and lyricist Jerry Herman] are cautiously watering down their material, their splashy entertainment usually hums along in its unabashedly conventional way. Wait for those privileged occasions when [the actors and] Mr. Herman summon up the full courage of the show's convictions, and you'll hear ''La Cage aux Folles'' stop humming and sing.

Frank Rich. *The New York Times*. August 22, 1983, p. C13.

Two recent plays about AIDS point up, by their failings, the delicate balance that [William] Hoffman's play [*As Is*] achieves. Harvey Fierstein's *Safe Sex*, the more ambitious of the two, at least in terms of its physical production, is also the more flawed, and has closed after a week on Broadway and an earlier trial run at La MaMa E.T.C. *Safe Sex* comprises three one-acters, two of which allow Fierstein to repeat the role he had such success with in *Torch Song Trilogy*: himself. The Fierstein persona combines the bitchiness of Truman Capote with the self-delighting self-parody of Liberace, and adds to that a smear of schmaltz as though he were for the moment possessed by the dybbuk of the supreme Jewish mother. With the recent demise of the above-named gay archetypes, Fierstein has probably inherited the title they once contested, as the homosexual Middle America most enjoys condescending to. My own reaction to Fierstein doing Fierstein is antipathetic to a degree that is probably out of proportion to any real thespic sins he may commit. As a gay myself, I felt like a black attending a Stepin Fetchit festival. Even if the jokes had been funny . . .

Applied to the AIDS crisis, the Fierstein persona is like a smiling-face, Have-a-Nice-Day sticker offered in lieu of medical treatment. In the first, mercifully brief playlet, *Manny and Jake*, Fierstein delegates his persona to a younger actor, John Mulkeen, deleting the camp humor and delivering instead gallons of mushy, McKuenesque prose-poesy. The theme of this mush, and of all the humor in the title one-acter that follows, is regret, not for the fallen but for the loss of promiscuous sex—a lament that doesn't ring true from Mulkeen or Fierstein, who both give off such auras of self-adoration that one can't imagine enforced celibacy posing either much of a problem. Through much of his monologue, Mulkeen must fondle his co-star John Wesley Shipp, which he does with all the erotic intensity of someone vacuuming a rug. When Fierstein comes to deal with the same unfortunate Mr. Shipp, they are placed at opposite ends of a symbolic seesaw, a contrivance that spares the audience the distress of witnessing any gratuitous physical contact. The play was designed very much with a crossover (i.e., straight) audience in mind, and the laughter it generated the night I attended suggested that the target audience had been reached: there were hearty Har! Hars! and soprano titters whenever Fierstein called his partner by a feminine name or otherwise implied that boys will be girls.

And what did AIDS have to do with this? Very little, except to provide Fierstein with a convenient pretext for avoiding a subject that is uncongenial to him: physical (forgive the expression) sex. The Liberace side of the Fierstein persona requires him to treat that subject with prophylactic euphemism, so that even AIDS is never mentioned by its nasty name. Nor do the characters ever deal with a single practicality of the stated theme, safe sex, such as whether they can kiss. Nor does it occur to them that they might be tested to see if they've been exposed to the virus, and thus be spared much mutual suspicion and uncertainty. No doubt the theater has other purposes than offering instruction in sexual hygiene, but Fierstein's play simply sounds like someone dithering on the subject.

Thomas M. Disch. *The Nation*. May 16, 1987, pp. 656, 658.

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FISHER, Dorothy Canfield (1879–1958)

Miss Canfield wants the whole of the psychic life to be carried on under the spot-light of the attention. It follows that she is opposed to the creation of instinct; that she desires, in fact, that the psyche should be like a country that refers all its business to a central government. That is a system that leads in the end to a tyrannous and inefficient bureaucracy and the decay of provincial life. . . . The fact is that Miss Canfield's mind is a stranger to the idea of ''the thing in itself''; and that makes her very little of a poet and rather less of a moralist.

Rebecca West. *New Statesman and Nation*. July 28, 1921. p. 444

To satisfy . . . worried, but conscientious souls, and perhaps to satisfy herself, Dorothy Canfield has written an earnest and serious vindication of marriage. . . . She has evidently tried to be honest. . . . Dorothy Canfield makes marriage a real thing—a thing of substance and color—but she makes its alternative weak and pitiful. . . . If Dorothy Canfield would face the intensity of love and the lure of freedom as willingly as she faces the reality and depths of family life, she could make a memorable contribution to current thought.

Freda Kirchwey. *The Nation*. Dec. 7, 1921. pp. 676–7

Mrs. Fisher has taken issue with the indictment of the American scene which has colored the writing of many of our most significant contemporary novelists. Her loyalties are the old ones of the New England school; she finds neither malice nor stagnation nor dulless in the village. Her New Hampshire landscape glows with the veritable color of the hills; her village folk are kindly and simple and human; for her rural life still has the atmosphere of contentment and of a large peace. These contacts are notable because, in a sense, they place her definitely among the conservative in her outlook on life.

Lloyd Morris. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 15, 1922. p. 25

Dorothy Canfield's sense of humor is keen but she has not wit. Neither does she indulge in epigram. She has done very effective scenes but she is not a quotable novelist. It comes back, I should say, to the fact that with her the story is the thing. Very earnest people are seldom witty. . . . Dorothy Canfield is concerned with ideas and with people. She has chapters of passion and beauty, but you must take them as a whole.

Dorothea Lawrence Mann. *Bookman*. Aug., 1927. p. 700

Her stories seem to be verifiably true, because they are never written with scorn or with the endeavor to prove anything; unless it be to prove that ordinary day-by-day life may be filled with excitement, that love may grow in the intimacy of marriage stronger instead of weaker; that there are just as many Main Streets in Europe as in America; that the society of one's own children is more diverting than the average crowd at a Night Club. . . . I sometimes think that Dorothy Canfield, who has a deservedly international reputation, would be even a greater novelist if she did not possess so much common sense. She knows actual life so well, her ideas are so rational, so sound, and so sensible that her love of truth and reality may actually stand in the way of her reaching the highest altitudes.

William Lyon Phelps. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 11, 1930. p. 199

Despite an imperfect mastery of the art of compression and terseness, Dorothy Canfield is foremost today among those novelists who stand for same perspective rather than sensationalism, for verity rather than realism, for selection of facts focused upon an indwelling universal law rather than a chaos of facts-for-facts'-sake, for limited free will rather than complete determinism. Thus, amidst the stultifying and stale conventions of naturalism, Dorothy Canfield is radiantly and dynamically unconventional.

H.H. Clark. *Bookman*. Nov., 1930. p. 300

Because she has been popular from the beginning of her career, because her shrewd common sense and understanding of the conditions of everyday life, even more than her emotional power, make her the ''favourite author'' of enormous numbers of unanalytical women who find in every story some illumination for their own lives, she has never had the recognition which her work deserves. She is journalistic to the extent that she produces constantly. She is unliterary partly because she is completely unselfconscious. If she achieves a beautiful passage it is because the words and sentences express what she has to say, and not because she is interested in beautiful writing except as a tool.

Elizabeth Wyckoff. *Bookman*. Sept., 1931. p. 44

Like Miss Cather, her wide knowledge at first hand of many sections of the United States and of some of Europe, prevented her from making those superficial generalizations which weaken the work of the satirists like Lewis, Dreiser, and Sinclair, and her knowledge of adolescence gained through her experience as a teacher, spared her from the errors of those novelists like Anderson who picture youth as a quagmire of evil. If her material seems at times to overwhelm her power of artistic assimilation and expression, her best fiction has an acuteness of insight which will keep her place secure.

Arthur Hobson Quinn. *American Fiction* (Appleton-Century) 1936. p. 714

It's always illuminating to see Dorothy in process of stabilizing all she writes by her constant re-pinning it fast to the common lot, to generic human experience. Her greatest achievement, to my way of thinking, lies in her power to stand firmly on this realistic ground, while at the same time she pulls a possible future through the present. It's a thing teachers sometimes do, but they seldom know how they do it, and I'm fairly sure Dorothy doesn't know how she does it. Teachers do it for individual children, whom they know fairly well; Dorothy does it for an unknown multitude. . . . Nobody could single out the influences strongly affecting American life for the first quarter of this century without including Dorothy's novels. They seize the reader by an intimate hand and take him at once on an incursion and an excursion.

Sarah N. Cleghorn. *Threescore* (H. Smith). 1936. pp. 132–3

Miss Canfield has had an accumulated mass of experience and anecdote from which to build her tales, and a birthright understanding of the persons of whom she writes. . . . Miss Canfield writes from the inside, looking out. . . . It is the ageless and universal striving of the human spirit of which she writes, and the material she has chosen is less noteworthy than the way she uses it.

All of us who are still learning to write should mark and envy the transparent simplicity, the quiet fluency of these tales. . . . Even more than these inestimable, warm tenderness that doesn't grow mawkish and sentiment that never sugars-off into sentimentality make the pretty everyday raw substances of Miss Canfield's tales beautiful and memorable.

Frederic F. Van de Water. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 23, 1949. p. 4

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FISHER, Vardis (1895–1968)

Mr. Fisher has written strikingly of a great subject, of the appalling and beautiful Wilderness and of the men and women who conquered it. He has remembered them, the way they talked and moved, the loneliness in their faces as winter came on, their astonishing adaptability in difficulty, the grim laconic quality of their heroism, their coarseness and lewdness and wildness. . . . *In Tragic Life* . . . ranks with the best work of our young writers. It is strong and vital and holds forth great promise for its sequels.

John Bronson. *Bookman*. Jan., 1933. p. 91

The novels of Vardis Fisher, emerging from the last stronghold of the American frontier tradition, the Rocky Mountain West, belong in the main stream of American letters. These are not mere regional novels. In their courage and rigorous honesty they are kin to the great works of confessional literature which know no national boundaries. But just as surely they grow out of the heroic, tragic, building and destroying conquests and aspirations of the pioneers—the fruits of which are now visited on the sons unto the third and fourth generation. . . . Vardis Fisher, single-handed, as he sees it, is conducting a revolution against the pioneer tradition. . . . Like Rousseau, he is intent on showing, without modesty, his hero's courage and nobility; and, without shame, his hero's sins and silliness, ineptitudes and secret mortifications.

Fred T. Marsh. *New York Times Book Section*. Jan. 20, 1935. p. 4

A tetralogy concerned with present-day life in the United States, which remains to the end a puzzling combination of obvious talent for fiction, extreme egocentricity, an honest search for the meaning of life and loose thinking, comes to an end with Vardis Fisher's *No Villain Need Be*. Like its three predecessors, *In Tragic Life*, *Passions Spin the Plot*, and *We are Betrayed*, it takes its title from a poem of George Meredith's. . . . There is no justification whatever for the loose and scattered ending of the work. . . . Nothing could be more fatal to an author's attempt to communicate his meaning to others than this deliberate failure to take into account the obligation to give his work as much coherence as possible, to use form as a means of communication, and not to deceive himself into thinking that he is being more honest than anybody else merely by discarding the conventions of the novel.

Herschel Brickell. *North American Review*. June, 1936. pp. 358–9

With all its faults—its sprawling formlessness, its monotony of tone, its occasional pomposity, and the didacticism and loss of story interest consequent upon the eventual absorption of Vridar Hunter in Mr. Fisher himself—the tetralogy had moments of power and passion. The naked spectacle of the awful secret agonies of childhood and adolescence dominated by terror and shame compelled emotional response; and there was conviction and trenchancy in the unsparing portrayal of the pettiness and pusillaminity of certain aspects of academic life.

Lucy Ingram Morgan. *Canadian Forum*. April, 1937. p. 30

A novelist can make no more serious demand on his art than that it tell us this: Granted such and such circumstances—and they will probably be those which the unsought experience of his own life has led him to consider—how shall a man conduct himself so that his soul may not sicken and die? It is because Vardis Fisher makes this demand that he commends himself to our interest. His resources as an artist are limited, his taste is uncertain, and his sense of form is not strong enough to allow him with impunity to discard the common conventions of the novel. But no one could doubt the earnestness of his moral purpose. His effort has been extreme to set down his conclusions honestly.

John Peale Bishop. *Southern Review*. Oct., 1937. p. 350

Placing Vardis Fisher is one of the sharpest problems offered by recent American fiction. Fisher's sincerity is so marked and his refusal to be beaten down is so gamely stubborn that he may seem at times to be a more significant novelist than he really is. . . . It is not a pleasant duty to list the faults of an author with so much talent and honesty and sense of human justice. . . . Perhaps Fisher could probe deeper into the current evasions if he also had a social scalpel, and his work might be given a logic and balance it now lacks. But the whole situation isn't so simple. Because Fisher has fallen into the trap of writing novelese, part of the answer to his problem would have to be technical.

Harry T. Moore. *New Republic*. July 27, 1938. p. 342

Vardis Fisher has chosen for his very considerable literary talents a very considerable fictional task. He has decided to write a family

saga encompassing the history of man, beginning with prehistoric nomads and ending with whatever is left of contemporary humanity after the present military engagement. . . . It is his contention that the great discoveries which modern science has made concerning the origin and early experiences of man are locked away from the average citizen in text books and technical studies. Pondering this, he concluded that if such knowledge were put into the most popular form of literature, i.e., the novel, it would reach a general audience, and be absorbed into the national consciousness, where it might do some good by giving the voters in a democracy better knowledge of themselves and their problems.

Thomas Sugrue. *Saturday Review*. March 27, 1943. p. 22

(He) is, in part, fascinating, in part tedious and, throughout, plethoric. . . . No one can quarrel with (him) for being a novelist and wanting to be an anthropologist. One can only wish that he would keep his ambivalences to himself and be one or the other, for what emerges from his efforts is certainly not a novel and even less a reliable source-book. It is, rather, a kind of cross-pollination of the two and the resulting hybrid, defying classification, tends unpleasantly to baffle the reader.

R.J. Bender. *Chicago Sun Book Week*. Aug. 10, 1947. p. 6

In Fisher's case (as opposed to that of Erskine Caldwell) we have none of (the) sense of removal; he insists that we identify ourselves with his people. His characters' ignoble patterns of thought and pretenses of superiority are presented as the norm for humanity. Our self-love is affronted, and we read insults into these books. That is exactly the trouble: we feel that this is precisely how Fisher wants us to react. It is as if he has a perverse wish to outrage us, as if in his desire to publish discoveries of our common frailty he stands in the position of prosecutor and accuses us of crimes.

George Snell. *Shapers of American Fiction* (Dutton). 1947. p. 278

In each of the first four volumes (of the *Testament of Man* series) he has examined the deep motives and the major contrivings of early men and women, adroitly deployed in the various fateful circumstances of the misty dawn of humanity. Each book is self-sufficient, an engrossing story of male and female, of man and the gods he dreamed, of the pains of man's writhing emergence from all that he once was. . . . Touching as it does the most tender sensitivities of our self-consciousness, it will enlighten, disturb and delight its readers in all the ways that their own age-old symbolic conditionings will allow and necessitate.

Wendell Johnson. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 19, 1948. p. 21

Mr. Fisher's interpretations of man's development are naturally personal and conjectural. It is easy to see that there is more of modern psychology than anthropology in his approach, and it is possible to feel that his ancient men and women, only just out of the caves, have a strangely modern quality of subtlety in their thinking. Nevertheless, Mr. Fisher is creating his continuous fabric of man's mental history with considerable success and is bringing to bear upon it a powerful poetic imagination.

Nathan L. Rothman. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 2, 1948. p. 30

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FITCH, Clyde (1865–1909)

In his early original plays such as *A Modern Match*, *The Moth and the Flame* and *Lover's Lane*, Fitch used many old-fashioned dramatic conventions, but there is already a well-defined promise of finer work. He abandoned hackneyed stage phrases, filled his work with technical innovations and touches of realism, gave evidences of keen insight into human motives and emotions, and of a remarkable instinct to chronicle the minutest detail and circumstances of the life he saw around him. . . .

In his latest work, however, Fitch has . . . made an advance on anything he has yet done. His powers are becoming more symmetrical, and [*The Truth*] is a fine example of his ability to invest a play with an air of sincerity. He has learned that sound logic and straightforwardness are not incompatible with effective threatrical situations. The fact is that the level of his recent original work is unquestionably high. . . .

Martin Birnbaum. *Independent*. July 15, 1909. pp. 125–7

In all apparent ways his career was a success; he made more money and achieved a wider reputation than any other American playwright, past or present; his work was popular and well rewarded with critical esteem, not only in his own country but in England, Germany, and Italy as well; and yet, looked at largely, this same career appears to be a failure, because Fitch has left behind him no single drama that seems destined to endure. . . .

His very best and most important characters, if we examine them critically, are seen to be amplifications of what, in essence, are ''bit'' parts. In the girl with the green eyes, Fitch achieved a very searching study of a young woman afflicted with ineradicable

jealousy; and in the heroine of *The Truth* he rendered with very wonderful insight the character of a woman constitutionally doomed to telling fibs. Fitch's truest people are women rather than men; and they are nearly always women who are weakened by a flaw in character. They are, in any real sense, *little* people. Thus, even at his best, Fitch achieves his effect by amplifying the little instead of by imagining the large.

Clayton Hamilton. *Bookman*. Oct., 1909. pp. 135–6

Great interest naturally attaches to Clyde Fitch's last play, and his posthumous triumph with *The City* adds a pathetic touch to the history of his career. The workmanship of this play is so fine that it would seem that he had reached the perfection of his artistic growth. The philosophical meaning of *The City* is less definite than its effective passages of tragedy. The scenes are abhorrent and appalling, but this laying bare of a vicious soul in such a way that its absolute truth is felt is an achievement. . . . The play is as abhorrent . . . as Ibsen's *Ghosts*—perhaps because it has as much of a lesson.

The Theatre Magazine. Feb., 1910. p. 34

His letters reveal that he never outgrew his depressing reaction to unfavorable criticism of his plays; not that he resented being told wherein he had failed, but so often the spirit behind the public comment was heedless and personal. . . . A review of the attitude of the press toward him would indicate that there was a stereotyped approach toward everything he did; that is why he liked to read to his friends the foreign estimates of him, which approached his plays on their individual merits, and placed him high as a man of letters in the theatre. At home the papers praised his dexterity, his clever use of familiar detail, his feminism, which they put into a formula until answered by *The City*, his unerring choice of casts. They pigeonholed him without weighing his literary worth, which, at the time, was a rare exception in the American theater. But Italy, Germany, and France were more ready to place him high for such a play as *The Truth*.

Montrose J. Moses. *Clyde Fitch and His Letters* (Little). 1924. p. ix

His public career covered exactly twenty years, from 1889 to 1909. When he began to write, American drama scarcely existed; when he died, it was a reality. He did more for the American stage than any other man in our history; when the chronicles of our original plays come to be written, he will fill a large space. He made a permanent impression on the modern theatre; for he was essentially a man of the theatre.

William Lyon Phelps. *Essays on Modern Dramatists* (Macmillan). 1929. p. 152

Fitch's position in American dramatic literature has never been fairly settled. Among critics old enough to have seen his plays in their original production, and what is more important, with the surrounding atmosphere of American society of that day, they hold, undoubtedly, a higher value than they deserve. . . . They reveal, it is true, a fidelity to detail, and an occasional sharp commentary on social manners and customs, but it is obvious that they are more concerned with personality than with character and that the comment goes no deeper than a smartly superficial humor.

John Anderson. *The American Theatre* (Dial). 1938. pp. 63–4

The early work of Clyde Fitch was tentative, but when he produced *The Climbers* . . . he entered upon a more definite period of workmanship, and showed himself a master in delineation of the actions and motives of people moving in social relations. This social consciousness had been in his work from the first. . . . Fitch, however, did not limit himself to social satire; his greatest plays have in them a central idea, which unifies the drama and gives it body.

Arthur Hobson Quinn. *Representative American Plays* (Appleton). 1938. p. 639

There was, in Fitch, a *grand couturier* of genius. He could, with equal success, either invent a mode or perfect an established one; the result was always certain to become the actress for whom he designed it. When historical romances and costume plays were in vogue, he produced the best. When taste shifted to drawing-room drama, he was quick to excel in that fashion also. . . . In some ways, Fitch understood women better than they understood themselves. This insight accounted for much of his success.

His best comedies framed a series of portraits of the American woman of fashion at the opening of the twentieth century. . . . Fitch's most memorable heroines, for all their presumptive elegance and fastidiousness, were apt to be deeply tainted. . . . The flower of native ''good society,'' they were, fundamentally, what a later generation would describe as vulgar bitches.

All this the moralist in Fitch perceived and implied. The artist in him . . . sought to disguise it by sheer bravura, so that the ''mist of shams'' might seem to represent the solid substance of life. . . . For forty years afterwards, Fitch could still be reckoned a master of scenic illusion whose drawing rooms were peopled by women idly chattering, displaying their vacuous souls and their delightful gowns, whose ''society'' resembled a wilderness of apes and wantons. . . . This was as close as Fitch dared come to expressing his sober verdict on his social environment.

Lloyd Morris. *Postscript to Yesterday* (Random). 1947. pp. 175–7

. . .the untimely death of Clyde Fitch was commonly said to have cut off the one writer who might have produced the ''Great American Drama.'' Fitch had, it is true, worked zealously in many styles in his few years in the theater and scarcely a season passed in the early years of the century without at least two of his plays competing vigorously for the entertainment dollars of New Yorkers. He was acclaimed for the power of his characterization, the freshness of his themes, and the frankness of his dialogue. Indeed for the last he was not infrequently reproached. . . . The scene in *The Girl with the Green Eyes* attests Fitch's close observation of human behavior and only increases the regret that he could not

shake off the collar of theatricalism in connection with his major characters and their problems.

Alan S. Downer. *Fifty Years of American Drama: 1900–1950* (Henry Regnery). 1951. pp. 8, 12

Clyde Fitch . . . began to write under the spell of the romantic theater, but ended his short career with a number of realistic character-problem plays. . . . Yet even the romantic social comedies, melodramas, and period plays which gave Fitch an international eminence during his first decade were decidedly in advance of their times. . . . Fitch surpassed his mid-century predecessors in such romantic or even melodramatic situations by his wit, and by the appeal of the characters whom he has projected upon scenes so obviously idealized or exotic. . . . The character-problem plays of his last decade no doubt constitute Fitch's more lasting contribution to the literature of the stage.

Sculley Bradley in *Literary History of the United States*, edited by Robert E. Spiller *et al* (Macmillan). 1953. p. 1012

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FITTS, Dudley (1903–1968)

Mr. Dudley Fitts has a subtle mind, sensitivity to beauty, an esoteric sense of humor . . . , and a most elliptical manner. He is already known as a translator of the *Alcestis*, and another of his translations from the Greek will be forthcoming this fall. . . .Mr. Fitts seems to me, more than most, to possess authentically the kind of mind and temper that have contributed to the achievement of T. S. Eliot. . . . I admire the deftness of Mr. Fitts, but he does not recapture that first fine careless robustness. This is not meant to imply that he has not his own originallty.

William Rose Benet. *Saturday Review*. July 3, 1937. p. 18

Like these men [Pound and Eliot], many of whose stylistic traits he has taken over (as witness his falling cadences, esoteric allusions, and juxtaposition of classicism and slang), he voices an attitude of disillusionment and despair tempered by irony and wit. But because he is writing at a later point in time, that is, at a time when these sentiments have lost their *raison d'être*, he is unable to bring to them the same vigor and conviction. Whereas Pound was disgusted and Eliot agonized by contemporary brutality and anarchy, Fitts tends to exhibit boredom and polite cynicism. . . .

Mr. Fitts is least successful when his disillusionment is self-conscious rather than lyrically spontaneous, when it seems the result of an attitude rather than of assimilated experience. In most of the longer poems . . . the sentiment is offered as a quasi-philosophical commentary, is conveyed through abstract rather than sensory terms. In the short lyrics, however—and Mr. Fitts's talent is essentially a lyric one—the emotion is objectified; there is unity of sentiment and form. Here the poet contents himself with the presentation of conventional moods such as nostalgia and melancholy and achieves a coherent and convincing poetic statement. The poetic personality is not diffused through any contradiction between approach and expression.

T.C. Wilson. *Poetry*. Nov., 1937. pp. 108–9

The poet in Fitts was more often than not concealed behind his adaptations into English from the Greek and Latin, which he seemed to carry before him as a shield—to protect, perhaps, and to keep alive the sensibility and wit which never failed to delight the sensitive reader of poetry. Fitts's sensibility in poetry was not one of possessing a ''melodic ear'' but rather one of tonal propriety and grace; his verse . . . moved with formal elegance within the traditions that inspired it. . . . The clean diction, the sense of classical restraint, the finely balanced periods and rhythms place Fitts's adaptations of the Greek anthology in a world far removed from the far more clumsy, thickly worded, unrhymed verses of Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*.

Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska. *A History of American Poetry, 1900–1940* (Harcourt). 1946. pp. 356–8

Dudley Fitts . . . has gone for ''faithfulness'' rather than ''Strictness,'' with the result that his *Lysistrata* comes through as a powerful experience in English. As a non-reader of Greek I had previously known the *Lysistrata* only in two feeble translations that may have caught the words but certainly missed the force, the tragedy, and the great roaring bawdiness of Aristophanes. With this rendering by Fitts I have found the play for the first time, an experience in delight. . . .Aristophanes, after all, went for what *Variety* calls the ''boff.'' He wrote for the theater. And what would

his audience—holding its side at a good raucous piece of bladder-flailing—care for the derivation of the gag? What it wanted was a gag it could respond to. And Fitts delivers it with an assurance that would certainly have delighted the old goat himself.

John Ciardi. *The Nation*. June 14, 1954. p. 525

Spontaneous as his gaiety seems it is frequently also remarkably faithful, . . . and where his raciness seems labored, Aristophanes too seems to limp. The issues of the play *The Frogs* (poetry and politics, and not, as the jacket says, the nether world) and the jokes stemming from the incongruities of the situation, Mr. Fitts reproduces with admirable sharpness; where he (and every modern reading of Aristophanes) must fall short is in the marcurial play of literary wit and in lyrics. . . . Vitality is not Mr. Fitts' only merit. His divisions of the text clarify the articulation of what usually appears as a jumbled mass. His Introduction and Notes present essential information succinctly and with spirit.

Moses Hadas. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 11, 1955. p. 10

For Dudley Fitts, as for Aristophanes, *The Birds* is fun. This modern, colloquial translation is, of course, aimed at introducing the comic literary and dramatic genius of Aristophanes to the general reader, but the apparatus of scholarly and critical notes and the index of proper names have a fresh exuberance that Aristophanes would surely have enjoyed. Fitts, moreover, has the imaginative insight to meet the Greek dramatist on his own literary grounds. . . . These literary games are not precocious mannerisms, for Fitts makes them an integral part of Aristophanes's dramatic and thematic structure. Instead of finding a unifying base in some dubiously allegorical Utopia, Fitts molds a play, not of ideas, but of dramatic voices—human and not so human, bird-like, and divine. The beauty and excitement of this version arise out of his ability to counterpoint a wide variety of voices—gentle, buoyant, crude, arrogant.

Paul H. Cubeta. *Saturday Review*. June 22, 1957. p. 30

Until very recently we were unhappily dependent upon the dated Aristophanes of B. B. Rogers or the clumsy prose of the Anonymous translation as debowdlerized by O'Neill. But with the gradual appearance of Fitts' versions . . . and the complete Greek Comedy forthcoming from Michigan, the gap should be filled. At the moment Fitts stands alone, and he is very good indeed. His virtues are fine wit, style, readability and a keen sense of comic motion, marred only by occasional lapses into an owlish coyness and archness.

William Arrowsmith in *The Craft and Context of Translation*, edited by William Arrowsmith and Roger Shattuck (Texas). 1961. p. 180

Some 40 years ago, it was Ezra Pound who advised young poets to revitalize the classics; and if they enjoyed the work of an ancient writer, to ''make it new.'' In this country, Pound's immediate successor was Dudley Fitts, who converted the chore of translating Greek and Latin verse into one of the liveliest of modern arts. The brilliance of his new versions of the Greek Anthology is now well known, and in the effort to revive Aristophanes, no one has equalled Fitts's *Lysistrata* and *The Frogs*. What he has done has been to breathe new life into the comic spirit of Athens and of Rome. . . .

Some kind of critical moral may be drawn from the success of [his] new version of Martial's epigrams: throughout the course of his career as a maker of ancient verse into something new, Dudley Fitts has never compromised his wit, his taste, or his well-assured affinity with the work that inspired him to write. His version of *Sixty Poems of Martial* is a supreme example of light verse in the 20th-century manner.

Horace Gregory. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 29, 1967. p. 12

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FITZGERALD, F. Scott (1896–1940)

The world of his subject matter is still too much within Fitzgerald himself for him to see it sustainedly against the universe. Its values obtain too strongly over him, and for that reason he cannot set them against those of high civilization and calmly judge them so. Hence, wanting philosophy, and a little overeager like the rest of America to arrive without having fully sweated, he falls victim to the favorite delusions of the society of which he is a part, tends to indulge it in its dreams of grandeur, and misses the fine flower of pathos. He seems to set out writing under the compulsion of vague feelings, and when his wonderfully revelatory passages appear, they come rather like volcanic islands thrown to the surface of a sea of fantasy. . . . He has seen his material from its own point of view, and he has seen it completely from without. But he has never done what the artist does: seen it simultaneously from within and without; and loved it and judged it too.

Paul Rosenfeld. *Men Seen* (Dail). 1925. pp. 222–3

And now it seems almost too contrived that Scott should have chosen this year in which to die. For it is altogether fitting that Scott's career should begin where one world war ends and end where another begins. He spoke for a new generation that was shell-shocked without ever going to the front. He was one of our better historians of the no-man's-time between wars. He was not meant, temperamentally, to be a cynic, in the same way that

beggars who must wander through the cold night were not born to freeze. But Scott made cynicism beautiful, poetic, almost an ideal.

Budd Schulberg. *New Republic*. March 3, 1941. p. 312

There are novelists who find their material almost entirely outside themselves, and there are others who find it almost entirely within themselves. Scott Fitzgerald's talent lay in an unusual combination of these two modes. The basis of his work was self-scrutiny, but the actual product was an eloquent comment on the world. He was that rare kind of writer, a genuine microcosm with a real gift of objectivity. The combination explains his success. It is the reason that the force of his best work always transcends its subject matter.

Mark Schorer. *The Yale Review*. Autumn, 1945, p. 187

Fitzgerald's great accomplishment is to have realized in completely American terms the developed romantic attitude, in the end at least in the most responsible form in which all the romantic's sensuous and emotional responses are disciplined by his awareness of the goodness and evilness of human experience. He had a kind of instinct for the tragic view of life. . . . He had, moreover, with all its weakness and strength and in a time when the undivided understanding was rare, an almost exclusively creative kind of intelligence, the kind that understands things, not abstractly, but only concretely, in terms of people and situations and events.

Arthur Mizener. *Sewanee Review*. Jan., 1946. pp. 66–7

Let us mean by (a masterpiece) a work of the literary imagination which is consistent, engaging, and dramatic, in exceptional degrees; which exhibits largely mastered a human subject of the first importance; and which seems in retrospect to illuminate the whole physical and spiritual situation of which it was, by the strange paturition of art, an accidental product.

One easy test will be the rapidity with which, in the imagination of the good judge, other works of the period and kind will faint away under any suggested comparison with it. Now a small work may satisfy these demands as readily as a large one, and *The Great Gatsby* satisfies them, I believe, better than any other American work of fiction since *The Golden Bowl*.

John Berryman. *Kenyon Review*. Winter, 1946. pp. 103–4

The root of Fitzgerald's heroism is to be found, as it sometimes is in tragic heroes, in his power to love. Fitzgerald wrote much about love, he was preoccupied with it as between man and woman, but it is not merely where he is being explicit about it that his power appears. It is to be seen where eventually all a writer's qualities have their truest existence, in his style. Even in Fitzgerald's early, cruder books, or even in his commercial stories, and even when his style is careless, there is a tone and pitch to the sentences which suggest his warmth and tenderness, and, what is rare nowadays and not likely to be admired, his gentleness without softness.

Lionel Trilling. *The Liberal Imagination* (Viking). 1950. p. 244

He is so familiar with the characters and their background, so absorbed in their fate, that the book has an admirable unity of texture; we can open it to any page and find another of the touches that illuminate the story. We end by feeling that *Gatsby* has a double virtue. Except for *The Sun Also Rises* it is the best picture we possess of the age in which it was written and it also achieves a sort of moral permanence. Fitzgerald's story of the innocent murdered suitor for wealth is a compendious fable of the 1920's that will survive as a legend for other times.

Malcolm Cowley. Introduction to *The Great Gatsby* (Scribner). 1953. p. xx

The odd, the haunting thing about F. Scott Fitzgerald himself is how close he always was to being a ''fringe writer.'' Or a marginal writer, perhaps, always treading the edge of the abyss, following a narrow ledge between achievement and disaster. And perhaps it was this artist's original confusion about fame (or popularity or cash) and art which led him so swiftly to catastrophe. In any case Fitzgerald's work is split down the middle, between the ''objective'' novels like *The Great Gatsby*, which lacked somewhere a solid center, and the ''confessional'' novels like *The Beautiful and the Damned* which lacked a solid form.

Maxwell Geismar. *Saturday Review*. April 26, 1958. p. 17

More important than the nature of Fitzgerald's moralism, of course, is its quality. The most serious charge that must be leveled against him is that he never made a really searching inquiry into the sources of his moral ideas or of the reasons behind the situations that moved him to render moral judgment. His own specific references to his tendency to moralize were always oblique, as though he felt he should either get rid of this predilection or make light of it. Instead of trying to understand it, he tried to direct his reader's attention to something else. When this was no longer possible, he found himself in the midst of a tangle of sometimes adolescent, sometimes senile ways of coping with the moral issues raised in his fiction and in his life.

The absence of a mature, well-defined position of moral perception in a writer is important only if it damages the effectiveness of his writing. In Fitzgerald's case it is clear that his work was damaged, and seriously so. This deficiency kept him from realizing the brilliant potentialities of some of the characters he created. It meant that even the best of them must be only pathetic creatures lost in a world they never made, a world that was hopelessly bewildering.

Kent and Gretchen Kreuter. *Modern Fiction Studies*. Spring, 1961. p. 80

With success Hemingway's slight early diffidence was vanishing into the restrained bravado of a champ. Comparing him to Fitzgerald at this time would be like comparing a butterfly and a bull; the butterfly has beautiful colors on its wings, but the bull is *there*. Hemingway was a force. His personality overpowered you, making you do the things he wanted to do, making you enthusiastic about the things he was enthusiastic about. The world revolved around *him*, while Fitzgerald—off to one side—was subtler, more insidious, more sympathetic, more like light playing through clouds. Fitzgerald had the dangerous Athenian qualities of facility and

grace as against Hemingway's Spartan virtues of ruggedness and perseverance. Both were accomplished artists, but perhaps the ultimate choice lay between Fitzgerald's more sensitive penetration of human lives and Hemingway's harder, more burnished style.

Andrew Turnbull. *Scott Fitzgerald* (Scribner). 1962. p. 188

The legend of Fitzgerald's disorderly romantic life answers, and with a better writer, the intense American need for a mythical artistic hero like Poe. An interest in Fitzgerald's work can scarcely escape entanglement in the Fitzgerald legend. Nevertheless, his work today seems to enjoy great favor, perhaps because he seems less mannered than Hemingway, less tortuous than Faulkner, and less clumsy than any of a dozen novelists in the naturalistic tradition. The excellence of his style tends to hold his reputation high while other reputations tumble. But at least two other matters operate in his favor. The first is the hard core of morality which makes him one with those writers of greatest strength in American fiction: Melville, Hawthorne, and James. Second, unlike a majority of modern American writers, he offers a fiction which is hard to imitate but from which much can be learned.

Kenneth Eble. *F. Scott Fitzgerald* (Twayne). 1963. p. 153

Fitzgerald accomplished more than a chronicle of Jazz Age belles and playboys, with whom he has been consistently associated. His repeated emphasis on the theme of corruptive wealth—present even in the notes for the unfinished parts of *The Last Tycoon*—and his depiction of the melancholy implications in the dream of the social aspirer—these represent the core of his commentary on our experience. His contribution was twofold: he distilled in beautiful prose the spirit of an age, and he urged a penetrating criticism of the values that formed its foundation.

William Goldhurst. *F. Scott Fitzgerald and His Contemporaries* (World). 1963. p. 228

In these ''crack-up'' pieces one becomes gradually aware that Fitzgerald is referring not to a brief period of only two or even five years, but to the span of his whole career. The moral sickness was always there, and in 1936 it erupts like an ugly boil for all to see; although painful, perhaps the discharge will aid the cure—or at least relieve the inflammation. Like Melville's Bartleby the scrivener, Fitzgerald seems ready to face the blank wall and stare in profound silence for the remainder of his life, for he seems to have withdrawn completely from the human scene, and to have lost even the sense of his own identity. . . .The only element throughout these terrible revelations which suggests that Fitzgerald is not doomed by self-revulsion is his acute sense of time. . . .Only a man haunted by possible achievement could possess such an obsessive awareness of time.

James E. Miller. *F. Scott Fitzgerald* (NYU). 1964. p. 129

Artistically, however, it was a long step from a sense of the tragic complexities that emerged in him about 1923 to the embodiment of that sense in a viable work of art. As a novelist he had yet to create a hero who was indeed tragic, who could command the reader's admiration as well as his compassion. To this pursuit, from about 1923 onward, he devoted the rest of his life.

We can watch him struggling in this direction in the surviving drafts that we have of *The Great Gatsby*. But because the book has two half-heroes—Nick the thinker and Gatsby the doer—instead of a single tragic hero, its artistic power is divided and diffused and it fails as formal tragedy. *Tender Is the Night* was also intended to be tragedy and Dick Diver possessed the attributes of a truly tragic hero: a keen intellect and a fine sensibility. He was to be the modern middle-class American raised to heroic stature and then destroyed by an excess of virtue, by his fatal gift of charm. But Fitzgerald could not maintain the necessary aesthetic distance, and halfway through, Dick lost his heroic attributes. As a result this novel also fails to sustain the tragic vision.

In the fragmentary *Last Tycoon*, Fitzgerald most fully realized his desire to write a modern tragedy that would fit the traditional design. Monroe Stahr is the classic hero who compels our respect and admiration as neither Gatsby nor Dick Diver could. Stahr is one of the archetypal heroes of American society—the self-made man doomed to fulfill his tragic destiny as a successful man of affairs.

Henry Dan Piper. *F. Scott Fitzgerald* (Holt). 1965. p. 295

Into the figure of Gatsby he put much of what he admired in America. . . . There is something in Gatsby's generous, ideal aspirations which transcends their sordid base and survives their squalid destiny. His hopes are visionary, even though his end is coldly actual. . . .Fitzgerald is remarkable because he never blinks at the gaudiness and sentimentality, indeed the almost majestic vulgarity of Gatsby's imagination, yet he can catch what is truly lyrical and valuable and rare in the spirit behind it. He never fell into cynical disillusion even though he went on to show how inwardly fallible and outwardly foredoomed the wondering idealist was.

Tony Tanner. *The Reign of Wonder* (Cambridge). 1965. p. 360

The thing to be emphasized about *Paradise*, after the apologies, is that it sincerely wished to grapple with the ominous sense of fate which obsessed Fitzgerald's youthful ''philosophers.'' Today's critics usually point out that this fatalism was a period melancholy, neither authentic nor universal. It was, admittedly, subject to egregious sentimentalisms, as in *Paradise*, but the malaise running through art, for order and purpose and self-identity, tells us something about the age and Fitzgerald's central role in it—his early awareness that the gift of imagination was at once the American's fall and his possible redemption, that the self was the imagination and the imagination the self, to be used upon life's exchange as the medium of a very precarious purchase. Unfortunately for Fitzgerald, and for a great many of his contemporaries, there were no absolute economic laws governing the expenditure of self, only ones made up as you went along.

Joseph N. Riddel. *Modern Fiction Studies*. Winter, 1965–66. p. 339

Yet to recognize the lapses of form in *Tender Is the Night* should not detract from the novel's extraordinary achievements. In a way

Fitzgerald fulfilled the ambitions with which he had begun his new novel back in 1925. *The Great Gatsby* had placed him among the leaders of the modern movement in the arts, and yet he had wanted to move beyond, to write a novel that would be ''the model for the age that Joyce and Stein are searching for, that Conrad didn't find.'' With *Tender Is the Night* he did move beyond the modern movement, moved away from universal myths and toward the pathos of history. This novel is a vision in art of an era in American history, of the failure of a society and of an individual who embodied its graces and its weaknesses. In *Tender Is the Night* Fitzgerald created a work of fiction rare in American literature, a novel uniting romantic beauty and also historical and social depth; and he proved by his creation that his art, and his identity as an artist, could survive the death of the society which had nurtured and sustained him.

Robert Sklar. *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Last Laocoön* (Oxford). 1967. pp. 291–2

Why does Gatsby exist . . . to a far greater degree than Joyce's Stephen? We know from *Tender Is the Night* and ''The Diamond as Big as the Ritz'' that Fitzgerald entertained his fantasies to a degree dangerous in anyone and peculiarly so in a writer; his daydreams of the beauty and style of wealth are not unlike Stephen's proud exertions. But in *The Great Gatsby* and again in *The Last Tycoon* the dream is rendered in all its beauty and ''placed''—not discarded. A distinguished intelligence that yielded to the dream in *Tender Is the Night* now insisted upon its rights. But the real explanation is that for Fitzgerald the person existed; *The Last Tycoon* is all person.

Denis Donoghue. *The Ordinary Universe* (Macmillan—N.Y.). 1968. p. 67

Even Nick's own wishful vision of beautiful futility [in *The Great Gatsby*] recognizes the continual phoenix-rebirth of dream and aspiration as the fountainhead of human history. It was Amory Blaine, the hero of Fitzgerald's first novel [*This Side of Paradise*], who discovered and accepted the moral philosophy that one must, after defeat and failure, pick up and go on to ''the next thing.'' Putting behind him Nick Carraway's rendering of a blind-end world in *The Great Gatsby*, and taking with him that part of it which has value as usable human truth, Fitzgerald went on, as an artist, to the ''next thing'' in *Tender Is the Night*, which is the story of a man who, with much fuller knowledge of the inexorable laws of reality than innocent Gatsby had, nevertheless pitted his character, his integrity, his personal vision and energy, flawed and imperfect as they were, against the futility and despair that he knew were the ruling truths of his world.

Richard Foster in *Sense and Sensibility in Twentieth-Century Writing*, ed. Brom Weber (Southern Illinois). 1970. p. 108

In all Fitzgerald's thinking there is a consistent pattern, a habit of mind which asserts itself in every situation. His ideas on any subject tend to arrange themselves into a system of opposed contraries. We have just seen how strongly this is reflected in his conception of the artist, but it is equally apparent in all the other matters discussed in this chapter: he regarded wealth and social status from both a middle-class and an aristocratic standpoint; he acted as spokesman for a new freedom in morals and manners and yet possessed a puritan conscience; and the Jazz Age fascinated him because he saw in it a capacity for delirious excitement balanced by equally strong potentialities for disaster. He was fully conscious of this tendency in his thought and assigned a very high value to it: as he remarks in ''The Crack-up,'' ''the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.'' It is no exaggeration to say that this is the essential element in his gift as a social novelist, but it implies a creative tension which can only be maintained at the cost of an enormous and unremitting effort. It provides the ground for the most fruitful kind of complexity in art, but must often lead to uncertainty and disorder in actual living. . . .

His intense self-awareness and the complexity of his reactions made it almost impossible for him to be spontaneous and natural, and his social life had the character of a series of complicated manoeuvres or theatrical tableaux. Sometimes these were hasty improvisations like the bus incident: often they were contrived in advance with the forethought of an impresario or a film producer. . . . Fitzgerald's feeling for the right thing was matched by an uncannily precise instinct for the worst possible behaviour: the quality of insight which enabled him to charm and captivate, could also be used to devise peculiarly subtle punishments for people who bored or irritated him. . . .

What appears as confusion and error in his life is transformed into an ideal clarity of vision in his art. While this is the case with many great artists, it is true of Fitzgerald to an unusually marked degree. It is the main reason why the critics and biographers who see his life and his work as alternative, almost interchangeable, versions of the same story are so completely misled.

Brian Way. *F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Art of Social Fiction* (St. Martin's, 1980), pp. 19–21

All of Fitzgerald's characters start off with romantic expectations, with a heightened sense of self that eventually comes into conflict with the outside world. Amory Blaine gives way to postwar cynicism; Anthony Patch to a sense of drift in a work-a-day world; Jay Gatsby to a world of established money that he never understands; Dick Diver to an emotionally sick and sterile society; and Monroe Stahr to a materialistic world that cannot accommodate the fated idealist and quickly exhausts him. Like Monroe Stahr, Fitzgerald's characters create a sense of the lavish and heighten it further through the vitality of imagination. But it is imagination that is severed from everything but its own vision. Alone, detached, aloof, their dreams are exhaustible because they feed on themselves and are cut off from the resources of a vital culture. In Fitzgerald's fiction, a sense of romantic possibility plays itself out in a cultural wasteland. Fitzgerald's sense of opportunity warred with a Spenglerian sense of destiny; and if Fitzgerald found in Spengler a historian whose idea of the modern augmented his own, as I believe he did, he also brought to Spengler a sense of romantic possibility that challenged these historical assumptions at the outset.

Richard Lehan. *Twentieth Century Literature*. Summer, 1980, pp. 154–55

The Great Gatsby's image patterns and even the workings of its plot show more than a general family resemblance to classical tales

of flying men. The legend of Phaeton is the one which echoes in this novel most persistently and strongly—so strongly that there is cause for wondering whether Phaeton isn't as deliberately called up here as Odysseus is in Leopold Bloom's wanderings around Dublin. . . .

There is no proving that Fitzgerald consciously turned to Ovid in designing *The Great Gatsby*. He apparently never said a word about doing so; and we can be sure that if Phaeton was on Fitzgerald's mind, other tales were haunting him too. One of his working titles for the novel, *Trimalchio in West Egg*, certainly makes the case for *The Satyricon*, but there are also shadows of *The Waste Land*, and recently some interesting parallels have been turned up between passages in *Gatsby* and lines in *The Golden Bough*. The point, then, of looking at the Phaeton tale in *The Great Gatsby* is not to make an argument for one literary debt and one alone, or to arrive at one pat explanation of how the novel works and what Fitzgerald meant by it. If *Gatsby* borrows something from Phaeton, it might very well be an unconscious borrowing. But one way or the other we are left with the fact that parallels between the stories turn up in uncanny profusion, that the implications of those parallels need to be followed out, and that the closeness of the new myth to the old one helps us understand better how Gatsby's story is a myth, how the rise and fall of a deluded and childlike gangster turns into a vital classic of *our* time. . . .

At the end of the novel the ''American Dream'' is alive because Nick's imagination is still under its spell. If Gatsby has lived that dream to an inevitable, disastrous conclusion, he has done so in a fashion as much classic as American, and Nick has been classic in telling of it, not simply in allusion and metaphor but in condition of mind. Phaeton may be here in Gatsby by contrivance, or he may not; but *Gatsby* is certainly more akin to Ovid than it is to the Fuller-Magee case or Ben Franklin's *Autobiography* or *Hopalong Cassidy* or the Alger stories or any other rise or rise-and-fall tales that Fitzgerald ever knew of. The story is ancient in more than one way, and that is precisely why it stays with us, not only powerful, but invincibly new.

Bruce Michelson. *Modern Fiction Studies*. Winter, 1980–81, pp. 566–67, 577

It should be clear that there is a curious unanimity about the critical approach to [F. Scott] Fitzgerald. The reason for this being that for some forty years all criticism has started from the unquestioned premise that he was an emotional rather than a conceptual thinker. This belief has led to a special interest in his life story because it is felt that life and art must be taken together in order to see him clearly. Whether he is seen as the tragic or the pathetic exemplar, the method of his critics is the same: they proceed from the assumption that his whole life was a struggle for personal understanding and artistic control. Even those critics who have sought to establish the idea of Fitzgerald as a careful craftsman have done so while maintaining the notion of the precarious subjectivity/objectivity balance. . . .

What has never been seriously considered is the possibility that everything Fitzgerald wrote was drawn from a firm intellectual center; that he had a consistent point of view which determined all the fiction. The curious fact is that this point of view is easily apparent. Although it operates in the manner of James's celebrated image of the figure in the carpet, it is not the expression of an arcane philosophy. It has been passed over simply because the notion that Fitzgerald lacked a conceptualizing intelligence has determined that his critics have searched for an emotional ''primal plan'' rather than an intellectual plan. Far from stemming from a vaguely romantic predisposition toward subjective melancholia, the sad note in his later fiction had its origin in the same comprehensive and rational view of life which controlled the first novel. . . .

From the first attempts to achieve the correct form in ''The Romantic Egotist'' to the mature complete expression of *Tender Is the Night*, there is a remarkable consistency in Fitzgerald's thought. Even if his ''philosophic concept'' is not thought to be startlingly innovative, it did give his work intellectual coherence and its presence at the heart of all his artistic concerns should have obviated any suggestion of a lack of control.

John B. Chambers. *The Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (Basingstoke, England: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 9–10, 188–89

Overwhelmingly, the critical consensus on [*The Great Gatsby*] has asserted that its greatness as fiction resides in its totally successful disposition of particularities to attain artistic ends. The integration of its narrative details has been claimed to be nearly flawless, certainly exquisitely well performed. As I have indicated, the novel's chronology has previously been almost completely unexamined, but, within this critical context, surely an intricate and successful patterning of temporal details would seem a necessary corollary, and has in fact been categorically asserted by [Robert E.] Long: ''Fitzgerald's handling of time may deservedly be called masterful; time broken up and scattered through the work has been used in every instance with maximum aesthetic effect.''

It is most surprising that there is no recognition in the work of Matthew J. Bruccoli of how frequently chronological incoherence occurs in *Gatsby*. Bruccoli's admirable *Apparatus* for a definitive edition will be cited here repeatedly for matters of factual background, and its explanatory notes do concern themselves with chronological errors. However, only two of the literally dozens that occur are noted—the contradiction about the time of Nick's narration and the error in Pammy's age. . . . It should be unnecessary to state that I do not write in disparagement of these investigators of *Gatsby*. Quite to the contrary, my point is that the novel's chronological inconsistencies have passed unnoticed by even the best of its critics. Whether or not one agrees with the significances I will attach to those inconsistencies, it must, I think, be allowed that the fact of their existence should be noted. . . .

The temporal failings in *Gatsby* are failings in verisimilitude, and it is on the quality of fiction that thematic or symbolic meanings depend for their validity. If Daisy looked like Catherine or if Gatsby's house looked like Nick's, his ''following of a grail'' would be absurd. To repeat [Kenneth] Eble's dictum, ''It is however, only because of the excellence of the particulars that general meanings suggest themselves.'' If in *Gatsby*, ''five years'' or ''three months'' or ''several weeks'' or ''spring'' or ''just after the war'' or ''nine thirty'' do not mean consistently and coherently what they should mean, then the particulars are somewhat less than excellent and the general meanings somewhat less than validly established.

There is beyond any argument a great deal to admire and appreciate in *Gatsby*—elegant language, powerful evocation, great

energy, excellent dialogue, fascinating characterizations, marvelously well-rendered scenes. But as for its being a perfectly executed fiction—as Thomas Wolfe once told Fitzgerald—''Flaubert me no Flauberts, Bovary me no Bovarys.''

Thomas A. Pendleton. *I'm Sorry About the Clock: Chronology, Composition, and Narrative Technique in The Great Gatsby* (Selingsgrove, Pa: Susquehanna Univ. Pr., 1993), pp. 13, 138

In ''F. Scott Fitzgerald and Fashionable Literary Antisemitism'' (the only essay on this subject, published in *Commentary* nearly fifty years ago), Milton Hindus attributed Fitzgerald's hostile attitude toward the Jews to ''the fashionable anti-Semitism of the 1920s, of the sort we find in T.S. Eliot at the same period.'' But Hindus based his argument solely on *The Great Gatsby* and *The Last Tycoon*; he ignored the evidence from Fitzgerald's two early novels, letters, notebooks, poems, essays, and stories, as well as memoirs about him; and he both obscured and oversimplified the origins of his anti-Semitism.

Fitzgerald's antipathy to Jews developed during his youthful years in St. Paul at the Newman School and Princeton—well before the 1920s. But in the 1930s—after Fitzgerald had formed a number of important friendships with Jewish writers, developed personal and professional contacts with many Jews in Hollywood during the last three years of his life and became increasingly aware of the Nazi threat to the very existence of the Jews—his attitude changed from bigotry to sympathy. In the Jewish hero of *The Last Tycoon*, he created his most impressive and appealing character.

Anti-Semitism was endemic among middle-class white Americans at the turn of the century. Fitzgerald—who came from a provincial, midwestern, socially insecure, Irish-Catholic background—was particularly susceptible to this kind of racial prejudice. His father was a genteel failure, his mother the eccentric daughter of a self-made immigrant, and the family clung precariously to the fringes of ''good society.'' As he told Sheila Graham, his companion at the end of his life: ''My mother went to mass every day. I'm sure she believed that Christian boys were killed at Easter and the Jews drank the blood. She was a bigot.'' . . .

Fitzgerald's attitude toward the Jews, however deplorable in its earlier manifestations, transcended the fashionable literary anti-Semitism of the 1920s and was, in the end, quite admirable. He was sufficiently open-minded and generous-spirited to reject the bigotry engendered by his background and education, and to follow the sound advice of Nick Carraway's father: ''Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone . . . just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had.''

After meeting a number of sympathetic Jews, Fitzgerald was able to accept them, despite his former prejudice, and to form close friendships.

Jeffrey Meyers. *Midstream*. January, 1993, pp. 31, 34

In a letter to Scribner's great editor, Maxwell Perkins, the impoverished Scott Fitzgerald pleaded for the possibility of a reprinting of *The Great Gatsby* as one more title in a series of twenty-five-cent paperbacks. ''Would a popular reissue,'' he asked, ''with a preface *not* by me but by one of my admirers—I can maybe pick one—make it a favorite with classrooms, profs, lovers of English prose—anybody? But to die, so completely and unjustly after having given so much! Even now there is little published in American fiction that doesn't slightly bear my stamp—in a *small* way I was an original.''

The pathos of such pleading is equaled only by the painfulness of a vision of F. Scott Fitzgerald reduced to such a diminished view of himself by adversity and literary oblivion, for he was certainly an original. He introduced the idea of an entire generation in recoil and rebellion, a theme and a set of materials that since his focus on them in American fiction have been echoed again and again by the antiheroes of post-World War II fiction of the 1940s and 1950s, by the beat generation of the 1950s and 1960s, by the hip generation of the 1960s and 1970s, and by every dissenting generational sense that has transcribed itself in American fiction from Norman Mailer to J.D. Salinger to Ken Kesey to the present moment. Before Fitzgerald the literature of dissent was not so much an identification of generations as it was a struggle of the individual against self, society, and the universe. The pioneering experimentalists in realism and naturalism and literary impressionism—Fitzgerald's literary predecessors—were concerned more with universal types of the human psyche alone amid forces than with the historical identification of generations.

Fitzgerald changed that. In a *large* way he was an original. Not only in his marriage of Romanticism, realism, and modernism, but also in his subject matter he introduced new directions in American literature (for instance, he was one of the first to see Hollywood as archetypal American material), discovering that by turning his characters into generations, in effect, he could articulate his moral and historical vision of the meaning of American experience in the changes of time. And nowhere more than in *Tender Is the Night* did Fitzgerald successfully adapt his prose style to the metaphoric creation of the moral history of America. No other book so fully as *Tender Is the Night* becomes *the* American historical novel, in which the *idea* of America, the idealized and idealizing promises of the past, and its loss are identified and defined against the background of the disillusioning actualities of the present generation.

Milton R. Stern. *''Tender Is the Night'': The Broken Universe* (New York: Twayne, 1994), pp. 11–13

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FITZGERALD, Robert (1910–1985)

Robert Fitzgerald is one of the many young poets who have learned a great deal from the school of Eliot. His poetry is obviously influenced in technique and in philosophy by those figures in poetry who since 1925 have dominated the scene. This is both good and bad. He writes exceedingly well, with a fine command of form, of phrase and with a careful selection of imagery. He understands the use of the heightened statement. But he has not, as yet, a great deal to say that has not already been said.

Eda Lou Walton. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Jan. 26, 1936. p. 4

''Craftsman'' is by a shade too earthy a word for Mr. Fitzgerald; ''artificer,'' which suggests the silver-smith, the lace-maker, and the illusionist, is better. His first volume reveals a technique that is not equaled in subtlety and polish by any other of our younger poets. The magic of these poems springs from precision in the descriptive use of language, brilliance and intricacy of metaphor, and a mastery of elaborate patterns of sound. . . . This poetry has both the merits and the limitations of a mind that seems to be an isolated and a highly introspective one.

Philip Blair Rice. *The Nation*. Feb. 19, 1936. pp. 227–8

A follower of Eliot and Pound, Mr. Fitzgerald is at present notable chiefly for the intelligent use he has made of his models and for his scrupulous craftsmanship. There is here little of the uncertainty or crudity of statement common to first books of verse—even when most derivative, these poems evince a skillful manipulation of cadence and phrasing that must command our respect.

In absorbing the stylistic virtues of his masters, however, this poet seems to have been obliged also to accept their philosophic and emotional attitudes. Loneliness, nostalgia, despair and bitter resignation are ghosts Mr. Fitzgerald seems unable to rout from his pages.

T.C. Wilson. *New Republic*. June 10, 1936. p. 138

At every turn Fitzgerald gives the impression of knowing what he is doing and where he is going. He has devoted himself to a definite method with an admirable but perhaps needlessly exclusive single-mindedness. . . . Here is none of the nibbling at many uncongenial stylistic foods, none of the purblind groping that goes so far to damage most initial efforts. Here, instead, is the work of a man who is sensitively aware of his method and of his own temperament and who speaks with the tone of authority that is characteristic of the practiced.

C.A. Millspaugh. *Poetry*. June, 1936. p. 166

How good it is to read a book of poems not frantic with a message, not fancy with frilly fashions, using words gravely, for music's sake, or brightly, for that of image; literate without pedantry or affectation; sensitive without being neurotic or too full of nostalgia; moved but not excited; if not quite up to a pitch of high and joyous serenity, yet contemplative and calm, without complacence! How good, how rare; but these blessings are vouchsafed to us in Robert Fitzgerald's collection of poems, entitled *A Wreath for the Sea*.

Rolfe Humphries. *New Republic*. March 6, 1944. p. 324

Today we are more ready (than in 1936) to appreciate his remarkable modulation and poise. The absence of trickiness, fever and ''drama'' is a relief. The poems have color and vigor, a spry, confident intelligence constantly at work fusing picture, metaphor, emotion, reflection into deeply satisfying utterance. At times there is a touch of artificially or superrefinement, but not often.

Kerker Quinn. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. April 30, 1944. p. 10

Beyond any poet of my own generation, Fitzgerald seems to me to command the magic of evocative poetry; now in a phrase or line, now in a stanza, sometimes in an entire poem, scene and emotion are called up with a swiftness, an exactness, a poignancy so sharp and lovely and strong, that one is lifted past response to participation. . . . Fitzgerald seems to me a descendent of imagism, yet almost unrecognizably so since remarkably crossed with classicism. . . . It is the balance of emotion and intellect which so distinguishes these poems.

Winfield Townley Scott. *Poetry*. May, 1944. pp. 111–2

The poetry, the lyric gift of Robert Fitzgerald are probably best known in the fine translations, with Dudley Fitts as his collaborator, of *Oedipus Rex* and *The Antigone* of Sophocles. As reinterpreters of Greek drama in terms of twentieth-century poetry and wit, Fitts and Fitzgerald made a rare, an almost priceless combination. The wit of Dudley Fitts counterbalanced Fitzgerald's lyricism—and the brilliance of their collaboration has already withstood the test of time. . . . It would seem that for some undiscovered cause behind the poems Fitzgerald is at his best in his translations from the Greek. There is no question of his seriousness, or his fine temper; yet a paradox remains: he is most at liberty, and most profoundly his ''own man'' behind the mask of Sophocles.

Horace Gregory. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 17, 1957. p. 5

Fitzgerald's material ranges through graceful lyrics to long, autobiographical recitatives, taking in translations from the Latin on the

way. Among the most amiable qualities of Fitzgerald's writing are calm and lucidity. . . . Fitzgerald's lines are clean; and despite their often personal character, cooly objective. . . . Here is none of the pseudo-elegance of dependence on superficialities of form, like wearing borrowed clothes, but an authentic grace implicit in the nature of the poems. It is a genuine poetry developing from an inner organic need which, after all, is the hallmark of good things at all times. Its classic qualities geometrically balance form and content, the realities of existence with poetic imagination.

Byron Vazakis. *Saturday Review*. April 13, 1957. p. 20

While he has been little favored by the popular anthologists and curiously neglected by the critics, the new volume of selected poems by Robert Fitzgerald makes it clear that he has never belonged anywhere but in the first rank of contemporary poetry. There is so much to commend in his book, that, in fear of shading work that deserves only praise, one hesitates to make a preference or lay an emphasis. Here is a poet, rare in the era of the one-shot chance and the jazzy push to ''make it'', who begins in a spirit of apprenticeship to form, and to a twenty-five hundred year old heritage which, in his case, is assumed as lightly as though it were a personal endowment. Under hard taskmasters—the Greek and Latin poets and the English poets of the seventeenth century—he proceeds at his own pace toward refinement of technique and attitude the outcome of which must either be self-determination or self-exemption.

John Malcolm Brinnin. *The Yale Review*. Spring, 1957. p. 455

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FLETCHER, John Gould (1886–1950)

In the idea of a series of symphonies in which the sole unity was to be a harmony of color, in which form and emotional tone could follow the lead of coloristic word-associations no matter how far afield, Mr. Fletcher discovered an ''Open Sesame!'' so ideal to his nature, and so powerful as to not merely open the door, but at one stroke to lay bare his treasure entire. . . .The result was, naturally, the most brilliant and powerful work which Mr. Fletcher has yet given us—a poetry of detached waver and brilliance, a beautiful flowering of language alone, a parthenogenesis, as if language were fertilized by itself rather than by thought or feeling.

Conrad Aiken. *Dial*. Feb. 22, 1919. p. 190

He has yet to learn the restraint of the Greeks, whose exuberance was always proportioned and controlled. But since the first naïve blossoming of Imagism he has grown steadily. He has thought and felt deeply and sincerely. . . . Even when Mr. Fletcher describes what is dead or dying, he keeps his own vitality; even when he presents the grotesque, he sees it in relation to beauty. . . . He has not accepted the doom of an echoing discipleship. He realizes that to go alone is to arrive.

Marguerite Wilkinson. *New York Times Book Section*. March 13, 1921. p. 6

What Mr. Fletcher has not is patent enough; he has no instinct for telling a story, he employs neither wit nor satire, he is dramatic only in the large. What he has are his own unique perceptions and impressions, great knowledge, love of colour, form, and significance, and understanding to interpret the forces behind the actions of men.

Amy Lowell. *Literary Review*. April 16, 1921. p. 1

It is a question how far deliberation is creative. One rarely feels in Mr. Fletcher's art the true lyric rapture, the emotion that seizes the singer and carries him away. But one does feel something only a little less impassioned—the absorption of the contemplative spirit in its object, the self uplifted, and transcended into ecstasy. This latter mood or method, while more conscious than the other, while invoked rather than inspired, is but a little less authoritative in all the arts. It implies an imagination sensitive and worshipful, keen to accept and reflect all of this world's varied manifestations of beauty.

Harriet Monroe. *Poetry*. Jan., 1926. p. 206

His work would be important, if for no other reason, on account of the extension of rhythmical possibilities of the language and the peculiar care bestowed upon the richness and variety of verse texture. In the verse of both Swinburne and Hopkins there is a great intricacy and richness of texture, but a certain monotony. In his ''highly-orchestrated and colored words'' Fletcher has exploited surprise and resolution in a fashion not dissimilar to the verse of ''Ash Wednesday''. . . . And Fletcher was the first, or one of the first, to develop in English a type of imagery which Edith Sitwell has since erected into something like an oblique technique of vision.

Robert Penn Warren. *Poetry*. May, 1932. pp. 106–7

His imagery, curiously delicate, pale-tinted, often vague, is now accompanied by an echo of formal music, as though it were something made precious by distance and imperfect hearing. Like Shelley, like Whitman, his verse contains air-pockets: there is a frequent decline into soft, blurred phrasing, but at this point we must recall again that Fletcher's work also retains the imprint of the

lesser Symbolists, whose poetry reveals the flaws as well as the sensibilities of their master, Paul Verlaine.

Horace Gregory. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Dec. 29, 1935. p. 6

There is nothing to burrow in to find and feel the meaning out. There is more meaning immediately, at first glance, than can ever be found on subsequent intimacy; that is because the general intent, not the specific datum, is viable. You do not anywhere weigh these poems: you run through them. If you run through a lot of them, you will get quite a lot of Mr. Fletcher himself, a generous, brilliant, prodigal lot. . . . Mr. Fletcher is a personal poet in that it is the prevalent sense of his personality that animates his poems and alone gives them form.

R.P. Blackmur. *Poetry*. March, 1936. pp. 346–7

I think it is fair to say that Mr. Fletcher's noticeable defects as a poet have been these: his sense of humor sometimes fails to come to his rescue, he often seems to lack a real centre, whether geographical or emotional or both, he has diffused his effort into much experimentation, and his disillusionment, though understandable, is tiresome because it seems to have no beginning, no middle and no end. But these faults are occasional, and even if he had not outgrown them he would still be one of the three or four greatest living-American poets.

Baucum Fulkerson. *Sewanee Review*. July, 1938. pp. 286–7

The early work of John Gould Fletcher illustrates the weaknesses intrinsic in a strict application of the Imagist creed. The most memorable parts of his early poetry are the eleven color-symphonies in *Goblins and Pagodas*. These remarkable sequences of beautiful images are a practical demonstration of the inability of the human mind to live by images alone. It is not enough to string bright images on the thread of a single color; the reader demands the dynamic allurements of emotion or thought or action. But Imagism was merely a stage in Fletcher's complex development; in succeeding volumes, emotion and thought were not absent.

Fred B. Millett. *Contemporary American Authors* (Harcourt). 1940. p. 142

Although he shared in many group enterprises, he was never truly of any group or coterie, never had the support of any claque or organization, cultural, commercial, or political, never was the darling of any publisher, never enjoyed a real popular success. He is an extraordinary, almost unique example of the isolated artist. Independent to the last degree, outspoken and frank, uncompromising where his principles were involved, yet wholly without guile, he won all that he won by the test of merit alone. . . . He gave his strength to the cause of art and to those who were enlisted in that cause. To Fletcher, this was a chivalric pursuit, the only chivalric pursuit left to modern man to cherish. For this, and for much more, he will be remembered and honored.

Donald Davidson. *Poetry*. Dec., 1950. pp. 160–1

When he is compared with his contemporaries, his stature is not lessened. His range is greater than that of Frost; he takes into account nations and not alone individuals. His literary background is as rich as that of Amy Lowell, and his sympathies are broader. He is as philosophic as Robinson, and though he lacks the Maine poet's sense of narrative, his verse has greater clarity and equal lyric dexterity. . . . Through his residence abroad, his Americanism was thrown into sharper relief. Because of his prolific output, his technical abilities, his breadth of sympathy and experience, he may eventually come to be considered the poet most representative of his generation.

Norreys Jephson O'Conor. *Southwest Review*. Summer, 1953. p. 243

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FOOTE, Shelby (1916–)

Of all the Civil War writings in the centennial harvest now coming, Shelby Foote's projected three-volume work [*The Civil War: A Narrative*] is one of the most ambitious in scope. The first volume, now published, opens with Jefferson Davis' resignation from the Senate and Abraham Lincoln's departure from Springfield, Illinois. It closes—nearly two years and more than 400,000 words later—with Lincoln's ''We cannot escape history'' message to Congress in December 1862.

In between, the reader is treated to a grand, sweeping narrative made up of many narratives. It includes the course of battle along the entire front, from Chesapeake Bay and the Carolina coast to the Mississippi Valley and the desert of New Mexico. It includes also the political events that bear most pertinently upon the fighting. All the themes are carried forward together, clearly and without confusion, by means of marvelously skillful transitions.

Throughout, the characters and careers of Davis and Lincoln provide a kind of unity in duality.

Both of the Presidents are viewed with sympathy and understanding. Davis being pictured as a man of courage and consistency, one who was loyal to those who were loyal to him, one who ''sustained them through adversity and unpopularity.'' Viewed with sympathy also are the officers and men on both sides. The

author, a Mississippian, by birth and upbringing, is no biased partisan of the Lost Cause.

Politicians, generals, soldiers—all appear in these pages as unique, living individuals, their appearance and personality convincingly suggested with an economy of descriptive detail. . . .

The reader puts down the book with the feeling that he actually has met and known the actors in it. He feels, too, that he has experienced the events they took part in. He has been in battle with them, seen the fire and smoke, felt the shock, heard the shouts and the moans, smelled the dust and afterwards the stench, sensed the exultation, the terror, and the weariness.

This sounds like history written by a novelist, and in fact it is. ''Accepting the historian's standards without his paraphernalia''—such as footnotes—''I have employed the novelist's method without his license,'' Foote explains. ''Instead of inventing characters and incidents, I searched them out, and having found them, I took them as they were. Nothing is included here . . . without the authority of documentary evidence which I consider sound.'' After all, he says, the novelist and the historian are seeking the same truth.

And Foote is as good as his word, or almost as good. Certainly he makes up no conversations, presents no stream-of-consciousness stuff, indulges in no empty ''poetic'' prose. He writes with transparent honesty.

Yet one may question whether the novelist and the historian, even when both are writing history, are always after quite the same kind of truth. The novelist is interested in the lifelike detail, which often is derived from a single, unsupported source. The historian insists upon the verifiable fact, which usually lacks sharp outlines and specific color, because it has to be somewhat generalized; it has to be reduced to the lowest common denominator of several more or less conflicting sources. The novelist, confronted with various bits of evidence, chooses the one that gives a realistic touch. Then he goes boldly ahead and makes the most of it. For him to hem and haw, as the historian often must, would destroy for the reader the precious sense of verisimilitude.

Choosing his sources by a storyteller's instinct as well as the historian's standard, Foote relates as accepted truth a number of things that historians question or dispute. At Lincoln's inauguration, he says, Stephen A. Douglas took and held the President's tall hat. Once in office, Lincoln knew he must unite the North, ''and he knew, too, that the most effective way to do this was to await an act of aggression by the South, exerting in the interim just enough pressure to provoke such an action.'' During the Sumter crisis he agreed to give up the fort if Virginia would adjourn its secession convention. And after the war Robert E. Lee, when asked who was the ablest Federal general he had opposed, replied: ''McClellan, by all odds.''

Now, all those propositions are dubious at best, and so are a number of others like them in Foote's narrative. Down-right misstatements of fact, however, are few. One of these concerns the Second Confiscation Act, of 1862, regarding which Foote says: ''No slave was to be freed by it until the master had been convicted of treason in a Federal court.'' In fact, as Lincoln himself remarked in objecting to the measure, it would forfeit property, including slave property, ''without a conviction of the supposed criminal or a hearing given him in any proceedings.''

On the main points Foote probably is as accurate as most historians writing a book of comparable coverage. Certainly he is more interesting. Any one who wants to relive the Civil War, as thousands of Americans apparently do, will go through this volume with pleasure and then await the next one with impatience. And, years from now, when the centennial ephemera have been forgotten, Foote's monumental narrative most likely will continue to be read and remembered as a classic of its kind.

Richard N. Current. *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*. November 23, 1958, p. 5.

Professionals do well to apply the term ''amateur'' with caution to the historian outside their ranks. The word does have deprecatory and patronizing connotations that occasionally backfire. This is especially true of narrative history, which nonprofessionals have all but taken over. The gradual withering of the narrative impulse in favor of the analytical urge among professional academic historians has resulted in a virtual abdication of the oldest and most honored role of the historian, that of storyteller. Having abdicated—save in the diminishing proportion of biographies in which analysis does not swamp narrative—the professional is in a poor position to patronize amateurs who fulfill the needed function he has abandoned.

In no field is the abdication of the professionals more evident than in military history, the strictly martial, guns-and-battle aspect of war, the most essential aspect. The burden of this kind of history has to be borne by narrative. The academic professionals are prolific with books on the political, diplomatic, economic, ideological, and psychological history of wars, but not on the purely military history. The leading chroniclers of the most important American military experience, that of the Civil War, have been Douglas Southall Freeman, Bruce Catton, Kenneth P. Williams, and Shelby Foote—none of them trained academicians. Allan Nevins did become a professor, but he was jealous of his amateur standing as a military historian.

Shelby Foote is the author of five novels, yet most of his writing has gone into his huge history of the Civil War, which he unabashedly describes as ''A Narrative.'' [''Red River to Appomattox''] is the third, the largest, and the final volume of a work that has been twenty years in the writing. Like his predecessors named above (with the exception of Nevins) his subject has been military history in the strictest sense. Within these limits, however, he has attempted a more comprehensive treatment than the others. Freeman viewed the war from the standpoint of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia and was concerned primarily with the eastern theater. Catton treated the western theater as well as the eastern, but from the stand-point of the Union Army. Williams also covered both theaters, but from the outlook of the Union command. When one of these writers calls a chapter ''A Season of Reverses,'' you know whose reverses he is talking about. Save for river gunboat actions, they do their fighting ashore.

Foote undertakes to cover it all, all the military history—Union and Confederate, east and west, afloat and ashore. As narrator he is omnipresent, shifting from Grant's headquarters to Lee's, from Sherman's to Johnston's, from the eastern theater to the western and back again, and from dry land to blue water. Disavowing any ''thesis to argue or maintain,'' he does profess a desire ''to restore a balance,'' lacking in previous accounts, between the eastern and western theaters, and to correct the impression of the war in the West as ''a sort of running skirmish [that] wobbled back and forth, presumably as a way for its participants, faceless men with unfamiliar names, to pass the time while waiting for the issues to be

settled in the East.'' In spite of his Mississippi origins, Foote also attempts to keep an even hand in giving North and South their due measure of praise and blame. Yet somehow a bit more adrenalin goes into his accounts of campaigns west of the mountains; there is more dash in a cavalry charge of Forrest's than in one of Sheridan's, and the heroes in gray were a bit more heroic than those in blue. And maybe that was the way it was.

It is the last year of the war—from the Red River Campaign in Louisiana in April, 1864, to Appomattox in April, 1865—that is covered in this volume. The conventional view is that by this time the Rebels had lost their will to win and that the action was essentially reduced to mopping-up operations. It did not seem that way to General Sherman, who was in a position to know. At the beginning of that last year he wrote his wife that ''no amount of poverty or adversity seems to shake their faith, . . . niggers gone, wealth and luxury gone, money worthless, starvation in view, . . . yet I see no sign of let up—some few deserters, plenty tired of war, but the masses determined to fight it out.'' They needed more persuasion, and he was prepared to give them all that was required, and more. ''All that has gone before is mere skirmishing,'' he told his wife as he set forth on the task—his knock-out blow to Georgia and his rape of South Carolina.

General Grant opened his Virginia campaign of that horrible last year with the same relentless savagery. Within one month after it crossed the Rapidan River the Army of the Potomac under Grant had lost no less than half as many men as it had lost in the previous three years of bloody fighting in Virginia. ''For thirty days it has been one funeral procession past me,'' protested one of Grant's generals, ''and it has been too much.'' Yet it was only the beginning. By the time he had crossed the James and besieged Petersburg, Grant's losses came to nearly 75,000 men—more than Lee and Beauregard had had in both their armies at the start of the campaign a month and a half before. In one charge before Petersburg a Maine regiment of 850 lost 632 men, more than 74 percent, in less than half an hour. Casualties among the graybacks were nearly always much smaller in numbers but larger in proportion to their available manpower and therefore more costly in military terms. With that fateful knowledge, Grant ruthlessly swapped casualties on unequal terms and never abandoned his meat-grinder tactics, pouring black meat after the white into the grinder.

While he is willing to admit that there is ''a good deal more to war than killing and maiming,'' Foote has little space for the other aspects. We are admitted to a few of Lincoln's cabinet meetings and some of the president's public speeches and private conversations. We are taken backstage occasionally in the Richmond theater of politics. We are permitted a passing glance at an election, a diplomatic exchange, and (particularly in the South) an economic crisis that had immediate military consequences. The politics of command in both armies—personal rivalries, political animosities, and power plays among the brass—are adequately kept before the reader. But always the main matter before us is the ''killing and maiming.''

To the predominantly analytical historians of the schools, this flood of action provides little of what they call ''insight.'' That means clues to mass motivation, keys to puzzles of grand strategy and policy, and answers to large questions of ''why''—why the North won and the South lost, for example. I suppose the narrative historian's answer might be that there is something to be said for knowing how a cataclysm was experienced as well as explaining why it happened. Problems of motive and explanation acquire a new dimension in the presence of surviving veterans of the battle of Spotsylvania. . . .

The intimacy of combat in that age of warfare lends itself to Shelby Foote's impressive narrative gifts and to his dramatic purposes. In World War II, battleships opened fire at a range of thirteen miles or more—beyond sight of their targets. In the Battle of Mobile Bay the opposing flagships rammed each other head-on, and the *Tennessee's* guns were so close to the *Hartford* that the powder blackened her side. In the latter ship, Admiral Farragut had himself lashed to her rigging the better to command, and his opponent and friend Admiral Buchanan attacked Farragut's fleet of seventeen vessels with his one surviving ship out-gunned twenty to one. Rebel taste for histrionics supplies embarrassing riches of color. The duel between the *Alabama* and the *Kearsarge* in the English Channel is right out of Scott, with Admiral Semmes flinging his glittering sword into the sea as his ship sinks. Jeb Stuart whirls through cavalry actions in red-lined cape, bright yellow sash, black ostrich plume, and golden spurs—no less dangerous for it all.

Where possible, however, Foote tends to let his beloved Army of Tennessee upstage the easterners. The western spirit of desperate improvisation best typified the expiring rebelion. General Joe Johnston, the Virginian, whom Sherman described as ''a sensible man who only did sensible things,'' yielded command to General Hood, the Texan, an unsensible man who did desperate and unsensible things. One leg missing, one arm paralyzed, strapped to his saddle, he led his army of barefoot scarecrows to their doom. Three regiments that started the war with an average of 1,250 effective troops fought on with sixty-five, fifty, and sixty-four present for duty. In five weeks Hood lost 20,000 veterans in casualties, including sixteen generals. He was loyally supported by that genius of improvisation, General Forrest, whose engineers constructed bridges out of grapevines—literally.

For all this ''the butcher's bill'' was a North-South total of 623,026 dead from all causes and 471,427 wounded, or a total of 1,094,453 for both sides, in and out of more than 10,000 military actions. Another historian, Eric McKitrick, has calculated that a casualty rate in World War II comparable to Union deaths in the Civil War would have required nearly 2.5 million deaths as against actual losses of 384,000. Southern losses in dead or incapacitated were fewer in number but greater in proportion to the number available for service—one out of four (including noncombatant Negroes) as against one out of ten in the North. Of generals the Unions lost one out of twelve killed in action, the Confederates one out of five.

But what has all this to teach our ''psychohistorians,'' our ''cliometricians,'' and our crypto-analysts busy with their neat models, parameters, and hypotheses? It is hard to say for sure. It is possible, however, that the 1,100 pages of this raw narrative, bereft as it is of ''insight,'' might serve to expose them to the terrifying chaos and mystery of their intractable subject and disabuse them of some of their illusions of mastery.

C. Vann Woodward. *New York Review of Books*. March 6, 1975, p. 12.

Our historical profession of late has come under widespread attack because of a simple, growing and potentially fatal weakness. Historians, it is charged, have abandoned popular history. Turned

around, the criticism is more biting. Professional scholars seemingly devote too much time to studies with limited readability. Too often historical works are ponderous if not pontifical; too often rebuttal and revision prevail at the expense of revelation; too often ''scholarly studies'' are designed for fellow historians and graduate students rather than for interested laymen and the buying public. In other words, a feeling persists that the study of history is slipping into a closed shop exclusively for the professionals. Such an occurrence would be disastrous for all concerned.

The possibility of that transpiring in the Civil War field is unlikely, thanks in great part to a corps of writers who have so popularized the conflict between North and South as to make it far and above the nation's favorite historical period. For example, Carl Sandburg, Clifford Dowdey, V.C. Jones and—especially—Bruce Catton have shown through numerous studies that history can be human, appealing at all levels, and enjoyable if the narrator can use a broad base and a gifted pen. These attributes have rarely been wielded in more brilliant fashion than by Shelby Foote; and now, with the completion of . . .[*The Civil War: A Narrative*] encompassing decades of labor, Foote hereby surges forth as one of the half-dozen major figures in Civil War writing. His trilogy is at once important and imposing. It offers a direct and competent challenge to Catton's *Centennial History of the Civil War*.

Foote is a native of Mississippi who long ago adopted Memphis as his home. His literary fame first developed with five novels. Two of them—*Follow Me Down* and *Shiloh*—had Civil War themes. Then, in 1954, he was persuaded to embark on a full-scale narrative history of the war. Neither Foote nor the publisher realized at the time the dimensions that the project would ultimately take: twenty years of work on three widely spaced volumes containing a total of 1,500,000 words.

Volume I, first published in 1958, begins the story with secession and preparations for war, skillfully carries the reader through the early crises, and concludes with the autumn, 1862, campaigns at Perryville and Antietam. Volume II, released in 1963, opens with preludes for battle at Prairie Grove, Stone's River and Fredericksburg. It provides an in-depth study of the major and awesome 1863 contests: Vicksburg and Chattanooga in the West, Chancellorsville and Gettysburg in the East. Some 900 pages later, it is March, 1864, and U.S. Grant arrives in Washington to take supreme command of the Union armies.

Now the long-awaited and concluding third volume is at hand. It fulfills every expectation. Certainly it is the most dramatically written of the three installments, in part because it treats of the war's most dramatic months. Sherman slashes his way across the Deep South, and Sheridan blackens the Shenandoah, while Grant methodically pounds Lee into the immobility of the Richmond-Petersburg defenses. A short series of blows in the spring of 1865 and, for the South, a dream ends but a heritage begins.

Comparing Foote with Catton is inevitable, and not merely because each is the author of a three-volume narrative history. The two men possess such writing talent as to put them in a special category to themselves. Both rely on printed sources—although Catton came to depend on research assistant E. B. Long for a wealth of manuscript material. Catton uses documentation; Foote disdains footnotes. Catton is a Northerner and Eastern-oriented. He concentrates on military matters and gives excellent discussions of a selected number of Civil War subjects. He writes in a moving, poignant prose style unequalled by any other current historian. Foote is a Southerner and Western-oriented. He is also interested primarily in army actions, and he is given to a far broader but somewhat more shallow coverage of the struggle. His prose is powerful, tending more toward the overwhelming than toward the incisive.

Punctilious scholars will charge that historian Foote is assailable on at least four separate counts. First is his total reliance on printed sources. That is not as serious as it might seem. Indeed, it is difficult to criticize Foote's research because the literature of the Civil War is so immense that it is actually a compliment to any writer who can wade through thousands of volumes and glean informational nuggets to the successful degree demonstrated by Foote. He has carefully digested a mass of printed material and then rewritten the story to suit the tenets of his own presentation. This can hardly be branded as slipshod work. In fact, Foote regularly presents little human-interest stories that give personality to history. A Johnny Reb once shouted across no-man's land to a Billy Yank: ''Why don't you come over to our side? We're fighting for honor and you're fighting for money.'' The Union soldier hollered back: ''Well, I reckon each of us is fighting for what we need the most.''

The absence of documentation is a more serious flaw in this study. No one will challenge the authenticity of statements made by Foote, but it would have been extremely helpful to serious readers and working historians to know the sources for some of his facts. One case in point will suffice. At Gettysburg, Foote states, all Confederate corps and division commanders were West Point graduates save one—and he had attended Virginia Military Institute. Foote then points out that only 14 of 26 corps and division leaders in the Army of the Potomac had attended the Military Academy. The majority of Meade's generals were non-professionals who suddenly found themselves immersed in the most professional war then known to man. Such contrasting situations would be worth pondering further, if one only knew where to start the search for additional information. With no leads provided, frustration results.

Foote's stated aversion to making interpretations would seem to violate one of the historian's most basic obligations. He refuses to pause to render judgments or to argue conclusions. He makes no judicious observations, predictions or the like, he asserts, because in his mind this would be a gross encroachment on what he is primarily interested in producing: a narrative history in which he puts the action before the reader and the reader before the action and then allows no intrusion on his presentation. Foote takes pride in keeping the story free from opinion.

The irony of it all is that, in spite of Foote's efforts, interpretations abound throughout the text. Braxton Bragg is repeatedly portrayed as a general too narrow-minded for the intricacies of battle. William T. Sherman is ''a violent-talking man whose bite at times measured up to his bark, and whose commitment was to total war.'' Following Gettysburg, Lee's army ''had slipped back to the disorganization of the Seven Days'' because it ''could not make up for the crippling lack of direction from above and the equally disadvantageous lack of initiative just below the top.'' Foote's evaluation of Joseph E. Johnston is especially barbed. ''On the evidence, Old Joe's talent seemed primarily for retreat; so much so, indeed, that if left to his own devices he might be expected to wind up gingerly defending Key West and complaining that he lacked transportation to Cuba in the event that something threatened one of his flanks.''

Whether Foote admits it or not, these are interpretations—not facts.

Finally, some purists will allege that Foote says little not already well-known and readily accessible in other works. This is only half-true. Foote does present the usual stereotypes of the war's leading figures, and he sometimes displays an equalitarian tendency to lower or raise men to the same level. However, what sustains these three volumes—what Foote utilizes that others missed—is a prose ranging from powerful to adroit.

It alternately brims with natural movement, constructed excitement, allegory, color and force. On a few occasions, it overflows badly when Foote's sentences become hopelessly long and sometimes end with a damaging, dangling participle. Yet practically every page in this set contains at least one quotable passage. It might be a battle description such as Foote's statement after ''Stonewall'' Jackson's men delivered a point-blank volley into an assaulting Federal column at Fredericksburg: ''The blue line stopped, flailed ragged along its forward edge, and then reversed its flow.''

Or it might be a succinct assessment of one man, such as this comment on the Northern president: ''Nothing pleased Lincoln more than to have an opponent think he was an idiot. It was like swiping somebody with a razor and then telling them to shake their head.'' Or the prose could be a simple rendition of one human story. Foote has obvious (and commendable) admiration for Jefferson Davis. Volume I begins with Davis' farewell speech in the Senate on the eve of war. Volume II opens with his 1862 inaugural address in Richmond. Foote fittingly ends Volume III—and the study—with a statement Davis made just before he died: ''Tell the world I only loved America.''

Whether from a publisher's stinginess with review copies or from editors' apathy with widely spaced installments of an undocumented history, America's major historical journals largely ignored the first two volumes of Foote's study. The set is now complete. Foote no longer can be, or will be, ignored. He has provided a superb view of the forest rather than the usual and tiring look at a few trees; and he has done so in a writing style both fluid and appealing. The inclusion in this set of no less than 140 maps, each placed just where it is needed, is but a dividend to a sweeping history impressive to read and impossible to forget.

James I. Robertson, Jr.. *Civil War History*. June, 1975, pp. 172–75.

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FORCHÉ, Carolyn (1950–)

Kinship is the theme that preoccupies Carolyn Forché. Although she belongs to a generation that is reputed to be rootless and disaffiliated, you would never guess it from reading her poems. Her imagination, animated by a generous life-force, is at once passionate and tribal. Narrative is her preferred mode, leavened by meditation. She remembers her childhood in rural Michigan, evokes her Slovak ancestors, immerses herself in the American Indian culture of the Southwest, explores the mysteries of flesh, tries to understand the bonds of family, race, and sex. In the course of her adventures she dares to confront, as a sentient being, the overwhelming questions by which reason itself is confounded: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?. . .

Carolyn Forché's poems give an illusion of artlessness because they spring from the simplest and deepest human feelings, from an earthling's awareness of the systemic pulse of creation. The poems tell us she is at home anyplace under the stars, wherever there are fields or mountains, lakes or rivers, persons who stir her atavistic bond-sense. . . .

She listens. At Justin Morrill College, an experimental residential branch of Michigan State University, where five years ago the earliest parts of *Gathering the Tribes* were conceived, she began her avid consumption of languages. Now she studies Russian, Spanish, Serbo-Croatian, French and Tewa (Pueblo Indian), listening beyond grammar for the secret texts. She acknowledges a primal sense of the power of words. The power to ''make words''—in the mouth, in the heart, on the page—is the same to her as to give substance. Aiming at wholeness, strength, and clarity, she works at language as if it were a lump of clay or dough in her hands. In her search for poetry, in her effort to understand it, she has bent over the potter's wheel, climbed mountain ranges, ventured into the Mojave Desert. . . .

The places dearest to her include the south Michigan heartland where she was raised, Truchas and the Pueblo village of Taos in New Mexico, the Washington coast, and the Okanogan region of southern British Columbia. Anna, Alfansa, Teles Goodmorning, the dulcimer maker, Rosita, Jacynthe, the child born in the Okanogan, the monks of the mountain abbey, and Joey, a first love, who went off to study for the priesthood, are all characters clearly drawn from life and attached to specific locations. One might say that they are embodiments of the reality of their settings.

If I am right in supposing that ''Year at Mudstraw,'' ''Taking Off My Clothes,'' and ''Kalaloch'' are among the last poems written for this book, it would appear that Forché is moving toward a tauter line, packed with incisive detail, and a firmer dramatic structure than is evident in her earlier narratives. . . .

I have little doubt that the poem in *Gathering the Tribes* that will be most discussed, quoted, and anthologized is ''Kalaloch'' (pronounced ka-lå-lok), an almost faultlessly controlled erotic narrative of 101 lines. In its boldness and innocence and tender, sensuous delight it may very well prove to be the outstanding Sapphic poem of an era.

Stanley Kunitz. Foreword to Carolyn Forché. *Gathering the Tribes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. xi–xiv

Carolyn Forché's second book of poems is interesting both because Forché is a talented poet—her first book, *Gathering the Tribes*, was a Yale Younger Poets selection—and because it tackles the political subject matter I [have been] arguing is so uncongenial to young poets. The first section, dedicated to the memory of Oscar Romero, the murdered archbishop of San Salvador, is set in EI Salvador,

where Forché lived for two years and worked as a journalist. Other poems are addressed to old friends from the working-class Detroit neighborhood of Forché's childhood: one has become a steelworker haunted by memories of Vietnam; another, with whom Forché had shared adolescent dreams of travel and romance, lives with her husband and kids in a trailer. Elsewhere in the poems we meet a jailed Czech dissident, the wife of a ''disappeared'' Argentine and Terrence Des Pres, author of *The Survivor*, a study of the death camps. This is strong stuff, and the excited response *The Country Between Us* has already provoked shows, I think, how eager people are for poetry that acknowledges the grim political realities of our time.

At their best, Forché's poems have the immediacy of war correspondence, postcards from the volcano of twentieth-century barbarism. . .

Testicles are ''crushed like eggs,'' rats are introduced into vaginas, José waves his bloody stumps in the air, Lil Milagro is raped and forced to defecate in public. ''There is nothing one man will not do to another,'' Forché tells us. So shocking are the incidents reported here—so automatic is our horror at a mere list of places where atrocities have occurred (''Belsen, Dachau, Saigon, Phnom Penh'')—that one feels almost guilty discussing these poems as poems, as though by doing so one were saying that style and tone and diction mattered more than bloody stumps and murdered peasants and the Holocaust.

This unease, though, should not have arisen in the first place, and it points to an underlying problem: the incongruity between Forché's themes and her poetic strategies. Forché's topics could not be more urgent, more extreme or more public, and at least one of her stated intentions is to make us look at them squarely. And yet, she uses a language designed for quite other purposes, the misty ''poetic'' language of the isolated, private self. She gives us bloody stumps, but she also gives us snow, light and angels. You have to read ''The Island'' several times, for instance, to get past the exotic tropical scenery, the white dresses, the ''seven different shawls of wind,'' the mist that is like bread and so forth, and realize that this is a poem of homage to Claribel Alegría, a heroic woman whom Forché would like to resemble, and that Claribel is telling Forché not to give up hope for El Salvador. At least, I think that's what it's about. . . .

Whether or not one admires Forché for stressing the intensity of her responses to the sufferings of others—many readers, I should point out, do not share my discomfort with this emphasis—the intensity is vitiated by the inadequate means by which it is conveyed. It is embarrassing to read that Forché goes ''mad, for example, /in the Safeway, at the many heads/of lettuce, papayas and sugar, pineapples/and coffee, especially the coffee.'' It trivializes torture to present it in terms of lunch:

> The *paella* comes, a bed of rice
> and *camarones*, fingers and shells,
> the lips of those whose lips
> have been removed, mussel
> the soft blue of a leg socket.
> (''In Memory of Elena'')

It is wildly histrionic—and slanderous, too—to accuse politically moderate human-rights activists of deriving masturbatory pleasure from torture reports:

> they cup their own parts
> with their bedsheets and move
> themselves
> slowly, imagining bracelets
> affixing their wrists to a wall
> (''The Return'')

Does Forché think we read her poems as pornography?

It is not enough—this too may be a minority opinion—to dedicate one's poetry to the defeat of the torturers, to swear that

> I will live
> and living cry out until my voice is
> gone
> to its hollow of earth, where with our
> hands and by the lives we have
> chosen
> we will dig deep into our deaths.
> (''Message'')

The boldness of the promise is undermined by the commonplace rhetoric (''hollow of earth'' for ''grave'') and woolly syntax (the hands and lives dig into our deaths *after* the voice is dead?).

On the other hand, to make such a promise is not nothing, either. If poetry is to be more than a genteel and minor art form, it needs to encompass the material Forché presents. Much credit, then, belongs to Forché for her brave and impassioned attempt to make a place in her poems for starving children and bullet factories, for torturers and victims, for Margarita with her plastique bombs and José with his bloody stumps. What she needs now is language and imagery equal to her subjects and her convictions. The mists and angels of contemporary magazine verse are beneath her: she *has* seen too much, she has too much to say. Of how many poets today, I wonder, could that be said?

Katha Pollitt. *The Nation*. May 8, 1982, pp. 562–64

Is the country between us a medieval sword laid down between sleeping lovers on a soft pine forest floor like a steely oath of obdurate sublimation? Is it a country you would have to visit in order to be where I now am on the other side of the frontier? (Until you understand the horror, the horror, the cold chills, the sweat and oil, all that I saw, that I went through, we'll never be able to communicate with each other again.) Or, is it by any chance a country we implicitly share—roads groping from your flesh to my flesh? Or perhaps our territory. . .both. . .and. . .the sacramental conjunction of bread?

Whatever, between *us*. It is not only the lyric plurality of the pronoun that is important here, where two or three are gathered together, but its objective case—implying a sort of paralysis of the communal will, a screen (like that between the living and the dead) through which we (whoever we are) would have to burst with enormous energy in order to come out into the nominative light of existential affirmation. And were we fully to become it, whatever country (including the pun embedded there) formerly kept us apart would contain us whole, all of us, leaven of a deeper plenitude than want could possibly be aware of.

At this particular moment in history the country between us happens to have an incredibly suggestive name: El Salvador, where these bones and this flesh (as Aquinas said)—that body, hers, his—are being continuously broken and blood shed beyond the power of the outraged earth to absorb it. El Salvador, that is, where masses are hourly said over massacred fragments of our common humanity.

> Those who commit themselves to the poor have to be open to the same destiny as the poor; and in El Salvador we already know the destiny of the poor: to disappear, to be captured, to be tortured, to reappear as corpses.

The man who said these words out loud above a whisper, who lived to be himself the language of truth incarnate, was shot saying mass on March 31, 1980. It is to him, Monsignor Oscar Romero, that Carolyn Forché dedicates the first section of this, her second book. A section of her life for the first time publicly located in time and space: ''In Salvador, 1978–80,'' she calls it. . . .

We waited decades to hear how Akmatova waited outside Leningrad Prison for months during the Yezhov terror. Carolyn Forché's poems from EI Salvador reach us while events duplicate to those she describes are still taking place. It's not as though we were waiting for faded or blurred records of ignominious naked genocide to be salvaged from history and released like a nightmarish family album. The film these days is smuggled out, processed, and wired almost immediately. Those maimed, violated bodies seem to be falling and decomposing before our very eyes, severed heads of youths falling, as it were, on our breakfast plates. With words alone Carolyn Forché brilliantly records such characteristic dismemberments.

> Judith Gleason. *Parnassus*. 10, Spring–Summer, 1982, pp. 9–12

The Spring 1982 publication of *The Country between Us* by Carolyn Forché has stirred the old cauldron, painstakingly labeled in our culture, ''political poetry.'' The book has already made literary history, winning the di Castagnola and Lamont prizes, going into its second printing in six weeks, with reviews in *Time* and *People Magazine* and other non-literary ''mainstream'' publications. As one poet put it, *The Country between Us* is close to becoming, unlike any poetry book of our times, a bestseller. In a culture noted for its disdain of poetry, and, among its poets, a disdain (in regards to subject matter) of the political, this is a phenomenon that cannot be readily dismissed. . . .

It is against [her] brilliantly perceptive description of contemporary poetry's dominant aesthetic that Pollit. . .discusses *The Country between Us*. But in doing so I think she misses a great point of the book. Forché's book is not a book of ''political poetry,'' at least not in the way that concept is normally held. As Forché herself has said, ''My poetry is no more political than that of a poet who is celebrating an afternoon as the sun sets in the Mediterranean. It's foolish to say because you're talking about poor people, or because your poetry celebrates or gives witness to the plight of the poor, that it's political. That is the perception of the right. The *status quo* never views itself as political, so it's only others, others in opposition or in striking contrast, who are viewed as political.'' And she has said it the other way: '''Political poetry' often means the poetry of protest, accused of polemical didacticism, and not the poetry which implicitly celebrates politically acceptable values. . . .There is no such thing as a nonpolitical poetry.''. . .

As everyone knows poetry *matters* in Latin America; it is the voice, or one of them, of the people. Were Forché's Salvadorean ''educators'' ignorant of the impoverished status of poets in the States, or is this book not, in fact, a message to us about the only path our culture grandly opens to poets: that city walk-up in dead of winter where personal redemption from our corrupt and evil country is silence, insanity, suicide.

I am taking liberties. The book, in our tradition at least, must stand on its own. Hints of the turmoil and sense of inadequacy of being ''just a poet'' in witness to such a place and ordeal *are* strewn throughout the poems—that is, the story continues, even in Salvador, of the Northamerican wanderer seeking her work, her words, her world. ''The Colonel,'' the most oft-quoted and reprinted poem of the book is, interestingly, set in prose and the witness breaks down midpoint when the Colonel spills a sack of human ears onto the dinner table: ''There is no other way to say this.'' Who is it that is breaking down here? Not the witness, but the poet with the burden of her U.S. aesthetics. Who is she apologizing to? First and foremost, to us, her fellow poets (or is it to her teachers and critics who will disapprove?). The opening lines of the piece are also addressed to us, I think. ''What you have heard is true. I was in his house,'' as if a poet should not have been, as if to answer her poet friends who warned her about this. The ears ''are like dried peach halves,'' the poet's only simile here and one I think that undeniably authenticates her experience. *We* need this simile, for how many of us have had the experience? It brings the ears alive for us, just as the one dropped in the glass of water by the Colonel ''came alive.'' And even he addresses the poet's ''problem'' as he performs his heinous act. ''Something for your poetry, no?''. . .

For me, Forché's book is ''political''—to try here to understand, to perhaps even claim the word—in that it is the female voice in many ways of my generation, representative of a vast number of women who are living outside of, and have been for some time now, the lives we were programmed for, the lives of our mothers. This is a poetic voice from which we have not heard much yet. The powerful, revolutionary female voice of our generation, besides that of popular music, has been the inestimably important lesbian-separatist one. (The majority of other well-published women poets write from the conservative, domestic stance Pollit describes.) Forché is clearly a nonseparatist feminist, the one we are familiar with in our music, though strangely, not our poetry: very female, erotic, sexual, mobile, independent, exploratory, nondomestic, childless (a nagging awareness in the book typical of the many still childless women who came to puberty with the advent of the Pill). ''In what time do we live that it is too late to have children?'' (''Selective Service''), a woman traveling alone, the hunter rather than the hunted, a very lonely *caminante*—but not a loner and not a separatist. . . .

The Country between Us is the work of a late-twentieth-century-educated-and-trained Midwest poet. The work does contain many of the characteristics and values Pollit describes of our contemporary literary form. Forché is working within the current ''tradition,'' except perhaps for subject matter. And perhaps it is that subject matter—in both of her books—along with her wonderfully wild sensuous energy, her commitment to the present rather than the past, her subliminal ethic of action, that causes her always to transcend the static, ''fascist'' form. How true her language is to the ''real'' voice and the land and experience from which she comes is a question perhaps time will help to answer (though time is not necessarily free of the coercion of culture). But this poet, this extraordinary woman has already gone further than most ever will in trying to authenticate her voice, immersing herself and her language in the ''real'' and very dangerous world. She has used her verbal training like a guerrilla uses intimate knowledge of the land, taking the aesthetic jammed into her as a young working class

woman gone to college and jamming it right back into the real, the political. This is a poetry of terrible witness, the strains of our villainies on the language and ethical constructs undoubtedly show. Thus the phrase, ''the country between us.''

Sharon Doubiago, *American Poetry Review*. January–February 1983, pp. 35–36, 39

What is. . . ''allegiance to Art?'' And what, given the circumstances, is sensationalism? I think, in the case of Carolyn Forché's second book, *The Country between Us*, the poet undergoes and records a journey that reconciles the political with the artistic rather than severs that vital connection—for, finally, there is nothing sensationalistic about setting down the facts of a dinner party. If one argues that such facts remain sensationalistic in the context of poetry it may be because readers no longer expect facts from poems. . . . And if this is so isn't one really arguing for that ''inward'' aesthetic that Hans Magnus Enzensberger criticizes? And isn't. . .such an aesthetic designed to limit poetry in its subjects? Therefore, isn't it, really and finally, another kind of censorship?. . .

Forché's position in the poems about El Salvador is admittedly partisan. She is, as are many of the people *in* EI Salvador, against the military, against the government, the landowners, the mockery of ''land-reform,'' and against all U.S. aid, especially military aid. But such partisanship seems, under the conditions now apparent in that country, not Leftist so much as simply decent and human, and describable in many ways as a concern for the poet's friends in EI Salvador. . . .

Forché, in discovering another country, discovers herself—discovers, too, how American she is (''a country you never left''). Part of that discovery is the discovery of limits. It is a mature and brilliant act when Forché relinquishes her poem and allows Josephine to speak, when the poet becomes a listener as well as a speaker. For one of the ironies about the poems is the learning process, a reciprocal or dialectical process that resembles and actualizes the paradigm of Paulo Freire's in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a book that Forché acknowledges as an influence on her work and on her life. Moreover, the irony of learning in the poem is positive just as the poet learns to be more human from Josephine. Josephine herself, in speaking of what most torments her, becomes a poet. The poem's relationships are unshakably egalitarian. And so it is proper that Forché listens, for the duty of a poem like this is to witness and report, to detail a particular misery, to try to rescue some of the dead from an almost certain oblivion.

Larry Levis. *American Poetry Review*. January–February 1983, pp. 10–11

Forché had already created a sensation among poets by describing her experience in war-torn EI Salvador and calling for ''a poetry of witness'' more accountable than ever before to ''the twentieth century human condition.'' *The Country between Us*, Forché's second volume of poetry, has reached a surprisingly large audience, and apart from the book's topical interest, one can sense in its powerful impact on readers and hearers an important argument for poetry. Initial commentary on the book evokes an old fear, the New Critics' fear of the corrupting influence of politics on the purity of the poem's language. Actually, Forcheé's book goes beyond the question ''Can a good poem be political?'' to some far more significant and fearful ones: Is poetry adequate to a century of holocaust? Can an intensely personal language and vision of things suffice? Can poetry help us? (*Are* we still human? some have asked.) *The Country between Us* possesses one of the severest orderings of poems of any collection in recent memory, and an examination of its three-part structure will help us ponder some of these questions. The book embodies the process by which Forché became a survivor who somehow found the courage and honesty to make of the atrocities she witnessed the test and education of her moral will. Her personal transformation becomes in the reading of the book an exemplar for our collective response. Above all, the book will suggest what a poetry of witness might involve in a time such as ours. *The Country between Us* enacts with intense drama and sensuous immediacy the agony of human survival in an age of mass death, and as such it is the compelling story for our century's ninth decade.

John Mann. *American Poetry* 3, Spring, 1986, pp. 51–52

In the four years since their publication, the poems of Carolyn Forché's *The Country between Us* have been identified with a renewed debate concerning the claims, the merits, and the possibilities for ''political poetry'' in contemporary America. They have been taken as an occasion for critical pronouncements on the question of ''mixing art and politics'' and have been widely praised as well as strenuously criticized. The apparent plurality of critical opinion surrounding *The Country between Us* would seem to suggest that the question of poetry's relationship to politics is once again productively open, but in fact it masks a more disturbing consensus: whatever their merit, these poems belong to a specialized genre—''political poetry.'' They are to be evaluated for their ability to ''reconcile'' or ''balance'' impulses generally regarded as contradictory: the personal or lyrical on the one hand, the political or engaged on the other. I see several problems with such a notion of political poetry. First, it implies that certain poems are political while others (the majority) are not, and it thus functions to marginalize those poems regarded as political without yet having explored the social and political constitution of all literary discourse. More importantly, such a notion of political poetry adopts unquestioningly an already reified conception of the social; it is incapable of helping us to think of relationships between individuals and society in terms other than those of opposition. As a result, it replicates the split in contemporary ideology between private and public. That subjects may be socially constituted is a question usually not asked. Finally, this taken-for-granted definition of political poetry is not a *historical* definition: it fails to consider the ways in which lyric poetry, since the Romantics at least, has been constituted *in opposition* or reaction to dominant modes of social and political discourse. Severed from history, the lyric poet becomes an isolated voice crying out in the empty wasteland of modernist despair: politics becomes mere psychologism and the struggle to wrest freedom from necessity is rewritten as a purely individual quest. The compulsion to read Forché's poetry as political in this narrower sense, then, has resulted in readings that distort and diminish the real accomplishments of the poems while undermining any claim they, or any contemporary poems, have to be political in any deeper sense.

In the autobiographical ''EI Salvador: An Aide-Memoire,'' Forché herself has provided us with a text that asks to be read as

both a preface to and a theoretical defense of the project undertaken in *The Country between Us*. ''Aide-Memoire'' is pervaded by an uneasiness regarding the critical terms in which the poems have been received and discussed. In response to critics' classification of the poems as ''political poetry,'' Forché writes: ''I suspect that underlying this. . . is a naive assumption: that to locate a poem in an area associated with political trouble automatically renders it political.'' The essay, in fact, concludes with an enumeration of several of the more problematic questions concerning the theoretical status of poetry as political—suggestions, perhaps, of ways in which the political constitution of all poetry might more productively be explored. What emerges is the notion that there are really two different senses of the term ''political.'' The first, more limited sense sees ''politics'' as the largely institutionalized, two-dimensional discourse of political programs and ''ideologies'' in the official sense; the second, invoked in response to the confinement of the first, defines politics far more broadly and flexibly as any action or discourse carried out in a social world. These two competing definitions are made dramatically clear in the juxtaposition, on the final pages of ''Aide-Memoire,'' of the following two statements. First, Forché's own allegation that ''there is no such thing as nonpolitical poetry''; second, a statement from Hans Magnus Enzensberger's ''Poetry and Politics'': ''The poem expresses in an exemplary way the fact that it is not at the disposal of politics: this is its political content.'' Where most American readers of Forché seek to reduce the political to the more limited of these two senses, Forché and Enzensberger attempt to open up the notion, to make ''the political'' again the site of an ongoing, daily contestation.

Michael Greer. *Centennial Review*. 30, 1986, pp. 160–62

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Gathering the Tribes, 1976 (p); *The Country Between Us*, 1981 (p); *The Angel of History*, 1994 (p)

FORD, Richard (1944–)

Richard Ford's fourth novel [*Wildlife*] is a perfectly executed narration of one's childhood world as seen by an adult reliving those childhood experiences. The many appearances of such works in which viewpoint becomes a layered text of irony about the real content of observation make up almost a subgenre of contemporary American fiction. It is not that such fiction takes as its subject the growing up of a child, but that the tellers of the tales are adults attempting to regain their child's voice and eyes in order to capture truth in their telling; at the same time the writers-narrators admit the impossibility of doing so. Knowing the inevitability of their profound but enriching failure in recreating such a warp of time, the tellers rely on differences in tone from their present voice (and eyes) and their past ones, and yet as they end their tales, the persona's voice has become the narrator's voice. What the persona/protagonist all along was moving to is the narrator who all along has been struggling to capture the present of a time past and not passed through it. Still another inevitability of irony lies in these reflections recollected in modern ironic tranquility; the child persona and the narrator-adult become one locked in their identity of loneliness and yet distinct from each other in the figments of the author's voice. Indeed, the author becomes still another presence, a third outpost, to tease the reader into layers of speculation.

Ford may be compared to E.L. Doctorow (particularly *Billy Bathgate*, in which the child and narrator are one, and all the difference in two worlds), and to John Irving's Owen Meany. His work also has associations with the classic texture of recollection as Wordsworth saw it, and of the terror lying beyond everyday life as Coleridge envisioned it. Yet Ford's novel stands as well on its own as an affecting story of a boy who watches the marriage of his mother and father fall apart and then come together again. In the process it is the boy who learns he must leave home while his parents learn their separation from each other is a greater void than the imperfection of their union. In Ford's understated style and in the minimalist literary techniques he uses, the shift of urgency is somewhat slowed, but the lyric power he evokes is enhanced. Ford's story of breakdown, recovery, and mystery of human character is effected by his spareness of approach; he creates reality and emotion by the purest flint of words. This newest novel is likely to gather him many readers.

Martin Tucker. *Confrontation*. Fall, 1990–Winter, 1991, pp. 217–18

Ford's achievement in *Independence Day*—and it is a considerable one—is to reclaim the strangeness of a country which he knows is at least as beguiling as it is wretched, and to rescue it from his worst own image. Amazingly, this late in the American century, he gives every impression of cruising through a territory nobody has laid claim to, nailing it with such a devouring—such an undeceived—eye that it begins to seem new again and in need of a writer of Ford's marvelous talents to explain and translate it. It needs a path to cut through its potentially murderous complexities with what Ford is not embarrassed to call ''a hungrified wonder.''

Edmund Wilson once praised Scott Fitzgerald's wonderfully clear judgment about Americans and American life—a judgment, Wilson said, ''saturated with twentieth-century America.'' *Independence Day* is a book written in that exalted tradition.

Gordon Burn. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. July 14, 1995, p. 21

Before he went West, so to speak, in his stories and in the novel *Wildlife*, Richard Ford had published three books of fiction: *A Piece of My Heart* (1970), *The Ultimate Good Luck* (1981), and *The Sportswriter* (1980). *A Piece of My Heart*, the first, is an elaborate, stylistically ambitious, and complex novel, somewhat in the Southern Gothic vein. . . .

Ford's second novel, *The Ultimate Good Luck*, is another trip altogether, this time to Mexico, around Oaxaca. It is a steamy ride through the south of the border labyrinth, with characters who are defined by situation, plot, intrigue, and denouement. They have a certain brittleness as they act out their roles; and there is a cinema noir aspect to the landscape of drug smuggling, prisons, bribery, disappearances, threats of murder, and actual murder. . . .

The Sportswriter followed the first two novels and preceded the Western stories and the novel *Wildlife*. Frank Bascombe is the

sportswriter, living by choice in Haddam, New Jersey, a pleasant suburban town. . . .

Independence Day, Ford's new novel, returns to Frank Bascombe. *Rabbit Redux?* Not quite. Bascombe is an upscale ruminant, now in his forties, with opinions about everything and Emerson's *Self-Reliance* in the glove compartment. There is no outstanding typicality in him; instead he has the mysteriousness of the agreeable, nice person, harder to describe than the rake, the miser, or the snob. As a professional, or a working man, his resume is unsteady—short-story writer, sportswriter, and now a ''realtor.''. . . .

Independence Day, if you're taking measurements like the nurse in a doctor's office, might be judged longer than it need be. But longer for whom? Every rumination, each flash of magical dialogue or unexpected mile on the road with a stop at the pay phone, is a wild surprise tossed off as if it were just a bit of cigarette ash by Richard Ford's profligate imagination. *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* are comedies—not farces, but realistic, good-natured adventures, sunny, yes. . . . The new work, *Independence Day*, is the confirmation of a talent as strong and varied as American fiction has to offer.

> Elizabeth Hardwick. *New York Review of Books*. Aug. 10, 1995, pp. 11, 12, 13, 14

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FORNÉS, María Irene (1931–)

Despite the sharp differences between her early and her later plays, all of [María Irene] Fornés's work can be seen as a relentless search for a new theatrical language to explore what theater has always been about: the difference between text and subtext, between the mask and the naked face beneath it, between the quotidian and the secret, between love and the fear and violence always threatening its fragile dominion. Fornés's early plays are filled with a slightly melancholic cheer, the result of an interplay between a sequence of fantastic and whimsical interactions and the underlying knowledge of unrequited desire and unfulfilled hopes—or in the words of her Dr. Kheal, ''Contradictions compressed so that you don't know where one stops and the other begins.'' *Promenade*, for example, is peopled by a variety of symbiotic pairs, escaped convicts and a jailer, rich socialites and servants, ladies and gentlemen, a mother and her children. It is a comedy about the failure to make connections, searching for its plot in the same way that the jailer searches for his prisoners or the mother for her lost children. Throughout the play the pairs keep missing each other and although they delight in the unexpected turns, there is an intimation of a darker reality always held at bay. At the end the mother asks the two convicts, ''Did you find evil?'' And when they tell her ''No,'' she assures them, ''Good night, then. Sleep well. You'll find it some other time.''

Even in these early works, Fornés's revolutionary use of language is evident. From the first, she has honed speech to a simple, concrete and supple essence, whether in dialogue or . . . in the song of the convicts from *Promenade*. . . . This is language surprisingly capable of expressing complex shades of emotion and mobilizing a rich and understated irony. . . .

Fornés's plays differ from those of most of her contemporaries in that almost all are set either in a preindustrial society or on the far edge of middle-class culture. They are filled with a deep compassion for the disenfranchised, for whom survival—rather than the typically bourgeois obsession with individual happiness and freedom—is the bottom line. They do not delight, even covertly, in suffering but take a stand unequivocally against dehumanization and violence in its myriad forms. Perhaps it is in this context that her revolutionary use of language is best understood, its simplicity and beauty signaling, in the midst of violence and decay, a verbal utopia in which things are called by their proper names and brutality is so embarrassingly evident that it can no longer hold sway.

> David Savran. *In Their Own Words* (New York: Theatre Communications, 1988), pp. 52–53

If *Promenade* brought Fornés a momentary commercial esteem in the late 1960s. *Fefu* brought critical recognition in the late 1970s. . . .

The uptown and downtown reviewers are almost perfectly split in their respective dismissal and praise of Fornés's work. The key issue seems to be the challenge that a Fornés play presents to the audience's understanding. The uptowners do not mind riddles as long as they get the answers by the end. The downtowners value the puzzle itself in its ineffable splendor. This is partly a matter of taste, but it is also a matter of Fornés's aesthetic strategy. Her plays do not provide tidy messages in either domestic homilies or zealous politics; they provoke thought in an open-ended, often haunting way. If the plays are hollow, it is because they carve out a cavernous space in which those thoughts can resonate after the final curtain. They are the audience's thought, though, not Fornés's; she has only instigated them, allowed them, to bubble up to the surface and pop as they hit the hostile air of consciousness.

The period since *Fefu* has been a prolific one for Fornés. She has written and directed at the rate of more than one play a year. *Eyes on the Harem* (INTAR, 1979) and *A Visit* (1981) suggest a return to the polymorphous perversity and satirical thrust of the earlier off-off-Broadway plays. . . . Both plays reflect Fornés's interest in sexual politics, this time using historical settings and source materials.

> Scott T. Cummings. In Philip C. Kolin, ed. *American Playwrights since 1945*, (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1989), pp. 116–17

Fornés's plays provide a striking opportunity for illustrating the nature of gestic language, especially gestic monologue, in feminist drama. Her works emphasize the creation of embodied characters—that is, characters who enact the movements toward and away from female subjectivity in which corporeality locates itself as the site of culturally conditioned ''meanings.'' While these characters may reflect the ''broken''-ness and isolation that are inevitable in their repressive environments (see, e.g., Julia in *Fefu and Her Friends* [1977], Sarita in the play by that name [1984], or

Marion in Abingdon Square [1987]), the fact that their ''impulses'' as such are communicated in the gestic, self-narrated discourse of Brechtianism allows a partial recuperation of this fragmentation. . . .

Fornés, then, presents what Catherine Belsey calls the ''crisis of subjectivity,'' a crisis set in motion at the moment of entry into the symbolic order embodied in the mode of performance. A reclamation of the speaking body's ability to act (in its dual theatrical/existential senses) comes through recodifying this symbolic order; as Belsey says, ''in the fact that the subject is a *process* lies the possibility of transformation.'' The *Gestus*, with its multivalent moments of highlighting the competition of logos and gestuality, insists on an attention to this process. The female bodies on stage in Fornés's plays may not ''speak'' with the comic literalness of [Carolee] Schneemann's interior scroll, but her theatricalization of the subject-in-process through the use of gestic monologues suggests a similar preoccupation with the scripting/inscription/conscription of a textualized voice, playing ironically, like Schneemann, off the notion that language ''originates from'' the body of the speaking subject.

Deborah R. Geis. *Postmodern Theatric(k)s: Monologue in Contemporary American Drama*. (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Pr., 1993). pp. 119, 134

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FOWLIE, Wallace (1908–)

There is something lofty, elegant and austere in the style Wallace Fowlie has made his own. Capable of tremendous absorption, condensation, sifting and synthesis, he imparts his profound erudition lightly. He is at home amidst the most antagonistic elements, directing his frail bark with the skill of a born mariner. . . . His certitude is never arrogant or pedantic. Woven into his skill, his grace, his dexterity there is always the element of risk, of daring, known alike by the acrobat and the poet. His moments of suspense are those same moments known to the performer and the man of solitude—when he takes flight with his whole being and emerges from the experience a new man, a man dedicated to still greater flights of daring, whether in the air or in the mind.

Henry Miller. *Chimera*. Autumn, 1944. pp. 47–8

Repeatedly he insists that ''all great poetry is knowledge of the occult.'' But Dante's poem, to which greatness cannot be denied, offers the knowledge that comes of a journey through the moral universe, which is not quite the same thing as ''knowledge of the occult,'' and Homer's epics, even when they take us in the realms of the dead, are wonderfully lacking in mystery, except that mystery to which all being is inescapably knit. There are more kinds of poetry than the kind that Rimbaud wrote, and to take cognizance of their value is not to destroy or impair his greatness. One wishes that Mr. Fowlie had shown his appreciation of this fact. . . . His hierophantic air detracts from his most acceptable pronouncements.

Babette Deutsch. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Oct. 27, 1946. p. 30

Two outstanding gifts distinguish Wallace Fowlie as a critic. First, in the Bergsonian sense he understands ''duration,'' the curve which is both art and philosophy and which marks a configuration in time. . . . His second gift is his reduction of multiple details to key symbols and categories. Fowlie's successors will be his debtors. They will borrow and debate his key signs. . . . Maritain characterizes Thomas Aquinas as a theocentric humanist. Fowlie extends the terms to Maritain. It is also applicable to Fowlie himself. His range of vision saves him many stumbles.

Jeremy Ingals. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 20, 1947. p. 34

The author fell in love with the French language at school. He mastered the language as well as any American ever has, wrote several books of criticism . . . and became one of the most inspired teachers in the country. . . . Some of the sketches (in *Pantomime*) . . . are drawn with a delicate pen and reveal a sensibility which rarely coexists with scholarly knowledge or survives an academic career. . . . Behind the delicate and discreet touch of the author one gradually perceives a tragic obsession with the problem of the artist in the world and especially in America.

Henri Peyre. *New York Times Book Section*. June 3, 1951. p. 5

He considers himself a spectator, a person playing different parts throughout life. He feels himself strongly attracted to the clown, ''unashamedly awkward, exalted by the noblest dreams, and always tricked in some way before touching his dream.''

And his reminiscences, like his interpretation of the clown, completely lack irresponsible spontaneity, a healthy sense of malice, and a reassuring arrogance: traits indispensable to the true clown. If Mr. Fowlie were the least bit fairer or more poised and gentle, he would be dull.

Serge Hughes. *Commonweal*. July 13, 1951. p. 338

Fowlie can write with equal ease about people and places and ideas, he can be intimate and general, poetic and grave: and yet one has the feeling that it is all of a piece. It might be added, too, that this writing is in the French tradition of the journal; and this is not at all surprising coming from one who has so thoroughly adopted his beloved country that his work has sometimes been more generally appreciated abroad than at home. . . . Fowlie—in making his own

the great French tradition—has brought to his prose-writing something of the penetration and sweep which he had found in his French masters.

Robert Heywood. *Renascence*. Autumn, 1951. p. 110

Before visiting a foreign city or foreign country, we often avoid dull Baedekers and consult friends who have been there. . . . In dealing with the foreign domain of contemporary French letters, Wallace Fowlie offers just such informal advice to the prospective traveler. His *causeries* are lively, personal, and stimulating. . . . If Mr. Fowlie frequently remains superficial and spends space in anecdotes, this is inherent in his conversational manner which is at the opposite extreme from the academic monograph.

Justin O'Brien. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 17, 1957. p. 56

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FRANK, Waldo (1889–1967)

Waldo Frank's book [*Our America*] is a pessimistic analysis! The worst of it is, he has hit on the truth so many times. I am glad to see such justice done to Sherwood Anderson, but this extreme national consciousness troubles me. I cannot make myself think that these men like Dreiser, Anderson, Frost, etc., could have gone so far creatively had they read this book in their early days. After all, has not their success been achieved more through natural unconsciousness combined with great sensitiveness than with a mind so thoroughly propagandistic (is the word right?) as Frank's? But Frank has done a wonderful thing to limn the characters of Lincoln and Mark Twain as he has,—the first satisfactory words I have heard about either of them. The book will never be allowed to get dusty on the library shelves unless he has failed to give us the darkest shadows in his book,—and I don't think he has.

Hart Crane. Letter to Gorham Munson, Dec. 13, 1919, in *The Letters of Hart Crane*, edited by Brom Weber (Hermitage House). 1952. pp. 26–7

Both the novels of Waldo Frank, *The Dark Mother*, as well as the earlier *The Unwelcome Man*, are large and remarkable conflagrations. But they are conflagrations which pour forth less clear orange flame than choking black smoke. The presence of a literary force, a force potentially richer and more abundant than that of perhaps any other of the young American prosemen, is most indubitably announced in them. The traits of the man who could cast up the many deposits of bulky, energetic, and hot-blooded prose to be found in both, who could agglutinate words into the arresting forms scattered through them, entertain such piercingly personal visions, and construct, even theoretically, a complicated pattern of human relationships like that in *The Dark Mother*, must appear well-nigh grandiose to any clear-sighted person. In his most confused, most jejune moments one knows, always, that Frank is a passionate and powerful and living creature, a man who has something to express, and who is driven by a veritable need of expression. But, unfortunately, the immense narrative power of Frank is still intimated rather than revealed. His force is still a force tangled and uneducated.

Paul Rosenfeld. *Dial*. Jan., 1921. p. 95

Rahab . . . is a good deal more confused than profound. . . . the doctrine seems to be that what the vulgar call salvation comes through what the vulgar call sin. Both story and doctrine call for careful statement, but both instead are clapper clawed and mauled and dragged through keyholes and kept in the cellar until only God and Waldo Frank can guess what the row is all about. It is a pity, for Mr. Frank has at times a quite uncanny perception and a quite arresting candor. Where in fiction has the leaping flame of a man's jealousy been hinted at with a more fiery accuracy than on page 64 of this novel? And there is a vividness in a method which, eschewing narrative, darts from mood to mood, seen always from within the consciousness. But the total effect is not that of clear light; it is that of lights tangled and blinding; it is that of several films projected all at once upon the same sheet, and all flickering.

Carl Van Doren. *The Nation*. April 26, 1922. p. 497

One goes into a park and sits down, and immediately, if one is an artist, the park becomes a problem. It lies there. The individual feels his edges knocking improperly against it. He is sitting in somebody else's park. Then, if he is Waldo Frank, he starts remaking that park. Exorbitant characters appear, the skyline begins to churn, mad speeches are ground out. And we have ''John the Baptist,'' one of the most interesting stories of *City Block*. But such a park is a personal creation, and is statistically false; it is true

as a reflection of Waldo Frank's temperament, true in a sense that Mallarmé's fauns are true, but completely erroneous as a gauge of our environment.

My reason for pointing this out is a somewhat complicated one. But first of all, I feel that it provides us with a criterion for approaching Mr. Frank. Thus, we have the two possibilities: a book must be statistically true, a whole and proper valuation of life; or it must be true in the sense that Mallarmé's fauns are true, must be a beautiful possibility created in the mind of the artist. I have consistently objected that Mr. Frank does not qualify on condition one; life as he presents it is assiduously culled, the volitional element of the artist is over-emphasized. Or, to borrow from a colleague, M. Cowley, I should say that he has stacked the cards. However, if we admit this cheating, take it as a basis of our calculations, we must next inquire as to whether Mr Frank cheats dextrously; we shall not ask if he is false, but if he is *superbly* false. On the whole, I think he is not, for the two books under consideration are not *finally* beautiful. They lack just that element of cold carving, that bloodless autopsy of the emotions, which allows Mallarmé so near an approach to perfection.

Kenneth Burke. *Dial*. Oct. 22, 1922. pp. 450–1

It is about time that the truth was told about this kind of thing. Critics for the most part, while they are eager to stop real progress and the development of literature, are afraid to tell the truth when they are brought face to face with anything as noisy as this book, for fear ''there should be something in it.'' Any one who foams at the mouth may be gifted with prophecy. They need not be afraid in this case. Mr Frank is not a writer of genius. He has, however, talent and is interested in things, and if he would stop thinking about genius, and would try to exercise restraint and develop his talent, he would give us writing as admirable as the chapter from ''The Will of Saint and Sinner.'' In this chapter [in *Virgin Spain*] he discards all his faults and develops all his virtues. . . . It is a great pity that Mr Frank is not content to restrain himself and give us writing like this more often. He would deepen and widen his talent and develop his powers, which are real. His admirers are doing this writer the worst disservice in bolstering him up to works of noisy bombast. No amount of shouting will bring fire down from heaven; but a beautiful household fire is within the reach of this writer of talent, if he cares to work for it.

Sacheverell Sitwell. *Dial*. Jan. 27, 1926. pp. 64–5

. . . Frank wishes passionately to communicate his world view, his sense of the Whole, his religious vision, to an audience. Yet his paradox is that he writes in such a way that most of his readers cannot see his form for the style, cannot, this is to say, grasp his message, that of a human being valiantly striving to solve the meaning and aim of existence, because of the intrusion of his personality. He does not wish to be simply a writer's writer nor a self-communer who happens to please a coterie: yet he does not pay the price of consciously manipulating the reader's psychology and so conducting him *through* his ordinary impressions, associations, and prejudices to a new insight. . . . Frank has a less naive view of man in relation to the cosmos than the majority of his contemporaries, and he strives to formulate this view, to become aware of it. As an artist, he is distinguished in his conceptions of form: all his books have an astutely planned unity of larger organization. The two are related. Equally related are one's personality (a product mainly of education, taking that word in its widest sense) and style. And Frank's style shows so markedly the effects of artistic theories current to-day that it defeats his more profound intentions.

Gorham B. Munson. *Style and Form in American Prose* (Doubleday). 1929. pp. 184–5

Waldo David Frank's chosen method of writing, expressionism, is, after all is said, a way natural to him, at least in his rhapsodic moods—and they are frequent. It is failure to recognize this fact that is at the bottom of the frequent misunderstanding of the man and his purposes by the critics whose dislike for the mode prevents their getting at the matter of his work. It is a pity that this is so, because Frank's basic philosophy and ideas are good for all of us, especially now when any self-hood worth the keeping is in danger of being lost in the leveling process of standardization of thinking as well as of living.

John Jocelyn. *Sewanee Review*. Oct., 1932. p. 405

The strange career of Waldo Frank offers an instructive symbol of the intellectual fog through which America has blundered during the last two decades. A brilliant and ambitious critic, he has not been content merely to appraise books and literary forms; he has been driven by a nostalgia for the absolute to seek cosmic and abiding values, to frame a philosophy of life so comprehensive and organic that it would serve both as a religion and a *Weltanschauung*. What he sought in culture was not knowledge, but light and faith. He became a God-seeker, a passionate mystic who turned from the quest for a personal deity to embrace Humanity as God. Whatever he writes is permeated by the peculiar character of the man; everything that comes from his pen, be it impressions of travel, literary criticism, discussions of the drama or dance, is stamped with the same personal quality. No American writer today, not even Gertrude Stein, has a more individualized style and manner of thought. He is the most metaphysical of native critics—a strange mixture of mysticism rooted in the culture of the west, science employed against the pretensions of science, Marxism combined with a romantic conception of cosmic mystery. He is a visionary gifted with a turbid style which occasionally emits prophetic flashes of insight.

Charles I. Glicksberg. *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Jan., 1936. p. 13

Mr. Frank is one of those writers who tries to say more than he can. But no one can afford to dismiss the body of his thought smugly because the whole of it has been an attack on American smugness.

Max Lerner. *Saturday Review*. May 25, 1940. p. 3

. . .it is not only that Frank's poetic world—in which virtue and ''wholeness'' are achieved through naivety and ''darkness,'' through philosophical sexual raptures, metaphysical breasts and teleological wombs—is poetically inadmissible; practically and politically

it is even to be feared. If Frank criticizes the Marxian determinism as but a niggardly conception of man and the world, what he offers for its enrichment is a Marxian Rosicrucianism. His creation of ''higher'' realities leaves no reality whatsoever; he can play with radical politics, for example, until it ceases to be politics and becomes a kind of activistic Nirvana in which all spiritual burdens are laid down. . . .In short, Frank makes the familiar leap from the frying-pan of rationalistic determinism into the fire of mystic authoritarianism; it is a feat that will, I think, be emulated with increasing frequency in our time of political irrationalism, easy feeling and undisciplined moral fervor.

Lionel Trilling. *Kenyon Review*. Winter, 1940. pp. 96–7

Before passing from Frank's fiction to his cultural studies, one should note that Frank's experiments with form in the novel make him one of the important innovators of the American Renaissance. The studied imitation of the rhythms of Whitman and of the Song of Solomon in *Rahab*, which become free verse in *Holiday* and *Chalk Face*, have undeniably affected the prose of several novelists, notably Sherwood Anderson in *Many Marriages* and *Dark Laughter*. The expressionism of Frank, best exemplified in *City Block*, is alleged to have exerted an influence on O'Neill and Dos Passos, while it is apparent the pattern of the book has a genetic relationship to Elmer Rice's *Street Scene*. Frank's influence will keep him alive long after any legitimate interest in his ideas is dead. He has been a fountain of power—for others—in our time.

Oscar Cargill. *Intellectual America* (Macmillan). 1941. p. 674

Indeed, many of the now mature and middle-aged literary men of the present day were as profoundly impressed with *Our America* as [Hart] Crane confessed himself to be. There was one important exception, however. Frank stressed the importance of spiritual components in the new pioneering. When he called for realism in literature, it was a realism controlled by spiritual realities and inner searching and not by material factors. Only upon Crane of all his contemporaries did this spiritual necessity postulated by Frank exert a compelling force of its own, and only in his work do we see its flowering to any considerable degree.

Brom Weber. *Hart Crane* (Bodley). 1948. pp. 166–7

In Frank's early novels one observes the materials of the artist, scarcely integrated, just as they appear in his early critical evaluations of American culture. One discovers that Frank is, after all, going beyond his materials, imposing a philosophy of his own upon his ideal hero, a fictional archetype whom he has sought for in vain in his studies of historical and contemporary characters. This ideal man is in some way or other a rebel against the world of statistics and profits. . . . Waldo Frank's debt to Freud is extensive. We discover it at first in the early works, which, though sincere in intention, are immature in form. Their mass of inadequately assimilated facts are the raw materials which he is to use later in subtler form. In the course of his development several clues suggest that he has not thrown off the influence of Freud: his preoccupation with the unconscious life of his later characters is not merely a deeper study of motivation; for the unconscious of his central character is always the point to which events are referred. What-Frank *does* furnish is the creative means of victory over death—the ''mystic x'' which Freud hesitates to allow.

Frederick J. Hoffman. *Freudianism and the Literary Mind* (Louisiana State). 1957. pp. 257,263

The basis of all of Frank's writing is his sense of the unity of all things: this unifying force in the multiverse he calls God; not a being or an object, but an action, expressing itself through its parts, among which are persons, peoples, and the total dynamics of creation. Philosophically, he fits in with Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. He continues Emerson's concept of the Whole Man and Whitman's ''I'' who is both Walt Whitman and mankind. To Frank, achievement of the self, becoming a Person, conscious of oneself as a part of the Whole, involves recognition of being partial—existing only in relation to all other persons and all other things—and at the same time involves recognition of God—not fragmented, but entire—within oneself. The Person aware of God within him does not live ''in terms of the part as if it were the whole,'' but ''in terms of the Whole expressed through its parts.'' If God is within the Person, God can be within the People, and achievement of harmony in a society—harmony within itself and harmony with other societies—involves the same awareness on the part of a people. . . .In his later fiction, Frank has been engaged in demonstrating the analogy between a healthy society—a People—and a whole Person. In this too, he has been unconventional.

William Bittner. *The Novels of Waldo Frank* (Pennsylvania). 1958. pp. 16–17

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FREDERIC, Harold (1856–1898)

Frederic's understanding of racial and theological ideas is at times penetrating; for example, his analysis of the conflicting elements in the Irish character and his contrast of the Greek and the Hebrew ideal of life in Christianity. Frederic's picture of the Catholic Church is very interesting, but he is drawing with sympathy only

one element in it, that of the man who loves its artistic side and is not concerned with dogma. . . . The general effect of this book [*The Damnation of Theron Ware*] is to paint religions as necessary concessions to human weakness. But, being an artist, he does this without descending into crude caricature as Sinclair Lewis does in *Elmer Gantry*. His people are real, and he never allows them to become shrill or disgusting, however he may be turning their souls inside out. His satire is therefore all the more effective.

Arthur Hobson Quinn. *American Fiction* (Appleton). 1936. p. 452

In one of his most passionate novels, *Seth's Brother's Wife*, Frederic commented on the fact that American humor grew out of ''the grim, fatalist habit of seizing upon the grotesque side,'' and his bitterness made the most of it. His most famous novel, *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, is a mischievously written museum piece, persistently overrated because it was among the first American novels to portray an unfrocked clergyman and to suggest the disintegration of religious orthodoxy. But the unfrocked clergyman was to become as useful a symbol of the new era as the businessman. . . .

Alfred Kazin. *On Native Grounds* (Reynal). 1942. pp. 35–6

Frederic could agree with the age of Howells that the application of reason to passion could save; and *Seth's Brother's Wife* has a happy ending. When he came to investigate the growing complexities of other realms of the human mind, however, Frederic wrote not a comedy, but a tragedy: the story of the fall of a man, rather than his salvation, through illumination and knowledge: *The Damnation of Theron Ware*. . . . The really extraordinary objectivity of the author—the story was told strictly from the minister's point of view—involved the reader completely with the protagonist, so that he was unaware that the education of Theron Ware was anything but good; he was shown ''expanding, growing in all directions,'' and only gradually was it realized that what seemed improvement was, instead, moral degeneration.

Everett Carter. *Howells and the Age of Realism* (Lippincott). 1954. pp. 243–4

Many elements of the American Dream appear in this strong novel [*The Damnation of Theron Ware*] and participate in its vitality. There is the flouting of mere conventional morality, the belief in a scientific or rationalistic view of man and his relations, and the earnest faith in intelligence, human dignity, and freedom. There is also, initially, a firmly monistic sense of the interdependency of nature and spirit: both the rasping piety of the community and the personal inadequacy of Theron are introduced as functions of the environment. But, just as in *Seth's Brother's Wife*, the stream of moral earnestness separates from the stream of scientific analysis, and presently it appears that Frederic has slipped back into the simple formula of orthodoxy which says that a person who displays moral weakness is one of the damned. . . . What appears in the novel as the indignant condemnation of Theron for his moral deterioration began as Frederic's moral indignation with the small town. Because he did not have the technique to lay out the whole spiritual landscape, he funneled his passion into the study of Theron—and there it appears, transformed but still providing the novel's vitality and interest.

Charles C. Walcutt. *American Literary Naturalism, a Divided Stream* (Minnesota). 1956. p. 52

Satirical humor of a broader sort is the main virtue of . . . *The Damnation of Theron Ware*. . . . This interesting but recently overrated novel is at once an effort of critical realism—dealing as had Frederic's first novel, *Seth's Brother's Wife* . . . , with the decadence of village life and faith—and a problem novel. . . .Frederic is justly remembered as a forerunner in provincial satire of Sinclair Lewis.

Warner Berthoff. *The Ferment of Realism: American Literature, 1884–1919* (Free). 1965. pp. 131–2

Possessed of an imaginative knowledge of his home county, in which character was inseparable from ethnic, religious, historical, political, and social conditions, he was able to follow Howells' lead in producing a fiction of the commonplace, yet to surpass the dean in rendering a sense of communal density. Not until Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County did American literature have a region so fully and intimately explored as Frederic's fictionalization of his native area—the land around the invented cities of Tyre, Tecumseh, and Thessaly. In *Seth's Brother's Wife* (1887); *The Lawton Girl* (1890); *In the Valley* (1890), a historical romance about the region in colonial times; *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896); and several collections of short stories, Harold Frederic, sitting in London, detached from the immediate political maneuverings of upstate New York, brought into existence a fully articulated human community. The peculiar quality of rural brutality as well as rural speech, the way the political boss Beekman rules the countryside as well as the town, the relation of the best families to the processes of making public policy, the aldermanic view of responsibility, the contrasting social roles played by the Methodist and the Episcopal Churches, the Dutch resentment of the English settlers who had migrated from Massachusetts, and the code of the masculine small-town world as opposed to the public code of sexual morality, all emerge dynamically; they are, in Frederic's pages, so rich a context of action that the American would appear to be comprehensible only in terms of his dwelling place and the multifold allegiances and enmities that he has inherited with it.

Larzer Ziff. *The American 1890s* (Viking). 1966. p. 209

In literary quality, the stories [*Stories of York State*] are competently handled for their time, with a surprising lack of mannered extremities: the clichés of feeling and expression, the incredible manipulations of plot and motivation, and the frequent sentimentality strike one as much less offensive than they might be. Although these seem to be negative virtues, the relative unobtrusiveness of the ''period'' features gives the stories a durability certainly not evident in the minor works of Mark Twain, for example.

The positive value of the stories lies in their appeal to Civil War enthusiasts, to antiquarians of the area, and to those who enjoy regional literature in general (if such readers exist at all). . . .

The stories possess two particular features which we often have assumed either the invention or the personal property of one or

another contemporary writer; but this ghost, when he hears boasts of newfangled inventions, replies, ''Oh, we had the same thing when I was young.'' For example, the persistence of the naïve, usually orphan, adolescent narrator . . . suggests that Hemingway and Salinger are a bit later in the field than is often realized. In addition, Frederic's treatment of a semi-imaginary county and its towns in these stories as well as in three of his novels, where place and family names recur, takes a bit of the edge off enthusiastic claims for Faulkner's giant achievement in the same kind of effort.

Frank Baldanza. *Southern Review*. Winter, 1969. pp. 250–1

The novels of Harold Frederic have a breadth that clearly goes beyond what the epithet ''pioneer realist'' suggests. Although much of his fiction was set in the same small area of upper New York State, his concerns were far from regional. He often returned to the hills and valleys of his home, but he always looked beyond them. His reputation must rest most heavily on *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, a work whose greatness has yet to be fully appreciated, despite the current revival of interest. As long as it is commonly thought to be what Van Wyck Brooks' edition proclaims it, a classic of realism ''which exposes the cultural barrenness of the small town,'' the novel will probably never attract the kind of reader who would most appreciate its fine and subtle ironies, its complex and original treatment of the most American of themes—the ambiguous relationship between innocence and experience.

The other novels deserve wider attention too. Not all of them, to be sure, not *In the Valley*, *The Return of the O'Mahoney*, and *March Hares*. But the remaining works have in rewarding measure the artistry and intelligence which distinguish *The Damnation of Theron Ware*. From *Seth's Brother's Wife* through *The Market-Place* they tell a story worth telling, a paradoxical tale of an innocence that discovers itself endowed with new ideas, new opportunities, new powers, only to discover itself as still innocent, still limited, still banal.

Austin Briggs, Jr. *The Novels of Harold Frederic* (Cornell). 1969. pp. 211–2

Frederic tended on occasion to write dramatized essays rather than novels. Not only that, but he was curiously inept with essay materials and in these novels he was often betrayed by the unresolved conflict between his ideology and the dramatic reality which embodied most faithfully his deepest understanding of the nature of men. It was only in his last three years that this conflict was resolved and his mature genius found expression. When it did, his achievement was too far in advance of current attitudes to be comprehensible to his public. . . .

Frederic's achievement lies in the sensitivity and power with which he probed the naïveté and inconsistency of the American Dream and announced its inevitable collapse in the face of the new order of complexity of the twentieth century. In this he surpassed all his contemporaries in his ability to dramatize, allegorize, and mythicize the coming fall from innocence. In addition, testing his vision against his own experience, he understood that a loss of innocence might not bring a dignified, saddened wisdom, but might transform youthful egotism into debased cynicism, and ultimately into predatory rapacity. Thus Frederic wrote for the twentieth century, not his own, and in his greatest works achieved a vigorous and alarming vision of the civilization to come which has, as we can now see, verified his worst fears and proved him to be one of the most perceptive and important novelists of his time.

Stanton Garner. *Harold Frederic* (Minnesota). 1969. p. 45

My own view is that *Gloria Mundi* illustrates an unresolved ambivalence toward the issue posed by all three of the principal women—and especially by Frances Bailey—that of female emancipation, and also a self-contradictory attitude in Frederic between his observations of human behavior and his will to believe in the possibility of human fulfillment. Furthermore, these problems of ambivalence as regards both topics are characteristic of his work more generally, and they account both for certain cruxes in individual works and for much of the intellectual interest and tension of the novels. An instance is Frederic's shifting moral attitude toward Celia Madden between *The Damnation of Theron Ware* and *The Market-Place*. The structure of *Gloria Mundi* is a negative example. We have here a portrait of human frustration upon which the will to be happy, to believe that love conquers or resolves all, is super-imposed in the form of the fairy tale. The traditional resolution of the romance (with the inheritance, the title, and the marriage) partially obscures both the architectonic structure, the dialectical character, and the irresolution of the novel of ideas.

Jean Frantz Blackall. *Markham Review*. May, 1972. p. 46

Frederic's War stories expressed all that [Stephen] Crane said they did. They also reflected a tacit bias that Crane left unmentioned. Far from celebrating the War as a holy cause, Frederic treated it as unmitigated disaster, and his stories are probably among the earliest examples of fiction written by a Northern writer of distinction which was not simply against war, as Crane's was, but against *the* War. . . .

Frederic is at his best in depicting the confused reactions of the villagers to the distant savagery. The ferocious casualties suffered by Oneida County contingents in the Peninsular campaigns alone stunned their families and friends. How much of these times Frederic actually remembered and how much he simply reconstructed from latter-day recollections of others it is hard to say, but he recreates as few writers have ever managed to do the atmosphere of a bereft community mourning its dead and swept up ''in a hysterical whirl of emotions—now pride, now horror, now bitter wrath on top.''

Daniel Aaron. *The Unwritten War* (Knopf). 1973. pp. 220–1

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Correspondence of Harold Frederic, 1977; *The Civil War Stories of Harold Frederic*, 1992

FRIEDMAN, Bruce Jay (1930–)

The peculiar pressure that inflates this book [*Stern*] to the bursting point is created by the author's relentless juxtaposition of the inadequacy of the common notion of manliness with the unavoidable compulsion of the hero to judge himself by it. The texture of the book is essentially poetic; it is the poetry of the feminine, accepting, creative personality challenged from without and within by the necessity to be a man and defend one's home and family against forces which are probably insuperable. . . . The terrible thing about Stern's fantasies—the quality which makes them grip and hurt—is that they have a large foundation in fact. Could Stern use the history of this century to soothe away his nightmares? The fact of the program shadows every page of the book. But of course Stern's Jewishness is just a special instance of a general fear and trembling. . . . Friedman is nervously alive to every bit of brutality that men grab to get through their lives untouched; he is wide open to the comedy and sadness that attend a man who will be touched.

Jeremy Larner. *The Nation*. Dec. 1, 1962. pp. 380–1

Stern was a small but brilliant book, kept from an absolute triumph only by a late flagging of impulse and decisiveness, but wonderfully consistent and revelatory for most of its length. Friedman's second novel is brilliant, too, largely in ways that its predecessor broke ground for. It confirms the feeling that his comic gifts are almost unique among writers of his generation, since they do not depend, as nearly everyone else's do, on contrivance or exaggeration; they do not press reality to yield up arbitrary and exotic charades but release it, through purely verbal agencies, into its inherent sense of displacement and sad, domestic absurdity.

Yet something is wrong with *A Mother's Kisses*—on a very high level, but wrong. It is a much less imagined and considered work than *Stern*, having clearly been appropriated from what one assumes is Friedman's own past. And this results in a failure of *transformation*, a failure to metamorphosize personal history into present vision.

Richard Gilman. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Aug. 23, 1964. p. 5

Friedman has nothing of the cleverness of [Philip] Roth; he lacks Bellow's intellectualism altogether. Unlike Malamud, his people don't even have connections to a life of the past. . . . Friedman uses no props: his people simply lead ash-can lives. . . . What makes Friedman more interesting than most of Malamud, Roth and Bellow is the sense he affords of possibilities larger than the doings and undoings of the Jewish urban bourgeois, which, after all, comprises but an infinitesimal aspect of American life. What makes him more important is that he writes out of the viscera instead of the cerebrum. What makes him more dangerous is that while they distribute prose designed by careful planning for careful living, Friedman really doesn't know what he's doing. . . . Bruce Jay Friedman is that rarity, a compulsive writer whose innocence makes his flaws of greater value, ultimately, than the perfections of skilled mechanics.

Nelson Algren. *The Nation*. Sept. 21, 1964. pp. 142–3

Stern, it seemed to me, was nothing more than promising because its situation and tone were so totally conventional. It was good because intelligent and unpretentious, but I think his second book [*A Mother's Kisses*] shows more encouraging signs. Here mama dominates, primarily her son Joseph, who wants to go to college and ends up at Kansas Land, and though mama is drawn strictly within the confines of the type, any book that ends up at Kansas Land cannot be accused of having been written before, not even by Malamud. Besides, Friedman is trying to whoop up his style, not in itself a good thing, but it shows he is aiming at more than simple jokes and tears.

Roger Sale. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1964–1965. p. 615

No young writer is more frightened than Bruce Jay Friedman. From the first pages of his first novel, *Stern*, he has been using fiction as juju—to control or appease or amuse the pressing uglinesses of modern life. Superfluously, I note that his work is such good art that it also functions for us or else he would be a mere autistic diarist. . . . *Stern*, movingly and bitterly, fixes—one may say, immobilizes—the ridiculousness of anti-Semitism and the way it can make Jews ridiculous. In his first book of stories, *Far from the City of Class*, assorted fears and fallacies are tickled into momentary lulls. In his second novel, *A Mother's Kisses*, he depicts the possessiveness of motherhood as a hilarious horror, with the Bosch-like image of a young man tied by an umbilical cord to a gaping womb that he drags after him as he flees it.

Now Friedman publishes a book of stories, *Black Angels*, in which he pushes, or is pushed, past black humor into black fantasy. In the past, like other black humorists, he has had fantastic visions of reality; most of these new stories are realistic visions of fantasy.

Stanley Kauffmann. *New Republic*. Oct. 8, 1966. p. 20

Friedman's humor is more reductionist than [Saul] Bellow's or [Isaac] Rosenfeld's; that is to say, it is less humane. In works of complex irony, like Italo Svevo's *Confessions of Zeno*, the narrator offers several alternative explanations for his actions, contrasting his motives with others' interpretations of those motives, and with the unanticipated end results. The idea emerges of man as an intricate, irreducible being who is both funnier and more precious than he ordinarily appears. But the black humor of *Stern* explains away all motives, presenting a view of man that is necessarily meaner and more circumscribed. The final pages of the book show Stern's overflowing sympathy, which is *almost* recognized as the manifestation of a great soul. . . . Stern's capacity to admit the humanity of his adversary, his vision of the enemy as just another ''refugee,'' could have made him a moral hero. Instead he is cut down to size in the final paragraph where all this emotion is exposed for the theatrical extravagance the author finds it to be.

The book remains critical of the protagonist and uses the weapons of satire to deflate him. Nevertheless, even Stern's

ineffectual sensitivity is healing. If at the end he is still not at home in the world, he is at least more at home in his home, as husband and father and man.

Ruth R. Wisse. *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero* (Chicago). 1971. pp. 89–90

Friedman's world is ominously dependent on chance, a world of inconsequential meetings and partings. The future ceases to exist as an estimable series of actions. The categories of time and space fail to define the limits of perception, leaving Stern and Joseph forever vulnerable to the indefinites of unfolding experience. As in the involved world of television defined by Marshall McLuhan, so in the would-be conformist worlds of *Stern* and *A Mother's Kisses* discontinuity and simultaneity have displaced uniformity and consecutiveness. Hence the absence in Friedman's stories of family history, of sense of place, of names (what is Stern's first name? Joseph's last? Joseph's father's?), of anything other than the rudiments of narrative succession; and contrariwise an emphasis on the terrifying involutions of the moment. Under the circumstances not to feel anxiety is not to be human.

Max F. Schulz. *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties* (Ohio Univ. Pr.). 1973. pp. 107–8

A number of our toughest novelists have gone so far in the direction of comprehensive in-joking, cosmic cynicism, urbane oversoul that they've out-toughed themselves, out-orbited modernity, and checked themselves back in with the basics—parents, children, marriage, friendship, gutted tradition. Their over-experienced, flailing heroes have reeled through all the circles of our hip Inferno and are now ready to retest their reactions to certain establishment values even if the retesting process hurts. And it does hurt.

Case in point: Bruce Jay Friedman's unheroic but swinging compendium of vulnerabilities named Harry Towns [in *About Harry Towns*]. . . .

A book . . . of brilliant chapters, a series of episodes with little development, change that is no real change, irresolute resolution. Harry writes scripts for Hollywood and scripts for the lives of himself and everyone else. The professional scripts sell and are evidently successful; the others are aborted by flaky circumstances. Friedman solves nothing for his well-meaning protagonist, who, on the last page, senses that maybe he ought to go to Sofia and knows that he must ''try like hell not to get hit with a brick.'' Even Ulysses might settle for that in 1974.

James R. Frakes. *New York Times Book Section*. June 23, 1974. p. 32

About halfway through the first act of Bruce Jay Friedman's newest fever dream of a comedy, *Have You Spoken to Any Jews Lately?* a man in the audience explodes with, more or less metaphorically speaking, words supplied by the playwright. ''This is a cheap commercialization of this century's most barbarous act,'' the man shouts to the actors. ''Have you no shame?'' . . .

Not really.

Shame isn't much in evidence on the stage of the American Jewish Theater, where *Have You Spoken to Any Jews Lately?* opened last night. Yet there's a lot of anger, fear, and compassion, sometimes expressed in terms that are as horrific as they are funny. Mr. Friedman is a novelist with sterling credits (*Stern*, *A Mother's Kisses*), and playwright (*Scuba Duba* and *Steam-bath*), who has recently been working in movies. Maybe that's why he likes to push his luck when he finds himself in the comparative freedom of the Off Off Broadway theater.

Have You Spoken to Any Jews Lately? is about Jack Horowitz, born and bred in the Bronx of devout Jewish parents. He's married to a beautiful, blond Roman Catholic, Flannery O'Halloran, and the father of an off-stage daughter. Chrissy, who has begun to bug him with questions about who she is. What, exactly, are her roots? Her ethnic obligations? . . .

Though *Have You Spoken to Any Jews Lately?* is loaded with Jewish manners, lore, figures of speech and history, it would be a mistake to consider the play as narrowly ethnic as it sounds. Beneath its engagingly disreputable particulars, the play is another consideration of the same kind of moral aimlessness Sam Shepard examined in *Simpatico*.

When American social and economic life was dominated by people sharing the same northern European heritage, one could speak of this country as a great melting pot. Today, it's apparent that we don't all melt down at the same speed and to the same consistency. Somehow we have to learn to accommodate that fact, Mr. Friedman seems to say. Otherwise, chaos.

Vincent Canby. *New York Times Book Section*. Jan. 14, 1995, pp. C13, 18

There are 47 [stories] in this collection [*The Collected Short Fiction of Bruce Jay Friedman*], published between 1953 and 1995. . . . Mr. Friedman's stories with their whammo endings, tend to divide into two kinds: the first leave you whispering, ''Wow''; the second go whistling over your head like an artillery round and leave you muttering ''Huh?'' . . . Out of nearly 50 stories, my ''Wow'' count came to 12, the ''Huh?'' to only a very few, leaving many pleasurable others in between (as well as one or two clunkers). . . .

Mr. Friedman's stories are about psychiatrists, Jewish mothers, Hollywood, death, the Air Force, cocaine, sex, getting cheated on, suicide, guilt, and exquisitely bizarre situations. . . . Mr. Friedman's absurdities amount to a kind of Jobian—as in Job, he of the dunghill—querulousness in the face of higher universal incomprehensibilities. . . .

Mr. Friedman has been likened to everyone from J. D. Salinger to Woody Allen. This collection should finally establish him for what he is: Bruce Jay Friedman, sui generis and no mean thing. No further comparisons are necessary.

Christopher Buckley. *New York Times Book Review*. Nov. 5, 1995, p. 9

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FROST, Robert (1875–1963)

Mr. Frost's book (*A Boy's Will*) is a little raw, and has in it a number of infelicities; underneath them it has the tang of the New Hampshire woods, and it has just this utter sincerity. It is not post-Miltonic or post-Swinburnian or post-Kiplonian. This man has the good sense to speak naturally and to paint the thing, the thing as he sees it. And to do this is a very different matter from gunning about for the circumplectious polysyllable. . . . One reads the book for the ''tone,'' which is homely, by intent, and pleasing, never doubting that it comes direct from his own life, and that no two lives are the same.

Ezra Pound. *Poetry*. May, 1913. pp. 72–4

''Yankees is what they always were,'' sings Mr. Frost. His New England is the same old New England of the pilgrim fathers—a harsh, austere, velvet-coated-granite earth. . . . To present this earth, these people, the poet employs usually a blank verse as massive as they, as stript of all apologies and adornments. His poetry is sparing, austere, even a bit crabbed at times; but now and then it lights up with a sudden and intimate beauty; a beauty springing from life-long love and intuition.

Harriet Monroe. *Poetry*. Jan., 1917. pp. 203–4

The Frostian humour is peculiarly important for America. No other of our poets has shown a mood at once so individual and so neighborly. Moreover, the comparative thinness of American literature, its lack of full social body and flavor, is due to the extraordinary interval between our artistry and our national life. Our nation is widespreading and unformed, tangled in raw freedom and archaic conventionalities. Our poetry, now responding to and now reacting from our national life, tends to be rather banal, or rather esoteric—in either case, thin. Mr. Frost's work is notably free from that double and wasting tendency. His own ambiguity is vital: it comes from artistic integrity in rare union with fluent sympathy. His poetic humour is on the highway toward the richer American poetry of the future, if that is to be.

G. R. Elliott. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. July, 1925. pp. 214–5

Mr. Frost's poetry was first awarded critical approval because it was thought to be in revolt against something at a time when poetry must be in revolt. . . . Poetry must now not be anything like Imagism and must not even revolt, but must be the kind of poetry that Mr. Pound or, more purely and quintessentially, Mr. Eliot wrote. . . . It is quite true that Frost does not write like Eliot, Pound, Auden, or Spender. Fools may conclude that he is therefore a bad or an unimportant poet, but intelligent people look at the poetry he has written. When you do that, unless your nerves are sealed with wax, you immediately and overwhelmingly perceive that it is the work of an individual and integrated poet, a poet who is like no one else, a major poet not only in regard to this age but in regard to our whole literature, a great American poet.

Bernard DeVoto. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 1, 1938. pp. 4, 14

If he does not strike far inward, neither does he follow the great American tradition (extending from Whitman through Dos Passos) of standing on a height to observe the panorama of nature and society. Let us say that he is a poet neither of the mountains nor of the woods, although he lives among both, but rather of the hill pastures, the intervales, the dooryard in autumn with the leaves swirling, the closed house shaking in the winter storms (and who else has described these scenes more accurately, in more lasting colors?). In the same way, he is not the poet of New England in its great days, or in its late-nineteenth-century decline (except in some of his earlier poems); he is rather a poet who celebrates the diminished but prosperous and self-respecting New England of the tourist home and the antique shop in the abandoned gristmill. And the praise heaped on Frost in recent years is somehow connected in one's mind with the search for ancestors and authentic old furniture.

Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*. Sept. 18, 1944. pp. 346–7

Frost . . . may be described as a good poet in so far as he may be said to exist, but a dangerous influence in so far as his existence is incomplete. He is in no sense a great poet, but he is at times a distinguished and valuable poet. . . . He is the nearest thing we have to a poet laureate, a national poet; and this fact is evidence of the community of thought and feeling between Frost and a very large part of the American literary public. . . . The principles which have hampered Frost's development, the principles of Emersonian and Thoreauistic Romanticism, are the principles which he has openly espoused, and they are widespread in our culture. Until we abandon them in favor of better, we are unlikely to produce many poets greater than Frost.

Yvor Winters. *Sewanee Review*. Autumn, 1948. p. 596

Creatively, there are at least three Frosts—the actual artist, the legendary public character, posed and professed, and the latent, potential poet that might have been. . . . Frost himself all through his work, more or less, offers clues as to the kind of thing he might have done, the line of a frightful and fascinating interest that he almost dared to follow. The road not taken. . . . One wishes he had been a little less fearful of evil tidings, less scared of his own desert places. One wishes he had wasted less time being sane and wholesome, and gone really all out, farther than he did beyond the boundaries of New England's quaintness into its areas of violence, madness, murder, rape, and incest. . . . It is this night side of life and nature that Frost's art has, I think, scamped reporting, and not because he did not know it; no American poet, nor Poe in his stories, has come closer to Baudelaire.

Rolfe Humphries. *The Nation*. July 23, 1949. pp. 92–3

The controlled development of his talent, and the finality and grace of statement in his best poems, are of moral no less than artistic

value, exemplary for all who practice this art. . . . His vein of romantic triviality and perversity is not hard to distinguish, and it may be indulged.

That stern critic, Yvor Winters, considers Frost an Emersonian and therefore untrustworthy sage; but he would probably concede that on occasion Frost has had a harder edge and eye than Emerson, more humor, and more of the fear of God. It would be going too far to think of him as a religious poet, but his work tends towards wholeness, and thus towards a catholicism of the heart.

Robert Fitzgerald. *New Republic*. Aug. 8, 1949. p. 18

His cheerfulness is the direct opposite of Mr. Babbitt's or even of Mr. Pickwick's. It is a Greek cheerfulness. And the apparent blandness of the Greeks was, as Nietzsche showed in his *Birth of Tragedy* the result of their having looked so deeply into life's tragic meaning that they had to protect themselves by cultivating a deliberately superficial jolliness in order to bear the unbearable. Frost's benign calm, the comic mask of a whittling rustic, is designed for gazing—without dizziness—into a tragic abyss of desperation. . . . In the case of this great New England tragic poet, the desperation is no less real for being a quiet one, as befits a master of overwhelming understatements.

Peter Viereck. *Atlantic Monthly*. Oct., 1949. p. 68

Frost is that rare thing, a complete or representative poet, and not one of the brilliant partial poets who do justice, far more than justice, to a portion of reality, and leave the rest of things forlorn. When you know Frost's poems you know surprisingly well how the world seemed to one man, and what it was to seem that way: the great Gestalt that each of us makes from himself and all that isn't himself is very clear, very complicated, very contradictory in the poetry. The grimness and awfulness and untouchable sadness of things, both in the world and in the self, have justice done to them in the poems, but no more justice than is done to the tenderness and love and delight; and everything in between is represented somewhere too, some things willingly and often and other things only as much—in Marianne Moore's delicate phrase—''as one's natural reticence will allow.''

Randall Jarrell. *Kenyon Review*. Autumn, 1952. pp. 560–1

I think of Robert Frost as a terrifying poet. Call him, if it makes things any easier, a tragic poet, but it might be useful every now and then to come out from under the shelter of that literary word. The universe that he conceives is a terrifying universe. . . . But the *people*, it will be objected, the *people* who inhabit this possibly terrifying universe! About them there is nothing that can terrify; surely the people in Mr. Frost's poems can only reassure us by their integrity and solidity. . . . They affirm *this* of themselves: that they are what they are, that this is their truth, and that if the truth be bare, as truth often is, it is far better than a lie. For me the process by which they arrive at that truth is always terrifying. The manifest America of Mr. Frost's poems may be pastoral; the actual America is tragic.

Lionel Trilling. *Partisan Review*. Summer, 1959. pp. 451–2

The conditions which circumscribe Frost's poems are those of a world not yet dominated by urban, industrialized, bureaucratized culture—the very world which, seeing its inevitable coming, Emerson and his kind strove to confront and save for man before it would be too late. Frost glances at this world, only to turn to a one he knows better. In that world the proper life style—which in turn generates the literary style—is that of Frost's characteristic protagonists: individuals who again and again are made to face up to the fact of their individualism as such; who can believe that a community is no more than the sum of the individuals who make it up; who are situated so as to have only a dim sense, even that resisted mightily, of the transformations which the individual might have to undergo if he is to live fully in the modern world and still retain his identity as an individual. But, of course, Frost's protagonists refuse to live fully in the modern world and will have little or nothing to do with such transformations. Frost's work is in the end a series of expressions of that refusal and assessments of its cost.

Roy Harvey Pearce. *Kenyon Review*. Spring, 1961. pp. 261–2

Let the School System make a whited saint of Mr. Frost if it must; and as, alas, it will. The man himself remains an *hombre*. If he is half radiance he is also half brimstone, and praise be. His best poems will endure precisely because they are terrible—and holy. All primal fire is terrible—and holy. Mr. Frost could climb to heaven and hear the angels call him brother—*frater*, they would probably say—but he could as well climb Vesuvius and equally hear every rumble under his feet call out to him. The darkness in his poems is as profound as the light in them is long. They are terrible because they are from life at a depth into which we cannot look unshaken.

John Ciardi. *Saturday Review*. March 24, 1962. pp. 15–6

A question arises from Frost's *Collected Poems* . . . : what are the possibilities for a poetry based upon nothing more than a shared sense of human fact? Is this enough? Will it serve instead of those other ''certainties'' which are, for many readers, insecure?

Frost would seem to answer ''Yes.'' Yeats relied on nervous improvisations or religious patterns hired for the occasion of the poem. . . . Frost committed himself to the common ground he *knew* existed between himself and his putative reader. He knew that if he were to tell a pathetic story in a few common words whose weightings were part of our blood, we would respond feelingly. And that was something. Frost has spent a lifetime seeing how much he could say on those terms. He is the poet most devoted to bare human gesture.

Denis Donoghue. *The Yale Review*. Winter, 1963. p. 216

Both poets [Frost and Wallace Stevens] accept the physical world of positive, scientific, fact; both put aside comforting myths that deny the evidence of the senses, and for both truth is many observable truths. But both have experienced transforming moments in which the imagination creates undeniable reality of another sort. Both Frost and Stevens have given up Romantic metaphysics, but they are engaged in a sophisticated balancing act of enjoying the Romantic dream while 'having just escaped from

the truth,' from 'the doctrine of this landscape.' (Stevens: 'The Latest Freed Man.') The poems also offer a clear index to the difference between the two writers, in that Frost concludes with 'parts of a world' as 'measured by eye'; Stevens, with a 'supreme fiction.' Stevens being closer to the Romantics leaves us in the 'strange world' of illusion (though we know from the start that it is one), and Frost takes us out of it (though we know what the illusion is like).

Reuben Brower. *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (Oxford). 1963. pp. 94–5

And here, in the abrasive play among the poems, there emerges, at least as a personal solution, a rather whimsical figure, the ''literate farmer.'' (I take the term from the poem ''The Literate Farmer and the Planet Venus.'') This figure reveals himself at times as the clown, at times as the grotesque sage (''the tramp astrologer''), but eventually we see him as the fallible yet fulfilled man in ''West Running Brook.'' His essential quality is that of a kinetic mind always in motion: the humorist yielding to fantasist in turn yielding to thinker. He is always in part the bright schoolboy—some patient soul ought to count Frost's references to schoolboys, college boys—the mercurial tease, the enquirer. The most notable facet of the personality, however, is the erudition, all the outdoor table talk, which seems at first glance at odds with probability. . . . when the literate farmer sends out his thought like a sonic signal and awaits the echo, he waits for the abstract to touch the enduring surface of nature—and to return; to return transformed. And this transformation buys a lyric intensity which perhaps diminishes the claims of realism or appropriateness. But the literate farmer has a stronger claim for acceptability. There is, after all, a tradition of the thoughtful country man in New England.

Radcliffe Squires. *The Major Themes of Robert Frost* (Michigan). 1963. pp. 67–8

In some quarters, even his acknowledged masterpieces have been tried and found wanting, at least in the light of his apparent self-indulgence in the role of national cultural hero. Yet the facts, the poetic facts, speak for themselves; the poems must be left to survive the spate of memoirs, commentary, letters, juvenilia, and appreciations, that has already swelled to something more than a spring freshet. Much of this material will prove valuable in the long run; but it will take a scholar of extraordinary gifts—one who is an acute reader of the poetry as well as a disinterested observer of the 20th century literary scene—to separate the trivia from the essentials, the useless from the useful. And because the trivial is sometimes useful, his task will be all the more difficult.

Samuel French Morse. *Poetry*. July, 1964. p. 254

If these letters are used initially to clarify discrepancies between the mythic and actual Robert Frost, as is hoped, certain warnings are in order lest the general public jump from one false extreme of assumption to another. Those who knew the poet largely from his poetry and his public appearances—and who take pleasure in remembering the evidence of his affirmations, encouragements, cherishings, tenderness, humor, wit, playfulness, and joviality—may not be prepared to see how often his private correspondence reveals periods of gloom, jealousies, obsessive resentments, sulking, displays of temper, nervous rages, and vindictive retaliations. Partly because he lacked confidence in himself, he suspected the presence of enemies everywhere, and he frequently indulged his passion for hurting even those he loved. ''I'm a mere selfish artist most of the time,'' he admitted to one correspondent.

All of his self-deprecations complicate rather than simplify the problem of understanding Robert Frost. They suggest, through a mingling of frankness and guilt, his own constant awareness of the tension between his commitments as an artist and as a human being. If the artist in him demanded priority, as it almost always did, he never forgot that he had made two different kinds of promises and that he wanted to keep them both.

Lawrance Thompson. Introduction to *The Selected Letters of Robert Frost* (Holt). 1965. pp. viii–ix

The aim in Frost's poetry is to develop a human act which has meaning in terms of the world man really lives in. The first step is to find out what kind of world it really is. The world Frost discovers, and he depicts the making of this discovery in many nature lyrics, is not friendly to man's great hopes, dreams and needs. But to despair in it is *not* the human answer to the grim world discovered. . . .

On the other hand, grandiose, sustained or programmatic actions are not the answer either, for this is a world in which such actions can be initiated only through blindness or willful self-deception, neither of which states accords with Frost's picture of ''mind.'' What is possible is the small gesture, which, however, must be unremittingly repeated. The human life is not heroic in an epic sense. It is a life of staying.

This solution is certainly not transcendental. This is not a life in conformity with nature, nor a life striving to be merged into nature. On the contrary, it is rather an endless battle against the decaying flux which nature, lacking mind, is continually victim to and therefore continually illustrates. Because the flux endures as long as existence endures, the battle against it is endless.

Nina Baym. *American Quarterly*. Winter, 1965. pp. 722–3

Frost's innate Emersonianism never showed as plainly as when he observed Emerson's directive to ''feel all confidence in himself, and never to defer to the popular cry.'' When some act of government, or fashion, or personality was being cried up by half the populace and cried down by the rest, and the impression was left that all history depended upon the moment, the resultant crisis provided the test of the self-reliant individual. ''Let him not quit his belief,'' advised Emerson, ''That a popgun is a popgun, though the ancient and honorable of the earth affirm it to be the crack of doom.'' Thus it was for Frost with the Imagism of the World War I years, the art-for-art's sake of the 1920's, the social consciousness of the 1930's, the superpatriotism of the forties. In none of these seductive pools did Frost more than wet his toes.

Philip L. Gerber. *Robert Frost* (Twayne). 1966. p. 69

Throughout Frost's poetry the reader senses a struggle between the natural and human realms that is demarcated by a host of familiar emblems—walls, brooks, bridges, ice—which simultaneously separate and link the combatants. The oft-noticed conservatism of

Frost's statements—the refusal to tread either out far or in deep, or the fact that the swinging birches never swing out too far but always return to a middle range—is in fact a kind of phenomenological ''trimming.'' For the problem of defining a poetic ''self,'' with all its attendant vocational questions, while simultaneously exploring the contours of the self-in-the-world, provides the charm for so much of Frost's personal and artistic reminiscence, while simultaneously giving his poetry a unique spatial configuration.

Jan B. Gordon in *Modern American Poetry*, ed. Jerome Mazzaro (McKay). 1970. pp. 61–2

''Humor is the most engaging cowardice.'' Although Frost's manner is not always humorous, and although much of his ironic defensiveness represents . . . a conscious pragmatism, an awareness of the moral and psychological value of a humorous perspective, this statement perhaps sums up best of all why Frost is not among the great poets, though he is among the very good ones. We reserve greatness for ''believers''—in no matter what. Frost's concern ''not to set down an idea that is of [his] own thinking,'' but rather ''to give it as in character'' certainly made for liveliness, immediacy, and variety in his work. He greatly extended the ''sound'' of poetry. But all too often the ''voice'' of a poem acts as a mask, ''simply a kind of guardedness,'' shielding the poet from the full implications of his serious subjects and preventing any real intellectual grappling with them. . . .

Apart from the interpretation of individual poems, a proper attention to the tones of voice in his poetry enables us to appreciate more exactly the nature of Frost's distinctive contribution to American literature. The sheer variety of sound in Frost's poetry makes most other poets seem one-dimensional. Working with the cadences of New England speech, and declining ''music'' in favor of ''the sound of the talking voice,'' Frost ranged in tone from the lyric to the narrative, from the dramatic to the meditative, from the ''terrifying'' to the humorous. All the fun's in how you say a thing.

Elaine Barry. *Robert Frost* (Ungar). 1973. pp. 15–7

Let there be no confusion about the particular relationship that I claim for Frost and the modern tradition. Though Frost read William James, and through James came into contact with a number of the salient themes of modernist philosophy and aesthetics, I doubt that Frost was ''influenced'' in the sense that historicists used to say that imaginative writers were influenced or ''shaped'' by the ''intellectual backgrounds of the times.'' My understanding is that writers are rarely influenced in that way; they learn almost nothing from philosophers, aestheticians, and literary critics. What happens is that they sometimes read a philosopher (or even a literary critic) and find their own intuitions about things reflected discursively, and hence in that sense confirmed. Modernism becomes the historical ambience of Frost's work in the sense that it is what one comes to conceptually if one moves outward from his poems in an attempt to define the intellectual milieu of the kinds of experience found there.

Frost is not modernist because he holds self-consciously to certain ideas which we identify with this or that modern philosopher because there are few ideas as such in his poetry (modernist or otherwise). Properly speaking his poems do not ''belong'' to the intellectual environment we call ''the modern mind'' because ''the modern mind'' does not have independent, Platonic existence. It is a thing that the poems themselves have helped to create. The perspectives of modern philosophy and aesthetics are conceptual abstractions from that dense, pre-ideational, primary data of human experience which Frost renders from the inside, as lived.

More than most modern poets Frost needs to have some sort of historical context deliberately constructed for him. Unlike Wallace Stevens, Frost rarely deals directly with the issues of post-Kantian epistemology; unlike Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, and W.H. Auden, he rarely situates us in the modern urban environment; unlike Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot he does not measure in any richly allusive way the modern moment against tradition and the past. And, from the point of view of language and metrical experiment, Frost looks very traditional. In two of the best books about him, he is presented as inhabiting a sort of timeless world. John Lynen sees Frost in the venerable tradition of pastoralism. Reuben Brower, drawing his comparisons from the range of world literature, relates him to the tradition of tough-minded, unflinching writers who see things as they are and do not hesitate to tell the score. Lynen and Brower are both persuasive. Frost inhabits a timeless world as do all poets of high quality. Yet Frost did not exist in a vacuum, and his poems do not present an ahistorical consciousness. What I would call his ''implicit poetics'' is a regulative principle which does not help much in explicating the poems, but which does help us to ''generalize'' the experiential patterns of those poems, and hence to extend their significance for our times.

Frank Lentricchia. *Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self* (Duke Univ. Pr., 1975), pp. 18–19

Frost is a poet of genius because he could so often make his subtleties inextricable from an apparent availability. The assumption that he is more easily read than are his contemporaries, like Yeats and Eliot, persists only in ignorance of the unique but equally strenuous kinds of difficulty which inform his best work. He is likely to be most evasive when his idioms are so ordinary as to relax rather than stimulate attention; he is an allusive poet, but in a hedging and off-hand way, the allusions being often perceptible only to the ear, and then just barely—in echoings of earlier poets like Herbert or Rossetti, or in metrical patternings traceable to Milton; he will wrap central implications, especially of a sexual kind, within phraseologies that seem innocent of what they carry. . . .

Frost seems to me of vital interest and consequence because his ultimate subject is the interpretive process itself. He ''plays'' with possibilities for interpretation in a poetry that seems ''obvious'' only because it is all the while also concerned with the interpretations of what, in the most ordinary sense, are the ''signs'' of life itself, particular and mundane signs which nonetheless hint at possibilities that continually elude us. . . .

His poetry is especially exciting when it makes of the ''obvious'' something problematic, or when it lets us discover, by casual inflections or hesitations of movement, that the ''obvious'' by nature is problematic.

Richard Poirier. *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (Oxford Univ. Pr., 1977), pp. x–xi

Frost's most powerful inspiration seemed to take shape in visions of struggle. The speakers in his three score greatest poems, regional

and nonregional alike, are explorers, seekers, questioners. What they long for is understanding, confidence, and a sense of form or order: what he called a ''momentary stay against confusion.'' All his great works draw on this vision. As a young man (in fact, until he was approaching forty), his personal lack of confidence was so great and his sense of uncertainty and aberrancy so strong that he could hardly find effective ways to express his imaginative impulses. His quest for an attractive and imposing vantage point led him to adopt a variety of essentially Romantic poses; yet they elicited no sincere commitment and provided no satisfactory stance from which he could objectify his visions and give voice to his inspiration. . . .

To read or hear or recite Frost's great poetry is to share in the pursuit of a profound vision of human life. As we observe his speakers undertake physical, intellectual, and imaginative exploration, the power of their words and the beauty of their song persuades us that they deserve not only our attention, but also our commitment and fullest appreciation. Few modern American authors have more to offer us. Whether in America, or around the world in Europe, Africa, or Asia, we may find rewarding fields for our own exploration as we turn and turn again with increased understanding and enjoyment to those poems in which Frost made best use of his literary gifts and his extraordinary imagination, his special sensitivity to life in New England and his insight into human nature.

John C. Kemp. *Robert Frost and New England: The Poet as Regionalist* (Princeton Univ. Pr., 1979), pp. 230, 235

A number of Frost's best-known early lyrics are made of a language from which distinctively formal words are largely excluded. But it is equally true and important—although for this, etymological breakdowns cannot provide objective corroboration—that the language of these poems is lacking in words and expressions of distinctively colloquial quality. . . . The regionalisms so paradoxically lacking in poems so thoroughly regional are but one subclass of the distinctively literary elements, are by and large excluded. Frost's elected norm of discourse here, and the key to his verbal artistry, is the common level of style, which represents a selection from the spoken language rather than a reproduction of it. . . .

In setting himself up as the exclusive ''guide'' (''And put a sign up CLOSED to all but me'') to a truth he has hedged about with verbal and symbolic obscurities, and in proceeding to imply that only those who can interpret this poetically mediated truth are worthy to be saved, Frost, one may well think, has his nerve. The teasing and testing, the archness and complacent whimsy, will always alienate a certain number of readers, and long familiarity will not render them any less irritating. But though ''Directive'' is flawed in part by the arch-avuncular pose of the elderly Frost, it is not seriously damaged. The ideal it upholds—the encompassing of Puritanical grimness and strength by a saving joy and imagination—is powerful and viable in this as in the other poems which make up Frost's New Testament. And, in ''Directive'' particularly, we must admire the brilliance with which so great a range of resources—rural Americana, American-style humorous understatement, legend, history and fairy tale, the literary past, the chivalric and Christian traditions—has been drawn upon and forged into a stylistic whole. Here, as in all Frost's best poems, what is literary and elevated seems not to impose itself upon, but to rise naturally from, basic simplicity—the everyday things of country life, lucidly and concretely rendered in common language—which is Frost's primary and most memorable poetic world.

Marie Borroff. *Language and the Poet: Verbal Artistry in Frost, Stevens, and Moore* (Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1979), pp. 29, 40–41

Although Frost is reported to have joked once that ''Directive'' is his ''Eliot poem'' because it mentions the Holy Grail, the religious trappings are not throw-aways. Allusions to the Crucifixion (''tatters hung on barb and thorn'') and to God as the final source (''Too lofty and original to rage'') are offered seriously to those readers who would experience the poem as a religious statement. Frost himself pointed to the word ''source'' as the center of ''Directive'': ''the key lines, if you want to know, are 'Cold as a spring as yet so near its source,/Too lofty and original to rage.'. . . But the key word in the whole poem is source—whatever source it is.''

Despite the importance of the religious tone, the poem is indispensable because it nudges the reader to consider sources beyond religion. Frost hints as much when he comments on ''whatever source it is,'' thus suggesting an extra-religious dimension. . . .

''Directive'' ends with the word ''confusion'': ''Here are your waters and your watering place./Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.'' A significant word in the Frost canon, ''confusion'' is probably best known as part of the memorable phrase in his essay ''The Figure a Poem Makes'' when he talks about ''a momentary stay against confusion.'' Although the literal meaning of the phrase is that the completed poem stays the confusion which the poet experiences when he first begins to write, the context of the entire essay suggests that any consciously created form, but especially poetry, is a momentary stay against the permanence of confusion. Form stay chaos, but only for a while. Poems must be written again and again.

If this suggestion has merit, then the last great poem of Frost's career is as much about poetry as it is about religion. The source that helps mankind to be ''whole again beyond confusion'' will be different things to different people, but for Frost himself the source is poetry—it always was. The technique of ''Directive'' testifies to his artistic prowess in old age; he was seventy-three when *Steeple Bush* was published. One can only marvel at the stately blank verse, the sudden opening line of monosyllables, the metaphors of quest and home and child. But ''Directive'' is a major poem by any standard because it insists on the close relationship between artistic creation and religious faith. Those familiar with the Frost biography know how his commitment to poetry clashed with his commitment to family. Frost was a survivor. He would not be beaten down by anyone's death but his own. When pressure threatened and chaos called, he always had poetry to go on with. Art was his source. To create it was to affirm wholeness.

Affirmation of creativity is the heart of Frost's canon. Even in his darkest verse, those lyrics and dialogue poems that unsettle the reader with glimpses of universal terror and portrayals of domestic fear, the affirmation of technique balances the pessimistic theme. He lodged so many poems in American literature that his best work will be forever necessary to the cultural health of the nation. The phrase ''the indispensable Robert Frost'' thus cuts two ways: it describes the stature of a major author, and it invites a discussion of those parts of his canon that the reader who would understand his work should know. Frost himself might not have agreed with the

choices examined here, but eager to hold the spotlight he would have been pleased that the examination was taking place.

Donald J. Greiner. In *Critical Essays on Robert Frost*. ed. Philip L. Gerber (G.K. Hall. 1982), pp. 237–38

What [Robert] Frost valued, of course, were the ever-recurrent occasions to discover something or make ''a new start.'' Nor would it matter when searching brought back only pieces, glimmerings: ''If you see the little truths with sharp delight or pain, you will not be anxiously straining to do final justice to the whole of reality.'' And if wisdom consists of enduring the world and our limits just as they are, our ability to know the whole of reality demands our trust in ultimates out of our reach. It also insists on less-than-final statements, partial insights which can seem to deny others. Frost so often spoke in terms of ''as if'' that its bearing on contrarieties in some of his poems may be lost on readers. Radcliffe Squires remarks in this regard on Melville's complaint: it was unfair to hold a poet answerable forever for what was true for him only in the moment.

Stanley Burnshaw. *Robert Frost Himself* (New York: George Braziller, 1986), p. 303

Among major poets of the English language in this century, Robert Frost is the one who takes the most punishment. ''Like a chimpanzee'' is how one friend of mine remembers him in the flesh, but in the afterlife of the text he has been consigned to a far less amiable sector of the bestiary, among the stoats perhaps, or the weasels. Calculating self-publicist, reprehensible egotist, oppressive parent—theories of the death of the author have failed to lay the ghost of this vigorous old contender who beats along undauntedly at the reader's elbow. His immense popular acclaim during his own lifetime; his apotheosis into an idol mutually acceptable to his own and his country's self-esteem, and greatly inflationary of both; his constantly resourceful acclimatization of himself to this condition, as writer and performer—it all generated a critical resistance and fed a punitive strain which is never far to seek in literary circles anyhow.

Still, it would be wrong to see this poet as the unwitting victim of the fashion which he surfed upon for decades. Demonically intelligent, as acute about his own masquerades as he was about other's, Frost obeyed the ancient command to know himself. Like Yeats at the end of ''Dialogue of Self and Soul,'' Frost would be ''content to live it all again,'' and be content also to ''cast out remorse.'' Unlike Yeats, however, he would expect neither a flow of sweetness into his breast nor a flash of beatitude upon the world to ensue from any such bout of self-exculpation. He made no secret of the prejudice and contrariness at the center of his nature, and never shirked the bleakness of that last place in himself. He was well aware of the abrasiveness of many of his convictions and their unpopular implications in the context of New Deal politics, yet for all his archness, he did not hide those convictions or retreat from them.

Frost's appetite for his own independence was fierce and expressed itself in a reiterated belief in his right to limits: his defenses, his fences, and his freedom, were all interdependent. Yet he also recognized that his compulsion to shape his own destiny and to proclaim the virtues of self-containment arose from a terror of immense, unlimited and undefined chaos. This terror gets expressed melodramatically in a poem like ''Design,'' and obliquely in a poem like ''Provide, Provide,'' but it is also there in many of his more casual pronouncements.

Seamus Heaney, ''Above the Brim: On Robert Frost.'' *Salmagundi*. Fall–Winter, 1990–91, pp. 275–76

For many, [Frost] was the plain, popular, rural sage, a moral sentimentalist, a poet of the rural heartland, an individualistic democrat who spoke publicly for private values and was admired by President Kennedy. But for others, like the critic Lionel Trilling, he was the great poet of contemporary tragic vision, evoking a ''terrifying universe'' of exposure and emptiness, the romantic vacancies of modern secular life.

If Frost is a major Modernist poet, it is precisely because of this latter dimension of his work. An essential development in the history of twentieth-century poetry has been a coming to terms with the withdrawn legacy of Romanticism, the fading traditional claims of pantheism and transcendence. The poet is thus returned to him- or herself, the word to vacancy, the symbol to disconnectedness. Frost often seems to suggest that the old tradition of nature poetry is recoverable; a major part of his verse is, after all, based on seasonal or natural lessons drawn from a natural world that seems to contain human significance. Frost strikes this pose, yet what he finds in nature—the harsh lives, the rugged New Hampshire settings, the relation of farmer to neighbor—breeds skepticism about ideas of wholeness or fulfillment. Nature's mystery is present, but it is not Emersonian. As in the poem ''Design,'' it may be ''the design of darkness to appal'' or there may be no design at all. The famous ''Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,'' from the volume *New Hampshire* (1923), is a poem of division between human promises and obligations and the white mystery of nature. Yet the whiteness is itself ambiguous in its meaning, as is apparent in another poem from the same volume, ''For Once, Then, Something.''. . .

The vernacular roughness of Frost's lines is more than pure populism; it is a skepticism of vision that gives him the curious and distinctive metaphysical control of his best poems. An image, word, or construction is turned and teased, as he as speaker tests and retests himself. One of the key questions for the poets of Frost's generation was whether a Whitmanian or Emersonian Romantic posture was recoverable in the modern urban and secular world. Frost gives us little of that world as a place, but he responds to its poetic condition. Like Wallace Stevens, though with demotic skepticism rather than philosophical abstractness, he is concerned both with the difficulty of finding meaning in the thing perceived and the danger of unacknowledged self-shaped perception.

Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury. *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991), pp. 282–84

I have been emphasizing Frost's distrust of too much form, his awareness that metaphors ridden too far or taken as truth can betray and oppress us. Frost also considers the making of metaphors, the search for truth, or at least for trueness, to be essentially human. (''I always think trueness better than truth. Trueness has a warmth about it. It's human.'') Frost's thinking, and his poems, occur between complementary views, at the border where metaphors are

constantly building up and breaking down. Frost's commitment to the implications of that position was remarkably thorough. He mocked monism as ''moanism,'' for instance, yet with a characteristic gesture of ''bothering'' reconsideration he also recalled that we can ''take too much satisfaction in having once more remarked the two-endedness of things.'' ''A melancholy dualism is the only soundness. The question is: is soundness of the essence.'' Similarly, Frost's awareness of the dangers of too much commitment is countered by his complementary admiration for ''definiteness of position,'' his belief that, while ''every act is a great simplification,'' ''You should go ahead on insufficient information.'' He counted as one of the freedoms ''the wit to make unexpected connections''; he also said that the world is in parts, and that the separation of the parts is as important as the connection: the demand is for ''good spacing.'' Some readers find this ''shiftiness'' in Frost, his mixing of a heroic sense of the risks incurred in asserting form with a ''diminishing'' sense that it is all some interminable game, rather hard to take. (Asked if poets are born or made, Frost said, ''Most people can't bear poets.'') Frost's ''duplicity'' caused Yvor Winters to label him a ''spiritual drifter.'' Frost's own summations put the matter better: ''My ironies don't seem to iron out anything'': ''I'm not confused; I'm only well-mixed''; ''My motto for yesterday was, Don't let being mixed make you feel confused. . . . Keep moving. Keep changing your motto.''

Having said all this, it is tempting to skip over the vexed question of Frost's modernity and make him out a postmodernist, aware that human systems of order are the only orders we have and that those orders, carried so far that they are taken to be inevitable or natural, become modes of oppression that limit our freedom; aware, too, that we are all inevitably implicated in the making and consecrating of systems of order. But as radically provisional as Frost's poetry is, his differences from the postmodernists are many. His urge to form, however richly qualified it is, is never finally distrusted or despised. So, too, with his sense of authorship and authority. And Frost incorporates the past by other means than appropriation. He is too content with the rules of the game as laid down to fit postmodernist norms, too filled with ''vulgar'' vitality—with confidence that playing well is sufficient satisfaction and that no government or god could change the rules, too certain of the priority, presence, and continuity of the individual person and of his or her power to work successfully within given limits. Anticipating, say, Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Frost drew a parallel between the methods of poetry and those of science: both, he thought, are ever in motion, building metaphors up and breaking them down in response to the ''antifictive of the given environment.'' That motion, expansion *and* contraction, is our life.

Guy L. Rotella. *Reading and Writing Nature: The Poetry of Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and Elizabeth Bishop* (Boston: Northeastern Univ. Pr., 1991), pp. 66–67

One key to Frost—both the poems and the poet—is his assertion that ''every poem is an epitome of the great predicament, a figure of the will braving alien entanglements.'' . . . In comparing a poem to the will braving alien entanglement, Frost suggests that a poem contains within it the history of its making—the desires, struggles, conflicts, *and* results. But we know it also contains seeds of its future—the alien entanglement of its reader. . . .

Reading Frost, of course, is . . . a ''braving [of] alien entanglements.'' An encounter with one of his poems can be seen as an engagement, perhaps a battlefield, perhaps a communion, where reader and writer meet, risk their ''wills,'' brave entanglement with one another. And in the potential encounter, each is risking his wholeness, his perception of self. The writer risks being misunderstood, or understood and appropriated at best. He risks being rejected or ridiculed at worst. He risks sharing ownership of his text. Sometimes Frost would say there is only one right way to read any text; at other times, he said, ''The poet is entitled to anything the reader can find in his poem,'' and at still other times, he wanted his texts to invite in only the right readers and leave out those who were not. As he implied in ''Directive,'' and later said of the cryptic phrase on parables in Mark, he did not want the wrong ones being saved. (Frost's looser version of Mark was that Christ implied one cannot be saved unless one knows how to read poetry.) Each of these positions demands a different kind of reader, a different view of what a reader is supposed to be or do in relation to the poem. These views conflict and, in so doing, represent the conflict in the poet between the need to be entangled with ''other,'' to be engaged with and enriched by the encounter (that is, the poet's social, additive needs), and the need to protect, to keep whole and pure and private the inner core of the self.

Surely this is a conflict every artist experiences: on the one hand, the need to share one's art and thought, one's ''self,'' and with that the need to be recognized; on the other hand, there is the equally strong need to protect that self and that creation. Studying a poet such as Frost, therefore, can help us to understand the complex and ambivalent attitude writers can have toward their readers and the effect such conflicting feelings have on their poetic texts, on what sorts of engagement they will provoke from the reader.

Judith Oster. *Toward Robert Frost: The Reader and the Poet* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Pr., 1992), pp. 1, 2–4

Regardless of the intellectual, imaginative, or psychological reasons for it, Frost's social vision in the heuristic emblem poems represents in some ways the most remarkable of all his achievements in refusing to accept crucial modern discontinuities. Frost achieves his vision of ''fellowship'' despite being an American, though our culture has historically tended toward acute individualism; despite being an American nature writer, though that tradition has strongly emphasized the need for solitude as a means of apocalyptic preparation; despite being a modern poet, though all of the major poetic traditions since 1798 stress the supremacy of the individual mind; despite, finally, his own ungenerous political theories expressed again and again, not only in conversations and letters but also in many of the ''editorial'' poems of his last thirty years. It is this side of Frost which has driven a number of intelligent critics to attack his social vision as atomistic or worse. Malcolm Cowley, for instance, in a famous attack in 1944, suggests that ''What Frost sets before us is an ideal, not of charity or brotherhood, but of separateness'' or ''self-centeredness.'' Denis Donoghue, more than twenty years later, concludes that Frost is a ''Social Darwinist.'' More recently, even as sympathetic a critic as David Bromwich (like Cowley, basing his conclusions substantially on ''Two Tramps in Mud Time''), sees Frost as a poet of

''charity denied.'' The unsympathetic, ungenerous side of Frost's social vision cannot be wished away—but it is not the only side. At least in ''An Unstamped Letter,'' ''The Tuft of Flowers,'' ''Iris by Night,'' and ''Two Look at Two,'' and in fact in numerous other poems, Frost is capable of celebrating remarkably intense ties between people—though, admittedly, these exist not between groups, or between the individual and a group, but between pairs of human beings. At that level, Frost's social vision is remarkable not just for him but for any twentieth-century American writer.

Thus Frost shows that a poet with a feisty temperament, a genuine relish for imaginative difficulties, and the resources of a centuries-old tradition need not simply or passively accept the great social discontinuity of modern experience any more than the Cartesian or the temporal. Emerson writes that ''it is dislocation and detachment from the life of God, that makes things ugly,'' and that the poet, because he ''re-attaches things to nature and the Whole, . . . disposes very easily of the most disagreeable facts.'' Surely Frost would view the desire to ''dispose'' of any facts, even the most disagreeable, as a fatal kind of self-deception; he neither does so nor wants to do so. Yet he clearly and consistently is concerned with resisting many of the characteristic modern varieties of ''dislocation and detachment,'' with ''re-attaching things to nature and the Whole,'' and by doing so, fulfilling a major part of the task which Emerson sets for the poet. Using the emblem-reading tradition, modifying it, bending it, playing off it, Frost's nature lyrics move again and again to relocate both the synecdochic emblem and the individual emblem reader in a larger order of being, to show that the emblem—butterfly weed or decaying woodpile or dried-up brook—is never just an isolated thing, and to help the reader ''realize,'' as Thoreau puts it ''where we are and the infinite extent of our relations.''

George F. Bagby. *Frost and the Book of Nature* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Pr., 1993), pp. 197–98

[The] halfway place between Earth and Eden is the one Frost characteristically inhabits and the older I get, the more I admire his ability to dwell there resolutely, in a middle state; to stay buoyant, rhythmically and spiritually, while still managing to register the full drag of the gravity of being alive. Hence the continuing appeal of ''After Apple Picking'' and ''Birches.'' They are not just beguiling evocations of a man on a ladder or a lad in a tree, but poems in which a positive state of mind is matched against an exhausting experience of the world. And the same could be said of the even starker confrontations between consciousness and mystery in ''The Most of It'' and ''An Old Man's Winter Night.''. . .

Frost is at his very best when he holds this balance between stark evidences of human aloneness and intimations of human belonging. In the beginning, it was there in ''The Tuft of Flowers''; it reappeared constantly, in monologues like ''A Servant to Servants'' and parables like ''Mending Wall'' and ''For Once Then Something'' and ''The Most of It,'' but for me, nowadays, it is embodied most entrancingly in his strangely convincing poem ''Two Look at Two.'' In it, Frost displays an empathy with [D.H.] Lawrence, and a scrupulosity of observation that would have pleased [James] Joyce. But in the way it weaves a colloquial tone and vocabulary into a feat of artful repetition and variation—repetition as the law of increasing returns, as it were—and in the way it brings sensation to a point where it becomes revelation, the poem is pure Frost.

Seamus Heaney. *Poetry Review*. Winter, 1993–1994 [print version of talk given at ICA, London, November 29, 1993], pp. 31, 32

Frost grounded not only his linguistic practice but his vision in the Emersonian beliefs that every word was once a metaphor and that life itself—our American life—is the source of poetry unmediated by dependence upon the past. We can imagine how wounding to Frost's sense of his own desserts, despite his four Pulitzer Prizes, was the sway of the modernist poets with their practices so implicated in what Eliot had called ''the mind of Europe.'' It was not only his rural subjects that kept Frost's work from winning approbation from academics and reviewers; the very method of his versing, the ways his poems do their work upon the reader, was unrecognized by critics trained only to parse the thickets of allusion offered by the modernist masters. . . .

In . . . Frost's best work, the poetry itself ''throws off'' its ''fixed symbols.'' The meaning grows out of the language, the syntax, the associations of the words, the rhythms of the speech in which they are spoken. Meaning is dependent upon neither a set of arbitrary, assigned correspondences, nor a specialist's knowledge of arcane sources. In his reliance upon the poem itself as the source of its symbols Frost reflects his debt to Emerson after all. Rejecting the self-centered, spiritualizing aspects of Transcendentalism, Frost nevertheless accepts—and revels in—Emerson's call for personal experience unmediated by the authority of the past. When Frost does invoke the past, drawing on classical legend or Biblical allusion, he undermines the authority of his allusions. His well-gazer's search for Truth rebukes the self-love of Narcissus; his Adamic apple-picker embraces without guilt the sensuous experiences that have fatigued him; his dream-vision holds the possibility of a resurrection without repentance. Frost accepts the world, with which he said he had ''a lover's quarrel.'' Acknowledging that we can grasp no more than half a loaf in our search for absolutes, Frost celebrates our seeking with invented symbols adequate to his skeptical vision. As he said in ''The Figure a Poem Makes,'' his poems do indeed begin in delight and end in wisdom.

Daniel Hoffman. ''Robert Frost: The Symbols a Poem Makes.'' *Gettysburg Review*. Winter, 1994, pp. 104, 111–12

Frost believed that a poem should be written in a single, free-flowing run. He compared composing verse to sliding down a hill on a sled and declared: ''I never wrote anything without thinking: 'This is it!''' Like Plato's symbolic horses, whose creative energy had to be harnessed by a charioteer in order to be transformed into art, Frost wrote, in a punning passage, that the first rush of inspiration must be tempered by wordplay in order to avoid the twin dangers of cliché and aestheticism. . . .

A brilliant teacher from youth to old age, Frost had many valuable—and always pragmatic—ideas about the imaginative act, the rush of inspiration, the methods of revision, and the pressures of publication. He was not a tormented, self-destructive poet, but one who loved the play of the imagination, took joy in his creation, and believed that ''poetry spoils you for anything else in life.'' Fond of social life and a great talker, in middle and old age he loved to draw

large crowds at lectures around the country. But he also needed and valued solitude and reflection. Reflecting on the apparent laziness of his early years, he declared that loafing had a great deal to do with being creative, and that for proper artistic growth there must be idleness, which had been the making of him.

Jeffrey Meyers. Introduction. In Robert Frost. *Early Frost: The First Three Books* (Hopewell, N.J.: Ecco Pr., 1996), pp. xxxiv-xxxv

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FUCHS, Daniel (1909–1993)

Though he never quite succeeds, it is impossible to read *Summer in Williamsburg* without being aware of its sincerity, its vitality and—in a way—its importance. . . . No comment on *Summer in Williamsburg* would be complete without mention of Mr. Fuchs's style, which is extremely competent and incisive. . . . His talent lies chiefly in the direction of dialogue. . . . He has captured the very cadence, the accent and inflection, of a local idiom.

Margaret Wallace. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 18, 1934. p. 6

With this second novel [*Homage to Blenholt*] Mr. Fuchs performs a rare feat in switching from the naturalistic approach of his first book (*Summer in Williamsburg*) to a racy, caricaturing manner, appealing strongly to the sense of humor. What is still more unusual, he does not direct his satire against Babbitts or intellectuals—the customary targets for satire in America—but sticks to the locale he knows best, that drab Jewish section in Brooklyn known as Williamsburg. . . . His manner is fundamentally his own. Its main features may be traced to a keen ear for picking up the rich idiomatic language of his characters, an intense dislike (which sometimes gets out of hand) for the social system that smothers them, and an almost morbid sensitiveness to the folly of human beings influenced by a tabloid-movies atmosphere.

Jerre Mangione. *New Republic*. April 1, 1936. pp. 229–30

His novels, of which *Low Company* is the third, are as inclusive as they are terse and clever. Their humor is inimitably Jewish, but few other novelists have conveyed it so unobtrusively, and for the same purpose. It is a humor that consists largely of the homely metaphors that abound in Yiddish, but which sound uproarious only when heard in literal translation. Too many Jewish writers have stopped at that, and as a result their work reads like mimicry. In Mr. Fuchs' hands the humor retains its extravagance and its crude vitality, but it is a humor that is pointed to indicate the desperation that so often lies behind it.

Writing in that spirit, Mr. Fuchs has proved again and again that the ghetto was never destroyed; it was merely moved, piece by piece, from the East Side to Williamsburg and Brownsville and the Bronx.

Alfred Kazin. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Feb. 14, 1937. p. 8

Low Company is the story of petty lives, of petty tragedies. Fuchs hates all his characters. When he writes with pity, it is a merciless, steely, stiletto kind of pity. A few times we are appalled at what happens to the characters and are just about to lavish our sympathy, when the author pours his icy water over every living thing in Neptune Beach. And here we come to the debit side of Fuchs' artistry. Fuchs, at this stage of his writing, has found no place to lay down his burden. His hate is a slow, burning, consuming hate, and he vents it ruthlessly. The superb humor, the comical situations magnificently described in *Low Company*, are actually merciless jabs at his characters. There have been comments that Fuchs, because of his penchant for grotesquerie, stems from Charles Dickens. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. While Dickens hated many of his characters, he had a great love and compassion for his heroes and heroines. Dickens was a confirmed believer in the happy ending. Fuchs is a child of sorrow.

Albert Halper. *New Republic*. Feb. 24, 1937. p. 90

Sympathy is a dominant note in Fuchs' writing. He has a keen eye, an excellent ear for the speech of his characters, a quick perception of the grotesque, the whimsical, the pathetic, the tragic in crowded urban life. And underlying these capacities is a genuine respect for his characters, for the human animal. . . .

The present novel [*Low Company*], like its predecessors, is constructed almost like a drama. There is considerable dependence on dialogue, there is a fairly strict effort to obtain objectivity, and an ingenious sense of plot and construction is displayed. In fact, the author's gift for construction threatens to become a defect. The concluding pages of *Low Company* unite and complete the novel's many stories in such a fashion that one almost sees the seams and stitchings. Yet I know of few novelists in America today of Fuchs's age who possess his natural talent and energy or his sense of life.

James T. Farrell. *The Nation*. Feb. 27, 1937. p. 244

The first of Daniel Fuchs' novels opens with a ''hard mad'' summer storm which sends the inhabitants of Williamsburg scurrying for shelter. The last one ends in a steamy heat that promises to bring business at last to the desperate concessionaires of Neptune Beach. In between is a richly knowing account of sudden changes

in psychic weather, destructive twisters, brief, illusory periods of sunlight, in the lives of some yearning, trapped, angry, wrong-headed, immensely vocal individuals. They are mostly from Brooklyn, mostly Jews. Mr. Fuchs treats them with satiric relish and yet with a deep sense of identification. . . . Except for the movies and radio programs they name, these novels are not dated in the least. The author deals with the conditions of bad housing, corruption, widespread dishonesty and racketeering that preoccupy New Yorkers today and he deals with them—though his novels are a quarter of a century old—in a way that is fresh and revealing as literature.

Robert Gorham Davis. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 10, 1961. p. 5

Very few writers are able to evoke anything out of the environment that depressed them as they grew. Fuchs has been compared to James T. Farrell, but it is clear now that he had greater gifts than Farrell, and did much more than transcribe. His dialogue, from the very beginning, had a flavor of its own; while seemingly realistic it is as artful as Hemingway's or O'Hara's, and read aloud it usually makes one laugh. In this book, as in the others, there are the sensitive and the brutal; they encounter and are astonished by each other, and Fuchs judges not, for they are all human.

Reading the novels again, I was fearful that they might not hold up, but time has neither dimmed nor darkened them, and I suspect they are more readable and compelling today, if only because the problems are different now, and we can meet all of the author's wonderful people simply as people and not as representatives of a condition. They are fixed now, the nice ones, the evil ones, the old, the young, as a wonderful tapestry of ''low life'' captured with unsentimental warmth.

Hollis Alpert. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 23, 1961. p. 18

If *Summer in Williamsburg* presents a dilemma, and *Homage to Blenholt* is a high-spirited attempt to delay or evade the problem of choice, *Low Company* marks an acceptance of the burdens of commonplace reality. For what constitutes both a major strength in Fuchs' work and a reason, perhaps, for the abrupt termination of his career as a young novelist, is his grim and ironic appreciation of the power of the commonplace, everything in daily existence that erodes ambition and spirit. As Albert Halper, a novelist who is Fuchs' contemporary, remarked of him: ''he is a man with a burden. I do not envy him . . . he is a child of sorrow.''

Perhaps so. But this child of sorrow, this poet of the Williamsburg streets, wrote some of the most winning fictions we have about American Jewish life. His scope narrow, but his tone pure, Fuchs was that rarity, a ''natural'' writer with a gift for spontaneous evocation and recall.

Irving Howe in *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties*, edited by David Madden (Southern Illinois). 1968. pp. 104–5

West of the Rockies is a novel about Hollywood, though the people and events it deals with are as far removed from the stardust image as the book itself is from the ''blockbuster'' treatment accorded to that strange, artificial community by writers less talented if more widely known, than Daniel Fuchs. It is a tightly controlled, perceptive piece of writing which tells of the tenuous, perturbed relationship between a world-famous Hollywood actress—a star—and a youngish man who works for her agency; and though it is no part of Mr. Fuchs's purpose to reveal sensational examples of tat behind the glamour or vicious backstage wheeling and dealing, we are given, with no sense of strain or contrivance, a sense of the realities of ''stardom'': of the personal failures which have led to the crisis the characters now face. . . .

Mr. Fuchs develops this notion of dependence and muted anguish with considerable skill, relying not only on what he tells us but on what he deliberately omits in order to convey the pressures and decidedly unglamorous aspects of stardom on Hollywood's terms.

TLS: The Times Literary Supplement. Oct. 15, 1971. p. 1290

How different . . . from any other Jewish fiction of the forties and fifties is a book like Daniel Fuchs's *Summer in Williamsburg*, first published in 1934, ten years before [Bellow's] *Dangling Man*. When Fuchs's novels were reissued in the early sixties much was made of the fabulistic, ''poetic'' side, as if they could only be appreciated in the wake of a moral allegorist like Malamud. Actually, the great strength of the books is their feeling for the life of the streets, the Runyonesque ''low company'' of youthful gangs in Williamsburg and Jewish mobsters in the Catskills, a chapter of social history quickly forgotten when the Jews became more respectable and the Jewish novel more morally austere. In Fuchs the moral temperature is low—he is notably ham-handed in portraying the religious life of his Jews, a more inward subject. He is a folklorist, an anthropologist of street life rather than a purveyor of moral parables. For all his freedom from the cant of proletarian writing he remains in essence a 1930s realist; for him life is with the people.

Morris Dickstein. *Partisan Review*. Nov. 1, 1974. p. 42

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FULLER, Charles (1939–)

[*The Village: A Party*] leaves you thinking. Mr. Fuller has written a not-too-fanciful fantasy about racial integration that somberly concludes that it will not at present solve anybody's racial problems.

A charismatic black man, married to a white girl, has founded a community for other racially mixed couples. Superficially, the community has been a success, both in terms of the personal happiness of its members and the edification of the world at large; but now its leader has found another woman, and she is black.

Fearing for the community's ''image'' if their leader is allowed to defect from his dream, the group strikes him down at a birthday party. His widow it is decided, must marry a black man. Utopia has become not just a ghetto but a cell-block.

Mr. Fuller's initial situation is so intellectually provocative that his resolution seems disappointingly melodramatic. Even in a

symbolic context, it is as hard to believe that these suburban types would automatically devour their leader as it was to believe a similar situation in Edward Albee's ''Everything in the Garden''; in such well-appointed living rooms, discussion always precedes—and generally replaces—action.

However, *The Village* has enough things right with it to make you want to watch Mr. Fuller. His dialogue can crackle—''I knew you before you were black, Nick,'' the leader's wife tells him bitterly—and he knows how to make a point without words, as when the partygoers are shocked to find themselves pairing off for cards according to race, blacks with blacks, whites with whites.

The argument of Mr. Fuller's play—that integration exacerbates rather than relieves racial tensions—is too important to be treated in the brief fashion allowed here. The play's originality and urgency are unquestionable and so is the talent of the playwright.

Dan Sullivan. *The New York Times*. November 13, 1968, p. 39.

[*In the Deepest Part of Sleep*] is about the debilitating effect of a mentally disturbed mother on a Philadelphia family in the mid-nineteen-fifties.

As seen through the eyes of a young black adolescent on the brink of manhood, this may be a true experience, at least for the playwright, but it does not hold much interest as theatre.

As was also evident in Mr. Fuller's *Candidate!*, . . . the author has a tendency to overdraw his characters and his situations. . . .

In *In the Deepest Part of Sleep*, the mother, released from the hospital after a breakdown, makes obsessive demands on her son, his step-father and her nurse, who is decidedly provocative to both males in the family.

The situation is an obvious one, but it still might be dramatically viable if it were written with insight or at least if it were played in a natural, straightforward manner.

In the opening minutes the play is stricken by bathos and never fully recovers. . . . [The mother] cries and moans so much that she loses all of our sympathy (and we wonder how the other characters are able to endure her). The play continues, predictably, even, in the end, to a suggestion of an incestuous relationship. . . .

There are several moments in *Deepest Sleep*—just as there were in *Candidate!* (which was about the election of a black mayor in a northern city)—that make it clear that Mr. Fuller is a playwright who should be heard from.

In one touching encounter . . . the mother confesses her sexual craving to her husband, and when rebuffed, switches immediately to verbal attack. In another, the nurse tries to seduce the son, and the playwright is shrewdly observant about the ineptness of adolescence.

Unfortunately these are only flashes of reality in a play that asks for too much indulgence.

Mel Gussow. *The New York Times*. June 5, 1974, p. 54.

A Soldier's Play is, to put it simply, a major breakthrough for the promising author of *The Brownsville Raid* and last season's *Zooman and the Sign*. This is, in every way, a mature and accomplished work—from its inspired opening up of a conventional theatrical form to its skillful portraiture of a dozen characters to its remarkable breadth of social and historical vision. It's also a play that speaks to both blacks and whites without ever patronizing either group. Mr. Fuller writes characters of both races well—and he implicates both in the murder of Sergeant Waters. . . .

Waters isn't as simple as he seems in the play's early flashbacks. For all his venom and cruelty, he was also a prideful man who refused to today to whites and who often wanted the best for his fellow blacks. ''Who the hell was he?'' asks the prosecutor in frustration as the evidence comes in—and it soon becomes apparent that the case can't be solved until that question is resolved.

As the answer comes, Mr. Fuller uses it to illuminate the behavior of every black character in the play, as well as the white society they inhabit. Waters is psychotic, all right, but the basis of his warped, cruel behavior is self-hatred, not hatred—and the cause of that self-hatred is his own recognition of the bankruptcy of his efforts to please whites. Much as he's tried to bury his black roots and as far as he's gone in the Army, Waters just can't escape the demon of racism—that sinking feeling that, for all his achievements, *they still hate you*. And in Water's distorted personality, his men see a magnified, mirror image of what they most fear and hate in themselves—the fear of being destroyed by allowing white racism to define the ambitions of one's life.

While we can see why the men might have been tempted to murder Waters, Mr. Fuller recognizes such an act for what it is—both a symbolic and literal form of self-destruction. The playwright took this same moral position in *Zooman*, which told the story of a contemporary black community that was too cowardly to identify a murderer in its midst. Here, as before, the playwright has compassion for blacks who might be driven to murder their brothers—because he sees them as victims of a world they haven't made. Yet he doesn't let anyone off the hook. Mr. Fuller demands that his black characters find the courage to break out of their suicidal, fratricidal cycle—just as he demands that whites end the injustices that have locked his black characters into the nightmare.

At the same time, Mr. Fuller places his new play in a historical context that gives it a resonance beyond its specific details. As the investigation proceeds, another, larger drama is played out; the soldiers, who have not seen any wartime action, wait in desperate hope that they may get orders for overseas, so that they can prove that ''colored boys can fight'' Hitler as well as white boys. But in the playwright's view, this aspiration is just another version of Water's misplaced ambition to deny his blackness by emulating whites—and just as likely to end in tragic, self-annihilating doom.

Frank Rich. *The New York Times*. November 27, 1981, p. 3.

An angry, consuming energy which propels the protagonist towards violence, an irony which humanizes him while depriving the viewer of easy categorizations: these elements characterize Charles Fuller's style. Within an American theatre tradition Fuller's work both acknowledges the seminal position of Amiri Baraka and extends the vision of the tumultuous 1960s beyond a rigid, racial schematization which in conferring upon blacks the status of victims of oppression, seemingly robbed them of any responsibility for or power over the circumstances in which they found themselves.

A former bank loan collector, college counsellor, and city housing inspector, Fuller initially gained a measure of national recognition in 1976 with *The Brownsville Raid*. Though presently out of circulation, the play is of interest because it prefigures the approach adopted in the later *A Soldier's Play*. *The Brownsville Raid* is a dramatization of the investigation into a 1906 shooting

spree which culminated in President Teddy Roosevelt's unwarranted, dishonorable discharge of an entire black infantry brigade. With historical accounts as his starting point, Fuller skilfully interweaves a ''whodunnit'' plot with a compelling portrait of a black corporal who has his faith in the Army shattered when he refuses to comply with his officers' demand for a scapegoat. Both black and white men are presented with strengths and faults; what emerges is a composite picture of men and a society whose vision is distorted by racism.

In both *Zooman and the Sign* and *A Soldier's Play* racism appears not as a specific, external event to which the black protagonists must react; rather, its negative values have been so internalized that, propelled by their own frantic despair, the characters move relentlessly towards self-destruction. In the first play, about a father's search for his daughter's killer, a knife-toting, drug-running, 15-year-old casually admits to the audience at the outset that he is the killer. Although Zooman attempts to mask a mounting sense of entrapment with calculated bravado, his direct conversations with the audience about familial disintegration, unwanted homosexual encounters, and detention for uncommitted crimes characterize him as an alienated youth whose experiences have taught him that ''niggahs can't be heroes,'' that blacks seemingly have no control over the atrophy engulfing their families and communities. These monologues, delivered in a street-wise, frenetic style which is nonetheless reminiscent of black toast traditions and Muhammad Ali's alliterative poetry, have the effect of humanizing Zooman, of placing him in a context where his asocial behavior becomes more understandable, and his affinity to the larger society more apparent.

Just as Zooman believes that blacks are helpless, so too do the neighbors of the slain girl, for no one will come forth as witnesses to the crime. The father's erecting a sign accusing them of moral complicity triggers only hostile recriminations from the neighbors and argument within the family itself. Symbolic of a community's failure to foster a more active, ennobling sense of its own possibilities, the sign occasions the final violence wherein Zooman is accidentally killed in his attempt to tear it down. Another black child lies dead in the street, another family grieves, and another sign goes up as momentary monument to incredible waste.

An ultimately pervasive irony, which empties the landscape of possible victors and reveals instead a society maimed by racism, is equally evident in *A Soldier's Play*. Unlike Zooman, Sergeant Waters espouses the black middle-class values of hard work, education, and racial pride as the means of self-advancement. Like Zooman, Waters, in seeking a sphere in which to exercise a masculine sense of control and dignity, has had only limited success, for he operates within the segregated Army of World War II. The search for his killer triggers a series of flashbacks which reveal him as a vicious, petty tyrant bent upon literally ridding the race of all those blues-singing, hoodoo-oriented men who he says prevent advancement; yet, they also create a measure of sympathy for this ambitious man, consumed by misplaced faith, self-hatred, and guilt.

The eventual identification of two black recruits as Waters's murderers defies the expectation, carefully nurtured by the playwright, that overt white hostility is the motivating factor. Additionally, it raises questions concerning the definition of justice, for the infantrymen have just received their long-awaited orders to ship out, in effect being granted license to kill in Europe a tyranny similar to what Waters represents at home. Compounding the irony further, Fuller provides a postscript which subverts the dramatic experience: the investigating officer reveals that the entire incident is recorded in military documents as meaningless black-on-black crime; Waters is inadvertently listed as an heroic war casualty; and the entire company is destroyed in combat. Thus, the Army learns nothing from this sorry episode.

To date, Fuller's dramatic world is dominated by driven, destructive men trying to carve out a viable place within a hostile environment. Though his characters inhabit a bleak landscape, his audiences need not: through the dramatic experience they can appreciate how racism distorts an entire society and choose to stop the human destruction.

Sandra L. Richards. In *Contemporary Dramatists, 5th edition*, ed. K. A. Berney (St. James Press, 1993).

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FULLER, R. Buckminster (1895–1983)

Buckminster Fuller—you are the most sensible man in New York, truly sensitive. Nature gave you antennae, long-range finders you have learned to use. I find almost all your prognosticating nearly right—much of it dead right, and I love you for the way you prognosticate. . . .

To say that you have now a good style of your own in saying very important things is only admitting something unexpected. To say you are the most sensible man in New York is not saying much for you—in that pack of caged fools. And everybody who knows you knows you are extraordinarily sensitive. . . .

Faithfully [I am] your admirer and friend, more power to you—you valuable ''unit.''

Frank Lloyd Wright. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 17, 1938. p. 14

At a time of crisis in his life Fuller set himself, like Descartes in his Dutch stove-heated compartment, to survey the whole of the human dilemma—all the obstacles that stood in the way of man's survival and in the way of man's potential development. His philosophical starting point was the totality of possible events—''universe,'' as he called it, defining it in terms of the way it impinges on the human mind. . . .

Fuller's definition of ''universe'' is an attempt to treat *all* experience as finite. . . .

Fuller makes cumulative experience a pivotal factor in change. Experience is finite; it can be stored, studied, directed; it can be turned with conscious effort, to human advantage. . . .

Real wealth to Fuller is thus nothing more than the extent to which man, at a given moment, has harnassed forms of universal energy and, in the process, has developed a re-employable experience.

Robert W. Marks. *The Dymaxion World of Buckminster Fuller* (Reinhold). 1960. pp. 9–10

Through the more immediate results of Fuller's work, structures of great elegance affording dramatic, functional performance may be viewed around the world. Its greater value, however, may lie in the wide influence of his philosophical approach. His coherent system of thought is a creative synthesis which embraces many significant areas of the social, industrial, scientific, and individual aspects of living. It represents a major attempt to outline a workable and comprehensible cosmology which endeavors to account for all physical and psychophysical phenomena behaviors within a field system of relations encompassing all known scientific laws and hypotheses.

In assuming a finite universe, permeable to human thought (which though not simultaneously ''knowable'' may yet be comprehended through its rationally co-ordinate patterns), Fuller restores man to a comprehensive position in which he may exercise his full evolutionary initiative toward controlling his destiny. He avoids previous philosophical dilemmas of paired antitheses, like materialism versus idealism, by assuming an integral polarity in phenomena relations, in which apparently exclusive opposites are resolved into places as complementary interactive aspects of a whole process. Within this approach, Value is not ultimately material, but like thought may be externalized in a materially operable principle. Hence ethical assumptions gain new dignity as the embodiment of such Value principles, materially and durably evident in man's universal experience.

John McHale. *R. Buckminster Fuller* (Braziller). 1962. p. 42

Ideas and Integrities is a difficult book to read from start to finish. It is a much better book to read from finish to start. Each page is, in a sense, a statement of a contemporary problem, followed by a series of incisive, unexpected, wildly imaginative questions. The genius of Richard Buckminster Fuller is that he knows exactly what questions to ask, and in which order. What makes him more than a walking computer is his humanity and his imagination. For whether he likes it or not, Bucky is, above all, an artist and a poet—that rare contemporary poet who does not despair of the human condition.

Peter Blake. *New York Times Book Section*. July 28, 1963. p. 7

Buckminster Fuller, whose name is high on the campus lists of favored environmental persons, is a comprehensive, all-purpose, long-distance, world-around genius talker who teaches everything to everyone everywhere. Wherever you look, there he is in his blue suit, with wide-open magnified eyes, pouring out his ideas in a flood of words, intoxicated by the universe and fed by an internal stream of energy that re-creates itself as it is used, and that may very well be a conscious effort by the universe to use Fuller to illustrate its own principles. For him, the universe is simply an endless, beginningless, wrap-around environment, ''a non-simultaneous complex of unique motions and transformations.''

Forty years ago when he first began talking on a broad scale about the universe, what it contained, what to do with it, and how to live in it, he was seldom understood and only rarely appreciated. His thoughts, and the language he used to express them, occasionally reached the outer limits of inscrutability. . . .

Fuller over the years has found his own way to clearer and deeper expression of a philosophy of science, art, and society—an expression that uses the imagery of a fully developed poet, the ideas of a scientist, designer, and practical engineer, and the spiritual energy of an authentic prophet.

Harold Taylor. *Saturday Review*. May 2, 1970. p. 56

It is impossible to convey the density of illustration or the copiousness of Buckminster Fuller's thought in a brief synopsis. Nor is it possible to draw a hard line between those points in Fuller's thinking where description leaves off and prescription takes over. Science fact and science fiction blur, perhaps by design, in [*Intuition*]. . . . Written partially in English, partially in space-think, the art of saying more with less words, Fuller's non-poems are a sort of physics refresher course cum brainstorm cum moral epistle.

Victor Howes. *Christian Science Monitor*. May 10, 1972. p. 11

There is an earnestness in Buckminster Fuller's attitude to life that is direct and manly and that inclines a critic to relent from too exclusive a concern with the aims of the poetic craft. . . .

One sees evidence [in *Intuition*] that Buckminster Fuller is indeed exquisitely sensitive to certain forms of beauty. . . . But framing seemly, shapely speech is not among his gifts. That is a misfortune. There is no instrument save language for giving expression to his doctrine, and dressed in the language that he has devised for the purpose that doctrine seems childish and embarrassing. Mr. Fuller is plainly a man who must be judged by his actions, for his intuition fails him when he sets out to speak to his fellow man.

Emile Capouya. *Saturday Review*. June 24, 1972. p. 67

Bucky had discovered something about the way of his own thought. Though he did not, like Thoreau, polish aphorisms till they resemble souvenirs, yet like the aphorist he thought in discrete energy packets, linear in sequence. The key to clarity was to make these boundaries somehow evident. From this time even the sentences he prints as ordinary prose have a new awareness of internal marking points.

He had discovered, in his own roundabout way, a mode of American poetry, the straightforward sentence collected out of energized units, and analyzed into them again by a visual aid. . . .

Bucky Fuller's satisfactions are conceptual: the domes, a general case, and the worldwide process he has envisaged for so long, a general case as well.

Similarly, the satisfaction he takes from writing (mostly verse now—the published prose comes from lecture transcripts) is that of conveying with clarity the most accurate general statement he can manage. Beauty does not concern him. It is not banished, though, by those enjambed polysyllables. The 1956 poem he dedicated to Dr. Jonas Salk not only resembles Roman and Elizabethan attempts

to versify advanced knowledge, it is the nearest thing we have to a Metaphysical poem.

Hugh Kenner. *Bucky: A Guided Tour of Buckminster Fuller* (Morrow). 1973. pp. 219–20, 222

Whatever Bucky has built or tried has been a demonstration that it is possible, in a practical way, to break out of the limiting conceptions supplied by common knowledge and the standard operating procedures. And . . . in form and structure whatever he has built or tried to build, derives from the views he has developed of the form, structure and play of forces in the universe. Repeatedly he tells his devoted audiences to start with Whole Systems. ''Dig wholes!'' . . .

How far along has Bucky gotten in the fulfillment of these excellent intentions, bringing all the parts of our special knowledge and interests to bear on our well-being? In verbal precision and definition he gets more successful every year. But there are not yet many practical returns. . . .

In a time of specialization, alienation, divisiveness, dissonance, fragmentation of knowledge and all the rest of it, Bucky has come forward with demonstrations, in artifacts and schemes, of healing possibilities. His task, like Thoreau's, has been to work outside the customary practices, as a maker of metaphors and paradigms ''meeting our deepest needs,'' freeing us a little from limiting conceptions, giving us new points of departure.

Elting E. Morison. *New York Times Book Section*. March 11, 1973. p. 6

In performance what is wrong seems to matter little, because Fuller when performing makes the particular points minor, and the star-spinning from one to the next entrancing.

This may indicate why Fuller is so beloved, and scorned, and even feared. He seems to cast a spell that makes interested listeners into something like followers, and those who seek to dismiss him know that spell-binders have been suspect for a number of centuries. Those who claim to chart the universe are often known for having too easy answers; in response to such people, specialists, who could be trusted, came into being, and they soon demonstrated that the universe could not be charted. They piled up such huge storehouses of specialized knowledge that any one person's knowledge of more than a little bit of it would have to be inaccurate, or superficial, or trivial. So let us accept this. As a knower, as someone speaking about history or chemistry or physics or architecture, Fuller is seldom going to be as accurate, as subtle, as comprehensive as at least some and maybe many specialists in each of these ''subjects'' might be. But is there nothing left? What is left is Fuller's faith. . . .

Sitting on bleachers, watching him at a distance of at least a hundred yards, one could nonetheless feel his presence as something more than charismatic or soothing. He asked and so received and deserved, only for time and patience, not for belief, or if he asked for that, it was only as a way of asking us to believe more in ourselves. That was memorable, and listening to Fuller as he spins his stars is an experience one should have, and probably more than once.

Roger Sale. *New York Review of Books*. Feb. 7, 1974. pp. 30, 32

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G

GADDIS, William (1922–)

This 956-page first novel [*The Recognitions*] is easily the most exasperating mélange of genuinely scathing and merely random satire, of shrewd dialogue and chaotic fragments, of apt allusion and pretentious display, of suggestive prose and turgid outpourings that this reader has come upon. With such virtues of good avant-garde writing as audacity, freshness and independence it mixes such faults of the bad as obscurity, formlessness and intellectual arrogance. Inevitably it echoes the devices of *Ulysses* and resembles it in its attitude toward contemporary life, except that Joyce's vision of the decline of man from a godlike Ulysses to a commonplace Dublin Jew seems by contrast wistful and whimsical. For Mr. Gaddis (who, by the way, began this book eight years ago, when he was about twenty-five years old) sees ours as literally a society of forgeries, counterfeits, plagiarisms and fakes. . . .

It would be unjust to treat Mr. Gaddis' book as though it were in any way intended as a conventional novel. Structurally it is a series of symbolic episodes calculated not to tell a story but to suggest the sterility of contemporary life. Like a poem it coheres only in spirit, and this it does by exemplifying throughout half a million words man's degeneration to a point where he can no longer recognize the genuine, no less create it.

Unfortunately *The Recognitions* does not persuade us that it is based on any but a narrow and jaundiced view, a projection in part of private discontent. It is a clinical collection of slides showing organisms of decay magnified grotesquely and stained to an unnatural vividness. Somewhere in this book there is material for a novel and somewhere behind it is a writer with remarkable equipment, but *The Recognitions* itself is a grandiose curiosity.

Milton Rugoff. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. March 13, 1955. p. 6

What [*The Recognitions*] lacks, like all claustrophobic works of art, is imagination. It has plenty of invention and fantasy, but that is something different. Imagination in art is the ability to select significantly: to select in order to communicate a vision.

It is only belated recognition of *The Recognitions* that may now indicate some definite guidelines to the course open to the contemporary novel. And for those who consider the achievements of James Joyce in perfecting many vital aspects of the modern novel—only to bemoan the absence of any major successors to Joyce—a closer examination of Gaddis's first and only novel to date should do much to emphasize the pervasiveness of the Joycean influence and perhaps indicate tendencies of what is to come. . . .

When imitation becomes impossible, it usually follows that a reaction develops instead, but in the case of James Joyce such a reaction could hardly be fruitful: against which Joyce is one to react? the naturalistic Joyce? the symbolistic Joyce? the Joyce of ''scrupulous meanness'' or the Joyce of ''mandarin'' involutions? the poet? the storyteller? the chronicler? the moral amoralist or the immoral moralist? With James Joyce, I am suggesting, the twentieth century has produced its most consummate literary artist, and it is to William Gaddis's credit that he has sought and found in Joyce both a direction toward the future and a definite delineation of what has been accomplished, so that *The Recognitions* at once acknowledges its debt and proclaims its individuality. Gaddis is able to do this because the basic element of his work is the delicate balance between originality and imitation, and the book itself as such is able to be a living example of what it *means*.

Bernard Benstock. *Contemporary Literature*. Summer, 1965. pp. 177–9

Even the most indulgent well-wisher is likely to pick up any novel, especially a first novel, three hundred pages longer than *Ulysses*, with reluctance and read it to the end only with stalwart perseverance, even if stimulated, as in Gaddis's novel, by excellence in conception and execution. Stretches of vexation, frustration, *déjá vu*, and frank boredom make the first reading sluggish; but I read it a second time much more willingly and have perused it again and again eagerly. . . .

Gaddis has published no other novels; but a chapter from a new one appeared in the fall of 1970 in *Dutton Review*, No. 1. At forty-nine, Gaddis is a classic example, apparently, of a young writer of genius shooting the works in his first novel—equal in length, range, and complexity to five novels. Appalled by the disconnectedness of time, Stanley, a character in the book who has devoted his life to finishing a massive composition for the organ, makes a statement that describes *The Recognitions* itself: ''It's impossible to accomplish a body of work without a continuous sense of time, so instead you try to get all the parts together into one work that will stand by itself and serve the same thing a lifetime of separate work does, something higher than itself.''

David Madden in *Rediscoveries*, ed. David Madden (Crown). 1971. pp. 292–3

Tony Tanner recently concluded his critical survey of American fiction between 1950 and 1970 [*City of Words*] by claiming that William Gaddis' *The Recognitions* (1955) inaugurated an entire period of American fiction. Tanner's conclusion culminates a long, largely underground history for Gaddis' gigantic novel about forgers and counterfeiters, phony art, onanistic sex, and the false rhetoric of all kinds of religions. Still, few outside of a coterie of devoted followers have read or even heard of *The Recognitions*. Although it surfaced briefly at various times during the last twenty odd years, making its way onto an occasional college reading list, relatively little has been written about the perplexing novel since the initial, antagonistic reviews. A satire so fastidious in its condemnation of the entire modern world—a deliberate counterfeit which itself borrows at random from hundreds of sources and satirizes such living persons as then Senator Richard Nixon—of necessity had to provoke exasperated responses. Because reviewers attacked the novel as being too long, complicated, and nihilistic, the public at large ignored it. We have now had, however, access to some of Gaddis' manuscripts, which may help *The Recognitions* find its rightful aboveground reputation.

The manuscripts reveal Gaddis' intent to satirize the book reviewing world of the 1950s for preferring the kind of work being done by Hemingway and other popular writers of the time. Thus he made no attempt to accommodate reviewers or readers and went so far as to predict they would not read his 956-page long, involuted, fragmented, self-consciously demanding novel. . . .

Peter William Koenig. *Contemporary Literature*. Winter, 1975. pp. 61–2

The most radical feature of *JR* (and the one that may limit its audience to readers possessing powers of super-human endurance) is the form in which it is presented. The book consists of 736 pages of virtually uninterrupted monologue and dialogue, an almost continuous outpouring of language embellished scarcely at all by descriptions of character and setting. People by the dozens move back and forth through thick mists of verbiage, talking to and at and around and behind one another. Yet somehow nobody really listens or quite understands what is being said. This, as it turns out, is entirely appropriate to the subject, which is the debasement of language as both cause and symptom of the corruption of a society which has been abstracted by technology from the concrete realities of feeling and being, and in which the totalitarian obfuscations of bureaucratese, the gibber and jargon of the computer, and the lying Newspeak of Watergate politics, corporate finance, and multimedia education have severed the connection that is supposed to exist between words and the truths they are intended to describe. . . .

Gradually there emerges out of this babble of jargon-demented tongues the perfectly sane, merely obsessive figure of JR, logical end-product of the ongoing situation, supreme example of the utilization potential of a meaningful learning experience. A good old American boy from his perpetually runny nose right down to his torn sneakers with the flapping soles, JR has learned his lessons well and knows by instinct how to apply them manipulatively to achieve, in the classic rags-to-riches tradition, the only goals he has been taught to respect: money, fame, and power. . . .

It is undoubtedly inevitable that the novel promises at almost every point to fall victim to the imitative fallacy, that it is frequently as turgid, monotonous, and confusing as the situation it describes. Yet Gaddis has a strength of mind and talent capable of surmounting this very large difficulty. He has managed to reflect chaos in a fiction that is not itself artistically chaotic because it is imbued with the conserving and correcting power of his imagination. His awareness of what is human and sensible is always present behind his depiction of how far we have fallen from humanity and sense. His vision of what is happening in our world is profound and extremely disturbing. If it should ever cease to disturb, there will be no better proof of its accuracy.

John W. Aldridge. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 4, 1975. pp. 28–30

Like other novels of excess, *JR* is aggressively rhetorical, risking the reader's refusal while offering pointers to its own intentions. In *The Public Burning*, [Robert] Coover uses chapters on *Time* and *The New York Times* to comment on his own novel. The narrator of [Thomas Pynchon's] *Gravity's Rainbow* bobs and weaves among his characters, mixing charitable omniscience with insults to the reader. There are several episodes in *JR* that reveal the desperation of the communication breakdown that is a central subject of the novel and the methods—what I call recording and redundancy—Gaddis uses to prevent breakdown between his novel and its reader. These methods are risky: although realism and repetition are at first aids to clear communication, in excess they become an assault as Gaddis insistently and thoroughly manifests what a runaway is. Messages among the characters in *JR* fail for many reasons: the sender's intellectual shortcomings or lack of interest, duplicity in language itself, the receiver's distraction or ignorance of the code, interference in or overload of the channels of communication. Throughout the novel sirens, loudspeakers, radios, televisions, and other agents create noise against which communication has to struggle. These problems inspire several experiments by a minor character named Vogel. One of these, teleportation, reflects Gaddis' method in the book, for teleportation attempts to send the messenger rather than just the message. Adopting the roles of recorder, collector, and transmitter rather than narrator, Gaddis ''sends the messenger,'' allows his characters to present themselves as voices. This I call recording because Gaddis does not use certain conventions that would suggest authorial mediation or the transformation of speech into writing. Contexts and speakers are not identified in *JR*. There are no quotation marks in the text; the punctuation within sentences is irregular, usually suggesting the arbitrary pause of a voice rather than the formality of written discourse. The filler, solecisms, false starts, fragments, and repetitions of speech are left in. To further this sense of raw recording, Gaddis includes reproductions of newspaper advertisements, a handwritten school essay, a series of logotypes, and a writer's note cards. Playing back the stupid, pathetic, and ugly noise we hear in our work, media, families, and in our own throats, Gaddis assaults us with an excess of verisimilitude, what is called over and over again in the book ''the real.'' The single most dominant quality of this reality is its instantaneousness. As the clocks splinter into seconds, money-making minutes, the characters are always behind, late, making an abrupt change, rushing, trying to keep up with life that has been pervaded by the quantitative values of the runaway economic system. Fragmentation and trivialization of speech are the minute-to-minute effects of this speeded-up system.

Thomas LeClair. *Modern Fiction Studies*. Winter, 1981–82, pp. 598–99

In recent years we hear William Gaddis spoken of in tones of breathless adoration—the outlaw late modernist, the father-figure to a generation of American novelists, the overcoat from which Pynchon, Gass, and others emerged—or not at all. It is a difficult fate for the working novelist, who has not had the chance to be discussed and evaluated by readers alongside the critics. The reason is simple, and it somewhat indicts us as a culture: Gaddis is very difficult to read. In his second novel *J.R.*, which followed the more traditionally difficult *The Recognitions* (1955) by two decades, he announced a prose style that earned him much esteem and, I suspect, fewer real readers than even the pessimist might suppose. . . .

Readers more familiar with the reputation than the work now have reason to be grateful. For whatever reasons, Gaddis has, in *A Frolic of His Own*, produced his most accessible novel. Less dizzying in its transitions, more topical in presentation, easier on

the eye because of its incorporation of diverse texts—legal opinions, long sections of a play—the novel may win Gaddis some of the audience that he deserves. At the same time, it must be said, when placed in the high-altitude ranks of his other work, his new book is not his very best. Top-heavy with legalistic obsession, it skimps on character and thereby undercuts its chances of making a strong moral connection to the material. Even so—and this nicely illustrates Gaddis's anomalous position—it is, in intelligence, wit, and technical follow-through, leagues ahead of most so-called serious novels that are published these days.

Sven Birkerts. *New Republic*. Feb. 7, 1994, pp. 27–28

Is *A Frolic of His Own* that difficult, that exhausting? I devoured it in a weekend in a state of exhilaration and delight. Yes, you do have to keep your wits about when reading Gaddis, but it's a rare privilege these days to be taken this seriously as a reader. Like Henry James, William Gaddis wants the kind of reader on whom nothing is lost. He doesn't talk down or assume you can't make connections. He expects that you've read a few books in your time and read the papers. This is literature, not a TV sitcom.

The point is not whether Gaddis is difficult or not but whether difficulty is such a bad thing in literature. Those who prefer easy listening may want easy reading, but others should find a novel bracing, challenging. In Gaddis's second novel, *J.R.*, Jack Gibbs is asked if his work in progress on technology and the arts is difficult, and he answers, ''Difficult as I can make it.'' The difficulties Gibbs undergoes to get this book written, the breadth of his research and length of time he devotes to the task (after seventeen years he still isn't finished), show what sort of pact should exist between serious writers and serious readers.

Gaddis knows he's difficult (Gibbs is one of his personas in *J.R*)., and consequently lightens the task somewhat by making his books very funny, filling them with all forms of humor, from limericks and low puns to learned wit and Olympian ironies. The absence of a comic element can make some difficult literary works a real grind—Pound's *Cantos*, say, or Broch's *Death of Virgil*—despite their other virtues. On the other hand, the comic element is what makes extremely difficult novels like Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and Julian Rios's *Larva* such a pleasure to wrestle with. And yet few reviewers convey the idea that Gaddis is essentially a comic novelist and that his books can be great fun—rather than an exercise in masochism—to read.

Steven Moore. *The Nation*. April 25, 1994, p. 505

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GAINES, Ernest J. (1933–)

I can think of no other contemporary American novelist whose work has produced in me anything like the sense of depth, the sense of humanity and compassion, and the sense of honesty that I find in Gaines's fiction. It contains the austere dignity and simplicity of ancient epic, a concern with man's most powerful emotions and the actions that arise from those emotions, and an artistic intuition that carefully keeps such passions and behavior under fictive control. Gaines may be one of our most naturally gifted story-tellers. . . .

From the beginning, Gaines has worked to put into an appropriate form his own sense of history, a sense which has both dictated and arisen from his central subject, the blacks and the whites who live in and around his imaginary town of Bayonne, near Baton Rouge, and who work the land of the plantations that still survive. Gaines has the special feeling for these people and this land that comes from having grown up among them, and having absorbed the quality of their lives without exercising any analytical selectivity as to what he absorbed. Thus, his feelings are strongly attached to the sheer physical texture of this country, and it pervades his fiction: the hot summer sky filled with a hazy sun; the freezing, sleet-ridden days of winter; the monochromatic hues of a brilliantly white sky meeting a brilliantly white earth; the winter darkness in whose heavy overcast the distinction between the earth and the sky are obliterated. Gaines has the intuition of D. H. Lawrence and Thomas Hardy. Like them, he feels a permanent spirit residing in the land, which transcends time and space. His characters are born with the past in their bones, and their lives, whether they stay or leave this place, are dominated by it—this ''place'' in which the past is embedded. . . .

Whether it is intuitive or learned, Gaines's perception of the world resembles that of a biologist, who sees each living organism passing through time, occupying stages, crossing boundary lines into new and unfamiliar territory. Organic life is postulated on the oscillation between life and death, and these are the realities which Gaines fastens on to.

Jerry H. Bryant. *Iowa Review*. Winter, 1972, pp. 106, 110, 119

While his lands and subjects are consistent, there is an evolution of Ernest Gaines's vision through his four works, as he becomes increasingly concerned with black history and black community. The movement from *Catherine Carmier* to *Miss Jane Pittman* is from personal and racial history rendered as a kind of bondage, a solitary existential nightmare of dead ends and blasted families, toward history sensed as a natural cycle, wheeling slowly through the rebirth of a *people*, toward their inevitable collective liberation. As his vision matures, there is an accompanying shift in Gaines's use of materials and fictional techniques. He moves away from a personal version of the white ''existential'' novel, later assimilating and adapting folk forms—popular sermons, slave narratives, folk tales, oral histories—re-making the long fictional forms to his own unique ends. . . .

With *Bloodline*, Ernest Gaines sounds a very different emphasis on black history and community. The vision of history as fate, as a cycle from which one cannot escape, is expanded. As the title *Bloodline* suggests, the book is concerned with the living, the organic, and Gaines is writing with a vision of the natural history of a people. The dominant concern through these five stories is with natural patterns of growth and decay, the evolution from childhood to maturity to old age as seen in the lives of people, races,

generations, eras. In the shapes of these stories, and in the recurrent images and metaphors, the past, present and future are all of a piece; history is part of a natural process, and humans who live within it find their lives infused with significance.

Jack Hicks. *Black American Literature Forum*. Spring, 1977, pp. 9, 13

When Ernest Gaines published *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* in 1971, he secured his footing within the American literary world as an important artist. The critical acclaim was nearly unanimous, and the transformation of the work into a popular television drama embellished that success. But Gaines' quiet vision of endurance was no sudden occurrence. With the patience of a journeyman becoming master of his vision, his view of life had been worked out in three previous books; of these earlier works, *Bloodline*, a cycle of short stories published in 1968, is a minor-keyed masterpiece. This is so, despite an age in which easy praise inflates achievement.

To discuss *Bloodline* properly, one must grant that a writer need not strain with an overreaching ambition to create significance in his fiction; he may instead make his mark by accurately recreating the texture of ordinary life, and leave it to us to discover the subtleties of the specific milieu he knows thoroughly. In this sense, *Bloodline* is a worthy descendant of Turgenev's *Sportsman's Sketches* and Joyce's *Dubliners*. It is equally evocative of ordinary life. Within the specific tradition of Afro-American literature, however, *Bloodline* is of even more pressing importance.

Bloodline has significance because it is in line with, though still different from, past landmarks of Afro-American short fiction. Charles Chesnutt's *Conjure Woman and Other Stories*, Jean Toomer's *Cane*, and Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*—all, like Gaines' *Bloodline*, concern themselves chiefly with the South, that ''old country'' of racial memory. In these works, successive generations of particular writers, each with some tie to the South, wrestled to divine the significance of that ''old country.'' The works are important for that reason. Further, with regard to their importance and place in an ethnic short-prose tradition, these works are outstanding precisely because they are very much more than collections of separate pieces. Each writer in his own way—Chesnutt by undermining the Plantation Tradition, Toomer by evoking the mysteries of racial memory, Wright by the programmatic ordering of horror—constructs a whole with far greater significance than that of its separate pieces. In that regard, *Bloodline*, too, urges us beyond the bare sum of its parts, while, even more than its predecessors, accepting the ordinariness of the lives it sketches.

Todd Duncan. *Callaloo*. May, 1978, pp. 85–86

Ernest Gaines's fiction has been characterized from the first by its quiet force. The characters in his several fine books often raise their voices, but the author declines to raise his. These characters are mainly poor, and mostly black; their lives are seldom far removed from the threat of violence, physical or emotional or both. Sooner or later the violence arrives, and the characters cry out at one another, or to the heavens. Their pain, struggle, bewilderment, joys and agonies are registered with precision and sympathy, but the strong prose that carries their stories is not affected by the fevers or the biases of those it describes.

A swimmer cannot influence the flow of a river, and the characters of Ernest Gaines's fiction—from Catherine Carmier to Miss Jane Pittman, and from Miss Jane to the Rev. Phillip Martin of *In My Father's House*—are propelled by a prose that is serene, considered and unexcited. It is the force of Mr. Gaines's character and intelligence, operating through this deceptively quiet style, that makes his fiction compelling. He is, pre-eminently, a writer who takes his own good time, and in this case [*In My Father's House*] the result of his taking it is a mature and muscular novel. . . .

Not the least of the book's virtues is the variety and richness of its minor characters. Phillip Martin's guilty search into his past takes him, internally, down a long road of memory. Externally it brings him into contact with a number of people—his godmother, an old girlfriend, a former gambling buddy and an embittered young black guerrilla—whose portraits are done with Flaubertian economy but equally Flaubertian vividness. The dialogue is spare, but unerring, and humor will keep slipping in subtly, despite the tragedies behind these lives. The tone of the book is determined by Mr. Gaines's decision—a brilliant one—to set the novel not in the expected context of a sweaty, dripping Louisiana summer, but in the miserable, frigid, sunless Louisiana winter. The sun never shines on this story, and the metaphors that describe the doom of Robert X are, appropriately, metaphors of chill.

There are few blemishes on the book. Now and then a character strays into polemic; once or twice the tone breaks. Perhaps Robert X should not have been allowed to speak at all, for his condemnatory silence is far more eloquent than the little that he eventually says. But these are small blemishes indeed on a book that attempts a large theme, and is fully adequate to it.

Larry McMurtry. *New York Times Book Section*. June 11, 1978. p. 13

In My Father's House is an important work, showing significant development in Gaines's art and thought, especially in light of his depiction of and reaction to the 1970s. . . .

Gaines's distancing of his readers—and himself—from this novel may not indicate a change in his philosophy, but it does, I think, reflect a change in his attitude toward his characters' potential development. Considered in sequence, Gaines's first three novels show a gradual development in his characters' ability to grow, change, and prevail. All the characters in *Catherine Carmier*, his first novel, are victims of social or environmental forces, while in *Of Love and Dust* Jim Kelly and Marcus Payne achieve growth through fighting the inertia of southern black life and, within limits at least, gain the capacity to shape their lives. Gaines's sense of this power on the part of his characters culminates in the depiction of Jane Pittman, who prevails over seriously adverse circumstances. The *Autobiography* reconciles the dichotomies of the earlier novels: past and present, young and old, man and woman. In *In My Father's House* the reconciliation falls apart. . . .

Gaines's first three novels culminated in Jane Pittman, a character who embodies the positive values in his world. Perhaps he was then faced with the problem of how to create a story which would represent a significant development from such a powerful, heroic

figure. In *In My Father's House* Gaines implies that Miss Jane's triumph, both personal and social, may be atypical, that Martin's fall is the more usual human fate. Burdened by a past he cannot escape, by overweening pride and self-esteem, Martin is defeated. Whether he can rise again, as is characteristic of traditional tragic heroes, is problematical. The ending of this novel suggests the ending of his first novel, *Catherine Carmier*; in that the characters are in stasis, immobile, unable to move and break out of the pattern in which they are trapped. The novel ends *we just go'n have to start again*.

Frank W. Shelton. *Southern Review*. Spring, 1981, pp. 340–41, 345

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GARDNER, Isabella (1915–1981)

Her gravestone reads ISABELLA GARDNER 1915–1981: POET, but when I say that I am writing a biography of Isabella Gardner, I either draw a blank, or am regaled with stories about visits to, and thefts from, that most idiosyncratic Boston museum assembled by Isabella Stewart Gardner, ''Mrs. Jack.'' . . .

It is a biographer's boon if her subject's poems are autobiographical, as Isabella Gardner's so clearly are; for the poetry lover, a poet's life is just one impulse from which good poems may spring. . . .

In the late forties and early fifties Isabella Gardner proved herself to be a consummate craftsman of lyric verse, a magician of sound: quite a number of her poems were set to music. She took all forms, from the obligatory sonnet (''Sonnet for My acquaintances'') to the sestina (''The Music Room'') to the little known, forbidding ''Triolet,'' Gardner's first published poem. Although she seldom submitted to fixed verse forms, she controlled the chaos of life by end rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and, often, strictly metered iambic lines, as well as the ''symbology, inter-relating, universal and associative, of Christianity and myth and magic (and Freud)'' (in Gardner letters). . . . In [the] short, incantatory lyric [''Cock-A-Hoop''] above love, death, and war, Isabella Gardner plays witty verbal games—the cocksure soldier is almost a conceit—and alludes to fables and religion, observing with precision and feeling. . . .

Gardner wrote only about a hundred poems all told, thirty of which are now collected for the first time. A number of these ''new'' works, for instance the earlier mentioned ''Triolet'' and ''Incantate the Cockatrice,'' are apprentice poems. Gardner's high standards never allowed her to gather such poems in book form; in *Collected Poems* they demonstrate her mastery of technique. They are useful as contrast to Gardner's best poems in which formal devices particularize and therefore emphasize feelings, keeping intense emotions from crossing over to generalized sentimentality. Other previously uncollected poems, as well as two Villon translations and the late poem written about Allen Tate just after his death (''One Sunday in 1966'') show that although Isabella Gardner's output was small and her fame brief, the quality of her work is as monumental as Fenway Court [Isabella Stewart Gardner's grand house, now the Gardner Museum].

Marian Janssen. *Kenyon Review*. Summer, 1991, pp. 152, 157, 160

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GARDNER, John (1933–1982)

Taut, ruminative and in its dignity never solemn, [*The Resurrection*] is an ordeal to read—but a rewarding one. . . . I was reminded here and there of Hermann Broch's *Death of Virgil*, but Mr. Gardner's protagonist is altogether more in this world. The children (to whom he hardly knows how to speak) are deftly drawn in the insouciance of their daily energy; the frozen panic of the wife comes through movingly, and one character—Horne, the mad law-librarian—embodies the notion of malfunctioning demiurge. Mr. Gardner subtly combines them all through devices of hallucination and dream, tense-switching, and italicized thoughts-within-thoughts.

Paul West. *Book Week*. July 17, 1966. p. 12

At times Agathon [in *The Wreckage of Agathon*] whose name in Greek means the Good, stands for the whole Western tradition of humane tolerance, now threatened by the twin fanaticisms of repression and revolution. At others, he is some kind of primordial natural force, a witness to age-long woe and fatality. At still others, when what he calls facticity catches up with him, Agathon is just a slobbish old lecher smelling of onions. In this guise he represents the irreducible, incorrigible lump of humanity that always jams up the bright theoretical machines continually being invented by one Lycurgus or another, and thus saves mankind from betterment.

In this guise, Agathon saves the book too. With his rambling wit, his irrelevancies, rages, blunderings, unfairnesses, with his tender-rough efforts to jerk his friend Peeker to wisdom through the muck of the world, he emerges as one of the scapegrace saints who have adorned literature from Socrates to Gulley Jimson.

Robert Wernick. *Time*. Nov. 9, 1970. p. 86

John Gardner's [*The Wreckage of Agathon*], like [Dan] Jacobson's [*The Rape of Tamar*], is a *tour de force* dealing with ancient historical legend in modern idiom. The resemblance is even closer in that his central figure, a sublimely ridiculous seer named Agathon (a mixture of ''Crito'' and Joyce Cary's Gulley Jimson, with a touch of Marguerite Yourcenar's Hadrian), believes that, in a world where truth is unknowable and where time's wreckage makes prisoners of us all, vividness of being is the highest wisdom. . . .

The novel is narrated alternately by Agathon and his disciple and mixes the concerns of public and private life. Gardner is ambitious to make his book a statement not merely about justice or about time but also about sex, growing old, and the art of living. His rhetoric and invention maintain considerable energy, but on second reading the liveliness appears more facile than at first. . . .

And the book's numerous aphorisms, though potentially forceful in the proper context, are a good deal less original than the author seems to be claiming, hence a little embarrassing.

David J. Gordon. *The Yale Review*. Spring, 1971. pp. 433–4

Mr. Gardner's *Grendel* is interpretation and elaboration rather than translation—a sophisticated version of what *Beowulf* is ultimately *about* in modern terms. The device that he uses is to present us with a subjective autobiography by an extremely self-conscious Grendel before and immediately after Beowulf's arrival in Denmark. . . .

Mr. Gardner has a disturbing talent. There can be no doubt about that. Grendel, in addition to being the narrator, is much the most sympathetic figure in *Grendel*—in spite of his outrageous behavior and often deplorable opinions. What remains questionable is whether the literary object upon which *Grendel* is parasitic can carry the weight Mr. Gardner imposes on it. *Beowulf*, for all its historic interest, remains obstinately second-rate as a work of literature.

F. W. Bateson. *New York Review of Books*. Dec. 30, 1971. pp. 16–7

One approached Mr. Gardner's new novel [*Grendel*] with caution, suspecting another literary word-game. In the endless search for new objects of compassion, he has taken the monster from *Beowulf* called Grendel, and asks us to examine its predicament: how can Grendel's anti-social tendencies (eating all those brave Scandinavian soldiers) be explained except in terms of childhood deprivation, social rejection on account of physical deformity, horrible smell, etc.?

However, from this whimsical, monumentally silly idea for a novel Mr. Gardner has constructed something of pure delight. Grendel's grudge against humanity may originate in the pique of a rejected suitor when, on his first encounter with men, he is mistaken for a tree fungus, but Mr. Gardner invites us to believe that Grendel had a point. We examine the Beowulf legend for a start, and through it all the legends with which mankind sustains belief in his intrinsic nobility, and see the whole structure as a pack of lies. Squalid, bloodthirsty encounters between frightened men are built into epic battles; ignoble and furtive lusts become by the telling something beautiful and good. Mr. Gardner's book is as funny and as elegantly written as anything I have read for a long time.

Auberon Waugh. *Spectator*. July 1, 1972. p. 14

The Wreckage of Agathon, an inventive if rather baroque meditation on the status of imaginative freedom within an oppressive political order, and *Grendel*, a dazzling revision of the Beowulf story that injects nightmare into the complacencies of our cultural and historical self-imaginings, seemed for all their brilliance more like strokes of theater, bright ideas carried off by extraordinary powers of execution, than fully explored fictional territories. Both, though thematically ''relevant'' enough, took place in a remote past, letting us see ourselves in them only around a corner. One wondered if Gardner's art might not require such a corner, if he mightn't be doomed to being a writer who could address us only in asides, winking knowingly from a long way off.

Two readings of [*The Sunlight Dialogues*] now convince me that Gardner is much more than a sleight-of-hand man. Where *Grendel* was, within its limits, virtually perfect, like a masterfully practiced stage-turn, *The Sunlight Dialogues* is ambitious, heroically flawed, contemporary (though with rich mythic resonances), absorbing moment by moment and darkly troubling after it's over.

Gardner is that rare creature, a philosophical novelist.

Thomas R. Edwards. *New York Times Book Section*. Dec. 10, 1972. p. 1

Of course, Gardner's novel [*The Sunlight Dialogues*] can be faulted. Just as he shares with John Updike (and many other American writers) an obsession with entropy, so he reveals something of Updike's straining for self-vaunting but redundant simile. They both should be banned from using the word ''like'' for a decade. It could also be argued that some of the very long tirades detach themselves from the speakers' characters and swarm around like unattached mists of angry words. But these cavils are minor compared with the high degree of success achieved by this ambitious novel. It is a major fictional exploration into America, no less—the America that is vanishing and the problematical America of today. And without abandoning its fictional premises, it draws us into a sobering meditation on the possible shapes of our immediate future. It tells no lies yet ends with a refusal to accept despair. It does all this at the same time as it involves us in an absorbing and intricately interwoven story. This is a great deal for any one novel to do, and it should be recognized immediately for what it is—a very impressive achievement.

Tony Tanner. *Saturday Review*. Jan., 1973. pp. 79–80

John Gardner's last two novels, *The Wreckage of Agathon* and *Grendel* were short and beautifully compact. They, too, were philosophical novels; that is, they addressed themselves to contradictions and irrational miseries in our society, and they make splendid sense. *The Sunlight Dialogues* is too wordy, too vague of design, to sustain and deliver the same kind of energetic meaning.

Mr. Gardner is a medievalist (he teaches Old and Middle English at Southern Illinois U) and his mind would seem to have been on the sagas of Iceland when he undertook this novel. The sagas wander off in just this way, appending digression to digression, ending up with all the design of a monkey-puzzle tree. And yet John Gardner writes a bold, flexible prose, and his mastery of vernacular is superb. The book is too good to bore; it overwhelms, it hides its climaxes, it strays; it is too damned long.

Guy Davenport. *National Review*. Feb. 2, 1973. p. 159

Like a proper allegory, Gardner's novel operates on two levels. In its frame of realism, *The Sunlight Dialogues* takes place in Batavia, New York, in 1966. The Sunlight Man proves to be a member of a

prominent local family, and in his detailed chronicle of the generations of Hodges, Gardner can perform like a veritable Galsworthy toward his Forsytes.

But, like a morality play, the novel constantly moves from specific people and events toward a sort of staged warfare of good and evil. Clumly is the last tired Apollonian, struggling fecklessly to enforce the law's jot and tittles as small boys let the air out of his tires and, in fact, the old American order deflates around him. The Sunlight Man, a poet, a magician, is in essence a daemonic figure: the embodiment of all that is newly restless, newly rebellious in the American spirit.

Melvin Maddocks. *Atlantic Monthly*. March, 1973. p. 100

Jason and Medeia [is] a tour de force of literary nostalgia and imitative form.

Jason and Medeia is nothing less than an epic poem in 24 books (the full Homeric complement) on one of the major cycles of Greek legend. . . .

Gardner's ambition is evidently to fabricate in English a fourth ''ancient'' epic to complement the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid*, as well as a book to stand beside his own novels, which are very much concerned with myth, wonder and historical fantasy. . . . Gardner, himself an ingenious translator from the Middle English, has invented a bizarre variant . . . the open hoax, the instant classic, a translation without an original. . . .

What remains unclear . . . is why Gardner should have undertaken such a hybrid project. The answer, I'm afraid, lies near at hand: Gardner is a prolific and learned writer of amazing virtuoso dexterity, but with little power of judgment or depth of inspiration. Like another superb technician, Ezra Pound, he needs to hang his hat on another man's rack, to unravel and reweave someone else's thread. Always the clever student, full of boyish bravado, he sets tough tasks for himself—hurdles, challenges—and polishes them off effortlessly, without really pondering if they were worth doing at all.

Morris Dickstein. *New York Times Book Section*, July 1, 1973. p. 4

A serious case can be made for how little John Gardner resembles himself. Now he's an epic poet, now an epic novelist, now a medieval monster, now a simulated Poe or Melville. He is the latter two, and more, in this new collection of his short stories [*The King's Indian*], the title story a remarkable novella, full of marvels.

Gardner is the Lon Chaney of contemporary fiction, a writer without a personal psychography in his work. He seems sprung not from life but literature, history and ideas, a man making books with other books as a starting point, but a writer of enormous range and inventiveness. His prose is regal.

What he is is a splendid show-off.

William Kennedy. *New Republic*. Dec. 7, 1974. p. 19

A puzzling absence of criticism attends the works of John Gardner. He has published five novels since 1966: *The Resurrection* (1966), *The Wreckage of Agathon* (1970), *Grendel* (1971), *The Sunlight Dialogues* (1972), and *Nickel Mountain* (1973); he has also published a long poem, *Jason and Medeia* (1973), and a collection of stories, *The King's Indian* (1974). His works have been praised in an impressive number of brief reviews; his experiments with novelistic form have won him recognition as an innovator. But as prolific, well-received, and innovative as he may be, Gardner has not yet received the serious critical attention which his works merit. . . . One can consider the five novels as a group of works written at the beginning of his career and suppose that they were written in the following phases: the ''very early'' phase—*The Resurrection* and *Nickel Mountain*; the ''early'' phase—*The Sunlight Dialogues* and *The Wreckage of Agathon*; and the ''late'' phase—*Grendel*.

The Resurrection and *Nickel Mountain* share a concern with the affirmation of life in the face of death. . . . These two novels from the ''very early'' phase of Gardner's career resemble each other in several ways. They share an upstate New York setting, which Gardner will replace with more fabulous realms in the later novels. They share an omniscient narrator, presenting plausible characters who speak convincing dialogue; Gardner will use self-conscious and unreliable first-person narrators in the later novels. They share a conventional chronological structure, which will be modified to more experimental forms in the last three novels. *The Resurrection* and *Nickel Mountain* share a large, philosophical focus on the question, posed bluntly and emphatically to James Chandler. ''*What is the meaning of life?*''. . . Just as the first two novels share similar themes and techniques, they also share a similar flaw. At their worst, they are sentimental; the affirmations made by the protagonists are not earned nor are they fully credible. . . .

Gardner's last three novels are his best and are distinguished from the first two by their inclusion of the figure of the alien, developed to its fullest in *Grendel*. Gardner's three most compelling characters are aliens: the Sunlight Man, Agathon, and Grendel. Each is an eccentric, estranged from a society he improves through the biting wit of his alienation; each is pitted against righteousness and complacency; each is an artist of sorts: the Sunlight Man with magic, Agathon with fictionalized narrative, and Grendel with poetic myth. Finally, each is a joker, a sad clown, whose jokes emerge like black humor from a mood of despair.

The Sunlight Dialogues and *The Wreckage of Agathon* share a similar theme, in which the metaphysical focus of the earlier novels is replaced by a social focus. Both novels are about the inadequacy of law and the need for justice, the narrowness of codified rules and the need for a broader human understanding.

Susan Strehle. *Critique*. 18, 2, 1976, pp. 86–88

John Gardner is one of the few American novelists who has remained fascinated by the man who acts, who wills one thing intensely enough to get it. A medievalist, Gardner seems to have kept his faith that ''except in the life of a hero, the whole world's meaningless.'' *October Light* is a stunningly written tragicomic novel that searches through the operative myths of national greatness for a surviving American heroism. Sally, an 83-year-old feminist, and James, her 70-year-old farmer brother, mirror two heroic strains in the American consciousness, the one intoxicated by progress; the other devoted to the land and deriving its values from the endless repetitions of nature. Belief in progress and change and willingness to work the land opened up the American wilderness. . . .

Missing in his novels is a sense of masculine purpose, of the hero as the man who can put his power in the service of a

worthwhile cause. Gardner's heroes are willful, self-absorbed narcissists who see determination and merit as the same, and whose heroism involves only the willingness to follow their obsessions wherever they might lead. . . In not making distinctions between the value of one obsession and another, Gardner stalemates his novels.

Gardner's irresolution takes the form of an irony so pervasive it seems to stem from that well of American bitterness that made Herman Melville and Mark Twain, creators of distinctive American heroes, finally black about America's possibilities. Gardner presses his ambivalences into *October Light*, forcing his chauvinism and his nihilism against each other like monuments to two American civilizations. He achieves a disturbing, utterly original novel that gets as close as any book can to that acid cartoon, Grant Wood's ''American Gothic.''

Josephine Hendin. *New Republic*. Feb. 5, 1977, pp. 31–32

On Moral Fiction . . . will probably be quoted as widely as [William] Gass's *Fiction and the Figures of Life* was a few years ago, not because Gardner's formulations of the new fictional conservatism are particularly brilliant but because he articulates feelings and tastes many disgruntled readers share. Gass's essays had an elegant uselessness; Gardner's appeal is plain talk and righteousness. I have heard ''Kill the Aestheticians'' murmured in my university library. Gardner responds to this kind of frustration with academic jargon by using words, such as Beauty, Truth, and Goodness, that most critics walked away from years ago. These abstractions come to have a sludge-like quality; Gardner's distinctions often lack precision (a favorite pejorative is ''creepy''), and his readings of recent fiction are sometimes militantly unimaginative. But *On Moral Fiction* is still a necessary book because its earnest force requires even the reader who resists it page by page to examine his assumptions about fiction and because no other writer—Tom Wolfe in *The Painted Word* excepted—has reminded us recently that art is by and for human beings.

Gardner finds most contemporary American fiction and its criticism mediocre or worse. Authors lack belief, so they follow the cult of style, fancy surface. If they have values worth communicating, their fiction is too often programmatic and didactic. Criticism accepts this diminished state of fiction while trifling with finer and finer-gauged descriptive categories. What we need, argues Gardner, is a moral fiction, one that improves life through its sane and healthy vision and through its creation of character models for our imitation. The moral artist is the poet-priest who creates by a process of careful imitation, testing his fiction against the larger reality of human experience. A true criticism would judge fiction, at least partially, on moral grounds. This summary does little violence to Gardner's positions. While they are filled out with some explanation of central terms, with references to classic authorities, and with discussions of contemporary writers (John Fowles as hero, William Gass and mostly unnamed nihilists as villains), Gardner's arguments are meant to be fundamental. He insists on a common sense view, an enforced simplicity, and he has the Platonic assurance that we—always it is ''we''—know the good but just can't find it.

I think Gardner's assessment of the current literary scene is substantially accurate if our contemporaries are measured against classic or even classic modern writers. His judgments would also be true of the fiction written in the 1870s. Still, we do need to recognize that very few of our writers have the heart or ambition to be a Melville or a Pynchon. Even Gardner's prescriptions could be persuasive had he not vitiated the basic force of his argument with an inconsistent definition of moral fiction, with narrow assumptions, inflated claims, and limited sympathies. Gardner defines moral fiction both by the exploratory, mimetic process of its composition and by the healthy effects it has without fully considering that a ''moral'' process can and sometimes does produce a negative, even a nihilistic work. His assumptions—that ordinary language is adequate for interesting fiction, that art communicates very much like other discourses, that the reader should fall into fiction as into a dream—are insistently naive, but even more difficult to accept is Gardner's pride. He proclaims that art and criticism are the only ordering agencies left in our culture, that ''true'' art—and not just the best art—is necessarily moral, and that the artist is the only true critic. As a reader of his fellow novelists, Gardner is sometimes pettish (his comments on Bellow and Updike), occasionally sloppy, and at least once flatly wrong—when he mistakes what happened in Heller's *Something Happened*. There is little sympathy for satirists, creators of indirect affirmations, and makers of imaginative ornaments. In a world where everything and everyone is used, ordered for a purpose, Gardner would make fiction one more operation, the most efficient persuasion. He forgets fun.

On Moral Fiction does not collapse through its many weaknesses because, ultimately, Gardner sides with great art, an ambitious humane art that displays the writer's love for his craft, his world, and his readers.

Thomas LeClair. *Contemporary Literature*. Autumn, 1979. pp. 509–11

The garden and the machine confront each other anew in Gardner's fiction. The voice of the garden, linked to the pastoral impulse with its love of nature and poetic longings, confronts the voice of the machine, linked to the darker Manichaean belief that the world is mere accident, brute force controls all history, and only outright manipulation will keep things running. The basic pattern of dialogue between the classical/medieval hope for regeneration and redemption, linked to light and often magic, and the modern nihilistic certainty of gloom and despair, linked to darkness and often black magic, informs the basic narrative structure of Gardner's fiction. These voices set off against one another—the human heart in conflict with itself—set up a counterpoint in his fiction, which slowly works itself out in the process of the confrontation itself. Fiction becomes a ''dream unfolding in the mind,'' a spell cast by both opposing camps, defining each other by the pattern of dialogue and conflict between them. . . .

In *The Sunlight Dialogues* Gardner achieves that equilibrium between ''radical disunites,'' that fully wrought balance between the pastoral idyll and Calvinist/Manichaean melodrama, which lies at the heart of the greatest of American literature. Here Clumly, the benevolent watchdog, and Taggert Hodge, the Babylonian anarchist, confront one another in a series of dialogues representing the contradictory impulses of western and, in particular, American culture. The dialogue, in fact, becomes Gardner's basic narrative structure, his basic aesthetic form, in the book. The Babylonian holiness of matter confronts the Judeo-Christian holiness of spirit. The Babylonian love of substance opposes the Judeo-Christian ''idle speculation'' about abstract relationships between soul and

flesh (p. 413). An impersonal universe confronts that ''grand American responsibility'' for right and wrong (p. 323). Clumly finally realizes that '''we must all be vigilant against growing indifferent to people less fortunate. . . . We have to stay awake, as best we can, and be ready to obey the laws as best as we're able to see them. That's it. That's the whole thing''' (pp. 670, 672). No winners or losers but a constant juggling of contraries, a balance of irreconcilable positions, a continued vigilance in the unrelenting encounter between the ''radical disunites'' of American culture. The Manichaean interpenetration of each becomes the only certainty, although the pastoral vantage point points the way toward armed reconciliation. . . .

What Henry James referred to as American literature's ''rich passion for extremes'' can be found in Gardner's fiction. Gardner's hope for human communion and love, however fragmentary and diminished, remains undaunted. He is clearly reworking the American fable for our own troubled contemporary times and not merely delighting in structuralist and ''post-modernist'' techniques for their own artificer's delight. Like Hawthorne, Melville, and Faulkner before him, he seems intent on dispelling anew the notion of a special American innocence, yet at the same time recognizing the pull and enchantment of the pastoral impulses implicit in that American myth. He's aware of the precariousness in that farther darkness and uses his pastoralism as a vantage point from which to observe and re-create the American heart's unrelenting conflict with itself.

Samuel Coale. In *John Gardner: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Robert A. Morace and Kathryn Van Spanckeren (Southern Illinois Univ. Pr., 1982), pp. 20, 23, 26–27

In recent years, Gardner has been dogged by charges of plagiarism—he was accused of twigging his popularized biographical book *The Life and Times of Chaucer* (1977) with unattributed borrowings from more-serious Chaucerian scholars—and in a foreword to this new book, he conscientiously reels off his sources and influences, perhaps hoping to fend off further charges. He needn't have fussed. The novel *is* patchy and derivative, but that's the least of its worries. . . .

His new novel, I'm afraid, is a whopping piece of academic bull slinging. With *Mickelsson's Ghosts*, John Gardner hasn't so much composed a novel as he has used his mind as a vacuum cleaner to suck up a lot of serious reading and then dump the scruffy contents on the reader's carpet. Gleanings from Nietzsche and Luther and Wittgenstein, ruminations on the significance of Dadaism, trendy little velleities about nuclear strife. . . , deep-think musings on the sovereignty of music, morbid broodings on the lingering shadows of Nazism—time and time again Gardner empties his mind, burying the reader in foothills of lint. . . . What is *Mickelsson's Ghosts* about? Name it: love, guilt, history, family ties, entropy and doom, God's enigmatic silence—the whole shebang. But magisterial themes call for a magisterial style, and the writing in *Mickelsson's Ghosts* is all slap and dribble, a trickling spill of irrelevancies. . . .

Mickelsson's Ghosts . . . is . . . one of those big, noisy books that tries to be about everything and, because of its incoherence, ends up being about nothing. Nabokov describing Pnin's tongue at play among his craggy teeth gives one more to live for than does John Gardner prowling through the mists of history, trying to slip the handcuffs on Heidegger. . . .

Literary critics aren't the only ones thrown from the sled by highbrow slumming; trying to play philosopher in this new novel sends John Gardner for an inglorious spill. As *Grendel* proved, Gardner is at home with myth and legend—he can make you feel the heat of a beastie's breath, the crack of wood on stone. But as a thinker he's hopeless. *Mickelsson's Ghosts* simply won't do.

James Wolcott. *Esquire*. June, 1982, p. 134

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GARLAND, Hamlin (1860–1940)

In Hamlin Garland we meet an earnest man—one who believes in his own work so thoroughly that he cannot fail to impress others. His characters are real men and women. He has lived with them, toiled with them, suffered and resented wrong with them. It would be impossible for him to write anything else than those dreary, hopeless stories of life upon Western ranches.

Edwin Markham, 1893 in mss. quoted in *American Literature*. May, 1945. p. 153

Mr. Garland's books seem to me as indigenous in the true sense as any our country has produced. They are western American, it is true, but America is mostly western now. . . . I like being in the company of men who believe so cordially in man's perfectibility; who believe that wrongs can really be righted, and that even in our depraved conditions, which imply selfishness as the greatest personal good, teach that generosity and honesty and duty are wiser and better things. I like stirring adventure without bloodshed, as I find it so often in his pages; I like love which is sweet and pure, chivalry which is in its senses, honor for women which recognizes that while all women ultimately are good and beautiful some women are better and beautifuller than others.

William Dean Howells. *North American Review*. Oct., 1912. p. 526

American criticism, which always mistakes a poignant document for esthetic form and organization, greeted these moral volumes as

works of art, and so Garland found himself an accepted artist. No more grotesque miscasting of a diligent and worthy man is recorded in profane history. He had no more feeling for the intrinsic dignity of beauty, no more comprehension of it as a thing in itself, than a policeman. He was a moralist endeavoring ineptly to translate his messianic passion into esthetic terms, and always failing. *A Son of the Middle Border*, undoubtedly the best of all his books, projects his failure brilliantly. It is, in substance, a document of considerable value—a naïve and often illuminating contribution to the history of American peasantry. It is, in form, a thoroughly third-rate piece of writing—amateurish, flat, banal, repellent. Garland got facts into it; he got a sort of evangelical passion. But he couldn't get any charm. He couldn't get any beauty.

H.L. Mencken *Prejudices: First Series* (Knopf). 1919. pp. 134–5

Mr. Garland told his early stories in the strong, level, ominous language of a man who had observed much but chose to write little. Not his words, but the overtones vibrating through them cry out that the earth and the fruits of the earth belong to all men and yet a few of them have turned tiger or dog or jackal and snatched what is precious for themselves while their fellows starve and freeze. Insoluble as are the dilemmas he propounded and tense and unrelieved as his accusations were, he stood in his methods nearer, say, to the humane Millet than to the angry Zola.

Carl Van Doren. *The Nation*. Nov. 23, 1921. p. 596

To us of the Middle Border the Hamlin Garland books are epic. Their unashamed provincialism is their glory. Here is the perfection of the willingly provincial—not on the defensive, not in any challenge, never by a breath apologetic. But completely articulate. . . . Not only to one who knows the land and the people, but to anyone who finds inestimably worth while an honest record of any section of national life—of world life—the Border books are almost intolerably precious. They are the record of that rarest of creatures, the provincial who goes into the world and makes it his own without seeking to ''change front''—and then tells the whole progress with power.

Zona Gale. *The Yale Review*. July, 1922. p. 852

Hamlin Garland has been called a realist; he might with better reason be called a romanticist. Like lads romantic, he paused, tired to the bone from plowing, to read of dukes and duchesses and of people with charmed lives. . . .Although he pictures his boyhood as hard, still the book probably considered his masterpiece, *A Son of the Middle Border*, tells of a bright world vanished, a landscape so beautiful that it hurt him to have some parts of it revealed to aliens. At every step, in his description of the terrible toil of his people, the beauty of the natural scene remains.

Ruth M. Raw. *Sewanee Review*. April, 1928. p. 202

What, one wonders, would have happened if he had kept his loyalty to the humble, hapless farmers of (his) early stories? What if he had extended that loyalty so that it embraced urban as well as rural laborers? He might have avoided the whole period of unhappy experimentation in romanticism, and he might have ended, not as a complacent and garrulous chronicler of past glories, but as the great novelist he once gave promise of becoming.

Granville Hicks. *The Nation*. Oct. 21, 1931. p. 436

Garland's ''middle border'' had been little treated in literature before, as deliberately chosen subject matter. Here it appeared, simple, humble—oh, so humble!—but with a certain candor, a direct view of life, that was to be its hallmark, and a new note in American culture. The country boy born in Wisconsin, who had declaimed the standard pieces of eloquence in a two-by-four academy in Iowa, who had seen what the pioneer was up against on the burning plains of Dakota, and who in good time had the chance to orient himself amidst the world's store of knowledge in Boston, swore to tell what he knew, without dressing or palliation. Young Garland in the first fresh tide of self-consciousness is almost the very type of intellectual young America, so eager, so serious, so full of his new truth.

Ferner Nuhn. *The Wind Blew from the East* (Harper). 1942. p. 80

The movement, nurtured by Howells, found its major spokesman in Hamlin Garland. . . . When he came to Boston and found the example and personal encouragement of Howells, he wrote his only substantial work of fiction: *Main-Travelled Roads*, the book that almost singlehandedly exploded the myth of the West as the Garden of America, the happy lair of noble primitives surrounded by the soft beneficence of a friendly nature. It was a work, Howells saw immediately, which expressed the sad spirit of the rural Northwest from the experiences of one who had been part of what he saw. Following Howells' precepts, Garland wrote out of his own experience and about the region that he knew best, and for the particular brand of realism which dealt explicitly with the provincial environment out of which an author came, he coined the word ''veritism.''

Everett Carter. *Howells and the Age of Realism* (Lippincott). 1954. pp. 120–1

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GARRIGUE, Jean (1914–1972)

Miss Garrigue's first book of poems is notable for two qualities: an acute introspective sensibility, at its best in such delicate probings of mood and motive as ''Letter for Vadya,'' and an unusual accuracy of physical observation, especially when she is dealing with animals. The verse is relentlessly honest, stripped of tricks—too stripped, perhaps—, alive at every point. . . . Unhappily . . . the greater part of the poems, for all their vitality, are marred by a sloppiness that seems to be the result less of obtuseness than of impatience. There is *brio* enough here, and to spare; but there is a tendency to sag, to go unkempt.

Dudley Fitts. *Saturday Review*. June 19, 1948. p. 26

Her poetry is at once lush and cryptic, extravagant and concise. It is elaborate with color and imagery, rich with alliteration and a frequent Elizabethan elegance. . . . There are occasional overtones of Hopkins and Dylan Thomas in her work, but she is undeniably original and individual as an artist and a craftsman in complete command of her medium. . . . The poetic intensity, the wealth of light and color, and the real distinction of Miss Garrigue's work cannot fail to impress the perceptive and careful reader.

Sara Henderson Hay. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 16, 1954. pp. 19–20

The world of *The Monument Rose* is romantic in its richness and strangeness and curious elaboration of detail. . . . Most of all, though, and for all the elegance in particular words, the character of this poetry is just where it belongs, in the play between rhythms and syntax, the wave-motion so to say, which makes the identity of passage after passage and makes all one and most fine. This thing, the weaving and stitching, is the most neglected part of poetry at present, but attention to it is a mark of mastery, and the gift for it, the melodiousness which is, as Coleridge claimed, the final and distinguishing sign of a poet, is something Miss Garrigue wonderfully has.

Howard Nemerov. *Sewanee Review*. Spring, 1954. p. 317

Leaving aside the poems about Colette, cats, country gardens, etc., her work contains a core of intensely and I should say fully humane poems, which are increasing in proportion to the whole. If they never rise to anything that can be called a pitch, they nevertheless preserve the attractive quietness of steady intellectual warmth. At the same time there can be no doubt that she has a splendid lyrical gift and uses rhyme and meter elegantly. This is a less rare attainment than her others; some of her poems could be transposed to volumes she never wrote and no one would know the difference; but in the best poems her softly modulated rhymes and assonances together with unexpected variations in the length and pace of her lines produce what she (elegantly) calls ''a little native elegance'': the effect is right and original.

Hayden Carruth. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1965. p. 134

Miss Garrigue is perhaps more skilled than any other poet writing today with the power to dramatize emotional thresholds between jeopardy and renewal. She has a genius for returning to life's viable starting points following defeats, disappointments, hovering over the twin craters of frustrated love and failed art, owning up to the bleakest shortcomings in the self. In poem after poem, her subject is the failure of events in daily life ever to measure up to her spirit's esthetic craving for perfectability. . . . She relentlessly subjects her keenest life-experiences to the refining ''restless eye'' of her dream-life. It is because she is able to enjoy all living beauties so much, strictly for themselves, that one is assured of the tragic heroism of her deprivations, of the demands her theology imposes on her responsive being. Her triumph is one of restraint, a succession of inured resistances to all pleasures easy of access, delaying and forestalling her natural gift for spiritual uplift until she has reached the supreme moment in which we are able to ''think all things are full of gods.'' She will settle for nothing short of that arrival, and if she has had to sacrifice the more fashionable virtues of poetry in our time—expressiveness and immediacy—to evolve a middle range, a plateau, of vision (halfway between the language of feelings particularized and the language of elusive dream-states), we can only be as grateful for the qualities her art withholds as for those it affords, for there are rewards to be secured in reading her best poems of a kind that can be found in no other body of work.

Laurence Lieberman. *Poetry*. May, 1968. pp. 121–2

The sumptuary must convince the skeptical reader that so much strenuous emotion is warranted and not just self-indulgence. The overingenious design of Miss Garrigue's poems cannot support so much emotion.

When she restrains her impulse to shock, however, when her self-consciousness is in abeyance, she writes finely and movingly. My favorite poems are ''This Swallow's Empire,'' ''A Fable of Berries,'' most of ''Pays Perdu,'' ''Address to the Migrations,'' with its controlled oratory, ''Of a Provincial City,'' and ''Nth Invitation.'' Miss Garrigue has a gift for song, and many of her best pieces are love ballads which either *Christabel*-like blend romance with black irony, or in the manner of songs in Jacobean plays express a macabre love-wit (''The Strike of the Night'' and ''Gravepiece''). Beginning with *Country without Maps*, she achieves a comely lyrical calm; the shorter lines provide a welcome enlivening of the rhythm.

Herbert Leibowitz. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1968. p. 560

It emerges gradually that Miss Garrigue has taken up her rich, mannered style with her eyes open. There are prose stanzas in this book [*Studies for an Actress*] in which that style is dropped, and they are good. But they do not contain those lines of poetry which appear in her other verse. Her style, then, is the only way in which she can realize her potential for certain thoughts; thoughts which cannot form in the mind unless the emotional conditions are propitious to them and the clock is turned back. They cannot form in this mind and be recognized as poetry unless they resemble what has already been poetry. For she has no vision of a lyric poetry which is new in kind. . . .

In her last book she has made an effort to bring both sensibility and manner up to date; possibly she had at last woken up to the fact that her traditional poetic abilities were strangling her. The mixture is of old and new. But she begins to know herself well enough to hear her own voice.

Rosemary Tonks. *New York Review of Books*. Oct. 4, 1973. p. 10

Once in a while [in *Studies for an Actress*] there are echoes, strains of the old magic, of the enchantment her poems can convey when she mingles dream and reality, magic and fact. ''Pays Perdu'' from *Country without Maps* may sum up and distill that essence more perfectly than any other poem of hers. In this volume [*Studies for an Actress*] though I find a diffuseness and uncertainty that may not have been a matter of ''failing powers'' but rather a function of a new start, an engagement with new material. To our loss Jean Garrigue did not live to finish what she began.

Louis Coxe. *New Republic*. Oct. 6, 1973. p. 28

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GASS, William H. (1924–)

The world with which Mr. Gass works [in *Omensetter's Luck*] has long been exhausted, you would think, not only by Sinclair Lewis but by the likes of Sherwood Anderson and Edgar Lee Masters. Certainly all the hip little novelists nowadays have abandoned it for the chic regions of drug addiction and alcohol trauma, jet-set sodomy and the dropout's novel of ideas. Mr. Gass, though he leads us into many a terrifying vision, does not resort to a single routine apocalypse. And yet while the costumes of the book may be historical, its impact is compellingly modern. . . .

Mr. Gass's prose is equal to his design. Among novels I've read in recent years, only Norman Mailer's *An American Dream* has been able to pound such wild music out of pain. Gass, like Mailer, finds the very melody of dread. But whereas Mailer uses the current counters of urban despair, Gass reaches back to the language of the Bible, of Cotton Mather and the Farmer's Almanac.

Frederic Morton. *New York Times Book Section*. April 17, 1966. pp. 4, 53

Gass's first novel [*Omensetter's Luck*] . . . received remarkable critical acclaim from all shades of the critical spectrum, and Gass immediately became one of the important writers of his generation. This collection [*In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*]. . .serves to focus the distinctive qualities of his sensibility and style. . . .Gass is ''old-fashioned'' in his insistence that language is an immediate extension of human feeling and cognition. But what makes him modern is how much he knows—like John Barth, Thomas Pynchon and Walker Percy he is one of the philosopher-novelists who bring a new intellectual power to the basically transcendental American sensibility. It is writing like this that will achieve, if it is at all possible, a saving continuity with tradition as it attempts to save human feeling and individuality for art.

Jack Kroll. *Newsweek*. April 1, 1968. p. 92B

[Gass] is not much interested in the kind of mirror before which preens that dandy Nabokov whose novels, Gass says, are used ''to hold the mirror up to Nabokov.'' Nor is his interest that blasted cliché which he staunchly rejects, old friend though it may be, of the novel as a mirror to the world. . . .

Gass's own looking glass is like Alice's, not a plane off which images bounce but a medium through which one passes lightly and easily from one realm to another, between the world of God's creation and the world of, say, Henry James's, between philosophy and art, criticism and fiction, phenomena and words. What interests Gass most of all is the relationship between these realms, the boundary (he knows it is there) that one has crossed, and the slightly bumpy sensation one feels at the precise moment of passing through.

Beverly Gross. *The Nation*. March 22, 1971. p. 376

[In *Fiction and the Figures of Life*] the fictionist, trained as a philosopher, examines the art of fiction, its tools, and its relation to philosophy with thoroughness, speaking always to the point until the consistency of the essays becomes the flaw in the collection.

Though the essays are written with unfailing grace, the reader of Mr. Gass's fiction will find them redundant, for the subject of the fiction is often fiction. In his essay, ''The Concept in Fiction,'' Gass is erudite and analytical about the names of characters. In *Omensetter's Luck* he is convincing. . . .

In the essays he deals brilliantly with a Platonic vision of language and reality, calling for a fiction in which characters, ''freed from existence, can shine in essence, and purely Be.'' But the difference between the stories spilled like all-too-digested dinners from the mouths of old women and the fiction that can ''shine in essence, and purely Be'' is *demonstrated* in Gass's fiction.

Earl Shorris. *Harper's Magazine*. May, 1972. pp. 98–9

The Midwest . . . in William H. Gass's story ''In the Heart of the Heart of the Country'' . . . becomes a metaphor for loneliness, for a

sense of the self as stranded in a symbolic geography, almost before the writer has done anything to make this happen. Lives are ''vacant and barren and loveless,'' Gass writes, ''here in the heart of the country.'' ''Who cares,'' he asks later, ''to live in any season but his own?''

I suspect that it is because this last question is so central in American writing, and so perfectly rhetorical, not expecting an answer, that the Midwest, with its physical spread and relative emptiness, slips so easily into allegory, has a hard time sustaining itself as a real place in fiction. There is no mention of the Midwest in Gass's *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*, but the location is recognizably that of Gass's earlier story: the heart of the heart of the country, the lonely heart of a person looking for love, a lonely mind reaching out for us, then shrinking back, complaining of its isolation even as it wriggles further into solipsism. . . .

Behind the fussiness of much of his book there is a real urgency, a powerful vision of the loneliness inherent in writing (you write because you can't speak, for whatever reason) and of writing as a useful and articulate image for loneliness of other kinds.

Michael Wood. *New York Review of Books*. Dec. 14, 1972. p. 12

In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes sexualizes the pleasure of reading contemporary fiction and calls for ''writing aloud''. . . . William Gass' *On Being Blue* is the writer's companion to Barthes' reader's guide, an erotics of writing that defines the productive relation of lay and lie for the novelist. Gass both argues and displays ''the use of language, like a lover . . . not the language of love, but the love of language, not matter, but meaning, not what the tongue touches, but what it forms, not lips and nipples, but nouns and verbs.'' Throughout *On Being Blue* is the kind of ''writing aloud'' we get from no other American novelist or critic. . . .

At once metaphor and metaphoric, *On Being Blue* is an elegant extension of Gass' plea for the medium of fiction articulated in the essays of *Fiction and the Figures of Life* and in the fictional essay *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*. He asks the writer to ''give up the blue things of this world in favor of the words which say them'' because sex—and most other charged subjects—lacks a sufficient vocabulary, disrupts esthetic form, and turns language into a transparency on a world we only think we know. Blue books come to signify every kind of fiction that makes its reader a voyeur peering through the lens of language, never noting it no matter what its color, to see the supposed subject—politics, city life, the perils of being female, whatever. . . . *On Being Blue* [is] a book no person who loves writing and the sound writing makes should be without.

Thomas LeClair. *New Republic*. Oct. 9, 1976, p. 38

Mr. Gass is hardly a structuralist philosopher, but he has written works of fiction—*Omensetter's Luck* and *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* are his best-known works—that give heart to the structuralist enterprise, and his essays may be said to promote the attack on realist aesthetics. . . . [The essays in] *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (1972) . . . constitute the most vigorous anti-realist literary ''programme'' we have had in our time. His new collection of essays, *The World within the Word*, not as dedicated to system-building as the first, but no less teasing and brilliant, sustains but does not substantially develop his theory. When the earlier book first appeared, a reviewer for the *New York Times* called it ''a defense of 'poesy' in a time of need.'' The time is always needy, of course, and it is more than ''poesy'' that Gass defends, but the reviewer was not mistaken to state that Gass ''calls our attention to art.'' To do so, need we say, is to remind us as well of all the things that art is not, and ought never to be asked to be. Gass calls our attention to art not by instructing us in the decipherment of signs or in the chastening of sentiment but by underlining all of the things art will not do, and celebrating the very special things it has to do.

Gass's books are wonderful books because they raise all of the important aesthetic issues in the starkest and most inventive way. The writing is informed by a moral passion and a love of beautiful things that are never compromised by the author's compulsive addiction to aestheticizing formulations. We all know what Gass is writing against, including the tiresome use of novels for purposes of unitary moral uplift and penetrating ''word-view.'' What he detests is the goody sweepstakes, in which works of art are judged not by their formal complexity or nuances of verbal texture but by their ability to satisfy easy moral imperatives. Gass has had some hand in discrediting the kind of righteous moralism that so corrupts ordinary apprehension of the literary arts. That is good. But the essays in his two collections have also served to confuse some readers about the art of reading. In so far as the essays suggest that realism is necessarily a debased aesthetic, they encourage a view of reading as a specialized activity to which we bring special passions—like the passion for form—and from which we rigorously exclude others. That is not, it seems to me, an entirely useful way to record what really goes on when we read a book. Strange to say, I think William Gass knows better than the rest of us what goes on; and one day he may even decide to tell us.

Robert Boyers. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. Nov. 3, 1978, pp. 1274–75

William Gass is a critic and a professor of philosophy at Washington University in St. Louis and the author of three volumes of fiction, each of which is intelligent and well-crafted but somehow less than memorable. For three decades, he has been laboring over a vast novel about the frustrations of private life in an age of historical enormities. Here is the finished product. Some may seize on it as a postmodern masterpiece, but it is a bloated monster of a book. (At 400,000 words, it is almost one-third longer than Joyce's *Ulysses*.) The bloat is a consequence of sheer adipose verbosity and an unremitting condition of moral and intellectual flatulence. Lest this last description seem gratuitously mean, let me quickly note that Gass's narrator is himself obsessed with farting; history writing, politics, and sex are all repeatedly reduced to a bursting bubble of malodorous gas. At one point Gass's text is actually embellished with a diagram of four farts, labeled *F* to *T*.

Gass's real achievement is to have produced a complete compendium of the vices of postmodern writing. His narrator, William Kohler, is a professor of history at a midwestern university, who records in a secret diary his ruminations about his life, about his colleagues and (very intermittently) about the Nazi genocide, after having completed a major study called *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler's Germany*. The time of writing is the 1960s, when Kohler is in his fifties. . . .

From its very beginnings the novel adopts a variety of devices to disrupt the realist tradition. Gass's narrator is an inscriber of what John Barth once designated ''the literature of exhaustion.'' Professorial to the marrow, he inhabits a library, buckles under the weight of the innumerable volumes that he carries in his head. . . . The line between reality and textuality blurs, and everything turns into text. . . .

The Tunnel is equally postmodern in its transgression of the limits of structure. Where modernist novels that break with traditional linear narration . . . replace it with an elaborate structure of recurring motifs and other kinds of formal symmetries and antitheses, the procedure in *The Tunnel* is loose, unimpeded, free-associative flow. The principle of artful selection is renounced. . . .

The mingling of styles, the conjoining of high and low, which critics such as Bakhtin and Auerbach saw as the fulfillment of the modern novel, is pushed here to an extreme and banal limit.

Robert Alter. *New Republic*. March 27, 1995, pp. 29–30

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GATES, Henry Louis, Jr. (1950–)

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., is a pivotal figure in the generational shift that has been taking place in African American criticism. A former member of the Yale English faculty, currently a distinguished professor at Cornell, and an active member of the MLA [Modern Language Association], Gates has had an enormous influence on literary studies in the United States. Through his scholarship and sponsorship of various conferences and research projects, he is responsible for drawing attention to the richness and diversity of black writing here and abroad and for encouraging critics to draw on recent developments in critical theory as a foundation for examining African American expressive culture. . . .

Like the generation of black artists and critics who preceded him, Gates saw American and European written discourse as historically linked to an oppressive, ethnocentric political order bent on suppressing the cultural heritage of those it subjugates. It was imperative, for this reason, for black critics to derive interpretative practices from the aesthetic principles unique to their own traditions.

The Signifying Monkey is Gates's most important and sustained piece of scholarship to date. Essentially a series of essays linked together through a common theory of the vernacular, it is in effect a major effort at racial retrieval, an attempt to reclaim the Afrocentric roots of African American literature. What makes the work unique is that it does not shy away from establishing a heritage common to black people in the U.S., the Caribbean, South America, and Africa. Moreover, in celebrating the African influence on life in the diaspora, it openly challenges the hegemony of a white Eurocentric culture that continues to negate, coopt, and absorb black creativity. Gates does not give an historical account of how the West attempts cultural genocide, but he is clear from the outset that he intends to rescue African values from marginalization and degradation and to assert their originality and sovereignty.

In this work, Gates modifies his initial position that there are no determinating formal relations between literature and social institutions. Still committed to establishing a theoretical framework for the study of black literature that is text-centered, Gates has been forced to develop a broad cultural approach to accommodate his notion that African American creativity is rooted in the vernacular.

Norman Spencer. *American Book Review*. January-February, 1990, pp. 15, 25

[Kwame Anthony] Appiah's eloquent and extensively researched work [in *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, [1992] makes a formidable statement about the historic inability to frame linguistic resistance to biological racism except in oppositional terms and the consequent reliance on other forms of racial discourse. This discourse of racial solidarity is what limits the positive aspects of Pan-Africanism. But in framing his own argument, Appiah appears to perceive the Afrocentric position (a term he does not use) with a narrow lens. He refers to the rich and varied cultures of precolonial Africa in questioning the existence of a unified African worldview, but it is unclear how this precludes the existence of certain shared values and traditions, especially among coregional cultures. . . . However, in vigorously articulating the complexities and contradictions in the Pan-African movement, Appiah creates a space in which crucial dialogue can continue on ''more secure foundations'' than that of the reverse discourse of racial essence (176) toward a ''reinvigorated Pan-Africanism'' based on the continent and the diaspora's ''shared contingencies'' of histories, geographies, and societies (180).

In his new book, humorously titled *Loose Canons*, well-known African-American literary theorist Henry Louis (''Skip'') Gates, Jr., explores the notion and realities of these ''shared contingencies,'' along with the pitfalls of the Pan-African/Afrocentric movement, while responding to the critics of multiculturalism. As the subject moves from the African continent to the diaspora, specifically to the United States, Gates presents a companion text to Appiah's. (Having worked closely together for so long, the two critics have apparently produced a dialogic voice in developing their positions.) Gates directs his analysis to the background of Black Studies, the contentious debate over the literary canon, and finally the relationship of all of these issues to the reality of black people's lives in a postmodern, postslavery society. He writes this book because of his fear that the ''mindless celebration of difference for its own sake is no more tenable than the nostalgic return to some monochrome homogeneity.'' His aim is to ''search for a middle way'' (xix). . . .

In part 3: ''Society'' [of his book], Gates returns to an issue underlying the other sections, that ''it sometimes seems that blacks are doing better in the college curriculum than they are on the streets'' (19). Although he is painfully aware that multicultural studies is not a ''panacea'' for social problems, Gates also reminds us that tolerance must come with understanding—and of course education. It is in the last essay, ''Trading on the Margins,'' that

Gates unequivocally names his ''middle way'': he is a cultural pluralist, neither right nor left. Although he is clearly more sympathetic to the cultural left, it is his attack on the left that is most telling. In the binary opposition of literary and cultural center versus margin, the self-appointed ''Other'' allows the structures to remain intact and those in the margins to remain marginalized—kept in our place. It is, according to Gates, this paradigm—a ''colonial'' one—that ''has started to exhaust its usefulness in describing our own modernity'' (189).

Like Appiah, Gates is attempting to set up a new paradigm—in this case, for a multicultural America, no longer based on us–them politics. But, as Gates well knows, the middle ground is not so easy to find.

Gay Wilentz. *College English*. January, 1994, pp. 73–75

The debate about multiculturalism and the literary canon would seem to have been played out by now, rendering old news Henry Louis Gates's collection of essays dating back to 1990 [*Loose Canons*]. But the need for sensible, informed voices like his is increasingly important as we struggle over what we most value in our schools and our national identity. . . .

Gates's most important contribution is to offer a moderate voice that both defends multiculturalism and can think productively about the larger issue of American culture. The key point of debate concerns the American identity. Schlesinger argues passionately for the idea of a unified American culture: ''Our task is to combine due appreciation of the splendid diversity of the nation with due emphasis on the great unifying Western ideas of individual freedom, political democracy, and human rights. These are the ideas that define the American nationality—and that today empower people of all continents, races, and creeds.'' Gates doesn't really disagree but offers a different emphasis. Whereas Schlesinger speaks of needing to appreciate diversity, Gates wishes to highlight it: the only way to transcend divisions ''is through education that seeks to comprehend the diversity of human culture. Beyond the hype and the highflown rhetoric is a pretty homely truth: there is no tolerance without respect—and no respect without knowledge.''

John Ottenhoff. *Christian Century*. Jan. 19, 1994, p. 53

We read Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s, memoir because of who he now is: a highly respected scholar and essayist, one of the few preeminent black intellectuals in a culture where, more often than not, the two words together are viewed as a contradiction in terms. But *Colored People* falls short of the criteria for successful memoir. This is both surprising and disappointing, since Gates's achievements over barely four decades as writer, scholar, public intellectual and chairman of Harvard University's Afro-American Studies Program are certainly impressive. I suspect that the story of the forces and influences, adversity, and insight that transformed a poor kid from hardscrabble West Virginia into one of America's leading scholars is inherently fascinating. Unfortunately, that is not the tale we are told in *Colored People*.

Instead, we are given a memoir of Gates's boyhood and early life that seems somehow sanitized. We are left with surface information: that Gates came of age during a period that straddled segregation and desegregation; that he suffered a serious physical disability as an adolescent; that he was an extremely bright and precocious child in a time and place when people didn't know what to do with precocious children, least of all black male precocious children; that for years he competed unsuccessfully with his older brother for his father's affection and attention; that, growing up in a household in which his mother ''hated'' white folks, many of his early sexual attractions were to white women. . . .

Reading *Colored People*, I sense that Gates has a lot to say but isn't ready to say it, opting instead to charm and amuse. Perhaps memoir is not for him, since it demands a discomfiting degree of personal revelation and introspection. Perhaps the more interesting material can be found in the twenty years since he left West Virginia. The personal, political, and academic journeys, challenges, and machinations that must have attended his near-meteoric rise in the still-segregated academy would make for great reading. I hope that in the future he decides to write that story and tell all. Unfortunately, in *Colored People*, Gates does not tell enough.

Jill Nelson. *The Nation*. June 6, 1994, p. 795

Gates is one of the most gifted and accomplished black academics in American history. He is in many ways an awe-inspiring figure, especially since he has achieved his celebrity by being a literary critic, a somewhat arcane intellectual pursuit. For a man of Gates's stature, then, one must have high standards. And so one is obliged to ask, about *Colored People*, not if it is worth reading (anything that Gates puts on paper is worth reading), but whether it was worth writing. This book makes one worry that Gates's position is foreclosing what he can do as a writer, pressuring him to produce work that seems not as carefully thought-out and crafted as it might be, more preoccupied with the projection of a public image that would please blacks and not alienate whites than with the exploration of the meaning of his consciousness. Gates's talent and intelligence promise a great deal more than this book delivers.

Gerald Early. *New Republic*. July 4, 1994, p. 38

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GELBER, Jack (1932–)

For while *The Connection* may not be ''art,'' it is none the less arresting. . . . Though the play's form is unresolved, and some of the writing self-conscious as well as overlong, it is a bit of naturalism not without point and not without talent. . . . *The Connection* creates a distinct sense of authenticity, even in the terrible languor of pace which marks the opening of the proceedings. . . . The result will surely seem unpleasant for spectators eager for either ''art'' or entertainment, but there is a sort of melancholy in the event, with touches of genuine pathos and even a wretched sort of lyricism. It is as if one had looked for a moment into a corner of our city to breathe the rank air of its unacknowledged dejection. The play reeks of human beings and if we turn completely away from people of any kind we can know little of anything worth knowing.

Harold Clurman. *The Nation*. Aug. 15, 1959. p. 80

. . .Jack Gelber's play, despite obvious literary derivations, soon emerges as highly original and unpredictable. . . . *The Connection* even avoids that over-intellectualization of human behavior which informs the work of Beckett, Ionesco, and Genet. Gelber has managed to assimilate, and sometimes to parody, his borrowed techniques without a trace of literary self-consciousness; and by the use of live jazz . . . as a rhythmic contrast of the dialogue, he has introduced an effective theatrical device all his own. The most striking thing about this work is its Spartan honesty. . . .

Robert Brustein. *New Republic*. Sept. 28, 1959. p. 29

Jack Gelber's *The Connection* . . . skillfully blends jazz with Beckett's theme of waiting. The image of the drug addicts waiting for the arrival of the messenger carrying their drug is a powerful conception. The presence of a jazz quartet improvising onstage lends the play a fascinating element of spontaneity, and the dialogue has a lyricism of pointlessness that equals much of the best writing in the Theatre of the Absurd. But the play is marred by a laborious superstructure of pretense at realism. Author and director appear, and go to great lengths to convince the audience that they are seeing real drug addicts; two film cameramen who are supposed to record the events of the evening are involved in the action, and one is actually seduced into drug-taking. And, finally, the strange, spontaneous, poetic play culminates in a plea for a reform of the drug laws. *The Connection*, brilliant as it is in parts, founders in its uncertainty as to which convention it belongs to—the realist theatre of social reform or the Theatre of the Absurd.

Martin Esslin. *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Doubleday Anchor). 1961. p. 227

It is only when the pose of metaphysician or metaphysical psychologist is assumed, even when the metaphysics are those of nothingness, that the pretense becomes objectionable. The most obvious case of this is Jack Gelber's *The Apple*, played in last season's repertory at the Living Theater.

Gelber had his actors appear to improvise ''a life behind the senses,'' letting them work on the proposition that the spectators—representing people at large—lived mostly on the surface. The actors therefore assailed the spectators (particularly a drunk paranoiac who came up out of the orchestra to assail them) where they were most complacent, and where their complacency most covered up their vileness. A whole bag of tricks was used to show what life was really like. The play succeeded in its task of alienation—but unfortunately to no purpose. For the life behind the senses, at least as Gelber dramatized it, was just as meaningless as it was vile. . . . What was wrong was that he was trying to be political in metaphysical or anti-metaphysical garb.

The Connection wasn't like this. For all its unconventionality it was an honest political drama. It created a mood, a feeling, and despite some sleight-of-hand here and there, as in the excessive use of the jazz, its sincerity was strong enough to make people take it seriously. The irony was that when social protest was really felt and effectively voiced it often transcended itself to become something religious.

L.E. Chabrowe. *Kenyon Review*. Winter, 1963. pp. 146–7

Jack Gelber's rough paean to junkies, *The Connection*, was an early document of hipsterism and it should come as no surprise to find him operating out of the same pad in his first novel, *On Ice*. The title is meant to suggest the cool and precarious existence of Manny Fells, a Village hipster who, on a phony resumé, takes a job as a private eye impersonating a camera salesman in a suburban discount house. As might be expected from this description, Mr. Gelber's theme is ''identity'' and while his *milieu* is familiar—the post-war world that the Whole Sick Crew of Thomas Pynchon inherited from the whole sick crew of Joseph Heller—he does have some interesting things to say about the difficulty of being your own man these days.

Paul Levine. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1964. p. 472

The Connection, in spite of its pretense at documentary technique, makes an almost complete break with the emotional and political objectives of naturalism. In a naturalistic play we accept the illusion created on the stage, and take it for reality: once we assume that the stage is a room with one wall missing, for instance, and that the players do not know they are being watched, we are likely to accept almost anything, as long as it maintains a decent level of verisimilitude. But in *The Connection* we are unsure, since the play won't allow us to make the initial pretense. The person sitting next to a spectator might be an actor—or is he?. . . In *The Connection*, the actors, because they are addicts, cannot maintain the artifice of role-playing; their extra-dramatic needs keep breaking through and, as we have seen, take over the play. Reality keeps rudely displacing the illusionistic performance: it is method-acting with a vengeance.

Louis Kampf. *College English*. Oct., 1966. p. 11

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GIBSON, William (1914–)

Gibson's special force is in linking an almost Wordsworthian apprehension of nature to a technique which does combine flow and complexity. He gives an effect of tension rather than of reflectiveness; his sense of a lost paradise is modest. But his feeling for the unity of a natural scene and internal tension seem to come spontaneously in a way that has been rare since the original romantics. . . .

There are defects in the volume, of course—echoes that are occasionally too close, an overenthusiasm now and then for the massing possibilities of the rhythms. But the total effect is of brilliant accomplishment. . . . *Winter Crook* does not establish Gibson for certain as one of the best American poets for the fifties, but it definitely enters him as a possibility.

James Hall. *Poetry*. August, 1948. pp. 278, 281

Mr. Gibson manipulates his complicated story [*The Cobweb*] with admirable skill and a keen, if somewhat hectic, sense of drama. He is a master of dialogue. His characters, remarkably alive, are viewed with clarity and charity; he sees them moving through life with ironical unawareness of the disaffections they often inspire in those nearest them, and at the same time he stirs the reader to pity for them all. . . .

The author's power . . . is such that you will overlook his tendency to go into excessive detail whenever one of his characters enters wardrobe or bathroom. This is the literary paradox in a work that signals the arrival of a brilliant new novelist with the technique and the maturity to command respect at once and anticipation for the future.

Charles Lee. *Saturday Review*. Mar. 13, 1954. p. 19

William Gibson's *Two for the Seesaw* . . . is one of those pleasant plays that obviously belong in the theatre, since they are almost always highly popular. They are the bestsellers of the contemporary stage. No one should cavil at their success. But, I confess with some reluctance, they interest me very little. . . . The play, in short, is a conventional tale without real characters, cemented by jokes and that sense of recognition which is the recognition of clichés and thus supposed by many playgoers to represent a modest realism.

Harold Clurman. *The Nation*. Feb. 1, 1958. p. 107

Although I doubt whether playwright William Gibson would put it so, class distinctions are the hard core of his most adroit and refreshing dramatic duet called *Two for the Seesaw*, a play sustained entirely by the relationship of a Nebraska lawyer called Jerry with a Bronx girl called Gittel. . . . This disparate pair merge their separate loneliness in an affair, full of tenderness, humor and plain honest earthiness. So fresh and accurate is Mr. Gibson's dialogue, so right his mercurial changes of pace . . . that you almost believe in the affair's reality.

Marya Mannes. *The Reporter*. March 6, 1958. p. 36

Here [in *The Seesaw Log*], at last, a playwright has had the courage and bad manners to chronicle his seventy days of rehearsal and pre-Broadway tryout agony. His log, though necessarily edited, makes no deliberate attempt to be entertaining. It is admirably free of the sort of dramatization one finds in most pre-opening newspaper pieces, or of the color that Lillian Ross put into her brilliant profile of the making of *The Red Badge of Courage*. Not that such articles should avoid being as readable as possible, but to one who has been through such an experience, they never seem to be quite the way it really was.

Lest the reader suspect that *The Seesaw Log* describes a particularly grim case, let it be pointed out immediately that Mr. Gibson had a much happier situation than do most playwrights. . . . Yet despite these unusually favorable circumstances, the playwright found his seventy days as enervating and ungratifying as they are in almost every Broadway show. . . . I don't believe Mr. Gibson *has* complained. He has stated what happened, and what would probably happen if he were to do it all over again. And his statement stands as a penetrating document of our contemporary theatre.

Henry Hewes. *Saturday Review*. March 14, 1959. p. 55

It is something like a stroke of genius then for William Gibson to have thought of prefacing the text of the published play [*Two for the Seesaw*], with a 141-page *Log* describing his experiences in selling, casting, rehearsing and trying it out. For it is one reader's opinion that the *Log* is a more important addition to our theatrical library than the play itself.

Harold Clurman. *New York Times Book Section*. March 15, 1959. p. 5

. . .like the play which preceded it [*Two for the Seesaw*], *The Miracle Worker*—written with the same wit and mounted with equal competence—is essentially a two-character work about the relationship of kindness to love. . . . It is Gibson's penchant for instructing his characters in ''mature'' behavior which disturbs me most. In common with most playwrights of the modern school, love operates in his plays with all the intensity of an ideology, and the only development his people are permitted is a more accurate apprehension of the proper way to show affection. . . .

I say this with regret because, although his craft is still a little shaky, Gibson possesses substantial literary and dramatic gifts, and an integrity of the highest order. In addition, he brings to his works authentic compassion, wit, bite, and humor, and a lively, literate prose style equalled by few American dramatists. . . .

Robert Brustein. *New Republic*. Nov. 9, 1959. p. 28

Mr. Gibson's book [*The Seesaw Log*] is something more than a book about the theatre. It is also a book about our culture in general.

Mr. Gibson is quite aware of this. In his account of what was entailed in bringing his play *Two for the Seesaw* to the stage, he does not conceive the difficulties he confronted to be merely technical, but also as having to do with the assumptions of the significant part of the population that was to be his audience and with the relation of the writer to these assumptions. For Mr. Gibson the chief cultural interest of his adventure with the theatre presents itself as a personal and moral question. His play, as everyone knows, became a great success and made—is still making—a great deal of money. What Mr. Gibson is concerned to discover is whether in the arduous process of its becoming a success, the play lost some of its truth and the playwright some of his integrity.

Mr. Gibson is an intelligent man and I don't think he misconceives his problem by overrating his play. It is a ''little'' play, its modesty is one of its virtues. It was written for Broadway and in the hope of its succeeding with Broadway audiences. It challenges none of the vested interests, affronts none of the deep-rooted pieties of this audience. I say this not in order to denigrate the play, which I like, but simply to suggest the level on which Mr. Gibson raises and faces the question of truth and integrity. It is not as if he had written *Ghosts* and had yielded to commercial pressure to change the ending of the play to a happy one. But even a modest comedy about a love affair may be more or less honest, as may any scene in the play, or any speech in a scene.

Lionel Trilling. *Drama Review*. May, 1960. p. 17

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GINSBERG, Allen (1926–1997)

This poetry is not ''rational discourse'' such as we find in almost all other American literature of dissidence. Nor is it that flaccid sort of negation, too easy and too glib, that so often reduces the charge in the writing of Patchen and others. . . . It is the fury of the soul-injured lover or child, and its dynamic lies in the way it spews up undigested the elementary need for freedom of sympathy, for generous exploration of thought, for the open response of man to man so long repressed by the smooth machinery of intellectual distortion. . . . Despite his many faults and despite the danger that he will screech himself mute any moment now, is he the real thing?

What we can say, I think, is that he has brought a terrible psychological reality to the surface with enough originality to blast American verse a hair's-breadth forward in the process.

M.L. Rosenthal. *The Nation*. Feb. 23, 1957. p. 162

Among the literary radicals of the West Coast, Allen Ginsberg and his poem ''Howl'' have acquired a succès d'estime remarkable in both its proportions and its manifestations. The poem so clearly intends to document—and celebrate—several types of modern social and psychological ills that the question of its literary merit seems to me almost irrelevant. . . . Walt Whitman is the poet's chief master. . . . But the virulence of Ginsberg's revolt against modern society comes—if these things really have any literary antecedents—from the verse of the Great Depression: Fearing, Patchen, Richard Wright, et al. . . . It's a very shaggy book, the shaggiest I've ever seen.

Frederick Eckman. *Poetry*. Sept., 1957. pp. 391–3

Ginsberg gets away with it because he is frankly justifying himself (in ''Howl''), because his assault on America is a personal cry that rings true, because his hysteria is tempered with humor, and because the dope addicts, perverts, and maniacs he celebrates are not finally glamorized. . . . (But) no new territory is being staked out by these writers—Ginsberg's return to Whitman is a shift in fashion, not the mark of a revolutionary sensibility. . . . The fact is that it takes more than a feeling of ''disengagement'' from the contemporary world to provide the materials for a genuine avant garde revolt.

Norman Podhoretz. *New Republic*. Sept. 16, 1957. p. 20

In the lines of Ginsberg's *Kaddish* is evoked the passionate and destroyed body of a woman who pursues a world which is not hers and which does not become hers. In the poet's prayer for the dead is the sound of the man wrenched from the past by horror and compassion: in that isolation and clarity is the terror of myth and its sense of the ultimate threats. It is not a poem which could easily be forgotten. Everywhere reflecting Whitman and Lindsay and the width of the American past, the poem moves in its final sections through the heavy bars of the traditional Hebrew prayer. It is a poem of very great power, of very great ''mass.'' It is also a poem of great visual acuity, and often of startling verbal precision, avoiding nothing in its path. It is not, to say again, a poem which could easily be forgotten. . . . But the danger for Ginsberg in the shorter pieces is that there may be nowhere for him to go if he is to rely on declamation, that he might be stuck on too high and too declamatory a note. There need be nothing ephemeral about the lyric poet who responds passionately and in his own way to his own vision, but if the poet begins to ask us to accept a system of opinions and attitudes he must manage the task of rigorous thought.

George Oppen. *Poetry*. Aug., 1962. p. 329

The death of the Jewish mother in Ginsberg's *Kaddish*, and the succession of cultural generations implied in the burden of identity laid by the mother on the son, is unquestionably the most momentous record in English of the problem of the passing of the older

sociology and meaning of the Jewish family-centered culture in America. But the mysticism with which Ginsberg faces the problem of the death of Israel is, perhaps, less momentous than the poetry which he makes the vehicle of that problem. . . . We may note that the Jewish symbology becomes available in American poetry just at the point in which the Jewish poet finds it necessary to document the death of the Jewish cultural fact.

The earlier poetry of Ginsberg, that represented primarily by the volume entitled *Howl*, is a great deal more buoyant than the poetry which we are here considering. Between *Howl* and *Kaddish* Ginsberg has lost his humor and gained a kind of horror which even he cannot accommodate to the necessary reticence of the poetic mode. Ginsberg's chief artistic contribution in *Kaddish* is a virtually psychotic candor which effects the mind less like poetry than like some real experience which is so terrible that it cannot be understood. In America, which did not experience the Second World War on its own soil, the Jew may indeed be the proper interpreter of horror.

Allen Grossman. *Judaism*, Fall, 1962. p. 307

Perhaps the chief accomplishment of his first book, *Howl and Other Poems*, was to give maddened voice to the more depressing statistics of the day—the rise in mental illness, drug addiction, and homosexuality—and to the morally anarchic mood that came in the wake of the war and the cold war, or McCarthyism, and of the Bomb. Now the long poem *Kaddish* lays open the personal experience behind this voice. In accordance with the Hebrew meaning of the title, it is both a hymn of praise to God and an elegiac incantation inspired by the death of the poet's mother. . . . Mr. Ginsberg is merciless in presenting what would normally be the secret wounds of family life.

Still, it is a tender, affectionate poem. The form, even the syntax, is improvisational—piled-up notes on Naomi's habits and sayings and on particular incidents, interwoven with echoes of Hebrew prayer and with the poet's own insights, prophesying, dreaming, and praise of life in the face of the horror.

M.L. Rosenthal. *The Reporter*. Jan. 3, 1963. pp. 46–7

The lines don't shape, predict, and limit whole-poem forms. Most of the poems might have been shorter or longer. The reason is that external reality (time, place, event) dictates Ginsberg's means, so the means are outside the poem and, though unrecoverable, are more complete there. Certain things happened in a certain city at a certain time: a journal, or cata-travelog of accidentals. Opposite (for clarification) is the internal vision, selecting, transfiguring, making new and whole; the poet servant to the poem that exists apart in terms of its own reality. The unity in Ginsberg's work is Ginsberg in search of unity, so that the poems are fragments of the search. The greater poem is possible when the poem is the sought unity, the poet providing the fragments to the whole from his fragmentary experience.

The poems in this volume [*Reality Sandwiches*] date from 1953 to 1960, poems both before and after *Howl*. They mostly lack the desperately earnest cry for truth and the sung-tension accuracy of Ginsberg at his best.

A. R. Ammons. *Poetry*. June, 1964. pp. 186–7

Allen Ginsberg is a notoriety, a celebrity; to many readers and nonreaders of poetry he has the capacity for releasing odd energetic responses of hatred and love or amused affection or indignant moralizing. There are even people who are roused to very flat indifference by the friendly near-sighted shambling bearded figure who has some of the qualities of such comic stars as Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin. And some of their seriousness.

His latest book *Planet News* grants another revelation of his sensibility. The usual characteristics of his work are there, the rhapsodic lines, the odd collocations of images and thoughts and processes, the occasional rant, the extraordinary tenderness. His poetry resembles the Picasso sculpture melted together of children's toys, or the sculpture of drift-wood and old tires and metal barrels and tin cans shaped by enterprising imaginative young people along the polluted shores of San Francisco Bay. You can make credible Viking warriors from such materials. Ginsberg's poetry works in parallel processes; it is junk poetry, not in the drug sense of junk but in its building blocks. It joins together the waste and loss that have come to characterize the current world, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, the Orient, the United States, Peru. Out of such debris as is offered he makes what poetry he can.

Thomas Parkinson. *Concerning Poetry*. Spring, 1969. p. 21

What is engaging about *Planet News* is the personality of Allen Ginsberg. This King of May and guru presides over a gentle saturnalia. He is believably ''tranquil in his hairy body,'' his bawdry devotional and his homosexuality as casual and empathic as Whitman's. The poems have a friendly clutter and humor. For those who expect the howls (and howlers) of a Beat publicist for buggery and expanded consciousness, *Planet News* will prove surprising in its chaste and controlled lyricism. Ginsberg is more Ganymede than Jove. From a poet as erotically gregarious and ''prophetic'' as Ginsberg, one is prepared for a certain amount of the ''Gasbag,'' and his long shaggy prose lines droop at times from all the cosmic weight they must bear. Still, in such poems as ''Galilee Shore,'' ''Describe: The Rain on Dasaswamedh,'' most of ''Wichita Vortex Sutra,'' ''City Midnight Junk Strains'' (a fine elegy for Frank O'Hara), and in particular, ''Wales Visitation,'' he may not ''make Mantra of the American language,'' but he certainly makes ''old human poesy.''

Herbert Leibowitz. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1969. p. 501

Allen Ginsberg . . . is the figure who preeminently represents the link between right now and back then; and in a single remarkable poem called, of course, ''America,'' becomes the living memory of our dying memory of the mythological thirties. He included the poem in his first slim collection, *Howl*, a little book which raised a lot of hell, out of which there emerged finally a new life-style and a new metapolitics that has remained at the center of the cultural scene ever since.

Leslie Fiedler. *The Collected Essays*, vol. 2 (Stein and Day). 1971. p. 253

Ginsberg is one of the most traditionalist poets now living. His work is an almost perfect fulfillment of the long, Whitman,

Populist, social revolutionary tradition in American poetry. In addition he is a latter-day *nabi*, one of those Hebrew prophets who came down out of the hills and cried ''Woe! Woe! to the bloody city of Jerusalem!'' in the streets. *Howl* resembles as much as anything the denunciatory poems of Jeremiah and Hosea. After Ginsberg, the fundamental American tradition, which was also the most international and the least provincial, was no longer on the defensive but moved over to the attack, and soon, as far as youthful audiences were concerned, the literary Establishment simply ceased to exist. It's not that Ginsberg is the greatest poet of the generation of the Fifties, although he is a very good one, it's that he had the most charismatic personality. The only poet in my time to compare with him in effect on audiences was Dylan Thomas, and Dylan Thomas was essentially a performer, whereas Ginsberg meant something of the greatest importance and so his effects have endured and permeated the whole society, and Thomas's have not.

Ginsberg is the only one of his immediate associates who outgrew the nihilistic alienation of the Beat Generation and moved on to the positive counter culture which developed in the Sixties. He was the spokesman of the lost youth of 1955 and he remained a spokesman of the youth who were struggling to found an alternative society in 1970. His influence is enormous, as great in India or Sweden or underground behind the Iron Curtain as it is in America.

Kenneth Rexroth. *American Poetry in the Twentieth Century* (Herder and Herder). 1971. pp. 170–1

Should it not be declared that with the publication of [Ginsberg's] *Howl* (1956) and [Lowell's] *Life Studies* (1959) our poetry was indubitably changed and indispensably enriched? Before that, it now seems, there were the giants (Eliot, Pound, Williams) struggling with their long poems, and the veteran lyric craftsmen (Frost, Stevens) presenting us with many fine shorter ones. But beyond that—a handful of well-made, intelligent, quite respectable lyrics that, after taking an English course or two, one could produce dutiful analyses of and admire for their wellwrought shapes. Ginsberg and Lowell changed all that, thrusting upon us in their immensely different ways the poem as personal performance. . . .

Often with Ginsberg the solemn and the silly are in too close company for this reader's comfort; it is the lack of complex ideas that for all its incidental virtues finally make his poetry mean less to me than it does to some. But the very idea of reviewing Ginsberg, certainly our most incorrigible poet, has its ludicrous aspect. . . .

William H. Pritchard. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1973. pp. 592–4

Largely because of his deep feeling for [Neal] Cassady, Ginsberg's tender lyrical voice is well-represented in *The Fall of America*. But his ambition in this book to speak, like Whitman, from the self-transcendent perspective of a prophet doesn't come off very well. The data remain data, conceptually unmanaged; the mood of outrage seems childishly insufficient as a mode of emotional mastery over the horrors he describes. As in *The Gates of Wrath*, Ginsberg's strength in this latest book is the strength of his belief in the art of poetry itself. Ginsberg remains an imitator, a disciple whose work is always reminding the reader of the 19th-century Romantic masters. As their disciple, however, Ginsberg has no peer: perhaps it is his own form of maturity as a poet. In any case, Ginsberg's whole working life has been an illustration of the capacity of that poetry to revitalize itself in the consciousness of people seeking through every mode of communal effort to find grace, a way to survive with others.

Diane Middlebrook. *Parnassus*. Spring–Summer, 1974. p. 135

Ginsberg insists that the study of consciousness is the primary legitimate tradition in poetry. . . . Ginsberg vowed to dedicate his life and poetics to the realization of Blake's demand that the poet must cleanse the doors of perception. . . .

Robert Lowell and Allen Ginsberg, arguably the best poets of their generation, have perhaps succeeded most notably in surviving their own publicity. They have been able to write good poetry for thirty years in part because the publicity that surrounded them was generated by others who were quick to attend not so much to talent as to popularity. Lowell and Ginsberg became well known in different ways, of course, but both ways grew out of their talents for an endless, often *driven* form of speaking that at one and the same time clarified itself and grew more inclusive of the historical complexity it recorded. This speaking—one often thinks of both poets as ''commentators''—has a confessional cast to it, and both men have made the private order into public occasion more than once. But their fullest voices were achieved through their ability to make the public events they often deplored into something like private musings. The languages they discovered to enable this transformation are sometimes similar; for all the apparent differences in their sensibilities, it might be interesting to see just what lies behind, and inside, their distinctive modes of speech. . . .

The source of Ginsberg's sensibility . . . is the affinity group rather than the nuclear family. In contrast to Lowell's historical burdens, Ginsberg's social and political consciousness, and even his conscience, seems looser and yet more extensive. Lowell's political awareness takes shapes in key epochs, or even key moments, that serve as measures of values, tests of true progress, while at the same time hinting that all is devolutionary. Ginsberg's polis is always a future, utopian one; though he shares Lowell's sense of America's massive failure as a political ''experiment,'' that failure has a different texture, a different moral weight in his poetry than it does in Lowell's.

Charles Molesworth. *The Fierce Embrace: A Study of Contemporary American Poetry* (Univ. of Missouri Pr., 1979), pp. 37, 39

Allen Ginsberg, in ''Wichita Vortex Sutra,'' seems to have managed both the articulation of particulars and their imaginative transcendence. It appears that Ginsberg's powerful emotional response to the inhumanity that war represents, as it is reflected early in the poem, allows him finally to negate that war, to eliminate it entirely from his system of recognitions. No poem that I have seen dealing with the Vietnam period in American life is so packed with angry details at the beginning—the minutiae of newspapers, radio reports, advertising slogans, all of which tend to falsify reality—and so blithe and ethereal at the end. The personal and poetic transformation Ginsberg works in ''Wichita,'' from almost total submersion in and obsession with political and military detail and dishonesty to final disbelief and liberation from such detail, is most unusual.

Perhaps even more unusual is the fact that this poem was written with the greatest ''projective'' rapidity—actually composed on tape-recorder as the poet traveled southwest through Kansas by car. The transformation occurring at the end—the transcendence of the personal—. . . is effected not through the adoption of *persona*, dramatic projection, or the subordination of present ills by a philosophic consideration of the past, but rather through the ritual act of *mantra*, in which Ginsberg, having described as many civil and military evils as possible, calls upon a rich pantheon of Indian, Christian, and Jewish gods to exorcize those evils and flatly declares the end of war. Surprisingly, the mantra seems to work, not just for Ginsberg, but for the reader as well. . . .

In this work of Ginsberg we have, to my mind, that rare integration of visual and aural, phenomenal and personal attentions which somehow eluded both Denise Levertov and Robert Duncan in their various strivings to personalize and politicize their poetry. We also have a remarkable instance of the success of modern organic/projective poetry from a writer who, for all his uplifted spontaneity, refuses to shut himself off from the validity of the outside world—particularly the natural and human world—and its insistent claim to reality.

William Aiken. *Modern Poetry Studies*. 10, 2–3, 1981, pp. 232, 240

It seems a strangely sober act to pick up *Collected Poems 1947–1980*, all eight hundred pages of it, and read [Allen] Ginsberg as if he had always, like any poet, asked to be judged by his work. No Jack Kerouac sits beside you beating out the rhythms on coffeehouse tables with the palms of his hands, and assuring you how important Allen's poetry is. This is Ginsberg on his own, sans bells, kids, grandmothers, presenting himself as if he were dead and the twentieth century past and he had fallen into line with the poets of the age to see who will make it into the American literature survey courses of 2001. Yet it does not feel fair to judge him in that company.

If one makes comparisons with Eliot, Pound, Lowell, Stevens, or even with Ransom or Robert Penn Warren, the collected Ginsberg does not stand a chance. What these eight hundred pages prove is that Ginsberg has always been a minor poet; that is, a poet who has produced a few remarkable pieces, but the bulk of whose work shows no philosophical growth (despite its ostentatiously philosophical preoccupations) and rarely any depth. It is no small thing to be a minor poet; few make the list in any century. Ginsberg seems to be aware of his place. In the introduction, he warns that this collection will allow readers to ''observe poetic energy as cyclic, the continuum a panorama of valleys and plateaus with peaks of inspiration every few years.''

So, in fact, we do observe. When one considers that these poems cover thirty-three years of personal and national history, most of them lived feverishly, there is a striking sameness to the body of this work. Only Ginsberg's musical brilliance, his perfect pitch, saves the sameness from monotony. . . .

Does the collected Ginsberg represent the collected us? Certainly not, at least in the sense of reaching the nation's real complications. Still, as a guidebook to the national emotional highlights of the past four decades, the book is indispensable. So, evidently, is Ginsberg. Continually changing shapes and sounds, he has managed to outlast better poets by remaining forever current, urgent, with it, whatever ''it'' happened to be. What a strange national Moses. But maybe not. The two qualities one takes from this collection are sinful innocence and innocent sin. Allen was always a good boy.

Roger Rosenblatt. ''A Major Minor Poet.'' [Review of *Collected Poems 1947–1980* by Allen Ginsberg] *New Republic*. 192, March 4, 1985, pp. 33–35

The major thematic pronouncement of [the volume] *Mind Breaths* is one which encourages nourishment of and communion with the inner Self, an inner ''form,'' and which would, as well, suggest that involvement with the tragedies of society is only a hindrance to achieving that inner peace, which is, since all else is ''hopeless,'' the only achievable goal left.

With the thematic suggestions of [the other poems in the volume] as a backdrop, the poem ''Mind Breaths'' stands out as the realization, in poetic form, of an inner peace, an inner calmness, which allows the individual to reflect upon the outer world and to take in the outer world without becoming either actively involved in it or emotionally disturbed by it. ''Mind Breaths'' is the only poem in the volume which shows the poet, as it were, ''acting'' to manage the world around him. Other poems—''Yaweh and Allah Battle,'' ''Yes and It's Hopeless,'' ''What I'd Like to Do,'' ''Hospital Window''—have suggested that one must cultivate the inner Self or achieve an inner peace instead of or before confronting the outer world, but ''Mind Breaths'' is the first and only poem in the volume which depicts the individual actually as having achieved that inner peace and thereby providing an example of, in a sense, the ''solution'' for the individual. . . .

The poem ''Mind Breaths'' thus becomes, in a sense, the centerpiece of the volume, standing as the incarnation—the enactment—of the individual's solution to managing the outer world, a solution which is but longingly hinted at in other poems—or explained, rather than illustrated, in ''Contest of Bards''—and it underscores, finally, the dramatic shift Ginsberg has taken thematically away from earlier volumes.

The point here has not been—as it so often becomes in literary explications—to suggest that the poetry in *Mind Breaths* is ''better'' or ''worse'' than Ginsberg's earlier poetry but to point out that a significant thematic shift is occurring in the poetry which has been hitherto overlooked. Whether this shift is, as [Mark] Shechner and the other critics have suggested it is not, an ''advance in vision'' for Ginsberg is really a moot question. One would, of course, first have to define advance—a word which, when dealing with intangible movements or shifts, is very problematic, and perhaps even more so when talking about poetic ''vision.'' The point is, I believe—and this is what critics have failed to perceive, probably because certain poems in *Mind Breaths* (e.g., the ''songs'') have turned critics away from the entire volume—that the poems of *Mind Breaths* are not rehashing the topics and themes of *Howl* and *Kaddish*. They reveal a changing Ginsberg.

Jay Dougherty. ''From Society to Self: Ginsberg's Inward Turn in *Mind Breaths*.'' *Sagetrieb*. Spring, 1987, pp. 89–91

The Beats shook up American life in ways other than literature. With their free-and-easy ways, their belief in love and visions and openness, they made the first cracks in the armor and gave America some breathing room after the claustrophobia of the postwar

decade. Ginsberg has claimed that the Beat Generation influenced everything from gay liberation, black liberation, and women's liberation to liberation of the word from censorship, the demystification and/or decriminalization of some laws against marijuana and other drugs, and the spread of ecological consciousness.

Some of these claims have been dismissed by critics. The Beats had no obvious connection with the civil rights movement, and most feminist historians are critical of the Beats for their misogyny; it would be ingenious to find the origins of the women's movement among Beat Generation literary activity, except perhaps as a reaction against it.

The gay movement, however, has clear roots in the kind of open-minded comradeship and male bonding found among the early Beats, particularly between Ginsberg and Kerouac, or Kerouac and Cassady. It was a kind of masculine tenderness out of Walt Whitman, virtually unknown in the late forties and early fifties, which later became a prototype in the gay community, what Ginsberg called a ''cooperative tender heart.''

The bravery of Ginsberg's confessions in *Howl*—''America, I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel'' or ''who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy''—revelations of homosexuality in the middle of the McCarthy period, made without guilt or shame, was inspirational to homosexuals across the country and heralded the beginnings of the gay liberation movement. Ginsberg held up his gay ''marriage'' to Peter as exemplary, although he later worried about the harm that may have caused to anyone copying him and was later criticized by sectors of the movement for simply reproducing role stereotypes. He gave dozens of benefit readings for gay causes and championed the cause in interviews and the media. In the history of the struggle to achieve acceptance for homosexuals in American society, Ginsberg was a central figure.

The Beats and their publishers, notably Barney Rosset at Grove Press, played an important role in ending literary censorship, through the trials of *Howl* and *Naked Lunch*. Ginsberg was willing to put himself on the line, whether testifying on behalf of Jack Smith's film *Flaming Creatures*, which had been seized as obscene, or opposing 1988 FCC regulations that prohibited ''Howl'' from being read aloud on the radio except after midnight. Although Ginsberg often claims the Beat Generation as the genesis of the ideas of sixties youth culture, in most instances, where some lasting influence on society can be shown, it was caused not by the Beat Generation but by Ginsberg himself in his tireless campaigning for what he regards as a better world.

The one continuous thread throughout his life has been to fulfill the vow he made as a teenager, standing on the windswept prow of the Hoboken ferry on his way to take the Columbia University entrance examinations: to devote his life to helping mankind. He became the poet advocate of the underdog, and this has always been his greatest theme. To paraphrase Richard Ellmann on Oscar Wilde, Ginsberg's greatness as a writer is partly the result of the enlargement of sympathy that he demands for society's victims.

It was not an easy ride. Ginsberg's sincerity has been doubted, his methods have often been criticized, his poetry has been ridiculed. Despite that, he has become the most famous living poet on earth, one of America's best known cultural ambassadors, his poetry translated into virtually every language, from Chinese to Serbo-Croatian. He changed the world a little.

Barry Miles. *Ginsberg: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), pp. 532–33

It will be forty years in October since Allen Ginsberg gave his historic first reading of ''Howl'' (in San Francisco), the poem which so spectacularly launched his poetic career and put the Beat Generation on the American literary and cultural map. Looking back at the various outraged responses the poem inspired, the one that now seems strangest is not the (unsuccessful) prosecution for obscenity (some of Ginsberg's poems still can't be broadcast on American radio during the day) but the objection from the literary ''establishment'' that the poem was wild and wholly lacking in craft. What has become clear over the intervening years is just how systematic and considered Ginsberg's methods are. Indeed, next to this anarchic beatnik, many formalist and traditionalist poets seem like brave improvisers, going it without the kind of aesthetic (and ideological) framework that Ginsberg has always so readily invoked to explain and justify his art. . . .

Now that he's nearly seventy, the record is inevitably dominated by the experience of age and the prospect of death, and it is this subject matter rather than any technical advance that distinguishes *Cosmopolitan Greeting: Poems 1986–1992* from all his earlier volumes.

Nicholas Everett. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. Feb. 10, 1995, p. 7

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GIOVANNI, Nikki (1943–)

Power and love are what are at issue in Nikki Giovanni's poetry and life. In her earlier poems (1968–1970), these issues are for the most part separate. She writes of personal love in poems of private life; of black power and a public love in political poems. She won her fame with the latter.

In poems such as [''The True Import of the Present Dialogue, Black vs. Negro''], Giovanni speaks for her people in their own

language of the social issues that concern them. Her role is that of spokeswoman for others with whom she is kin except for the fact that she possesses the gift of poetry: ''i wanted to be / a sweet inspiration in my dreams / of my people. . . .'' The quotation is from a later poem in which she is questioning that very role. But as she gains her fame, the concept of poet as ''manifesting our collective historical needs'' is very much present.

In defining poetry as ''the culture of a people,'' Giovanni, in the statement from *Gemini* quoted earlier, uses ''musician'' and ''preacher'' as synonyms for ''poet''. All speak for the culture; all *speak*, with the emphasis on the sound they make. Making poems from black English is more than using idioms and grammatical idiosyncrasies; the very form of black English, and certainly its power, is derived from its tradition and preeminent usage as an oral language. . . .

The act of naming, of using language creatively, becomes the most powerful action of all—saying, calling fudge love, calling smiling at old men revolution is creative (rather than derivative) action that expresses more than her own powers as woman and poet. In ''Seduction'' there was a significant gap between language (rhetoric) and action, between male and female. In that fable, men and words were allied and were seen by the woman poet as impotent. The woman was allied with action (love), but she was, in the poem, mute. The man calls her action ''counterrevolutionary.'' Now, in ''My House,'' the woman's action, love (an overt expression of the personal, private sphere), is allied to language. Giovanni brings her power bases together in this poem, her dominion over kitchens, love, and words. No longer passive in any way, she makes the food, the love, the poem, and the revolution. She brings together things and words through her own vision (dream, poem) of them, seeing that language (naming) is action, because it makes things happen. Once fudge has been named love, touching one's lips to it becomes an act of love; smiling at old men becomes revolution ''cause what's real / is really real.'' Real = dream + experience. To make all this happen, most of all there must exist a sense of self on the part of the maker, which is why the overriding tone of the poem is the sense of an ''i'' who in giving need feel no impotence from the act of taking (both become aspects of the same event). Thus this is *her* house and he makes her happy, thus and only thus—''cause'' abounds in this poem, too: this, her poem, can be his poem. Not silly at all.

In bringing together her private and public roles and thereby validating her sense of self as black woman poet, Giovanni is on her way towards achieving in art that for which she was trained: emotionally, to love; intellectually and spiritually, to be in power; ''to learn and act upon necessary emotions which will grant me more control over my life,'' as she writes in *Gemini*. Through interrelating love and power, to achieve a revolution—to be free. She concludes her poem ''When I Die'' (*My House*) with these lines:

> and if ever touched a life i hope that life knows that i know
> that touching was and still is and will always be the
> true revolution

These words of poetry explain the way to enact a dream, one that is ''a real possibility'': ''that I can be the first person in my family to be free. . .I'm twenty-five years old. A revolutionary poet. I love''.

Wherever Nikki Giovanni's life as poet will take her, she will go there in full possession of her self.

> Suzanne Juhasz. *Naked and Fiery Forms* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), pp. 157–58, 173–74

It was the publication of *Black Feeling, Black Talk, Black Judgement* (1968, 1970) that began her rise to national prominence. She captured the fighting spirit of the times with such lines as ''Nigger can you kill?'' (in ''The True Import of Present Dialogue, Black vs. Negro'') and ''a negro needs to kill / something'' (''Records''). These poems were distinguished more by the contrast between the words and the image of their author than by anything else. Also in the volume were a number of personal poems, including gentle satires on sexual politics, and introspective, autobiographical ones, such as ''Nikki-Rosa,'' still one of her best. It talked about growing up, the value of a loving childhood and challenged the stereotype of the angry militant: ''. . .they'll/probably talk about my hard childhood/and never understand that/all the while I was quite happy,'' she wrote.

From the beginning, the personal, feeling poems were juxtaposed against those of violent militancy. But in subsequent books she spurned the latter completely. Her vision in *Black Feeling* which saw ''our day of Presence/When Stokely is in/The Black House'' (''A Historical Footnote to Consider Only When All Else Fails'') narrowed, in her autobiographical essays *Gemini* (1971), to the conclusion that ''Black men refuse to do in a concerted way what must be done to control White men.'' In any case, as she wrote in *My House* (1972), ''touching'' was the ''true revolution'' (''When I Die'').

But Giovanni's books after *Black Feeling* did more than repudiate violence. As critic Eugene Redmond pointed out, they offered her view from a new perspective: that of the rite of passage toward womanhood. The growing-up motif is a common one in literature, especially among women writers. It has provided some of their most memorable work and, in Giovanni's case, a unifying theme in her work.

> Paula Giddings. In Mari Evans, ed. *Black Women Writers (1950–1980)* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), p. 212

Giovanni is a frustrating poet. I can sympathize with her detractors, no matter what the motives for their discontent. She clearly has talent that she refuses to discipline. She just doesn't seem to try hard enough. In ''Habits'' she coyly declares:

> i sit writing
> a poem
> about my habits
> which while it's not
> a great poem
> is mine

It isn't enough that the poem is hers; personality isn't enough, isn't a substitute for fully realized poems. Even though she has created a compelling persona on the page, she has been too dependent on it. Her ego has backfired. She has written a number of lively, sometimes humorous, sometimes tragic, often perceptive poems about the contemporary world. The best poems in her three strongest books, *Black Feeling*, *Black Talk*, *Black Judgement*, *Re: Creation*, and *Cotton Candy*, demonstrate that she can be a very good poet. However, her work also contains dross: too much unrealized abstraction (flabby abstraction at that!), too much ''poetic'' fantasy posing as poetry and too many moments verging on sentimentality. In the early 1970s, after severely criticizing Giovanni's shortcomings, Haki Madhubuti said he eagerly awaited

the publication of her new book, *Re: Creation*; he hoped that in it she would fulfill the promise of her earlier poetry. Even though it turned out to be one of Giovanni's better books, I find myself in a similar situation to Madhubuti's. I see that not only does Giovanni have promise, she already has written some good poems and continues to write them. Yet I am concerned about her development. I think it is time for her to stand back and take stock of herself, to take for herself the time for reflection, the vacation she says Aretha deserves for work well done. Nikki Giovanni is one of the most talented writers to come out of the Black 1960s, and I don't want to lose her. I want her to write poems which grow out of that charming persona, not poems which are consumed by it. Giovanni must keep her charm and overcome her self-indulgence. She has the talent to create good, perhaps important, poetry if only she has the will to discipline her craft.

William J. Harris. In Mari Evans, ed. *Black Women Writers (1950–1980)* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), p. 228

Upon reading Nikki Giovanni's early poetry, one immediately notes the ferocity of her verse. Its force, its passion, and its hatred startle, but the 1960s were startling years. Hers is a message of revolution, killing, changing. The cry is for a strong sense of individualism and for an individual who will stand up to effect the changes society demands. The combined volume containing the texts from her two books, *Black Feeling Black Talk/Black Judgement*, illustrates this emphasis. A later volume, *My House*, is much more personal and concentrates on the influences at work on the poet.

The Women and the Men continues that sense of mellowing, of shifting focus and emphasis in the poetry, as the poet stresses personal contacts. It is interesting to note that many of her individual poems are dedicated to specific people, often identified by name or by initials. In the most recent volume, the mellowing is not only evident; it is the thrust of the book.

One critic of contemporary poetry praised Giovanni for her ability to use simple folk and blues rhythms and techniques. That strength is evident in . . . her verses about strong black women she has met.

Dennis Lloyd. In Ray Willbanks, ed. *Literature of Tennessee* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1984), pp. 197–98

While Giovanni has received more attention first for her militant poems on racial themes and later for her feminist writing, the poems that will finally determine her position in the canon of American poetry are, almost without exception, ones in which place functions not only as a vehicle, but also as a theme. In her most recent work, her themes are becoming increasingly complex, reflecting her maturity as a woman and as a writer. Traditionally in Southern writing, place has been associated with themes of the past and the family; these themes are seen in Giovanni's poems of the late 1960s and the early 1970s, with the added dimension of a desire to understand the faraway places from which black slaves were brought to the American South. Her later poetry reflects a changing consciousness of her role in society as a single woman, the need to adjust her concept of home and family and of the importance of smaller places, such as houses and rooms, to fit her own life, a life that many American women and men, black and white, can identify with. In her best poems, places grow into themes that convey the universal situation of modern humanity, a sense of placelessness and a need for security. . . .

For her, place is more than an image, more than a surface used to develop a narrative or a theme, just as place functions in the best poetry of the Southern tradition lying behind her work. Further, the changing sense of place in these poems can be seen to reveal Giovanni's developing sense of herself as a woman and as a poet. Suzanne Juhasz, Anna T. Robinson, and Erlene Stetson all emphasize in their recent critical discussions the growing feminist consciousness they find in Giovanni's work. Her use of place is broader than simply a feminist symbol, though, just as her poetry has developed beyond purely racial themes. The relationships of people to places and the ways people have responded to and tried to control places are important themes for Giovanni, as are the ways places sometimes control people. Greatest in thematic significance are the need to belong to a place or in a place and the necessity of moving beyond physical places to spiritual or metaphysical ones.

Martha Cook. In Tonette Bond Inge, ed. *Southern Women Writers: The New Generation* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990), pp. 228, 299

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GLASGOW, Ellen (1874–1945)

Miss Glasgow has refused to consider herself less than an artist. She has not written of Virginian life but of human life in Virginia. She has taken two or three years to perfect a book, not because she wanted to be sociologically accurate but because she wanted to be artistically mature, and this sense of pace and dignity, this tacit assumption that the novel is a major work of art—these are the qualities she has brought to her interpretation of immediate environment.

Howard Mumford Jones. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 16, 1943. p. 20

You have in the work of Ellen Glasgow something very like a complete social chronicle of the Piedmont section of the State of Virginia since the War Between the States, as this chronicle has been put together by a witty and observant woman, a poet in grain,

who was not at any moment in her writing quite devoid of malice, nor of an all-understanding lyric tenderness either; and who was not ever, through any tiniest half-moment, deficient in craftsmanship. You have likewise that which, to my first finding, seemed a complete natural history of the Virginian gentlewoman throughout the last half-century, with all the attendant features of her lair and of her general habitat most accurately rendered. But reflection shows the matter to be a great deal more pregnant than I thought at outset; for the main theme of Ellen Glasgow, the theme which in her writing figures always, if not exactly as a Frankenstein's monster, at least as a sort of ideational King Charles's head, I now take to be The Tragedy of Everywoman, As It Was Lately Enacted in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

James Branch Cabell. *Let Me Lie* (Farrar, Straus). 1947. p. 243

In her comedies as in her serious novels, Ellen Glasgow significantly advances but a single thesis, that man is the enemy of woman. The comedies rout him with ridicule and edged contempt; the serious novels display his dead body as proof of love's futility. . . . In no major work from the publication of *Virginia* which may be reckoned as the author's first demonstration of mature powers, does a man of questing virility appear but to dupe or otherwise humiliate a woman spiritually his superior. . . . Nor is one villainous hero to be confused with the other; such are the author's gifts that each betrayer remains sharply individualized. By multiplying particularized instances, Miss Glasgow seeks to establish the general truth of her proposition, that men, until winnowed by the years, bring only rue in their wake. Rue, that is, to women; for Ellen Glasgow presents masculine character primarily as it subserves feminine.

Josephine Lurie Jessup. *The Faith of Our Feminists* (H. Smith). 1950. pp. 52–3

Ellen Glasgow was a literary rebel in the first half of her career, a literary ancestor in the second half, but her work has never had the full recognition it deserves. One of our top three women writers, she has been eclipsed by the glow of Willa Cather's lovely fairy tales and by the cool glitter of Edith Wharton's social snobbery. Yet as a literary figure Miss Glasgow was superior to these ladies in many respects, and her best novels are of equal interest and importance with theirs.

Maxwell Geismar. *The Nation*. Nov. 13, 1954. p. 425

The social historian cannot become personally involved at the expense of his own satirical objectivity, for at that moment true satire becomes impossible. All of which is a way of saying that Miss Glasgow's success at applying blood and irony in pursuit of the social history of Virginia depends upon her own detachment; and too often she is not at all detached, but instead is so intensely engaged and identified with the supposed objects of irony that she can be neither ironic nor realistic. She surrenders her objectivity to the private demands of her characters; instead of creating Dorinda in *Barren Ground*, she becomes Dorinda. Or rather, it is Dorinda who ceases to be a fictional character and becomes an extension of Miss Glasgow's own life and personality, until it is Miss Glasgow who is undergoing the experience.

It is a good rule of thumb for the Glasgow novels that whenever the author begins identifying a character's plight with her own, begins projecting her personal wishes and needs into the supposedly fictional situation, then to that extent both the character and the novel are weakened. Contrariwise, Miss Glasgow's success as a novelist is in direct proportion to her success in standing away from her characters and letting them find their own fictional level, as created figures in a story.

Louis D. Rubin. *No Place on Earth* (Texas). 1959. pp. 13–14

In the novels which compose her triptych of manners, Ellen Glasgow explored the meaning for her Virginians of a change in moral attitudes. In these novels she showed plainly that she could neither accept nor wholly reject the code of behavior which had governed polite society or, indeed, all of society in Virginia since colonial times. Earlier she had attacked the features of that code which she found debilitating, or even evil in their effect. Especially had she objected to what she called ''evasive idealism.'' For against all forces in the life of an aristocratic society which prevented men and women from living rich lives, or which protected barbarity, weakness and greed in the name of tradition, Ellen Glasgow sternly waged war. Yet, if she attacked the code as faulty, she could not readily accept what was usually offered as its alternative: the abandonment of all rule in human relationships. . . .

The Sheltered Life (1932) is Ellen Glasgow's finest novel, for in this tragedy of manners she combined most effectively all the elements of her material and art. In it character, action, and atmosphere interact to reveal not only the tragedy in lives shaped by the code of polite behavior and by the pretenses of a cult of Beauty but also the evil lurking in assumptions of innocence. She cast over these people a magic portrayal, a brilliance of life, and a beauty which makes superb the irony in the charm of their outward lives and their darker implications.

Blair Rouse. *Ellen Glasgow* (Twayne). 1962. pp. 98, 108

It is unfortunate for the artistic stature of her short stories that Miss Glasgow did not continue writing them after 1924. Although she dated *Virginia* (1913) as her first mature work, it is generally agreed that her ''major phase'' began with *Barren Ground* (1925). This novel, together with *The Sheltered Life* (1932) and *Vein of Iron* (1935), remains unchallenged by anything she wrote in a shorter form. ''Jordan's End'' gives us a hint of what she might have done if she had taken the short story as seriously as she took the novel, if she had not been so obsessed with her ''social history of Virginia.''

From our perspective today, we can see that Ellen Glasgow kept maturing stylistically, but that her moral and social concepts solidified in the middle of the 1920's. The rebel of the nineties found herself the conservative of the twenties. Nevertheless, the advice of Walter Hines Page and her own iron vein kept her writing fiction even after she had lost faith in her readers, even when she knew she was celebrating lost values. For this she had earned her status as one of America's leading woman novelists.

Richard K. Meeker. Introduction to *The Collected Stories of Ellen Glasgow* (Louisiana State). 1963. p. 23

The advantages that she brought to her task and ambition were indeed considerable. Out of her wide reading she selected the mightiest and probably the best models to guide her in her re-creation of the Virginia scene. She used Hardy as her master in rustic atmosphere, George Eliot as her guide in morality, Maupassant for plot, and Tolstoy for everything. She had the richest source material that any author could wish, consisting simply of a whole state and its whole history, a state, too, that occupies the center of our eastern geography and of our history and that not coincidentally has produced more Presidents than any other. And the social range among Miss Glasgow's characters is far greater than that of most twentieth-century novelists, suggesting that of such Victorians as Trollope, Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, and, again, George Eliot. . . .

Miss Glasgow had the same range in scenery that she had in human beings, and she could make the transfer without difficulty from the grim mountains and valleys of *Vein of Iron* to the interminable fields of broom-sedge in *Barren Ground* and thence to the comfortable mansions of Richmond and to the smaller gentility of Petersburg and Williamsburg. Highly individual in American letters is her ability to pass with equal authority from country to city, from rusticity to sophistication, from the tobacco field to the drawing room, from irony to tragedy.

Yet for all her gifts and advantages she does not stand in the very first rank of American novelists. She was unable sufficiently to pull the tapestry of fiction over her personal grievances and approbations.

Louis Auchincloss. *Pioneers and Caretakers* (Minnesota). 1965. pp. 86–8

In her novels of manners, Ellen Glasgow repeatedly shows us men and women of wisdom and perception who lack the moral courage to act upon their knowledge and hence are destroyed by societies whose fundamental weakness they recognize but to which they bring not anger or resistance but amusement and retreat. Nowhere is this characteristic more obvious than in her novel *The Sheltered Life* where her protagonist, she claims, is General Archbald. She regards the General as an example of ''the civilized mind in a world where even the civilizations we make are uncivilized''; and yet despite that kind of praise, General Archbald is finally a representative figure of his own world, a world that subscribes to a false idealism. At every crucial point he has lacked the quality of character which would have enabled him to make his civilized mind felt as an active force in his decaying civilization.

C. Hugh Holman. *Three Modes of Modern Southern Fiction* (Georgia). 1966. p. 21

In the history of Southern literature Ellen Glasgow's place is assured. She was, simply, the first really modern Southern novelist, the pioneer who opened up for fictional imagination a whole spectrum of her region's experience that hitherto had been considered inappropriate for depiction in polite letters. From the very beginning she meant business, and she had no patience with those who would have literature be anything less or other than an honest portrait of human experience and human meaning. Decades before Faulkner, Wolfe, Warren, Caldwell, Welty, and the others, she did her best to write about Southern experience as she actually viewed it, not as her neighbors thought she ought to be seeing it. In the words of the historian C. Vann Woodward, ''When eventually the bold moderns of the South arrested the reading and theatrical world with the tragic intensity of the inner life and social drama of the South, they could find scarcely a theme that Ellen Glasgow had wholly neglected. She had bridged the gap between the old and the new literary revival, between romanticism and realism.''

Louis D. Rubin, Jr. In *Ellen Glasgow: Centennial Essays*, ed. M. Thomas Inge (Univ. Pr. of Virginia, 1976), p. 4

Ellen Glasgow, . . . who died in 1945, is not at all highly regarded at present; yet she was a distinguished American novelist and the first of the Southern women writers . . . to repudiate the ''willed heroic vision.'' Her primary theme, indeed, is the way in which grand ideas and facile goodwill interfere with the capacity to perceive ordinary miserable truths. . . .

What fascinates Ellen Glasgow is the paradox involved in the correlation between integrity and dissembling; in her novels it is always those of the highest moral character who are most reluctant to take account of domestic or social ills. They become adept at pretending. She makes the point over and over: ''Her higher nature lent itself to deceit''; ''. . . both clung . . . to the belief that a pretty sham has a more intimate relation to morality than has an ugly truth.'' The characters—most of them at any rate—are not at all critical of society's arrangements, but the author is: she is openly a crusader for social reforms, but she avoids a haranguing note by keeping her tone sardonic rather than impassioned. Benign obtuseness, willed or otherwise, is her target; but she understands how this quality can make life more agreeable for those who possess it. . . .

Ellen Glasgow's objective . . . is to underline the harm occasioned by self-deceits and wilful delusions, and to suggest, as far as possible, a wider social parallel for the personal failures and tragedies her novels depict. At best, her work is authoritative and graceful; and her social observation is always acute.

Patricia Craig. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. Nov. 13, 1981, p. 1319

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GLÜCK, Louise (1943–)

Glück's cryptic narratives invite our participation: we must, according to the case, fill out the story, substitute ourselves for the fictive personages, invent a scenario from which the speaker can utter her lines, decode the import, ''solve'' the allegory. Or such is our first impulse. Later, I think, we no longer care, in ''Thanksgiving'' for instance, who are the prey and who the predators: we read the poem, instead, as a truth complete within its own terms, reflecting some one of the innumerable configurations into which experience falls. Glück's independent structures, populated by nameless and often ghostly forms engaged in archaic or timeless motions, satisfy without referent. They are far removed from the more circumstantial poetry written by women poets in the last 10 years, but they remain poems chiefly about childhood, family life, love, and motherhood. In their obliquity and reserve, they offer an alternative to first-person ''confession,'' while remaining indisputably personal.

The leap in style from Glück's relatively unformed first book (*Firstborn*, 1968) to *The House on Marshland* suggests that Glück is her own best critic. For myself, I would hope she might follow the advice Keats and Stevens gave themselves, and write a long poem: ''All kinds of favors,'' said Stevens, ''drop from it.''

Helen Vendler. *The New Republic*. June 17, 1978, pp. 34–37.

Louise Glück is familiar to readers of contemporary American poetry. As early as her debut appearance in Paul Carroll's *Young American Poets* (1968), her work intimated a poet of consequence. There was something about the obvious technical facility and self-lacerating tone that was immediately engaging, not to say arresting. Her first book, *Firstborn* initially published in the United States by the New American Library in 1968, substantiated that impression. In a review of the book, Robert Hass wrote that the poems were ''hard, artful, and full of pain,'' characteristics of the poetic *épistémé* in which they were written.

True to its ''confessional'' sources, the poetry of *Firstborn* is, as Hass hints, formally strict, musically dense, and thematically elliptical, even obscure. But two poems, ''The Egg,'' and ''The Wound,'' set forth Glück's obsessive subject, abortion, and form a kind of thematic matrix for the book as a whole, focusing its somewhat blurred emphases. And those emphases, the recurring themes of emptiness, sterility and death, are powerfully reinforced by their juxtaposition with the plenitude, fertility, and vitality of the natural world or, one might say, the nature fertility of the physical world. Hence, in the presence of nature (''Ripe things sway in the light / Parts of plants leaf / Fragments''), not the ''gored roasts'' or ''plot / Of embryos,'' abortion seems unnatural, *contra natura*. Furthermore, what the poems insist in their oblique way is that one can never be done with something like abortion. What is seemingly dead, past, returns—as Freud knew—to haunt the present and future, obsessively alive. Such, at least, is the poetic premise of *Firstborn*. . . .

It is a commonplace that every poet has his or her subject and, as readers, we grant them this. Yet in an art that has been dominated by male obsessions (what Foucault calls the discourse of power), Glück's subject is an uncommonly female one, even as the style and models of *Firstborn* are not. Herein lies the contradictory nature and ambiguous achievement of the book. This is not to say that Glück polemicizes her subject as, I think, Adrienne Rich has recent books. Although ''The Egg'' and ''The Wound'' are not wholly successful artistically speaking because of the unresolved disjunction between verse and voice, they are still too rich and complex for the reductionism of ''right to-life'' or ''radical feminist'' slogans. Glück is not intent to teach, but to present. And what is presented—sometimes coolly, sometimes fiercely, always forcefully—is not easily dismissed. Which is simply to say that Glück is not a proselytizer but a poet, and an accomplished one at that. . . .

If poems such as ''The Racer's Widow,'' ''Cottonmouth Country,'' and a formal *tour de force*, ''Phenomenal Survival of Death in Nantucket,'' mark a poet of considerable talent at work in *Firstborn*, one not wholly subject to her poetic models, nonetheless the tone that pervades the book is so high-pitched that, finally, there is little of the quiet control that is often a sign of the mature poet. In a review of *The House on Marshland*, Calvin Bedient wrote in the *Sewanee Review* (Spring 1976):

> Her earlier poems are tense performances, the light a little too strong, with Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Robert Browning [evident in her frequent use of the dramatic monologue] noticeably coaxing from the wings. The poems are brilliant but lack resonance. . . . They suffer from a too-conscious subject and skill.

The House on Marshland however, is a major advance on its predecessor—brilliant and self-conscious as that book was—and evidence of an achieved poetic maturity. In poem after poem the subtle interweaving of myth and music produces an effect that can only be termed spellbinding. On its publication Stanley Kunitz wrote: ''Those of us who have waited impatiently for Louise Glück's second book can rejoice that it confirms and augments the impression of a rare and high imagination.'' Yet that imagination, burdened by a difficult subject which seemed to necessitate a difficult style (or perhaps it was, as a Russian formalist or Glück herself might argue, vice versa), was occulted in *Firstborn*.

Reading *The House on Marshland* though, one senses that Glück could not have written the latter without the poetic travail of the former. The effect, evident from the very first poem of the book, ''All Hallows,'' is a poetry liberated of its creator's designs (and, as Keats knew, of the reader's as well). It also makes possible a situation in which, to paraphrase Heidegger, *poetry speaks us*, author and reader alike. While implicitly criticizing the clipped style of her first book, Glück in a recent, illuminating interview (*Columbia* [Spring/Summer 1981]) credits the transformation to a change in technique.

> *Firstborn* is full of those bullet-like phrases, the nonsentences. When I finished the poems in that book, it was clear to me that the thing I could not continue to do was make sentences like that. The earliest poems in *The House on Marshland* were responses to a dictum I made myself, to write poems that were, whenever possible, single sentences. . . . What it turned out to do was open up all kinds of subject matter that I had not had access to. . . . technical impositions precede change. I had become habituated to a mode of expression that was itself communicative of a certain state of mind and attitude. If you take that. . . . technique away, then by definition you are going to have something else. . . . The atmosphere of spontaneous deadedness will go. That was what I thought I was doing from Book 1 to Book 2.

Thus, as Glück notes, the terse voice and clotted verse of *Firstborn* give way to the off-hand tone and matter-of-fact rhythms of, say, ''Pomegranate,'' a representative poem from *The House on Marshland*. . . .

If, as Helen Vendler claims, Glück's poems ''are far removed from the circumstantial poetry written by women poets in the last ten years,'' they also suffer occasionally from a lack of immediacy, a sense of humor or wit (where there is no lessening of intensity, as Eliot defined it) which would leaven her sometimes too deadly serious tone. Certainly Glück's possesses, and is possessed by, a magisterial voice that has made for some astonishing poems. The danger is that it will produce mere magic, rhetoric devoid of the felt experiences of everyday life. This caveat, I suppose, accounts for some of the ambivalence I experienced after reading Glück's third and most recent book of poems, *Descending Figure*. At first glance, it merely seems to repeat the successes of *The House on Marshland*.

However, if Glück's tone and language have not changed appreciably (which readers familiar with her work might find vexing), *Descending Figure* does extend the emotional range of the first two books to accommodate events, one surmises, in the evolution of her personal life. Although still haunted by pain and loss and death, the poems are less obsessed with these topics and so less marked by a rather nostalgic desire for extinct states of being and non-being in general: the world of childhood innocence, the ''absolute knowledge'' of the womb and tomb. True, there are poems about dead children and deadlier male-female relationships, staples of the first two books, but there are also poems about the poet's husband and son, the domesticities of daily life and its small, though not insignificant, pains and pleasures. . . .

Paradoxically, despite or because of its downward movement toward the things of this world, *Descending Figure* represents a slight upbeat impulse in Glück's poetry, one not perceptible perhaps to the general reader though one, more importantly, which two poets of pain and loss and death, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, never lived to see and write about. ''I have survived my life,'' a speaker in *Firstborn* says. Louise Glück has survived, and *Descending Figure* is a small testament to her canny craft and courage. In the future, no doubt, her poems will not only continue to move and amaze us but reflect more and more those moments when, just as we are waiting on what Rilke calls a ''rising happiness'' (steigendes *Glück*), ''a happy thing *falls*'' (*ein Glückliches* fällt). Descending figures such as these are also the stuff of poetry.

Robert Miklitsch. *The Hollins Critic*. October, 1982, pp. 1–13.

[Louise Gluck's *The Wild Iris* is an] innovative, demanding new work by one of our most important poets. *The Wild Iris* returns to the distanced voice of Gluck's early poetry—and to its restrained, meticulous observation of the natural world—but this volume is not recapitulation. It is a foray into new territory, from which emerges a personal mythology giving rise, in turn, to theology.

The Wild Iris weaves three essential voices. The first is the singular, solitary cry of the supplicant. Sometimes devotional, sometimes chaste, sometimes ecstatic, this voice is found in the seven poems entitled ''Matins'' and the ten called ''Vespers''—all of which present the human condition. These poems contain both praise and query, comprising a one-sided debate with the concept of god. The second voice is that of the earthly garden—of flowers both tended and wild, the anthropomorphized world speaking as from within some innate wisdom. The third voice is a dispassionate divinity as he declares himself, either as a presence in the natural world or as an absence. Together, these fifty-four poems form a single braid; the reader senses both the individual strand and the combined strength.

The poems of *The Wild Iris* are intellectual, wholly realized within the rational mind, and yet they depend not only on an intimate knowledge of nature but also on a respect for (and passionate love of) the natural world. In narrative time, the book's duration is from early spring through early fall—a garden's visible cycle. By giving the garden a voice, Gluck forces us to see ourselves as the plants might see us—silly, foolish creatures obsessed with our mortality. Gluck does not really describe the plants (description alone being of no interest to her); she speaks from *inside* the flowers, giving each a voice and unearthing new knowledge of human behavior by examining the particularities of each variety, whether it is the lamium's predisposition toward shade (''living things don't all require/light in the same degree'') or the snowdrop's surprising revival (''I didn't expect/to waken again, to feel/in damp earth my body/able to respond again. . .'').

This is a book that should be read at one sitting. The voices combine to create an intense religious experience—even if the god proves to be nonexistent. The effect is one of dazzling austerity. . . .

It is a privilege to watch as a poet breaks new ground. In *The Wild Iris*, Louise Gluck has applied a stringent mind to nature in order to understand not only the self but the definition of faith and/or acceptance. (The acceptance, though, is a dark one: we are given one brief life.) Like [Robert] Frost, Gluck looks for the moment she will see *beyond* and *through*. The poems are simultaneously passionate and remote, as though written with the white heat of a distant star. Their visionary mode may even provide an entry into the snowy fields.

Judith Kitchen. *Georgia Review*. Spring, 1993, pp. 145–59.

Louise Gluck is a poet of strong and haunting presence. Her poems, published in a series of memorable books over the last twenty years, have achieved the unusual distinction of being neither ''confessional'' nor ''intellectual'' in the usual senses of those words, which are often thought to represent two camps in the life of poetry. For a long time, Gluck refused both the autobiographical and the discursive, in favor of a presentation that some called mythical, some mystical.

The voice in the poems is entirely self-possessed, but it is not possessed by self in a journalistic way. It told tales, rather, of an archetypal man and woman in a garden, of Daphne and Apollo, of mysteriously significant animal visitations. Yet behind those stories there hovered a psychology of the author that lingered, half-seen, in the poems. Gluck's language revived the possibilities of high assertion, assertion as from the Delphic tripod. The words of the assertions, though, were often humble, plain, usual; it was their hierarchic and unearthly tone that distinguished them. It was not a voice of social prophecy, but of spiritual prophecy—a tone that not many women had the courage to claim.

It was something of a shock, therefore, when Gluck's recent book *Ararat* turned away from symbol to ''real life,'' which was described with a ruthless flatness as though honesty demanded a rock-bottom truth distilled out of years of reflection. In that book Gluck restrained her piercing drama of consciousness, and reined

in her gift for poetic elaboration. It was clear that some sort of self-chastisement was underway.

Now, reversing course, she has written a very opulent, symbolic book, full—of all things—of talking flowers. [*The Wild Iris*] is really one long poem, framed as a sequence of liturgical rites: the flowers talk to their gardener-poet; the poet, who is mourning the loss of youth, passion and the erotic life, prays to a nameless god (in Matins and Vespers, many times repeated); and the god, in a very tart voice, addresses the poet. As the flowers are to their gardener-poet, so is she to her gardener-god; the flowers, in their stoic biological collectivity, and their pathos, speak to her, sometimes reproachfully, as she speaks, imploringly, to her god. The god has a viewpoint both lofty and ironic, and repeatedly attacks the self-pity or self-centeredness of the poet. These are dangerous risks for a late twentieth-century poem to take, but Gluck wins the wager of her premises. The human reader, too, is placed in ''this isthmus of a middle state'' (Pope) between the vegetatively animate world and the severe spiritual world, and shares the poet's predicament. . . .

What a strange book *The Wild Iris* is, appearing in this fin-de-siecle, written in the language of flowers. It is a *lieder* cycle, with all the mournful cadences of that form. It wagers everything on the poetic energy remaining in the old troubadour image of the spring, the Biblical lilies of the field, natural resurrection. It depends, too, on old religious notions of spiritual discipline. It is pre- Raphaelite, theatrical, staged and posed. It is even affected. But then, poetry has a right to these postures. When someone asked Wallace Stevens's wife whether she liked his poems, she answered, ''I like Mr. Stevens's poems when they are not affected. But they are so often affected.'' And so they were. The trouble lay, rather, in Elsie Stevens's mistrust of affectation. It is one of the indispensable gestures in the poet's repertory.

Helen Vendler. *The New Republic.* May 24, 1993, pp. 35–8.

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GODWIN, Gail (1937–)

Back in the days before the Women's Liberation Front changed everything it used to be possible to think of women who wrote novels as a different order of beings from male novelists. Now, we are supposed to think of all women as essentially identical with men, except for some slight variations in plumbing, etc.

Yet the desire to think of women who write as dissimilar in some real and important sense to men who write persists, and Gail Godwin's first novel, it seems to me, has to be thought of in relation to this difference. Her book is very much a woman's novel, and I want to discuss it in those terms. But let me say first that it is an excellent piece of work, shrewdly observed and carefully crafted, deserving of the praise that such established writers as Kurt Vonnegut, John Fowles, and George P. Elliot have already bestowed on it. *The Perfectionists* is, in fact, too good, too clever, and too finished a product to be patronized as a ''first novel.'' It deserves better; it deserves criticism. And that is what I will try to give it.

The Perfectionists is a novel of domestic life or, more accurately, of sexual partnership. The ''perfectionists'' of the title are an English psychotherapist, Dr. Empson, and his American wife, Dane, who come to Majorca for something like a belated honeymoon, along with the doctor's three-year-old illegitimate son and one of his female patients. The relationship between husband and wife, as complicated by the strange little boy, is the central concern of the novel, and it is developed with a satiric and symbolic vigor that suggests a combination of Jane Austen and D. H. Lawrence. The eerie tension that marks this complex relationship is the great achievement of the novel. It is an extraordinary accomplishment, which is bound to attract and hold many readers. . . .

My principal criticism of these proceedings has to do with the resolute femininity with which they are presented. By this I mean not that metaphysical womanhood which Dickens perceived behind the pseudonym of ''George Eliot'' when he reviewed her amazing first novel, *Adam Bede*, but a narrower and pettier kind of thing. The women in this novel are, all of them, more or less interesting, more or less sympathetic. The men, starting with the doctor . . . are all fatuous and self-centered creatures.

This is, then, a woman's novel in a narrow and constricting way. I suspect that Miss Godwin can extend the range of both her sympathy and her satire. I hope that she will want to. From Jane Austen to Iris Murdoch, the great women of our fiction have been metaphysically female and not merely feminine.

Robert Scholes. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 8, 1970, pp. 37–38

Gail Godwin's *The Odd Woman* (1974) does not at first glance seem to be in the currently popular mode of self-conscious fiction—and perhaps for this reason has not attracted the critical attention it deserves. Neither a work as involuted as one by Borges nor a *Kuenstlerroman, The Odd Woman* centers on the relation between literature and life, especially on the effect that literature—and the lies it often tells—has on those who believe it. Of special interest is the novel's focus on fiction's traditional portrayal of women and its effect on women's relations with and reactions to men. . . .

To Jane, a professor of English, literature serves as far more than simply vocation or avocation. It is not just an object of perception but conditions her very mode of seeing. She views her own life through the refracting filter of literature. . . .

The full insight that the literary world has no necessary correlation with the actual world bursts on Jane. Villains in art need not be villains in life. Moreover, her insight confirms the truth of Jane's early wondering whether or not the concept of the self is itself a myth—''Characters were not so wholly good or bad, heroes or villains, anymore,'' whether or not the very notion of personality—the staple of fiction—is itself false. As the concepts of personality and of heroes and villains die, so does ''all the stuff of novels'' on which Jane depends to give meaning to her life.

Unfortunately, *The Odd Woman* does not end on an optimistic note of lessons learned. . . . The novel closes with the snow falling, reminding us of Jane's retreat when writing her dissertation, and pointing to another such frozen retreat from the actual world.

Godwin seems to offer a forceful indictment of literature and the harmful effects it can have on its readers. Jane can never be happy except, perhaps, in the safe world of the imagination, the

only world which can begin to fulfill the expectations literature has fostered in her. We must go on to ask how Godwin can escape her own indictment of literature, whether her message does not undermine the very novel in which it is embodied. . . .

As Jane notes, Gissing's novel [with the same title] displays his ''unrelenting pessimism. It was one of the few nineteenth-century novels she could think of in which every main female character who was allowed to live through the last page had to do so alone. The book's ending depressed her utterly.'' Godwin might find her defense against the charge she, too, levels against literature in pointing to the pessimistic ending of Jane's story as an example of the truth-telling that we must require from contemporary fiction. Godwin, however, has some of the Jane Clifford in her, and her novel still embodies some of the old attractive lies.

Susan E. Lorsch. *Critique*. 20, 2, 1978, pp. 21, 31

Gail Godwin's newest novel, *Violet Clay*, [is] a terrifying example of sentimentality in the disguise of contemporary sensibility. . . .

None of the novel's characters has been translated by Godwin's imagination into credibility. They speak to each other in prolix and tendentious conversations, so unedited by personality that they are droll. . . .

Well, to be fair, a lot of this is the fault of bad writing, an inability to describe exactly or to transcribe the sound of different voices into anything resembling living language. . . .

But there is worse than this, the basis from which the flabby language, the insubstantial characters, the odd lapses of taste seem to spring; the novel is simply half-baked, half-created, and so far from inevitable that one reads it constantly reminding oneself that it could easily have been avoided. . . .

If the book carries any conviction with it, it is that Violet's esthetic is pretty much molded by her author's, a schoolgirl sensibility in search of vocation. Gail Godwin has been regarded highly as a novelist for some time, certainly since *The Odd Woman* was published in 1974, and I wonder unhappily how much of that regard is due to the fashionable nature of her themes, which can create, without feeling for character, language, ambience, or moral significance, a job lot of current concerns that passes as ''Women's Fiction.''

Edith Milton. *New Republic*. July 8–15, 1978, pp. 40–41

Gail Godwin, on first reading, seems to stand apart from contemporary women writers. She appears immune to experiments with style and the contemporary raw language of sexuality. Her works are plotted symmetrically in the manner of George Eliot, whom she admires, and at a time when many women writers are primarily concerned with woman's emerging sexuality as well as with her active participation in the outside world, Godwin maintains that the demands of the inner woman are much more complex than this. Inner life, says her heroine, Jane Clifford (*The Odd Woman*, 1974), is as important as outer life. But it is obvious that the author considers the inner life even more important. Her first two novels, *The Perfectionists* (1970) and *Glass People* (1972), are clever, well-executed works about women who attempt to grapple with the domestic life and with sexual partnership. More specifically, the heroine of *Glass People* is confronted with what she comes to regard as the awful responsibility of freedom.

How to achieve freedom while in union with another person, and impose one's own order on life so as to find self-fulfillment, is the theme which runs through Godwin's works and becomes the major theme of exploration in her third novel, *The Odd Woman*. . . . Where some other women writers maintain a pessimism about the man/woman relationship, Godwin has her heroine doggedly affirm that man and woman can be a unit; man and woman need each other. Yet it is worth noting that the heroine is alone in the end. The open ending, however, indicates that the author is still the writer of freedom, marriage, love, children, and the relationship between generations. Her subsequent work, *Dream Children* (1976), continues these themes with variations.

Anne Z. Mickelson. *Reaching Out: Sensitivity and Order in Recent American Fiction by Women* (Scarecrow, 1979), p. 68

Gail Godwin's heroines have abandoned their soapboxes, and thank goodness for that. Godwin is by now an ''established'' writer; she has four novels and a collection of short stories to her credit, not to mention a National Book Award nomination. Her complex and fascinating characters, like Jane Clifford in *The Odd Woman* and Violet in *Violet Clay*, have until now suffered from two crippling flaws: they have repeatedly indulged in long, often boring, interior monologues—''meandering and distinctly tedious,'' huffed novelist Larry McMurtry of an earlier novel—and they have had no sense of humor whatsoever.

However, the news of Godwin's latest novel, *A Mother and Two Daughters*, is good, in fact, very good indeed. Nell, Cate, and Lydia Strickland, the three women who dominate the stage, are—like Violet Clay and Jane Clifford—thoughtful, well-educated, self-analytic people, but Godwin hustles them along at a brisk pace through this long, but definitely never tedious tale. They don't opine about the meaning of love or the perils of George Eliot, but do share with us their attempts to make a good job of an ordinary daily life familiar to us all. . . .

Only a few times in this long novel does Godwin falter. A digression on contemporary fiction seems jarringly self-conscious. The requisite eccentrics are skillfully drawn, but show up right on cue: the overbearing, curious spinster aunt Theodora and the disfigured Uncle Osgood with his heart of gold and his redemptive role for latter-day sinners. The middle-class black couple seem plopped down in order to stir up a few thoughts on prejudice and change. All the characters take themselves very seriously, but it is part of their astonishing strength that they persuade us to do likewise.

Anyone from an average family will find themselves drawing a breath and muttering: ''Yes, that's how *I* felt, that's how it always is.'' Godwin wrote of Jane Clifford in *The Odd Woman*: ''Her profession was words and she believed in them deeply. The articulation, interpretation, and preservation of good words.'' She could have been describing herself. She pilots her cast of characters with infinite care, through turbulence, clouds, and sparkling skies. The smooth landing at the novel's end is deeply satisfying: not a neat tying up of loose ends, but a making sense of the past and a hint of the possibilities of the future. Gail Godwin is not just an established writer, she is a growing writer.

Brigitte Weeks. *Ms*. Jan., 1982, pp. 40–41

In general, Miss Godwin's gifts (like Margaret Drabble's) have been best served by the spacious dimensions of the conventional novel. Her talent lies in creating intelligent woman protagonists—usually middle-class and imaginative, often with artistic aspirations—who struggle to lead examined lives in the face of self-imposed as well as cultural constraints. Blessed with humor as well as perceptiveness, they are nearly always sympathetic, even when they behave badly. (Their amiability can be irritating. I sometimes wish Miss Godwin's characters would behave worse more often; her women often suffer from the excess of politesse common to children of the 1950's.)

In any case, her reflective characters come to life slowly, emerging as much from thought as from action, and Miss Godwin's novels have generally accommodated them. I especially liked the edgy perversity of *The Perfectionists* (1970) and the irony and insight of *The Odd Woman* (1974), as well as the gentler but widening vision of *A Mother and Two Daughters*.

I wish I could be as enthusiastic about *Mr. Bedford and the Muses*, a short novel and five stories. The stories have the more obvious problems, which are at least partly due to brevity and partly to their tucked-in edges. Shapeliness is deadly in short fiction. At best, it creates an excess of charm; at worst, it kills the story on the page. . . .

On its own terms, which are not those of Miss Godwin's larger novels, *Mr. Bedford* is a memorable portrait of the kind of people who might have known Scott Fitzgerald during their ''better days.'' It is wry, haunting and sharp.

Judith Gies. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 18, 1983, pp. 14, 37

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GOLD, Herbert (1924–)

If it is true that Mr. Gold's novel (*Birth of a Hero*) has a special importance because it represents a turning point in the intellectual's attitude toward the middle class . . . , it must not be overlooked that Mr. Gold writes with charm and talent. He understands the phenomena at which he is smiling, and he communicates adroitly his delighted recognition of the significance of such neglected rituals as the office party and the commuter's daily journey. If we are really at the beginning of a new era of conservatism, we can only hope that the writers who will choose to celebrate the heroic virtues of the middle-aged and the comfortably placed will be able to do so with at least a portion of Mr. Gold's benevolent wit, radical perception, and intellectual vigor.

Harvey Swados. *The Nation*. Oct. 6, 1951. p. 284

Like Flaubert, Herbert Gold hangs his effects on a faithful reporting of sensations recorded by the five senses. . . . Scenes are strung together necklace-style and motivation is not always clear or credible. Characters have labels and are stuck to them. It's a cerebral performance with a tangle of long, long thoughts, most of them entertainingly presented in colorful, runaway language. A high fidelity ear and eye are at work here.

James Kelly. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 14, 1954. p. 5

The Man Who Was Not With It is itself a carnival, bringing the reader into a strange and fascinating tent. The novel is a spectacular linguistic performance. Herbert Gold's writing is sometimes flashy and full of sideshow guile, but much more often his story is beautifully told, with tough and tender humor. . . . Herbert Gold is no longer a novelist to be watched in the future—his performance is here, and well worth watching right now.

Alan Harrington. *The Nation*. June 23, 1956. p. 535

Herbert Gold's *The Man Who Was Not With It* belongs to (a) tradition, that of the picaresque, which Mr. Gold has fitted with the existentialist idea of the tragedy of ''engagement'', in a novel that is exciting both as language and as figuration of destiny. . . . Mr. Gold's story has as its human substance the awful risk inherent in adult faith between men. The picaresque design of the book lies in the adventures of a kid who travels with a carnival. . . . To be ''with it and of it'' is the carnival lingo for the ultimate loyalty to the strange, spiritually islanded life of the carnival.

Dorothy Van Ghent. *The Yale Review*. Summer, 1956. p. 632

Gold's intelligence is the brightness of skill, exuberance, and his prized risk-taking. It is the sheer vitality of a talented writer. . . . Herbert Gold . . . seems to have found, evolved, or perhaps been born with, a Baroque style that is exciting and controlled; but he has yet to find a theme thick and heavy enough with significance or rooted deeply enough in the universals of ''human nature'' . . . to be worthy of this style. . . . The only resonance is that of the word-music; and though rich and various, it sometimes seems like pleasant ornamentation, or fireworks and exhibitionism, and occasionally it reminds me of Parmigianino's mannerist portraits of the long-necked Madonna: exceedingly beautiful, except that a little of such beauty goes a long way.

Melvin Seiden. *The Nation*. April 25, 1959. pp. 389–90

There are no writers under forty—and there are few of any age—for whom I have more admiration than I have for Herbert Gold. His first novel, *Birth of a Hero*, published while he was still in his twenties, was an extraordinarily perceptive study of love in middle age. He followed it with a dramatic and vivid novel of city life and race conflict, *The Prospect Before Us*, and then came his novel of carnival ways, the drug habit, and young love, rich in carnie talk, *The Man Who Was Not With It*. He has also written several first-rate short stories and some vigorous criticism. In less than ten years he

has produced a body of work that establishes him as a central figure in today's literature.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. April 25, 1959. p. 12

Mr. Gold has an extraordinary talent for style, but also a weakness for it; he is in danger of becoming a *stylist*. As Shakespeare, according to Dr. Johnson, would sometimes trade all sense for the achievement of a pun, Gold will trade it for a frill, or sometimes even a trill. His style is by nature a vehicle of warm and intelligent humor, and when it is properly limited, leashed, and pommeled into obedience, it does its work well and charmingly. Gold can be very, very funny; or expressive; or even brilliant in little perfect flashes of incidental observation or conversation. . . . But often there is a regrettable muddying of perception by style—an overstyling that blinds or distracts or blurs the eye that is supposed to see something more clearly with the style's help.

Richard Foster. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1961. pp. 146–7

Gold has emerged as a kind of literary hipster, far too cunning to be taken in by any hipster nonsense, but who in his unsentimental coolness, pitiless sense of the contemporary, and inside dopesterism has links with the type.

Even more important, Gold, like very few of our major writers, has tried to stretch language to meet the new requirements of our time. He has used an idiom that is highly permutable, strained perhaps, too shifty; but it reaches out to encompass new states of mind that writers in an easier time did not have to cope with. At its best, it is taut, keyed-up, nervously inventive; at its worst, it is merely artsy-smirky, a pushy, obtrusive prose. And it defines Gold's stance: the novelist as wise guy. . . . Herbert Gold leaves us where we were before. There is a terrible emptiness everywhere. If the older generation of writers dealt with the loss of values, Gold's characters seem never to have had them.

David Boroff. *Saturday Review*. April 20, 1963. pp. 45–6

Mr. Gold is ''That most happy fellow'' in America, the master of ''the going thing.'' His stories and novels are zeroed in on a new generation who suffer early sorrow, make an early marriage, father children at an early age, and then—surrounded by the symbols of middle-class domesticity—find their hearts festering with unrealized adolescent desires. Divorced in their early thirties, cut adrift in a hustling world that ''understands'' but never helps, these martyrs to the American fixation on ''love'' wobble desperately between fantasies of suicide and a second, better union.

The one man who speaks consistently to their condition—who describes it minutely in all its embarrassingly familiar detail and yet never betrays its poignant optimism—is Herbert Gold.

Albert Goldman. *New Republic*. June 8, 1963. p. 23

Herbert Gold's *Salt* is a western of the *Playboy* world. Touching all the conventions of life among the lonely crowd on and off Madison Avenue, Mr. Gold draws a triangle of two old army buddies and the girl whom one of them really loves and the other one merely uses. Pretty Barbara is a small town girl in the big city; poor Dan, a sad sack hero from Cleveland who is trying to forget a divorce; and suave Peter, a cynical Wall Street junior executive who juggles oranges to keep his balance between love affairs. Around this configuration, Gold paints in the usual local color: Village hipsters, suburban organization men, and, of course, GIRLS, GIRLS, GIRLS.

Gold's ironic sweet-and-sour style is quite good for reproducing the sidewalks of New York—''it's a lovely city at certain intense moments, both hard and cajoling—but what do you do with the rest of the moments?''—but quite inadequate for penetrating beneath the surface. . . . Gold's characters may be looking for love but they will settle for sex; and while there is nothing necessarily wrong with their attitude there is something definitely wrong with the author's. Mr. Gold wants it both ways: to be hip with the hipsters and moral with the moralists; and his final rejection of the New York scene—irritating and unconvincing as it is—is magically consistent with the *Playboy* philosophy of bourgeois bohemianism.

Paul Levine. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1963. p. 458

The Man Who Was Not With It—in the few years of its paperback existence rather wildly called *The Wild Life*—is a book to which synopsis can't do justice. It can merely indicate some of the main trends of the story. Herbert Gold has marvelously captured carnival life, with its lures for markers and its fights with rubes, all the excitement and tinsel and struggle. Grack is the most successful of the author's vitalistic characters, and to hear him giving his pitch on the midway, with his ''lookee'' and his ''hee hee hee'' and ''ho ho ho,'' is to be in the gusty atmosphere of the fairgrounds. In having Bud tell the story in carnie slang, Gold makes full use of his own ability to handle colorful idiom. It crackles. But the language isn't flashed just for its own sake; it is organic. Through it, the author is able to present nuances of character and investigate the depths of his particular kind of people in a way which would have been less intimate with straight language. Herbert Gold's tendency toward the bizarre in style exactly matches the subject matter in this book.

Harry T. Moore in *Contemporary American Novelists*, ed. Harry T. Moore (Southern Illinois). 1964. pp. 180–1

Gold always seems on the verge of writing the big one. *The Man Who Was Not With It* almost turned a carnival barker's world into a modern myth. *The Age of Happy Problems* was a collection of bright, Gold-plated journalism. His last novel, *Salt*, merely glossed the ways of Madison Avenue. The facile, witty Gold has yet to hit that blend of the comic, realist and moral visions that might make him a first-rank figure. He is currently a *Playboy* intellectual under contract. . . . Coming of age in the Midwest, he never developed that tough-minded desire for battle that is the hallmark of the New York Jewish tradition. Before *Fathers*, in fact, Gold never needed to write a *Jewish* novel. Now that he has, his efforts to establish a family history for himself—to make amends to Sam Gold for having once rejected his gift of life—seem painfully painless, another glittering, but not quite valuable Gold mine of ''happy problems.''

Howard Junker. *Newsweek*. March 27, 1967. pp. 104A–105

With Mr. Gold's fictional world there can be no finicky discriminations: we go through good times and bad with a brave wonderful family, with a huge supporting cast of uncles, aunts, cousins,

school friends, business associates, racketeers. The excitement and the good-heartedness are infectious, without doubt, and there's no denying that Mr. Gold's writing is crisper than it used to be; his book is mercifully free of the gooeyness that characterized his earlier novels.

Still, one has to resist Mr. Gold's eager message that experience, slice it how you like, is just wonderful, though one can see how he came by it. As a novelist he combines the Whitman-style hipster and the Jewish immigrant, as is evident from the opening paragraph of *Fathers*. . . . In his early novel, *The Man Who Was Not With It*, the hipster mode predominated, whereas the new novel is fixed in the denser realities of Jewish family life, and has a correspondingly greater solidity.

Bernard Bergonzi. *New York Review of Books*. June 1, 1967. pp. 30–1

Mr. Gold's novel [*Fathers*] has a curiously seductive quality. I am not usually captivated by this particular form of Jewish excess, which inflates every character into a near-caricature and which drips and runs over with tears-behind-laughter. Mr. Gold can be shockingly corny at times, and his folksiness is always threatening to swamp him. (''Every sky has its own magic if a man knows how to put it there.'') But he can also write with a wonderful and very individual power, canalizing his ferocious energies and creating exactly the effect that he intended. He is funny; he is charming; he is, by the end of the book, irresistible, even if one is left with the uneasy feeling that one should have fought rather harder against him.

Philip Toynbee. *New Republic*. June 17, 1967. p. 21

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GOODMAN, Paul (1911–1972)

Paul Goodman's dance poems are based indirectly on the Noh-plays. These are not intended to be dramatic, in the Western sense, of unfolding an action. Their aim is rather an ''initiation into a true awareness.''. . .

The style—a loose blank-verse interspersed with short lines and with prose—is fluid; the thought is always interesting, and the stylized form allows him to make use of such phrases as ''how curious this is!''—''how strange!''—with full effect. A poet with such a strategic sense as these dance-poems reveal may develop along unexpected lines.

Lloyd Frankenberg. *New Republic*. March 16, 1942. p. 371

Among writers of the non-realistic persuasion, Mr. Goodman is unusually well-educated, imaginative, and witty, and even though, as we follow him from piece to piece, his unremitting literacy and cleverness become a bit wearing, this virtuosity must be to some extent excused as an excess of virtues. [*The Facts of Life*] contains at least one story, the title story, which is entirely delightful, and a play, ''Jonah,'' about the prophet of doom, which is both comic and wise. The fact that the collection as a whole falls short of these two items doesn't of course diminish Mr. Goodman's stature in relation to other writers of his convention. It does, however, tend to confirm an old suspicion that even the method of non-realism cannot forfeit story-telling to disputation and still be sustaining.

Diana Trilling. *The Nation*. July 28, 1945. p. 90

In a sense . . . *The Empire City* is what can always be called ''coterie literature.'' More often than necessary, it is frankly, intimately addressed to the intellectual who has had Utopian dreams, read or written for *Partisan Review*. . . . At the same time, it is a book originating in good will, mature candor, and an urgently fermenting, more than secular morality. . . . The spirit inside, and the text itself, which seems not so much written as whistled, laughed, teased, prayed, come as close to imparting a man's gratuitous love for his own kind as mere language ever can.

Robert Phelps. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. June 28, 1959. p. 3

The Empire City unfolds as a series of incidents, antic, lyrical, wry or elegiac, but informed by high spirits that counterbalance a terrifying awareness of degradation. . . . Nothing that we have lived or lived through during the past generation escapes having its absurdities uncovered. . . . It is all funny and sorrowful and not to be denied. . . . Yet Goodman, unlike Kafka, who was content to let the humor, ruefulness and terror speak for themselves, has an irrepressible taste for oratory, a thirties-like itch for declamation that introduces great stretches of tedium into an otherwise fertile landscape.

Richard Gilman. *Commonweal*. July 31, 1959. p. 401

The Community of Scholars beautifully exemplifies Goodman's virtues as a social critic, in a less dramatic way, perhaps, than his classic study of juvenile delinquency, *Growing Up Absurd*, but no less impressively: this is a book that deserves comparison with Newman's *The Idea of a University* or Veblen's *The Higher Learning in America*. The theme here is the disruptive effect of administration and administrative mentality on the proper relation

between college students and their teachers in America today, and on the proper relation between the college itself and the surrounding society. As usual with Goodman, the approach is philosophical rather than narrowly political. That is, he does not begin by asking what choices are allowed by the apparently ineluctable forces of the present (in this instance the growth of an administrative apparatus extraneous and even hostile to the process of learning); he begins by asking what are the essential properties and purposes of a college, under what arrangements historically have these properties found their fullest expression, and under what conditions can we plausibly imagine that they might be better realized in the future. [1962]

Norman Podhoretz. *Doings and Undoings* (Farrar). 1964. pp. 99–100

Goodman is by temperament optimistic and busy; one wonders whether he cares very much about seeing his demands realized or whether just making them is sufficient satisfaction. His habit of attributing the evils and neglects of society to mental inadequacy . . . is, to my mind, an evasion of the real resistance to change arising from people's historically acquired attachments to property, conventions, superstitions. . . . Though, if things were up for a vote, I should oppose most of Goodman's recommendations, I do not doubt that arguing against them would lead me to better opinions than agreeing with almost anyone else. This is another way of saying that Goodman is making an indispensable contribution to democratic thinking.

Harold Rosenberg. *New York Times Book Section*. Jan. 14, 1962. p. 6

Essentially, all of Paul Goodman's poems are about himself, and social and political concepts are present, not programmatically, but because they are interwoven with his private concerns. Thus the erotic is just as likely to be present in a political context as the political in an erotic context, and we gain some beginnings of insight into their still obscure interaction. The relationship between sexual fear and the politics of murder and suicide, and the alternative relationship of an architecture of community and the use of human energy for peace and pleasure: these concepts are as integral to his poetry as Pound's insistence on the reciprocity of monetary reform and just government with precision and vitality of language are to the *Cantos*.

Denise Levertov. *The Nation*. April 13, 1963. p. 310

Intimacy really means everything to [Goodman]. Placing the sharpest value on the spontaneous utterance, the thing to be said, yet schooled, helter-skelter, in the classical tradition, Goodman, predictably, is a glorious mixer. Politically, he blends, I think, Kantian morality with Humean expediency; personally, he ''publishes thirty books and rears three children,'' and indulges his idiosyncrasies. If Hebraic truth is prophetic and for the race, and Christian truth confessional and individual, Goodman irresistibly responds to both. In the novels, whether the naturalism of *Making Do* or the surrealist tinting of *The Empire City*, his heroes, devastatingly impressionable, keep fingering the chinks in the armor, the holes in the fences, wrestling with those parts of the economy, or the self, unexplored or unwanted. They are, like Goodman, both pariahs and charioteers.

Similarly, the poems. These are rallying songs of innocence and experience—querulous, anecdotal, prayerful, salacious. Often they are hymns to overcoming that which cramps, celebrating that which heightens, or brings together: ''Creator Spirit, come.'' The best, it seems to me, are unpruned or unornamental, zesty and life-giving, if only for the moment. The worst (and, happily, that means the minority) lack everything—fullness of language, flow of images—that poetry must be if it is not to be cactus.

Robert Mazzocco. *New York Review of Books*. May 21, 1970. p. 4

America's inability to accommodate and profit by the whole of Paul Goodman is, for Goodman, properly a sign and symptom of her inability to deal with *any* experience in a spontaneous and inclusive way (though it should be said, in America's defense, that to accommodate the whole of Paul Goodman is a considerable undertaking, one that might make any republic fractious). Goodman's emphasis on a reading of his *Collected Poems* as a whole, as a *Leaves of Grass*-type experience, rather than as a series or even as a scattering of beautiful realizations, lucky hits and near misses, is part of the same impulse towards convergence, unity, completion, connections within the self. . . .

Goodman [is], more than any American poet alive, the true heir and disciple of the Good Grey Poet, mining the verge of the inclusive experience; and if he does not have Whitman's genius for suggesting that he is a Cosmos in himself, relying of necessity on the received forms to stiffen his talent, he is apter to catch his own posture, even his own imposture, in a reflexive and restorative irony. The other, public irony is that Paul Goodman's poetry has been obscured—cancelled, as a Sacred Book—by its situation in his canon—if he had written only poems, he would I think have held the place in American poetry today that sexuality, say, has in our assessment of human possibilities—central, flawed, affording occasions for joy and fulfillment.

Richard Howard. *Alone with America* (Atheneum). 1971. pp. 155–6, 162

[Goodman] had been a hero of mine for so long that I was not in the least surprised when he became famous, and always a little surprised that people seemed to take him for granted. The first book of his I ever read—I was sixteen—was a collection of stories called *The Break-up of Our Camp*, published by New Directions. Within a year I had read everything he'd written, and from then on started keeping up. There is no living American writer for whom I have felt the same simple curiosity to read as quickly as possible *anything* he wrote, on any subject. That I mostly agreed with what he thought was not the main reason; there are other writers I agree with to whom I am not so loyal. It was that voice of his that seduced me—that direct, cranky, egotistical, generous American voice. . . .

Paul Goodman's voice touched everything he wrote about with intensity, interest, and his own terribly appealing sureness and awkwardness. What he wrote was a nervy mixture of syntactical stiffness and verbal felicity; he was capable of writing sentences of a wonderful purity of style and vivacity of language, and also capable of writing so sloppily and clumsily that one imagined he

must be doing it on purpose. But it never mattered. It was his voice, that is to say, his intelligence and the poetry of his intelligence incarnated, which kept me a loyal and passionate addict.

Susan Sontag. *New York Review of Books*. Sept. 21, 1972. p. 10

There was always a coarse-grained Hasidic magic about Goodman's stories, novels and poems. As with Buber, his peak moments were events that happened between people and in community. The Gestalt group work pioneered by Goodman and Perls is really a therapeutically ritualized search for Buber's I-Thou experience—with a heavy admixture of Reichian body mysticism to give it an even greater earthiness and weight. Like Buber, too, (and like the Taoist sages who are so similar to the Hasidic mystics) Goodman had a shrewd eye for how miraculously transfigured the commonplace substance of life might be—if only for one zany instant—if only to be followed by the business as usual of benightedness, folly, nastiness and failure. . . .

The patient acceptance of human frailty, the constitutional melancholy and broodiness, both are drawn from the Hasidic masters. . . . The whole nobility of Judaism has always lain in its stubborn trust that the world, such as it is, and people, such as they are, are unique manifestations of the Lord's will and so here is where we must make do.

Theodore Roszak. *Book World*. Oct. 15, 1972. p. 10

Belatedly, in August, I heard of Paul Goodman's death. Shortly before, I'd been reading his last book of poems, *Homespun of Oatmeal Gray*, a book full of frustration and loss. I had thought again, as often in the past ten years, of writing him a letter. His ''Drawing the Line'' was one of the writings that changed my way of being in the world in the early '60's; that, along with Simone Weil, moved me toward politics. All his work, poetry and prose, was full of vital energy and courage and love for good craft, ''healthy speech,'' the natural world and the human body. Goodman was one of those few contemporary poets for whom there was no apparent split between himself and nature—in his own person he did not seem to suffer from that division, although he certainly suffered from and struggled with its effects on politics and the social order. His sensuality—at least as I read it in his poems—seems all of a piece: grass, water, a Cape Cod beach, city streets, the embrace of another body, the taste of food, are parts of one whole for him, much as they were for Whitman. Like Whitman, he seems to have come by this wholeness through bisexuality (though I think of Whitman as a more truly feminine nature). Whether he was as capable as Whitman of respecting wholeness in others, I do not know.

Adrienne Rich. *American Poetry Review*. Jan.-Feb., 1973. p. 16

[Goodman] belonged among those authors who are remembered less for what they wrote than for who they were. As a teacher he did not bring a new message but evoked the voice that had been slumbering in the imagination of his audience. His thought was neither very original nor in any way systematic. A eulogy that were to try a summary of his ideas could only reveal their contradictions. I can honor him only by continuing in his own aphoristic, somewhat freewheeling style, to free-associate some ideas which might please or displease him.

I believe that Paul was first of all a poet, and the youth of the 1960's listened to him not because he or they were politically radical, but because he opposed Wordsworth to General Motors, free love to the Board of Education, community to big organizations. He was neither a socialist nor an anarchist in the strict sense of those terms, but a rebel who had the courage to say what others dimly guessed or did not admit to themselves: that they did not understand the world into which they were supposed to grow up; that they felt crushed by the demands made on them by their parents, their teachers, their future employers; that all this seemed absurd. Many who, before he said this, had felt stupid, felt free because he had said it.

Henry Pachter. *Salmagundi*. Fall, 1973. p. 54

Many years ago I said in a review that if Paul Goodman had written in French or German he would have been well known all over the world before he was thirty. In a recent book on American poetry I said of him that he taught at Black Mountain a part of the year for many years. The second statement is a mistake. As a matter of fact, the squares on the Black Mountain faculty, particularly the most reactionary (putatively Far Left) German refugees, demanded that he be fired because he was what they considered a ''sexual deviant.'' One thing he certainly was for many years was a leading think tank for the editors of the *Partisan Review*, along with Harold Rosenberg and Lionel Abel. Had Rahv and Phillips not taken exhaustive notes on the conversations of these three mentors, the *Partisan Review* would have had great difficulty ever rising above the intellectual level of the *Reader's Digest*. . . .

All his life he wrote poetry. Did he think of himself as a poet? Was he a poet? . . . One thing he certainly is not is a poet of the international modernist idiom. Twelve dollars and fifty cents worth of poems [*Collected Poems*], four hundred and sixty five pages. There is little evidence that anybody from Baudelaire to many of the youngest poets of the *American Poetry Review* ever existed. The work of a life in poetry—it's the life that matters. This is confessional poetry in a different sense than the use of the term invented by A. Alvarez. He meant the autobiographical case histories of the more or less mad. I think he first applied the term to Sylvia Plath. Paul was far from mad. He was sane and sad. He is one of the very few Americans with a genuine tragic sense of life, that sense that comes from six thousand years of culture, the abiding realization that life is heartbreakingly comic. Never forget, Chekhov called his plays of disorder and early sorrow, suicide and decay ''comedies.'' Paul shared that point of view, a hard thing to do in a country where you are either an optimist or a pessimist or unpublishable.

Kenneth Rexroth. *American Poetry Review*. 3, 3, 1974. p. 48

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GORDON, Caroline (1895–1981)

Penhally is the triumphant tragedy of a house and the vindication of a mode of life. It is an achievement at once of erudition and of sombre and smouldering passion. It is distinguished by the afterglow of the Greek-Roman-Anglo-Saxon classicism that marked the Old South off from all other lands. . . .

Penhally differs from other historical works which are written from the outside and are at best *tours de force*—more or less reconstitutions. It unites itself to the living school of autobiographic writers in that it is a piece of autobiography. Mrs. Tate [Caroline Gordon] has from her earliest days so lived herself into the past of her race and region that her whole being is compact of the passions, the follies, the exaggerations, the classicisms, the excesses, the gallantries and the leadings of forlorn hopes that brought the Old South to its end. She does not have to document herself in order to evoke Morgan's cavalry raids or conditions of life amongst the slaves in the be-hollyhocked Quarters. She has so lived in the past that it is from her own experience that she distils these things.

So *Penhally* is a chronicle of reality. . . . Her characters have none of the historic over-emphasis that distinguishes the usual romance of escape. Her Southern girls are not over-dimitied, her gallants not over-spurred, her great proprietors not over-lavish. They are in short everyday people—but people of an everyday that is not today. That is a great literary achievement—and a great service to the republic the chief of whose needs is to know how life is constituted.

Ford Madox Ford. *Bookman*. Dec., 1931. pp. 374–6

None Shall Look Back fills out by a . . . discursive method the fortunes of the family in the midst of a war which destroys the social basis of its way of life. *The Garden of Adonis* has for scene the country community about the time of the last depression, when the full effects of defeat have had time to show their marks. *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* is not outside [Caroline Gordon's] subject but treats it in a very special way; and her most recent novel, *The Women on the Porch*, shifts the location to the city, the full-blown symbol of the western progression, or more specifically in American mythology, the end of pioneering. The heroine, the first to marry outside the connection (and this is significant), in her flight from the City with no intention of returning to the family seat instinctively finds her way back, but this time to a place of ghosts and sibyls. But the startling disclosure of the book is the crystallization of what has been gradually emerging, the theme of prevailing interest. To isolate such a theme . . . is an act of violence and distortion to the work as a whole. Briefly, this theme is what Life, the sly deceiver, does to womankind but particularly to the woman of great passion and sensibility. It is not that men do not come in for their share of sorrows and disappointments; it is, rather, that Life, represented in the only possible hierarchy of institutional and organized society, has a masculine determination. Very subtly the White Goddess reasserts herself as Miss Gordon's Muse. The young girl in ''The Brilliant Leaves,'' the various heroines of *Penhally* (Alice Blair, the dark sister), Lucy of *None Shall Look Back*, and most eloquently the wife of Aleck Maury, are all the same woman. Very few of the male characters—Forrest, Nicholas, Mister Ben the possible exceptions—are able to measure up to the requirements of what the heroine thinks a man should be.

Andrew Lytle. *Sewanee Review*. Autumn, 1949. p. 578

[Caroline Gordon] has not accommodated the austerities of her method to that cultivation of violence and oddity for its own sake, whether in subject-matter or style, which is one of the more distressing infantilisms of an otherwise vital and growing Southern expression in literature. And while there is nostalgia and backward glancing in her early novels of the old South, she sternly reminds herself in the title of one of them that ''None shall look back.'' Thus she loses out, as well, at the popular romancing level of Southern fiction, for she has not gone with the wind.

Caroline Gordon, whose prose is perhaps the most unaffected and uniformly accomplished that is being written by any American woman today, should be seen as the conservator in contemporary Southern fiction of the great classical tradition of the nineteenth century novel as formulated by Stendhal, Flaubert and somewhat later, Henry James. . . .

Miss Gordon's allegiances are clearly formulated [in the preface to the anthology *The House of Fiction*] and in her last novel, *The Strange Children*, her fidelity to the tradition of ''naturalism'' as she has defined it emerges with a mature authority. It is in this finely thoughtful work that her real service to the realm of Southern letters as the conservator of the heritage of ''naturalism'' and thus of the mainstream of the great fiction of the western world is most powerfully demonstrated.

Vivienne Koch in *Southern Renascence: The Literature of the Modern South*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., and Robert D. Jacobs (Johns Hopkins). 1953. pp. 325–7

The Malefactors marks a new departure in Miss Gordon's fiction. Yet it does have a connection with four novels which precede it. It also illustrates strikingly a change in outlook which these novels represent. *Penhally* and *None Shall Look Back* are full of regret for the vanished order of the Old South where men and women knew their place in the social hierarchy and could depend all their lives on values which their ordered society taught and supported. With *The Garden of Adonis* Miss Gordon moved into the modern Southern world which has lost its connections with the old order. Her men and women must now struggle through the crises of their lives helped only by a sense of decency and the necessity of reconciliation to forestall disaster. There is no way back, not even through nostalgia and grief for a vanished order.

In *The Strange Children* a new note is faintly sounded. . . . This muted emphasis on a religious theme prepares us for its full development in *The Malefactors*. Among the wastrels of talent whom we meet at the fête of the prize bull only Tom and Vera discover the way up and are reborn. Will this, then, be the pattern in Miss Gordon's fiction hereafter? As the South has faded from her novels, religion has taken its place, and the way is up.

Willard Thorp. *Bucknell Review*. Dec., 1956. pp. 14–5

Most of the critics who have written about Miss Gordon have discussed her as a Southern writer—and of course she is. Some of her characters are deracinated Southerners or Middle Westerners, usually intellectuals who have left home. They are invariably unhappy; trouble and disorder trail along their foreign paths and remain with them when they occasionally return home. Miss Gordon has also written many passages, even whole novels, about the land and its healing moral power, which gives one a sense of belonging. She especially likes land that has not given up its fruits and rewards too easily; one appreciates what one has sweated to achieve.

Is Miss Gordon's preoccupation with Art also Southern? Perhaps, but her style is closer to Willa Cather's than it is to Southern rhetoric, even the quiet rhetoric of Katherine Anne Porter. Respect for form is in part Southern—for example, in manners, which cover and control personal likes, dislikes, drives, and ambitions; possibly too in a fairly general disregard for scientific principles and a preference for the arts that bear on personal relationships; and in a more open respect and liking for ''elegance.'' But change comes on apace, and the Southern world of Miss Gordon's youth is no longer what it was. North and South grow more, not less, alike, and at least one or two of her novels seems to acknowledge that this is so.

William Van O'Connor in *South: Modern Southern Literature in Its Cultural Setting*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., and Robert D. Jacobs (Doubleday). 1961. p. 321

Most of Miss Gordon's fiction belongs close to the heart of the new tradition; in fact, she and her husband [Allen Tate] are responsible for the term, symbolic naturalism, and for its definition. Miss Gordon conspicuously lacks the spontaneity and originality of the more widely read artists in the mode, but she has been one of the most conscientious students of technique and has constantly sought to broaden the range of her subject matter and philosophic understanding. Committed, like her husband, to the conservative agrarian ideal and opposed to modern ''progress,'' she turned immediately to a fictional examination of her heritage, which centers in a rural district on the Kentucky-Tennessee line, adjacent to that of Robert Penn Warren. Only gradually, after an excursion back into Virginia beginnings, did she work her way into the modern era.

Miss Gordon's instinct is for pattern; she works most effectively, therefore, with the historical movement, the family group, the typical, rather than the individual, character. Not until her later novels does she attempt any deep penetration into her protagonists' minds or psychological processes and seldom then does she enter into them with any strongly participative warmth. Her quality as an artist depends upon objective observation and analysis, on a sure control of technique and symbolic extension, rather than upon the arousal of an empathic response to her characters. Perhaps largely for this reason, she has never achieved great popular success, though her work has stood high in critical esteem.

John M. Bradbury. *Renaissance in the South: A Critical History of the Literature, 1920–1960* (North Carolina). 1963. pp. 57–8

In 1953 Caroline Gordon remarked that a trend toward orthodoxy in religion was apparent among fiction writers as it was in the world at large. . . . It is no more surprising that in her quest for the universal myth she should have come to Catholicism than that she should have found, before her conversion, the touchstones of her being in the southern past. She is not, in the forties, a Catholic writer. But the entire, combined force of her need—for order, for tradition, for piety, for absolution and grace, for a shaping world view that would take the place of the shapeless chaos of the world—forced her inevitably and logically toward the Roman Church; and at the end of the decade, in 1951 to be precise, she published her first overtly Catholic novel. She had made the open commitment augured in all her predispositions. The wonder is that writers like Faulkner and Warren, who, for the same reasons, seemed to press toward the same end, had not yet entered the Church a decade later.

Before the Church there were the South and the Past. The elegiac tone Carolina Gordon adopted toward the past derived from her conviction that a total conception of life, life as good, stable, and continuous, had disappeared or been destroyed. A pervasive sense of cultural loss flows through her work. The fragmented lives of her characters are a reflection of this destruction of a whole and coherent cultural pattern that might define life. No force appears in the secular world to act as anchor for man, since neither the cosmopolitanism of urban culture nor the intellectualism that flourishes there provides a satisfactory center for human existence. Nor is the world of nature in itself sufficient. The urgent pessimism of her fiction is the result of her conviction that man's hope and his fate are equally blasted.

Chester E. Eisinger. *Fiction of the Forties* (Chicago). 1963. p. 186

It is the strength of Miss Gordon's work to suggest continually new facets of significance as one lives through the books in his mind. The characters and the incidents form new configurations with the result that the significance of any one of her books enlarges constantly as one reviews it. Her purpose has been from the beginning to suggest that reality is spiritual as well as empiric, immaterial as well as material. Accordingly, she has presented the experience of her characters in time and then again as it reaches beyond time. The ineffable dimensions of her materials she suggests through a discerning use of myth; and in her later books Christianity reinforces their universal implications. . . . As a writer Miss Gordon is the inquiring moralist even before she is the religious writer. Because of her passionate concern with the way life should be, her books are rooted in social realities even as they look toward the visionary. Intelligence, compassion, psychological

insight, depth of vision, and stylistic distinction inform a canon of work that impresses always by its comprehensiveness and strength.

Frederick P. W. McDowell. *Caroline Gordon* (Minnesota). 1966. p. 45

[Caroline Gordon's] fiction dramatizes the myth of the South, as Cooper's does that of the Western migration, James's of Old and New World culture, Proust's of French social change at the end of the nineteenth century. Beginning, in thematic order, with *Green Centuries* and ending with *The Malefactors*, Miss Gordon's fiction shows the movement from loss to acquisition, from rootlessness to stability, from chaos to order, from matter to spirit. In *Green Centuries* the antagonistic natural world drives the exile to certain destruction as he escapes his past (finally, himself) in the pursuit of the unknown. This theme of the natural world as opponent reappears later in *The Garden of Adonis* and particularly in *The Women on the Porch*, as does the central concept of the failure of love between man and woman, in part the result of destroyed cultures or man's warped view of new and different economic systems.

James E. Rocks. *The Mississippi Quarterly*. Winter, 1967–68. p. 10

Penhally is a completely ''rendered'' novel, as [Ford Madox] Ford would have said. Its method of presentation—the shifting post of observation in the line of succession among the Llewellyns—allows a remarkable degree of control for such a large subject. Its author has seldom written better. But she was not content with the perfection of a method, and her subsequent books have realized her subject by a variety of means. Her second novel, *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* (1934), for instance, is based on the convention of the old-fashioned memoir. Aleck Maury is the only one of her major characters whom Miss Gordon has granted the privilege of telling his own story, and she thus departs from what with her is a virtual principle. This, the most popular of her novels, can stand by itself, but it gains something from those written after it, as though it were cutting across a territory whose outlines are more fully revealed later on.

Ashley Brown. *Southern Humanities Review*. Summer, 1968. p. 283

No more than a handful of modern writers have produced short stories which are both technically sound and rich in fictional values.

Such a writer is Caroline Gordon, whose artistic discipline has always been adequate to control the wide range of vision she brings to her fiction. Indeed she tends to crowd into her stories more than their formal limitations would seem to permit: the total experience of a region's history, the hero's archetypal struggle, the complexity of modern aesthetics. In every instance, however, she succeeds in bringing the broad scope of her narrative into focus and in creating the ideal fictional moment, when form and subject are at war and the outcome hangs forever in the balance.

Yet there is a classic simplicity in most of her short stories, an unusual economy of incident and detail which decorously masks their essential thematic complexity. Even the prose is, for the most part, spare in its diction and syntax, particularly in the first-person narratives, dominated by a tone that is quiet and conversational, the intimate language of the piazza on a warm summer evening.

And it is in this quality that one finds a clue to the origins of Miss Gordon's narrative virtue. For she is still in touch with the oral tradition which in her formative years was a vital element of family life. Like William Faulkner and Katherine Anne Porter, with whom she has much in common, her experience of the nature of being begins in the family, with its concrete relationships, its sense of wholeness, its collective memory.

Thomas H. Landess. Introduction to *The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium*, ed. Thomas H. Landess (Dallas). 1972. p. 1

The Glory of Hera is a matchless book—a peak, I think, in the career of a writer devoted to a too familiar, and often belittled, vocation. The uniqueness of the book consists in this: that its author stretches the capacities of the novel so that it can operate authentically in the protean land of ancient Greek myth. It can take on the shapes and assume the colors that make it resemble a luminous mosaic depicting the exploits which were attributed to the god-engendered hero, Heracles. Beginning with Homer's account of the burly bowman, the myth, though revealed piecemeal in many arts, remained the special property of the poets, so astonishing was it, so unbounded, ranging as it did from Heaven to Hell and over all of the perilous borderlands of Earth. The ancients would argue that whatever else might occur, this ineffable stuff could never be captured by a writer of mere prose, by which they would have meant, of course, a chronicler or encyclopedist of some sort. That Caroline Gordon has captured it—indeed she has delivered it quivering and alive from the monstrous darkness of the past—is a triumph for the modern art of prose fiction as well as for the far from modern arts of revivifying immemorial legends.

Howard Baker. *Southern Review*. Summer, 1973. pp. 523–4

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GORDON, Mary (Catherine) (1949–)

The three principal characters in the novel [*Of Men and Angels*] variously mirror and read each other; more exactly, Anne is the central figure ''doubled'' on two sides by Caroline and Laura. Like Caroline, whose life and work she pores over, Anne is a creative woman and a mother. However, unlike Caroline, Anne has a passionate commitment to motherhood: whereas Caroline was a

''bad'' mother to her son, ''allowing'' him to die young (shades of the maternal omnipotence fantasy), Anne is a totally ''good'' mother to her children and has their safety uppermost in her mind. Caroline, on the other hand, was a good ''other'' mother to Jane, whose feelings toward her own biological mother were no warmer than (as she puts it) feelings toward ''a rather distant cousin'' (167). Caroline is therefore split into a murderous and a nurturing mother, depending on whether one looks at Stephen or Jane. But she can also be seen as the ''bad'' version or double of Anne—a mother who chooses to sacrifice her own child to her work. . . .

The web of connections between the characters in the novel suggests several observations. First, the structural similarity between Caroline and Anne is evident, but so is Anne's greater complexity (and more complicated splitting), which rightly confers on her the title of protagonist, if not necessarily of heroine. . . . The second observation my reading suggests is a truism, but significant: in order to survive, a child needs at least one good mother, whether it is the biological mother or an ''other'' one. Stephen and Laura, who find no nurturing mother, die. Finally, in this novel no child (except perhaps Anne?) has more than one ''good'' mother. And that raises once again the question of maternal fantasy and its relation to social reality.

Susan Rubin Suleiman. *Signs*. Autumn, 1988, pp. 35–38

[*Temporary*] *Shelter* is an important word in [Mary Catherine] Gordon's work, sought by all of her characters with more or less success. (It is no accident that the title for her collection of short stories [1987] is *Temporary Shelter*.) In the first two novels, love and shelter must be searched for outside the traditional family setting. Both Isabel and Felicitas find themselves members of a family in the extended sense. Struck by Eleanor's jealousy of her friendship with Liz, Isabel realizes, ''We are connected. . . . I am not entirely alone'' (121). Reflecting on the relationship among her friends, Felicitas's mother Charlotte realizes that ''there was something between them, between all of them. They were connected to something, they stood for something. . . . When all of them came together, they were something'' (18). It is this ''something'' that Felicitas rejects, to seek security in the Cavendish menage, ''more like a family, and Felicitas needed a lot of support'' (156). In *The Company of Woman*, there is only one nuclear family, the one Cyprian leaves behind to enter the priesthood; ''I would not be the son of my father, the brother of my brothers, bumbling and heavy and uncouth. I would be part of that glorious company, the line of the apostles. I would not be who I was'' (278). the few families in *Final Payments* lack love. Liz and John Ryan find marriage more of a convenience for raising two children than a meaningful relationship. Liz finds fulfillment in a lesbian liaison, while John regularly commits adultery. Cynthia Slade has tricked Hugh into marriage and now taunts him with his infidelities.

John W. Mahon. ''Mary Gordon: The Struggle with Love.'' In Mickey Pearlman. *American Women Writing Fiction: Memory, Identity, Family Space*. (Lexington: Univ. Pr. of Kentucky, 1989), p. 50

The Other Side is a family saga raised several octaves. Here are the failed marriages, the hypocrisy, the old pretense, and the evolving hatred. But Mary Gordon's treatment of these themes is unique. The story moves in and out of focus on members of the MacNamara family: the parents, gentle, decent Vincent, and high-principled but irascible Ellen, who emigrated from Ireland to America (the ''other side'') in the early part of the century; their daughters and grandchildren—particularly the cousins Cam and Dan—and their great grandchildren. . . .

Mary Gordon's writing has a gravity which is often mythic in tone. ''Her mother is a house she would bring down,'' thinks the malign Theresa. And indeed there are references throughout to the House of Atreus, as though hinting at a modern Celtic Oresteia. She has a capacity for revealing the tragic in ordinary people, awarding them stature even in their petty vindictiveness. The doom-laden atmosphere, the unity of time and place, the clash of generations, and the unmasking of ancient lies are reminiscent of O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*.

Mary Flanagan. *New Statesman & Society*. Feb. 2, 1990, p. 34

The bloody wretched Irish, ''they could never be happy, any of them . . . unhappiness was bred in the bone, a message in the blood, a code of weakness. The sickle-cell anemia of the Irish: they had to thwart joy in their lives,'' so carries on, in what seems typical pub-fashion, one of the members of Mary Gordon's big Irish-American family in *The Other Side*. He, Dan, saw it in Ireland, ''everywhere he went . . . the doomed service of the ideal, the blatant disregard of present pleasure, . . . in their politics, their architecture . . . their living rooms, their towns, . . . in the jarring printed carpets and the half-glass doors that closed as if they kept out someone dangerous or insane.'' Well, I'm convinced, but please go on: I like the details, the crazy love/hate thing, the sound of your voice, its rhythms, and the overriding oceanic swell that it all mattered, and does yet. This book is full of marvelous talk, scenes and people: and five generations of a big family, all of whose stories we get to hear. . . . And for each life, a whole America is painted in, beginning with immigrant life in New York, early union organizing, two world wars, the Depression, holding the family together despite all, up to a new slacker America of divorce, scattered households, weaker characters, more money but far less sense, much less beauty. . . . Gordon brings such fresh insight, energy, patience, engagement to each portrait in the gallery that we feel it too, and we read this rambling rich novel with much pleasure, and often surprise.

Alice Bloom. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1990, p. 163

The novel [*Final Payments*], in fact, implicitly affirms the value of language even in its gloomiest sequences: there are few novelistic characters for whom exactness of word choice and attention to the sheer beauty of language are more important than they are for Isabel Moore. Throughout the book, Isabel has used words like ''clarity,'' ''purity,'' ''certainty,'' and especially ''center'' with such frequency and care that they begin to seem as solid as the word ''bastard'' sounded in Archbishop Lefebvre's mouth. Although it is her lover Hugh Slade who, according to Isabel, is able to take words like ''devoted'' and ''duty'' and ''polish them like stones'' (168), it is really Isabel herself who is the novel's primary word polisher. It is through her aesthetic, erotic, humorous care with language that a bridge has been created between the beautiful but rigid (and lost) world of Joseph Moore and the world of temporal

humanity: ''That, at least, I owed to my father—making the effort to find the proper words for things'' (152). . . .

And by presenting Isabel's ultimate faith that human beings in the modern world can still articulate a religious vision if they employ a narrative rather than a doctrinal discourse, *Final Payments* seems to be making a larger statement about the efficacy of storytelling for pursuing religious questions; this is a religious novel about the religious value of novels. Gordon demonstrates that narrative can consider religious issues imaginatively, metaphorically, even playfully, without freezing them into dogma. This means that, for Gordon, religious truths cannot be stated definitively; there is no One True (and Literal) Language. But there are plenty of metaphors to weave, tales to spin, jokes to tell. The last words of *Final Payments* are, appropriately, ''There was a great deal I wanted to say.''

John M. Neary. *Essays in Literature*. Spring, 1990, pp. 109–10

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GOYEN, William (1918–1983)

Here are the most extravagant feelings, the most absurd recklessness of revealment, at times there is real danger of the fatal drop into over-pathos, over-saying: a boyish tearfulness over some very dubious attachments. . . . To balance this fault, the writing as a whole is disciplined on a high plane, and there are long passages of the best writing, the fullest and richest and most expressive, that I have read in a very long time—complex in form, and beautifully organized, shapely as a good tree, as alive and as substantial.

Katherine Anne Porter. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 20, 1950. p. 17

He has the poet's ear for the spoken word and he knows how to use the regionalist's best tools. All of these tales (in *Ghost and Flesh*) but one are set in the dusty county of east Texas, and even in that single exception a young man in a San Francisco hotel room recalls those landscapes, though he has abandoned them. Mr. Goyen knows how these people blending South and West in their inheritance, talk and move and how they dress and what they raise in their gardens and what churches they go to, and his writing takes on strength and richness from that familiarity. He can tell stories in dialect that is fresh and unforced; and he has noted the figures of speech used by country people.

Sylvia Stallings. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Feb. 10, 1952. p. 5

William Goyen's short stories exhibit the same qualities which made his recent literary debut an exciting one: intelligence and sensitivity, an intense and sometimes florid imagination, and an extreme preoccupation with form and language. At their best these stories possess a magical quality rare in contemporary American fiction which marks this Texan as one of the strikingly talented young writers of the last decade. . . . The author examines the problem of the nature of reality in terms of a never-ceasing conflict between the present and the past, between the visible and the invisible.

William Peden. *Saturday Review*. March 22, 1952. p. 17

In a captivating fantasy called *In a Farther Country* William Goyen continues to fabricate the fragile world of super-reality which characterized *The House of Breath*. . . and . . . *Ghost and Flesh*. . . . Events in the story grow not out of rationally plausible circumstance, but occur simply because the author exercising the flat of a fairy tale, waves his wand and bids them happen. All seem on the verge of vanishing momentarily if removed from the sustaining medium of Mr. Goyen's evocative prose style. That they do not vanish until the end, when the dream is broken, attests to the efficacy of that style and to the talent of a strangely gifted writer.

Jerome Stone. *Saturday Review*. July 23, 1955. p. 27

It is hard to believe that these two books were written by the same man. One, the *Selected Writings*, shows William Goyen to be an extraordinarily rewarding and exciting writer. The other, *Come, the Restorer*, is an embarrassingly bad echo. Of course, Goyen's fiction technique is by its nature a fail-safe gamble. He approaches the problem of fiction in such a way that he can only win or lose—he cannot produce a middling good book.

William Goyen is one of those writers whose reputation has always outrun his sales. When I first read him some 10 years ago, I was told that he was like Malcolm Lowry. Well, I don't see the resemblance—except perhaps in the fervor of his devoted readers. The *Selected Writings* collection brings together some of his out-of-print works, from the years 1950–1963; its intent clearly is to present Goyen as a kind of classic. The book actually includes a short bibliography, articles in three languages to show what a fine and valued writer he is. Now that is a pretentious bit of scholarly trivia—but don't be put off by it. The *Selected Writings* is a book well worth reading. It is not, as the English would say, a ''good read.'' It is dark, mystical, hypnotic, grotesquely powerful. It will probably haunt your dreams. . . .

Goyen is usually classified as a Southern writer, but his regionalism sits lightly on him. He superficially resembles Flannery O'Connor and the early Truman Capote (''Other Voices, Other Rooms''). But the similarities are misleading. Capote and O'Connor were truly regionalists, drawing their support from their background. Goyen is very nearly a completely placeless writer, his landscape the mind's interior.

The *Selected Writings* shows Goyen to be an eccentric, difficult writer. Because of his great concern with his own inner perspective, he is often jumbled in his words and tangled in his wildly grotesque visions. He is primarily a writer of despair, of hopelessness, of pain. There is no relief, no shadow of comfort in his vision, only a kind of

frenzied dance of death performed with a curious desperate elegance. A stylish apocalypse, as it were.

Goyen always seems far more interested in expression—the recording of his own visions and thoughts—than in communicating with the reader. And this is basically the reason for the failure of his new novel.

Come, the Restorer is a long private dream of good and evil, of the life and death, of man the angel and man the beast, of creation and destruction. It is like a canvas of Hieronymus Bosch but without Bosch's unifying esthetic tensions. *Come, the Restorer* is a novel without pattern, without plot (except in the crudest sense), without forward motion. Everything is symbolic, and every symbol alters its meaning many times. It is a book in which conventional logic is of no use, no value. This fragmentation is of course quite deliberate. In his freewheeling fashion Goyen pyramids his shifting symbols (a white rattlesnake, a grave in the Garden of Eden, an exploding chemical factory, etc.), relying on their cumulative effect, their overall impression on the reader's emotions rather than his intelligence. Randomness produces unity—at least in theory.

Come, the Restorer is a foolish novel. There is, for example, a long passage in a tropical Garden of Eden (where elemental male and female forces engage in a battle of sexuality) that is embarrassingly silly. It is as if *Green Mansions* were being replayed with Xaviera Hollander in the part of Rima the bird girl.

The novel suffers, moreover, from being too clever. It dies of its own intricacy. Its grotesques are just impossibly exaggerated. . . .

Still, in this day of written-to-order novels, of fiction tailored to meet the expected demands of the market—like a new breakfast cereal or an after-shave lotion—it is encouraging to find a novelist who has enough faith in himself as a writer to be difficult and obscure and inevitably limited in his sales. The serious American novel is still alive!

Shirley Ann Grau. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 3, 1974, pp. 73–74

As befits an age of universal solitude, in which art often is *about* art, William Goyen's stories are a testament to the essentiality of telling. He regards such communication as a form of love, a process including seeing and saying: to tell one must know; once one knows he *must* tell. . . .

Goyen's sense of his own work is just as serious: ''story telling is a rhythm, a charged movement, a chain of pulses or beats. To write out of life is to catch, in pace, this pulse that beats in the material of life.'' His affirmations that he wishes ''to write out of life'' and ''record as closely as possible the speech as *heard*'' show that he sees himself as a medium of a heritage. Like many of his characters, he passes on an assimilation of actual and imagined material. Though the proportions of the mixture would be impossible to measure, Goyen's concentration on rendering the ''true music'' in the ''marvelous instrument of language . . . *given* to me'' is the most distinctive feature of his work.

The willingness to discipline himself in the use of language underlies his entire achievement as a writer. His stories ring with precision because they are language told to someone, not simply private, inchoate voices. . . . *The Collected Stories of William Goyen* (1975) . . . presents his ideas with remarkable continuity and seems to have been his means of experimenting in form and of finding ''a language I thought I could use.'' Whether he writes of homelessness, fragmentation of individuals, elusiveness of the past, or the miracle of human love, Goyen is playing his main themes—the essentiality of telling—and orchestrating speech to render the ''marvelous reciprocity'' of a genuine relationship. . . .

Goyen has always written of human relationships—solitary people who fail to connect, solitary people who succeed in loving. The latter have been Goyen's hope: they are alert to surroundings; they have patience and imagination to comprehend others.

Jay S. Paul. *Critique*. 19, 2, 1977, pp. 77–78

The House of Breath is unique in our literature, owing no debts to any literary antecedents. One reason for such uniqueness is that Goyen almost always writes in the first-person singular, and the voice is unquestionably his own—Southwestern, sensitive, searching, deeply rooted in Old Testament locutions. Goyen, exiled in body from the Southwest, can never absent himself from that locale. He has the almost morbid sensibility that comes from the feelings of exile and suppression. . . .

A second reason his work is unique is that his books seem composed through a sort of double process—that of the photograph and that of the poem of the fact and the vision. . . .

Thirdly, Goyen's imagery is often dreamlike, unreal to the point of surrealism, and always intensely personal. He draws upon a personal mythology of rattlesnakes and oil wells, tightrope walkers and flagpole sitters, which is distinctly his own. Goyen is in point a fabulist, making his own myths and creating characters much larger than life. His dreamlike imagery and mythic characters are but two facets of his distinctive style. His stories and novels are all written in prose, but in prose which has many of the characteristics of poetry. It is a style which yokes the exaltations of poetry with the ordinariness of spoken prose. His books are dramatic, but they are not plays. . . .

Like poetry, they give the outlines of life rather than the whole of it (as in many novels). In this respect, Goyen's fiction bears little relationship to the sociological novel, or the novel of environment. . . . Goyen's novels break with the things which are in order to merge with those things which *may be*, including even spirits, which figure prominently in his second book, *Ghost and Flesh*. . . .

From the first—that is, roughly from 1949 onward—his fiction has been of the most intimate kind, surpassing the physical realities in favor of the subjective ones. Events, when they occur in his fiction at all, are related not to character so much as to sensibility. His concern is not for concrete truths, but poetic truths—for the dream, the fantasy, the outrageous. It is this engagement with *all* things, not merely the physical things of this world, which is a part of Goyen's real achievement. . . .

Overall, his work is consistent and at a very high level. And *The House of Breath* is perhaps a masterpiece—still in print twenty-five years after publication.

Nevertheless, it is doubtful that Goyen's fiction has been a creditable influence upon any other writer of note today. His concerns and his style are too highly individual to be of use by others. (Anyone who has attempted to copy his style will find that task near impossible.) Rather than being famous as the founder of a school or a following, Goyen should be noted as a highly individualized voice. He is a fabulous original, like Carson McCullers and

Flannery O'Connor and not many others. In an age of mechanization, he devotes himself to poetry. In an age of plastic, he celebrates the ghost and the flesh.

Robert Phillips. *William Goyen* (Twayne, 1979), pp. 33–35, 112, 114

William Goyen, who died in August, will be remembered as one of the great American writers of short fiction. Tapestries of storylike scenes form his famous first novel, *The House of Breath* (1950), and the later ones. His special success with the short form grows essentially from his language, which grips the reader with an Ancient Mariner's powerful hand while speaking of both the everyday and the uncanny. Though Goyen was often labeled a Texas writer, his language was a stylistic accomplishment rather than a regional or period manner, utterly individual, neither typically Southern nor, as some would have had it more recently, magic-realist. What may appear at first to be a colloquial narrative often becomes an intense, songlike prose utterance with verses and refrains. Goyen himself once remarked that some of his stories were really anthems.

Arcadio, his only major published work since *Collected Stories* (1975), is the most intense of these visionary songs of life. Set in his native Texas, like many of his previous works, it opens with a typically Goyenesque narrative of a ''visitation''—Goyenesque in that the author characteristically filtered a story through one of its characters, a witness slightly apart who hears someone else speak of what happened, and Goyenesque also in that what interested him most of all was passion and intensity of experience. . . .

The apparition has been evoked by the narrator's memory of his taciturn uncle, who on another hot night had told him of seeing a person bathing in secret in the nearby river, someone who seemed both man and woman. That was Arcadio, a living war and a reconciliation of opposites, half man and half woman, half ''Mescan'' and half Texan, half saintly and half wanton, half truth teller and half blatant exaggerator.

Framed by the narrator's reminiscence, the novel becomes Arcadio's account of himself (he seems slightly more male than female), delivered on a long day to a silent listener—our narrator—in the shade of an abandoned, vine-tangled railroad trestle over a dry riverbed. Jesus consorted with publicans and sinners, and Arcadio recounts a life of spiritual quest in a world of brothels and jailhouses.

This is a work of profound sympathy for the lost, the displaced, the crazy, the imprisoned, the homeless, the deformed, the loveless—all the turned-away, whose light we tend to put out by our fear of them. Amazingly, Arcadio also touches on the reigning social problems of our day: the environment destroyed, the family broken and dispersed, loveless sex. He does this in passing, offering the viewpoint of the outcast, the sinner, whose sense of the world around him is both true and naïve. Neither Arcadio's ultimate confrontation with his long-lost family nor the apocalyptic destruction of cities and people he has witnessed can redeem his travails or solve the problems around him. Instead, he tells his story to a silent listener, and his extended aria transforms pitiable sadness and crazy misdeeds into a reconciliation of violent opposites. His remembering and singing of others who are gone makes peace with them and, through his being heard by his listener, makes peace for them. An early story, ''Ghost and Flesh,'' is perhaps the most important statement of Goyen's belief that the situation of the storyteller and the listener is a spiritual one in which guilt, suffering and sorrow are finally redeemed.

Arcadio's parables and paradoxes restore meaning to the lives he recounts. His song may be Goyen's finest achievement. The work of a master fabulist, it was one more courageous foray into fiction unlike anyone else's, haunting the reader with its tenderness and ferocity.

Reginald Gibbons. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 6, 1983, pp. 14, 36–37

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The House of Breath, 1950 (n); *Ghost and Flesh*, 1952 (s); *In a Farther Country*, 1955 (n); *The Faces of Blood Kindred*, 1960 (s); *The Fair Sister*, 1963 (n); *Arcadio*, 1983 (n); *Had I a Hundred Mouths: New & Selected Stories, 1947–1983*, 1985 (s); *William Goyen: Selected Letters from a Writer's Life*, ed. by Robert Phillips, 1995; *Half a Look of Cain: A Fantastical Narrative*, 1994 (n); *Come, the Restorer*, 1996 (n)

GRAU, Shirley Ann (1929–)

Most of these stories center around Negroes in Louisiana. . . . These ''colored'' stories are quite definitely the best of her work. The reader may be occasionally mildly troubled by Miss Grau's tendency to blur or confuse her own point of view with that of her focal characters as she does in the rather unsuccessful story ''Miss Yellow Eyes''; for the most part, though, she writes with considerable control and skill. More important, she sees and hears well; most important, she understands what she sees and hears. To an uninitiated ear her dialect is for the most part effective; her people are almost always convincing. Miss Grau, further, displays considerable variety and flexibility; whether she works in the border-region of myth and folklore, as she does in the effective title story of Stanley ''the Black Prince'' . . .or in the more traditional medium of the realistic ''The Way of a Man,'' she avoids sensationalism, violence, and whimsy for their own sakes. She writes out of neither sentimental love not tear-filled despair. Hers is not a namby-pamby world of dreams, or a darkened alley in which animals die meaningless deaths. Frustration and violence and death are present in her world, but so also are serenity and achievement and life.

William Peden. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 29, 1955. p. 16

Her basic approach in the stories was one of careful atmospheric setting. She has used the same technique in the novel [*The Hard Blue Sky*], painstakingly describing the coast, the islands, the desolate sweep of marshes, birds, oaks and palms, the packs of wild dogs that overrun the Isle aux Chiens—her island world, a terrain outlined minutely and enclosed by water and the hot summer sky. . . . Miss Grau writes wonderfully well about people—there isn't character on the island who doesn't come alive, and no two, even though everyone on the island seems to be more or less vaguely related, who are alike. Her handling of the relations between men and women is particularly perceptive, but again it is

her knowledge of and interest in character that reveals so much about these relations. . . . Above all, Miss Grau is a natural storyteller, and her novel has a kind of casual looseness that makes room for many stories, tales which, far from destroying the unity of the book, tighten the fabric of the world she constructs.

Elizabeth Bartelme. *Commonweal*. July 11, 1958. p. 380

[*The Hard Blue Sky*] belongs in the category of novels which are essentially evocations of a little-known region or place—in this case a small, primitive, storm-swept island off the Louisiana Coast on the edge of a dangerous swamp. The people on the Isle aux Chiens are of mixed French and Spanish descent, and their curious speech is peppered with eroded bits of French. . . . Miss Grau recreates in all its dimensions the singular life of an inbred, almost isolated little world. She is a fine artist, but she has stretched her material too far; it could have been handled more effectively within the compass of a novelette.

Charles Rolo. *Atlantic Monthly*. Aug., 1958. p. 84

The Hard Blue Sky, to the extent that it needs to be classified, belongs to the old-fashioned school of regionalism. *The House on Coliseum Street* could be Gothic but isn't: . . . it is not even specifically Southern. It is full of the sights and sounds and smells of New Orleans and the surrounding country; that is the kind of writer Miss Grau is. But its essential action could take place anywhere.

To me *The House on Coliseum Street* is not so exciting as *The Hard Blue Sky*, but it is a good book for Miss Grau to have written at this point in her career. Her control is perfect, and there isn't a scene that doesn't count. Her senses are acute, and, as I have said, they make their contribution to the texture of the novel, but there are no descriptions for the sake of description. The writing, as always, is wonderfully firm. Miss Grau is not exploring new territory, as she was in some of her stories and in *The Hard Blue Sky*, but she has done admirably what she wanted to do, and she has left us with a picture of a young woman that it will be hard to forget.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. June 17, 1961. p. 20

The most effective aspect of Miss Grau's work here [*The House on Coliseum Street*], to my reading, is the conveyed awareness of loss and emptiness following the abortion. . . . Joan is haunted by ''that first ghost child. Ghost child, lost child'' and in her imagination it takes on the aspect of a bit of seaweed, ''my seaweed child.'' This, in what seems to me the novel's furthest imaginative grasp, becomes the ultimate loneliness, the lost ''heart ticking away inside. . . . The soft floating seaweed bones.''

But there are only occasional and faint flashes of such imaginative and verbal magic here, magic which lit up page upon page of Miss Grau's memorable first book, *The Black Prince and Other Stories.*

Coleman Rosenberger. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. July 23, 1961. p. 6

Shirley Ann Grau has been demonstrating her gifts as a sensitive observer of human development and growth for some time now. With a few words she can establish a mood, mixing man's emotions with appropriate reflections of them in landscape. . . . She knows the people, knows the ambiguities of race relations, the devices, pretenses, ironies, absurdities, and incredible frustrations. . . . Most significantly, she writes at a time when she can know some answers too. For this is a novel [*The Keepers of the House*] which in its own sudden and firm way has a statement to make. . . . She gathers herself together and ends her story by insisting that deceptions exposed are ultimately if painfully better than compromises and falsehoods endured.

Robert Coles. *New Republic*. April 18, 1964. pp. 17–19

Shirley Ann Grau is a Southerner who writes about the Deep South with a word choice as fastidious as Willa Cather's and with a passion aroused by the turbulence in her home country. Her new novel, *The Keeper of the House*. . . , a beautifully designed, beautifully written book, is a story told in two moods. The first half is the evocation of the William Howland plantation. . . . The tone of the telling changes after [William's grand-daughter] Abigail's marriage to handsome John Tolliver. She suspects that he married her for her money, and he did; and she suspects that he is a philanderer, which he is. But she knows that he is a hard worker in his law office, and she loves him; she bears their children and works for his political career, until they are flung apart by the scandal over Old Will's miscegenation. The bitter vengeance that follows is hard to take.

Edward Weeks. *Atlantic Monthly*. May, 1964. p. 135

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GREEN, Paul (1894–1981)

Evidently the numerous short folk-plays which Mr. Green has written have served him well. The image of a primitive society which he projects upon the stage [in *The Field God*] with an apparently effortless ease has an extraordinary depth and solidity, and the minor characters who create it are all conceived with an incisive yet natural humor. But it is not with this that he stops. The wildly passionate story which he tells of a conflict between a primitively powerful love and the religious fanaticism of a remote community is one which is firmly rooted in the manners and traditions of that community. It is no conventional stage plot foisted upon a certain set of characters but something which grows out of the people and their ways—a genuine folk tragedy.

Joseph Wood Krutch. *The Nation*. May 4, 1927. p. 510

Paul Green's *Wide Fields* . . . is the first venture into a volume of prose by the winner of last year's Pulitzer Prize in drama. It is a collection of pieces about the poor whites of Little Bethel, a North Carolina community. While there is an unevenness in Mr. Green's

work on the technical side, every one of his sketches, grave or gay, is informed with fine sincerity, with understanding and a deep sympathy. What is important is his turning to the poor white as literary material, and this sample is proof enough that the neglected field he has begun to work has rich soil. I think this book may be hailed safely enough as the augury of some good novels if Mr. Green decides to take time enough away from his twin loves of the drama and philosophy to turn his hand to fiction.

Herschel Brickell. *Bookman*. June, 1928. pp. 461–2

In Abraham's Bosom is one of the most beautiful and tragic of all modern dramas. The character of Abraham is carried through seven scenes, each showing a crisis in the hero's struggle to broaden his limited mental horizon. But every time he seems on the point of success, he finds himself thwarted. Nor is his tragedy altogether the tragedy of the Negro in a white man's world; his failure lies ultimately within himself. Mr. Green makes no attempt to solve his problem, simply stating it in human terms. . . . He exults in tragedy as the manifestation of man living at his intensest, and the intensity of his thirst for life and ever more life is satisfied with nothing less than life can give him. This is always what we call tragedy, though when it is seen through the eyes of an artist of Mr. Green's stamp, it is a tragedy that burns and purifies like fire.

Barrett H. Clark. *Theatre Arts*. Oct., 1928. pp. 734–5

There are no folk motion pictures, nor ''speakies.'' The pictures are standardized products, turned out wholesale from Hollywood, like a motor car or a breakfast food. But Green's plays could come from no place but the corner of the South where he was born and reared, and their value first is to the cultural life of his own State, and only later to the country at large, exactly as the value of the plays of Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory was first to Ireland. . . .

He has written with equal understanding about the whites and the blacks in North Carolina, though perhaps as yet his best work is about his black friends, for whom he has intense sympathy without sentimental delusions. Their language and metaphor being more picturesque than that of the whites, he has in writing about them been able more fully and happily, because more naturally, to indulge his poetic flair for rhythmical and heightened speech. In some of his negro plays we can feel something of Synge's power to evoke music and moods from the mere sound of words.

Walter P. Eaton. *The Drama in English* (Scribner). 1930. pp. 328–9

The characters in Mr. Green's play [*The House of Connelly*] are clearly defined; their words—all but the heroine's—are profoundly Southern and have been well heard by the dramatist out of his own Southern life. Sometimes a detail, though tiny, is so startlingly Southern that none but a Southerner could savor its exactness. . . . The uncle's role, rather too long for the sting and pathos intended by it, runs somewhat too far toward the Russian flavor; and his suicide seems to me unconvincing, as well as being both untrue to this Southern type or temperament and harmful to the play's total impression on the memory. *The House of Connelly* remains, notwithstanding, well worth a dozen more facile works. Uncle, girl, problem or no, it is at its source poetic, by which I mean the richness, quiver and dilation that it often gives to the material presented.

Stark Young. *New Republic*. Oct. 14, 1931. p. 235

I hasten to report, at last, a performance of real importance: Paul Green's *House of Connelly*, as presented by the newly organized Group Theatre. It is important because the author and the assembled actors and directors are trying for something fundamental, something beautiful, careful, conscientious: something worth doing for its own sake. In this they are nearly unique. . . . A pithy description of this play is going the rounds, to the effect that it kills two birds with one stone, *The Seagull* and *The Wild Duck* and it is true that Mr. Green has been influenced by his predecessors, especially Chekhov, more in this play than in any other I know—no doubt because of his theme. . . . Of course when it comes to the form of the play as a whole, there can be no question of comparison with the master. Will Connelly marries Patsy Tate with the approval of their author, and the brash, bright, business-like alliance of these two, with its hopes of profit and rejuvenation, sticks out of the melancholy Russian pattern like a bandaged thumb. Chekhov's vision was comparatively whole as well as essentially tragic; the people he knew, the best he could find, were degenerating. Mr. Green's vision, on the other hand, is partial, tentative, hopeful, and not without its sociological axe to grind.

Francis Fergusson. *Bookman*. Nov., 1931. p. 298

As more short plays began to flow from his pen Green found less need for one-act models. His material found expression in its own language and the simplest narrative form served his dramatic purpose. The society which he pictured in brief snatches of drama was easily drawn, for it had strongly definitive lines. There were plantation owners, poor whites, negroes. The relationships between the three types, and their influence on one another, made drama. Very sensibly Green first recorded this drama in single independent acts as he discovered it. The last few years have shown how he has built upon these early foundations. . . .

In Abraham's Bosom . . . was produced at the end of the year 1926 in the Provincetown Theatre, New York. It was an episodic chronicle in seven scenes that summed up without sentimentality the story of the white man's inconsistency toward the black. In the tortured soul of the play's protagonist, Abraham McCranie—in his failure to establish himself as an educator, in his inability to humiliate his spirit before his weakling white half-brother, in the worthlessness of his son whom he had consecrated to the service of his people—lay the subject for a pure and inevitable tragedy. It gave the playwright full opportunity for the employment of all his gifts—his accuracy of observation, his poetic sensitivity, his philosophic turn of mind. The simplicity of its narrative form was, moreover, wholly fitting to its content.

Carl Carmer. *Theatre Arts*. Dec., 1932. pp. 998–9

Having established himself as one of the more important American playwrights, Paul Green now brings out a long and authentic novel [*This Body the Earth*] about the plight of the white sharecropper in the South. . . . In spite of the structural defects that result from Mr. Green's attempt to impose the technique of the theatre upon the

technique of the novel, it is an outstanding addition to the literature of social protest that is being written by Southern writers. . . . [The hero] is defeated, not by himself, but by the agricultural economy of the South. This economy, in Mr. Green's novel, becomes the Nemesis of the old Greek tragedies—merciless, vindictive, hounding a man to death. The implicit moral is that the individual, no matter how rugged, cannot combat a system that makes individuals its prey. . . . Paul Green has written a brave, honest, eloquent book—his most important performance since *In Abraham's Bosom*

Hamilton Basso. *New Republic*. Nov. 13, 1935. pp. 24–5

Paul Green's play [*Johnny Johnson*] with music by Kurt Weill is a brave and at times successful attempt to project an anti-war play with a sense of humor. Johnny Johnson is a young Middle West American who believes in peace, but takes war propaganda at its face value until he is disillusioned. . . . Had the play itself been less naif, and as good as Mr. Green's lyrics and Mr. Weill's music, it might well have been a landmark in the American theatre.

Greenville Vernon. *Commonweal*. Dec. 4, 1936. p. 162

Paul Green's plays are a statement of unquestioned fact about the negroes and country whites of the North Carolina lowlands. They are folk plays. With the exception of a few isolated pieces like Roark Bradford's and Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures* and Dorothy and Dubose Heyward's *Porgy*, Paul Green's work is America's strongest contribution to the perpetuation of the folk-play genre. The type is important in the new American drama. Although it has attracted Broadway, it is not written to satisfy Broadway standards. It is theatre for the people everywhere, and has met encouragement in many scattered centers. So Paul Green writes with a free hand and experiments as much as he likes. . . . The economic problem as Green presents it makes *In Abraham's Bosom* classify as proletarian. This is likewise true of most of the later plays, and especially of the latest, *Johnny Johnson*, produced in New York by the Group Theatre during the season 1936–1937. This play—part fantasy, part musical satire, part symbolic poetry—Green calls '' a legend.'' The hero, '' a natural man in a sick world,'' is white—an idealist like the colored hero of *In Abraham's Bosom*, and as destined to failure. All of Green's plays show that he is a professional philosopher. Every folk idea and custom is a symbol of some significant social truth. But it is the picturing which makes the plays distinguished.

Vernon Loggins. *I Hear America* (Crowell). 1937. pp. 219–21

Most of his work, perhaps all, springs from a knowledge of the tragic quality of life. He has people singing folksongs in almost every play, but their songs, whether gay or melancholy, have the air of lament and the sob of a people singing to keep up spirit.

No one writing for the stage has set down more haunting and plaintive lyrics than those given here [*Out of the South*] to the tired mouths of plain people. . . . There is not a play, new or old, in this collection that does not have that high thematic combination of pathos and tenderness and humor running through it.

Stanley Young. *New York Times Book Section*. June 11, 1939. p. 15

It is not too much to say that Paul Green is the only playwright, with the uncertain exception of Eugene O'Neill, who belongs notably to both the American land and the American theatre. He came to the latter as the natural poet of the Old South. The depth of his commitment to his people, which was from the beginning a commitment to the human race, also made him the laureate of the *New* South aborning not without labor and turbulence. He started in the 1920's as a writer of short plays of local color, moved into a professional Broadway theatre with full-length dramas of the South, and after 1937 started extending his horizons with the writing of epics that encompass historical events for which ordinary playhouses and the resources of realistic plays are patently inadequate. . . .

In coalescing a number of one-act plays of Negro life into the Pulitzer Prize drama *In Abraham's Bosom*, in 1927, Paul Green enlarged his dramatic scope impressively. . . . *The House of Connelly*, the play with which The Group Theatre opened its momentous career in the 1930's, remains the most poignant drama of the postbellum South, and *Johnny Johnson*, given another Group Theatre production in 1936, is by far the most imaginative and affecting antiwar full-length play in the American theatre.

John Gassner. Introduction to *Five Plays of the South* by Paul Green (Hill and Wang). 1963. pp. ix, xi

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GREGORY, Horace (1898–1982)

Chelsea Rooming House is an extraordinary book; a fresh poetic vision and an individual talent here are loosed to express a great fear and a deep tenderness concerning human life. Mr. Gregory as poet interprets unintellectual humanity hurling itself at doors to which it has no key. . . . Although Mr. Gregory's poems spring from a strong feeling about social conditions they never become propaganda. The poet is far too intellectual to allow that. Instinctively and rightly he connects the past with the future, throwing a vision of life backwards and forwards along its right plane. The pattern of life is different in each age, but the feeling for life is universal.

Eda Lou Walton. *The Nation*. Dec. 17, 1930. p. 680

Gregory is grouped among writers of social revolution, where he is remarkable for adding the authority of a poet to the authorization, whatever it may be worth, of official orthodoxy. But this destination is incidental to his fundamental qualities. The sincerity and art that have gone into his books should be major assets to any cause, but they are too substantial to need or allow partisan coercion. What is important is that their authority exists before and after the specific issues of subject matter are faced. This is equivalent to saying that Gregory, as a poet, dignifies his beliefs by bringing to them the highest integrity of which the intelligence, socially or practically directed, is capable.

Morton D. Zabel. *New Republic*. June 19, 1935. p. 173

The agrarian pattern is that of the ''Eternal Now.'' It brings the past to us, not as if of antiquarian interest, as a collection of curios in a museum, but as another version of the present. The events of today (and Gregory can note them as concretely as does any barrister's indictment before a Grand Jury) are at the same time fused with a sense of the long perspective, whereby the poet is *close-to* and *remote-from* simultaneously. In his case, a specific intimate event, existing in its particularities but once, is reported with an overtone of migrations and historic sweeps. The poet observes through a screen of myth, so that what he sees bears the markings of this screen upon it.

Kenneth Burke. *Poetry*. July, 1935. pp. 228–9

His technique is particularly interesting. Like Eliot, he is fond of the dissonant chord and unresolved suspense; like Hart Crane, he crowds image upon image to increase sensation and suggest new perspective. But he does not share Eliot's disillusion nor Crane's disorganization. There is constant control as well as positive belief in Gregory's poetry; his faith is a social faith. His method and manner created a new tone, half-ruminative, half-lyrical, superficially descriptive yet somehow integrated.

Louis Untermeyer. *Saturday Review*. April 12, 1941. p. 15

By temperament Gregory seems happiest as an elegiac poet, celebrating, with his grieving rhetoric, the lost places, the lost persons, the lost world of his inheritance. . . . Gregory is not and never will be a casual writer. To be sure, he has a strong sense of the contemporary, in both its historic and its idiomatic aspects, but to use the contemporary breezily, *au naturel*, is not his talent: he must work on it imaginatively and break it down into the deep, grave rhythms of his reflective spirit.

Stanley J. Kunitz. *Poetry*. June, 1941. p. 155

Gregory is no less a craftsman than MacNeice. But his material is so much more substantial and it is given such a solid poetic integration that the mechanics of his writing are less assertive than those of MacNeice. Gregory is primarily a dramatic poet with the command of lyric which, in our poetic tradition, has always accompanied true dramatic expression. . . . Human experience is his material, but he does not patronize or poeticize it. He simply extracts its essence, adding nothing which might artificially dignify it. The inherent dignity of the essential is the beauty of Gregory's poetry.

John L. Sweeney. *The Yale Review*. Summer, 1941. p. 821

It is Mr. Gregory's intention, and high distinction, to be conscientiously contemporary, deriving his imagery from what is most recent in our surroundings. . . . Yet his effectiveness as a poet of the present depends, paradoxically, on an allegiance felt rather than declared to the past. . . . Other poets who have shared this doubleness of vision have often yielded to the urge to use it with satiric malice. Mr. Gregory is free of that. One feels behind his sharp awareness of what is about him a depth of terror and a depth of tenderness for the human lot.

George F. Whicher. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. May 4, 1941. p. 2

Mr. Gregory is a stubborn formalist. His project is before him and he sticks to it; he foresees and numbers the details that must be attended to in its careful execution, and like a good general he always has a firm thumb on the map. This makes, let us admit it, for a certain rigidity. It is a little as if the resultant poetry were too much done to formula. The right ingredients are there—imagination, tenderness, humor, irony, the pathos of distance, the pathos of the contemporary-ephemeral, the convenient stairway that always leads from the finite to the infinite—but one has the feeling that Mr. Gregory has somehow got them there by a clever and cultivated sort of sleight-of-mind, a trained and studious dexterity.

Conrad Aiken. *New Republic*. Sept. 15, 1941. p. 346

Most of Mr. Gregory's poems do not have regular meters, line lengths, or stanzas; any poet knows how hard it is really to organize a poem without these. But his feeling for speech and tone, his real selectivity, . . . do manage to hold his poems together surprisingly often. . . . He belongs more to the conversational-colloquial half of modern poetry than to the rhetorical-obscure half; his textures often have the particularity and precision and bareness of successful prose. He is an accomplished, sensitive, and complicated poet; honest, too: he never fools his readers without fooling himself.

Randall Jarrell. *The Nation*. Sept. 20, 1941. p. 258

We who have known Gregory's poetry over the last ten years know that a great deal of its force and depth have arisen from an acute perception of the past as being still alive and working in the present day. Gregory is inferior to no poet living; but he has learned to trace out, carefully, just where in the past, both of the strains that made up our present actually got started.

John Gould Fletcher. *New York Times Book Section*. April 16, 1944. p. 3

It may seem a long jump from an early poem called ''Salvos for Randolph Bourne'' to a late one called ''Homage to Circe,'' but if you examine them side by side you find a similar delicacy of texture, a similar unerringness of choice of detail, and in the later poem a further growth of an ear so intricately modulated it has few rivals this side of Eliot.

Without brains, such facility could be mere dulcet tone. It never is. . . . Horace Gregory has always moved the mind. Now he has ways of twitching at one's nerves also, and latterly, at his best, moving the heart.

Winfield Townley Scott. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Aug. 19, 1951. p. 3

Each of the poems of this collection *Selected Poems* represents a degree of formal attainment, of formal success.

Yet Mr. Gregory is striving for much more. The myths he evokes are in a constant state of flux and as a poet he seeks to integrate himself therein. . . . Each of the poems is some form of question on the essential mystery of man, and some form of lament over the poet's consciousness engaged in a life which limits the consciousness. Mr. Gregory revindicates one of the oldest functions of poetry, envisaged as the reservoir of human unhappiness, and also as the means, the noblest means perhaps, to transcend the unhappiness, to make of it a way of contemplation, a way of understanding.

Wallace Fowlie. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 19, 1951. pp. 5, 20

Gregory is, I think, our best chronicler of the universal *devices* of distraction, of the ruses—especially alcohol and opulence—modern man employs against the unthinkable and the inevitable. (If I were ever to meet Gregory, I would expect him to say, before I had the first one, ''Have another drink.'') The variations he plays on this nameless hysteria, the settings he gives it, the characters who act it out, are amazing in their aptness. There is a kind of civilized gallows humor in their telling which Gregory uses with what would seem very nearly like sadism if it were not for the underlying pity that one feels also in his rendering of people at bars, official dinners, open-air concerts, or sitting at night in rich apartments in New York with ''The city washed away like time beneath us/And nothing there except the perfect view.'' Yet one wonders, sometimes, if his work doesn't depend a little too much on decor, on descriptions of settings, and such. I won't dwell on this, though, for it really doesn't disturb me more than faintly. I am too much in favor of Gregory's kind of subtlety in depicting the condemned playground that the diseased unconscious makes of our world, the extraordinary ways in which he shows the eruption of the timeless myths into modern life, and the inability of moderns to rise to the myths and their meanings, though they live them, unrecognizing.

James Dickey. *Sewanee Review*. Summer, 1962. p. 494

He belongs to no school or clique. His career both as writer and as teacher has involved a dauntless, even heroic struggle against ill health, and he has had no time, if he were so inclined, for those public readings by which reputations are sometimes enhanced. Amid all the noise of literary politics, he has worked quietly ahead, hardly noticed even when, from time to time, he does receive some award or honor.

His work is not in the least sensational or exhibitionistic. And now that he has brought out his *Collected Poems* at the age of sixty-six, we can see more clearly than before that many of his best poems have been intense, concentrated, and very self-contained; enduring, yet slight and hard to keep in view; quick trout in cold, almost silent streams. Sensuality and violence are often present in these poems, yet are used not as weapons against the reader but as the raw material of the poet's sensibility. After all, ''classical restraint'' does imply something to be restrained.

M.L. Rosenthal. *The Reporter*. Sept. 10, 1964. p. 50

In an age in which the raw, the raucous, and the personal are increasingly identified with the real, it is natural, even appropriate, that poetry such as Horace Gregory's be given less than its due. This is all the more ironical in that few poets have been as successfully occupied with our day's Medusa-like powers. But now that so much of a lifetime's writing is in, to the discerning, the harvest, as well as the gratitude we should feel for it, must be obvious. . . . From his first poem on he treats the anonymous, buried lives of our world. And he gives them, by discovering their own most private speech, full voice. This voice, awing in its ability to bridge the chasmic distance between dream and reality in these lives, is a constant, growing one in his work.

Theodore Weiss. *Poetry*. Nov., 1964. p. 134

A characteristic feeling of these poems is disquiet. A characteristic form, the monologue or dialogue. A characteristic effect, that of the lucid and haunted. The manner is lucid but it is dealing with

shadowy presences or with wind, silence, darkness, or with the forces behind the reality of our times.

This effect of the lucid and haunted is Gregory's particular own. His eye on the world is sharp but his greater concern is to see it in its widest implications—which is, in an essential sense, to mythologize it. His ''hellbabies,'' drunks, salesmen, police sergeants, lonely sensitives, are voices out of the theater of some vaster play—characters, too, of their own void, warped by the pressures of circumstances. . . . Horace Gregory is an old master of the clear-cut articulations of the musical line, the incised image, and of the architecture of a poem. His art, subtle like the virtues his poetry lives by, expresses a tragic view in a nervous-veined and noble language.

Jean Garrigue. *New Leader*. Feb. 15, 1965. pp. 23–4

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GUARE, John (1938–)

Although steeped in Ibsen (frequent references to *A Doll's House*) and Chekhov (one notably funny diatribe against *The Three Sisters*), [*Marco Polo Sings a Solo*] recalls nothing so much as the play Kurt Vonnegut would have written if he could write plays; the same affectionate loathing for humanity, the same manipulation of preposterousness in event and language, the same comic ability to grab a cliché and twist it into life by taking it literally. Above all, the same despair, splashed across an otherwise good-humored farcical entertainment, too thinly to rank as a deep artistic vision but strong enough to put a chill on the jollity, to scatter it across the stage in tiny beads of freeze-dried horror. You feel that, packed into a test tube, Guare's view of life would indeed be powerful enough to freeze the whole world, like Vonnegut's ice-nine. We probably ought to be grateful that he has the kindness to dilute it with sheer playfulness, that his mind cannot resist a purely comic or nonsensical diversion, that he follows so many tracks off in so many directions that returning to the main point becomes a tour de force.

The forces that keep *Marco Polo* from falling apart are the characters' obsessions, carried almost to the degree of Jonsonian humors: one with heroism and planthood, one with the glow of someone else's family life, one with his stature in the pop-political world of diplomacy. And the glamorous female around whom these three creatures revolve, drained of any feeling at all, sublimates her disgust by going to endless productions of *A Doll's House*. The end is stasis, an emotional icing over that reflects the ice-palace setting. The characters wait, frozen, for the new century, wondering if they have actually lived through any of this one.

Michael Feingold. *The Village Voice*. Feb. 14, 1977, p. 43

The Landscape of the Body is quite simply the best work Guare has ever done. It is the play Guare's supporters have always wanted to see and the one which skeptics, pointing to the brilliant flashes contained within plays that never seemed to find a final structure, doubted Guare could write. With *Landscape* ''the world's oldest living promising playwright'' (the quote is from Guare's *Rich and Famous*) hands in a masterpiece. . . .

Guare has always defined his plays as being about the conflict between dreams and the world. But it strikes me that Guare at his best is about much more than that. He is a man at once furious at the imperfections of the world—he actually does find it disgusting, as Holahan says in the play, that Joseph Welch made a movie for Otto Preminger—and thoroughly compassionate about what people must do when in battle with this world.

This compassion is not always present in Guare's work, but when it is there, it makes Guare unique among current satirists. Guare is not a social critic standing on the outside and laughing with slight disdain. He is *inside*, and it is from this particularly painful vantage point that the laughter comes. It brings not only criticism but complicity, not righteous anger but a desperate struggle against despair. Guare is an idealist and realist both.

Terry Curtis Fox. *The Village Voice*. Aug. 15, 1977, pp. 34–35

Muzeeka shows Guare's inventiveness and facility. Unrealistic monologues alternate with direct address to the audience as violence erupts out of domesticity. The titular Muzeeka is the canned music of conformism, which overtakes Jack Argue (whose name is an anagram of Guare). Although inspired by the Dionysian dances of the Etruscans, Argue becomes a junior executive for Muzeeka, marries a nice girl, has a suburban house and a baby. On the night his baby is born, he goes to a whore in Greenwich Village for a ''Chinese basket job.'' Glad to be drafted, Argue is soon in Vietnam, where the soldiers fight for television coverage of their skirmishes. When his soldier buddy offers Argue a share in his father's business and marriage to his sister, Argue stabs himself. At home his wife intones patriotic platitudes, the Greenwich Village whore intones hip platitudes, his Vietnam army buddy intones military platitudes, and a stagehand pours the ketchup of Argue's blood. . . .

The House of Blue Leaves . . . [is] a marriage of Feydeau and Strindberg, or a painful domestic situation played as farce. The House of Blue Leaves is an insane asylum, and the inhabitants of a Queens, New York apartment convert it to an insane asylum when they step in and out of three doors and a window. . . .

In marrying Feydeau of the precipitous doors to Strindberg of the restraining straitjacket, Guare complained: ''Who says I have

to be confined and show a guy slipping on a banana peel? Why can't I take him to the next level and show him howling with pain because he's broken his ass?'' Guare hasn't learned the simple answer: because a broken ass on stage is funny, and the audience will not believe the pain.

By 1972 Guare did not have to think of pain. Not only did *Blue Leaves* win an Obie and the New York Drama Critics Circle award, but also his adaptation of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (with music by Galt MacDermott) was voted the best musical. Rich and rather famous, Guare wrote *Rich and Famous* about a Broadway playwright with the farcical name of Bing Ringling. One actor plays Bing, and another plays all other male parts, while an actress plays all female parts. . . .

Landscape of the Body (1977) parodies another aspect of New York City, but Guare sees the play as ''people fighting against the death in all our lives.'' Death is grisly soon after the opening scene in which a disguised passenger on the Hyannisport-Nantucket ferry apprehends a woman for beheading her adolescent son. . . .

After these sallies Off-Broadway, Guare returned to Broadway with the small cast, reined fantasy, but unsubdued wit of *Bosoms and Neglect* (1980). His most skilfully constructed plot—a prologue and two acts on three realistic sets—and clearly delineated characters were soon swept off the Great White Way, but they have graced several other theatres in the very year of opening. . . .

Like Neil Simon, John Guare endows his characters with wit at the expense of credibility. Tending to self-indulgence at the expense of drama, Guare seems most recently to be in control of wit and farce. In *The House of Blue Leaves* we were barely introduced to Guare's Strindbergian characters before they were slammed by Feydeauian doors. A decade later farce simmers down to neurosis in *Bosoms and Neglect*, and the Strindbergian note sounds only in a loveless mother-son family, a loveless daughter-father (offstage) family. True to Broadway desire, a new couple finally forms, and yet the coupling bristles with psychological peril. The contemporary avatar of happy endings is person-to-person warmth, however fragile, however improbable. Sentimentality has a new hard edge.

Ruby Cohn. *New American Dramatists: 1960–1980* (Grove, 1982), pp. 36–41

John Guare has just run his second horse in the Lydie Breeze Sweepstakes, while a third is being saddled up for the next race. At this rate, he will soon have the largest stable in the American theater. Let's wish him luck with his final entry. The first two nags haven't shown the stamina to finish the course, and they are being led to the starting post in confusing chronological order.

Gardenia . . . takes place in 1875 and 1884; *Lydie Breeze* . . . is set in 1895. A few of the events remembered in the latter work are dramatized in the former, while some characters only mentioned in *Lydie Breeze* now constitute the central figures of *Gardenia*. That history is happening in *Gardenia*, rather than being recalled, should result in a more active play. It doesn't. Guare is more controlled here, because less distracted by the progress of spirochete bacilli through his characters' veins, but *Gardenia* remains basically undramatized, a disunified sketch in search of another draft. . . .

It is maddening to find this gifted playwright continually betraying his own talents through a failure of craft. Guare usually provides enough material for a dozen plays. I think his dramaturgy would benefit by his settling on one (how much more powerful *Bosoms and Neglect* would have been had he not diluted a black comedy about death with an irrelevant second act about a cute meet in a psychiatrist's office). We should be grateful that at least one American playwright is willing to create an historical context for his work, but perhaps he should think more about supplementing his readings in revisionist history with some study of Aristotle's *Poetics*. . . .

I await the third play in the trilogy, less out of expectation that it will produce something significant than out of hope that John Guare will finally have gotten this damned Lydie Breeze business out of his system. Perhaps then he can settle down to write a coherent and consistent play—preferably one that observes the unities.

Robert Brustein. *New Republic*. May 19, 1982, pp. 24–25

[John] Guare's early plays—through *Marco Polo*—are whimsical comedies with a dark undercurrent, peopled by unpredictable eccentrics, alternately foolish and violent, for whom everything goes wrong. In *Blue Leaves*, written under the aegis of Strindberg and Feydeau, the director friend of Artie Shaugnessy, the protagonist, flies into New York from Hollywood to mourn his incinerated girlfriend and ends up leaving with Artie's, who's very much alive. *Rich and Famous* takes place on the disastrous opening night of the first produced play (but the eight hundred and forty-third written) by Bing Ringling, the world's oldest living promising young playwright, whose parents end up deserting him for his archrival, the boy next door. *Marco Polo*, set on an island off the coast of Norway in the year 1999, ends just after Tom, whose legs have been eaten by piranhas below the ice floe, makes a remarkable observation: ''I've been reading Chekhov. *Three Sisters*. Those poor girls, all the time trying to get to Moscow. The town they lived in was only forty-eight miles from Moscow. In 1999 that town is probably part of Greater Downtown Moscow. They were in Moscow all the time.''

The evocation of Chekhov is more than coincidental. Guare stands out among his contemporaries for his intricately plot-driven playwriting, filled with both the major reversals and the little ironic surprises—so common in Chekhov—that force characters incessantly to reevaluate their situations. Events never turn out as planned, his characters never get what they want and yet, almost inevitably, they turn their losses into unexpected gain. In a theater dominated by dramas of disillusionment and perdition, Guare has almost single-handedly renovated the classic ironic formula, writing dramas in which recognition issues out of suffering, understanding out of dismay.

David Savran. *In Their Own Words* (New York: Theatre Communications, 1988), pp. 84–85

GUARE: Reality! Everything you do is based on reality. Henry James once said you can soar as high as you can, but you've always got to hang onto a string—the string which holds onto that balloon—and that's a very demanding image. I love to anchor things in reality. My current play, *Six Degrees of Separation*, was inspired in part by an actual event reported in the *Times*. *Bosoms*

and Neglect is based on a terribly real event that happened to me. I believe that any reality is there to use and explore. We have nothing else but that.

DIGAETANI: That reminds me of Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, which is also based on a newspaper story. A newspaper story was what gave Leoncavallo the idea for his opera *I Pagliacci*.

GUARE: Most plays are based on a real event.

DIGAETANI: But I think your talent is not historical but comical. What generates the comedy in your writing?

GUARE: I have no idea. I like to make people laugh, I guess. I don't know.

John L. DiGaetani. *A Search for a Postmodern Theatre: Interviews with Contemporary Playwrights* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Pr., 1991), p. 110

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GUTHRIE, A.B., Jr. (1901–1991)

We shall never know exactly how the mountain men talked; they had no literal reporters. We shall never know as much as we should like about their psychology; they told little of themselves and wrote almost nothing. We do not even know as much as we should just how they dressed, fed. . . . All this has to be patiently reconstructed with historical research, firsthand knowledge of the Western scene, and above all imagination. Mr. Guthrie has not written a great novel (in *The Big Sky*), but he used imagination and study to do an impressive work of reconstruction.

Allan Nevins. *Saturday Review*. May 3, 1947. p. 10

(On *The Big Sky*) A monument of a book! One of those monuments made out of rough boulders, native to the spot, rolled together to serve as a pedestal for a towering bronze figure of epic size. The first monument raised to the men who in the wild emptiness of those middle plains and beyond, in the mountains which are the spine of our country, preceded the home-making pioneer, a monument to the ''mountain man.''

Dorothy Canfield Fisher. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. May 4, 1947. p. 1

I can't help feeling that Mr. Guthrie has applied the realistic technique to material of which the reality cannot be captured by the documentary method. This method serves him well in one respect. The brutality and the plain squalor of life in the early West come through. On the other hand, one suspects that its rather solemn and pedestrian compulsions inhibit him in another respect. Though a few tall tales are spun around campfires, he makes very little use of the humorous myth-making which was and still is a constant and indigenous American way of coping with the overwhelming presence. . . . Mr. Guthrie's mountain men would be more believable if they were more legendary—by which I do not mean romantic.

Margaret Marshall. *The Nation*. May 24, 1947. p. 632

Even more successfully than its predecessor, *The Big Sky*, Mr. Guthrie's second novel (*The Way West*) repossesses the past and gives a sense, not of fiction, but of the Western experience itself as it was totally known a hundred years ago by the men who underwent it, who chose it, and who were re-created by it as Western Americans. Mr. Guthrie writes with modest but sure art, especially in his feeling for the idiom of Western talk and for the narrative style proper to it.

Robert Gorham Davis. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 9, 1949. p. 5

Recollection falters at the attempt to number the troops of fictional tales spawned of Parkman's *Oregon Trail* and the library of overland emigrants' journals. Just as Emerson Hough's *Covered Wagon* was the best of the lot when it appeared, now *The Way West* tops them all; indeed it is another kind of book. They were adventure stories. This is a novel. It is not an action story for action's tumultuous sake, but a story of people.

Elrick B. Davis. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Oct. 9, 1949. p. 3

What emerges above all from a consideration of *These Thousand Hills*, and a glance back at *The Big Sky* and *The Way West*, is the fact that Mr. Guthrie is moved by a fictional purpose as high and valid as his historical purpose is big, and that the two are soundly related, that he is writing, out of the real events of a real world, something like a spiritual epic of the Northwest.

Walter Van Tilburg Clark. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 18, 1956. p. 54

One of the wonderful things about A. B. Guthrie's novels . . . is that they grow out of a great popular literary tradition—the ''Western.''. . . We see how a sort of folk literature, become sterile and puerile to the point of absurdity, can be lifted up. And I think its roots have everything to do with its artistry. There's only a slight difference between it and the better tales in the conventional manner. But that slight difference takes this novel out of the rut to a point where it can take its place beside other superior novels growing out of other traditions the world over. It will hold its own.

Fred T. Marsh. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Nov. 18, 1956. p. 3

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MODERN AMERICAN LITERATURE

MODERN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Volume II • H–O
Fifth Edition

ST. JAMES PRESS
AN IMPRINT OF GALE

DETROIT • LONDON

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Modern American Literature.—5th ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Contents: v. 1. A-G — v. 2. H-O — v. 3. P-Z
ISBN 1-55862-379-5 (set). — ISBN 1-55862-380-9 (v. 1). —
ISBN 1-55862-381-7 (v. 2). — ISBN 1-55862-382-5 (v. 3).
1. American literature—20th century—History and criticism.
PS221.M53 1998
810.9′005—dc21 98-38952
CIP

Printed in the United States of America

St. James Press is an imprint of Gale

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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This new edition of *Modern American Literature* represents a significant advancement in the series. These volumes collate all entries from the original three volumes of the fourth edition, published in 1960, with entries from the three supplements published in 1976, 1985, and 1997, so that all excerpts on a given author now appear in one place. Seventy new entries have been added, bringing the total number of authors discussed to 489, and bibliographies for all authors have been updated. In addition, the format has been simplified. Citations for journal articles now include the full source title, eliminating the need for the abbreviation key used in previous editions, and bibliographies now immediately follow author entries, rather than appearing in a separate section at the back of the book.

The compilers of this edition have built upon the notable efforts of previous editors, each of whom made significant contributions and additions. As in the past, entrants in the series, as well as the sources chosen for excerpting, have been carefully selected to provide broad and instructive overviews of the most significant authors of the modern period in American literature. New authors for this edition have been selected not only on the basis of their prominence but also on their presence in the contemporary curriculum. The richly diverse nature of American letters is reflected in the wide variety of genres represented, from the humorous contemporary tales of Andrei Codrescu to the contemplative nature essays of Annie Dillard to the literary and philosophical speculations of George Steiner. In addition, a concerted effort was made to broaden the cultural scope of the series by presenting discussion of the works of black, Hispanic, and Native American authors, including a number from earlier in this century whose works have until recently been undervalued or ignored, figures such as William Stanley Braithwaite, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, and Alain Locke. As in previous editions, every effort has been made to cull from brief reviews as well as lengthy critical evaluations, and from a wide variety of critical perspectives, showing wherever possible the evolution of an author's reputation and stature.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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GENRE ABBREVIATIONS

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a	autobiography
	adaptation
anthol	anthology
art c	art criticism
b	biography
c	criticism
coll	collection
d	drama/play
e	essay
ed	editor, edition
h	history
	interview
j	journalism
juv	juvenile, children's literature
l	letters
	lecture(s)
m	memoir
misc	miscellany
n	novel, novella
nf	nonfiction
	opera libretto
p	poetry
	pamphlet
	photographs
pd	poetic drama, verse play
r	reminiscence
rd	radio drama
s	story, stories
scrp	screenplay
sk	sketches
t	travel writing
tr	translation
tv	television play, television drama

H

HACKER, Marilyn (1942–)

Marilyn Hacker's intelligence, wit, passion and craft have delighted her readers ever since *Presentation Piece* announced her arrival a decade ago. *Assumptions*, her fourth book, moves us with new strength and nerve. Hacker continues to explore the forms, powers and attributes a woman can assume, searching her past as the poems move from personal to mythic expressions of a woman's progress toward herself.

The personal tone of her work is clearest in the section of the book called ''Inheritances,'' where the pain of the past is revisited through the poet's relationship with her mother, for example, in this sonnet:

> We shopped for dresses which were
> always wrong:
> sweatshop approximations of the lean-
> lined girls' wear I studied in Seventeen.
> The armholes pinched, the belt didn't
> belong,
> the skirt drooped forward (I'd be told at
> school).
> Our odd-lot bargains deformed the
> image,
> but she and I loved Saturday rummage.
> One day she listed outside Loehmann's.
> Drool
> wet her chin. Stumbling, she screamed
> at me. Dropping
> our parcels on the pavement, she fell in
> what looked like a fit. I guessed: insulin.
> The cop said, ''Drunk,'' and called an
> ambulance
> while she cursed me and slapped away
> my hands.
> When I need a mother, I still go
> shopping.
> (''Fourteen'')

Another poem, ''Mother,'' gives us some biographical facts while making it clear that what Hacker doesn't know about her mother is almost more significant than what she does. In part it's that ignorance that forces her to reconsider the past. Her own daughter, Iva, helps precipitate the poet's journey back, asking questions about her black Christian and white Jewish immigrant forebears. The stories must be told, must be heard.

Hacker sees her mother, herself and Iva in relation to one another. Her recollected distance from her mother is now measured against what her own daughter may feel for her. In ''Towards Autumn,'' she writes, ''I missed the words to make friends with my mother,'' and ''Befriend / yourself: I couldn't have known to tell my mother / that, unless I'd learned it for myself. / Until I do.'' The older and younger generations skewer Hacker between them in many of these poems, creating a tension that strengthens and enlarges them beyond those addressed to Iva in her third book, *Taking Notice*.

Many mothers are celebrated in this book, but accepting her own, with all the forgiveness that implies, is Hacker's most difficult and liberating assumption. We've been prepared for such a pardon by these lines from the ''Regent's Park Sonnets,'' in *Taking Notice*:

> It was not my mother or my daughter
> who did me in. Women have been
> betrayed
> by history, which ignores us, which
> we made
> like anyone, with work and words,
> slaughter
> and silver.

Now, in *Assumptions*, come the poems that forgive.

Hacker moves out of the familial house of the first section in a group of thirteen sonnets called ''Open Windows.'' Speaking both to herself and to a lover, she airs such subjects as freedom and solitude, the roles of lover and mother, desire and satisfaction, justice and the disinherited.

Her tone shifts from intimacy and vulnerability to irony and vulnerability in ''Graffiti from the Gare Saint-Manqué,'' a 170-line variation on the *ballade suprème* which wryly considers the life of a lesbian: ''The sin we are / beset by is despair.'' The poem leaps borders and centuries; as in Hacker's earlier work, travel is an outward expression of the interior journey of the soul or libido. Like the title of the book, *Assumptions*, the diction of this poem rings Catholic bells: ''Saint,'' ''communicants,'' ''sin,'' ''celebrants,'' ''salvation,'' ''nuns.'' Hacker suggests the creation of a new faith for unbelievers in the old.

If, in the first section, the poet retrieves and invents her mother so that she and her daughter can understand and live their own lives, she appropriates a myth for a similar purpose in ''The Snow Queen,'' a narrative sequence of eight poems. Again the work centers on mothers and daughters: the Robber Woman and the Robber Girl; the Snow Queen and her daughters; and Gerda, who must find other women to mother her. While in Hans Christian Andersen's tale Gerda's quest is for Kay, her male friend lured away by the Snow Queen, in Hacker's version he is only a pretext. Her real search is for herself. In ''Gerda in the Eyrie,'' Gerda addresses the Robber Girl: ''I almost love you. I've wanted to be you / all my life. You are asleep in the straw / with my story.'' In contrast to the Robber Girl, Gerda has inhabited a tiny world, by her own assent: ''But I was happy where I was . . . I sat still.'' In the poem's final image, Gerda merges with her alter ego, suggesting the possibility of change.

''The Snow Queen'' section closes with a prose poem, an encomium to ''bad old ladies,'' who greet age with gusto on their own terms and are rewarded when their ''daughters slog across the icecap to get drunk'' with them. This image leads to the collection's final poem, a homage to the poet's ''mothers,'' literary and historical.

That poem, ''Ballad of Ladies Lost and Found,'' balances the earlier ''Graffiti'' in form and tone, finally lightening the book. While any archness in both poems can be read as protective, this is perhaps not the best note for *Assumptions* to end on. But since the

poet's shaping of the book has been so deliberate, we must conclude the effect is intended. Hacker's strengths have always been most impressive in sequences and long poems—large structures that provide ample space for the play of her range. While no sequence in *Assumptions* has the intensity of the title poem in *Taking Notice*, the whole volume reads more like a single poem.

The formal dexterity we expect from Hacker animates *Assumptions*. Whereas Adrienne Rich (who has inspired and emboldened her) discarded the formalism of her earlier poems, Hacker continues to explore a multiplicity of forms, ''venerable vessels for subversive use.'' Hacker's work is political, looking toward a new order of things. Hence, when she writes in forms associated with the primarily male poets canonized by literary history, it is as if she were slipping, in broad daylight, into a well-guarded preserve. She uses the decorous sonnet, sestina and villanelle to contain a vernacular, often racy speech. Playing against formal conventions and the surrounding language of the poems are lines like ''Unsaintly ordinary female queers'' and ''(whenever I'm horny, I first think I'm/hungry)'' and ''I wish I had my knife. I bet she'll drop/it and lose it, or give it to that drip/and never use it for herself. Piss on her!'' In another poet, Hacker's formalism may seem imitative or passé. Her subject and emotional range make it a claim to ownership.

In *Assumptions*, her most moving and personal book to date, Hacker reconciles all manner of polarities. More than ever, her poems make us forget to admire their technical brilliance. They deepen and expand our conception of what it is to be a woman.

> Carole S. Oles.*The Nation*, New York. April 27, 1985, pp. 506–09.

The sonnet sequence, indeed lyrical love poetry itself, has faded out of fashion. In our age of control the poetry of helplessness, which is what love poetry inevitably must be, is disdained. But John Berryman wrote a magnificent sonnet sequence in the 1940s (not published until the late 1960s), in a casual conversational style that masked the strictness of his form, recognizable iambic pentameter in the difficult Petrarchan rhyme scheme. (The Petrarchan form, with its minimal number of rhymes, is constricting in English, which has relatively few rhyming words. It was modified early in the sixteenth century by Surrey and further refined by Shakespeare.) Berryman's poems allude to cities and countryside, newspaper reports, accidents, police cars, jukeboxes, parties, other people, drinking and work, especially the work of writing poetry—a twentieth-century innovation, identifying process and product. They have plot elements too: separations willed and involuntary; the fears, jealousy and frustrations inherent in adulterous affairs; but above all, and uniquely, the character of the adored Lise, who is no idealized Lady but a vivid, passionate, thinking woman.

And now we have a new sonnet sequence, Marilyn Hacker's *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons*. Hacker clearly knows, and was perhaps influenced by, Berryman, but her prime model is Shakespeare, as the book's epigraph and many allusions testify. For it was Shakespeare who wrote love poems to a person of the same sex much younger than he, and whose sonnet ''sequence'' (as far as we know, he himself did not arrange it as one) contains poems addressed or referring to someone other than the beloved young man, a person we call the Dark Lady.

Hacker's sequence has a jazzy New York ambiance which is really a point of view, and it carries over into foreign scenes. In keeping with this, it is written in extremely slangy, sometimes ''obscene'' English, with equally slangy French interspersed. The emotional drama is interwoven with a detailed context of places and people and the events of daily life. The first lines set the tone:

> You hailed a cab outside the
> nondescript
> yuppie bar on Lexington to go
> downtown. Hug; hug; this time I
> brushed my lips
> just across yours, and fire down below
> in February flared.

We learn in this poem that the beloved has ''someone . . . waiting up at home''; the third sonnet, addressed to Bill, a friend, tells us that the beloved is 25; and the fifth, that the narrator is considerably older (42, we discover later). The narrator—at one point she calls herself Hack—has an 11-year-old daughter, Iva, who lives with her part of the year. Hack has been without erotic love for such a long time ''that I honestly / wondered if I'd outgrown it.'' The beloved is Rachel, sometimes called Ray; the two met in a poetry class taught by Hack, in which Rachel is a student:

> Class night: osmotic energy
> got all the girls in gear. Tight forms to
> tame
> only made them write funkier, slang
> their diction down. I know some of
> them know
> (besides Elaine); still, it was brash to
> throw
> my Bic at you, and, oh dear, yes, I
> sang
> ''You Are My Soul and My Heart's In-
> spiration,'' to amplify the echoes in your poem.

The plot has considerable tension. Rachel lives with someone she calls her wife; Hack won't get involved with her because ''infidelity's/the kind of bad taste that leaves a bad taste/worse than the mouse breath of a hangover.'' At the same time, ''I want you so much I can taste it''; ''I'm horny as a timber wolf in heat. / Three times a night, I tangle up the sheet. / I seem to flirt with everything with tits:/. . .I think I ought to be kept off the street.'' Eventually, the two women do come together but the tension remains, a sense that the poet loves more than she is loved. Rachel admonishes her, ''need me less and I'll want you more''; the poet helplessly explains, ''I feel damned / by wanting you so much it looks like need.''

The erotic element is strong in these poems, and expressed without self-censorship, in references to fucking and explicit descriptions of love making. The entire account is frank. It does not blink at jealousy:

> I wish Kim hadn't made a pass at you.
> I wish she hadn't asked you not to tell
> me
> she had. Oh hell, I wish that she would
> call me,
> so she and I, *copines*, could talk it
> through.

or self-consciousness:

> Il y avait au moins une trentaine de
> guoines

(that's ''dykes'' in French) come listen
to me
sound off (in French) and read some
poetry
(in English).

Both women worry, in a twenty-five-line villanelle, ''Do people look at me and know I'm gay?'' Rachel's unhappiness about not having children because she is a lesbian is addressed in three poems called ''Having Kittens About Having Babies.''

There is considerable movement in space, as the two women take cabs and buses around the city: Rachel lives in Chelsea and has a white bedroom; the poet lives uptown and has a blue bedroom. They visit bars and parks across the city, shop in Bloomingdale's. The poet goes to Paris, where she has an apartment in the Marais; to Vence in the south of France, where her close friend Julie lives; to Florence. The lovers go together to Provincetown (P'town), where they have friends. Rachel travels in her job, for a ''Commissar'' of a boss.

Berryman's sequence also details places, bits of the scene, allusions to the ongoing life of the lovers. But Hacker's is very much a *woman's* sonnet sequence: it embraces all elements of life equally. Nothing is too insignificant to be included. Rachel, Hack and Iva play ball in Central or Riverside Park; Iva listens to Cindi Lauper on headphones on the plane to France; Hack does the laundry; she writes out shopping lists, goes marketing, prepares meals (not just *''lapin / à la moutarde''* and ''cassoulet / with goose from Carcassonne, let *mijoter* / on the burner till nightfall'' but even leftovers); she walks in the countryside around Vence; she picks blackberries. Hack teaches; Rachel works for the Commissar. Both women work composing poetry, and Hacker, like Berryman, identifies the act and its issue.

The lovers are embedded in a dense social context: the names and actions and words of friends and acquaintances weave through the poems. Besides the beloved Julie, Jacqueline (Jax) and Erzsi, there are Alice, Meg, Karyn; Sonny, Britt, David, Joanna, Kim and Catherine, the Countess, elegant and arrogant, who was still carousing at 92. The lovers also carouse. There is frequent heavy drinking; there are hangovers. There are deaths here, too, and two funerals. The lovers' world is, if anything, too peopled; it is hard for them to find time to be alone together. Comings and goings swirl around them, never glamorized, always recognizable. They quarrel in the car, while Iva sulks in the back seat; they have dinner with friends (''*magret de canard . . . escargots*''); they go dancing in gay bars; they make love; or Hack lies alone, in longing.

This inclusion of domestic, personal details creates the texture of a life lived in body as well as mind, of suffering and satisfying appetites sexual and sensuous, in an inclusive world. Love is not a thing apart, a spiritual or romantic quest elevated above the quotidian, but one strand of a diverse, disorderly, mentally and physically rich experience. The poet accepts all of self and all of life; she celebrates living. The characters eat, drink, excrete. They experience love, friendship, betrayal; motherhood and the longing for motherhood; jealousy, estrangement, loneliness; the seasons and their natural manifestations. They are acquainted with what is disgusting, foolish, childish, erotic, maternal, joyous, serene, painful—with everything real. Like Hopkins, Hacker praises ''All things counter, original, spare, strange;/Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?) / With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim.'' But, unlike Hopkins, she does it without excluding any part of life.

Hacker uses a loose sonnet form, varying the rhyme scheme of the sestet considerably. There are sets of linked sonnets, the last line of one being picked up, sometimes with variation, as the first line of the next. Her rhythms are often jerky, mixing four-stress lines and unscannable lines with iambic pentameter. They are not graceful, lyrical, but are often strong. Strength, indeed, is necessary to make up for the lack of music. A couple of the sonnets are formed with two (separated) half-lines; a few expanded villanelles are included. Some of the poems are addressed to friends, as letters. There are allusions to a wide range of literary sources, but especially to Shakespeare, and first lines that echo his, like, ''From you I will be absent as the spring / turns into summer.''

Some of the sonnets end weakly (can we refer this too to Shakespeare, whose concluding couplets often seem perfunctory?):

I'll take books to the park—it
is a fine day. I miss you very much.
We do it once like ladies, once like
tramps.
We love each other very very much.
Sometimes the conceits seem forced:
(It's either that or lie awake and stew
more.)
(I wish that there were only beef to
stew.)

And sometimes the rhyme, as in ''Tack-/y,'' or ''disdain/ing.'' There are a few lines in which the sense is opaque.

But these are minor problems. A more serious problem is the emotional range of the poems. Although they contain a great variety of experiences, suggesting that the poet censors nothing, refuses to treat any part of living as illegitimate, Hacker does seem to censor her emotional expression: she never permits herself to express anger. This would not matter if there were not situations in the narrative that call for anger, poems in which anger hangs faintly, distantly, like an echo in a room where music played hours before, or the backcloth for a play so often performed, so familiar, that the reporter feels the scene does not need to be described. One misses it. Hacker is aware of this lack, aware that ''Grown-ups, at least, will not rush to applaud. They / won't believe you.'' Still, she insists she feels only loss and sorrow.

Altogether, though, *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons* is deeply satisfying. It allows the reader, in the concentrated and vivid way only poetry provides, to be immersed in the texture of one woman's actuality. And so detailed is that texture that the life stands, regardless of the outcome of the love affair. Unlike any other love poems I know, Hacker's sequence provides a context that offers a tacit explanation of how one can go on when the heart is shattered.

Marilyn French. *The Nation*, New York. November 1, 1986, pp. 442–47.

Marilyn Hacker's poems from the beginning of her career have established a unique counterpoint between classical rhyming forms—sestina, sonnet, villanelle—and blunt declarative sentences to display the deranged obsessiveness of contemporary minds. Her hard-edged language in the 1970s is darkly jewel-encrusted, redolent of a devastated inner world of difficult loving, tangled sexuality, and convoluted relationships. Semiprecious gems—onyx, amethyst, alexandrite—express the hardness, mystery, and richness of

experience. Lured by the foreign and strange, Hacker invents ''imaginary translations,'' playing with exotic locales and overblown emotions. Almost tours de force, these poems lead into her central concern, the elucidation of her own intense passions, sexual, moral, and political.

Love is the premier passion which runs as a continuing strand from the earlier to the later work. Because the poem sequence ''Separations,'' from the volume of that title, is written in sonnet form, it de-emphasizes obsession and becomes a graceful, almost Shakespearean delineation of the aspects of love, which always springs up lively and ubiquitous despite the poet's difficulties. But love always arouses thoughts of death, as in the opening poem of *Presentation Piece* (1974), in which she speaks to ''the skull of the beloved'' as a brooding nobleman in a Jacobean play addresses the skull of his dead mistress. ''The Navigators'' foreshadows the heartbroken elegy ''Geographer'' in *Separations* (1976), a poem which unites in formal sestinalike word repetition her continuing themes of death, cities, gems, language, and painful but persisting love.

''Persisting love'' as a descriptive phrase grossly understates the obsession with a young lover that besieges Hacker for a year in *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons* (1986). This ''verse novel,'' as she calls it, is a book-length sonnet sequence emphasizing physical love almost exclusively as the poet waits, in various situations, to be united with Rachel, called Ray. The poems perform in explicit, masculinized language a *Kama Sutra* of fantasized ways of lovemaking. When Ray breaks off the affair, the poet plunges into the utter bleakness, without perspective, of the coda's final poems. But these clarify an underlying motif: her lust arose from the foredoomed but irresistible wish to be young again. By 1990, in *Going Back to the River,* Hacker is on a more even keel, enjoying good food, drink, and the landscapes of two continents and appreciating quotidian objects. All is not pleasure, however; the unassimilable horrors of wartime experience and persecution of the Jews in France are evoked in ''Days of 1944: Three Friends.'' Thus reminded of her Jewishness, Hacker meditates further on her ethnic background and her parents' lives in the title poem of this volume, as the rivers she goes back to—Thames, Hudson, Seine—are seen not as destinations but as reminders of the flux and uncertainties of experience.

Flux has, however, in a sense become a way of life—Hacker has homes in both New York and Paris—by the time she writes *Winter Numbers* (1994). Here the incorporation of French words renders her forms more supple and varied while also enriching the poems' sense of place. Her internationalism lessens the pain of change, making it a modus vivendi, a respite from narrow American prejudices. But her consciousness of painful change escalates as personal losses through AIDS and cancer assail her. Death is the ultimate change which everyone fears. The word ''numbers'' in the book's title has multiple associations: with the metrics of poetry, with mileage, with dates and time periods—the length of time, for instance, between diagnosis of illness and surgery or death. In the book's last section, ''Cancer Winter,'' meditation on her own uncertain fate after breast cancer is enlarged to include history and the fates of those dead in the Holocaust.

The skilled use of form to serve candid observation, the ability to register ephemeral beauty, the strength to face oncoming death for herself, for everyone—these powers infuse Hacker's poems and serve as a mark of their profundity and accomplishment.

Jane Augustine. In *Contemporary Poets, 6th edition,*, ed. Thomas Riggs (St. James Press, 1996).

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HALL, Donald (1928–)

Although Donald Hall's [*The Alligator Bride: Poems Selected and New*] offers work both recent and early (the latter somewhat revised) and although it clearly shows his poetic manner shifting to accommodate, or at least to accompany, the changing styles of 20 years, certain features are consistent from beginning to end; consistent and curiously old-fashioned. We are reminded of the period when Hall began to write, the late forties and early fifties.

The past, Hall says, is better than the present. Grandfathers are superior to fathers, middle-aged lovers make better love than young lovers. The values of early generations of New Hampshire farmers were more humane and reasonable than the values of their descendants. In his own life the poet's progress toward middle age, or even old age, brings him nearer to freedom, discovery, and a wise appreciation of pleasure.

Yet because this progress ends in death, and because past values are irretrievably past, Hall's attitude is touched with inevitable irony. His celebration of pleasure is imbued with a sense of loss. He is, in short, hung up on the conventional dilemma of metaphysical poets, which he meets by conventional means: his poems are elegiac in tone, and civil, subdued and orderly in manner. The alternative, he would say, is insanity.

There is obvious truth in this, and obvious importance too. . . . But this is not the truth that most Americans want to hear today. Nor is Hall's poetic decorum, with its roots in literary tradition, what attracts their notice. . . .

A second point concerns Hall's attitude toward natural objects. For him they are things to be manipulated in the poet's favor, ''objective correlatives.'' A stone, tree, bird or animal is significant only as it transmits meanings from outside itself, meanings which are verbally imposed. This is the attitude of Yeats, Eliot, and many great poets of 40 years ago. Call it Neo-Symbolism or Post-Symbolism if you will; it is still Symbolism, and its roots are deep in the Transcendental past.

To the great majority of American poets today, however, working under the influence of Pound, Williams, Zukofsky and the Black Mountain school, this view is not only wrong but evil. The objects of our world have their own meanings, natural meanings, which poets have no right to manipulate. Instead the poet's work is to represent the objects in their pristine selfhood, not as symbols of his feeling but as counterparts, or simple presences. . . .

The point here is that, next to the clear-cut poems of the objectivists, Hall's symbolic poems, even his leanest and sharpest, are likely to seem murky and portentous by comparison.

Yet sometimes it is easier to judge a poet who is out of fashion than one who is in. If a poem projects through its facade of quaintness, so to speak, and genuinely touches us, then probably it

is a success. How great a success doesn't matter; we call it, loosely but reasonably, a good poem. Hall's most famous poem, his early ''Elegy for Wesley Wells,'' in which the poet grieves for the death of a New Hampshire farmer and the values he represents, is not a good poem. . . .

But a few of Hall's poems from the middle and later parts of his book do break through: ''The Snow,'' ''The Stump,'' ''The Long River,'' ''Swan,'' perhaps three or four others. These, more cleanly written and less derivative than the early poems, have attracted strong advocates and many readers, and doubtless have earned a place, in the New England tradition.

Hayden Carruth. *The New York Times Book Review*. September 13, 1970, p. 38.

Hall knows as much about poetry as anyone in America; instead of staying with that relatively austere and respectable concern, [in *Remembering Poets: Reminiscences and Opinions*] he has chosen—with a humility and generosity that are characteristic—to navigate in the murkier waters of the poetry scene, that is to say, of the poet's relation with his public. And so he has written a book about what it means to be a poet in the English-speaking world in the 20th century.

His account is not speculative, but grounded in particular episodes and occasions recalled and recreated with the richness and nuance of the great storyteller or—that rarer creature—the great biographer. [Dylan Thomas, Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound] come before us as individual, fallible human beings trying to cope with the conditions of 20th-century living while yet not betraying their poetic calling. The difficulty of that—in the long run the impossibility of it—could have provided Hall with many an easy irony; instead, what he makes it yield is sorrow and sometimes anger.

There are some places—notably in the poignant pages devoted to a self-accusing Ezra Pound known through several days in Rome in the early 1960's—where the book provides information that will have to be taken account of by responsible scholars. . . . But these are incidental bonuses. The central achievement is in humanizing the poetic endeavor, by bringing it down once again to the fact of an isolated individual trying to speak to, and be heard by, his concerned contemporaries.

I suspect that Donald Hall has written a modern classic. Certainly his unassuming memoir of these four poets can most valuably, for the common reader, bypass and cut through many shelves' worth of learned commentaries and exegeses. He proffers from time to time, notably on Eliot, his own ultimately Freudian explanation of why, alike in the life and in the writings, a poet's career took the shape it did. I am not persuaded—because I'm not persuaded by the Freudian schema that in its outlines Hall takes to be axiomatic. But that, too, is beside the point: The diagnoses are tentative, the evidence is presented with a fullness and a fairness that permit and even invite quite different explanations. And no one can afford to disagree with Hall's central and passionate contention—that great poetry is a record of sanity maintained and achieved, not of sickness pushed to the hysterical and suicidal limit. If there is a sickness in the life of each of these poets—and we must surely agree with Hall that there is—in three of the cases (Thomas is the exception) the lives and the poetry show us the sickness not indulged and exacerbated, but heroically if partially surmounted by, and in the interest of, the art. (pp. 15, 33).

Donald Davie. *New York Times Book Review*. February 19, 1978, pp. 15, 33.

Once in a great while a book of poems comes along and one feels that a time has been spoken for. Such is the happy occasion with Donald Hall's *The One Day*, a book that recently, deservedly, received the National Book Critics Circle Award in poetry. A book-length poem in three parts, *The One Day* has about it the wicked satire of a Tom Wolfe, an Old Testament razzmatazz of rant, a prophetic energy akin to Allen Ginsberg's ''Howl,'' and a lyricism which bears Hall's fully developed signature. One thinks of books, among contemporaries, such as Galway Kinnell's *The Book of Nightmares* or A. R. Ammons' *Sphere*, to compare how both ambition and the brickwork of construction might meld themselves into a single structure and presence.

With Picasso's assertion that ''Every human being is a colony'' as its credo, *The One Day* is built within an arc of juxtaposed shifts that advance elliptically a multiple protagonist, an almost simultaneous speaking of characters who waft in and out, and the undersong of the book is the choral pitch of so many attempting to do what they want to do. . . .

Hall has long kept his eye and ear upon what is old, what is historical, what seems *behind* us yet is still living with us, and with *The One Day* he moves out into a different terrain from his recent mature books, *Kicking the Leaves* and *The Happy Man*. His ear is still wrapped around the sounds of words and there is a characteristic adherence to the marked rhythms wherein time itself is given form, but the mordant and bloody-minded surge of much of *The One Day* has about it a much surer sense of drama and its throughlines. This is a refinement over his earliest poetry, which was sometimes marred by its own precosity and use of irony, particularly where that irony could not find the means to dramatize itself and find full closure.

Characters and images of stasis and torpor haunt the beginning of the book, lives prevented by the disappointment that was theirs to inherit, lives now grown into an American culture where idleness and entropy are seen to prevent any authentic love or real work. Busyness has become business, and passion is sublimated into distraction and an entertainment unto death. One of the most inspired sections of *The One Day* is the poem ''Pastoral,'' in which a mock-shepherd and shepherdess pipe their song of adultery back and forth to each other—easily some of the funniest and most wincing writing about adultery, and about the suburbs in general, I've ever read. Byron once said, ''If fools be my theme, let satire be my song,'' but as *The One Day* moves toward its climax we know that fools are not here Hall's theme. His writing is invaded by a sympathy for all that lives, even as satire and rage hover everywhere about what seems, often, only our ridiculous enduring of ourselves.

The final section of the book, ''To Build a House,'' is in fact a coming to terms with the soul's need for repose, based on that ''third thing'' we look out upon in the mix of our love and building. ''Work, love, build a house, and die,'' Hall writes, ''But build a house.'' The artistry of *The One Day* is itself evidence of such a triumph of real work, and I suspect those of us who come to poetry for an ultimate spareness of expression—and for even another

reason: wisdom—will be pulling this book from our shelves for some time. It will even revive those who think they hate poetry, who are convinced they really can't stand The Stuff.

Liam Rector. *Los Angeles Times Book Review*. February 5, 1989, p. 3.

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HAMMETT, Dashiell (1894–1961)

It is doubtful if even Ernest Hemingway has ever written more effective dialogue than may be found within the pages of this extraordinary tale of gunmen, gin and gangsters [*Red Harvest*]. The author displays a style of amazing clarity and compactness, devoid of literary frills and furbelows, and his characters, who race through the story with the rapidity and destructiveness of machine guns, speak the crisp, hard-boiled language of the underworld. Moreover, they speak it truly, without a single false or jarring note, for Mr. Hammett, himself an old-time Pinkerton detective, knows his crime and criminals through many years of personal contact. Those who begin to weary of the similarity of modern detective novels, with their clumsily involved plots and their artificial situations and conversations, will find their interest revived by this realistic, straightforward story, for it is concerned solely with fast and furious action and it introduces a detective who achieves his purposes without recourse to higher mathematics, necromancy or fanciful reasoning. It reads like the latest news from Chicago.

Herbert Asbury. *Bookman*. March, 1929. p. 92

Now that Dashiell Hammett is beginning to be taken seriously by the highbrows, my first enthusiasm for him is beginning to cool a little. Not that *The Thin Man* is not a first-rate murder story and one that only Dashiell Hammett could have written. But, perhaps because he has turned the trick so easily before that he is now getting a little tired of it, perhaps because we are beginning to notice that he sometimes repeats his effects, *The Thin Man* seems a less excitingly fresh performance than, say, *The Maltese Falcon*. It is still head-and-shoulders above any other murder story published since his last one. . . .

One reason why Hammett's books have been so outstanding, aside from the naturalism of his style, the careless humanity of his characters, is that his murders are gangster-political affairs; they come naturally out of his tough backgrounds, instead of being the kind of academic and farfetched bridge problems in a vacuum of the ordinary detective story writer.

T.S. Matthews. *New Republic*. Jan. 24, 1934. p. 316

Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; and with the means at hand, not hand-wrought dueling pistols, curare, and tropical fish. He put these people down on paper as they were, and he made them talk and think in the language they customarily used for these purposes.

He had a literary style, but his audience didn't know it, because it was in a language not supposed to be capable of such refinements. They thought they were getting a good meaty melodrama written in the kind of lingo they imagined they spoke themselves. It was, in a sense, but it was much more. All language begins with speech, and the speech of common men at that, but when it develops to the point of becoming a literary medium it only looks like speech. Hammett's style at its worst was as formalized as a page of *Marius the Epicurean;* at its best it could say almost anything. I believe this style, which does not belong to Hammett or to anybody, but is the American language (and not even exclusively that any more), can say things he did not know how to say, or feel the need of saying. In his hands it had no overtones, left no echo, evoked no image beyond a distant hill.

Hammett is said to have lacked heart; yet the story he himself thought the most of is the record of a man's devotion to a friend. He was spare, frugal, hard-boiled, but he did over and over again what only the best writers can ever do at all. He wrote scenes that seemed never to have been written before.

Raymond Chandler. *Atlantic Monthly*. Dec., 1944. p. 58

Understand, there is a great difference between type and style. After the success of *The Maltese Falcon*, many writers began to imitate Hammett's *style*, which was distinct and original with him. I think of all the early pulp writers who contributed to the new format of the detective story, the word ''genius'' was more nearly applicable to Hammett than to any of the rest. Unfortunately, however, because Hammett's manner was so widely imitated, it became the habit for the reviewers to refer to ''the Hammett School'' as embracing the *type* of story as well as the *style*. This has caused some confusion. [Carroll John] Daly did as much, or more, than any other author to develop the *type*.

Erle Stanley Gardner in *The Art of the Mystery Story*, edited by Howard Haycraft (Simon). 1946. pp. 204–5

Hammett is the acknowledged founder of the hard-boiled school which specializes in word savagery—savagery in style, sophistication, sex, slugging, and sleuthing. Just how does Hammett achieve, against a background of sheer melodrama, the brittle lacquer of realism which we now associate with the hard-boiled species? The secret lies in his method: Hammett tells modern fairy tales in *terms* of realism. He combines extreme romanticism of plot with extreme realism of characterization. His *stories* are the stuff of dreams; his *characters* are the flesh-and-blood of reality. The stories are flamboyant extravaganzas, but the characters in those stories are authentic human beings who talk, think, and act like real people. Their speech is tough, earthy, two-syllabled; their desires, moods, frustrations are laid bare with probing frankness.

Ellery Queen. *Queen's Quorum* (Little). 1951. p. 101

I had known Dash when he was writing short stories, but I had never been around for a long piece of work. Life changed: the drinking stopped, the parties were over. The locking-in time had come and nothing was allowed to disturb it until the book was finished. I had never seen anybody work that way: the care for every word, the pride in the neatness of the typed page itself, the refusal for ten days or two weeks to go out even for a walk for fear something would be lost.

Lillian Hellman. *New York Review of Books*. Nov. 25, 1965. p. 20

The characteristics of Hammett's ''daemonic'' tough guy, with significant variations in the last two novels, can be schematized as follows: he is free of sentiment, of the fear of death, of the temptations of money and sex. He is what Albert Camus calls ''a man without memory,'' free of the burden of the past. He is capable of any action, without regard to conventional morality, and thus is apparently as amoral—or immoral—as his antagonists. His refusal to submit to the trammels which limit ordinary mortals results in a godlike immunity and independence, beyond the power of his enemies. He himself has under his control the pure power that is needed to reach goals, to answer questions and solve mysteries, to reconstruct the (possible) motivations of the guilty and innocent alike. Hammett's novels . . . present a ''critique'' of the tough guy's freedom as well: the price he pays for his power is to be cut off behind his own self-imposed masks, in an isolation that no criminal, in a community of crime, has to face.

Robert I. Edenbaum in *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties*, edited by David Madden (Southern Illinois). 1968. p. 81

What [Hammett's] stories have, even the earliest and least of them, is a flavor wholly individual. This flavor comes partly from the bareness of a style in which everything superficial in the way of description has been surgically removed, partly from his knowledge of actual criminal investigation, and partly from the wistful cynicism with which he wrote. . . .

With all his innovations of form and language, Hammett kept the puzzle element from the orthodox detective story. . . . The problems are composed just as skillfully as those in an orthodox detective story, but in the best of Hammett they are the beginning and not the end of the book's interest. *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Glass Key* offer a gallery of characters and scenes unexcelled in the crime story, all of them seen with a Dickinson sense of the truth in caricature.

Julian Symons. *Mortal Consequences* (Harper). 1972. pp. 137–9

The rebellion in crime fiction started . . . with Dashiell Hammett. From *Red Harvest* (1929) to *The Thin Man* (1934), his books used the hero as a man who was not far removed from the criminal elements he combatted. No fancy pants, he was ready to shoot or hit and to use illegal means to finish a case. Solutions were less important than the need to settle a job: that's what he got paid for. Nor was this an intellectual mandarin outwitting the stereotypical dumb police, but a professional of crime who knew that the police are—seriously—either incapable of solving certain crimes because of the orthodoxy of their methods or unwilling to solve them for political reasons. Organized crime became part of the world of fiction so that the miscreant was no longer a peculiar individual with even remote socially acceptable motives, but a faceless cog in a large machine which used violence with a ruthless neutrality.

The writing itself changed. Hammett's style is bare and terse, with a delivery that is direct and to the point, while the tone is cynical. Action and style support each other: both have a relentlessness which makes events seem inevitable. Though the detection puzzle remained, there was now more emphasis on atmosphere and characterization. This was the saving grace of the particular development, variously called the ''thriller,'' ''private-eye fiction,'' the ''hard-boiled school of writing,'' or the ''crime novel.'' In terms of literature it made something mandatory which only talent can provide: style.

E.M. Beekman. *Massachusetts Review*. Winter, 1973. p. 151

When Hammett turns [from criminals] to the respectable world, the world of respectable society, of affluence and influence, of open personal and political power, he finds only more of the same. The respectability of respectable American society is as much a fiction and a fraud as the phony respectable society fabricated by the criminals. Indeed, he unwaveringly represents the world of crime as a reproduction in both structure and detail of the modern capitalist society that it depends on, preys off, and is part of. But Hammett does something even more radical than this. He not only continually juxtaposes and connects the ambiguously fictional worlds of art and of writing with the fraudulently fictional worlds of society; he connects them, juxtaposes them, and sees them in dizzying and baffling interaction. He does this in many ways and on many occasions. One of them, for example, is the Maltese Falcon itself, which turns out to be and contains within itself the history of capitalism. It is originally a piece of plunder, part of what Marx called the ''primitive accumulation''; when its gold encrusted with gems is painted over, it becomes a mystified object, a commodity itself; it is a piece of property that belongs to no one—whoever possesses it does not really own it. At the same time it is another fiction, a representation or work of art—which turns out itself to be a fake, since it is made of lead.

It is a *rara avis* indeed. As is the fiction in which it is created and contained, the novel by Hammett.

Steven Marcus. Introduction to *The Continental Op* by Dashiell Hammett (Random). 1974. pp. xxiv–xxv

The works Hammett didn't write must give way to the ones he did. To move from surmising about what never happened in favor of discussing the real and the achieved is to clear a path to the art of fast-paced adventure and intrigue. Hammett has the craft of good narration well in hand. He writes fresh, muscular prose; he controls his materials; he knows how to seize and then hold the reader. . . . Much of Hammett's best work sustains this vibrancy by means of color, concreteness, and a sharp eye for both social detail and historical change. Sometimes, he wins the day by avoiding vibrancy. The precision of flat, bald factual statements recounted in toneless sequence conveys menace. . . .

Most often, Hammett stirs our imaginations by using forms and norms traditionally associated with crime fiction. He knew the aesthetic limits of his medium and kept within them. . . .

What other writers grope for, Hammett knows instinctively. He doesn't narrate. Instead, he makes things happen to people. Then he makes us wonder where the excitement came from and what it meant. There is little in his plots to stretch on the rack of literary theory. Hammett puts forth a personal vision that expresses itself in movement and conflict. There is little moral struggle, the characters having already lost their battles with conscience. Before they come to us, they have decided to rob, deceive a husband, wife, or business associate, steal—even kill for—the falcon. Hammett heightens but won't brood or analyze, showing the effects rather than the development of psychological drama. Vivid in both conception and execution, these effects translate well to radio and screen. . . .

Hammett avoids giving insights into his characters' thoughts and feelings in order to compel greater reader participation. The Op reacts neither morally nor emotionally to the twin discovery of a corpse alongside him and the apparent murder weapon, an ice pick, in his hand when he wakes from a drugged sleep in *Red Harvest*. His composure creates a high degree of intensity, yoking form to content while forcing the reader to question motives. But it also blocks expansiveness. If Hammett's people change or grow, they keep it to themselves. Rarely do we see a character converted or reborn. Experience teaches little in Hammett, even the experience of terror. . . .

Hammett's first-hand knowledge of crime-stopping gave American detective fiction both a freshness and a command it never enjoyed before. The narrative drive resulting in part from his brisk, colorful documentation has also earned him acceptance as the founder of modern American detective fiction—the tough, realistic mystery centering on a lonely, cynical private eye.

Peter Wolfe. *Beams Falling: The Art of Dashiell Hammett* (Bowling Green State Univ. Popular Pr., 1980), pp. 9, 18–20

[There are] a number of features or incidents in Dashiell Hammett's novels which seem to break sharply with previous conventions of the detective story. I do not refer to the important changes of direction brought about by the ''hard-boiled'' school and instanced by such matters as the professional detective, organized crime, dark urban streets and a spare, colloquial, ''tough'' style. Rather, I wish to concentrate on features which are unexpected even *in* the context of ''tough-guy'' writing and which occur unexpectedly in order deliberately and provocatively to remind the reader, in the midst of an easily-identifiable style, of other styles and methods of enquiry into human behaviour and, ultimately, of another and very different world-view which must be placed against the world-view of the rest of the novel. By adopting this technique, Hammett succeeds in drawing attention not only to the limitations of his particular kind of popular fiction but also to ways in which these very limitations can be used. The aspects of Hammett's novels to which I began by referring are not separated stylistically from the rest of the novel. But they nonetheless suggest to the reader that the first-person narrator might have to be viewed in a context other than that in which he normally presents himself for the reader's judgement (and, frequently, approval). . . .

Hammett's detectives do indeed rely on their own strength and invention to maintain their security, yet their strength resides not in a stable personality but in the ability to change like a chameleon to meet the needs of a fluctuating world, to hold to the security of the present moment, and their invention is always powerfully destructive in human terms. They operate not from the base of a recognizable interior self but from a deliberately created void. They cannot be seriously damaged because there is nothing there to damage. Hammett has often been likened to Hemingway, but Hemingway's heroes, in a non-teleological universe, adopt a concrete style as a mimetic representation of physical action allied to narrow but recognizable rules (bull fighting, big-game hunting) or physical action whose consecutive, non-idealized function is a healing coalescence with natural rhythms (''Big Two-Hearted River''). The Continental Op and Sam Spade adopt self-generative language allied to the creation of their own rules and the rhythms of their work are anything but natural. Even when Hemingway's heroes retreat from the illusions of the past and the impotence of the present to the narrowest possible area of light (''A Clean, Well-Lighted Place'') they harm no-one. Hammett's heroes persistently do harm without ever leaving themselves the chance to feel guilty.

John S. Whitley. *Journal of American Studies*. Dec., 1980, pp. 443, 454

In his economy of sexuality and violence, [Dashiell] Hammett's women characters necessarily take on a highly ambivalent status. They are at once fetishized and abominated—objectified as the Other and then, because so objectified, infused with all the threatening power of the alien, the inassimilable. Because Hammett in his women characters often combines voluptuousness with viciousness, ripe sexuality with rapacious self-interest, Hammett's texts not only figure what William Marling specifies as ''the Hammett succubus,'' but also embody in general the dynamic that de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, describes as ''[t]he man's hesitation between fear and desire [in his dealings with women], between the fear of being in the power of uncontrollable forces and the wish to win them over'' (152).

In order to explain the negative, misogynistic phase of this essentially manic response to women, de Beauvoir discusses cultural traditions that encourage the Western male to see ''himself as a fallen god,'' and to view himself as ''fallen from a bright and

ordered heaven into the chaotic shadows of his mother's womb''—to imagine himself as, and resent, being ''imprisoned by women in the mud of the earth'' (146). Here in fact the applications of de Beauvoir's theory of misogyny overlap with those of Paul Ricoeur's theory of Evil. For if women in Hammett's fiction at some level incur the sort of metaphysical resentment that de Beauvoir associated with misogynistic thinking, Hammett's women characters also incur the equally metaphysical ''dread'' with which Ricoeur associates the notion of ''impurity'' and, by extension, the idea of Evil. . . .

Yet as it turns out, the polysemousness of Hammett's own texts is precisely what lets ''Evil'' into Hammett's fictional world. The detective's very desire to purify himself of woman, it seems, is what most contaminates him, inscribing the dreaded object within the dreading subject—such that ''male'' and ''female'' cease to designate discrete entities. For by attributing androgynous features to certain of his women characters, at least in his early works, Hammett in effect blurs the differences between the sexes. In this way, Hammett, by complicating his oftentimes reductive vision of women, distends his own misogynist paradigm. Androgyny in Hammett's texts tends to neutralize, at one level, that conflict between men and women which, at another level, is one of Hammett's most abiding themes. Images of androgyny therefore make Hammett's early texts work against themselves; such images shatter that hall of mirrors in which violence replicates sexuality and sexuality, violence.

> David J. Herman. ''Finding Out about Gender in Hammett's Detective Fiction: Generic Constraints or Transcendental Norms?'' In Christopher Metress, ed. *The Critical Responses to Dashiell Hammett* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Pr., 1994), pp. 206–7

As courses in genre fiction continue to increase in popularity on American campuses, the deceptively simple art of Dashiell Hammett should begin to reach a wider audience. And as this art is studied in greater detail, teachers may come to realize that *The Maltese Falcon* belongs not beside *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* but *The Great Gatsby*, that *The Dain Curse* explores the same epistemological issues as *The Crying of Lot 49*, that *The Glass Key* predates by more than two decades the themes and techniques of the French *nouveau roman*. Whatever the outcome of his critical reputation, we can, with apologies to Raymond Chandler, know one thing for certain: the last sixty years have shown us that Dashiell Hammett is both a common writer and an unusual writer, the best in his genre, and a good enough writer for any genre, any time, any place.

> Christopher Metress. Introduction. Christopher Metress, ed. *The Critical Responses to Dashiell Hammett* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Pr., 1994), p. xxxv

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HANSBERRY, Lorraine (1930–1965)

The supreme virtue of *A Raisin in the Sun* . . . is its proud, joyous proximity to its source, which is life as the dramatist has lived it. I will not pretend to be impervious to the facts; this is the first Broadway production of a work by a colored authoress and it is also the first Broadway production to have been staged by a colored director. . . . I do not see why these facts should be ignored, for a play is not an entity in itself, it is a part of history, and I have no doubt that the knowledge of the historical context predisposed me to like *A Raisin in the Sun* long before the house lights dimmed. Within ten minutes, however, liking had matured into absorption.

> Kenneth Tynan. *New Yorker*. March 21, 1959. p. 100

It is a sound rule in the theatre that excellence is inversely proportional to tears shed; that is, the bigger the catch in your throat as the curtain comes down the more suspect the play will seem half-an-hour later. On this account *A Raisin in the Sun* is highly questionable. At the end of it the handkerchiefs were out in force and the audience, though they elbowed each other as savagely as usual through the doors, were speechless. True enough, Miss Lorraine Hansberry's play has most of the ingredients of the classic tear-jerker: a poor but honest family on the wrong side of the tracks; a benevolent despot of an Old Mum; her ageing son who is eating his and his wife's heart out for lack of an opportunity in life; his pert kid sister who goes to medical school and has a couple of admirers in tow, one intellectual, one rich. There is also a large insurance cheque, most of which the son is promptly conned out of. More than that, the dialogue is occasionally as predictable as the situations: the mother hands the cash over to her son with the words, ''It isn't very much, but it's all I got in the world.'' He, presumably, passed it on to the con man murmuring, ''Take it, it was my mother's.''

Yet, although *A Raisin in the Sun* occasionally slips over into triteness, it makes an extraordinarily compelling evening's theatre—which shows once again, I suppose, the degree to which drama is an extra-literary activity. As a play it may be patchy, but as a vehicle for the actors it is superb. One reason is that a powerful rhetoric comes naturally to Miss Hansberry. This puts her in a rather small club of writers, most of the other members of which are Celts. But with a difference: the rhetoric of a talented Negro writer always gives you the impression that it is about something, which is certainly not true of the Irish or the Welsh. Miss Hansberry has more than a gift of the gab; she also has a great deal to say on questions that deeply concern her. So her rhetoric is not just colourful; it has a natural dignity, which presumably has something to do with the fact that the rhythms and diction of passionate Negro speech come straight from the Bible. The language is felt and meant to a degree where it can afford to be simple. Finally, Miss Hansberry's characters continually talk about the subjects which concern all Negroes: the jobs they can get, the areas they can live in, the strategies by which their pride is preserved or undermined, the problem of assimilation and racial independence. This means that the otherwise nice, rather sentimental family life, with its humdrum quarrels, ambitions and pieties, is continually strengthened by outside loyalties and outside hatreds.

> A. Alvarez. *New Statesman*. Aug. 15, 1959. p. 190

The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window is not compactly written or tightly staged or performed. The chances are that its structure would have been strengthened and its wordiness thinned out if Miss Hansberry had not been gravely ill during the final weeks of preparation. . . .

In spite of its imperfections *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* can stimulate and please. Unlike so much piffling stuff on Broadway, Miss Hansberry's work reflects passion, intelligence and a point of view. It has an appreciation of character and it knows how to be earnest without pomposity or sobriety about the corruption that threatens every corner of our lives.

Howard Taubman. *New York Times Theater Section*. Nov. 1, 1964. p. 1

Lorraine Hansberry's greatest achievement lies in her ability to avoid what Saunders Redding has called ''The obligations imposed by race on the average . . . talented Negro.'' The obligation to limit one's scope to the immediate but parochial injustices of racial intolerance has for long sapped the creative energy of the Negro writer. Having paid her debt to this tradition with the poor *A Raisin in the Sun*, however, Hansberry achieves a significant breakthrough with *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, which is clearly in the mainstream of contemporary drama. The Negro is no longer seen as the victim of a savage social situation but becomes an endemic part of a society desperately searching for a valid response to the human condition. Lorraine Hansberry's death at the age of thirty-four has robbed the theatre of the one Negro dramatist who has demonstrated her ability to transcend parochialism and social bitterness. . . .

Lorraine Hansberry' commitment . . . transcends the merely parochial for her rebellion is directed less against intransigent racialism than against the sterility of the absurd and the inconsequence of a theatre founded on distraction.

C.W.E. Bigsby. *Confrontation and Commitment: A Study of Contemporary American Drama 1959–66* (MacGibbon & Kee). 1967. pp. 172–3

Structurally, Lorraine Hansberry remains essentially within the bounds of the conventional realistic well-made play, something almost anachronistic amidst the styles of the 1960s. The term ''well-made'' can be misleading because of its unfortunate connotations with the emptiness of nineteenth century tradition, but we need only look at the plays of a modern dramatist such as Lillian Hellman to recognize that orderly development of plot and a neatly planned series of expository scenes, complications, and climaxes can greatly assist in thematic and character development of a superior nature. Plot in Miss Hansberry's plays is of secondary importance, for it is not her main dramatic purpose. Nonetheless, because the audience has considerable interest in *what* is happening as well as *to whom*, both *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* are thoroughly enhanced by well-ordered revelation of the events which are so important in the lives of the characters. The straightforward telling of a story remains a thoroughly honorable literary accomplishment, and Miss Hansberry has practiced this ancient dramatic art with eminent respectability. Moreover, the scene, incident, and dialogue are almost Ibsenesque, avoiding over stylization for its own sake and performed within the standard ''box'' set that progressively becomes more rare.

Jordan Y. Miller in *The Black American Writer*, vol. 2, edited by C.W.E. Bigsby (Penguin). 1969. p. 161

Ed Bullins occupies much the position in today's vanguard of black writers that Lorraine Hansberry did ten years ago. The differences between their generations—as well as some surprising similarities—were highlighted this season by an evening compiled from Miss Hansberry's work, entitled *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*. The differences are matters more of content than form. Some of Miss Hansberry's attitudes (though not all) are decidedly out of fashion with black playwrights now. For example, the self-portrait she draws of herself as a young coed is far closer to the heroine of any standard McCall's serial about life in a white college dorm than to the experiences of today's black collegians. And her love of country (''I walk in my American streets again''), hedged with whatever doubts and increasingly superseded in the last years of her life by concern for her fellow blacks, would be unthinkable for a Bullins or a LeRoi Jones—as would her ambivalence about whether she considered herself a revolutionary.

Martin Duberman. *Partisan Review*. No. 3, 1969. p. 490

[Hansberry] knew that *naturalism* began in *determinism*, and she wanted no part of that. For her, for her play, human possibility was what counted. She wanted, as her remarks on Sean O'Casey in *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* indicate, to create the life of the Chicago she knew, but more than that she wanted to organize her creation so that her play and her hero could opt for what was best and most spirited in that life, not give in to all that was destructive. Her second play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, was primarily an attack on a particular kind of fashionable determinism, the assumption that nothing can be done about the evils of the world and the resulting ''great sad withdrawal from the affairs of men'', as one of the characters puts it.

Gerald Weales. *Commonweal*. Sept. 5, 1969. p. 542

When so bright a light goes out so early, when so gifted an artist goes so soon, we are left with a sorrow and wonder which speculation cannot assuage. One is filled for a long time with a sense of injustice as futile as it is powerful. And the vanished person fills the mind, in this or that attitude, doing this or that. Sometimes, very briefly, one hears the exact inflection of the voice, the exact timbre of the laugh—as I have, when watching the dramatic presentation, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, and in reading through these pages. But I do not have the heart to presume to assess her work, for all of it, for me, was suffused with the light which was Lorraine. It is possible, for example, that *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* attempts to say too much; but it is also exceedingly probable that it makes so loud and uncomfortable a sound because of the surrounding silence; not many plays, presently, risk being accused of attempting to say too much. . . . Lorraine made no bones about asserting that art has a purpose, and that its

purpose was action: that it contained the ''energy which could change things''.

> James Baldwin. Preface to *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* by Lorraine Hansberry (New American Library). 1970. pp. xiii–xiv

To Be Young, Gifted and Black is the portrait of an individual, the workbook of an artist, and the chronicle of a rebel who celebrated the human spirit. It is also, I believe, a prophetic chapter in the history of a people and an age.

It is worthy of some emphasis here, therefore, that Lorraine Hansberry's particular view of life did not emerge in one by nature given to celebration, to excessive confidence in the universe or the magnanimity of her fellowmen. What for others may have come with the weight and majesty of profound ''existential'' revelation—the discovery at some point in life that the universe is not particularly man's friend; that there is an inherent and inevitable tragedy in all men's fate; that there is within every human being an ego which will not be denied without fundamental havoc to himself or those around him; that to fulfill that ego, man is capable of the most incredible acts of transcendence or abasement, sacrifice or aggrandizement, humanity and inhumanity; that even so, our aspirations must ever outstrip our achievements; that we are, in simple fact, all born *dying*; and that, in short, there is a quite impossible, untenable, built-in absurdity to life—all this to her was *assumed*: was already assumed, it seemed to me—though I could neither appreciate nor handle such knowledge at the time—when I first met her as a girl of twenty-one. Had somehow been assumed, I sometimes think—though I know of course this is not possible—from the time she was a very little girl. Perhaps because of her intrinsic sense of vulnerability as a woman in a violent universe; perhaps because of her multifold experience as a *black* woman . . . perhaps because of her intuitive view of human frailty and the comedy of errors and compendium of terrors that is the average human life—it never could have occurred to her to think otherwise.

> Robert Nemiroff. Foreword to *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* by Lorraine Hansberry (New American Library). 1970. p. xviii

Lorraine Hansberry was no ''black panther,'' but an intelligent, compassionate human being with a gift for lucid dramatic writing which, when well acted as was the case of Sidney Poitier in *A Raisin in the Sun* and as now in a new kind of characterization by James Earl Jones [in *Les Blancs*], commands attention and inspires respect. To wave aside *Les Blancs*, a more mature play than *A Raisin in the Sun*, as old-fashioned and obvious—it may be ''old-fashioned,'' obvious it is not—is an evasion which I am inclined to ascribe to bad faith, especially in view of what certain folk call ''good theatre''.

> Harold Clurman. *The Nation*. Dec. 7, 1970. p. 606

Imaginative, unified, easily documentable, and intensely interesting story that it is, and being good theater as well as good dramatic literature, *The Drinking Gourd* is in the best tradition of historical dramas—much more so than *Les Blancs*, which is also an historical drama. In both of these works, nevertheless, as in the drama which first won her acclaim as a playwright, Miss Hansberry skillfully used original and vivid dialogue to reveal character and develop action. In *Les Blancs* she wrote all of the dialogue in standard informal spoken English, having no reason to use any other kind. In *The Drinking Gourd* she used the same kind of English to represent the speech of literate characters but changed to substandard usage to represent the speech of semiliterate and illiterate people. This she did convincingly without resorting to mutilated English, which has so often been perpetrated as ''dialect,'' whereas it represents nobody's actual speech.

> W. Edward Farrison. *CLA Journal*. Dec., 1972. p. 196

My God, how we need [Lorraine Hansberry] today! She knew that politics was not ideology, but caring. Politics is that quality of becoming more and more human, of persuading, cajoling, begging, and loving others to get them to go with you on that journey to be human—and defending yourself against those who seek to prevent that journey.

Perhaps the greatest irony is that so much humanity should have come from the life and work of a black woman. Then again, it is quite logical. She had been tempered by the fire and emerged briefly to let her own light shine. She knew that blackness was the basis for her existence, not the totality, and that if it becomes the whole, one can only become consumed by the fires of one's own rage and frustration. Lorraine Hansberry is the black artist who lived beyond anger, which is not to say that she wasn't angry. Her plays are an expression of rage against the outrages perpetrated against humanity. Anger did not define her art, but motivated and informed it. The quality which pervades her plays is compassion, the kind of compassion which can slap a face as easily as it can tease. She didn't make the mistake of hating white people. She hated what people did to each other.

> Julius Lester. Introduction to *Les Blancs* by Lorraine Hansberry (Random). 1973. pp. 31–2

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HASS, Robert (1941–)

On the poetry circuit, in the college-town bars, faculty cafeterias and California coffee shops, they have been waiting a decade for this book. Robert Hass, more than any other poet now in his forties, performs what other American poets of his generation have been yearning to emulate. In this respect, as in his capacity to convey pleasure in poetry, he fills the place of the late Elizabeth Bishop. Stanley Kunitz years ago wrote: ''Reading a poem by Robert Hass is like stepping into the ocean when the temperature of the water is not much different from that of the air. You scarcely know, until

you feel the undertow tug at you, that you have entered into another element.''

Hass's first volume, *Field Guide*, more than any other poetic debut of the 1970s, took up new postures: it seemed so fulfilled in its assurance, its care, its originality of authorship, its gentleness, its wit, its firmness of indignation. Those poems catalogued the phenomena of the California natural order, they spoke of family ties, of political injustice, of the rewards and challenges of literature. Hass's second volume, *Praise* (1979), had in it at least one masterpiece (''Heroic Simile'') and one other poem, ''Meditation at Lagunitas,'' which served a generation as an aesthetic model. . . .

Praise lit up the transition from the social entanglements of the poetry of the 1970s to the self-regard of the 1980s. Poem after poem set limits for itself as stern as gravity: white on white, block on block of stone, frames around pictures. The very motionlessness of the visual arts played a part in Hass's aesthetic (''It's an advantage of paintings''), as did the minutiae of nature. . . .

Praise also fell, now and then, into the trap of formulaic self-description that American poets are now trying to write their way out of: Hass's poetic intelligence was so acute that he kept, like Hamlet, cerebrating himself into the static condition that turned out to be all that his verbs would allow him. Regardless of his protestations to the contrary, his poems too seldom broke out of the straight subject-predicate construction and kept getting stuck in the is-ness of their situations. It is not surprising that he concentrates upon pictures, paintings, sculptures, motionless images, even in his very finest poems, such as ''Heroic Simile,'' one of the most remarkable single poems of recent years. Hass also brought together a book of luminous criticism, *Twentieth-Century Pleasures* (1984), that won the National Book Critics Circle Award and explicated his own formal and aesthetic intentions. He has translated, with Robert Pinsky, many of the poems of the Nobel Laureate Czeslaw Milosz, and he was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship.

Now, with *Human Wishes*, the wait is over. Hass's work has climbed to a place of the first importance in American poetry. This book shows the poet learning about aspiration from his children, Leif, Kristin, and Luke; exploring the consequences of desire with his wife and other women; describing with affectionate sadness the decline of a marriage and its expectations. His work is suffused with love, tinted with the balminess of the northern California climate, cradled in a balance of emotion that owes much to Buddhist acceptance, swept by a passion for language that treats words, form, ideas, with the shaping affection of handwork.

> Peter Davison. *One of the Dangerous Trades: Essays on the Work and Workings of Poetry* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Pr., 1991), pp. 167–69

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HAWKES, John (1925–1998)

Mr. Hawkes's gifts are notable, his skill and verbal resourcefulness are striking. Indeed, *The Cannibal* contains many paragraphs and pages that arrest and fascinate us by their brilliance, by the images they evoke. But the sum of these fractions is less than successful because it is less than comprehensible. . . .

He has written a nightmare tale of German degeneration and collapse, a surrealist phantasmagoria of Germany in 1914 and 1945; in which time telescopes or expands or runs backward without warning; in which scenes dissolve into one another, fade out indecisively, or move into quick montages; in which characters are alternately clear and vague, rational and irrational, single and dual, poised between humanity and symbol; a tale which teases its reader's mind with possible ambiguities and hidden meanings and strange distortions; a tale in which allegory steals into sight only to slip from view—a tale that begins and ends at the portals of an insane asylum.

> Ben Ray Redman. *Saturday Review*. March 11, 1950. pp. 16–17

This novel [*The Beetle Leg*] is a striking combination of detailed realism and overall surrealism. It is like a sweaty dream. It has something of the quality of a Cocteau film, tangible but remote. . . . The writing in this book has the density of poetry, and each sentence is elaborately packed with the concrete, the irrationally observed and rationally recorded, and, at times, the ludicrously ornate, the pretentious. . . . This is not the reality of daily life or of people alive today. The characters exist as the creations of an unusually talented writer, but without him as unifier, arbiter, stage-setter, and explainer, they would be pretentious abstractions. I cannot conceive of them alive outside of the mind and horizon of Mr. Hawkes.

> William Pfaff. *Commonweal*. Jan. 25, 1952. p. 407

His newest book, *The Goose on the Grave*. . . , is composed of two novellas. One is about a village hangman who governs the heartbeats of his townsmen with the cruel casualness of a pagan priest. The other concerns the adventures of a small boy in the far from mutually-exclusive worlds of the military, the monastic, and the secular. Both stories are set in Hawkes's unreal but authentic version of Italy, and are so imbued with elements of timeless pertinacity that it makes little difference whether they occur ''now'' or in some historical, or even imaginary ''then.'' Hardly a scene will be comprehensible to the reasonable-minded reader, yet the whole thing reverberates with overtones and after-images, inexplicable, unresolved, but oddly affecting, even to those who will accuse him of pointless obscurity.

> Jerome Stone. *Saturday Review*. July 24, 1954. p. 36

He is, in short, a Gothic novelist; but this means one who makes terror rather than love the center of his work, knowing all the while, of course, that there can be no terror without the hope for love and love's defeat. In *The Cannibal*, *The Beetle Leg*, and *The Goose on the Grave* he has pursued through certain lunar landscapes (called

variously Germany or the American West or Italy) his vision of horror and baffled passion; nor has his failure to reach a wide audience shaken his faith in his themes. In *The Lime Twig* he takes up the Gothic pursuit once more, though this time his lunar landscape is called England; and the nightmare through which his terrified protagonists flee reaches its climax at a race meeting, where gangsters and cops and a stolen horse bring to Michael Banks and his wife the spectacular doom which others of us dream and wake from, relieved, but which they improbably live.

Leslie Fiedler. Introduction to *The Lime Twig* (New Directions). 1961. pp. ix–x

Beyond the events of his story [*The Lime Twig*], Hawkes investigates a significant subject. He appears to be asking, ''What are the possibilities of, and terms for, the creation of the hero in our times?'' His answer here seems to be that the modern hero exists in a quest for love among the terrors of a world that has no center except that possessed by the hero himself.

The world of terror is, of course, a nightmare world—hence, presumably, the talk about surrealism. Any good novel is avant-garde, and if anyone wishes it, we may apply such terms to Hawkes. But let no one be misled: *The Lime Twig*, is an extremely readable novel. More than that, it moves the reader to a genuine pathos, and sheds a glow of understanding on our time.

Ray B. West. *New York Times Book Section*. May 14, 1961. p. 31

His novels are both visionary and circumvolved, expressing a highly individualistic conception of the dread, terror and calamity that confront human kind. They are at once complex allegories and private renderings of post-Freudian psychological insight. They are surrealistic in their distortions, Gothic in their horror, existentialist in their fatalism. . . . Most of his techniques and themes repeat in his novels: the fantastically irrational juxtaposed with the concretely realistic; faulty observation of events but accurate perception of their effects; zigzag narrative lines; rushing passages of dark lyricism; bizarre metaphorical images . . . are injected at moments of mock climax. Hawkes enjoys playing with numbers, colors, syntax. He creates suspense, often to squander it in rhetoric. There is a cold, oracular air about his novels which implies hidden wisdom and unrevealed confidences—side effects of Hawkes's deliberate timelessness. His characters . . . do not so much move as wander through Hawkes's disfigured territory.

Webster Schott. *The Nation*. Sept. 2, 1961. p. 122

John Hawkes, whose reputation is small but smoldering under the haystack of potential large acclaim, is another novelist who makes his own definitions as he goes. ''Surrealist'' is the descriptive adjective that has probably been most frequently used about him, and those who admire his work have said it is like a dream that makes sense. His fifth book, *Second Skin*, can sustain those descriptions to some degree, except it must be made clear that, syntactically, his novel is composed of orderly sentences, not Beckett's psychic gasps or Burroughs' verbalized hallucinations. . . . His reliance on his prose as such is certainly not misplaced. His figuration, selectivity, his ear and eye are extraordinarily fine and untiring. But one flaw in his method is that it spreads. . . . Whatever his subject matter in this book, Hawkes seems primarily concentrated on its rendering, rather than its realization in us.

Stanley Kauffmann. *New Republic*. June 6, 1964. pp. 19–22

And finally, to suggest the profound morality of Hawkes's achievement, we may view him and his work on the level of its most significant prowess: his art as a vehicle of life-affirmation and the artist as humorist. First, Hawkes's fictions are patently *absurd*. The laws of cause-and-effect are resolutely suspended within the legitimacies of the natural order, and the action of his novels cannot but be grotesque. Furthermore there is a pervasive irony in the working out of the dramatic destinies of the characters. . . . It should not be necessary to point out in detail the prevalence of such ''bitter humor'' throughout Hawkes's fiction. Thirdly, humor has frequently to do with the enlargement of trivia and the diminution of the grandiose. *The Cannibal* and, to a lesser extent, *The Beetle Leg*, both present material of expansive scope and potential grandeur: the one, the successful revolt of occupied Germany; the other, a vast irrigation project in the arid American West, designed to transform deserts into gardens. Both novels could be handled in the serious ''large'' manner befitting their possible importance; neither are. Instead, they are distorted into what are essentially comic patterns: space is restricted, atmosphere is unrelievedly sordid, and the characters are depicted as mean and small in relation to the events in which they are involved. Conversely, *The Lime Twig* projects a trivial occurrence—the running of a horse-race—with the epic emanations of a national religious rite. With some suspension of disbelief, therefore, Hawkes could be regarded as a somewhat erratic cultivator in the vineyards of satire.

Earl Rovit. *Modern Fiction Studies*. Summer, 1964. pp. 160–1

Regeneration as a theme will probably never cease to interest the novelist, however much the contemporary dramatist may have abandoned it. But as a counterweight to sentimentalism, the writer must be prepared to demonstrate that regeneration is not without its cost. The tragic implications of the theme may be, in fact, so stark that many recent critics have come to regard a work like *King Lear* as a portrait of almost unrelieved existential despair.

John Hawkes in his recent novel, *Second Skin*, chooses a comic development, but if his imagery and part of his setting owe something to *The Tempest*, the horror and brutality of many events recall the sterner stuff of *Cymbeline* or *A Winter's Tale*. And in other important respects Hawkes' novel departs from the overall pattern of those romances: the evil past and hopeful present are not so sharply separated, and there is no prospect of a glorious reunion or a joyful return to one's native land. Though the surrealism of Hawkes' earlier work has all but vanished, a system of interfolded flashbacks keeps the realities of both past and present constantly before our eyes.

Jay L. Halio. *Southern Review*. Winter, 1968. pp. 236–7

Feasibly our best writer, Hawkes has written six books which have gained him only a narrow readership—and that at a time when being a writer's writer and gaining attestations of one's immortality in the scholarly journals are of no earthly use in reciprocating an

artist's energy. Every book Hawkes has written is a work of uncommon intensity and originality, to put it mildly. Of the first six, *The Lime Twig* and *Second Skin* are the most extraordinary. *The Lime Twig* typifies Hawkes's earlier work in its psychotic and unswerving narrative. In *Second Skin*, on the other hand, a certain amount of light and relief are admitted for the first time; a queer and bucolic surrealism reigns over much of the novel. Hawkes's newest book, *The Blood Oranges*, is another step in the same direction. It is the most accessible novel to date of this difficult writer.

Out of a gentle recidivism, Hawkes slips the reader a dwarf from time to time; but in general, this is a different kind of book from that we had come to expect from Hawkes before *Second Skin*. Impressively, *The Blood Oranges* uses a cultivated diction reminiscent of Anglo-Mediterranean literature—Norman Douglas, Gerald Brenan, E.M. Forster—in the service of a distortive vision and narrative. This time, though, the book is less about death and violence than it is about sex and love. In an atmosphere deliberately reminiscent of *Twelfth Night*, Hawkes contrives a sequence of lyrical and narrative meditations on sexual multiplicity.

Thomas McGuane. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 19, 1971. p. 1

John Hawkes' sixth novel, *Death, Sleep & the Traveler*, cat-footed, makes the first five seem heavy. It walks on psychic eggs, sucks them, leaps off. Not a whit too much or little, nothing too violent or tame, almost nothing too obscure or obvious . . . sophistication could not go further. Clear and impeccable, free of the infra-realism and dream-sogged surrealism of the first books, composed in time-shifting short sequences, each with the throaty resonance of a vibraphone key, each with its soft psychic percussion, in a style at once deliberate and delicate, it is an esthetic performance of the first order. . . . The narrative *encases* life in its own perfection. Its ruthless detachment makes life itself academic. . . .

Since his third novel, *The Lime Twig*, Hawkes' fiction has dwelled upon not only sexual guilt but also the guilt of the artist as such—the dreamer whose dreams leave life untouched, the spiritual Narcissus. The new book sours on marriage and sexuality . . . as well as on myth, dreams, pornography—*representations* of sexual life. . . .

Death, Sleep & the Traveler is a beautiful achievement, unique and elegant in form, brilliantly judged, and likely to endure as a small classic. To be sure, Europeanized, Bergmanized as it is, it may not seem *Our* classic, except in being an intense romance and (what for us is hardly separable) its Puritan backlash, its ambivalence toward the raw stuff of life.

Calvin Bedient. *New Republic*. April 20, 1974. pp. 26, 28

Although [Hawkes] is still not much read by the general public, the steady, perennial voice of his supporters, and still more, of course, the novels themselves, have won from many a conviction of the centrality and importance of his work at the present time. It is clear, too, that Hawkes has merited his reputation for aesthetic purity: he is a singularly committed and devout practitioner of the fine art of the novel at a time when that austere discipline totters with disregard. There can be no quarrel with his seriousness and integrity.

Still, as is perhaps inevitably the case when a due measure of respect has been long withheld, compensating claims for Hawkes's stature tend to be exaggerated, implausible. If the general public has remained unimpressed, the reason may be that they are genuinely baffled and discouraged by the difficulties of Hawkes's presentation, or that they are offended, justifiably or not, by the harshness, the dread, the bitter violence of such earlier works as *The Cannibal* (1949), *The Beetle Leg* (1951), and *The Lime Twig* (1961). His latest novel *Death, Sleep & the Traveler*, and its immediate predecessor, *The Blood Oranges*, both seem to be mellow, erotic fictions, but in fact neither the horror of his earlier visions, nor their difficulty of access, has truly abated, though they have been transmuted and refined.

John Romano. *Commentary*. May, 1974. p. 58

Although Hawkes writes a maze-like work [*Death, Sleep & the Traveler*] about maze-like reality, he surely does not remain a passive creator. *He delights in his maze*. He shapes it so cunningly that although it resists thematic analysis, it remains a unique construction. There are many dreams . . . which dazzle me. There are the recurring, brilliant images of water, mirror, and animal. I realize that I am unsure of events . . . but I am confident that this fiction (about fictions) will continue to enlighten me for a long time. In reading it I meet ''various unfamiliar shadows,'' ''psychic sores,'' the bat-like terrors of sleep. I appreciate the cleansing anxiety it provokes. I accept its wise violations. I am, consequently, very grateful to Hawkes.

Irving Malin. *Commonweal*. May 3, 1974. p. 222

Travesty is a difficult work. Not that it is difficult to read, for it is on the surface the clearest of Hawkes's novels, easily gone through in one sitting. The plot is a relatively simple one, lacking in those abrupt shifts of time and place that often blur the action of Hawkes's other fictions. It is, in effect, a one-character novel. While Papa presumably talks to his passengers, we hear them only as they are filtered through his consciousness. He extends words of comfort to Chantal and Henri as they suffer respectively from spasms of hysterical retching and asthmatic wheezing, but we cannot be certain the two are even present.

Which begins to suggest the real difficulties of *Travesty*. It is not surprising that one reviewer found the novel ''disturbing'' because, as he put it, ''we cannot know how to 'read' it in any one stable, reassuring way . . . we cannot 'frame' it.'' Though *Travesty* is surely a disturbing novel, deeply disturbing, we can ''frame'' it. Indeed, we must. The last novel of a triad—preceded by *The Blood Oranges* (1971) and *Death, Sleep & The Traveler* (1974)—*Travesty* in great measure depends on the design which embraces the three parts into a coherent whole. That design is the pulse of comedy.

Travesty is a form of low burlesque; that is, it treats elevated themes in a trivial manner. The themes of Hawkes's travesty are the great subjects of comedy—death, sex, and the imagination. In high comedy, in the exquisite vision of *The Blood Oranges* for example, these are woven into a triumphant celebration, but Travesty turns the comic festival into a farce. Ultimately, the meaning of the triad is expressed neither in the sweet rhapsody of *The Blood Oranges*

nor in the raucous counterpoint of *Travesty*, but in the strange melody achieved by their harmony.

Enid Veron. In *A John Hawkes Symposium: Design and Debris*, ed. Anthony C. Santore and Michael Pocalyko (New Directions, 1977), pp. 64–65

The Owl is one of the very best of Hawkes' fictions, and probably the best introduction to his work. His method has always been to work with strong images that can be developed into scenes of nightmarish power and vividness, and then to seek some means by connecting these scenes in a coherent and developmental way. Because he starts with images rather than with a story, his work is different from conventionally plotted fiction, though this is not the same thing as being without plot altogether. Over the years, as his work has developed, he has turned more and more to the unifying voice of a single narrator as a way of giving coherence to the events of his narrative. At the same time, his fiction, which began with an emphasis on terror, violence, and death, has moved from those horrors toward a lush eroticism, initiated in the closing section of *Second Skin* and continued in *The Blood Oranges* and *Death, Sleep & the Traveler*. Even *Travesty*, which moves toward death, draws most of its strength from its slightly over-ripe eroticism—what the French, in speaking of the decadence that brings the grapes of Sauternes to their highest pitch of sweetness, call *la pourriture noble*. . . .

The point of this immersion in the abhorrent is to force readers to acknowledge a kind of complicity, to admit that something in us resonates to all sorts of monstrous measures, even as we recognize and condemn the evil consciousness for what it is. As a literary strategy this requires great delicacy and control. Both the horrible complicity and the shudder of condemnation must be actively aroused by the text and maintained in a precarious balance. In *The Owl* Hawkes manages this feat as well as anywhere in his work. . . .

This portrayal of repressive fascism is . . . at once terrible and comic, bizarre in its extremity but profoundly accurate in probing the philosophical and emotional roots of this mentality as embodied in the Hangman. It is of course an imaginative construct rather than a case study, an emblem rather than a portrait. In saying that plot, character, setting, and theme were the enemies of the novel, Hawkes was hyperbolically and provocatively protesting against certain traditional ways of approaching the construction of fiction. But the only true justification for surrealism in art is that it destroys certain surface plausibilities in order to liberate realities that are habitually concealed by habits of vision attuned only to the surface itself. And this is precisely what Hawkes accomplishes in *The Owl*. It is time to recognize that achievement.

Robert Scholes. *Hollins Critic*. June, 1977, pp. 2–3, 10

Setting in Hawkes' fiction has always been both specific and approximate: the Germany of *The Cannibal* (1949), the American West of *The Beetle Leg* (1951), the Italy of *Lunar Landscapes: Stories and Short Novels* (1949–1963), and the England of *The Lime Twig* were drawn with apparently authentic detail but were unmistakably no reader's ''real'' Germany, America, Italy or England. Specifically named and, thus, given a connotative ''history,'' these settings were inserts, props, backdrops as real as a Magritte sky in chunks and cubes or, perhaps more appropriately, as real as a Tanguy ''lunar landscape,'' glossy and always reproduced. But with the trilogy, countries have lost both their names and their historical associations. Cyril in *The Blood Oranges* is a cerebral Hemingway-expatriate, having more to do with Roman orgies of centuries ago than with the southern France he inhabits. Allert in *Death, Sleep & The Traveler* is more the Flying Dutchman of legend than a former denizen of Holland, and his cruise takes place somewhere in pagan mythology and *The Tempest* of Shakespeare. And the southern France of *Travesty* is as much a pretext as the plot: the narrator remains at the wheel of a speeding car from start to finish, and the exterior landscape does not influence the core situation of the fiction at all. . . .

Hawkes' fictional characters have moved from named countries and popular culture to myth and dreams, from unexplained horror to ominous and unfathomable sexuality, but the ultimate failure of eroticism in the trilogy points to the same existential condition in all of Hawkes' fiction. His characters are ''damned souls,'' doomed to playing out preordained tapestries that can only end badly, because there is no avenue of escape, no idea of salvation, no way of attaining ''grace.''

William F. Van Wert. *Literary Review*. Fall, 1980, pp. 37–39

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HAYDEN, Robert (1913–1980)

The two finest poems by Negroes (not the two finest Negro poets) both draw their subjects from the epic history of Negro suffering: Richard Wright's ''Between the World and Me,'' which celebrates an imagined lynching; and Robert Hayden's ''Middle Passage,'' which tells the story of the slave ships and their black cargoes. They have, in the literature of the race war, positions analogous to *Invisible Man* among the novels and *The Dutchman* among the plays. The effect they produce is irresistible and entire, the hurt they give is lasting. It inheres in part, this pain, in the very hell of their subjects, in each case so completely evoked. The effect is certified, though, by the satisfying, spherical fullness of the design, the exactness of the craft.

Both are long poems, in which one could scarcely change a word with any hope of increasing the rightness or the power. Both are bloody, graphic, even documentary in their detailing of the horror; but so certain and controlled one can *use* the torment. The urge to quote in both cases is irresistible, and appropriate; nothing less than extensive quotation, in the case of Hayden's piece, could

acknowledge the brim-full rightness, the necessary alternation of mode and effect. . . .

Hayden, a ''major'' Negro poet, has written many other poems, professional and stylish: Communist and African-memory poems, war poems, Negro hero poems, poems overfilled with a sort of decadent delirious excess of hallucinatory imagery. But it all now seems, in unfair retrospect, apprentice work for ''Middle Passage.''

David Littlejohn. *Black on White: A Critical Survey of Writing by American Negroes* (Viking, 1966), pp. 83–84, 86

The recent publication of Robert Hayden's *Angle of Ascent* is something of a troubling and problematic event for the student of the Afro-American tradition in poetry, for while it gives us occasion to review and pay homage to the best work of one of our finest poets, it insistently calls to mind the appalling tardiness of our recognition of his achievement. A meticulous craftsman whose exacting standards severely limit the amount of his published verse, Robert Hayden has steadily accumulated over the course of three decades a body of poetry so distinctive in character and harmonious in development that its very existence seems more fated than willed, the organic issue of a natural principle rather than the deliberate artifice of a human imagination. . . .

Robert Hayden is a poet whose symbolistic imagination is intent on divining the shape of a transcendent order of spirit and grace that might redeem a world tragically bent on its own destruction. And his memory, assailed by the discontinuities created by its own fallibility, is equally determined to catch and preserve every shadow and echo of the actual human experience in which our terribleness stands revealed. In poem after poem Hayden deftly balances the conflicting claims of the ideal and the actual. Spiritual enlightenment in his poetry is never the reward of evasion of material fact. The realities of imagination and the actualities of history are bound together in an intimate symbiotic alliance that makes neither thinkable without the other. Robert Hayden's poetry proposes that if it is in the higher order of spirit that the gross actualities of life find their true meaning, it is also true that that transcendent realm is meaningful to man only if it is visibly incarnate on the plane of human experience.

Wilburn Williams, Jr. *Massachusetts Review*. Winter, 1977, pp. 731–32

''Middle Passage'' is a deceptive piece, a perfectly modulated pastiche of voices contained in diary, deposition, and reminiscence, that has for its subject the slave trade between Africa and America. The poem exhibits a toughness of language and a variety of method, including prose, parody, and prayer, that create effects of horror and anger in service of a passage through history, the ''voyage through death/to life upon these shores.'' . . . ''Middle Passage'' is the best contemporary poem I have read on slavery. It is a singular performance, one which Hayden's later poems have not matched, in part because it is a poem whose special construction does not invite imitation.

Hayden has not discovered other methods rich enough to encompass public or private history so well. The defects which mar his poetry include compositional tics (repetition, for example: ''the name he never can he never can repeat'') and, especially in the newer poems, occasional opaqueness. Some recent poems are contrived from feelings so momentary that only a fleeting satisfaction is achieved. At worst, in the new work the phrases break up, the words fly apart, and the associative structure holds no meaning. The poems may shatter into component images, individually attractive but fragmentary. There are a few first-rate metaphors; the poems that remain in the mind persuade by narrative, not image. As one moves through the book, it is disconcerting to find the older poems last. Such an ordering places the newer poems, whose methods are smaller, and which should be seen as the product of development, at a disadvantage; as the older poems drape themselves in description and narration, the newer work seems insubstantial.

William Logan. *Poetry*. July, 1977, p. 228

Hayden is a poet of many voices, using varieties of ironic black folk speech, and a spare, ebullient poetic diction, to grip and chill his readers. He draws characters of stark vividness as he transmutes cardinal points and commonplaces of history into dramatic action and symbol.

The slender, potent *American Journal* is well named. For here we peruse, at close range, portions of America's visible (public, documented) and—to use Octavio Paz's term—''invisible history.'' We ascend ''The Point'' at Stonington, Connecticut, and in the brilliant air, alive with wild swans and terns, we salute the revolutionaries who repelled the British there: ''we are for an instant held in shining/like memories in the mind of God.''

The Afro-American past is of special concern here. In ''A Letter from Phillis Wheatley,'' Hayden uses understatement to reveal what historians have recently discovered: that Phillis, the 18th-century slave poet, viewed slavery and prejudice with horror, wonder, and well-guarded humor. . . .

The title poem is a tour de force framed as the jottings of an other-worldly visitor reporting on the American people during the bicentennial. The visitor, in earthling disguise, finds Americans noisy, vain, wasteful, and cruel worshippers of machines; yet the ''charming savages enlightened primitives brash/new comers lately sprung up in our galaxy'' are attractively vigorous and ingenious. Doubtful he could survive for long in this violent nation, the visitor is nonetheless lured by Americans' ''variousness . . . their vital elan and that something essence/quiddity I cannot penetrate or name.''

The most compelling section of this book is the sequence of poems ironically called ''Elegies for Paradise Valley,'' named for a tough Detroit neighborhood of yesteryear, a place vividly recalled from the poet's boyhood, and captured in terse, sometimes gritty language. . . .

American Journal, by Hayden the ''poet of perfect pitch,'' is a book of unforgettable images of America and her people, a prayerful report from one of our most hauntingly accurate, and yet hopeful, recorders.

Robert G. O'Meally. *Book World*. June 25, 1978, p. G6

[Hayden] has attempted to portray all human activity as essentially a spiritual journey, often grotesquely distorted, towards sanctity. The evils in his poems are scientific rationalism, materialism, and

the failure of universal love. That mankind will ultimately triumph, Hayden seems certain, and equally certain is his belief that the preparatory trials will be harsh and prolonged. The optimistic note is sounded in the title itself: *Angle of Ascent*. In many poems, spiritual revelation is the obvious intention; but many other poems would seem to express unqualified cynicism, much like Christ's despairing cry just before his death, if taken out of context. . . .

Angle of Ascent is Hayden's *Leaves of Grass*. Like Whitman's work, it contains the possibly final version of poems regularly revised. More importantly, *Angle of Ascent* possesses something like epic form, largely by means of unifying subjects and themes. Whether writing about religion, poetry, history, or other subjects, Hayden attempts to portray the essential oneness of the universe. In Hayden's view, all religions acknowledge powers beyond natural of reality. Even the grossest superstition contains the germs of spiritual enlightenment. Similarly, Hayden believes that true art, whether or not the artist consciously intended it, helps men to glimpse the underlying reality of existence. The apparent diversity of physical reality, the seeming contradictions in the visible universe are shown to be apparent and not real. Finally, the history poems also survey human experience, especially the Afro-American experience, not as meaningless and chaotic but as a necessary evolution, a progressive development towards freedom. But this is not to say that the evolution is uniform in all times and places. Much struggling and suffering will be necessary before spiritual enlightenment is universally achieved.

William H. Hansell. *Black American Literature Forum*. Spring, 1979, pp. 24, 31

The gift of Robert Hayden's poetry is his coherent vision of the black experience in this country as a continuing journey both communal and private. This journey begins in the involuntary suffering of the middle passage and continues across land and into consciousness. His poems are full of travelers whose imagination transforms the journey. In the striking sonnet, ''Frederick Douglass,'' Hayden names the journey ''this freedom, this liberty, this beautiful/and terrible thing, needful to man as air.'' He celebrates Douglass's dream that makes ''lives grown out of his life.'' These lives become the various dreamers of Hayden's canon. From his earliest published volume, *A Ballad of Remembrance*, to the last, *American Journal*, a traveler's perspective of our American experience is his most striking theme.

The black epic journey, a ''voyage through death,'' is the subject of his complex, brilliant early poem, ''Middle Passage.'' An anonymous narrator controls the tone of the poem from horror to celebration. The narrator is concealed as a witness, yet his is the ironic intelligence that judges, condemns, celebrates. He hears and reports the testimonies of those oceanic voyagers who are the poem's European voices. The epic black journey is recounted in a collage of white voices: hypocrites hymning in New England of Jesus walking upon the waters, scoundrel shipowners, deck officers, maritime lawyers, sick seamen. Into this sequence is threaded Shakespeare's song of Ariel in a fine double irony. It parodies the European civilization's great poet while it extends Shakespeare's text to emphasize the profound rage of the enslaved.

Vilma Raskin Potter. *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* Spring, 1981, p. 51

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HAYES, Alfred (1911–1985)

His poems are socially conscious, all about the movies, bars, dance halls, sex, the big time in the big city, no concealed sneering at the poor for being poor. Hayes's structure is lacking in form; his technical equipment is insufficient for a focused presentation of his emotional matter. However, the emotion is pure and forceful and his book, *The Big Time*, is an American document of importance.

Oscar Williams. *New Republic*. April 24, 1944. p. 582

He uses the less flagrant rhythms between good prose and good poetry to interpret realistically what many will call the seamy side of city life. It is the side of life which fascinated such great draughtsmen as Daumier and Forain, and it is not too much to say that in his own field, with workmanship that never degenerates into the slovenly, Mr. Hayes meets their eyes across the years. His work has drama, sophistication, and bite. It is full of real irony.

William Rose Benét. *Saturday Review*. April 29, 1944. p. 24

Mr. Hayes, a former soldier and poet turned novelist, has written a tough, tired, and blunt-spoken book (*All Thy Conquests*) about the cynical corruption, indifference, and despair of Rome shortly after its conquest-liberation. His book is as tensely emotional, sensitive and imaginative as only a poet could make it. Unusually adept at dialogue, expert in the use of stream-of-consciousness technique, Mr. Hayes has produced a work of real distinction. . . . Here are excellent portrait sketches, haunting suggestions of the fetid atmosphere of Rome, where hunger and poverty were less serious than hysteria and corruption, savage glimpses of Americans in victory. Mr. Hayes has no sermon to preach, no whipping boy to punish. He has been content to paint an impressionistic picture of a situation and to do it extremely well.

Orville Prescott. *The Yale Review*. Winter, 1947. pp. 381–2

There are passages in *The Girl on the Via Flaminia* that come a little too close to Hemingway, although this fault appears less in the dialogue than in the expository writing. . . . The best of the lessons that Hayes has learned from the older novelist are beyond mere tricks of style. They are the habits of writing under pressure, with painstaking accuracy and of never saying too much. What sets him apart from most of our younger novelists is his feeling for words and his sense of how to make them count. *The Girl on the Via Flaminia* is one of the very few war books of which one can prophesy that it will seem as true and effective in twenty or thirty years as it does today.

Malcolm Cowley. *New York Times Book Section*. March 20, 1949. p. 3

The Girl on the Via Flaminia manages to impart much by implication and poetic indirection only, for the characters and the scenes are by no means fully realized. It is as a mood piece, a study in wistfulness and melancholy, that this book is memorable. Mr. Hayes effectively uses images of wind, cold, and loneliness, and emphasizes significant details to give the illusion of completeness. With more substance and intensity, *The Girl on the Via Flaminia* conceivably could have been this war's *A Farewell to Arms*, but in his own manner Alfred Hayes does make his every note ring clear and true.

Siegfried Mandel. *Saturday Review*. April 2, 1949. p. 32

All my . . . praise has been only for his content—its interest, its authenticity—and not for his form. . . . His favorite meter is the enormously long line of Whitman and Jeffers, except that he prefers to rhyme it.

This device becomes monotonous and diffuse; it is rarely crammed with the intensity of Whitman or Jeffers. Yet despite the narrow range and occasional brassiness of his musical instrument, it twangs forth some magnificent psychological truths about human beings.

Peter Viereck. *New York Times Book Section*. April 16, 1950. p. 6

Hayes is not a ''natural'' poet in the sense of Blake, Hopkins, or Dylan Thomas; that is, there does not seem to be any compulsive music or verbal preoccupation through which poetic thought seeks expression. Rather one has the impression of a sensitive individual with a social conscience and a vivid historical sense who has chosen verse for his deepest reflections because of its succinctness and the opportunity it offers for dramatic contrast and suggestive paradox. In this genre, with his long, loose line and his violent mastery, he takes his place in the modern tradition that begins with Browning and includes among contemporaries such various figures as Jeffers, Fearing, Rukeyser and MacNeice.

Selden Rodman. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. April 16, 1950. p. 4

Welcome to the Castle is harsh and tender, clear and profound, beautifully composed. . . . The language is freshly minted, the handling of long free lines supple, the occasional rhymes barely heard, and the undulating movement not only haunting but faithful to plots and characters in the story. . . . In my humble opinion, *Welcome to the Castle* places Alfred Hayes in the front rank of young American authors, whether prosemen or poets. He is an artist of the first order, an order and understanding we need.

Alfred Kreymborg. *Saturday Review*. May 20, 1950. p. 19

Those who may have wondered if the findings of Dr. Kinsey will make stale and unprofitable the theme that has long proved most popular in fiction, should feel reassurance in Alfred Hayes's new novel, entitled in artful artlessness *In Love*. . . . Mr. Hayes writes with a rolling momentum that hides his quest of the uncannily right word. The Jamesian clauses, terraced with qualifications and parentheses, occasionally get out of hand . . . but in the main the reader is won over and the convoluted style seems justified by its success in conveying the utmost intricacies of self analysis. *In Love*, indeed, is a brilliant piece of dissection—a post-mortem in which even the corpse comes alive.

James Hilton. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Sept. 20, 1953. p. 3

Alfred Hayes has given us a powerful and disturbing novel of morality. It should also be said—and quickly too—that *My Face for the World to See* is an exciting, engrossing work, written with beautiful economy and the skill of an artist who knows what he is doing. . . . Choosing the lowest common denominator—an adulterous love affair between a wretched psychopathic Hollywood hopeful and a freelance screen writer—Mr. Hayes tells the story of two people, each reaching to find a reflection of himself in a mirror that produces shattering pieces. . . . Mr. Hayes has created characters that are the essence of human hopes and frailty.

Lenard Kaufman. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 2, 1958. p. 24

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HEARN, Lafcadio (1850–1904)

He stands and proclaims his mysteries at the meeting of three ways. To the religious instinct of India,—Buddhism in particular,—which history has engrafted on the aesthetic sense of Japan, Mr. Hearn brings the interpreting spirit of Occidental science; and these three traditions are fused by the peculiar sympathies of his mind into one rich and novel compound—a compound so rare as to have introduced into literature a psychological sensation unknown before. More than any other living author he has added a new thrill to our intellectual experience.

Paul Elmer More. *Atlantic Monthly*. Feb., 1903. p. 205

If, as some hold, the problem of modern romantic literary art is to portray the human spirit caught in a magic web of necessity, ''penetrating us with a network subtler than our subtlest nerves''; to marry strangeness with beauty; to accomplish this in a style as

express and gleaming as goldsmith's work; then few writers have solved it more brilliantly than Lafcadio Hearn. In this, rather than in his elaborate interpretation of Japan, may lie his enduring achievement.

Ferris Greenslet. *Atlantic Monthly*. Feb., 1907. p. 272

Théophile Gautier remains his model from the beginning to the end, and the warmth of colour of Latin literature the thing he wishes to put into ''the stone-grey and somewhat chilly style of latter-day English or American romance.'' In this he had some considerable success, and his style, though it may not always be quite ''sound'' from the severest Anglo-Saxon point of view, nonetheless has merits which compel attention. His real value, however, was behind the style, in the restless, sensitive, curious soul, which could bring back to more sluggish, stay-at-home imaginations the lovely loot of strange countries across the seas.

Harrison Rhodes. *Bookman*. March, 1907. p. 75

Hearn's irrepressible craving to create a style impelled him to seek ideas; and as Time—its eras, its epochs, its aeons—cast the greatest spell on his imagination, we find him irresistibly attracted to those facts and speculations which called up the past, and yet emphasized its distance. He is lured away . . . by an old song, a folk story, and every tradition and habit that gathers about a race. . . . The search for style is the search for the phrase that will reveal the deepest of these varied feelings to one's self and so perhaps to others.

Herbert Vaughan Abbott. *South Atlantic Quarterly*. April, 1907. pp. 192–3, 197

As to literary aim, Hearn distinctly and repeatedly confessed to me that his ideal was, in his own words, to give his reader ''a ghostly shudder,'' a sense of the closeness of the unseen about us, as if eyes we saw not were watching us, as if long-dead spirits and weird powers were haunting the very air about our ears, were sitting hid in our heart of hearts. It was a pleasing task to him to make us hear the moans and croonings of disincarnate griefs and old pulseless pains, begging piteously, but always, softly, gently, for our love and comforting. But it should not be unrecognized that no allurement of his art can hide from view the deeper pathos of a horrid and iron fatalism which to his mind moved the worlds of nature or of life, throttled freedom, steeled the heart, iced the emotions, and dictated the essential automatism of our being and of these sad dead millions which crowd the dimly seen dreams of Hearn's mind.

George M. Gould. *Concerning Lafcadio Hearn* (Jacobs). 1908. pp. 174–5

An intrepid soldier in the ranks of literature was Lafcadio Hearn. His work was not merely literary material turned out of his brain, completed by his industrious hand; to him it was more serious than life. He is, indeed, one of the most extraordinary examples of the strange and persistent power of genius, ''ever advancing,'' as he himself expresses it, ''by seeking to attain ideals beyond his reach, by the Divine Temptation of the Impossible!'' . . . From the earliest years of his literary career, his delight in composition was the pure delight of intellectual activity, rather than delight in the result, a pleasure, not in the work but in the working.

Nina H. Kennard. *Lafcadio Hearn* (Appleton). 1912. pp. 348–9

Hearn knew many things. He had dabbled in all the out-of-the-way corners of literature, particularly those obscure byways that contained exotic or macabre studies. . . . He began with a vivid and sometimes violent creation of atmosphere, an intense visual reaction to the abnormalities of existence. But as time passed he began to speculate more and more about the hidden side of things. . . . He remained to the last a painter in prose, a man who handled words as an artist handles pigments, but his subjects ceased to be highly colored exteriors.

Herbert S. Gorman. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 19, 1924. p. 11

Hearn was a romanticist who found his double impulse in a distrust of the theology under which he was brought up, and the sordid life into which he was thrust, his philosophical support in the teachings of Herbert Spencer, and his release in a lifelong search for beauty.

Percy H. Boynton. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. July, 1927. p. 421

The same words might be spoken of him that he used in talking of William Blake: ''In eighteenth century literature Blake blossoms like a strange wildflower of unfamiliar colour and yet more unfamiliar perfume.'' Even so, in our own literary annals does Lafcadio Hearn's work glow, with the spiced and honied beauty of an unknown bloom. For he wrote of goldeyed falcons poised on crests of pine, and slim fawns feeding under maple shadows, of wild ducks in snow and herons flying and iris flowers blooming, and of long-armed monkeys clutching at the face of the moon in water.

Jean Temple. *Blue Ghost* (Cape). 1931. pp. 5–6

Hearn was a minor artist and his work will never occupy a very large place in the history of American literature. Yet the place may be larger than critics are now willing to grant and it is likely to be permanent. What he could do on his limited scale, he did supremely well. . . . He had a gift, almost a genius, for retelling legends, and when all his Japanese ghost and fairy stories are collected into a single volume we may find that he is the only writer in the English language who can be compared with Hans Christian Anderson and the brothers Grimm.

Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*. April 18, 1949. p. 24

His work, which includes newspaper pieces, essays, translations, interpretations of oriental cultures, fairy tales and a considerable correspondence, is colored by his exotic, romantic outlook, his faculty for probing luminously into the mores of other peoples. In his leaning toward both the macabre and the romantic, his place in

the stream of literature is as assured as that of Poe, or in lighter moments, of Lamb.

Harry E. Wedek. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 13, 1949. p. 9

Though he accepted evolution, he recoiled at the brutality, the ugliness, and the seeming immorality of it all. He found no prospect that pleased him long except Spencer's far-off golden realm. The romantic ideal of perfectibility was both his comfort and his despair. . . . Hearn's *Japan* can best be read with the awareness that Hearn, in spite of such labels as folk-artist, decadent, impressionist, and the like, was a Victorian, with some of the same problems of the so-called ''solid'' Victorians on the other side of the world.

Allen E. Tuttle. *New Republic*. Oct. 24, 1955. p. 18

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HELLER, Joseph (1923–)

Heller's satire cuts a wide swath. He takes after a variety of bureaucrats, makes fun of security checks, ridicules psychiatrists and army doctors in general. Sometimes he shoots way over the mark, but often his aim is good. There are several extremely funny passages, the humor usually rising out of the kind of mad logic that seems to Heller the essence of modern warfare. . . . But . . . Heller has introduced so many characters, tried to deliver so many knockout blows, and written in such a variety of styles that the reader becomes a little dizzy.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 14, 1961. p. 31

Below its hilarity, so wild that it hurts, *Catch-22* is the strongest repudiation of our civilization, in fiction, to come out of World War II. That the horror and the hypocrisy, the greed and the complacency, the endless cunning and the endless stupidity which now go to constitute what we term Christianity are dealt with here in absolutes, does not lessen the truth of its repudiation. . . . To compare *Catch-22* favorably with *The Good Soldier Schweik* would be an injustice, because this novel is not merely the best American novel to come out of World War II, it is the best American novel that has come out of anywhere in years.

Nelson Algren. *The Nation*. Nov. 4, 1961. p. 358

Considering his indifference to surface reality, it is absurd to judge Heller by standards of psychological reality (or, for that matter, by conventional artistic standards at all, since his book is as formless as any picaresque epic). He is concerned entirely with that thin boundary of the surreal, the borderline between hilarity and horror, which, much like the apparent formlessness of the unconscious, has its own special integrity and coherence. Thus, Heller will never use comedy for its own sake; each joke has a wider significance in the intricate pattern, so that laughter becomes a prologue for some grotesque revelation. This gives the reader an effect of surrealistic dislocation, intensified by a weird, rather flat, impersonal style, full of complicated reversals, swift transitions, abrupt shifts in chronological time, and manipulated identities . . . , as if all mankind was determined by a mad and merciless mechanism.

Robert Brustein. *New Republic*. Nov. 13, 1961. p. 13

Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* is an extraordinary book. Its basic assumption is that in war all men are equally mad; bombs fall on insane friend and crazy enemy alike. . . . Ostensibly a black farce about an American bomber squadron stationed on an island in the Mediterranean towards the end of the Second World War, it is, in fact, a surrealist *Iliad*, with a lunatic High Command instead of gods, and a coward for hero. . . . Epic in form, the book is episodic in structure. Each chapter carries a single character a step nearer madness or death or both, and a step, too, into legend. The action takes place well above the level of reality. On leave or in action the characters behave with a fine disregard for the laws of probability. Yet . . . within its own terms the book is wholly consistent, creating legend out of the wildest farce and the most painful realism, constructing its own system of probability.

Julian Mitchell. *Spectator*. June 15, 1962. p. 301

Its technical innovations notwithstanding, Heller's novel does operate within an established literary tradition. *Catch-22* is finally

a radical protest novel. Like *The Grapes of Wrath* and *An American Tragedy*, its protest is directed from the left toward the prevailing centers of power in America. But whereas Steinbeck and Dreiser aimed their polemics at the trust and the tycoon, Heller's target shifted. As C. Wright Mills points out, the new images of power in modern mass society are the interlocking bureaucracies of industry, the military, and the political administration. Heller apparently feels that the power shift must be countered with new patterns of protest.

Charles B. Harris. *Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd* (College and University). 1971. p. 34

Taken as a whole, the Yossarian-Milo relationship [in *Catch-22*] concretely illustrates Norman O. Brown's thesis that capitalism is a sublimation of the death instinct, that money converts the world to matter (feces). Before a world organized into commodities to be accumulated, Eros withdraws. ''This withdrawal of Eros hands over culture to the death instinct; and the inhuman, abstract, impersonal world which the death instinct creates progressively eliminates all possibility of the life of sublimated Eros, which we nostalgically so admire in the ancient Greeks.'' *Catch-22* is as rich in meaning as any novel written in our century. It bears up under continuous rereading; and the multi-layered structure demonstrated here indicates simply that a work of art as varied and true as *Catch-22* is not the work of a prophet, but the creation of an artist so richly endowed by the sensibilities of his time that he knows unerringly where his culture is going.

Jess Ritter in *Critical Essays on ''Catch-22,''* edited by James Nagel (Dickenson). 1974. p. 56

Something Happened succeeds massively in sucking the reader into the claustrophobic world of the narrator. The despair Slocum feels when he thinks of his job, his pitiful attempts to defend his work against the onslaught of his children, who are afraid they will follow in his footsteps, makes us take inventory of ourselves, our work, and what we did to our own parents. Slocum's fights with his daughter, from which both emerge bloodless and desperate, make Arthur Miller's conflicts between father and son in *Death of a Salesman* seem anemic and unreal. The cannibalism, the relentless cruelty of the loving family has never been better portrayed.

Susan Fromberg Schaeffer. *Book World*. Oct. 13, 1974. p. 1

It would be easy to dismiss *Something Happened*, and probably wrong. For as he did so unforgettably in *Catch-22*, Joseph Heller pushes at us here a deadly moral and we may well find ourselves impaled on it. This is not just another punishment of the same old organization man. No, Slocum's scummy, slimy nature is calculated to trap us in his horror as surely as Yossarian's adorable boyish farce did in *his* horror. *Something Happened* does not have anything like the marvelous clowning, the poignant camaraderie, the wild caricature, the pure acetylene contempt of *Catch-22*; large corporations are pretty funny but nothing can be as funny as an army. Nor does business life provide quite such shocks as can the military. . . .

But the ruminations of Slocum do become as insidious as muck. The voice is so familiar. . . . These sketches and snatches of vision, which we ought to be ashamed to share, slowly work on one another and fester richly as we learn of their sources in what happened to Bob Slocum since he was born, and then the whole mess begins to give off an elemental stink of life.

John Thompson. *New York Review of Books*. Oct. 17, 1974. pp. 24–5

It is one of Joseph Heller's several virtues as a black humorist that he has been able to avoid this problem [i.e., that while the responses may be powerfully rendered, the concrete events and specific social circumstances that induced them are seldom identified or objectified] and dramatize his steadily darkening vision of contemporary life through an evocation of the experiences responsible for it. In the fiction of Pynchon and Donald Barthelme, for example, virtually everything and everyone exists in such a radical state of distortion and aberration that there is no way of determining from which conditions in the real world they have been derived or from what standard of sanity they may be said to depart. The conventions of verisimilitude and sanity have been nullified, and the fiction itself stands as a metaphor of a derangement that is seemingly without provocation and beyond measurement.

Heller, by contrast, derives his materials from the actualities of the observable world, portrays them with much greater fidelity to realism, and achieves his effects through comic exaggeration and burlesque rather than hallucination—which is perhaps to say that he descends from Dickens rather than Beckett. His characters are almost always grotesques, but they are presented as grotesques, and with no suggestion that grotesqueness is the natural and universal state of being. One is always certain, furthermore, precisely to what degree they and their situations are absurd or insane, because his narrative point of view is located in an observer with whom we can identify and who is rational enough to be able to measure the departures from rationality in the people and situations he encounters. . . .

But the deeply lodged suspicion in both *Catch-22* and *Something Happened* is that there is no one at all in charge, that Kafka's castle is in fact empty, that there is no crime for which one eternally stands condemned, no order behind organization, no system behind bureaucratic structure, no governing principle behind government, that what is happening is happening for no reason, and that there is absolutely nothing to be done about it because the causes responsible cannot be located and the very idea of responsibility may have lost all meaning.

This is the radically nihilistic perception behind Heller's new novel, *Good as Gold*. Yet in spite of it he has been able to generate what is at times an almost joyous comedy out of the depths of apocalypse and to identify and engage some of the specific social conditions that have caused the vision of apocalypse to become a defining feature of the present. Heller has accomplished this through his particularly effective use of two seemingly different kinds of narrative materials—the Jewish family experience (his first attempt in fiction to draw on this experience) and a wildly phantasmagoric rendition of the Washington political scene. His protagonist, Bruce Gold, is a minor Jewish intellectual, academic, and essayist who plans to write an ''abstract autobiography'' based on the history of Jewish life in America, a book that is never written, but which the novel, in effect, becomes. . . .

As he did in *Catch-22*, Heller tends here to ring too many changes on what is essentially one good joke. And the satire much of the time is so lightheartedly outlandish that it very nearly neutralizes one's awareness that the kind of insanity Heller makes laughable has also in the real world had the most destructive consequences. Yet there is more than an edge of anger in Heller's portrait of the Washington political scene, just as there are extremely ominous implications in his vision of American culture. His novel is indeed comic, often hilariously so, but it is also comedy of the blackest and blackest kind. It is all about a society that is fast going insane, that is learning to accept chaos as order, and unreality as normal. The horror is that the time may soon come when the conditions Heller depicts will no longer seem to us either funny or the least bit odd.

John W. Aldridge. *Harper's*. March, 1979, pp. 115–18

It's obvious that Heller wrote *Good as Gold* more quickly than either *Catch-22* (1961) or *Something Happened* (1974). If he used up his military experience in the first book and his corporate experience in the second, why not his Jewish experience this time, meager as it may have been? After all, a writer has only so much capital.

In any case the wisecracking voice we hear in *Good as Gold* is familiar from the two earlier novels, and uniquely Heller's own, however threadbare the material. Though the people in those books were deliberately *not* Jewish, their cast of mind bore unmistakable traces of the post-Kafka Jewish literary sensibility: nervous, agile, hilarious, paranoid, fatalistic. . . .

In his first two novels Heller seemed radically gripped by his material, exorcising his obsessions by working them into the form and language. This scarcely happens in *Good as Gold*. Heller's literary genius showed itself especially in a certain rhythm, a subtle but needling texture of repetition which is simply absent from the new novel. *Catch-22* took shape not in chronological sequence but around the unfolding mystery of the death of Snowden, the catch of Catch-22 itself, the raising of the bombing missions, and a hundred other intricately developed leitmotivs. . . .

Like Beckett and Pinter, Heller at his best knows how to make the trivial feel ominous through reiteration. This web of repetition makes the first 100 pages of *Something Happened* particularly brilliant; it locks us like helpless prisoners into Slocum's petty mind, and stirs up a terrific swirl of verbal energy that is not zany and explosive as in *Catch-22*, but burrowing, sinuous, and relentless. Slocum is all of us at our most grasping, selfish, and devious; but by confining us to his mean viewpoint for 592 pages, the book finally becomes as hollow and unbearable as its protagonist. The point about *Something Happened* is that hardly anything does. No one could accuse Heller of trying to be ingratiating.

Good as Gold picks up neither the bleakness of *Something Happened* not the burning intensity of its writing; but it does borrow some of the negative qualities of its hero, its theme of middle-aged compromise and disappointment. . . .

Good as Gold offers as many belly-laughs as *Catch-22*; there are pages we can barely resist reading aloud, gags we'll want to retell. But it's all too uneven, and when the satire ebbs, in the last 100 pages especially, the book turns slack and plotty, with little of real human interest to hold our attention. . . .

Heller's runaway riffs of surreal satire and winged fantasy are as brilliant as ever. But much of *Good as Gold* is too earthbound, too leaden, to really take off.

Morris Dickstein. *Saturday Review*. March 31, 1979, pp. 49–52

Heller's novels identify, as in Faulkner, the creative and ordering potency of consciousness, but Heller begins to modify naive, objectivist emphases. In the phenomenon of *déjà vu* in either novel, Heller accounts for both a content—the ontological status of *Catch-22* and *Something Happened* must be regarded as the human consciousness—and an epistemological technique. But—especially in *Catch-22*—he leaves open the answer to questions concerning where the phenomenon is to be assigned most prominently. It seems sometimes to operate traditionally, within the mind of an invisible narrator, but at other times it seems inside created characters, and, eventually, perforce, in the mind of a reader, in much the same well-known way that Joycean techniques of epiphany and narrative disjunction work. . . .

Heller, in contrast to Faulkner, has now identified a stable base in the archetypes of consciousness. Both manifest in and identified by literary constructs, these archetypes permit Heller [and others] now to project a more determinate fictional form than a naive existentialism would permit. The archetypal pattern of romance, which becomes the projected frame for Heller, offers his novel a construct within which he—projecting through the consciousnesses of his characters—can determine form and meanings. Discrete, disjunctive details of imagery and events begin to draw together around the archetypes at the core of consciousness—author's, character's, and reader's. So that despite the large gaps locally in Heller's novel, the overall form has revealed itself as rather more insistently determined than one might otherwise expect.

James M. Mellard. *The Exploded Form: The Modernist Novel in America* (Univ. of Illinois Pr., 1980), pp. 104, 106

Human, animal, and real—these words describe Heller's David in [*God Knows*]. This is the lover who commits adultery with the comely Bathsheba and then sends her husband to his death in battle, explaining that he could not help himself or that the devil made him do it. This is the artist who puffs himself up, taking credit for everything from the psalms and proverbs invented by Bathsheba to *The Messiah* written by Handel. . . . Which unpleasant aspect of David as drawn by Heller is the *real* David? Only God knows. What Heller's Midrash tells us is that our biblical heroes were human, not gods, and we do the Bible no credit by pretending otherwise. David's great deeds and noble aspirations shine all the greater in contrast to his pettinesses, lusts, and ambitions.

Indeed, *God Knows* turns on contrasts, and succeeds where it does so only on the basis of maintaining the delicate balance between the pure and the impure, the sacred and the profane, the high and the low. Elevation and denigration—inflation and deflation—are the very fabric of the novel. Heller sets up a double rhythm, juxtaposing the Biblical passages, with their grand syllables, to the modern vernacular, often a gutter tongue. The clash of cultures, as it were, is funny in and of itself—this is how Jewish

humor works, a remnant, perhaps, of the Yiddish tradition of self-deprecating humor that pulls the rug out from under itself.

John Friedman and Judith Ruderman. *Judaism*. Summer, 1987, pp. 300–301

The subplot of *No Laughing Matter* concerns Heller's divorce trial which was interrupted by his illness. Heller has a consistently sharp eye for institutional absurdity, especially in the law, and as usual reveals that absurdity by playing off one verbal style against another. Here the main butt of his irony is his wife's lawyer who, in spite of being the author of *Uncoupling—A Guide to Sane Divorce*, accused Heller of ''raping'' his Long Island home. Heller's method of portraying these hearings is to quote from the official transcript, commenting on the patent absurdities in a dead-pan voice. He suspends all wisecracks and even warns the reader ''now this is not a laughing matter'' (265), but from at least Mark Twain onward such warnings in American literature regularly act as a cue for more comedy. . . .

No Laughing Matter is a far less adversarial work than Heller's previous fiction. . . . Because it carried no pain it was obviously difficult for Heller to think of himself as ill; but it was equally obvious that he was seriously incapacitated. *No Laughing Matter* makes repeated play of the disparity between perceptions of Heller's illness and the medical facts; and between such terms as ''paralyzed'' and the physical actuality. Paradoxically the illness resulted ultimately in Heller's gaining an astonishing sense of well-being and happiness. . . . It remains to see whether changes will also take place in the vision of Heller's fiction.

David Seed. *The Fiction of Joseph Heller: Against the Grain* (New York: St. Martin's, 1989), pp. 188–89

We Bombed in New Haven is about a stage company putting on a play about a war; hence, that war is ''imaginary.'' But because Heller breaks down the wall between illusion and reality, the play is truly about the public's implication in the waging of war—or in any immoral activity decreed by the powers-that-be. The work, therefore, contains multiple, mutually enhancing themes: war, social responsibility and death. . . .

When Henderson is, finally, killed, quite brutally and onstage, and the actor playing Henderson does not get up off the floor, the audience has been properly instructed and prepared not only to grieve for a stranger but also to accept a certain moral responsibility for the death. The key to the play, in the remembrance of the Yale drama student who served as Heller's assistant, was this onstage murder. Heller was concerned not with the humor of the production but rather with its horror: the playwright was insistent that this scene shock the audience—that it come across forcefully. Only then, having previously refused to become involved in this spectator sport, would the audience feel as implicated in events as Starkey.

Judith Ruderman. *Joseph Heller* (New York: Continuum, 1991), pp. 69, 74–75

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HELLMAN, Lillian (1905–1984)

Miss Hellman is not a specialist in abnormal psychology and not a specialist in the Marxian interpretation of society. She is a specialist in hate and frustration, a student of helpless rage, an articulator of inarticulate loathings. Ibsen and also Chekhov have been mentioned in connection with her plays. Strindberg would be nearer, though perhaps still far enough from the mark. . . . She is fascinated by her own hatred of something.

Joseph Wood Krutch. *The Nation*. Dec. 26, 1936. pp. 769–70

The author is just with her characters; she sees them with a certain smiling asperity, an astringent, almost cruel, clarity. But she is unable to reveal in their weakness that which makes them part of what is blessed and great in life. The blunderers in Chekhov are brothers in our nobility even as in our abjectness. The characters in *The Autumn Garden* are our equals only in what we do not respect about ourselves. Miss Hellman refuses to be ''metaphysical,'' poetic or soft. She will not embrace her people; she does not believe they deserve her (or our) love. Love is present only through the ache of its absence. Miss Hellman is a fine artist; she will be a finer one when she melts.

Harold Clurman. *New Republic*. March 26, 1951. p. 21

In *Toys in the Attic* Miss Hellman picked up the sword of judgment many playwrights of the Fifties had laid aside and wielded it with renewed vigor. But this time, compassion guided her hand so that she performed surgery on her characters instead of summarily decapitating them. . . . It was the special merit of Lillian Hellman's work that its painful story unfolded ''naturally''; dreadful things are done by the onstage characters out of anxiety and loss of control rather than out of ingrained villainy. The author's corresponding view of life is ironic and is trenchantly expressed, but there is no gloating over human misery, no horror-mongering, no traffic with sensationalism in *Toys in the Attic*. And, unlike some well-known contemporary playwrights here and abroad, Miss Hellman proved again that she could deal with human failure without falling in love with it herself. She remained admirably sane in the midst of the ugliness and confusion she so unerringly exposed. Although she looked at life unsentimentally, she combined sympathy with her judgment of the characters. . . . Not the least of Miss Hellman's perdurable gifts is her ability to write for actors. Her art of characterization is insight exercised in the theatre that completes itself in performance.

John Gassner. *Theatre at the Crossroads* (Holt). 1960. pp. 137–9

Since she is a playwright of the thirties, she has sometimes been taken simply as a social playwright. Although there is implicit anticapitalism in *The Little Foxes* and explicit antifascism in *Watch on the Rhine*, Miss Hellman has always been most concerned with personal morality, although, as both *Foxes* and *Rhine* indicate, personal action has public consequences. Any social content in the recent plays is far below the surface. . . . If a character in any of these plays may be said to suggest social criticism it is the off-stage Cyrus Warkins in *Toys in the Attic*, the respectable businessman who uses thugs to beat up Julian Berniers and Mrs. Warkins, although even Cyrus' motivation may mix jealousy with outrage at being bested in a business deal. Despite her obvious concern with social evil, Miss Hellman more often seems preoccupied with abstract evil, even to the point of caricature, as in [*Another Part of the] Forest*, or she goes out of her way to provide acres of psychological motivation, as in *Toys*. For Miss Hellman, however, psychological determinism, as [*Autumn] Garden* shows, is never an excuse. Always the moralist, the playwright is usually intent on pointing a critical finger not only at the eaters of the earth, but at those who, in Addie's words from *The Little Foxes*, ''stand and watch them do it.''

Gerald Weales. *American Drama since World War II* (Harcourt). 1962. pp. 89–90

It is far too soon, of course, to know whether *Toys in the Attic* has anything of the stature of [Chekhov's] *The Three Sisters*, even though it has unusual magnitude. But it is revealing that this is the first of Miss Hellman's firmly-plotted plays of which such a question can be raised without absurdity. Miss Hellman's plays have always been dramatically powerful, and she has always displayed the virtues of vivid characterization, credible motivation, and an unusually clear and convincing dialogue style; but her work was always too limited in theme and attitude for general or permanent value. In *The Autumn Garden* she displayed something of the qualities she had lacked, but the play misses her characteristic force. In *Toys in the Attic*, with bows to Chekhov and the great fabulists, she has written her first play to combine all her earlier virtues with compassion, truth, detachment, and tremendous dramatic power.

Jacob H. Adler. *Educational Theatre Journal*. May, 1963. p. 117

Behind Lillian Hellman's plays there is a torn spirit: the bright stuffs of expensive productions and the hair-shirt of didacticism. Between these two, her genuine talent for characterization is diminished. Regina and the brothers go too far. . . . But they are alive and interesting. The little prostitute in *Another Part of the Forest* is a striking vignette. That these characters and others should be squeezed to death by the iron of an American version of Socialist Realism and the gold of a reigning commercialism is a problem of cultural history.

Elizabeth Hardwick. *New York Review of Books*. Dec. 21, 1967. p. 5

Her accounts [in *An Unfinished Woman*] of her loves and of her work are oblique, as if neither aspect of experience were vital to her (although the real meaning of the fact may be that both are too vital to be shared). Her summary comment on [Dashiell] Hammett, with whom she spent thirty years, is deliberately but disturbingly flat: ''He was the most interesting man I've ever met.'' Her most analytical comments about herself are that she was ''difficult'' or ''headstrong''—adjectives which classify her as her parents might, from without, but which provide little insight into her inner workings.

The cumulative effect of her lack of self-penetration, her apparent uneasiness in love-relationships, her reluctance to contemplate her own writing, her acceptance of a travelogue version of her experience, is to suggest that her central effort has been to create, for her own benefit as well as for others, a character to meet masculine standards. This is not a mere ''image'': her life substantiates it. The life of constant action (in this case ''masculine'' rather than ''feminine'' accomplishment) rests on a foundation of intense self-concentration. Lillian Hellman's work has been to make a self, rejecting in the process many traditional concomitants of femininity.

Patricia Meyer Spacks. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1971–72. p. 561

The dramatic quality [in *Pentimento*] is every where evident, not only in the background of social intrigue before which many of these lives are enacted; but rather more importantly in the author's sense of timing, a kind of poised power over the units of scene that few writers of fiction possess. But there is also the extraordinary gift for the precise detail which is a fictional quality, and then again, for the often comically explicit detail. . . . She seems always to find precisely the right word, the right combination. . . .

She has called herself an unfinished woman, and she concluded the book of that title with what is probably the most open-ended sentence in literature: ''However.'' Open to the rest of her experience in life, as she has been to it in the past, is the only sense in which we can accept the word ''unfinished.'' But be that as it may, she writes what seems to me a prose as brilliantly finished as any that we have in these years.

Mark Schorer. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 23, 1973. pp. 1–2

Such a value system as Hellman's, whether in the plays or the memoirs, with its clearcut criteria of good and evil, has a reassuring emotional appeal; it makes us nostalgic for a child's world (where the worst crime is to tattle on your friends) and for the make-believe world of fiction and drama, of despoilers and bystanders, where such a system flourishes. But the adult realm of politics and history demands complexities of knowledge and fact, in which value judgments are painfully arrived at. We must do more than ask Sophronia.

Lillian Hellman's insight is sharpest when it is most personal and specific. If some of her plays seem dated now it is probably because of their ''well-made,'' realistic mode and their two-dimensional, good-or-evil characterizations. But three plays (and perhaps others) have had current repertory revivals—*The Autumn Garden, Toys in the Attic*, and *The Children's Hour*. These are the less structured ones, more concerned with psychology than plot, and with moral ambiguity rather than moral definition.

As a memoirist, Hellman was able to present her materials dramatically, without the limitations imposed by the stage. The

memoir form allowed, too, for subtlety in the exploration of character; for unanswered questions, and for a certain mysterious quality that evoked a response from readers who knew that mystery for their own.

The personal, the ambiguous, were not appropriate, however, to the politics of *Scoundrel Time*, and Hellman has taken some punishment for that mistake. But she formulated her philosophy of survival when she was fourteen: ''If you are willing to take the punishment, you are halfway through the battle.''

Lillian Hellman is still producing, still battling, still surviving, still performing. Whatever we may think of her politics or temperament, we must rejoice in the energy, ingenuity, and skill of the performance.

Doris V. Falk. *Lillian Hellman* (Ungar, 1978), pp. 156–57

The central figure of this strange short memoir [*Maybe: A Memoir*] (if it can be called such) is not its ostensible subject, Sarah Cameron, nor the memoirist, Lillian Hellman, but the elusive, mutilated, often reeling character of memory itself. Again and again Miss Hellman tries to corner memory, forcing it to reveal the truth about the people and events she is trying to make sense of. Important epistemological questions are suggested: How valid is what we know—or think we know—about the people who dropped in and out of our lives in the past? How can we tell where memory blends into fantasy, producing a composite that takes on different shapes at different times, according to our needs? At the end of Miss Hellman's struggle with these questions, we have to settle for some very dusty answers; meanwhile we have been entertained, dismayed and, above all, tantalized.

Though few dates are given, one can, with the help of two of the earlier memoirs (*An Unfinished Woman* and *Pentimento*) and with close attention to some extremely vague sequences and contexts, assemble a rough chronology for the fragmented story that is being told. Some time around 1929 or 1930 Lillian Hellman met—at a *New Yorker* magazine party or at a Paris restaurant—a beautiful, uninhibited, alcoholic, dope-taking, chronically untruthful woman named Sarah who went to Foxcroft and married a rich lawyer named Carter Cameron; the Camerons had a son, Isaac, whom Sarah insisted on calling ''Som.'' Sarah may or may not have taken Lillian Hellman's first lover away from her; this malicious young man, Alex (also mentioned in *An Unfinished Woman*), had devastated Miss Hellman on their fourth and final session in bed by recommending that she take a bath because of her strong female odor. . . .

I shall myself withhold the bizarre revelations or possibilities concerning Sarah and Som that bring *Maybe* into the 1970s and instead comment upon the very interesting persona Lillian Hellman has created for herself in these pages. She portrays herself as truculent, sardonic and (better than most around her) able to hold her liquor. Sexually independent herself, she is nonetheless caustic with her longtime lover Dashiell Hammett for letting strange ladies drift casually in and out of his whiskey-soaked Hollywood existence. The conversations of this sharp-tongued, easily angered woman tend to be sparring matches that modulate into gentle banter when she is with someone like ''Dash,'' for whom she feels strong affection. The recorded or reconstructed talk is permeated with a fine period flavor, full of goddamns and wisecracks, with situations referred to as ''nutty'' and people as ''nuts.''. . .

But absorbing as this autobiographical material is, it does not compensate, in my opinion, for the emptiness at the heart of the book. Miss Hellman fails to bring Sarah Cameron into existence as even a remotely comprehensible woman. The evidence is so scattered, so inconsistent, so blurred by time and alcohol, that we are left with a wraith too insubstantial to evoke even a sense of mystery, much less to support a valid point about the ultimate unknowability of figures in our past. Miss Hellman is aware of her problem. ''One of the strangest things about heavy drinkers, me among them in those days,'' she writes, ''is that much that seems clear to you as you drink, in sober periods will never seem clear again, because of course it never was.'' Halfway through *Maybe* she admits that she doesn't know much of what really happened and ''never tried to find out.''. . .

I prefer to accept Miss Hellman's word that she is trying to get at the truth—and assume that the truth she has in mind is not of some novelistic or symbolic variety. Even if it were intended as fiction or as fictionalized memoir, the Sarah-story still would not add up to anything significant. Facts and dates do not constitute the ''truth,'' but they are useful in anchoring an otherwise free-floating subjectivity. By surrendering prematurely to the impossibility of getting things straight—or at least straighter—Lillian Hellman has, I think, lost a chance to make *Maybe* the fascinating encounter with memory and time that it might have been. Despite the subtleties of its voice, its strong period quality and its brave forays into the self, the book remains, disappointingly, less a memoir than a shaggy-dog story.

Robert Towers. *New York Times Book Section*. June 1, 1980, pp. 3, 36

Lillian Hellman's autobiographical writing is of interest because it extends the range of the form and explores significant theoretical issues. Hellman presents herself as both human being and writer in process, exposing her methods of recall, probing the multiple meanings of the past, and commenting on her problems as investigator and writer. Her focus has been on the nature of her personal involvement with herself and others, not on her career as dramatist nor on herself as a political person. Hellman's ''life-record'' is a full one: among her documents are the many detailed notebooks she began keeping when she was fourteen. While she turned to a fully documented autobiographical format in *Scoundrel Time*, the body of her work presents a quest for the truth of life as experienced—for the poetic and philosophical life. . . .

Hellman's work has helped move autobiography as a literary form into our time. Her autobiographical materials have shifted from dates and historical records to memory and its processes. Voice has shifted from objective, if personal, narration to presented and involved writer/protagonist, acting, creating, revising, speculating, and questioning. From a frustrated modernist style, Hellman has moved to multilayered pentimento and to baffling tone poem. As a quest for self and for answerable autobiographical style and form, Hellman's is a significant achievement in contemporary autobiography and a provocative probing of philosophical issues basic to the development of autobiography as a literary form.

Maurice F. Brown. ''Autobiography and Memory: The Case of Lillian Hellman.'' *Biography*. Winter, 1985, pp. 1, 10–11

Lillian Hellman knew how to *write* a terrific person, she knew how to *be* a terrific person—and for a great number of people she was

just that for many years. For those with fuller information, the reality shows catastrophic divergences from the exemplary character she affected and depicted. For some, that may strip her of any claim to admiration; for others, it may be as irrelevant as an awareness of the ugly backstage ropes and grids to the pleasure in watching a production of *Swan Lake*. . . .

There is little doubt that Hellman doctored, refined, and expanded the image of herself that would be left in the memoirs. Yet her concern for image was a late development and had not been an overriding motivation of her life; had it been, the most elementary sense of public relations would have moved her toward reclusiveness, allowing the public to see only what she revealed in her writings. Hellman, on the contrary, kept herself highly visible for the fifty years of her prominence. Instead of creating her character and then protecting it behind a wall of privacy, she brandished it on the front lines of notoriety where it could be shot at with ease.

For all of her prodigious impact on the world—plays, books, loves, friends, politics, social criticism—there seems little doubt that her greatest contribution was the character that she created in the memoirs. So much attention has been given to the truth or falsity of the portrait that the creative feat has been overlooked. In order to be able to get such a character down on paper, a writer must have a profound knowledge of the world, of human nature and of the particular psychology being created. It requires much torturous life experience and an ensuing catharsis. It requires a rare sensitivity to what delights or repels others, an original flair to set the character apart, a strong moral sense (to be projected into the character) and a facility with words that precisely complements the personality being presented. In fact, it requires many of the skills and sensibilities that make up a great fiction writer or dramatist.

The achievement in such a creation is major and renders all but irrelevant the question of whether or not such a character actually existed. For the author to stand up at the end and say, ''This Lillian Hellman you've been reading about, this is me,'' is, of course, a lie. And the fraudulence must alter the perception of her integrity. But it doesn't diminish Hellman's creative achievement. The Lillian Hellman that is widely known may turn out in part to be just another admirable literary work fashioned by an author with less than admirable character. There is nothing rare about that. What is regrettable is that the real Hellman, although not as admirable, is, with her mixture of strengths and failing, far more interesting. And had she set her artistry to a frank and accurate self-portrayal, the accomplishment could have been far greater.

> William Wright. *Lillian Hellman: The Image, the Woman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), pp. 433–35

Lillian Hellman's place in American theater is not clear, even though her plays are revived frequently in New York and all over the world, and her work has endured better than that of other dramatists in her generation. Unlike many celebrated playwrights she did little to promote or explain her work. Even her immensely popular memoirs do not concentrate on her theater career, so that some readers, acquainted only with *An Unfinished Woman*, *Pentimento*, or *Scoundrel Time*, have assumed that play writing held only an episodic value in her life, and that life itself was her finest achievement. As a dramatist, Hellman wrote no manifestos for the theater. In contrast to Arthur Miller, for example, she did not campaign for tragedy and the common man or experiment with expressionism and other theatrical styles. She remained, for the most part, a practitioner of realism and showed little interest in questions of form and creativity, telling her *Paris Review* interviewers that ''one form is as good as another. . . . There are a thousand ways to write. . . . If you break into a new pattern along the way, and it opens things up, and allows you more freedom, that's something. But not everything, maybe even not much.'' She avoided symbolism, except in her play titles, and no single character of hers can rival Willy Loman or Blanche DuBois in mythic suggestiveness. Hellman's writing does not deal in pathos; she has to be the most unsentimental major playwright America has produced.

Whether one is speaking of Hellman's political or aesthetic position, she is America's finest radical playwright. Her radicalism is characterized by a depth of belief and integrity of principle that is uncommon in American drama. She required a realistic and unambiguous form in order to attack the appeasement of iniquity. Several of her plays explore the weaknesses of liberalism, of its tendency to be too lenient with evil, even while professing allegiance to the highest humanistic ideals. There is a penitent tone and a let-us-be reasonable manner in some of her liberal characters that result in an obfuscation of evil that is deadly real. . . .

Hellman's plays and, indeed, nearly all of her prose, are polemical. To read Hellman, even to read about her, is to start an argument. She did not believe in balance: having convictions means taking sides. Principles are not arrived at through compromising one's feelings for the sake of social amity. As a result, one is never done with Hellman, and she holds on to her readers until they are either persuaded or put off by her positions.

> Carl E. Rollyson. *Lillian Hellman: Her Legend and Her Legacy* (New York: St. Martin's Pr., 1988), pp. 11–12, 14

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HELPRIN, Mark (1947–)

I know a divorced father with literary aspirations who makes up interminable bedtime stories for his 7-year-old son on the one night a week the boy sleeps at his place. The stories are picaresque, filled with adventure, magic, love and violence. They also contain surprisingly beautiful digressions, in which the father seems to be confiding his undisguised hopes and fears to his son. The boy is restless listening to these stories, but he realizes that his father needs to tell them.

I'm reminded of this man by Mark Helprin's new novel, *Winter's Tale*, in which he appears to be divorced from himself. Abandoning the delicacy, precision and economy of his last book, *Ellis Island*, he seems to be telling us all an interminable bedtime story in this garrulous new work. Perhaps he was aiming for the picaresque, but it seems to me that we are past the time for the picaresque. It requires a structured society to which a charming rogue can oppose himself, but in a world like ours, which is itself picaresque, there is no opposition, no tension.

Winter's Tale seems to be an extension of the weakest story in *Ellis Island*, the title piece, which is a surrealist fantasy full of the kind of fictional leaps and bounds that are commonly taken for spontaneity or inspiration. An author kicking up his heels seems to gladden readers' hearts, as if they felt more comfortable with him when he is less scrupulous about art.

Winter's Tale is about ''the millennium''—isn't all serious fiction about millenniums?—and once again the reader is menaced with the spectacle of general deterioration. The book, all 673 pages of it, is like the morning-after debris left by a wild and expensive party. . . .

Winter's Tale attempts a grand design, and when grand designs don't work, they become grand confusions or pandemoniums. Almost every good writer has unpublished pages, reams of them, that he had to write and then reject in order to clarify or purify himself. Some writers choose to publish them, and who is to say no if the machinery is there? I hope that Mr. Helprin feels better for it and that in his next book, he will again be as good as he was in *Ellis Island*.

Anatole Broyard. *The New York Times*. September 2, 1983, p. C20.

Arriving late at an elegant London dinner party, the narrator of ''Tamar,'' a short story in Mark Helprin's *Ellis Island, and Other Stories*, is seated at the ''children's table,'' as a kind of genteel punishment. (The time is close to the start of World War II; the narrator is in London on a mission that fails—raising escape funds for European Jewry.) The teenagers in attendance are new to him and charming—lively, intelligent, dream-ridden. Amused by their chatter, the narrator finds himself under compulsion to entertain. He launches a ''long story about Palestine,'' then races on—his imagination freed—''because they were children, more or less''—to wilder stuff. ''I spoke of impossible battles . . . of feats of endurance which made me reel merely in imagining them, of horses that flew, and golden shafts of light, pillars of fire, miracles here and there . . . anything which seemed as if it might be believed.''

I connect ''Tamar'' with *Winter's Tale*, Mr. Helprin's utterly extraordinary new book (his second novel and fourth work of fiction) for two reasons. The first involves simple literary sleuthing: The substance of the story-hour performance described in a few paragraphs in the tale is extremely close to the substance of the nearly 700 pages of *Winter's Tale*. Pillars of fire, impossible battles and feats of endurance abound in the book. A flying horse is a central character, and, like the man in the story, the novelist whips about gleefully among a dozen modes of the fabulous—tall tales, fairy tales, sci-fi, animated cartoons, what you will.

The other reason for connecting ''Tamar'' with *Winter's Tale* concerns the book's potential uses. A piercing sense of the beautiful arising from narrative and emotional fantasy is everywhere alive in the novel. And because the novelist commits himself throughout to the pursuit of nourishing truths—truths of justice, hope and cheer remote from the more fashionable truths of alienation and despair—*Winter's Tale* stands forth in its own right as restorer and comforter. The witty responsiveness necessary to a full experience of the book is doubtless more likely to turn up in urban readers than elsewhere; a primary ambition of the work seems to be, in fact, to teach its audience how to understand—i.e., how to inhabit to some purpose and with some joy—a great city. But in the end, the wisdom in these pages is in no respect whatever parochial. The affirming voices that one is reminded of are those of Blake and Whitman. . . .

It's not through any of [the] unique natures, though, or through an account of the touching, hilarious, strikingly variegated personages of the book that one best approaches the golden core of *Winter's Tale*. Nor can one possess the work merely by studying the touchstone passages in which description and narrative soar highest. . . .

No, the heart of this book resides unquestionably in its moral energy, in the thousand original gestures, ruminations, Woola Woola writing feats that summon its audience beyond the narrow limits of conventional vision, commanding us to see our time and place afresh. Is it not astonishing that a work so rooted in fantasy, filled with narrative high jinks and comic flights, stands forth centrally as a moral discourse? It is indeed. And although I would insist that it's the vividness of the ideal in this book that's the source of its moral weight, and although it's clearly the fantasies that carry the ideal, I do not pretend to know why or how the marvelous concord of discords in Mr. Helprin's *Winter's Tale* is achieved. I can testify only to the force of the book's summons to wider vision, to the strength of its command to see anew and to the pivotal significance of the author's reflections on the city itself in driving us toward awareness of his fundamental seriousness.

Heeding his summons, obeying his command, means sustaining steady alertness to the ranges of contradiction that must be embodied in any human being laying claim to a vital life in a metropolis. The obligation, as spelled out in *Winter's Tale*, is to shed indifference and apathy, to realize the suffering through which one walks—the suffering of small children living and dying like beasts, against which Peter Lake cries out to a self-made publisher, Isaac Penn. But the obligation of equal urgency is to feel at every moment, without complacency or stoniness, the icy sliver of truth in Penn's answer: ''Who said that justice is what you imagine? Can you be sure that you know it when you see it, that you will live long enough to recognize the decisive thunder of its occurrence, that it can be manifest within a generation, within ten generations, within the entire span of human existence?''

Winter's Tale tolerates no beamishness, will not let its readers simplify their being. It insists that its audience live along the nerves of Hardesty Marratta's repugnance at Manhattan—''the entire population . . . rushed about here and there, venting their passions—struggling, kicking, and shuddering like marionettes.'' But the book insists equally that its audience live into the moment when ''the wind changed, the light came out, and (Hardesty) was caught up in some sort of magic. For no apparent reason he suddenly became king of the world. . . . The city seemed to have no middle ground.''

And, above all, it requires that we think our way toward the ideal city, toward a sense of what such a place could and should mean, toward a conception of how the inhabitants might become

worthy of such space: ''To enter a city intact it is necessary to pass through . . . gates far more difficult to find than gates of stone, for they are test mechanisms, devices, and implementations of justice.'' One gate is that of ''acceptance of responsibility,'' another is that of ''the desire to explore,'' still another that of ''devotion to beauty,'' and the last is the gate of ''selfless love.'' It's in the development of this theme that *Winter's Tale* rises to the level of significant affirmation.

I understand that praising an author nowadays as an affirmer can harm him; books that discover justice in the world are exposed to the same suspicion stirred by positive-outlook scams such as television's ''good news break.'' And Mr. Helprin has a record. Gifted as a wish fulfiller, as in numberless other ways, he's created, in his earlier work, a large gallery of admirably indomitable, entirely improbable winners. And the population of his winners' gallery is considerably expanded by *Winter's Tale*. Good and evil lock horns time and again in this work, and evil does not prevail. Men and women of virtue and intellect are regularly awarded honors. Children who die untimely deaths are miraculously raised from the grave. Smoke-cloud disasters such as the burning of Manhattan at the time of the millennium are themselves found not lacking in silver linings.

But disasters without immediately visible silver linings occur in *Winter's Tale* and, to repeat, there is no whitewashing of Metropolis. If the author's theory of justice requires us to think in broader time frames than the ordinary professional historian or Marxist theorist is accustomed to imagine, and if his reasoning slides off occasionally toward incoherence, the grand argument of his work—its general impression of life, its challenge to the suffocating dogma that good hope in a writer inevitably signifies obliviousness—remains indismissible.

There's far more that I would wish to say about the book—so much more that I find myself nervous, to a degree I don't recall in my past as a reviewer, about failing the work, inadequately displaying its brilliance. The canniness of the balancing of fantasy and realism, the capacity of these Dickensian presences to bring to mind, subtly, contemporaries and near-contemporaries from Rupert Murdoch to Howard Hughes to Thomas Pynchon, the excitement scholars will find in interpreting Mr. Helprin's extension of the line of American imaginers who have grappled for longer than a century with the meanings of technology. . . . Not for some time have I read a work as funny, thoughtful, passionate or large-souled. Rightly used, it could inspire as well as comfort us. *Winter's Tale* is a great gift at an hour of great need. . . .

> Benjamin De Mott. *The New York Times Book Review*. September 4, 1983, pp. 1, 21-2.

The first story in Mark Helprin's first book, *A Dove of the East and Other Stories,* is indisputably a fantasy. ''A Jew of Persia'' is the tale of an immigrant from Iran, now living in Tel Aviv, who has been pursued for most of his life by a minor yet formidable devil in human form who is bent on revenging the protagonist's effrontery in resisting him once in the mountains of his old home. In miniature, this early story contains nearly all the elements that will come to distinguish Helprin's work: an unfaltering, unconcealed strong narrator's voice at once mythic yet prosaic, old-fashioned yet postmodern; the struggle between good and evil, duty and abdication; the grim necessities imposed on every individual by the simple act of existence; the centrality of family; heritage (most often Jewish; Helprin's mother was descended from Jews once resident in China) as the governor of identity. All modulated by a sense that surface existence is both merely a scrim over a deeper reality, and simultaneously all we can ever really know and cherish.

Yet perhaps because Helprin is so adept at depicting the quotidian—his visual descriptions, rich in metaphor, of mountains, cities, countryside, people are instantly evocative and crisply cinematic, his appreciation for the miracle of daily life and its appurtenances so keen—the underlying strata of the fantastic which crops up everywhere in his work has been generally ignored.

Readers searching only for further overt fantasy would be generally disappointed by the rest of the stories in *Dove,* none of which feature supernaturalism. Many are slight mood pieces, some as short as three pages, worthy apprentice efforts. Quite a few, such as ''Lightning North of Paris,'' evoke the pitiless ambience of Hemingway in his prime, an obvious model (within limits) for Helprin, as is Melville. But the cumulative effect of the volume is one that establishes Helprin's view of life as a fairy tale. Entries such as ''Elizabeth Ridinoure'' and ''Katherine Comes to Yellow Sky'' succeed in transforming such simple yet pivotal events as falling in love and relocating to a strange place into archetypical moments full of grace and promise, wherein every woman is a princess and every man a knight.

Helprin's first novel, *Refiner's Fire,* is best capsulized by its unabashedly romantic subtitle: ''The life and adventures of Marshall Pearl, a foundling.'' From the semi-autobiographical protagonist's stormy birth (he shares Helprin's actual birthday and some of his *curriculum vitae*) in the midst of a naval battle (his given name is a pun on ''martial''), through adolescent run-ins with Jamaican terrorists, to his climactic blooding in the Yom Kippur War, Helprin leads the reader on an odyssey of maturation and self-discovery, as Pearl continually pushes himself to his limits and beyond (as do most of Helprin's sympathetic characters). Early in the book, Helprin signals his intention to mix realism with fantasy: ''He could not restrain himself from consideration of that which was feasible mainly in the magical world, and, strangely enough, sometime in this one.'' From Pearl's arcane home-town—6,000 inhabitants obsessively sustain 30 fire-fighting regiments; a history professor makes an annual biplane flight to squelch Communism—to a surreal abattoir where time stops, to the mysteries hidden in New York's sewers, Helprin makes seamless transitions between achingly beautiful mimetic passages and wild-eyed flights of fancy, placing him firmly in the magical-realist camp.

Another tradition which can easily encompass Helprin is that of the quintessentially American Tall Tale. Vast improbabilities told with a straight face (Helprin once seriously confided to a reporter that he had been raised by a dog) amuse Helprin, whose sense of humour can best be described as mordant and droll, and he strews them liberally throughout his books. *Ellis Island and Other Stories* contains four stories of particular note. ''The Schreuderspitze'' is notable both for its mountain setting (Helprin is a retired climber), which will recur often, and for its notion of redemption through sacrifice and flights of the spirit. ''Letters from the *Samantha*'' is an enigmatic parable about a mysterious ape found adrift, very reminiscent of William Hope Hodgson's sea stories. Finally, both ''A Vermont Tale,'' with its portrayal of a mythic winter, and ''Ellis Island,'' the farcical misadventures of an immigrant in turn-of-the-century New York, point directly to Helprin's next book, the monumental *Winter's Tale.*

Helprin is a maximalist writer, and *Winter's Tale* is richly stuffed with indelible incidents and impulsively melodramatic characters. His work manages to be both formally and aesthetically challenging, while remaining the cliched ''good read.'' Set mainly in a city whose contours and history both overlap and diverge radically from the mundane New York we are all familiar with, *Winter's Tale* is split into two portions, the first and shorter detailing the Gilded Era exploits of one Peter Lake (like Marshall Pearl, a foundling), master thief and mechanic, lucky ''owner'' of the magical white horse Athansor, as he manoeuvres through a landscape dotted with magical Adirondack towns, insane and orgulous bandits, opulent oyster- and whorehouses, Utopian newspapers and semi-savage Baymen, among a thousand other lavishly and lovingly described impossibilities. The second portion concerns itself with the descendants of many of the early characters, along with several new ones and not a few revenants (including Lake himself, who gradually assumes the role of Fisher King), as they strive to avert or hasten the arrival of ''the truly just city'' which New York has the potential to become as our century cataclysmically slides into the next.

Unswervingly propulsive, sustainedly symbolic, gaudily illustrative of love, death and renewal, *Winter's Tale* must rank as one of the finest fantasy novels of the modern era, and the linchpin of Helprin's career to date. One character's passing observation could easily stand as the book's motto: ''Magic . . . was all about time, and could stop it and hold it for the inquisitive eye to look through as if through cold and splendid ice.''

Swan Lake, beautifully illustrated by award-winning children's book artist Chris Van Allsburg, is a novelette concerned once again with Helprin's core themes of duty and devotion as exemplified by the tale of treachery and misapprehension in a Ruritanian setting. It suffers a bit from being narrated one remove from the long-past action, and its climactic revelation of identity is easily guessed in advance. *A Soldier of the Great War* details the incredible sufferings and eventual transcendence of one Alessandro Giuliani, light-intoxicated peacetime student of aesthetics, later soldier, deserter, Alpinist, prisoner, and escapee during World War I. Helprin eschews fantasy almost totally in this nonetheless Homeric and affecting work, save for one central conceit: the entire Italian military effort is secretly under the control of a mad dwarf named Orfeo, head scribe at the Ministry of War, who is wont to rave of ''the blessed sap'' that flows through the universe, and to perform such arbitrary miracles as shipping the army's entire supply of cinnamon—several thousand tons—to one unlucky camp.

Jackson Mead, the Lucifer of *Winter's Tale,* undoubtedly speaking for Helprin, summarizes Helprin's work: ''Everything in the world . . . comes down to love or a fight, which, when they are hot enough to be flame, rise and combine . . . [pushing] a human soul to the highest state of grace . . .''

Paul Di Filippo. In *St. James Guide to Fantasy Writers*, ed. David Pringle (St. James Press, 1996).

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HEMINGWAY, Ernest (1898–1961)

Hemingway is, among his contemporaries, incomparably conscious of the art of prose. He seems to have known throughout what he had to do; and that was, as he discovered on the bed in Verlaine's old room, to find out in any given incident what really had happened. It is the mark of the true novelist that in searching the meaning of his own unsought experience, he comes on the moral history of his time. It is a hard task, and one that requires great scrupulousness; it is not one that can be generously undertaken while serving a cause.

Hemingway's accomplishment will, I think, stand. It has an historical, as it has a literary importance. . . . It was given to Hawthorne to dramatize the human soul. In our time, Hemingway wrote the drama of its disappearance.

John Peale Bishop. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Winter, 1937. p. 118

Hemingway has expressed with genius the terrors of the modern man at the danger of losing control of his world, and he has also, within his scope, provided his own kind of antidote. This antidote, paradoxically, is almost entirely moral. Despite his preoccupation with physical contests, his heroes are almost always defeated physically, nervously, practically: their victories are moral ones. He himself, when he trained himself stubbornly in his unconventional, unmarketable art in a Paris which had other fashions, gave the prime example of such a victory; and if he has sometimes, under the menace of the general panic, seemed on the point of going to pieces as an artist, he has always pulled himself together the next moment.

Edmund Wilson. *Atlantic Monthly*. July, 1939. p. 46

His writing was exciting and possessed of an extraordinary power of suggestiveness; it won over the reader to the feeling that he was actually participating in the lives of very real men and women. His use of dialogue helped enormously to create this impression. Others, notably Ring Lardner, preceded Hemingway in exploring and revealing the literary possibilities of the use of American vernacular, but he used it with amazing skill and originality. Both his suggestiveness in conveying a sense of life and his use of dialogue tended to turn the attention of youth toward common American experiences and to the speech expressing them on city streets and farms.

James Farrell. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 1, 1943. p. 6

From the beginning the thing that stirred him most was violence, and the emotions of which he wrote were those stimulated by pain and killing—war, and bull-fighting, and big game-hunting, and fishing to kill rather than for sport, and love conceived as something in itself very akin to violence. Purposely he chose a material which was stronger stuff than that of Frank Norris, and wrote about it as Sherwood Anderson might have written, if Anderson, who was a great story-teller but a lazy artist, had not sloughed the job

whenever a specific emotion was involved. The places where Anderson dodged, saying ''that's another thing'' or ''but let that pass,'' are the ones in which by instinct Hemingway saw his major goal.

W.M. Frohock. *Southwest Review*. Spring. 1947. p. 91

Why do they all (the critics) hate him so?

I believe the truth is that they have detected in him something they find quite unforgiveable—Decent Feeling. Behind all the bluster and cursing and fisticuffs he has an elementary sense of chivalry—respect for women, pity for the weak, love of honor—which keeps breaking in. There is a form of high, supercilious caddishness which is all the rage nowadays in literary circles. That is what the critics seek in vain . . . and that is why their complaints are so loud and confident.

Evelyn Waugh. *Commonweal*. Nov. 3, 1950. p. 98

The Sun Also Rises is . . . Hemingway's *Waste Land*, and Jake is Hemingway's Fisher King. This may be just coincidence, though the novelist had read the poem, but once again here is the protagonist gone impotent, and his land gone sterile. Eliot's London is Hemingway's Paris, where spiritual life in general, and Jake's sexual life in particular, are alike impoverished. Prayer breaks down and fails, a knowledge of traditional distinctions between good and evil is largely lost, copulation is morally neutral and, cut off from the past chiefly by the spiritual disaster of the war, life has become almost meaningless. ''What shall we do?'' is the constant question, to which the answer must be, again, ''Nothing.''

Philip Young. *Ernest Hemingway* (Rinehart). 1952. pp. 59–60

The critical question (in both senses of the word) is why *The Sun Also Rises* has lasted and by what hidden art and artifice its survival is more or less permanently guaranteed. Four parts of an answer can be readily given. First its language, having been pruned of the temporary, the faddist, and the adventitious, is still in daily use among us. Age cannot wither the possible variations of which this clean, clear, denotative diction is capable. Second is the devotion to fact, that debt—as Conrad's wisest preface observed—which the writer always owes to the physical universe. Third, and a corollary of the second, is the skill in the evocation and manipulation of emotional atmospheres. Such a skill is possible only to one for whom the moral and aesthetic apprehensions of human situations—their truth and falsehood, their beauty and their ugliness—has the immediate force of a blow to the midriff, or of the quiet leap and stir of the pleasurably astonished heart. Fourth is the symbolic landscape which in company with the diction, the recorded fact and the deeply implied emotion, sustains and strengthens *The Sun Also Rises* from underneath, like the foundation of a public monument.

Carlos Baker. *Saturday Review*. July 4, 1953. p. 13

He is essentially a poet, and a high romantic individualist, alienated from the world, and charting a dangerous course between glamour and despair. He is a poet of youth, unable to face the complexities, or even the advent of maturity. The drab circumstances of common experience are, so to speak, suburban; what he has always sought has been the exotic. Beneath a somewhat tenuous realism that extends only from climax to climax, never from day to day, he is the chronicler of intense emotional states that are deeply felt, beautifully projected, and never quite understood.

Maxwell Geismar. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 13, 1954. p. 24

As somebody who has never been concerned with ''rating'' Hemingway's works but has simply been grateful for whatever joy his writing has offered, I might as well throw in a word about those critics who took an injured, censorious tone when discussing the life that Hemingway led in later years and what they considered a decline in his work. They sometimes sounded as if they thought that Hemingway made a point of letting them, specifically, down, in order to disport himself as a public figure, whereas, as I saw it, he was heroically and uncompromisingly occupied day after day with writing as hard as *he could* and as well as *he could* until the day he died. And when he was unable to write or was between books, he still did what *he could*, which was to live life to the full and then, with that limitless generosity of his, make his private experience public, so that everybody else could also have a wonderful time.

Lillian Ross. *Portrait of Hemingway* (Simon). 1961. p. 16

He made the man who could follow him no farther than his own well-lit door, feel, standing in it, the dark precipitous edge where life drops in one moment to utter nothingness. As though a man must earn his death before he could win his life.

No American writer since Walt Whitman has assumed such risks in forging a style, and the success of these risks was not accidental. For they were risks assumed in living, and thereby derived a tension that no merely literary risk could have achieved.

They were not amateur's chances, such as that proposed by one of the beatnik saints in assuming that writing resembled driving with headlights out and a noseful of pot. The chances Hemingway took were professional, being measured, and were then governed by an iron control. They were the kind of chances by which, should they fail, the taker fails alone; yet should they succeed, succeed for everyone.

Nelson Algren. *The Nation*. Nov. 18, 1961. p. 387

And I looked up into Hemingway's smile—the teeth yellowish and widely spaced, but bared in all the ceremonious innocence of a boy's grin. He was suddenly, beautifully, twelve years old. A tough, cocky, gentle boy still, but also a fragile, too-often-repaired old man, about (how could one help knowing it?) to die. It puzzled me a little to discover him, who had never been able to invent a tragic protagonist, so much a tragic figure himself—with meanings for all of us, meanings utterly different from those of his myth, meanings I would have to figure out later. . . . Yet he seemed, too, as we had always suspected, one who had been *only* a boy and an old man, never what the rest of us for too wearily long must endure being—all that lies between.

Leslie Fiedler. *Partisan Review*. Summer, 1962. p. 404

Ernest Hemingway is too thoroughly committed to naturalism and too honest a man to try to delude himself into thinking that one can ever get outside the dimension of time; yet he is aware of what other men have meant in saying that an experience of completeness, wholeness, and power and delight may convey an aspect of eternity. He has probably not read St. Augustine on the subject, and yet his character, the young American Spanish teacher Robert Jordan, might have read St. Augustine, for he tries humbly, clumsily, very honestly, without recourse to mysticism, to say that duration of time does not make a satisfactory life but that a satisfactory life is made rather by a complete satisfaction of the spirit: . . .

The virtues that Hemingway celebrates are narrower than those celebrated by political liberalism. They are much narrower than those affirmed by Christianity. There should be no illusion about this. But the virtues Hemingway celebrates are ultimately necessary to Christianity, and, as we have seen, they look toward Christianity. For they have everything to do with man's dignity as a free spirit—they are ''spiritual'' even though the irony is that the creature who yearns after them is in Hemingway's view a dying animal in a purely mechanistic universe.

It is almost as if Hemingway, driven back out of theism, dispossessed of his heritage, insists upon stubbornly defending whatever he has felt could still be held. It is a kind of rear-guard action that he fights.

Cleanth Brooks. *The Hidden God* (Yale). 1963. pp. 18, 20

A constant act of creative will and a constant sense of universal responsibility conjoin in the awareness of the Hemingway hero. And the omnipresent threat which hands over his head is *nada*—a total whimsical destruction to his will, his responsibility, and the *meaning* which he has paid so highly for. The code is the tentative bridge which he erects into the future to effect a passage over the shadow; it is a network of promises to himself of what the future is likely to bring in the way of challenges and how he will respond to those challenges. It is tentative, flexible, and subject to swift changes; but, according to his capacity to redeem those promises to himself which can be kept, it gives the Hemingway hero that minimum amount of surety and rest in a quixotic world which is his only guide to the future. . . .

The silence of his last nine years, his suicide, the recurrent images in his fictions of the man that keeps the light burning at night in a vain attempt to ward off the horrors of ''nothing''—all these strongly suggest that Hemingway's natural talents were ''zero at the bone,'' and that he created himself out of that ''nothing'' under immense pressure in the writing of his prose. Indeed, his writing career argues cogently that whatever philosophical validity the Hemingway code may have possessed, its pragmatic functioning for him was cardinal and irrefutable.

Earl Rovit. *Ernest Hemingway* (Twayne). 1963. pp. 114, 172

The real thing (''Big Two-Hearted River,'' for instance . . .) gets confused with so brassy a counterfeit as ''The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber.'' It is bad enough that ''Macomber'' exhibits Hemingway's crudest sketches of his code hero and his bitch-heroine; but worse that the code has been simplified into imbecile bravado: if a man runs away from a charging lion he is a coward, and if he stands to face it he has confirmed his manhood. Nick Adams—the boy in ''The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife,'' the youth in ''The Battler,'' the man in ''Big Two-Hearted River''—inhabits a world in which the problem of choice, unlike Macomber's is unresolvable by any single action, and more difficult than lions. . . . We will never know just what Nick or Hemingway was suffering from, or whether it was many things, or whether all these sufficient things screen off the genuine unfaceable article: his puritanical home, his ambitious and disappointed mother, his father's suicide, his war wound. *A Moveable Feast* suggests something besides: a broken heart. The heroine—Hemingway's only live and persuasive heroine—of *A Moveable Feast* is the first Mrs. Hemingway. The book is in praise of her and of what he lost when he let her go, since losing her he gave up not only her love and his but his youth and his friends and Paris, everything that encouraged him to write the early stories and that he suppressed in order to emerge as the formidable and nerveless public figure.

Marvin Mudrick. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1964–65. pp. 574, 578–9

If *Across the River and into the Trees* was not very good Hemingway, neither was it as bad as the worst reviews claimed it was. And as a statement of the themes of love, it was, contrarily, very good Hemingway. No matter what it did for Hemingway as a novelist, it continued the evolution of the themes of love. Colonel Cantwell's love story should have been and was the next step in Hemingway's ideological maturation. Read, therefore, in light of the love themes, *Across the River and into the Trees* is an important novel with a sustained interest. . . . In the unfolding of the story, we see the subtle changing of the Colonel, his steady but sometimes reluctant changing into a latter-day Tristan, a tough-minded Tristan who wants to beget children on his Iseult. Renata, in fact, no matter how idealized she seems, no matter how romantic the setting and action in this novel is, is in revolt against the romantic tradition of love. Her idealization is deliberate and proper, just as the characterization of other Hemingway women had been. To read her as a dream girl, a fairy child, is to miss the point of the novel. Renata is more a Beatrice than an Iseult. She is the very Tristan-like Colonel's spiritual guide, who dramatically teaches him through her actions that eros and agape can be combined in a human relationship.

Robert W. Lewis. *Hemingway on Love* (Texas). 1965. pp. 181–2

. . .Hemingway's work . . . helped towards a new interpretation of the image of America. Not, of course, in the way of a direct presentation as in the case of a Sinclair Lewis, but through the much more concealed method of setting an American character, often in the role of the narrator, against a foreign background. Unrecognized by the author himself, this important aspect was, in the inter-war period, hardly noticed by European critics. One could even say that Hemingway, by designing provocative characters of Italian, French, Austrian and Spanish origin, distracted readers from a conscious view of his American characters. Nevertheless it would, retrospectively, be difficult to deny that, despite his being an expatriate, or perhaps rather on account of it, he considerably contributed towards the reshaping of the European image of American men and women. It was an image more fundamentally

human in its elementary and often inarticulate aspects and therefore closer to his contemporaries of the Old World.

Heinrich Straumann. Introduction to *The Literary Reputation of Hemingway in Europe*, ed. Roger Asselineau (NYU). 1965. p. 6

If, as I have suggested, [Gertrude Stein's] *Tender Buttons* is a primer of stylistic possibilities, then Hemingway's *in our time* is a deliberately composed book of stylistic exercises. It was published in Paris in 1924 at the Three Mountains Press; later it was revised, conservatively, and most of its ''chapters'' renumbered and inserted between the short stories in the 1925 New York collection, *In Our Time*. The original version is rich with technical demonstrations of style, and some of its chapters can stand as brilliant, independent miniatures. Only thirty pages in length, the book contains eighteen consecutively numbered chapters. . . . We have no specific name to give these chapters; they do not tell a consecutive story, nor do they in any way develop what we conventionally understand to be a plot, although they are both thematically and formally related. They have been called vignettes, sketches, and miniatures. Unprecedented in English prose and subsequently unimitated, these pieces served Hemingway eminently well, primarily as tests of the narrative voice. Because they so well illuminate his devoted effort to locate the pitch and tone of voice suited to his understanding of life, they deserve close attention.

Richard Bridgman. *The Colloquial Style in America* (Oxford). 1966. p. 203

I think he was a genius, and I cannot see why his career—or that of any artist—should be averaged out, like a sociological table. What finally matters is his best work. Hemingway's comprises a large number of stories and his two first extraordinary (though flawed) novels. This work was epoch-making and is, apparently, imperishable; more, it exemplifies a view of experience and art, a ruthless modernism, toward which much of literature had been moving, consciously and unconsciously, for a century. That is why he had such an overwhelming influence so quickly.

On the other hand, relatively early in his career he became a public fool, a conscious ''character,'' an undernourished scavenger on his former self.

Stanley Kauffmann. *New Republic*. June 10, 1967. p. 18

Jordan [in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*] regretted that he had no one to whom he could pass on what he had learned in his brief heroic hour, and his own model hero was his grandfather, not his father. In *The Old Man and the Sea* Hemingway ends his long series of father-son failures with a relationship that is as nearly perfect as it can be in an imperfect world: Manolin is the beneficiary of Santiago's heroism although Manolin is another man's son. Hemingway cherished the relationship of hero-father to son more than the relationship of epic hero to society, the isolated more than the public act of heroism. Like [Frank] Norris before him, he finally rejected the idea of heroism in war, the idea of the *Iliad* epic.

Leonard Lutwack. *Heroic Fiction* (Southern Illinois). 1971. p. 87

Hemingway's last novel, *The Old Man and the Sea*, is the single exception in his general decline. In many ways it turns back toward the older manner of the nineteen twenties. It is certainly more restrained than its predecessor, *Across the River and into the Trees*, even more than *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. *Across the River and into the Trees* is ruined by the hero's sentimental meditations on events of the past; *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms* were books of acts; *The Old Man and the Sea* falls somewhere between the two. The old man struggles with the fish, but also he thinks a great deal, perhaps too much. The code of the good characters of *The Sun Also Rises* was to have personal values, to see them in the facts and the deeds, but not to state them. Colonel Cantwell in *Across the River and into the Trees* dwells on old events and deeds, talks about them in order to see universal meanings.

Floyd C. Watkins. *The Flesh and the Word* (Vanderbilt). 1971. p. 152

Frederic Henry [in *A Farewell to Arms*] is the first completely developed example of what was to become Hemingway's dominant motif: a man, often of military or para-military status, who is forced to recognize the inevitability of death and the concomitant frustration of trying to secure something of value from its onslaught. What makes Hemingway's presentation in *A Farewell to Arms* a brilliant achievement—one never surpassed in any of his later variations on the theme—is his subtle presentation of the process of discovery and the near-perfect fusion he maintained between the theme and his narrative method. . . .

In Frederic Henry's growing imagination death is not merely a single, final act of surrendering life—although the absurdity of such death weighs on him; what makes death intolerable is the knowledge that, like life, it is a continuous process, the reduction of experience in the very act of living. It is the inexorable loss of one's capacities by subtraction to nothing for nothing—*nada*. How, the novel asks, can one find value in life which is best described as an ''occasional temporary avoidance'' of death?

Dewey Ganzel. *Sewanee Review*. Autumn, 1971. pp. 577, 582–3

Characteristically, Hemingway's fictional protagonists finish alone, a pattern which becomes increasingly dominant in his later writing. The fear of loneliness implicit in these final fictions reflects what Erich Fromm calls the ''deepest need of man . . . the need to overcome his separateness, to leave the prison of his aloneness.'' Hemingway as an individualist refused to subdue that separateness by blending into the herd or by following a numbing, nine-to-five work routine. He also found bumpy and dangerous the alternative route to integration, that ''fusion with another person, in *love*,'' which Fromm calls the ''full answer'' to the terror of aloneness.

In defining his terms, Fromm distinguishes between *symbiotic* love and *mature* love. In symbiotic love, one partner normally assumes a passive, masochistic, inferior role to the other's active, sadistic superiority. Most of Hemingway's love stories, which usually assume a dominant-submissive relationship, focus on this kind of love. Mature lovers, on the other hand, share equally: they give and gain by giving. In a process which Fromm defines as ''union under the condition of preserving one's integrity,'' the paradox occurs ''that two beings become one and yet remain two.''

In this paradox resided Hemingway's dilemma. Like all men he dreaded aloneness; he dreaded it more than most. But he also feared that love would deprive him of his own individuality, of his own inmost self.

Among his fictional counterparts, Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* comes closest to achieving the Frommian state of mature love. Like Frederic Henry with Catherine, he resists Maria's desire to become exactly like him, to passively submerge herself in him. ''I would be thee because I love thee so,'' she says, but he counters, ''It is better to be one and each one to be the one he is.'' Unlike Frederic, though, during his three days among the Spanish guerrillas, Jordan comes to understand the beauty of giving and the importance of selflessness to those in love. ''He knew he himself was nothing, and he knew death was nothing. . . . In the last few days he had learned that he himself, with another person, could be everything.''

At least once in his fiction, then, Ernest Hemingway created a hero who loved maturely and selflessly without giving up his own integrity. The evidence of his life and of the bulk of his writing, however, suggests that he himself kept barriers standing against such total commitment.

Scott Donaldson. *By Force of Will: The Life and Art of Ernest Hemingway* (Viking, 1977), pp. 173–74

Hemingway's first and last truths are remarkably akin to the dominant themes in Albert Camus and, from a quite different angle, to those in Boris Pasternak. These three so various novelists come together in celebration of a purified sensibility, an innocent love of being in the world. Cutting through grand phrases and empty syllables, they exalt in the plain confrontation of man with nature and with other men. Serge Doubrovsky, writing about Camus's reception in the United States, argues that American readers applaud the element of existential struggle and unremitting effort in his novels but often overlook the ''solar joy.'' So with Hemingway, we perhaps pay too much heed to the hero's battle, which is of unquestioned salience, and attend too little to his poetic joy, his sheer aliveness and sensual alertness. Hemingway sends us precise messages to, about, and through the senses; much in the manner of T.S. Eliot's ''objective correlative,'' his writing makes us experience as his hero experiences and recreate for ourselves his being and ''isness.'' We are told how things look, feel, taste, smell, sound. And never for a moment can we forget that the individual is a physical being in a physical universe. Existence for its own sweet sake, in a world of colors and textures, shadows and curves, is what we are enjoined to relish. The necessary but artificial fabric of values and concepts, vocations and ideals, is underlain always by the naked pleasure of sensory transactions. In the dense symbolic and institutional environment of modern society, we need to be reminded that we sweat and sleep, get rained and sunned on, feel shapes and see movements—and that our enjoyment of all these requires no justification, but does require recognition and praise. . . .

If Hemingway is firmly bonded to the first half of this century and if many of his assumptions are now unfashionable, we must still recognize that the universal qualities of his themes and perceptions outweigh the time bound. Regardless of changes in a society's values or in its conceptions of social roles, the key issues of being human and living a life persist. Whatever the specific lineaments of the social universe, one can scarcely envision a model of the good life that is not instinct with Hemingway's virtues. The individual cannot move through this world, cannot count himself fully alive, without the sense of solar joy, without the exercise of competence, without some deep apprehension of fidelity to himself and others. William James said that the true gentleman was the person who, in sure knowledge of life's brevity, yet conducted himself as if he were going to live forever. This the writer must do, especially in the conduct of his writing. So the best part of Hemingway lives on in the clear language, if not forever, at least for a very long time.

Robert N. Wilson. *The Writer as Social Seer* (Univ. of North Carolina Pr., 1979), pp. 43–44, 55

One of the most powerful sources of Hemingway's enduring appeal is the irresistible combination of lucidity and elusiveness in his writing. The surface is as clear as a trout stream, perfectly simple, indubitably there, the thing itself—caught and held and defined. Yet underneath, as every reader senses, strange unnamable monsters lurk: the swamp into which Nick dares not venture at the end of ''Big Two-Hearted River.''

The lucid-elusive phenomenon is most present and most immediately obvious in the short stories, although the technique is used in the novels also. The shorter the work, the more disturbing to the reader is the tension. We have fewer clues, less evidence. Every word counts. We sense, in fact, that some words are missing. Evidence has been withheld. Something is desperately wrong. . . .

As various critics have pointed out, the missing center is often connected with both physical and psychological wounding—Hemingway's dominant theme—and, as a consequence, much has been written from a biographical viewpoint about the wounding at Fossalta (and all the subsequent woundings in his life, culminating in the climactic suicide). Meanwhile, Freudian critics have leapt with cries of joy over all of the evidence that suggests castration fears—and the evidence is abundant.

More than any other work, the Nick Adams stories hold the clue. And especially the Nick Adams stories that present the relationship between father and son. . . .

Ann Edwards Boutelle. *Journal of Modern Literature*. 9, 1, 1981–82, pp. 133–34

[Ernest] Hemingway flaunted his weaknesses and hid his strengths, took more care to conceal his wisdom than his folly. Like his heroes Twain and Kipling, he never fully matured as an artist. He maintained an anti-intellectual attitude, cut himself off from cultural centers, quarreled with fellow writers, had a messy private life, succumbed to publicity and lost his serious dedication to art. His novels appeared in alternating cycles and his finest fiction was inevitably succeeded by minor works. . . . He did his best work between 1925 and 1940 and significantly declined during the last twenty years of his life. . . .

Though Hemingway has not equaled the very greatest modern novelists Mann, Proust, and Joyce—his stature, based on his innovative style, technical virtuosity, and emotional intensity in three major novels and a dozen first-rate short stories, is secure. Unlike Dreiser, Lewis, Anderson, Wolfe, Dos Passos, and Steinbeck, who are no longer widely read and greatly respected, Hemingway has survived his decline, his death, and his detractors. He is

now recognized as the most important American novelist of the twentieth century as well as a seminal influence on the modern American character. . . .

Hemingway's phrases now live in our language: *grace under pressure; a separate peace; death in the afternoon; a clean, well-lighted place; a movable feast*. His imagination has permanently placed in our culture a series of unforgettable scenes: the retreat from Thrace, the execution of the Greek ministers, fishing the Big Two-Hearted River, the festival at Pamplona, the arrival of the killers, the bitter couple waiting for the train in ''Hills Like White Elephants,'' Nick's breakdown in ''In Another Country,'' the retreat from Caporetto, his hawk-eyed father in ''Fathers and Sons,'' the bullet tearing through the lion in ''Francis Macomber,'' Harry's death at Kilimanjaro, the massacre of the Fascists in Pilar's village, duck shooting in the Venetian marshes, and the car journey with Fitzgerald from Lyon to Paris.

Jeffrey Meyers. *Hemingway: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 569, 572

The modern American novel asked that readers invest themselves in helping to create the fiction. It was an open, suggestive structure, built from clusters of images and shaded descriptions as much as from plot, characters, and a linear progression of events. It demanded the same kind of close attention a good reader would give to poetry. As T.S. Eliot had said of Djuna Barnes's fiction, ''a prose that is altogether alive demands something of the reader that the ordinary novel reader is not prepared to give.'' The fact that so many readers have been willing to give such careful, even rapt, attention to Hemingway's writing has made him one of the key American modernists. There is no question about his influence, his example to writers both American and foreign, his major role in changing fiction from a representation of life to a recreation of it, even a replacement for it. Hemingway's power lay in imagining a world so entirely, so accurately, that readers believed in its existence. His monumental simplicity—each word fitted into place for maximum effect and chosen from a vocabulary that would reach the least able reader—set writing on a new track, one accessible to the limited reader but equally rich and suggestive for the most sophisticated. Hemingway was the master of control in the technique of writing.

He was also the master of presentation of the scenes of life, episodes so apparently true, so germane to his reader's experiences that no one questioned their authenticity. Because readers believed that Hemingway was indeed writing truly, and about important things, they read his work carefully. Their belief in him and his art gave his fiction credibility. If a story seemed to be unfocused or fragmentary, the writer giving just a hint of the action or characterization, readers supplied the rest; they came to Hemingway's fiction willing to adjust their sights, to clarify for themselves the perceptions so deftly conveyed. Turning the focus control, as on a telescope or gunsight, the reader moved into line, worked to make the angle right; and the magical involvement of reader with text was achieved. ''I sometimes think my style is suggestive rather than direct. The reader must often use his imagination or lose the most subtle part of my thought,'' Hemingway wrote late in his life.

Linda Wagner-Martin. In *New Essays on '' The Sun Also Rises''* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1987), p. 15

Because of Hemingway's fame, because of his identification with his characters, because he advertised himself as writing from experience, and because he gradually failed to provide his fictions with sufficient distance, the attraction of the biographical fallacy has seemed nearly irresistible. Thus the burden on the professional reader of Hemingway's work to maintain a sense of separateness and otherness is particularly demanding. We succeed or fail as critics of his work not just in pointing to his failures in distance but in maintaining our own.

What seems to have happened in Hemingway's decline as a writer was that the very confusion that has infected the Hemingway reader infected the author—compounding the problem for both. Rather than maintaining a mental separation between the persons or stages of the creative process, there was in him a gradual breaking down of distinctions. He began to believe his daydreams and their images became real; he also began to believe that the bard was his real identity. . . .

The bard figure, which in Hemingway's case seems to have developed out of an insecurity that drove him to ''probe'' his daydreams, further corrupts the maker's craftsmanship by completing the circle of confusion. If daydreams can be made real, then one can live one's daydreams. The distance between ''what if'' and ''what was'' constantly shrinks throughout the author's career, and we can only guess at the causes. Certainly one possibility is an insecurity so strong that daydreams were not in themselves enough reassurance and comfort and so a public drama replaced the private drama. Another factor may have been the success of the bard figure in obtaining mass-media attention, a pact with the devil, so to speak, that brought him a kind of approval but that led to consequences that he was ill-prepared to cope with. And perhaps there was, as several biographers have suggested, a conscious attempt to sell the importance of the fiction as an extension of fame and give it prominence, in spite of the critics, that could not be overlooked.

Since the bard was not Hemingway's most successful creation artistically, the loss by his confusion was obvious. His tragedy was that the insecurity, depression, and paranoia that gave him the ''what if'' materials of greatness led him, like an addiction to a drug, to gradually, and publicly, dramatize through himself rather than through his writing. Life became a more satisfying expression of fiction than the pen, until physically he could no longer play the part. He ended his life, like a poet, dramatically fulfilling a denouement that had been foreshadowed by his father's suicide and a number of references in his writings to that suicide. It was his final substitution of life for literature, a painful and regrettable acting out of the terms imposed by the biographical fallacy.

Jackson J. Benson. ''Ernest Hemingway: The Life as Fiction and the Fiction as Life.'' *American Literature*. October, 1989, pp. 356–58

Before Hemingway, many writers of war tried to give ''the big picture.'' The position of regiments and brigades, the movement of troops and lines of battle, and most readers were confused. Since Hemingway (who followed Stephen Crane in *The Red Badge of Courage*), most writers of war leave placement and movement of regiments to historians and concentrate instead on the actions and feelings of individuals in battle.

His pessimistic writings in the twenties were a healthy corrective to the optimism of late Victorianism and American Progressivism. If World War I did not convince all that the attitude associated

with Pollyanna was wrong, then the Depression and World War II certainly did. Twenty years before Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, Hemingway was writing existentialism: there are no a priori values; people create their values by their choices and actions, defining themselves in the process. This point of view replaced cheerful optimism as the dominant literary philosophy, and is, together with the realism that Hemingway also secured, still with us. Modern readers distrust unbelievable happy endings; they distrust those coincidences that make everything work out all right.

Peter L. Hays. *Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Continuum, 1990), pp. 134–35

What seems remarkable about this amazingly self-reflexive novel, this story about opposing kinds of satires [*The Garden of Eden*], is its reenactment of the conflict between male and female definitions of the manly character in ways invidious to both, and its establishment thereby of a wound-and-the-bow approach to androgyny that speaks profoundly to Hemingway's struggle with himself, or with the opposing female muses within himself, one hostile, the other supportive, against both of whom he seems to establish the terms for his own distinctly masculine artistry. The ambitiousness, the risk taking, in this unfinished many-sided novel, this experiment in self-reflexive psychodrama which Faulkner at least might have recognized as a clear instance of going beyond safe limits, will make it an object of study for some time to come; and not the least among its ponderable treasures will be the theory of androgynous creativity that emerges most clearly from its manuscript rather than its published pages. The decision of Scribner's editor Tom Jenks to remove from the published version visits by two American couples to the Rodin statue of a lesbian couple making love, along with the subplot about the Paris couple, Nick and Barbara Sheldon, who are equally implicated in the statue's resonant meanings, diminishes that printed version considerably and of itself turns us to the original manuscript for clues to the author's fascinating intentions, his decision to present the Garden of Eden theme as an androgynous love bond, a lesbian coupling, as it were, the peculiar happiness of which—in his own mournful words—''a man must lose.'' It looks very much as if Hemingway were trying toward the end of his life to come to terms with his own androgynous leanings, especially as they might help to define his lifelong quarrel with them in both external and internal ways, and his ultimate sense that androgyny might after all be the wound against which he had always drawn his masculine bow. . . .

The parable that the novel offers on Hemingway's life is certainly instructive, and the novel virtually asks us to work it out, even as the supposedly impersonal Joyce asks us to extrapolate from Stephen Dedalus's experiences some implications about his own. The parallels [in the novel] with Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald are in this regard somewhat misleading. It is not so much Zelda's jealousy of Scott's writing that Catherine reenacts as that of Hemingway's several wives. One thinks of that suitcase full of manuscripts that Hadley left unguarded; or how impugned Pauline must have felt by ''The Snows of Kilimanjaro'' and the windfall approach to her rival, Jane Mason, in the Macomber story; or Martha's active rivalry as a novelist and foreign correspondent; or Mary's sacrifice of her own writing career to marriage. Similarly one thinks of Pauline's refrain during the famous one hundred days of separation, ''You and me are the same guy''; or of Mary's account of her androgynous relations with Ernest in *How It Was*; or of the sexual role reversals with the lost wife in *Islands in the Stream*. We have good reason to read this novel, then, as a revealing gloss on Hemingway's long adult quarrel with androgyny in his several marriages, and therefore as a revealing gloss on his own artistic struggles, his own self-definition as a writer with decidedly androgynous propensities.

Mark Spilka. *Hemingway's Quarrel with Androgyny* (Lincoln: Univ. Nebraska Pr., 1990), pp. 334–35

A Moveable Feast is the final statement about his life and art by a man who wished to appear as an assured, successful public figure, a man of letters who had learned his craft and devised his philosophy early in life and then unswervingly followed it through good reception and bad—a priest devoted to his art. Hemingway's success enabled him to offer his ideals, his goals, his values, and even his personal habits, as if they were tenets of a holy faith—as to some extent they were. In one sense *A Moveable Feast* served as a litany, a paean of praise to the art that he had served and to the youthful acolyte whom he had been, even as in another sense his reminiscences surely served, if only unconsciously, as an attempt to recapture that youthful, self-confident believer in a simple unambiguous faith. However, almost ignored in *A Moveable Feast* is the serpent in this garden, the dark side of the artist's credo: the doubts, the flaws, the sins, the heretical tendencies that he feared might lurk in his own character and that he criticized in others or perhaps even projected onto them. . . .

The happy myth of the writer that Hemingway attempted to create in his last years does not obscure the fact that throughout most of his career he suffered from a deep conflict about his writing. The root of the conflict was the division of his loyalties between devotion to his art and his need for ties to the rest of humanity. Determined to devote his life to his writing, Hemingway had lifted himself above the limitations of his education and his conventional Oak Park surroundings to become a major writer of fiction. Nevertheless, from the time he began his career in Paris, in those good years that he would recall nostalgically in *A Moveable Feast* he had harbored reservations about the role of the writer vis-à-vis his fellow human beings. . . .

One of Hemingway's early reactions to the internal struggle between the demands made upon him by his art and those made by intimate relationships with others was to avoid or ignore the conflict. Thus, a class of Hemingway's works features protagonists who are men of action rather than men of letters. . . .

The story of Hemingway's internal conflict as portrayed in his fiction ends with the publication of his posthumous works. It was a story that Hemingway was unable to conclude because he was never able to resolve the conflict from which it emerged. To the end of his life, he remained divided between feeling as a man and acting as a writer.

Robert E. Fleming. *The Face in the Mirror: Hemingway's Writers* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Pr., 1994), pp. 169–71

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O. HENRY [William Sydney Porter] (1862–1910)

The Trimmed Lamp is of a piece with *The Four Million*, filled with the tragi-comedy of life much as it appeared to Dickens and to Francois Villon. In *Heart of the West* the author exploits a vein that many have attempted in the short story as well as in the novel—the so-called ''Wild West.'' But no one, it is safe to say, has brought so much fun and humor to the Western story. Cattle-King, cowboy, miner, the plains and the chaparral—material of the ''dime novel,'' but all treated with the skill of a Maupassant, and a humor Maupassant never dreamed of. The merest sketch of them has a certain substance to it. Yet it is idle to compare O. Henry with anybody. No talent could be more original or more delightful. The combination of technical excellence with whimsical, sparkling wit, abundant humor and a fertile invention is so rare that the reader is content without comparisons.

Henry James Forman. *North American Review*. May, 1908. p. 783

Mr. Porter is a real *flâneour* of the American type, only, he confines himself to no boulevard, to no city, to no State, nor even to a single country. The world, in fact, is his oyster, and he has learned almost unconsciously to open it and to extract from it alike the meat and the salty juices. . . . He gets down to the very heart of things. He sees the humour and the pathos blended; yet, on the whole, he is an optimist, for he sees that in the end most things come out as they ought to, or else if they come out wrong, the majority of people do not know it. Hence arise his own easy temper, his careless slangy ways, his lack of reverence, his willingness to spoil even a very good story because of a strong temptation to inject something absurd into the midst of it. You laugh at the absurdity, but the story is thereafter impossible to take seriously.

H.T. Peck. *Bookman*. April, 1910. p. 134

The dregs of humanity are treated with a sympathy that pierces to the core of the trouble and sees its solution. And if we accept O. Henry's point of view, never again will we scoff at the flimsy pleasures of the poor: we will try to give them more pleasures.

We see motion pictures of these people. A glimpse, and the fate-driven actors are gone on their unchanging way, not suspecting how nearby the wings of romance have swept. They are described by their actions, or by brief, trenchant sentences that are hurled at our heads, as ''He wore heliotrope socks, but he looked like Napoleon.'' O. Henry uses rapid suggestive—never detailed circumstantial—description that is highly colored by bold figures of speech. Where many writers would waste three hundred words in a vain attempt to catalogue features so as to put an image of a character in one's mind, O. Henry can in twenty-five words paint a clear, unforgettable picture. No other writer has excelled him in the use of suggestive description. Sometimes his characters are described by their unusual surroundings. But since he seldom assumes complete omniscience, it is rare that he attempts any psychological analysis.

Hyder E. Rollins. *Sewanee Review*. April, 1914. p. 229

The jaded critics and the short story writers read O. Henry and admire him: they find in him what they want. Those who do not criticise and do not write read him and love him: they find in him what they need—a range of fancy, an exuberance of humour, a sympathy, an understanding, a knowledge of the raw material of life, an ability to interpret the passing in terms of the permanent, an insight into individual and institutional character, a resolute and pervasive desire to help those in need of help, in a word a constant and essential democracy that they find in no other short story writer.

C. Alphonso Smith. *O. Henry Biography* (Doubleday) 1916. p. 15

Delightful as is much of O. Henry's writing, unparalleled as time-killers as are so many of his stories, not even his most ardent admirer would claim for a considerable part of his writing anything more than a brief, hectic life. Written for current ''popular'' magazines, dashed off frequently under high pressure while the editor with bull-dog tenacity waited the long hours in Porter's own room for the manuscript to be completed, many of these stories deserve to be classified as cheap, trivial, insignificant, ephemeral. After the tumult and shouting have passed, a careful critical commentary would greatly clarify the issues—and help us to assay the output of the Great O. Henry Mine, to seperate the dross from the gold.

Archibald Henderson. *South Atlantic Quarterly*. July, 1923. p. 273

He studied Maupassant, but Maupassant in turn might have added a certain glow to the cold finish of his own tales, could he have

studied O. Henry. The American certainly was the more original of the two. Not enough has been made of the ingrained Americanism of the man. No one, not even Mark Twain, was more a product of our own soil. He was a finished oral story-teller of the Western hotel-foyer type before he had ever written a word of fiction. . . . The last distinctive element in his art is the strangest of all the strange paradoxes connected with O. Henry. In this unschooled druggist, this cowboy and Main Street clerk, this Texas funny man, one would hardly expect to find verbal precision and wide range of vocabulary. Modern slang he used with outrageous abandon, but everywhere amid the slang are felicities of expression and strange verbal flavors that amaze one. Not even Henry James could choose words more fastidiously or use them more accurately. . . . But brilliant as were the possibility of his powers, and distinctive as was his technique, his final place can never be high even among the writers of short stories. He did not take literature seriously: he was a victim of Momus and the swift ephemeral press. His undoubted powers were completely debauched by it.

F.L. Pattee. *The Development of the American Short Story* (Harper). 1923. pp. 361–2

Hundreds of thousands if not millions of his countrymen and countrywomen have read and found delight in O. Henry's stories. Scores of imitative authors have strained after the magic twist of his method. The best of them have failed to reach it. Much has been written about him. Yet, paradoxical as it may seem, he has only partially received his meed of serious critical appreciation, and very little of that has come from home. In that there is a subtle tribute.

Americans have so taken it for granted that every one knows O. Henry and his stories that in writing about him they have confined themselves to some single side or aspect of his work, to his association with this city or that city, his interpretation of the activities of the engaging confidence man, or his championship of the little shop-girl.

Robert H. Davis and Arthur B. Maurice. *The Caliph of Bagdad* (Appleton-Century). 1931, p. 374

It is said that O. Henry's fame is fading. It may be so. Everything is. In the rushing world in which we now live nothing seems to last. But at least it can be said that O. Henry's place in the history of American humor ought not to fade. In the mere technique of words O. Henry was a rare artist. He had Mark Twain's gift of making old words do new tricks. He used language with a careless ease as if contemptuous of style or rule. He never elaborated or polished, or strove for art. Life was not worth it, for him. It is often said—indeed it is now the stock thing to say—that O. Henry wrote only anecdotes, not stories. In a literal sense this is true, but in the wide sense it is not. O. Henry's work must be taken altogether, or at least gathered in large canvases; his pictured West with amiable and inimitable scoundrels like Jeff Peters and Andy Tucker, the sanded beaches of his Central America with its sunlit exile, and the vast panorama of his great city of the Four Million. O. Henry's picture of New York, seen not in one but in twenty stories, grows to the magnitude of Zola's Paris or Dickens's London. The ''anecdotes'' join up into a saga.

Greatest of all of O. Henry's characteristics is the power of bringing good out of evil, of finding a place for love and laughter, where all around seems misery and sin. He has the same power, known best to Dickens, of turning a crook into a sort of genial soul, an embezzler into an admired companion. He makes a kind of Robin Hood world in which the social values are reversed, and the outlaw becomes the real man, and the sheriff and the bishop the villains of the piece.

Stephen Leacock. *Greatest Pages of American Humor* (Doubleday). 1936. p. 199

This is that dubious hero of the press
Whose slangy tongue and insolent address
Were spiced to rouse on Sunday afternoon
The man with yellow journals round him strewn.
We laughed and dozed, then roused and read again,
And vowed O. Henry funniest of men.
He always worked a triple-hinged surprise
To end the scene and make one rub his eyes.

He comes with vaudeville, with stare and leer.
He comes with megaphone and specious cheer.
His troupe, too fat or short or long or lean,
Step from the pages of the magazine
With slapstick or sombrero or with cane:
The rube, the cowboy or the masher vain.
They over-act each part. But at the height
Of banter and of canter and delight

The masks fall off for one queer instant there
And show real faces: faces full of care
And desperate longing: love that's hot or cold;
And subtle thoughts, and countenances bold.
The masks go back. ''Tis one more joke. Laugh on!
The goodly grown-up company is gone.

Vachel Lindsay. *Collected Poems* (Macmillan). 1939. pp. 255–6

Although his readers delighted in tricks or verbal coruscations which appear to us cheap or brassy, they were a new reading public of broader social range, an audience for characters new to literature. The author's purpose was twofold: to win popularity and to convey a social picture. O. Henry was attuned to one of the principal movements of his day, for along with the rise of the fifteen-cent magazine had come the muckrake era. S.S. McClure, for whose syndicate he wrote, was engaged in exposing corporations and investigating municipal corruption, a reform movement of which Theodore Roosevelt's ''trust-busting'' became the practical application in politics. Sympathetic for the underdog and believing in man's ability to better himself, O. Henry approved, and by giving his followers enough sensation and sentiment to satisfy, by using humor to present social problems, was able to develop the themes he regarded seriously.

This, together with his art as local-colorist, his narrative skill and abundant humor, lifted his productions above their medium, capturing a more literary audience. And O. Henry's stories for the ephemeral journals became a set of books. So popular did his method become that the short story was thereby standardized.

E. Hudson Long. *O. Henry* (Pennsylvania). 1949. pp. 2–3

Whether some of us like it or not, the fact which ought to be clear by now, half a century after his death, is that O. Henry is here to stay. He has survived two decades of ludicrous overpraise and three decades more of deprecation and neglect in critical circles. People still read O. Henry, and there is good reason why they should continue to do so. It is true that there is hardly a single one of his stories which is not to some degree marred by sentimentality or farfetched coincidence or triviality of conception. Yet in spite of all the charges which can so easily be adduced against his work, what we have to do with in O. Henry is a kind of minor classic. One hastens to emphasize the word *minor*, and to qualify the pronouncement in other ways. O. Henry, one inevitably feels, is a rather disreputable figure in the company to which such a classification admits him. Nevertheless, the time has surely come to cease blaming him for the sins of his formula-bound imitators.

Gerald Langford. *Alias O. Henry* (Macmillan). 1957. p. xii

Throughout his life Will continued to respond to situations of distress, even though they might be accompanied by some humorous remark or incident. Unknown as a Harun-al-Rashid wandering in his Bagdad on the Subway, O. Henry often tipped waiters more than the cost of his meal; gave many a beggar surprising amounts of money; and invited hungry-looking shop-girls or chorus girls out to dinner, for, as O. Henry wrote in ''The Memento,'' ''There ain't a sorrow in the chorus that a lobster cannot heal.''

Ethel Stephens Arnett. *O. Henry from Polecat Creek* (Piedmont). 1963. p. 179

On the one level ''The Poet and the Peasant,'' like so many other O. Henry stories, is simply an entertaining bit of fluff. Its power to divert and amuse springs from a series of obvious related ironies; from O. Henry's absurdly comic portrayal of the Young Ulsterman, and from his narrator's slangy insouciance in juxtaposing the two seemingly unrelated accounts, welding them together as though there were nothing out of the ordinary in doing so, and applying two different idioms to his two groups of characters. All this superficial trickery provides ample entertainment for the typical O. Henry fan. But beneath this surface level there is suggested also a cluster of related truths about art and life, about knowledge and ignorance, and about human fallibility in distinguishing the genuine from the spurious. That O. Henry's technique enabled him to compress so much within the compass of a Sunday supplement page—and with such seeming artlessness—is the true measure of his artistry.

Eugene Current-Garcia. *O. Henry* (Twayne). 1965. p. 155

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HERSEY, John (1914–1992)

Hiroshima's stark simplicity has brought home to hundreds of thousands of persons what it meant to drop an atomic bomb on a great city. . . . Even at this moment, when the topical interest of John Hersey's story overshadows all else, *Hiroshima* is important on other counts. It is a capsule of Japanese life, and it tells more about our ex-enemy Japan than many learned books.

Ruth Benedict. *The Nation*. Dec. 7, 1946. p. 656

The Wall is a journalistic narrative that far outshines its predecessors in diligence, compassion, and virtuosity. . . . To call it a great novel . . . is to invite comparisons that *The Wall* is not constructed to meet. . . . He (Hershey) is a man who attends catastrophes to observe how people act in an extreme situation. It is the shattering event that sets him in motion and the pattern of his narrative does not arise from his actors; it is imposed upon them. His talent rests in finding out precisely what happened and conveying the information in terms that enlist the reader's respect and warm allegiance. No one writing today can match Hersey's appreciation of man under stress; he is a witness for humanity in a time of terror.

Robert Hatch. *New Republic*, Apr. 3, 1950. p. 18

Mr. Hersey obviously has carefully studied many of the available documents (for *The Wall*), and has also acquainted himself with Jewish legends, customs, language, and literature. . . . His profound sympathy with what the Jews suffered is clear, so is his intense admiration for the heroism of many individual Jews. . . . The book as a whole, however, . . . fails to impress. . . . Mr. Hersey's Jews are not only non-representative; they have no reality as Jews or as people. . . . He never gets very deeply into what Noach Levinson (in *The Wall*). . . calls ''inner Jewishness.''

Charles Angoff. *American Mercury*. May, 1950. pp. 626–30

Were Mr. Hersey's attempt more modest, his bland and pleasant narrative might do, but it is tragedy that is missing here, the story flounders on a blandness so pervasive—in the characters, in the limpness of perception and the leached ideas, in the stricken fuzziness of his tragic sense and the flatfooted march of his prose—that little more than a husk of tragedy survives. If, at first, we respond, it is to the intimation of the tragic, the feel of a generous and large intent; but, in the end, if it is tragedy and not dying falls we require, *A Single Pebble* must seem a disappointing book.

William Arrowsmith. *New Republic*. Aug. 13, 1956. p. 19

This writer, who is a master in a very high form of journalistic fiction (as in *Hiroshima*), who is really so intelligent, civilized, and ''right'' in his moral values, has a curious deficiency in the area of pure fiction. He is admirable also in his most recent tales, but not memorable. He belongs perhaps with those novelists of sensibility who are masters of illusion, but not of life. One may suspect that

there is a whole psychic area roped off from Hersey's consciousness, and that he sees people in terms of a situation—or a crisis—rather than in and for themselves.

Maxwell Geismar. *American Moderns* (Hill and Wang). 1958. pp. 185–6

What gives *The Child Buyer* its authority—its air of absolute command—is that Mr. Hersey has sensed that all these varying problems are simply different aspects of the same thing. He puts McCarthyism and the exploitation of children together because they belong together. It *all* belongs together—our cowardice in not defending McCarthy's victims, our refusal to take true responsibility for our children, our concurrence in the exploitation of human emotion for the sake of larger sales. It is one solid, homogeneous pattern of ignoble behavior into which we seem to have got ourselves locked.

The Child Buyer is a well wrought book, but what sets it apart from the usual ruck of fashionable scoldings is the unself-serving intensity of its scorn. Here is more than the *cri du coeur* of the artist asphyxiated by commercialism. Here is more than the thin scream of the paralyzed idealist. This is the pure, clear wrath of the righteous man; and so far from being intimidating, it is exciting. Mr. Hersey in writing this book has done something intelligent and brave, and by implication he asks his countrymen also to be intelligent and brave. So clear is the implication that more than one reader of *The Child Buyer*, in this autumn of 1960, is going to think what a pity it is that the author is not running for President.

Margaret Halsey. *New Republic*. Oct. 10, 1960. p. 22

The Child Buyer is a savage attack on modern education and on the ends that it serves, and hence ultimately on the morality of a society that either neglects education entirely or else in a crisis thinks of intelligence as a marketable commodity, to be literally bought up for industry and the industrial state to use for whatever insane purpose they may choose. In machine-made America, Mr. Hersey points out, many people seem to think that because the machine pays for education, the educated, especially the gifted who supposedly benefit most from it, must be willing to dedicate themselves to the machine, must, indeed, allow their minds to become machines. Thus the machine-mind will be able to perfect the machine so that it may in turn train more machine-minds. . . .

Because education in this country has tried to make itself a science, which it cannot possibly be (Mr. Hersey is wonderful in his command of the Pseudo-scientific gobbledegook of the educationists), it is corrupt, and can only be corrupted further by offering up its best intelligence, which it is unable to locate or to serve in the first place, on the altar of science. No one at the end of the committee hearings in Mr. Hersey's novel remains untouched by corruption; all are willing, for one reason or another, to sell out.

William Jay Smith. *New Republic*. Oct. 10, 1960. pp. 25–6

Paradoxically, it is this very quality in John Hersey—almost, one might say, of the supraconscience—which comes dangerously close to being his undoing as a practical novelist. That is to say, the novel is too often reduced to a kind of morality tale in which the situation, or ''lesson,'' takes precedence over a meaningful involvement in the human element. The novelist working in such a milieu runs the risk of seeing people as the embodied abstractions of his own particular contrivance, however admirable his characters and concept may be. . . . But in his most recent book, *The Child Buyer*, John Hersey has combined his very considerable talent for literature as journalism, with his fine sense of conscience and moral responsibility. It is an arguable book, to say the least, but that is only because it has the force of idea behind it—and since the force of idea is so alien to American fiction, it has also sent the reviewers scurrying in all directions to once. . . . It is an incredible paradox that our novelists should have to be reminded of the value of the human *person*—incredible, indeed, if only in the sense of craft, since there can be no significant dramatic effect in a milieu where everything is ''solved'' in behavioristic terms. Finally, then, if John Hersey can manage to attune his fine sense of conscience less to the singularly allegorical and more to the complexity of the human situation, it is likely that he may give us a novel that has some relevance not only to American life but also to the world at large.

Thomas P. McDonnell. *Catholic World*. July, 1962. pp. 241, 244–5

Medlar's maneuvering in the skirmish with wind and waves [in *Under the Eye of the Storm*] is superbly realized. There is a mute encounter with his wife in the dark turbulence which is more revealing than any of their dialogues or the sketchy history of their marriage. When a floating shed absurdly spoils the doctor's calculations and forces him to run before the storm on open water, the prose gains a force and authority equal to the demands of the subject.

Unfortunately, this isn't the kind of book that can be saved by one fine section. All too clearly, it was intended as a novel with a thesis, and the articulation of that thesis required a working mixture of allegory and naturalism. Each of the characters and the yawl named Harmony are meant to play a role in the unfolding action. The maelstrom into which the doctor takes his craft and lightweight crew is supposed to counterpoint the chaos of his natural self. As it turns out, however, the allegorical action—which should be coherent—is confused and intermittent, while the naturalistic rendering of character is as stiff, thin and mechanical as allegory.

R. V. Cassill. *New York Times Book Section*. March 19, 1967. p. 4

Between *White Lotus* and *The Call*, [John] Hersey wrote five other novels that are at least as discrete as the five from *The Marmot Drive* to *White Lotus*. He also returned to journalism dramatically, with *The Algiers Motel Incident*, a montage of interviews that contrasts fascinatingly with *Hiroshima*. From 1965 to 1970, at the height of the student movement, he was Master of Pierson College, and he went on to teach at Yale throughout the seventies. He became a critic, partly from teaching, with his commentary in *The Writer's Craft* and his essay on a recurrent topic in his seminars: the distinctions between journalism and fiction. In 1977 he began research for *The Call*. Although his novels of these two decades were noticed even less than his fiction in the fifties was, they include two of his best, *Under the Eye of the Storm* and *The Conspiracy*. These books demonstrate that he is not, as I suggested

twenty-five years ago, ''something other than a novelist'' but, rather, an accomplished novelist of ideas. In these books he refines his methods of discussing serious ideas within a well-constructed story. The hero of *Under the Eye of the Storm* keeps his yawl afloat through a line storm that develops suspense simultaneously with an argument against excessive technology in man's struggle with nature. ''But the whole point is being out *in* it, getting through it,'' Tom Medlar shouts. In *The Conspiracy*, Hersey makes fiction of history from several ancient sources to develop ideas of a writer's responsibility. When Lucan dies with his poem on his lips, has power been tested or beauty? ''Avoid frenzy,'' Seneca advises him; ''a writer must write.'' But Seneca, retired in the country, can avoid frenzy, while Lucan, proscribed in Nero's Rome, cannot.

Most reviews of *The Call* praised Hersey's mastery of his material without discussing the book in relation to his other work. Reviewers were moved by the story of David Treadup, and some noted references to the novelist's father as a minor character (Treadup's colleague in Tientsin), without commenting on how his appearance was a possible reflection of Hersey's own presence in this book. Hersey's narration encompasses Treadup's own vivid accounts of his experiences, its subtle tone moving from dispassionate commentary to judgment. It is Hersey's most accomplished display of his ''voice'' in all of his writing, whether in any of his delegated narrations or in his admiring essays on survivors. *The Call* is powerful beyond Hersey's other work because its hero, always in the narrator's view, comes closer than any of the writer's other fictional or actual subjects to questioning the meaning of existence.

David Sanders. *John Hersey Revisited* (Boston: Twayne, 1991), pp. 109–10

The fifteen short stories comprising John Hersey's *Key West Tales* are unified, as their title promises, by their concern with Key West, Florida, past and present. After his retirement from Yale, Hersey lived in Key West, except for summers on Martha's Vineyard; he completed this book shortly before his death last year. Eight of the stories, beginning with the first, ''God's Hint,'' and ending with the last, ''A Little Paperwork, '' are alike in a number of ways. These eight are brief, italicized anecdotes arranged in a forward-moving chronological sequence from the early nineteenth-century days of ''wreckers'' (sailors whose prosperity depended on routine shipwrecks on the great coral barrier reef, ''120 miles of this monster from Carysfort Reef to Key West'') to the salad days of Harry Truman and his ''little White House'' at the naval station in Key West.

Not unlike the interchapters of Hemingway's *In Our Time*, these pieces, set among seven other stories of variable but conventional lengths, serve to create the historical background for the larger stories, all of which take place in contemporary Key West. Thus, step by step, there is a gradual, cumulative knowledge of the place and familiarity with it. Key West becomes an experience for the reader. . . .

In a career beginning in World War II with the nonfiction works *Men on Bataan* (1942) and *Into the Valley* (1943), John Hersey produced 16 books of fiction and nine of essays and reportage. His first novel, *A Bell for Adano* (1944), won the Pulitzer Prize. Hersey learned any number of positive things from his early years as a first-rate journalist. Long before the widely advertised advent of the new journalism, Hersey was writing narrative reportage that remains a model of excellence for journalists old and new; and in all his fiction, including *Key West Tales*, he carried over some of the skilled reporter's good habits, curiosity and concerns, giving his often complex but always accessible fiction a firm foundation of fact and credibility, maintaining an unflagging authority based on detailed authenticity.

George Garrett. *New York Times Book Review*. February 13, 1994, p. 22

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HEYWARD, Dubose (1885–1940)

DuBose Heyward is one of a group of young Southern poets who are doing much to reestablish Southern poetry in the respectable position in which [Sidney] Lanier and [Henry] Timrod placed it. . . . His characteristic manner is one that has been highly developed by contemporary poets: a few vivid touches, suggestive rather than definitive, limited in intention, and designed to create an image of feeling that impresses through poignancy and suggestion rather than weight or lasting quality. . . . They avoid the dimness and rarified soulfulness which in much modern poetry sets up a spiritual intoxication that upon investigation often turns out to be auto-intoxication. They are not bizarre; they are genuine and have a recognizable basis.

Newman I. White. *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Oct., 1924. p. 377

Mr. Heyward's poems have something of this solidity, this strength. They belong to the country he is writing about as naturally as the trees that grow from its soil. They are not facile—one feels that the poet is not an easy master of his technique, that sometimes ''stout fibres slacken'' and the poem fails to achieve its aim. But in his best work one feels the full power of a man, backed by the accumulated power of his country and ancestry.

Harriet Monroe. *Poetry*. Dec., 1924. pp. 165–6

DuBose Heyward, white man and native of Charleston, has built up in *Porgy* a fresh and finished picture of the soul of the simple Southern Negro. As a racial outsider, who for all his candor and sympathy stands inescapably apart from his subject, Mr. Heyward still writes with an unerring certitude, an assured intimacy. This is in the main possible because the theme of *Porgy* is not essentially a Negro theme; it is a general one tempered by the particular traditions and superstitions of its locale. . . . Mr. Heyward places it in his own city of Charleston, among the swarming Negroes who inhabit the tenement called Catfish Row. And because he writes with poetry and penetration his story is a moving one; because he writes with detachment and tenderness, from keen-eyed acquaintance with these people, a fusion of comedy and tragedy is delicately achieved.

Lenore G. Marshall. *The Nation*. Dec. 16, 1925. p. 711

It would appear, on the face of it, that Mr. Heyward this time would be unable to resist the compelling lure of the known and stereotyped story of mountain life. Deceitful as ever, Mr. Heyward has once more forged his own trail. He leads the beguiled and enchanted reader past the stock situations and conducts him within the strange and magical world called *Angel*.

Life in *Porgy* as well as in *Angel* is very much an individual affair. Mr. Heyward is distrustful, if not actively skeptical of organized and codified social behavior. . . . Mr. Heyward, too, resents the complexities of the city, the encroachments of industrialism, and jealously conserves the surviving manifestations of self-supporting, independent, enduring simplicity. It is, however, Mr. Heyward's narrative skill, not his idea, which carries the story, and that is as it should be.

John W. Crawford. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 10, 1926. p. 11

. . .DuBose Heyward has written a novel [*Mamba's Daughters*] of scope, a novel of many characters and currents, a substantially rich novel that depends for its unity on something more than an artificially chosen container. And it may be noted with appropriate irony that in *Mamba's Daughters* Mr. Heyward has created something infinitely more satisfying than the works of most of the novelists who count themselves in the fictional advance guard.

Mamba's Daughters is a novel compact of many, surprisingly humanized characters, of a proliferation of incidents, of shifting social and spiritual values, of excellent dialogue in the mouths of both Negro and white, and of a human compassion that steers beautifully clear of both sentimentality and that sardonic approach to life that has usurped the ancient title of ''realism.'' But Mr. Heyward has not been afraid of sentiment where sentiment is called for, and he has leavened his book with humor in character, incident, and conversation.

John Chamberlain. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 3, 1929. p. 2

But with every intention to be critical I thoroughly enjoyed *Mamba's Daughters*. To begin with, it is a full-scale novel. It is one thing to describe picturesquely a train of violent action, or to expand a lyrical emotion. It is quite another to pursue the diverse fortunes of various characters through the complicated meshes of a highly organized society. This is so difficult a feat that few novelists even attempt it today. Mr. Heyward has carried it off with quite an air. Charleston and the black labor belt with its camps under the pine trees outside the city are both vivaciously created.

Alice Beal Parsons. *The Nation*. April 17, 1929. p. 486

The author does his best work [in *Peter Ashley*] in describing the city [Charleston, 1861] and the life and spirit and customs of the people. The Race Week which superseded war for seven days, the polite, gentlemanly and bloodless engagement with Major Anderson of Fort Sumter, the duel, the slave mart, all these are handled with masterly detail.

Archer Winsten. *Bookman*. Nov., 1932. p. 738

In spite of its shoutingly inappropriate title, *Star Spangled Virgin* is a gentle, wise and knowledgeable book. The title suggests something for the lesser shelves of the lending libraries—the novel itself is Mr. Heyward at his best, with his warmth of understanding, his gift for simplicity, and his economy of narrative. The frame of the story concerns the coming of the American flag and the New Deal to the bewildered population of the Virgin Islands. But political pamphleteering is not Mr. Heyward's purpose and he has used the comic and tragic aspect of that period of readjustment, not as political ammunition, but as background to a story of human character. . . .

This is a thoroughly delightful book. It is also a real one. Mr. Heyward's quiet perceptiveness is always on the side of truth. He has done as much as any one to break the stock figure of ''the good old darky,'' who grinned his unreality through so many novels, and supplant that figure and his turbaned consort with creatures of flesh and blood, whose dignity was as much a part of them as their humor.

Stephen Vincent Benét. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Aug. 13, 1939. p. 4

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HIJUELOS, Oscar (1951–)

MARIFELI PEREZ-STABLE: The longing for Cuba seems to play an important role in your novels. I am thinking, in particular, of Cesar's brother, Nestor, in *Mambo Kings*.

OSCAR HIJUELOS: In *Mambo Kings* Nestor longs for Maria who is still in Cuba. The longing for Cuba in my work is a desire to

connect with what my parents were about, to get hold of what they were feeling. I find the world quite cold. When I think of my family and where they came from—even though I'm pretty much removed in the sense of having grown up and been educated here—I find a beauty in their world that's missing from ours. I'm not a conservative, but I think it's not bad to dwell on the past. You learn from it and you become enriched by it.

Set mostly in the 1950s, a time when I was a little boy, *Mambo Kings* allowed me to experience a period I hadn't actually lived through. I wrote *Mambo Kings* as a complete fan. I had been living in Italy for a few years. When I came back, I started hearing the music again and it just drove me nuts. Since that time, I have had the opportunity to meet many of the original performers, like Tito Puente and John Pacheco. It amazes me that these living, vibrant human beings sustain a culture that goes back into the last century. What I try to do in my writing is to recapture the emotions and the beauty of the past so readers can feel that these are real people.

When you write novels, they genuinely reflect your inner psychic longings. *Our House in the Last World*, for example, brought me back to thinking seriously about my family, even though it's not straight autobiography. I don't keep a diary, but I know that when I'm an old man I will be able to look back at my books and see what I was going through spiritually. Latin culture respects and enjoys the past. Emotions that are thirty years old are almost as important as those you might feel the next afternoon. All time folds up into itself.

> Marifeli Perez-Stable. ''Interview with Oscar Hijuelos: Culture Makers.'' *Culturefront*. Winter, 1993, pp. 18–19

Oscar Hijuelos's highly rated first novel, *Our House in the Last World* (1984), relates the experiences of a Cuban family of immigrants buffeted by change in New York City. His second novel, *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (1989), won a Pulitzer Prize. A lyric tale of complex human relations and strong passions, *The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O'Brien* will surely add to Hijuelos's laurels. . . .

Hijuelos's vivid mosaic of characters reflects the multiple currents of change in twentieth-century American life, changes that often clash with the traditional values of the O'Briens. The most graphic example is Mariela, who, never having learned fluent English, takes refuge in writing poetry in her native tongue and remains a virtual stranger to her younger, Spanish-speaking children. The problems of Margarita's second husband, a bourgeois fugitive from Castro's Cuba, are not only cultural but political and economic as well, hastening his demise. . . .

Like Gabriel García Márquez, Hijuelos portrays a large family and sprinkles his text with hyperbolic descriptions, surreal fantasies, cyclical recurrences, and passionate sexual encounters. Although lacking the stylistic polish of the Colombian Nobel laureate, Hijuelos nevertheless displays a poetic exuberance reminiscent of the master.

> George R. McMurray. *World Literature Today*. Winter, 1994, pp. 127–28

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HILLERMAN, Tony (1925–)

Tony Hillerman, journalist, academic, and novelist, has earned high praise for his detective fiction. Five of his mysteries compose the two brief but compelling series for which he is best known. *The Blessing Way* (1970), *Dance Hall of the Dead* (1973), and *Listening Woman* (1978), feature an officer of the Navajo police force, Joe Leaphorn; and *People of Darkness* (1980) and *The Dark Wind* (1982) center upon Leaphorn's younger colleague, Jim Chee. All of the novels are carefully wrought mysteries, satisfying for mystery fans as well as for critics. They are also, however, telling commentaries upon contemporary American life in the Southwest, for in addition to beautiful nature imagery and remarkably clear and effective glimpses into Native American life, they offer vivid accounts of the difficulties of operating in a multi-ethnic society.

Each of the novels poses an interesting and taxing puzzle for its protagonist-detective, and each problem involves at least one murder. Joe Leaphorn's cases require him to find the killers of Luis Horseman, a man who has compromised his tribal identity; of Ernesto Cata, a youngster murdered during his preparation for an important role in a Zuni ceremonial; and of Anna Atcity and Hosteen Tso who are killed during a ritual directed toward healing, not death. Jim Chee's first assignment, tracking the killer of the head of the Peyote Church, also forces him to solve a much older crime, and his most recent case focuses upon the identification of a mutilated corpse—and of its killer. All five plots are informed by the religious faiths or ethical obligations of the characters; all examine the problems generated by overweening ambition or greed; and, very importantly, all are complicated by the tangled web of jurisdictional conflicts between various segments of the multi-ethnic society in which Officers Leaphorn and Chee work.

In the detective novel, it is common practice for the author to exploit assumed tensions between various law enforcement agencies and even sometimes between departments within the same agency. In Hillerman's novels, this tradition is observed regularly. . . .

Useful in themselves, these complications are further intensified in the Hillerman novels by a constant underlying awareness of the racial tensions which inform them. Though many non-Navajo characters are admirers or students of Navajo culture, and though others, who are strangers, are often open, friendly, and seemingly unbiased, still others are unfriendly or dangerous.

It would be easy to dismiss overtly racist acts by unattractive characters as atypical behavior, to assume that most people would abjure it. When, however, one of these unattractive characters represents the power of the political order, the social commentary cannot be dismissed; it must be reckoned with. . . .

Benjamin Vines, a major villain in the earlier Jim Chee novel *The People of Darkness*, is an abusive person. Though he does not represent the United States Government, he does represent the power structure, for he is immensely wealthy and is a strong economic and political force in his community. Enamoured with wealth, arrogant with power and his own cleverness, he embarks on a self-protective, long-term plot. Quite simply, he is systematically (and, one must admit, inventively) silencing every member of a

group of Native Americans who pose a danger to him—they know too much, but they are, for the most part, unaware of their dangerous knowledge.

Under the general guise of friendship to the Peyote Church, a subcult of Navajo-Christian belief, and specifically under the guise of friendship of the original leader of that congregation, he plots and manipulates. He also operates under the underlying assumption that the victims are ''just Indians''; indeed, one victim, buried on Vines's property, has been designated ''A Good Indian'' on his tombstone. Misunderstood by some as testimony that the two men were such good friends that they could turn a racial slur, ''The only good Indian is a dead Indian,'' into a joke between them, the epitaph actually, as readers come to realize, is both a statement of motive and an openly racist comment. . . .

Here again, Hillerman extends the psychological portrait of an unsympathetic character by welding racist thinking and other equally dangerous habits of mind into one powerful, effective motivation. Vines's racist attitudes so mirror the attitudes pervasive in his society that for many years—and many pages—it is difficult to identify him as the profoundly villainous character he is, and this pattern is a very useful plot complication as well as good evidence of careful characterization.

In *Dance Hall of the Dead*, an antagonist violates his own professional ethics and sacrifices the lives of two children, a Navajo and a Zuni, in order to serve precisely the motivations displayed by Vines. Here, too, is the strong implication that despite his training as an anthropologist, Reynolds sees anyone outside his tight, white world of the senior academic as expendable, and he exacerbates the horror of murder by engaging in sacrilege as well. . . . [He] is enabled to strip away his customary mask of civility, education, and professionalism because his victims and the cultures they represent are, for him, merely artifacts. They are, in a very real sense, convenient tools to use in order to advance his career.

No reader can be unaware of the underlying racism in the attitudes of figures such as these, but it is, I suggest, a major factor in Hillerman's appeal (and testament to his skill) that even his despicable characters do not indulge in overtly racist speech. Instead, Tony Hillerman dramatizes the presence of racist behavior in our society by consistently showing its effects as they are linked to other traits of character and social behavior. By developing his characters in this fashion, Hillerman deepens characterization and strengthens his social commentary in one sophisticated, effective stroke. Useful as it is to both plotting and to his social commentary, however, this ''I am white; I have might; I am right'' brand of racism and exploitation is far from Hillerman's most frequent or even most effective treatment of the problems of prejudice within our multi-ethnic society. Instead, the author presents most of his social commentary from the point of view of the protagonists and other sympathetic characters.

Both Leaphorn and Chee studied anthropology as undergraduates; both now study ''the white man'' as symbol of an alien and puzzling culture. This effort to understand the dominant culture is essential to their work—they must try, for instance, to grasp the concept of vengeance, a desire which motivates many Belacani [white people]. A concept absent from Navajo thought, revenge is puzzling to them. One cannot function well personally anymore than one can function well professionally within a culture whose values remain wholly mysterious. . . .

The detective's ''intuitive leap'' of imagination which, coupled with careful investigation, is so dear to the hearts of mystery fans would be unavailable to Leaphorn and Chee were they not earnest students of the societies around them, and the novels' popularity would also suffer markedly. Thus, their extended analysis of their multi-ethnic society, like most of Hillerman's devices, not only intensifies the social commentary but also enhances the plots in these novels.

Leaphorn and Chee are practical men who recognize reality and who then strive to operate effectively within it. Their realistic pragmatism is also clearly revealed in their attitudes toward situations which have developed from the government's manipulation of lands and people. Chee, for instance, assigned to discover who is vandalizing a windmill located on land recently and arbitrarily transferred from Navajo to Hopi control, doesn't evaluate the justice or injustice of the transfer; he recognizes the parameters used by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and proceeds with his job.

Similarly, Leaphorn, who has puzzled throughout a difficult case about the unpredictability of one character who seems to be a Navajo but who behaves counter to the Navajo Way, understands that behavior when he learns that the suspect is a Relocation Indian, moved from the Southwest to California, separated from the People and thereby deprived of the opportunity to absorb their values and practices. Leaphorn, like Chee, recognizes the injustice involved but does not ponder it much; he wastes little time over situations which he cannot alter.

Occasionally, however, each protagonist allows himself a moment of angry—or at least self-protective—reflection upon generalized racist attitudes toward his culture and toward himself. At one point, Leaphorn, having survived great danger and pain in order to solve a case, contemplates its final irony. A site sacred to the Navajo and the secret hiding place of a huge sum of money has been rendered inaccessible in the course of the chase, and the policeman wonders if access to the sacred relics will be restored. The money, he concludes, will prompt action, for it is money which counts; sand paintings, no matter how great their meaning, how deeply they are revered by the Navajos, would not matter much in the face of the vast effort and expense necessary to salvage them. . . .

These moments of bitterness or defensiveness enhance and humanize the characterizations of Hillerman's protagonists. Capable of the heroic action called for in almost every plot, they must also reveal some vulnerability to meet the demands of most modern detective fiction fans, and their very human responses to ignorance and prejudice aid in that process. Though both officers' pragmatic acceptance of and occasional reactions against the complexities of life as minority group members serve the novel very well, Hillerman's *most* effective treatment of prejudice arises from biases Leaphorn and Chee themselves reveal and cope with day by day.

The fact that both Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee clearly recognize that they must *themselves* guard against behaving in prejudiced fashion deepens their characterizations considerably. Most of their biases arise directly from the multicultural society in which they live and work. Important to their work, as well as to their personal relationships with the dominant culture, is, for instance, the necessity for retraining their eyes. Both men look very carefully at Belacani strangers, for both are educating themselves out of the habit of thinking that—and behaving as if—all white men look alike.

This detail serves a number of purposes, including adding a bit of sardonic humor, as do the equally complex problems the Navajo

policemen face in their professional and personal interactions with members of other Native American cultures. Just as intruders (often perpetrators) penetrate the Navajo culture, so do Leaphorn and Chee penetrate other cultures, and sometimes during those moments of intrusion, they risk violating the beliefs and practices of their neighbors.

To solve one of his cases, Joe Leaphorn must analyze the personality of George Bowlegs, a Navajo youth who yearns to become a Zuni because the Zuni way of life and belief appeals to him enormously. As a result of living near Zunis all his life, of talks with a college roommate, and of his study of anthropology, Leaphorn knows something of Zuni culture. But he is uncomfortable with Zuni people. This latter complication is foolish, he understands, and it arises directly from prejudice. . . .

During his investigation, however, Leaphorn must take two steps which, at least momentarily, assuage his old hurt and, perhaps, move him toward a sounder, warmer, more informed understanding of the Zuni. The case forces him to work with—and around—Ed Pasquaanti, Chief of the Zuni Police, who controls the investigation on the Zuni reservation, while Leaphorn, of course, works in Navajo territory. The early stages of the inquiry are marked with reserve and some tension between the two men; at one point, Leaphorn even allows himself to think, scornfully, that he can ''find tracks where a Zuni couldn't,'' and the thought is, in large part, still another reaction to what he, himself, dubs a ''silly inferiority complex.''

Later, however, Leaphorn and Pasquaanti must hold a difficult conversation which touches upon secret matters. Leaphorn's developing theory about the fates of the two youngsters requires him to ask delicate questions about a Zuni ceremonial; he does so with tact and discretion.

Soon after, the case takes Leaphorn (amid a host of other observers) to Shalako, the ceremony. There, in a hot, crowded room, the mystery and majesty of the ritual touch him deeply, and for an instant, he sees ''Shalako, the courier between gods and men'' as the Zuni see him. This moment of union allows readers a brief, revealing glimpse into the spiritual side of Leaphorn's nature, and coupled with the conversation with Pasquaanti, it also clarifies the Navajo policeman's motivation for the surprising action he subsequently takes toward the killer. Empathy, even should it prove fleeting, helps him to serve justice over law, and in doing so, he also serves his Zuni neighbors.

Jim Chee's penetration into another culture also results in the solution of a crime and in the application of rough but appropriate justice; yet its implications are very different, and his behavior, while redemptive rather than destructive, is alarmingly similar to that of Reynolds, the villain-anthropologist, Chee, too, must seek information about another culture in order to piece the clues he has been gathering into a useful pattern. . . . Early in the novel, for instance, Chee asks about a shrine he has discovered near the site of a crime. . . .

Chee uses this knowledge to slip into the tiny Hopi village of Sityatki during Astotokaya, Washing of the Hair, ''sort of an initiation ceremony into the religious societies of the village.'' The community is completely barred to visitors on this night, and Chee's secret presence is a serious intrusion. While this violation of custom and confidence serves justice and helps save Chee's career—perhaps even his life—it is, nevertheless, a profound infringement on Cowboy's friendship and upon the rights of the Hopi villagers. Chee, usually introspective, does not address this problem, largely, perhaps, because action rather than contemplation wholly occupies both his and the reader's attention from the time of the penetration to the conclusion of the plot. Still, Chee's unusually exploitative behavior extends and deepens his characterization even as it underscores the complexity of human relationships in a society composed of smaller societies so numerous and so diverse.

Hillerman's use of racial and cultural differences and the prejudices they engender clearly, then, enhances his portraits of antagonists and protagonists alike. As it simultaneously complicates and clarifies motivation, this device also strengthens the plots and, in a very real sense, alters readers' perceptions of the books. The Hillerman novels, fine entertainments in the tradition of the best detective fiction, also make serious, effective social comments, pointing out that prejudice and its consequences—dis-trust, discomfort, and exploitation—are endemic in our society.

A major difference between hero and villain in Hillerman's work is an awareness of one's prejudice and a willingness to combat it in oneself. If even the heroes, as Jim Chee demonstrates in *The Dark Wind*, occasionally slip into exploitative behavior toward other cultures, readers—ordinary, non-heroes like most of us—learn that they, too, must always monitor their own behavior as much as they must guard against racism in others. This is a serious lesson, and it makes its point well. It also teaches us that Tony Hillerman is a serious novelist who raises entertainment fiction to the level of valid social commentary without for a moment sacrificing either objective. . . .

Jane S. Bakerman. *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* Fall, 1984, pp. 17-25.

Tony Hillerman, the author who created the American Indian policier, adds a dividend for the reader in his latest novel, *Talking God.* In addition to setting his story in familiar Hillerman country—the Navajo Reservation and its environs in New Mexico—this time he includes Washington, a venue with its own mysterious tribal rites.

It's a sign of Mr. Hillerman's powers of observation that he (or rather his appealing main character, Lieut. Joe Leaphorn of the Navajo Tribal Police) sees things that even seasoned Washington observers might overlook. One of his nonmystery novels, *The Fly on the Wall,* also had a Washington locale; the author recognizes that there are shamans in the capital, too. So it's interesting for a follower of Mr. Hillerman's detective fiction to watch how he joins two different worlds to form his mystery.

The point of contact is the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of Natural History in Washington. A Smithsonian conservator who is part Navajo sends a coworker bones of two ''white Anglo types'' to protest the museum's policy of not returning ancestral remains to American Indians. The Navajo conservator is arrested by Lieutenant Leaphorn's younger sidekick, Officer Jim Chee.

Mr. Hillerman uses Chee to good advantage in his mysteries: the experienced hand and the protege play off each other while exchanging detective lore and wisdom. Readers will remember the pair from his previous book, *A Thief of Time.* They make a fascinating team. . . .

Lieutenant Leaphorn and Officer Chee are in the capital pursuing separate matters. Leaphorn is there because of a homicide; an unidentified corpse has been found near Gallup, N.M., with a note mentioning an Indian ceremony. The trail takes Leaphorn to what J.

Edgar Hoover in his correspondence grandiloquently called the ''Seat of Government''—the late F.B.I. Director's name comes up several times in Mr. Hillerman's mystery—where he obtains some help from an old G-man. Officer Chee is tracking down a ceremonial mask, the title's ''Talking God,'' the maternal grandfather of all the Navajo gods.

Along the book's journey to resolution, there are the usual fine scenes of the Navajo countryside and customs—Hillerman I.D.'s—as well as keen views of the capital. Officer Chee says he would like to ride New York's subways sometime but settles for Washington's. . . .

Awareness of differences of race and privilege are never far from the eyes and minds of Mr. Hillerman's Navajo characters. There is also a scene of homeless people living in cardboard boxes in the shadow of the Washington Monument. A couple of comments about the late F.B.I. Director are woven quite naturally into the story. . . .

Two uncooperative young F.B.I. agents talk stiffly, using phrases like ''at this point in time.'' Contrasting them with Leaphorn and Chee, the reader senses that the author is making a point he has made before: official bias exists against American Indians.

There is a political twist at the end of *Talking God* that gives the mystery another dimension—far from the immediate lives of the people on the Navajo Reservation. It involves the Chilean dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet and its long reach and killing ways, even in the United States. Somehow, the elements all come together.

To sweeten *Talking God* and give the two Navajo Reservation officers more rounded personalities, Leaphorn is grieving over the recent death of his wife and Chee is nearing the end of a love affair. These side attractions don't get in the way of the mystery; rather, like George Smiley's wandering wife who hovers in the background of several John le Carre stories, they add elements that enrich the book. It is touches like these, and political sophistication, that make the difference between a routine and a masterly genre writer.

Herbert Mitgang. *The New York Times*. June 10, 1989, p. 15.

As we all know, Dashiell Hammett, according to Raymond Chandler, took Murder out of the Venetian Vase and put it in the alley. If he had lived to see it, Chandler no doubt would have said of Tony Hillerman that he took murder out of the alley and put it in the desert.

''The desert'' in this case is the Navajo reservation in Arizona and the surrounding areas of Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico. Hillerman's leading characters, Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn and Sergeant Jim Chee, are both members of the Navajo Tribal Police.

Hillerman was brought up among Indians, went to an Indian boarding school, and has spent almost all his life among Indians. His knowledge of the customs, religions, and folklore of different tribes is extensive. All his novels—apart from *The Fly on the Wall,* a story of political corruption with a journalist as the leading character—have a folkloristic or religious *leitmotif.*

In his first novel, *The Blessing Way,* the motive for murder is witchcraft in the shape of a Navajo Wolf—a sort of werewolf; the sinister *Skinwalkers* also features some kind of witch as the main threat. The Shalako ceremony plays an integral part in *Dance Hall of the Dead,* and in *Talking God,* the Yeibichai, a healing ceremony, and the mask used by the leading character in one of the ritual dances of the ceremony, is the focalpoint of the novel. In *Sacred Clowns* the disappearance of an important cult object is the motive for the murders.

In *A Thief of Time,* probably Hillerman's best novel, archaeology is the background, and the novel is as much a search for the lost Anasazi tribe as for the killer. History and tradition play integral parts in all Hillerman's novels and especially in this one, where the ruins and artefacts of this once flourishing but now extinct civilization are central to the murder mystery. The Hunchbacked God Kokopelli, the Watersprinkler, with his flute is almost as fully realized a character as either Leaphorn or Chee.

The main theme of Hillerman's novels though is the clash between the Navajo Way and the so called American Way of Life, between tradition and the emptiness of modern society, between life in the Navajo reservation and the surrounding world and sometimes between the Navajo Tribal police and the F.B.I.

This conflict is expressed in different ways. In *A Thief of Time* the theme has a powerful metaphor in the concept of the ''time-thief,'' the pothunter who steals Indian artefacts to sell for profit. In *Talking God* ''old bones'' is the metaphor: when the Smithsonian Museum in Washington is full of thousands of Native Indians' bones, why is there such a fuss when the ''Navajo activist'' Henry Highhawk digs up a few white persons' bones to make a point? In the later novels the conflict of lifestyles is crystallized in the almost hopeless love affair between Jim Chee and the *belagaana* (non-Navajo) girl Mary Landon: they love each other, but Mary doesn't want to live in the Navajo reservation, and Jim can't think of living elsewhere.

This pattern is also expressed in the constellation Joe Leaphorn-Jim Chee: Leaphorn, the disillusioned agnostic (if there is such a thing as a Navajo agnostic), and Chee, the believer, who studies to become a *hathaali;* a shaman. This technique enables Hillerman to show more facets of the Indian world than he otherwise could. Each detective might start with a mystery of his own to solve, but it is soon revealed that they are intricately interwoven, bringing out interesting cultural and personal traits in both policemen.

The police procedural of course gets a rather special flavour in Hillerman's novels. The diligent police work is blended with a strong element of Navajo customs: the circumspect way of approaching a problem, the patience in taking on the mystery, so unthinkable for a city-dweller, the ''lobbying'' through old family ties, the way traditional thought patterns are visible behind the thin veil of modern civilization.

Crime fiction is often better than other kinds of literature—fact or fiction—at depicting social, political, and moral issues because the crime, especially a murder, highlights the issue. Apart from offering the reader thrilling entertainment, Hillerman's novels probably better than most other sources of information discuss important questions of racial relations and moral values in modern society.

Karl G. Fredriksson and Lilian Fredriksson. In *St. James Guide to Crime & Mystery Writers, 4th edition,* ed. Jay P. Pederson (St. James Press, 1996).

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HIMES, Chester (1909–1984)

Chester Himes had the immense advantage, for our purpose, of writing about Negroes from the inside, from their side of the fence. . . . The denouement [of *If He Hollers Let Him Go*] is brought about with the help of melodramatic cliches which one could readily spare, though they are credible enough. The important thing is that the character of Bob is sincerely and solidly drawn, and that his character, his state of moral being, is a function of his social situation. He is a black man without place in a world of hostile whites. They are hostile in the sense of denying him recognition or any of the means by which he might realize his nature. This book has not the power and sweep, the subtlety and depth, of *Native Son*. But in its lesser way it is an impressive performance.

Joseph Warren Beach. *New York Times Book Section*. Dec. 2, 1945. p. 7

If He Hollers Let Him Go is well sustained in action, but sacrifices too much to the melodramatic uses of violence. When Mr. Himes writes in his own person, abandoning the rhythms of jive or professionalism, he loses rhythm altogether; his style is a compact thing, known to the trade as ''hard-hitting,'' acceptable because it is free of the major irritants of journalese, but lacking in real literary distinction. Moreover, his book fails as a work of serious reflection on the Negro problem through a basic irresoluteness. Bob is shown to have but two alternatives: to accept the values of his light-skinned fiancée, Alice, the social worker, who wants him to study law, make the most of his limited opportunities as a Negro and climb as high as he can, socially and professionally; or to take the practically suicidal risk of his militancy, which will satisfy his sense of human dignity but leave him frustrated in every other respect.

Isaac Rosenfeld. *New Republic*. Dec. 31, 1945. pp. 909–10

Chester Himes's new novel [*Lonely Crusade*] is a study of the American Negro, a brave and courageous probing into the Negro psyche. His diagnosis reveals a racial malady for which there is no immediate remedy. The cure, as he sees it, is centuries of equality and miscegenation. And in the beginning simple equality is not enough. Equality to the Negro means special privileges. . . .

Mr. Himes's story, for all its hard realism and able writing, reads like a melodrama, with the Communist Party the real villain and the deputy sheriffs the actual murderers. His story also suffers from a form of elephantiasis. He tries to embrace too much and his themes cross and get mixed up, so that in the end Lee Gordon's tragedy could just as well have been that of a white man. This overzealousness led Mr. Himes into long generalizations and oversimplifications. The usual racial prejudices and discriminations against the Negro are merely catalogued, with the result that large segments of his book read not like a novel but like excerpts from extended social studies.

Mr. Himes has touched upon every phase of the Negro problem and has mercilessly vivisected the American Negro's personality. We have here clinical revelations of the Negro's homicidal mania, of his lust for white women, of his pathetic sense of inferiority, of his paradoxical anti-Semitism, of his arrogance and his incurable Uncle Tomism. At times it seems that Mr. Himes is trying to convince us that the whole Negro race in America, as a result of centuries of brutal oppression, is sick at soul.

Stoyan Christowe. *Atlantic Monthly*. Oct., 1947. p. 138

This reviewer was impressed by the controlled force of Mr. Himes' earlier novel, *Cast the First Stone*. Now *The Third Generation* has been published, a far less skillfully modulated work which yet seizes the reader with a strong, if incoherent impact of its own. Much obviously autobiographical truth and a great deal of agonized sincerity has gone into the writing of it. . . . Mr. Himes' difficulty stems from the fact that his novel is not one but two. *The Third Generation* starts as a basically robust saga of a family's search for a place in the sun. Its viewpoint is collective; it projects an acquisitive, restless and dynamic psyche. But suddenly the author changes focus. The narrative acquires an abrupt Oedipal undercurrent. . . .

Chalk it up to Mr. Himes' narrative talent, then, that his novel always lives and sometimes fascinates despite the bifurcation and despite a rather rough-hewn style. Count it as Mr. Himes' even greater merit that he has not written merely a protest novel. In this novel the suffering of the Negro is not for a propaganda end. It is rather a means of dramatizing all human fear and hatred of which prejudice is only a particularly shameful expression.

Frederic Morton. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Jan. 10, 1954. p. 6

In most of the novels written by Negroes until today (with the exception of Chester Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go*) there is a great space where sex ought to be; and what usually fills this space is violence.

James Baldwin. *Nobody Knows My Name* (Dell). 1961. p. 188

Himes's stories are the wildest of camps—grotesque, macabre, black humor (using ''black'' in a quite nonracial sense); and because they are about Negroes many readers may feel embarrassed. If a white writer created so many shiftless or vicious denizens of Harlem, he would be accused of using derogatory stereotypes. But since Himes is himself a Negro, it would appear that the enjoyment of these cruel and fantastic nightmares is *au fait* rather than ofay.

Cotton Comes to Harlem has some weaknesses (over-explicit sex and occasional plot confusion), but many splendidly strange notions, including the conflict between Back-to-Africa and Back-to-the-South movements and the peculiar plot-function of a bale of cotton. . . . We may have our reservations . . . and still find this carnival of gallows humor somewhat disturbing.

Anthony Boucher. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 7, 1965. p. 43

Negro detectives Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson are the bitterly efficient heroes in Chester Himes' series of ''Harlem domestic dramas,'' the most recent of which is *Cotton Comes to Harlem*. . . . At base, Himes' detective fiction is in the lean, crackling American lineage of the experience-hardened balancer of evil accounts who acts on the premise that a quick draw is much more utilitarian than a search warrant. In that tradition *Cotton Comes to Harlem* is paced like a hard-edged, up tempo Charlie Parker blues except that Himes too often substitutes scene-clearing violence for creative spontaneity. . . . An added thrust in the book is the intermittent needling of the white police lieutenant in charge—and sometimes directly of any white reader—by Grave Digger and Coffin Ed through their raw consciousness of being black.

Nat Hentoff. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. March 28, 1965. p. 11

Chester Himes is one of the most prolific of all Negro novelists. At this writing, he is the author of six major novels and a number of lively potboilers about a couple of Harlem detectives. Although he enjoys a good reputation in France, where he now lives, for the most part the American critics have dismissed him as being of the Wright school of naturalism, whose ''protest'' is no longer fashionable. Such criticism is not altogether fair. Himes's interests are considerably different from Wright's, and his firsthand knowledge of certain areas of American life is more developed. His protagonists are generally middle-class, fairly well-educated, somewhat sophisticated in the ways of the world, and often intellectually oriented. They are concerned with ideas and the application of ideas to their experience; they are constantly searching out rational explanations for the irrationalities of their lives. They move with considerable aplomb among white liberals and radicals of both sexes, and engage them in dialectics on their own terms. Himes is also a more deliberate prose stylist than Wright. He seldom intrudes, moralizes, or explains. His characters are usually sufficiently articulate to say what they mean—and what they mean issues often enough from their character and intelligence. Himes does parallel Wright in his bitterness, fury, and frustration. He has given up on America, and rarely returns now on visits.

Edward Margolies. *Native Sons* (Lippincott). 1968. pp. 87–8

In the crime novels of the black writer, Chester Himes, [Raymond] Chandler's blend of realism and exaggeration is exuberantly developed. His series of novels paints life in Harlem, including all levels of society from the pimps to the rich, in a direct, brusque style which is so very American that it is amazing Himes' reputation had to be particularly established in France (where he is considered the ''Balzac of Harlem''). Himes likes grotesque exaggeration, and his gallows humor is very vitriolic indeed. But despite their humor, their superb dialogue and poetic realism, these crime novels are angry books. Violence has a quality of grim delight here, born of a barely repressed hatred. In his explosive ferocity, Himes has an authenticity that a paper-shredder like [Mickey] Spillane completely lacks and for which Chandler did not have the personal motivation. I am surprised that Himes is so little appreciated in his own country while in Europe he is well known and seriously appreciated—surprised because his work is a pioneering document of black experience which, in many ways, is far more incisive than some recent autobiographical statements on the subject.

E.M. Beekman. *Massachusetts Review*. Winter, 1973. pp. 170–1

Himes, with his taut, upbeat prose, is more than a master stylist. Through a career that spans four decades, Himes moved toward the mastery of four distinct types of novel in a way that distinguishes him as one of the most versatile as well as one of the most enigmatic of modern writers. Himes's novels are not for the timid; they are bitter, structured around scenes of pervasive unpleasantness, rely heavily upon the symbolic implications of nightmares, and are filled with violence: fists crunch into jawbones, ballpeen hammers drop like weighted darkness, switchblade knives click open, pistols blast flame into the Harlem night, and murdered men lie sprawled among the cigarette wrappers and broken glass on the ghetto sidewalks. But this is not violence for the sake of morbid thrills only; it is based on Himes's conviction—arrived at in prison, expressed in all of his books, and reinforced by a hundred turns of plot—that people will do anything. The result is a singular kind of tension: reading a Himes novel is like standing on an electric grid, blindfolded, waiting for the current to be turned on, and knowing that it will be. Reading Himes is also an education in social history by a master of mayhem who specializes in powerfully individualized portraits of black men literally being driven crazy by white society and themselves. Himes gives us a vision of a racially obsessed and decadent America. But more important than that picture—as terrifying as it is—is his ability to coolly achieve, in his best work, an effective union of social protest and art. . . .

Whatever vision Himes chooses to express, his writing is icily incisive in its penetration of the American racial scene, so incisive that he is often frightening in his ability to evoke the terror of situations from which there is no exit other than desperation. But then he is also able to evoke the strange beauty inherent in desperate acts. What T. M. Curran wrote of *Black on Black* certainly holds for all of Himes's major work: ''[These] writings are powerful and, indeed, bear the authentic impress of a master. Himes is in absolute control of all moods and all forms. He can be tragic or hilariously funny, poignantly ironic or savagely vicious, absurd or coldly logical.'' But it is more than his range that makes Himes unique; there is no other writer like him because he is hard-edged and uptempo, a rule unto himself—articulate, durable to the point where even his failures are impressive, and always making the disturbing demands upon his readers that only mastery of form permits.

James Lundquist. *Chester Himes* (Ungar, 1976), pp. 2–3, 146–47

Himes, it seems clear, did not consciously choose to be controversial—he wanted to be popular, even extremely popular—but, he was in fact controversial. His books spurred readers to think about and react to subjects that invariably inspire anger. Something deep within himself—Baldwin's use of the word *integrity* seems an apt choice—had chosen for him the roughest road available, and he could hardly blame the critics for that. But, as a novelist, a man in the business of making verbal scale models of the world as he has known it, felt it, and lived it, as a constructor of elaborate extended

metaphors designed to guide readers into his own unique and private realm of experience, Chester Himes did, fairly often, have legitimate grounds for complaint against critics who refused to accord him his full share of artistic license, refused to respect fully his need to write subjectively in one of the most highly subjective of literary genres. . . .

Racism, the hurts it inflicts, and all the tangled hates, is the dominant subject of the literary works that Chester Himes actually did produce. He did not choose the subject. It was thrust upon him. He did not at first even choose the literary forms that he used. But he drove deeper into the subject than anyone ever had before. He recorded what happens to a man when his humanity is questioned, the rage that explodes within him, the doubts that follow, and the fears, and the awful temptation to yield, to embrace degradation. If you lock up a first-rate literary talent for a lifetime in a small box, it will give you a complete statement of how it feels to be locked up in that particular box. It is a simple situation, but a complex experience. And being caught in a trap, boxed-in, in one way or another, is perhaps the essence of the modern experience. Himes has had the advantage—dubious but real—of a highly visible trap. Racism was Chester Himes's box, and he has produced, in the form of a long series of novels, both heavy and light, what was, arguably, the most complete and perfect statement of the nature of native American racism to be found in American literature, and one of the most profound statements about the nature of social oppression, and the rage and fear it generates in individuals, in all of modern literature.

Stephen F. Milliken. *Chester Himes: A Critical Appraisal* (Univ. of Missouri Pr., 1976), pp. 305–7

Far more, however, than the informing vision and design of *If He Hollers Let Him Go* has been contrary about Himes. Nearly every novel and short story he has written since ''His Last Day'' explores one or another aspect of a world made violent by racial oppositions and inversions. Yet though his writing has been chided as often diagrammatic or obsessive, it has actually been pretty various—lyric, or acerbic, or of late, boldly satiric and surreal. Despite differences of texture, his ''serious'' fiction, the five novels he wrote between 1945 and 1954, has especially been thought to need leavening, even though hints of *Pinktoes* (1961), an eloquent piece of bawdy, and of the later thrillers, lay there all along. By a nice point of contrast Himes's detective stories, which began in 1957 with *For Love of Imabelle*, and in which Himes brought into play quite astonishing feats of plot-making and wit, were thought by some reviewers altogether too playful, the invention verging on showmanship, the wit giving in to mere display. Just as the earlier fiction was neither as solemn nor monotone as had casually been supposed so Himes's use of the thriller genre, ostensibly all pantomime and knock-about, could be seen to mask serious and long-held preoccupations. In changing from high to popular form Himes hadn't altered his basic sense of direction.

But if his themes have arguably been of a piece, Himes's overall achievement presents more difficult problems. His very best writing can give way to weaknesses of a quite blatant kind. He can sound clumsy, flat-footed, too strident. His style has often been uneven and the pressure of his own feelings has shown through. Yet within writing which exhibits all of these deficiencies, as well as others, he has scored clear and attractive triumphs. If Himes isn't major in the sense that we speak of Ellison or Wright, to cite two contemporaries, he assuredly amounts to far more than a passing minor talent. And if his achievement has seemed contrary, even contradictory, so too has the reputation of his work. Shifts of attention, of praise and disapproval, have dogged his career. . . .

As to his reputation: despite occasional good notices like Wright's, Himes's work has either been ignored altogether, or lambasted from the Right for doing racial dirt on America (*If He Hollers Let Him Go* was thought particularly to offend), or, as in a novel so resolutely individual in its political line on race as *Lonely Crusade* (1947), indicted by the Left for selling short the cause. Over time other evaluations have made their way to the surface. When not under scrutiny for his politics, Himes's racial concerns drew attention. If he persisted in writing on black life and themes, he was narrow, insufficiently universal; if he wrote ''raceless'' (meaning white) fiction, as in *Cast the First Stone* (1952), he had turned his face from his own heritage and condition.

A. Robert Lee. *Journal of American Studies*. April, 1978, pp. 99–100

[Chester] Himes's novels have remarkably succeeded in highlighting the values of his female characters. What these women instinctively feel as important in their lives, their male counterparts learn the hard way. Thus the two women, Alice and Ruth (in *If He Hollers Let Him Go* and *The Lonely Crusade* respectively) unmistakably reveal their middle-class outlook, Alice advocates progress for blacks under the framework of segregation. As for herself, she frankly tells her fiance that she is ambitious and wants a rich and important person for her husband—rich enough to overcome the unpleasantness that goes with color. Similarly, Ruth (in *The Lonely Crusade*) does not want to be a drudge all her life. She feels that moral and ethical principles should not be applicable to blacks and that it was more important to lead a materially comfortable life. Lillian (in *The Third Generation*) has inherited the white values of her parents who had earlier imbibed them from their white masters. She firmly believes in the dictum of individuals making progress by dint of hard work, education, and proper motivation.

Thus the pattern that emerges in Himes's novels is that of the protagonists' desire for economic security, wealth, success, property—all of these via education. These are the values that constitute, as it were, the very soul of the American middle class. It needs no reiteration that these values remain unchanged despite the author's involvement with Marxism.

Usha Shourie. *Black American Literature* (New Delhi, India: Cosmo Publications, 1985), pp. 207–8

''When I went into . . . the detective story field,'' noted the black expatriate novelist Chester Himes, ''I was just imitating all the other American detective story writers, other than the fact that I introduced various new angles which were my own. . . . I just made the faces black, that's all.'' And, indeed, Stephen Milliken has convincingly suggested that many of Himes's thrillers—which center on a group of sinister people competing in the search for a mysterious object—recapitulate the basic plot of Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*. But whether Himes was being disingenuous, or whether he was self deceived, he wasn't just imitating other American writers. In fact, you cannot take the genre and simply ''make the faces black''—not, at least, if you see the black experience as Himes does. More specifically, I'm going to argue

here that—despite his own claims—Himes substantially changed the genre that he inherited from Hammett and Chandler; that he was forced, whether consciously or unconsciously, into these formal changes because of his political situation as a self-aware radical black writer; and that by looking at the ways in which he altered the genre, we can see some of the contradictions between the Chandlerian thriller and American racial reality. . . .

Most of Himes's detective plots resolve themselves in surprisingly genial ways. Dennis Porter has pointed out that the ''hard-boiled novel ends with the rejection of a woman and a retreat from intimate personal relations,'' whereas ''the classic detective novel often couples the solution of a crime with an engagement or a wedding.'' And in this regard, Himes often follows the classic mold. At the end of *A Rage in Harlem*, the impossibly naive Jackson, who has gotten himself entangled with a brutal gang that manages to knock off several people far more experienced than he is, gets back both his job and his girlfriend; *The Real Cool Killers* ends even more sentimentally, with the impending marriage between the equally square Sonny and Sissie, who is pregnant with the child of the dead gang leader Sheik; in *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, Uncle Bud the junk man ends up with $87,000 with which to buy himself a harem in Africa. And while *All Shot Up* lacks the element of coupling, it too is upbeat: the stolen money is stolen back by Coffin Ed and Grave Digger and sent as an anonymous contribution to the Boys' Club. Indeed, the last words of that novel are those of the anonymous telegram they send to political boss and swindler Casper Holmes: ''Crime doesn't pay.''

You can't, however, just slap [an Agatha] Christie ending on a Chandlerian novel, and the very incongruity of these finales seems a self-conscious questioning of the implications of the genre itself. In a sense, then, these novels make a political point about the asymmetries of white and black experiences through their internal contradictions, which show that the same literary forms are not appropriate to both. And from this perspective, perhaps, some of the violence in the novels—especially the violence of Coffin Ed and Grave Digger themselves—can be seen to undercut the genre, as well. . . .

In a figurative sense, then, the violence is not only characteristic *of* the novels, but is also directed *against* them; the very incongruity of the genre and its subject matter produces a violent disruption. Perhaps that's why, in the last novel in the series, *Blind Man with a Pistol*, all attempt at a resolution is dropped, and the novel rips itself apart into chaos. A long good-bye to the detective story itself? Perhaps; but if so, it's a tacit recognition that when ideology and art collide, something has to give way. And since the genre stood in the way of Himes's own vision of what it meant to be black, who can say that his farewell was a wrong choice?

> Peter J. Rabinowitz. ''Chandler Comes to Harlem: Racial Politics in the Thrillers of Chester Himes.'' In Barbara A. Rader and Howard G. Zettler, eds. *The Sleuth and the Scholar* (New York: Greenwood Pr., 1988), pp. 19, 16–27

Several features make Himes a significant American writer. *If He Hollers Let Him Go* and *Lonely Crusade* offer one of the most vivid and coherent pictures of World War II Los Angeles culture in American fiction and mark a watershed in the tradition of proletarian fiction. *Cast the First Stone* is an important contribution to the special genre of prison fiction. Himes's impressive cycle of detective novels set in Harlem constitutes a unique antigenre in crime fiction. His notable autobiography offers an intellectual history of the African-American writer in exile, as well as evidence of Himes's relationship to the European traditions of existentialism and the absurd. Himes's work overall reveals a persistent effort to explore unpleasant truths and basic absurdities in American culture. . . .

By means of grotesque art, Himes aligns himself with a tradition of absurdist fiction that has both European and American antecedents. When Constance Rourke in 1931 identifies the essence of much American humor as a ''median between terror and laughter which is grotesque,'' she properly acknowledges an animating impulse not only in southwestern tales but in a tradition that we can trace through Poe, Melville, Twain, Faulkner, West, Ellison, and O'Connor to the contemporary period. Himes in his later European phase produced fiction as exaggerated in its comic terror and violence as anything in Faulkner—an author who was, Himes wrote in his autobiography, a constant source of bizarre inspiration. Moreover, Himes connects generically with the European tradition of the grotesque. His broad references to Sartre and Camus and such pointed declarations that Richard Wright's later fiction would have been more successful had it been more absurd point to his aesthetic allegiances. The Rabelaisian scenes in *The Primitive* and *Pinktoes*, the Kafkaesque absurdities of the trial in *A Case of Rape*, the Dostoevskian labyrinth that is Harlem in the detective cycle—all point to Himes's place with the world of extremities framed by the tradition of the grotesque.

> Gilbert H. Muller. *Chester Himes* (Boston: Twayne, 1989), pp. x, 118–19

As a writer of detective stories, Himes does not get high marks when he is measured against the narrow parameters against which such fiction is usually judged. He does not dwell on deep, mysterious secrets, international conspiracies, or dilettante sleuths. In many of his stories, the mystery is rather superficial, and the detectives have very little part in the solution.

Himes's criminal Harlem should not be judged along with traditional mystery fiction. To consider him thus would be to devalue his work. Perhaps unknowingly, Himes was following in the footsteps of a select few writers who actually had some knowledge of the world that they sought to fictionalize. It comes as no surprise that the work of old-timers like Hammett or Donald Goines and even newer writers like James Colbert and O'Neil De Noux is so realistic when you realize that they have experienced real life in the dangerous netherworld of urban America.

Himes's writing is particularly effective because he was able to combine realistic depictions of ghetto life and ghetto dwellers with symbolic elements that emphasize Black culture and heritage. His ability to ennoble otherwise comical characters and to create the aura of hope in an atmosphere of failure and degradation is in the highest traditions of the fiction writer's art.

At the same time, Himes created in Grave Digger and Coffin Ed two protagonists who could stand side-by-side with other romantic American heroes. It is worthy of note that the hard-boiled detective is as much a myth figure to twentieth-century Americans as Arthur and Roland are to Britain and France. Because America became urbanized so quickly, this mythical detective has replaced the cowboy as the definitive American hero archetype. . . .

Unlike many practitioners who have written about the same character through twenty or thirty adventures, we never tire of Coffin Ed and Digger. Because they grow and change, Himes made

them new each time we met them and charged them with a dynamism that is not evident in Travis McGee, Spenser, and other detective characters. When Digger and Ed's adventures come to a close, the reader inevitably faces it with a feeling of regret rather than one of relief.

Himes was an unusual and talented man. He was also angry and embittered, but these emotions tended to enhance his talent rather than reduce it. His entry in the field of crime writing was an auspicious one and from an historical point of view an important one. He infused a tired genre with new life and undoubtedly provided the impetus for many future writers to approach the hard-boiled story from a fresh and bold perspective.

Robert E. Skinner. *Two Guns from Harlem: The Detective Fiction of Chester Himes* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State Univ. Pr., 1989), pp. 181–82

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HOFFMAN, Alice (1952–)

Alice Hoffman's eighth novel [*Seventh Heaven*] is a coming-of-age story in which virtually every character comes of age. The setting is 1959 in an unnamed Long Island suburb, a town so new that when the men of Hemlock Street put down their lawns, crops of renegade potatoes turn up as reminders of the street's potato-farm past. Lawn care, indeed, reigns supreme as a symbol of complacency, repression, and hypocrisy; there is only one kind of family on Hemlock Street, and even when a husband-provider departs by natural causes, an odor of scandal remains behind. . . .

As the novel progresses, we become gradually seduced by the sense of enchantment clinging to even the most banal aspects of suburbia. Nora, with her hands raw from mowing her own lawn, might be a catalyst, but on Hemlock Street, even the Twinkies seem imbued with their own secrets. The novel is a tender revision of a time in American cultural history which has been prematurely sentenced to contemptuous dismissal. Like Alice McDermott's haunting love song to suburbia, *That Night*, *Seventh Heaven* gives us cause to remember the magic of those brand new towns. It is Hoffman's most beguiling fiction to date.

Jean Hanff Korelitz. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. Feb. 15, 1991, p. 17

Our behavior often appears unpredictable, erratic, and sometimes quite risky in moments of our own low spirits. This was the case with Robin Moore, who was divorcing her wandering husband, coping with a bright, but independent, loosely disciplined teenage son, and experiencing a severely reduced living standard. . . . It was on a thunderous night that Robin, on her way to ask her brother Stuart for help and comfort, met the wolf man, hands cuffed and about to be taken to a mental hospital. Against all odds, she managed to abduct him and take him to her home. . . .

The splendid opening of the novel leads to a series of events, all revolving round the impact made by this man Stephen, who was raised at an early age by wolves. . . . It is his adherence to the honesty of a romanticized wolf culture that leads to his final conflict and the inevitable denouement of choice between two worlds.

Love and deceit, honesty and betrayal: these are important issues to treat. Hoffman tackles them with care and with some lovely lyrical writing. Her novel certainly reads easy. But the fairy-tale qualities interwoven with the realistic details of ordinary life are often jarring. Are we to grant, without question, to assume such a simplistic pure culture to wolves? Does a return to nature always coincide with honest thoughts and brave behavior? . . . Though a reader may not always be comfortable with Hoffman's unique flight of fancy, he will find a table of contents appealingly presented.

Lee Mhatre. *Confrontation*. Fall, 1994–Winter, 1995, pp. 342–43

Suburbia is where Alice Hoffman goes for a taste of dark magic. There's something about those winding streets lined with identical houses that sets her to imagining witches, magicians, black cats, wicked crows, helpful toads, spells, hexes, presentiments. The people in her latest novel, *Practical Magic*, live in a world of incantations and Formica, magic potions and linoleum. They don't have time for lives of quiet desperation—they're too busy subduing ghosts and trying to figure out how much nightshade it takes to kill a grown man. . . .

The witches in this novel are not like Anne Rice witches, exactly, nor are they the *brujas* you meet in *Like Water for Chocolate* or the tales of the Latin American realists, despite the echoes you may hear. Alice Hoffman writes about women who have had their witchiness thrust upon them. They have children they love, dinner to get on the table, boyfriends who are bums or magicians or both. When they have problems, they try to solve them with a house in the burbs, a nice yard, regular living. But somehow these time-honored American solutions never seem to work. That's when you need to send for those little old ladies in black.

Mark Childress. *New York Times Book Review*. June 25, 1995, p. 25

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HOLLANDER, John (1929–)

John Hollander's poems [in *Moviegoing, and Other Poems*], even at their most frivolous and perverse, explore the shifting barriers between semblance and reality with a sort of chuckling irony, but never with a very high inner seriousness. His irony has no satirical thrust behind it, little melancholy, no compelling joy. These are poems whose major emotion lies in their own cleverness. It is worth taking poetry more seriously—as in their ways Creeley and Levertov do—and perhaps in his third book Hollander will find his way.

Peter Davison. *Atlantic Monthly*. Nov., 1962, p. 87

John Hollander's *Visions from the Ramble* . . . uses the New York locale. From that area of Central Park known as the Ramble, the poet sees visions, past and present, inner and outer, real and fanciful, ''remembering treacheries of remembrance.'' Unfortunately, too often the images won't stand up under examination. I am not thinking of the occasional faltering to be expected in a book of poems. It is rather that with Hollander the images are an exercise of the will, not a hatch of the imagination and the unconscious. Adjectives and adverbs clog his verses. He mistakes bad prose for poetry:

> The slowly-dropping summer sun
> Lowers a reddening yolk into
> its cup in New Jersey.

He mistakes bad puns for wit: ''ballads made to their mistresses' highbrows'' and ''on the foggy road Harvey rode westward.'' Nevertheless, poems like ''Sunday Evenings'' and ''From the Ramble'' show what Hollander is capable of. And one must respect the ambitious concept underlying his book, whose Poem and fourteen poems inviting comparisons with Hart Crane's *The Bridge* have the unity of a musical suite. Few poets today are ready to risk failure and disappointment by undertaking so long and sustained an effort.

Samuel Yellen. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 21, 1965, pp. 26–27

With the exception of James Merrill (in a poem like ''The Summer People'') I don't know an American poet better at turning out sophisticated, hard-nosed (but good-hearted too) social verse than John Hollander, and it ends up not feeling ''light,'' like light whiskey, at all. This volume [*Town and Country Matters*], published in 1972 in a handsome edition by David R. Godine, is made up of Erotica and Satirica, ''translations and fresh creation'' of ''a world of classical urbanity'' says the blurb. John Hollander's dirty mind is excellently displayed throughout, and Anne Hollander has provided appropriately feelthy and not so feelthy pictures as illustrations. The idea of setting out to be dirty and daring is a depressing one, but in fact these poems don't let themselves get locked into lubricious points. For me the best things in a never less than interesting collection are eighteen ''Sonnets for Roseblush''. . . . But the gem of the volume, and I would claim the best poem Hollander has ever written, is a long one called ''New York,'' spun off from Juvenal, the friend ''Rus'' leaving town for good because living in the city has grown impossible, the poet staying behind to reflect on the meaning of living there. Written in strong couplets the verse twists and moves rapidly through the junk and glories of urban life. . . . ''New York'' is neither a speciality nor a sport, just an admirable piece of work.

William H. Pritchard. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1973, pp. 590–92

Hollander has written his *Reflections on Espionage* in the form of a single long poem composed in strict eleven-syllable lines, except for twenty-one lines at the very end which contain a clever cipher carefully explicated in the author's notes. . . .

The basic power of Hollander's conception . . . lies in the way in which he has maintained the literal details of his fable: the ''Terminations'' of failed agents, the tortures, the deceptions, the sordid traps, the fears, the suspicions, the frustrations of a world in which ''Scattered outbreaks of terror do not abate,'' while he transmutes the details into a parable of the efforts of a creative seeker, a tragicomic saga of the human effort to explore the workings of ultimate truth, to probe the depths of one's own consciousness, and to discover the springs of human motive in others. The effort, we learn, can only hope to succeed through stout mental discipline (symbolized by the eleven-syllable grid). . . . And with discipline comes the hoped-for liberation: one must admire the flexibility and ease with which Hollander moves within his chosen grid; there is no sense of straining; the language, though frequently colloquial, moves with dignity and grace toward a measured eloquence. . . . With such a book, if we had not known his stature before, John Hollander surely stands forth as one of the two or three best in his generation of American poets now in their forties or early fifties. Indeed, I would say one of two.

Louis L. Martz. *The Yale Review*. Autumn, 1976, pp. 118, 121–22

In the group of essays which composes *Vision and Resonance*, Hollander explores questions of poetic form as it were after the fall. ''Music'' can no longer be trusted to explain anything, but must itself be explained. The critic must try to clarify a hazy relationship between the sister arts, as well as both the aural and spatial dimensions of poetic form.

Hollander's tastes are eclectic, which enables him to write cogently on poets as disparate as Donne, Jonson and Campion, Marvell, Milton and Pope, Wordsworth and Blake, Whitman, Pound, and William Carlos Williams. Since his cultural range includes European music and graphic art, classical literature and literary theory, and contemporary linguistics, the rifts of this volume are quite filled with ore. And his ear and eye are fine, so that his readings are usually reliable, which is more than one can say for many critics who attempt to write on prosody. He has excellent chapters dealing with contrastive stress, with enjambment, with rhyme. Each, if applied historically, would yield discoveries about ideas of order in English poetry over the last four centuries. The question of line-break has particular significance for modern poetry, where it serves as the single most important formal signal for a great number of poets (go back to Pound and Cummings, move up to Creeley), opening doors in hitherto plain blank walls.

Here Hollander makes some brilliant observations about how the relations between line-break and syntactic juncture in the twentieth century consistently direct attention, create drama, produce meaning. There are also good chapters on the role of meter as frame, and on formal experimentation, both theory and practice, in Romantic and modern American poetry. . . .

A . . . serious flaw concerns the ghost of sphery music haunting Hollander. He seems to occupy himself excessively with efforts to lay this ghost—belaboring poets and prosodists who have made misleading poetry-music analogies, extensively demonstrating, as if it needed demonstrating, the inadequacy of musical settings to Donne's unsonglike ''songs,'' recounting at length the differences between Greek meters, which were music-based, and English, which are not. We may all suffer from a nostalgia for primal harmony which we recognize as a fiction, but Hollander's repeated digressions from poetic to musical matters practically entitle this book to be called *The Elephant and the Music Problem*.

Finally, and unfortunately, both Hollander's organization and his prose leave much to be desired. This is a meandering, repetitive book, in which most of the essays read like occasional pieces or even worked-up footnotes, and the writing style is as stuffy as an overheated, overfurnished, close-windowed lamplit room. The possession of vast learning should not exempt an author from the lucidity and grace required of other mortals. In this case, non-specialists should brace themselves. Nevertheless, the ideas in *Vision and Resonance* deserve a wide audience for their solid discoveries and for their provocative suggestions, and for reminding us again, as at the outset of his first volume, that ''particularly in the case of poetry, the functional relationship of form to content continues to pose the most demanding critical questions.''

Alicia Ostriker. *Partisan Review*. 44, 4, 1977, pp. 634, 636

It is exactly 20 years since the appearance of John Hollander's first book of poems. I read the book then, soon after I first met the poet, and was rather more impressed by the man than by the book. It has taken 20 years for the emotional complexity, spiritual anguish, and intellectual and moral power of the man to become the book. The enormous mastery of verse was there from the start, and is there still, so augmented that only James Merrill in his own generation seems to me Hollander's peer as an *artist*, as a stylist equal to Auden and to Wilbur. But there seemed almost always to be more knowledge and insight within Hollander than the verse could accommodate. . . .

As a poet, Hollander was not truly Hollander until the volume, *The Night Mirror*, published in 1971, when he was past meridian. His book of selected poems [*Spectral Emanations*], now published is strongest in his work of the 1970s, in the sequence or long poem ''The Head of the Bed,'' in the title sequence of ''Tales Told of the Fathers,'' and in ''Spectral Emanations,'' the superb and difficult long poem that should make a new beginning for him.

Hollander began as an Audenesque poet of the 1950s, merging the American Auden back into the Jonsonian line of measured wisdom. But from *The Night Mirror* on, Hollander surprisingly blends Jonson and Shelley in a single body, with Stevens inevitably displacing Auden as central precursor. Quite explicitly, Hollander has developed into an American-Jewish High Romantic, esoteric and elegiac, and daring to write long poems in the Sublime mode.

Harold Bloom. *New Republic*. Sept. 9, 1978, p. 42

John Hollander does not become easier as he goes, nor does the somewhat frustrated pleasure of reading him grow less. He is always on the point of being fully comprehensible and never quite arrives at that point. The poems [in *Blue Wine*] are poems with beginnings, middles and ends; not parts of a continuum you could hack into pieces, without its mattering where you hacked, here would do as well as there, and call the pieces poems. Hollander's poems have not only structure but subject and substance, but even if I know what he is talking about, please do not ask me to tell you exactly what he is saying about it. Then what makes them admirable? It is easy to take examples of his artful combinations: from ''Anonymous Master, 'Standing Figure''': ''Of course, the painting, full of the rich/Light of contrivance, could hardly have/That for a name''; ''The literalness of shaping a/Mass is like a kind of/Groping around in a/Midnight of thick fact''; ''That would mean/Marble clanging out in sweet pain.'' But this is to break up the sequences, and there are sequences, if not exactly of thought, of a dreamlike train of ideas which in an assured order keep turning into something else. . . . Put it briefly, Hollander is a master poet with an eye for image, a sense of line (and a sense of humor), and a rightness of composition; all of which qualities makes him a delight to read, whether or not we come out more fully informed than when we went in.

Richmond Lattimore. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1979, pp. 443–44

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HOROVITZ, Israel (1939–)

The Indian Wants the Bronx . . . is funny and terrifying. . . .

The actors in this play brilliantly reveal the incipient ferocity born of moral isolation that can be observed in persons who still possess some of the charming folly of untrammeled youth. In *It's Called the Sugar Plum* it is innocence coupled with schooled dumbness that the actor conveys with apt ease.

Horovitz's writing of *The Indian Wants the Bronx* demonstrates a perfect ear for the speech of his two punks. He is not slumming: he has made himself part of their spirit. But like other playwrights of his generation (those between 21 and 30), he should not dwell too long or too lovingly within that sphere; it is narrow and shallow for lack of a more complete understanding of the world outside it. The world may be equally ferocious, but it is nevertheless the *world*, and all of it must be explored to make art splendid and life worth the strife.

Harold Clurman. *The Nation*. Feb. 12, 1968. p. 221

On the evidence of these two plays [*The Indian Wants the Bronx* and *It's Called the Sugar Plum*], Horovitz is a conventional playwright compared to some of the other graduates of the off-off-Broadway scene—Van Itallie, say, or Sam Shepard. He works in tight dramatic scenes in which the confrontation of character and situation dictates the action. The characters are not quite realistic (his hoods are too patterned in their articularity, and the hero of *It's Called the Sugar Plum* is not so much a Harvard student as a pastiche of campus fashions) and his situations are as unlikely as they are arbitrary. Yet his work is a variation on the realistic line that has always dominated in the American theatre. If *The Indian Wants the Bronx* is a fair sample, he may provide several more interesting stops on that line.

Gerald Weales. *The Reporter*. May 2, 1968. p. 35

There are perhaps two surprising, antithetical qualities in the work of the playwright Israel Horovitz, and both were evident in his latest double bill, grouped under the title, *The Honest-to-God Schnozzola*. . . . Mr. Horovitz is clearly imaginative and yet, in a sense, conventional.

He has a good ear for the way people talk—always the first test of any playwright—and he combines this with a very just sense of fantasy and feel of doom. Yet he also has a shrewd streak of theatricality running down his back. I don't object to it, but I think it might confuse firmer and less pliant minds. You see here, theatrically speaking, both pieces are set-ups for a final stroke of theater that arrives with the predictable unexpectedness of the pay-off to an O. Henry short story. Yet when the trick has been turned, even though we have an idea of how it has been done, it remains pretty effective.

Clive Barnes. *New York Times (daily)*. April 22, 1969. p. 40

The Honest-to-God Schnozzola. . .was more properly ''Honest-to-God 'Cabaret,''' but with a change in point of view; this time, the contempt has shifted from depraved Germans to even more depraved Americans. . . .

If any man has earned the right to go his own way, it is Mr. Horovitz, but I do wish he would change his course. As he has already proved in *It's Called the Sugar Plum*, which shared a bill with his *The Indian Wants the Bronx*, and which seemed to me much the stronger and more original of the two, he can delineate a character with a flick of a line or a piece of business, he can write dialogue that is dramatic and rings true, and he can explore an atmosphere or state of mind. I wish he would leave studies of corruption, evil, Fascism, mindlessness, and other abstract nouns to the lesser talents among us.

Edith Oliver. *New Yorker*. May 3, 1969. pp. 108–9

I think something fine has been achieved in *Cappella*. I think. The novel has absurdist affiliations: these irritate. . . .

A good deal is frankly impenetrable and annoying. God and gastronomy have the same liturgical significance. This comes with the absurdist franchise after all. Yet, quite reluctantly at first, I forgave. *Cappella* is also an entertainment.

This is the first novel of Israel Horovitz, a double-OBIE [award] playwright. As might be expected, Horovitz has a glib knack for soliloquy. His words decant without sediment; they purl. And it is here that the enjoyment of *Cappella* is located: up front, on the apron edge, in a single spotlight.

Three quarters of the book is an extended story telling. And the stories engross, they make thick laughter; their tone and accent, their circular movement is suave, accurate.

D. Keith Mano. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 25, 1973. p. 2

Mr. Horovitz [in *Dr. Hero*] is summarizing a life. . .though he has a distinctly oblique way of coming at it and a parodistic tone that ties its glimpses of everything from toilet-training to abandoned friends to ultimate defeat together. . . .

Mr. Horovitz has taken his familiar materials. . .and tossed them at us like so many eccentrically weighted basketballs. . . .

In short, the evening is a game, insouciant mockery throughout. . . . [The play's] contours are bold, its horrors are swiftly defined and swiftly dispensed with, its fantasy-quotient is consistent, its lens—the one we are allowed to look through—is sharply focused. If it fails, as I think it does, it is because Hero's ambition is much too generalized, nothing we can visualize with him, and because ''the contest'' in which he is defeated is similarly without an immediate, graspable base. Mr. Horovitz has got his outlines clean, his tonalities all in order; it's the ultimate innards of the piece that are spongy.

But his surface, at least, is controlled, pulled together; and that keeps us from drifting off on our own down memory's rag-tag lane.

Walter Kerr. *New York Times Theater Section*. April 22, 1973. p. 11

Israel Horovitz, of course, comes under the category of ''famous young playwright.'' He is a winner of two [*Village Voice*] ''Obies,'' and the seriousness of his commitment comes through in *Cappella*. What distinguishes his book is the chances he is willing to take. His dramatic skill (if that's the right word) works itself out in Cappella's brilliant monologues. Each story contains a half-truth that turns itself inside out to become a double character revelation as Cappella defends himself against his own life. The old man rants, boasts, wails, and wrings every possible change and, finally, self-condemnation out of each experience. . . .

As Franz Kafka said, ''From life one can extract comparatively so many books, but from books so little, so very little life.'' The copyist is that old thing, ''a literary conceit,'' through which Horovitz tries to impart another time dimension to his book. That

dimension is unnecessary. *Cappella*, while it's working, exists beautifully in its own time.

Corinne Robins. *The Village Voice*. May 10, 1973. p. 32

[*Alfred the Great*] is the first of a trilogy, to be called *The Wakefield Plays* by the American playwright [Israel Horovitz] best known for *The Indian Wants the Bronx*. Dedicated to Samuel Beckett, *Alfred the Great* is a domestic drama, but much more than that. No doubt Horovitz has been influenced by Beckett, O'Neill, Albee, and Pinter—and that is good: however, this four-character work set in the playwright's hometown contains no new vision beyond the basic themes and ideas of these masters of personal fears and terrors—and that is bad. Truly, much of the dialogue is brilliant, as are the silences; and the play is beautifully structured. But the plot, ''the return of the native,'' is quite familiar except for some particularly grisly twists which are not really surprising; and some of the stage directions are a bit pretentious. Despite anything it lacks, though, we should all be thankful for *Alfred the Great*; it bodes well for the trilogy, and no other American playwright of Horovitz' caliber seems to be doing anything worthy of publication (or production) at all.

Richard M. Buck. *Library Journal*. March 15, 1974. p. 772

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HOWARD, Richard (1929–)

In almost every poem in his recent book *The Damages*, Howard exhibits that Proustian capacity for attention to other people and to their quick gestures and the surrounding bric-a-brac which so relentlessly reveal them. . . . Howard has a talent which has lately come to seem the novelist's exclusively: the ability to observe social surfaces and manners accurately and to make the inessential suddenly seem essence. Such a talent does not in Howard's work result in satire. Instead, Howard's total attention leads to a kind of sympathy with things he sees. . . . Howard . . . has another of the talents normally associated with the novelist's art: the patience to let the judgments of situations apart from oneself arise from the situations themselves. He therefore asserts as an aesthetic premise the novelist's view of reality: ''Reality/had to be happened on,/one had to *find*,/not create it.'' Paradoxically, then, the energy of attention in Howard's work stems from a deep respect not for the formal medium of poetry but for the world of reality which is the material of art . . .

It would be easy, I think, to undervalue Howard's poetry, since one of its deepest impulses is toward diminution of vision, modesty of technique, and respect for reality. Yet this very impulse is Howard's great strength, for it simultaneously permits his poems to assume the honesty, gaudiness, and energy of genuine art. For above all, Howard attains within the terms of his work the formal coherence which is the end of all poetic technique.

Donald Sheehan. *Contemporary Literature*. Spring, 1969. pp. 293–5

Mr. Howard's criticism is distinguished for the breadth of its sympathies and the size of its appetite. He enjoys the advantage, of course, of being in a position to assume the very existence of that appreciation of modernist poetics that [the] older and more stringent body of criticism made possible. But he approaches this advantage with an admirable confidence, and exploits it with an uncommon energy and almost prodigal intelligence.

He is, above all, an enthusiast. He places no distances between himself and the poetry he is writing about [in *Alone with America*]. He immerses himself in it totally, and does so without apology or facile invocations to the zeitgeist. He not only likes this poetry—most of it anyway—but is clearly prepared to live by it. And he brings to it a vocabulary of praise far larger, less inhibited and more illuminating than any we have had from a critic of contemporary poetry since R.P. Blackmur wrote his early essays on the poets of his own generation.

Hilton Kramer. *New Republic*. Dec. 20, 1969. pp. 24–5

This collection of essays by Richard Howard [*Alone with America*] is at once a valuable (to date perhaps an indispensable) in-depth survey of forty-one contemporary American poets and a large, at times exasperating reminder of both the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary criticism. Its value springs from the fact that Howard not only has produced substantial essays on all forty-one of these poets (a formidable feat in itself), many of which have received no up-dated critical attention or virtually no attention whatever, but also he has managed to write at least a handful of good, incisive studies. . . .

Howard's reasons for writing these essays, or, in his words, for this ''accounting'' of these American poets, reveals that he too has chosen that brand of personalism characteristic of contemporary criticism. . . . Howard, then, implicitly admits that *Alone with America* isn't as much an assessment of ''the art of poetry'' since 1950 as it is a recording of individual entries. . . .

The advantages and perhaps inevitable excess of personalism in criticism are quickly and eminently obvious. These essays are marked by an energetic vibrancy and verve, a *joie de poésie* seldom encountered in criticism. Himself a poet and the author of three

books of poems . . . Howard responds to the work of his contemporaries with an involvement and excitement which is often literally breathless and in a style implicitly packed with the zing, bang, and pow of contemporary rhetoric. And because he approaches each poet as a free standing figure, because his response is not predetermined by a complex of critical premises, he can and does respond to the poetry, in large part, on its own terms.

However, those are also the sources of excess. Admittedly, there is little more dreadful than that bloodless criticism of dissertation scholarship. But Howard's exuberance becomes so breathless, an endless sequence of dashes and ellipses, that at times it is also virtually unintelligible and can be conservatively described as grotesque rococo; it is as felicitous as that which might result from a chance coupling of Hannah Arendt's high Anglo-German and Jack Kerouac's spontaneous bop prosody on Lautréamont's dissecting table.

A. Poulin, Jr. *Journal of Modern Literature*. vol. 1, no. 1, 1970. pp. 111–2

At a time when most poems being published—our best and our worst—are confessional, *Untitled Subjects* is an extraordinary collection not at all committed to that kind of exposure. Richard Howard's are ''life studies'' of another sort, wonderful monologues involving fifteen great, or sometimes obscure, figures from the Victorian past. . . .

Howard's is . . . an astounding book. We might have met the figures treated here as subjects in his two earlier books of verse. But now he abandons the role of literate spectator and with it the presumed security of both poet and audience stalking, with some awe, a superior historical figure; there are no privileged observers, the voices, with one or two exceptions, are only those of ''other lives''—vulnerable and resourceful. . . .

If the characters are redeemed from rather than reduced by history, it is because of the bravado with which Howard makes them want to account for themselves.

David Kalstone. *New York Times Book Section*. April 12, 1970. pp. 4, 22

Howard has emerged in his two latest books, *Untitled Subjects* and *Findings*, as perhaps our first consummate archeologist poet. He, too, would leave for history not words, but findings. *Findings*, unearthed in that literary archeology of scholarship and translated into a language of invisibility. A language divested of all surface glitter, style reborn as a pure instrument for transmittings, sacrificing all glamour of performance for functional rigor. An unimpeding, uninterfering, unmediated natural language of pure function best suited for the roles, the masks of mediumship. Findings wrestled into the heaped-up mounds of poems, abandoned by the mound builder at last, leavings yielded to us and our progeny.

These are the poems of a man who has stood squarely at the crossing roads between self-demolition and self-reconstruction . . . and in taking unflinchingly the longest single stride across that chasm of lost identity of any contemporary he has imported into his remodelings of the self, resources that no American poet before him had guessed could be sponsored by a thoroughly modern intelligence. Howard has discovered a mode for mating a heterodox creative scholarship with the art of poetic composition. His method is a form of impulsive treasure hunting and sleuthing that recalls Virginia Woolf's ingenious skirmishes—widening the scope of the familiar essay—in her *Common Readers*. Howard's free-ranging eye, like hers, in choosing finds, sources, magical touchstones in the writings of other authors to be assimilated into his own voice, seems to have been guided alternatively by idle curiosity, heart's impulse and a high bold sense of pioneer adventuring.

Laurence Lieberman. *The Yale Review*. Autumn, 1971. pp. 85–6

There is a scheme behind the publication of Howard's books. After the appearance of *Untitled Subjects*—a cycle of long poems—came *Findings*—a gathering of shorter unrelated ones. *Fellow Feelings*, the present volume, is for the most part work brief and varied. It follows *Two-Part Inventions*, six long dramatic poems obviously conceived as a book and not a gathering. With Howard shorter is not slighter! *Fellow Feelings* contains some of his most impressive work. These include ''Venetian Interior, 1889,'' a remarkably full rendering of the sad world of Pen Browning; ''Decades''; and ''The Giant on Giant-Killing.'' The latter two utilize Hart Crane's history and Donatello's bronze of David, respectively, to illumine Howard's own life. Both poems openly explore homosexuality: indeed, the book is the most out-of-the-closet collection since Howard's own *Two-Part Inventions*. Rather than being sensational, Howard's poems convey tenderness, and seek understanding. He movingly pictures both himself and Crane as on ''permanent short-leave from the opposite sex.'' In ''The Giant on Giant-Killing'' we are given a defense of homosexuality, yet are reminded that the name Goliath, while meaning *destroyer* in Assyrian, means *exile* in Hebrew. Throughout the volume there is a feeling of singularity and alienation.

Howard's most felicitous gift is for the well-turned epigram. Some are worthy of Wilde: ''Ripeness is hell''; ''The tiny is the last resort of the tremendous''; ''Kissing is not cosmetic, merely cosmic''; ''We are what we see''; ''The sacred and the suburban often coincide''; etc. The danger Howard risks is that he displays too much wit. Verbal pyrotechnics call attention to themselves, rather than to the meaning they are employed to convey. . . .

Yet all wit and wordplay are employed to extremely serious ends. If the book has two misfires (''Compulsive Qualifications'' and ''Howard's Way''—poems in which questionable subjects seem paraded rather than contemplated), it also has many direct hits on fascinating and difficult targets. Howard is one of our most original poets.

Robert Phillips. *Commonweal*. Sept. 10, 1976, p. 597

Like Good and Bad Angels, two spirits of very different kinds are at work in Richard Howard's six books of poetry to date. One is genial and generous, and shows itself in the two best known of the volumes, *Untitled Subjects* (1969) and *Two-Part Inventions* (1974). To the prominence of these, the third and the fifth of the books, the former's having been awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1970 and the latter's having been nominated for the National Book Award in 1975 attest, but the measure of the heights to which the books rise can best be taken in terms of *pleasure*. There is an ampleness about

the books that is perhaps the sine qua non of pleasure itself. For the reader of the poetry entire, however, the surest guide to their genius (or angel) is the relief felt in coming to them, particularly since we cannot help but sense that this feeling was the poet's before it was ours—his Good Angel was at work. . . .

But the two books are haunted by their successors, *Findings* (1971) and *Fellow Feelings* (1976), the fourth and the sixth of the volumes, in which the Bad Angel shows itself. These two are demanding where the other two are open-handed, compelling where the others are attractive; if we sense the poet's ease in *Untitled Subjects* and *Two-Part Inventions*, we will feel the constraints under which he works in *Findings* and *Fellow Feelings*. The measure of the depths to which the latter two sink, as it is perhaps the Bad Angel's name, is *will*. Since the books are not given to the poet or the reader, they have to be taken by each.

If *Untitled Subjects* and *Two-Part Inventions* were better books than *Findings* and *Fellow Feelings*, if the difference between them were that the former achieve what the latter fail to achieve, Richard Howard's poetry would be easier to understand. But *Findings* and *Fellow Feelings* are no less accomplished than their predecessors in the oeuvre; their success is different in kind. (A Good Angel differs from a Bad Angel in terms other than that of accomplishment). It may be possible to think of the poet's first two books, *Quantities* (1962) and *The Damages* (1967), as the bases for, without in any way being anticipatory of, the high ground of *Untitled Subjects* (the book comes as a surprise), but what I am contending here is that the first two books must be seen as preparation for the depths of *Findings* as well. And, for the reader, the delight in pleasure should be no less enjoyable than the admiration of will.

Henry Sloss. *Shenandoah*. Fall, 1977, pp. 85–86

An important force in contemporary American poetry, Richard Howard has grappled again and again with issues which haunt the twentieth-century American psyche. Confronting the passage of time in poems of notable elegance and finish as well as vigor and vitality, he has grown from an urbane young sophisticate obsessed with age into a poet of vision. Central to his development has been his emergence as a poet of ''otherness,'' one whose understanding of the lives of others has enabled him to transcend the limitations of a time-bound self. In response to a question about autobiographical passages in his historical poems Howard told Sanford Friedman, ''I am not sure whether you could call it a way of attaching other lives by injecting my own memories into them, or of achieving my own memories by articulating them in other lives.'' Howard's movement from a narrow self-absorption toward an apprehension of the continuity of human experience may be a result of his mature understanding of the limits of our individual lives. ''I am aware of alternatives the lived life does not suggest,'' he remarked to Friedman; and he added, ''I am somewhat intimidated by the notion that the life lived has to be that life and no other. . . . I should like the life to be thought of as, well, that life but other possible ones as well.'' His identification of himself with fellow feelers, his effort to rejoin the fathers after all, is not only a statement of human continuity, but also a recognition of shared values bridging the narrow spaces of individual lifespans. When an interviewer suggested that he was perhaps too ''generous'' in his evaluations of his contemporaries in *Alone with America: Essays on the Art of Poetry in the United States since 1950*, Howard protested, ''No, it's not that I'm generous—I think that's a mistake, unless we trace the word back to what it originally meant, which is that I recognize my kind.'' It is precisely this ability to recognize his kind which Howard posits as a solution to the existential loneliness of an individual life limited by the exigencies of time. To transcend these limits by rejoining the fathers, by identifying with fellow feelers, by recognizing one's kind, is simultaneously to affirm and to escape the self.

Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth. *Contemporary Poetry*. Winter, 1978, pp. 32–33

The formal versatility and fluent ease with abstractions of [Richard] Howard's early poetry recall [W. H.] Auden, but as early as *The Damages* (1967), many poems begin to locate either historical or imagined characters in vividly evoked settings. . . .: Donatello's David, or the aged Browning holding forth in Florence, or a figure in a Caspar David Friedrich canvas musing, or a pair of fictional Americans in Paris describing the (apocryphal) visit to that city of the old Wallace Stevens.

In such dramatic guises, and in suave, sinuous, and often witty language, Howard offers meditations on art and society, mortality and love. The poems are rich in aphorisms and cultural history alike, but transcend such ingredients: most tend toward a melancholic abstractness very different from the verve and bustle of a dramatic monologue by [Robert] Browning. The urbane voice is recognizably Howard's.

Ian Hamilton, ed. *Oxford Companion to 20th Century Poetry in English* (New York: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1994), pp. 238–39

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HOWARD, Sidney (1891–1939)

He has attempted nothing alarmingly ''experimental'' in the way of dramatizing so far.

Yet within the boundaries he has marked out for himself, he has written at least three plays that are so much more than competent that it would be understating the case to call them merely that. Mr. Howard is as skillful a dramatic wizard as is living in the United States today. One is continually aware of his theatrical proficiency. . . . But, to change the tune, Mr. Howard has given us nothing as tremendously moving and suggestive as *The Hairy Ape*. . . . His sympathy is with people more normal, happy, reasonable and amusing. He nurses no social indignation, no flaming grudges. He

has no strong appetite for tragedy, and either side-steps it or softens it when it obtrudes itself into his plays.

Charles M. Prager. *New York Evening Post Book Section*. March 5, 1927. p. 11

Although both *Ned McCobb's Daughter* and *The Silver Cord* are in every sense of the word acting plays they also have a stylistic distinction of their own which grants them an independent literary life. Their pages smell of grease paint but they are not smeared with it, and hence it is that they do not have to fear the cold light of print. They hold their own in type not only because of Sidney Howard's *flair* for plotting and characterization, but also because of the vigorous and vivid style which stamps his dialogue.

John Mason Brown. *Saturday Review*. July 2, 1927. p. 940

Sidney Howard ranks easily among the first three playwrights of America. Eugene O'Neill probably comes first. . . . Either Sidney Howard or Elmer Rice might easily pass O'Neill in the race, but neither has done so as yet. Howard, I think, has the greatest native dramatic ability of the trio and the greatest versatility, but suffers too frequently from acute self-consciousness. . . . Sidney Howard is essentially a poet who has disciplined himself too self-consciously into becoming a vigorous, hard-hitting theatrical writer. He has a great tenderness which he is afraid of showing, and a decent sentimentality which he is always trying to hide.

Richard Dana Skinner. *Commonweal*. March 15, 1933. p. 553

To witness one of his plays is to experience the same sort of exhilarating pleasure that one gets from the society of an active man with quick and vigorous perceptions. One is plunged at once into a series of happenings and made to share the wholehearted interest of a writer who throws himself into everything with an unreserved enthusiasm. The characters are observed with extraordinary intentness and set down in sharp bold strokes. Something of the author's own decisiveness is communicated to them, and the dialogue has something of the crisp clarity of his own speech. Subtlety of a kind is by no means absent and poetry of a kind is also present. But the subtlety does not exhibit itself as hair-splitting and the poetry is never rhapsodical nor dreamy. The men and women are plain people with their feet on the ground; the scene, some very definite corner of our particular America.

Joseph Wood Krutch. *The Nation*. Sept. 13, 1933. p. 295

A curious dualism runs through the work of Sidney Howard. Undoubtedly his forte is character portrayal. His finest creations along this line are the simpler types—sterling, vivid, individual, and solidly human—which people our heterogeneous American scene. . . . Yet the creator of such distinctive American types has devoted a large portion of his energies as a playwright to the adaptation of superficial Continental comedies of the type of *Ode to Liberty*. This is due to two things: first, to Howard's undoubted mastery of stagecraft, in which he runs second only to George S. Kaufman and which makes him greatly in demand among theatrical producers for work that requires such mechanical deftness and inventiveness; second, and more important to his work as a whole, to a superficiality of mind. . . . For while Sidney Howard is gifted with genuine insight into human character, he persistently ignores the conditions under which human character is obliged to exist and function. Thus he never probes the essentials of any dramatic situation.

Eleanor Flexner. *American Playwrights 1918–1938* (Simon). 1938. pp. 30–1

I am fortunate in having known many fine talkers. But Sidney Howard's conversation was of a special character. It was terse almost to the point of abruptness, and it was always energetic and intense with belief. It had a yea and a nay in it, remarkably satisfactory by comparison with the graceful equivocations of so many persons who enjoy a reputation for talking well. One was pleased by his frank condemnation and commendation, because it is impossible to resist the simplicity of the genuine.

Leonard Bacon. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 2, 1939. p. 8

I think he was the most completely alive man, the most multitudinous and abounding person with whom I ever had anything to do. That tall figure of his, usually clothed in heavy gray tweeds, the broad shoulders, the giant strides that gave the impression of someone treading on air; his air of bursting into a room as if he had just descended from the clouds, and his wholly unconscious and deferential way of getting things done in a hurry—they all come back to me whenever I think of Sidney Howard. . . . His work, his many associations with people, his exulting enthusiasm for the visible world about him, and children, as a sign of healthy and normal living in the present—these were the overwhelming realities in his life.

Barrett H. Clark. *Theatre Arts*. April, 1949. pp. 27, 30

A situation that a decade or so earlier in America, in 1910, would have been a romantic triangle tragedy, and that would have been a Sacha Guitry boulevard farce across the Atlantic, was canalized into a drama of human relations (*They Knew What They Wanted*) neither jejeunely romantic nor sophisticated. The play belongs to an intermediate genre, which if not overwhelmingly successful because tragicomedy is never entirely successful, has the ring of truth. It is funny but also truthful, it is of the theatre but also of life. It is, indeed, quite remarkable in this respect, tragicomedy being normally evasive of the truth and dishonest by any yardstick other than mere or, shall we say sheer, theatricality.

John Gassner. *Forum*. May, 1949. p. 288

Howard, like almost every contemporary, felt to some extent the influence of Shaw, although he was always as far from being a doctrinaire as Shaw was inveterately a preacher. . . . His weakest plays, I think, are those in which he allows himself to become involved in what looks like a thesis—*Yellow Jack*, for instance, and

the better but still not best *The Silver Cord*. Next to *They Knew What They Wanted* is, I think, *Ned McCobb's Daughter*, and that is not a discussion of bootleggers as a social phenomenon but simply a *story* about bootleggers and, especially, about the very interesting character that Alfred Lunt interpreted with such wonderful humor.

Joseph Wood Krutch. *Theatre Arts*. Feb. 1957. p. 92

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HOWE, Irving (1920–1993)

Howe is an Easterner and a city-dweller, not a townsman. He has a philosophical mind, thinks in terms of concepts (rather than in terms of things or feelings), uses a great many abstract words, and is not afraid to make dogmatic judgments. [Sherwood] Anderson groped and faltered . . . he was attempting to deal with states of mind that had never been presented in literature. . . . Howe has no sympathy for that method and I doubt that he understands it. He has little feeling for the rhythm of sentences and none for the shape or color of words. He likes clear ideas, solid constructions based on European cultures; essentially he doesn't like uneducated men who grope and fumble for a new sense of life. . . . The wonder is not that Howe's book is sometimes lacking in sympathy and gives Anderson credit for something less than his real achievement; the wonder is that the critic often comes so close to his subject.

Malcolm Cowley. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. April 8, 1951. p. 3

There have so far been three main varieties of opinion on Faulkner. . . . The third is represented by Howe himself, and this third group, in my opinion, is by far the best. It goes about its work carefully, aware of the difficulty of evaluating a writer whose fiction is still appearing, and the impression of which may not yet be clear. It is naturalistic and empirical in approach, and it insists on subordinating the values of symbolism (whether discovered or imputed) to the fictional ones of drama, scene and character—in a word, *story*—and it should appear to be the most capable of delivering sound judgment. Certainly, Mr. Howe's judgment . . . is as fair, reasonable, and well balanced as one could want.

Isaac Rosenfeld. *New Republic*. Aug. 4, 1952. p. 18

Once the reader learns to accept the contradiction between Mr. Howe, the literary critic, and Mr. Howe, the critic of ideas, he finds himself free to enjoy a really first-rate intelligence. . . . As a literary critic, he is excellent in dealing with Malraux, of whose merits he seems to have some doubts; Silone, whom he appears to love and Koestler, whom he appears to dislike; but with Orwell, the political critic again comes on top, and he fails to convince me either of Orwell's talent or sincerity.

Frank O'Connor. *New York Times Book Section*. March 31, 1957. p. 4

His radical opinions are evident in his essays, behind his approach to the earlier Europeans and behind his critique of American political novels, but they sharpen rather than corrupt his judgment, and they seldom get in his way. . . . The central tension of the political novel is the basis of Howe's critical method as well, his commitment both to politics and to the perspective of fiction. Ideology, he admits, does not easily dovetail with the concrete focus of the novel, but when it does the two illuminate each other, and the result is a challenge to more specialized minds. Howe's book [*Politics and the Novel*], about warring impulses by a man who has brought them into fruitful relation, shares and maintains that challenge.

Lewis Dabney. *The Nation*. June 15, 1957. p. 530

What we have in *Politics and the Novel* is not a series of critical ''readings'' of novels—there is nothing, for example, comparable to the brilliant chapter on *Winesburg*, *Ohio* in Mr. Howe's book on Anderson—but rather a collection of critical character sketches which explore with great subtlety the nuances of ideological commitment as they are represented in important novels. These critical sketches, taken together, constitute an impressive repertory of ideological roles which enjoy the advantage of having been subjected to all the complex criticism and moral fastidiousness of the novelistic imagination at its best. . . .

One merit of this critical approach—this is another distinguishing virtue of the book—is that it does not indulge any facile oppositions between literature and ideology. It takes for granted their common interests as well as their disparate functions, and, rather than mobilize the literary mind as a weapon against ideology, its effort is to engage literary intelligence for the humanization of ideology. And to the extent that this criticism is successful, it furnishes a necessary corrective to the efforts of liberal critics to disavow ideological commitments in favor of cultural quietism (as if this were itself innocent of ideological maneuvering).

Hilton Kramer. *Partisan Review*. Summer, 1957. p. 443

Despite obvious reluctance to employ categories that are borrowed from psychology the authors [of *The American Communist Party:*

A Critical History] phrase what they seem to regard as their most original contribution in terms like ''relative deprivation.'' They are, of course, contextualists and, for fear of using terminology improper for sociologists and historians, overcome whatever disposition they have to deal clumsily with subjective events.

It is impossible to examine the Communist case history in America without regretting the absence of research that employs the full equipment of the social and behavioral sciences in dealing with the total process. Lacking such material, Howe and Coser have supplied a sparkling collection of revealing incidents and a viewpoint that is clear and open to discount. If this book does not encourage more pointed studies of political radicalism of the right and left, it will be most disappointing.

Harold D. Lasswell. *American Sociological Review*. Oct., 1959. p. 720

The best things in the book [*A World More Attractive*], it seems to me, are the old-fashioned Life-and-Works essays on Lawrence, Wharton, and Gissing. Making no pretensions to depth of analysis or factual freshness, these studies do a good job of conveying the sense of a personality and the flavor of historical circumstances. Mr. Howe is not much given to elaborate or hard-worked interpretations; he doesn't, in fact, take his literature very close to the page, and his tendency is rather to generalize about it than to dig deeply into it. This habit of mind encourages a flexible point of view, a readiness to let the full record speak for itself, which constitutes the best element in these essays. On the other hand, none of Mr. Howe's studies is what one could call ''incisive.'' One doesn't learn anything about Wallace Stevens or Scott Fitzgerald that has not been said a good many times before; in fact, the texture of the writing is so frequently soft, slack, and conversational that one soon ceases to anticipate that much literary work will get done.

Robert Martin Adams. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1964. pp. 143–4

In almost every one of the essays in *A World More Attractive*, the underlying focus of description and judgment is fixed upon the drama of the individual writer—whether T.E. Lawrence or Edith Wharton or George Gissing—struggling to wrest from the disorder of the times and disarray of his own convictions some brave principle of transcendance, or failing that, of moral realism, in which to lodge the freedom of his spirit. In two of his most recent essays, those on T.E. Lawrence and Edith Wharton, the pressure of Howe's own stake in this ethic seems to break through the usual restraints of his rationalism and provides a new feeling of personal attachment to it. Here is Howe at his very best, a literary socialist stirred to eloquence by the spectacle of another ''writer struggling with a vision he can neither realize nor abandon.'' Too often in his other essays, he tends to take the theme of crisis for granted, so habituated has he become to it, and writes too patly and imperturbably about what were, after all, matters of spiritual life and death to his subjects.

Theodore Solotaroff. *Commentary*. June, 1964. p. 63

T. E. Lawrence becomes a central figure for Mr. Howe through his power to act heroically in a situation made confusing by his doubts of his own motives, by his distrust of his superiors', by his need to form a nation out of men who constantly lost sight of the idea he inculcated. Lawrence not only acted heroically; he could make a legend and a work of art out of these confusions, even in the face of the disenchanting uses to which his achievements were put. This is a prototype of the ''modern'' situation, and Mr. Howe quotes Lawrence's own words: ''One used to think that such frames of mind would have perished with the age of religion: and yet here they rise up, purely secular.''

If Mr. Howe seems to overweight the uniqueness of our moral and religious difficulties, he has a stronger case in dealing with social issues. Here again we have heard certain words at least once too often, words that, used too much, cease to be instruments of thought. But Mr. Howe first used ''conformity'' when it still had an edge, and he presented in 1954 an impressive catalogue of failure, compromise, and betrayal exhibited by critics turning into custodians and functionaries of established power. He may insist too single-mindedly on the role of the intellectual as critic, and he may undervalue the chances of the intellectual's decently exercising power.

Martin Price. *The Yale Review*. Summer, 1964. p. 596

Irving Howe's *Thomas Hardy* ripples with observation. Compact, sophisticated, balanced, it is alive all through. Howe takes his Hardy straight, undiluted by critical theory, pet ideas, or fear of emotion. Though his book is thorough, it leaves Hardy unimpaled. And how flexible and responsive it is. As for Howe's judgments, their tact is unimpeachable.

Calvin Bedient. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1967. p. 523

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HOWELLS, William Dean (1837–1920)

I do not think any one else can play with humorous fancies so gracefully and deliciously as he does, nor has so many to play with,

nor can come so near making them look as if they were doing the playing themselves and he was not aware they were at it. For they are unobstrusive and quiet in their ways and well conducted. His is a humor which flows softly all around about and over and through the mesh of the page, pervasive, refreshing, health-giving.

Mark Twain. *Harper's Magazine*. July, 1906. pp. 224–5

He will presently be established in the critical consciousness as a literary leader, as a social historian, and as an unrivalled technician. In the mind of the student of letters, he will emerge from the great artistic evolution that was consciously forming the world literature of his time—the realistic movement, as we loosely style it—the most conspicuous figure on this side of the Atlantic. Many of less exclusive interests will look at him, with astonishment at the accuracy of his methods and at the length and singleness of his devotion, as an indispensable recorder of the national life. And his perfection in all that relates to literary handling ought to become a still more compelling source and renewal to fellows of his craft.

Delmar Gross Cooke. *William Dean Howells* (Dutton). 1922. p. 1

It is clear enough to the critical sense of this decade that, with all his deficiencies, Howells is one of the decisive figures in the development of our literary culture. The meaning of his career it is no longer possible to neglect or to belittle: he was the first of our important imaginative writers thoughtfully to consider and intelligently to comprehend what was happening to the form and quality of American life as it moved away from the simplicity, the social fluidity, the relative freedoms, of the mid-century toward the ugly disharmonies of monopolism and empire. He was the author of the first realistic novels of permanent interest in which the effects of that development are represented dramatically with any fullness or clarity.

Newton Arvin. *New Republic*. June 30, 1937. p. 227

Howells, for all his geniality, was discriminating too, with a virtually unerring eye for important new talents. He missed scarcely one in forty years. . . . He was the mirror of American society for thousands of sympathetic minds, and, thanks to his unique experience and training, in the West and in Europe, in Boston and New York, he had no American compeer as a living man of letters. In part through his attacks on Dickens and Thackeray, he had destroyed, in America, the ascendency of the English Victorian novel, endeavoring to sever American fiction from the tradition of England and bring it into the main stream of the fiction of the world. This cause he assisted in the critical essays on French, Spanish, Russian, and Norwegian authors he had either written or published as an editor in Boston; for as a literary cross-fertilizer between Europe and America he anticipated James Huneker and others who were appearing in the nineties.

Van Wyck Brooks. *The Confident Years* (Dutton). 1952. p. 143

Howells was trapped by his infatuation with normality, by his excessive concern, as Vernon L. Parrington remarked, with ''the usual.'' He did not realize how normal abnormality is. He did not sufficiently grasp the fact that even the most naturalistic novels are full of fantasy, grotesquerie, and symbolic distortions. I do not mean to complain that he didn't pursue his vein to its depths. . . . Nor is it my point that Howells wasn't as great a writer as Tolstoy; it is rather, as Henry James put it, that he lacked ''the really *grasping* vision.'' He was too easily content.

Irving Howe. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 23, 1954. pp. 28–9

He consistently championed novels which were far freer in treating of sex than his own, but his fictional practice makes it difficult to deny that he approached the bestial passion timorously.

At the base of Howells' memory, from which all his artistry sprang, there were his two earliest recorded impressions. A peach tree spread its warm and fecund blossoms in the security of his childhood's own backyard. A one-legged man lunged from his skiff toward the steamboat, missed, and slid silently forever beneath the rain-dappled, yellow water of a great river. And these visions may well be the symbols of a fundamental ambivalence in his mind. When he could, Howells sided with what Basil March called ''civilization,'' with the Victorian conviction that the force of man's conscious mind, disciplined to science by logic and directed by good will, would solve the problems of mankind. Like Sir Leslie Stephen, for example, this Howells was an agnostic meliorist, progressive and realistic. Supremely gentle, idealistic, marvelously civilized, this was the domesticated Howells of the peach tree.

But out of the troubled childhood, up from the temperamental melancholia, there was always pushing the other man, the perturbed Howells of the drowned man. The confrontation of tragedy in the world, and then the irruption of tragedy upon his domestic heaven through Winifred, broke through his civilized serenity. These intimations of blackness kept Howells ''tender'' in the Quaker sense and prevented him from being ''tenderminded'' in William James's sense. They impelled him to his best and most mature literature.

Edwin H. Cady. *The Realist at War* (Syracuse). 1958. p. 138

It is clear that long before Sinclair Lewis sounded the cry for revolt from the village, Howells was hankering for a return to it. That was his first spontaneous reaction to the desolation of desolation which he saw around him, that the spirit of neighborliness had departed from American life and that it must be recaptured, with the barriers of class division and competitive goals being pushed aside. It must be observed that he never altogether receded from this position, although intellectually he came to recognize it as unattainable. In fact, if one seeks an answer as to why Howells's active social revolt came to an end after ten years, it is to be found in part at least in the realization that what he wished for would never be.

George J. Becker. *College English*. April, 1958. p. 288

On the face of it, the proposition that Howells' education in socialism was not totally converted to artistic gain seems simple enough, and is, of course, not really heretical. But it may seem so because of the amount of attention given to Howells' late-blooming

economic radicalism and because of certain implied judgments which have resulted from that attention. In a variety of guises the notion now passes current that Howells exhausted his rebellious spirit in a spate of economic novels from 1889 to 1893 and then lapsed into a tepid reworking of minor themes. The corollary to this view of his career is that the novels prior to 1889 are most valuable when they can be made to reveal preliminary evidences of his later social thinking.

There are rewards to be had from a reconsideration of the relation between Howells' socialistic ideas and the artistic success of his novels. Although the claim of greatness for *A Hazard of New Fortunes* has to be modified (and it often seems that the desire to make this claim has controlled the willingness to give over the rest of Howells' work), the generally high level of Howells' achievement is re-established. The pattern of his success from *A Modern Instance* to, say, *The Son of Royal Langbrith* is described not by a tremendous arc but by a relatively straight line.

George N. Bennett. *William Dean Howells: The Development of a Novelist* (Oklahoma). 1959. p. 176

If one accepts Eric Goldman's distinction between a liberal and a socialist (with the reservation, of course, that there is much overlapping) as the difference between a man working within a capitalistic framework to make that framework more flexible and more practical and a man working to establish an entirely new framework in which the State controls all means of production and distribution, William Dean Howells was both a liberal and a socialist. But his great contributions to reform lie in his *liberal* proposals. Probably he saw many of his ideas as eventually working toward a socialistic state, but he did not overlook the fact that others helped adjust the present capitalistic society. They aided conditions as they then existed, and such aid was Howells' immediate interest. It is clear that Howells the socialist, who envisioned a State where all conditions of competitive capitalism have been erased, has had little influence on American society. But as the liberal advocating government intervention in strikes, aid to farmers, and public works for the unemployed, he has been an integral part of an influential force in American culture. On the whole his patchwork has proven much more effective than his new fabric.

Robert L. Hough. *The Quiet Rebel* (Nebraska). 1959. p. 76

Perhaps more widely than in his other literary works, Howells' plays present a personal philosophy and an attitude toward social life. He was a man who liked to laugh, and he made fun an objective of his dramas. He was a man who held a thoughtful literary creed, and his best plays, sketches though they may be, suggest his basic critical theories. He was a man not always happy with the life that he saw around him, and in his plays, as well as in his fiction, he commented on human society as he saw it—superficial, proper, ridiculous, or truthful. Much of the time in his dramas he was playful, but he was also capable of great seriousness. There are, for example, few places in his writings where he talks about death and the mystery of what lies beyond with more beauty and feeling than in the *The Mother and the Father*.

Walter J. Meserve. Introduction to *The Complete Plays of William Dean Howells* (NYU). 1960. p. xix

Perhaps it is most accurate to say that *A Hazard of New Fortunes* is a novel about the scope that must be contained in the new American novel rather than the new novel itself. Howells and Basil March are both well into middle age, and just as March's social interests are contained by the fact of his having a family that needs certain comforts, certain supports, and certain guidance, so Howells' writing habits are contained by the fact that he served his apprenticeship and attained his mastery in plots about middle-class morals and manners. He is content in *Hazard* to accept this and to allow the Marches' domestic concerns and the several love affairs in the book to serve as the plot frame on which he can hang the wide range of March's gentle observations. The unity he so vainly sought in the disharmonious community of *Annie Kilburn* is, he realizes, just where he had left it, in the moral consciousness of the intelligent middle-class American. That this is too old-fashioned an answer, Howells admits, for in the novel March passes the problem of getting New York into a viable fiction on to a younger novelist, Kendricks, who, contemplating the task of incorporating the new diversities into one work, fears that ''the great American novel, if true, must be incredible.''

Larzer Ziff. *The American 1890s* (Viking). 1966. p. 39

In a sense, though he suggested that social reforms were needed, he could not envision society reformed: he could imagine only a new society composed of new men—Altruria. In *A Traveler from Altruria* and *Through the Eye of the Needle*, Howells insisted that if the Altrurians are better men than Americans, it is because the conditions of their society—specifically, its lack of money and classes—do away with the possibility of exercising some of the destructive passions. Howells's account of how the new society came into being suggests, however, that it was brought about by a moral development in its creators; for Altrurian conditions, which are based on the New Testament, were voted in almost unanimously—an astonishing example of altruism and rationality. If a new society must await the development of new men, the implication may be that the present society is appropriate for the men who make it up.

Howells's characterization of those who give their lives to the improvement of society supports that implication. His reformers are either fanatics, and incomplete as men, or saints, and therefore superhuman.

Arthur Boardman. *American Literature*. March, 1967. p. 58

Just as Howells's ''psychic sensitivity'' took the form of muffling his antagonisms to his father or to the Brahmins who invested this Western outlander in the archepiscopal robes of Boston's moral ideals by installing him as editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, the highest accolade New England culture had to bestow, so his fiction shied away from reporting fully the ugly polarities of American reality.

In the best pages of *A Modern Instance* (1882), *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), Howells is the dryly ironic observer of the vicissitudes and ''anxious respectability'' of the newly monied. He understands the comic folkways of all the classes in the social scale: the churchgoing which trivializes the old Puritan faith, the scatterbrained benevolence of the rich, the leeway given by parents to young couples courting, the cozy chatter of landladies and the leers of hotel clerks. One time Howells

approached the greatness of George Eliot and Henry James, only to retreat with imaginative cowardice from what he saw so clearly.

Herbert A. Leibowitz. *New York Times Book Section*. June 20, 1971. p. 27

One of [Howells's] most trenchant critiques of plutocratic values, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), links the Civil War directly with the class war of the Gilded Age, chattel slavery with wage slavery. . . .

Yet if Howells had deep reservations about the War's impact on American society as a whole, he was sure its influence on American literature would be incalculable, not because it inspired much writing of permanent value, but because it signalized a victory of nationality over provinciality. It ''fertilized the fields of thought among us,'' he concluded, ''as well as the fields of battle with the blood of its sacrifice.'' Before the War, Howells argued, American literature was New England literature; after 1865, a truly native literature nourished by European vitality animated the American consciousness.

The War provided him, as it did Whitman, with valuable evidence for his social and aesthetic credo. Howells's subsequent campaign against romanticism in literature employed some of the same words and arguments he used against the chivalric creed of the professional ''Southrons.'' Read in this light, the defeat of the South inadvertently assured the triumph of literary realism, for the War's authentic record was embodied in the annals of the common soldier, in the careers of a handful of officers unbeguiled by military glamour, and in the lives of a few statesmen.

Daniel Aaron. *The Unwritten War* (Knopf). 1973. pp. 130–1

To understand the psychic demands *Literary Friends and Acquaintance* made on Howells—to gauge the pressures hidden by his unassuming manner and genteel politeness—we have to recognize its place, emotional and thematic as well as chronological, in the Howells canon. The book has a complex inner dimension of meaning, belying its simple appearance as pleasant, nostalgic recollection of the golden New England world of the author's early and middle-aged successes. *Literary Friends and Acquaintance* is a chief aspect of a larger story Howells was engaged in writing much of his life. This story—told in letters, essays, reviews, editorial columns, short stories, novels, and memoirs—constitutes an irregular history of literary and intellectual life in America for a period of sixty or more years. Taken altogether—in both its direct and implicit dimensions—it is one of Howells' major achievements, having a significance comparable to the lifelong records of the literary and intellectual life in America afforded in the writings of an Emerson or, in our own day, of an Edmund Wilson.

Lewis P. Simpson. *The Man of Letters in New England and the South* (Louisiana State). 1973. p. 86

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HUGHES, Langston (1902–1967)

Langston Hughes, although only twenty-four years old, is already conspicuous in the group of Negro intellectuals who are dignifying Harlem with a genuine art life. . . . It is, however, as an individual poet, not as a member of a new and interesting literary group, or as spokesman for a race, that Langston Hughes must stand or fall, and

in the numerous poems in *The Weary Blues* that give poignant moods and vivid glimpses of seas and lands caught by the young poet in his wanderings I find an exceptional endowment. Always intensely subjective, passionate, keenly sensitive to beauty and possessed of an unfaltering musical sense, Langston Hughes has given us a ''first book'' that marks the opening of a career well worth watching.

DuBose Heyward. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Aug. 1, 1926. pp. 4–5

Fine clothes may not make either the poet or the gentleman, but they certainly help; and it is a rare genius that can strip life to the buff and still poeticize it. This, however, Langston Hughes has done, in a volume (*Fine Clothes to the Jew*) that is even more starkly realistic and colloquial than his first,—*The Weary Blues*. It is a current ambition in American poetry to take the common clay of life and fashion it to living beauty, but very few have succeeded, even Masters and Sandburg not invariably. They got their effects, but often at the expense of poetry. Here, on the contrary, there is scarcely a prosaic note or a spiritual sag in spite of the fact that never has cruder colloquialism or more sordid life been put into the substance of poetry.

Alain Locke. *Saturday Review*. April 9, 1927. p. 712

The double role that Langston Hughes has played in the rise of a realistic literature among the Negro people resembles in one phase the role that Theodore Dreiser played in freeing American literary expression from the restrictions of Puritanism. Not that Negro literature was ever Puritanical, but it was timid and vaguely lyrical and folkish. Hughes's early poems, *The Weary Blues* and *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, full of irony and urban imagery, were greeted by a large section of the Negro reading public with suspicion and shock when they first appeared in the middle twenties. Since then the realistic position assumed by Hughes has become the dominant outlook of all those Negro writers who have something to say.

The other phase of Hughes's role has been, for the lack of a better term, that of a cultural ambassador.

Richard Wright. *New Republic*. Oct. 28, 1940. p. 600

Few people have enjoyed being Negro as much as Langston Hughes. . . . He would not have missed the experience of being what he is for the world. . . . Langston Hughes has practiced the craft of the short story no more than he has practiced the forms of poetry. His is a spontaneous art which stands or falls by the sureness of his intuition, his mother wit. His stories like his poems, are for readers who will judge them with their hearts as well as their heads. By that standard he has always measured well.

Arna Bontemps. *Saturday Review*. April 5, 1952. p. 17

Langston Hughes's twelve jazz pieces [*Ask Your Mama*] cannot be evaluated by any canon dealing with literary right or wrong. They are nonliterary—oral, vocal, compositions to be spoken, or shouted, to the accompaniment of drum and flute and bass. For that matter, they speak from the page, the verses being set in capitals throughout; and there is a running gloss of indications for the proper instrument to use at the moment. . . .

In this respect, *Ask Your Mama* goes back to Vachel Lindsay and his ''Congo''; and I suppose it is fair to say that this is stunt poetry, a nightclub turn. The fury of indignation and the wild comedy, however, are very far from Lindsay.

Dudley Fitts. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 29, 1961. p. 16

Hughes does not always write in a serious vein, as readers of his stories and poems well know. His folk plays of urban Negro life, at once humorous and revealing, are a true contribution to American folk drama. The three included here—*Little Ham*, *Simply Heavenly*, and *Tambourines to Glory*—are, if one must define them, comedies. But the triple specters of poverty, ignorance, and repression can be seen not far beneath the surface of the comedy. The ''numbers racket,'' ''dream books,'' and the ''hot goods man'' in *Little Ham*, Simple's wistful sadness that no Negro has seen a flying saucer, and Laura's attitude toward the ''religion business'' in *Tambourines to Glory*, all indicate the near poverty, the ignorance, and the superstition that prevail in the world of which Hughes writes. Nevertheless, it is a colorful, wonderful world he presents to us, and we cannot but admire the spirit and vigor of his characters.

Webster Smalley. Introduction to *Five Plays by Langston Hughes* (Indiana). 1963. p. xii

As might be expected, Hughes has written most frequently, though not exclusively, of Negro characters. Consequently the importance of the color line in America is frequently reflected in his work. The effect of the color line on the American Dream is therefore an integral part of his protest. In one of his biographies for young people, *Famous Negro Music Makers* (1961), Hughes quotes musician Bert Williams as saying: ''It is not a disgrace to be a Negro, but it is very inconvenient.'' In viewing the string of ''inconveniences'' vitally affecting the dignity of black Americans Hughes voices his reactions to shriveled freedom, dwarfed equality, and shrunken opportunity—blemishes on the essential ingredient of the American Dream. His poetry and prose echo protest and, usually, hope.

James Presley. *Southwest Review*. Autumn, 1963. p. 382

His output was prodigious: poems, short stories, novels, librettos, lyrics, juveniles, pageants, anthologies, translations, television scripts. His work lacked the surface starkness, the power of the Negro writers who came after him. He felt as strongly, but he was more amiable in expression. He was close to those he wrote about and he got their speech and their wry approach to life into his books.

No poetry of our day has caught the syncopated quality of jazz better than Mr. Hughes's ''Dream Boogie,'' ''Parade,'' and ''Warning: Augmented.'' Their music is built in. It is interesting that the plain speech of his verse and the ordinary subject matter often

received as much criticism from Negroes as from those white people who couldn't see his writing as poetry at all. The Negroes felt it lacked the proper dignity that was their due. They were right; it did lack it. What the poetry had instead was life—a quality that has kept it fresh and spirited over the years.

So too with his ''Simple'' sketches. It was a low-pressure satire, but though Mr. Hughes supplied the humor he wasn't joking. He had come early, knew what the younger writers knew and had endured it longer.

Thomas Lask. *New York Times (daily)*. May 24, 1967. p. 32

It is difficult to give a proper assessment of Hughes's work because so much of its effect depends on an oral interpretation and the physical presence of an audience. Oddly, this is almost as true of his poems as of his plays, despite the fact that from the beginning he experimented with verse forms, diction, and typography. In a general sort of way he is in the Whitman-Lindsay-Sandburg free-verse tradition, yet despite this and his university education and wide cosmopolitan background, he is primarily a folk artist who writes *for* the people he is writing *about*. Even at his most ideological and didactic, he speaks with directness, honesty, and understanding to those whose experiences he loves to share and record. There is something unmistakably genuine about his pride in the ''little people'' whose lives, strivings, and endurance he celebrates, most often in their own voices, in jazz and gospel rhythms and in visual patterns that dance before the eye and demand to be read aloud.

Edward Margolies. *Native Sons* (Lippincott). 1968. p. 37

Langston Hughes's new poems [*The Panther and the Lash*], written shortly before his death last summer, catch fire from the Negro American's changing face. To a degree I would never have expected from his earlier work, his sensibility has kept pace with the times, and the intensity of his new concerns—helping him to shake loose old crippling mannerisms, the trade marks of his art—comes to fruition in many of the best poems of his career. . . .

Laurence Lieberman. *Poetry*. Aug., 1968. p. 339

While his poems appealed to an audience which included whites, Hughes created for himself a black audience, especially school children. And he expected his poems to be taken on the simple and unpretentious level on which they were written. One would be right in saying that Langston Hughes backed out of the Negro-artist dilemma by choosing not to deal with art as serious ''high culture.'' His casual and almost anti-intellectual attitude about art permitted him a wide freedom of subject and a personal honesty. It allowed him to make the very important point that the people's language, and voice, and rhythms were legitimate stuff of poetry. But this same freedom deprived him of the control and mastery that might make each (or indeed any) of his poems really singular. Langston Hughes avoided the Scylla of formalism only to founder in the Charybdis of folk art.

Nathan Irvin Huggins. *Harlem Renaissance* (Oxford—N.Y.). 1971. p. 227

The name, Jesse B. Semple [called Simple, in Hughes's Simple sketches], was a combination of advice and imperative, and in his so-called simplicity Simple joined the corps of American folk hero humorists—Uncle Remus, Josh Billings, Mr. Dooley and others—who drew laughter out of the shock and novelty of common sense. Simple may not always have been as funny as his predecessors, but he was richer and much more complicated.

He was an urban folk hero, equipped with city tastes and a city vocabulary, yet he was as ardent a regionalist as Sam Slick, Jonathan Oldstyle, Hosea Biglow, or any of the rural American humorists. It made no difference that Simple's region was Harlem and that his dialect was Harlem argot; his attitude toward his section of the country was as elaborately loyal as a Westerner's or Down Easter's, and he was just as purely a home-grown philosopher. He was brash, as are all literary regionalists, he was anti-authoritarian, and in spite of his critical stance and occasional doomsday visions, he was an optimist at heart. Where he differed from his fellow regionalists is that his region was continually under attack, because in a larger sense than Harlem his region was blackness: and so the criticisms he leveled at the nation were often informed by a sense of urgency and frustration which, until the emergence of contemporary black comedians such as Dick Gregory and Godfrey Cambridge, was unique in American humor. There was also the difference between a cracker barrel and a bar stool. The fact that Simple did his philosophizing from a local dive was designed to be one of his comic properties, but it also suggested that in order to sustain his hopeful view of the world it helped to be high, if only on beer.

Roger Rosenblatt in *Veins of Humor*, edited by Harry Levin (Harvard). 1972. pp. 226–7

During the twenties there arose the first large-scale manifestations of black pride: concern for the beauty of blackness, interest in black history and culture, and political awareness of poetry as a means of exploring and celebrating blackness.

Foremost among such writers is Langston Hughes, who has perhaps the greatest reputation (worldwide) that any black writer has ever had. Hughes differed from most of his predecessors among black poets, and (until recently) from those who followed him as well, in that he addressed his poetry to the people, specifically to black people. During the twenties when most American poets were turning inward, writing obscure and esoteric poetry to an ever decreasing audience of readers, Hughes was turning outward, using language and themes, attitudes and ideas familiar to anyone who had the ability simply to read. He has been, unlike most nonblack poets other than Walt Whitman, Vachel Lindsay, and Carl Sandburg, a poet of the people. He often employs dialect distinctive of the black urban dweller or the rural black peasant. Throughout his career he was aware of injustice and oppression, and used his poetry as a means of opposing or mitigating them.

Donald B. Gibson. Introduction to *Modern Black Poets*, ed. Donald B. Gibson (Prentice-Hall). 1973. p. 7

Hughes was primarily a social poet, and recognized himself as such; but he was also a lyricist of the first order. His lyric, apolitical poems, for the most part built on the techniques of Imagism and the

poetic conceit, are rich and original. His love poems, for instance, compare with the best in the language for their freshness, tenderness, musicality, and evocative power.

Hughes's poetry is both surface-simple and deep, both lucid and profound. It glitters with laughter—the understated, ironic humor of the blues. In his blues and jazz poems, and in the black sensibility which, against the opposition of his ''respectable'' readers, he succeeded in infusing into contemporary free verse in general, Hughes is a technician and innovator of the first rank and a seminal figure in American literature. . . .

Langston Hughes is quite possibly the most grossly misjudged poet of major importance in America. The American literary establishment, their lenses ground to formal complexity and trained on ''mainstream'' culture, when they acknowledge Hughes's existence at all, typically view him as a poor misguided soul laboring in an unrewarding ''ethnic province,'' searching for an illusory ''racial art.'' Hughes is dismissed as too simple, too quaintly humorous, unserious, unreflective, parochial, limited in scope, without a metaphysic and without profundity. . . .

Hughes's poetry exhibits many of the characteristics of oral poetry the world over. It is marked by an economy of means, by an almost ruthless exclusion of extraneous embellishments, resulting in a lean, spare, uncluttered style, and in efficient structure and logistics that permit no tedious or unnecessary diversions. Its commitment to the auditory, which in oral poetry is primary and definitive, and to a popular mass audience, makes indispensable a lucidity of surface, normal syntax, a contemporary and colloquial rather than archaic or learned idiom, and vivid, concrete, and evocative imagery—in short, felicitous speech and mellifluous motion. Hughes's poetry is to be commended both for its fidelity to traditional forms and themes and for its transposition, manipulation, and adaptation of them. . . .

In Hughes, black folk culture is the weapon, black social and economic sufficiency the prize fought for. By utilizing the black heritage so fully in his work, Hughes preserves and transmits that heritage and thereby aids the survival of Afro-Americans as a distinct people. One of the far-reaching effects of his esthetic, and of its elaborations and extensions by others, is to compel us, in evaluating a black writer, to take into account his attitude to himself and his people and heritage, and what use he makes or fails to make of that heritage. In other words, we must consider the presence, balance, and power of the positive compulsions in his work. Perhaps more than any other writer of his generation, Hughes permits these positive energies the most uninhibited, prolonged and unified play.

Onwuchekwa Jemie. *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry* (Columbia Univ. Pr., 1975), pp. xvi, 187, 196–97, 199

[There is] a basic ambiguity in some of Hughes' ''dream'' poems: on the one hand his satiric expose of the deferred dream in Black America is invariably couched in terms which taunt White America about the essentially non-revolutionist nature of its Revolution; but, on the other hand, his identification with the Black American's rebellion does not go beyond protest to any revolutionary ideology of his own. Indeed, one may speculate that it is easier for Hughes to demand that White America make good on the promises of its Revolution precisely because a satisfactory fulfillment of these promises, from Hughes' point of view, would not necessitate that fundamental restructuring of the social order, which even an historian like Bernard Bailyn associates with revolution. The point is not that Hughes is being hypocritical, or even muddle-headed, rather that his interest in socio-political reform is sharply defined by his basic loyalty to the unfulfilled promises of the American Revolution. So that in the final analysis his overall protest is not that the deferred dream is non-revolutionist but, quite simply, that it has been deferred. . . .

The poetic insights of Hughes' ''Freedom's Plow'' insist on a frank, if unflattering, admission of the gulf between the artist/intellectual and the masses, a gulf which Hughes as poet deliberately crosses in order to share a popular faith in the American Dream. On the other hand, the current trend in Black revolutionary literature assumes a rather easy identification of the artist with some mass revolutionary taste, a taste, one should add, that is often postulated but never really demonstrated as fact. Hughes' admission may very well irk the revolutionary enthusiasts among us, but in the absence of any obvious enthusiasm for radical revolution (as distinct from rebellious impatience) among those masses, one is left with the suspicion that Hughes is perhaps more realistic about the actual relationships between the Black American masses and the American Dream, and that, conversely, [LeRoi] Jones' prophetic vision of Black people as Black poets, Black poem as Black world is another dream legacy—that is, another revolution as dream.

Lloyd W. Brown. *Studies in Black Literature*. Spring, 1976, p. 18

Langston Hughes's final book of poetry, *The Panther and the Lash*, was assembled prior to his unexpected death on May 22, 1967, and published in July of that year. In many respects it is a somber book, devoid of racial comedy or humor. Within its pages there are no black folk characters luxuriating in the warm richness of the black experience; there are no happy blues singers, no Simples and no Madame Alberta K. Johnsons—no poems that celebrate the vibrancy and color of the black life-style. Instead, the emotional tone of the poems reflects the temper of the times. Between the publication of *Ask Your Mama* and *Panther*, America and the world had teetered on the brink of revolutionary racial change. Not only had the Montgomery miracle occurred in the late 1950s to give black America its first organized victory against racial segregation, but sit-in demonstrations had flared throughout the South and extensive riots seared the congested urban black ghettoes of the North. As a consequence, America and the rest of the world became aware both of the plight of black people and the ever increasing menace of widespread racial violence and revolution. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., astride his unicorn, had spread his doctrine of nonviolent social change for all to hear. His message appealed to people everywhere, but the roots of racial hatred ran so deep in America and elsewhere that many racists were never touched by the sunlight of Christian charity. . . .

His title, *The Panther and the Lash*—such a far cry from the black life-style titles given his other poetical volumes—suggests the bitter racial strife which was then shaking America from stem to stern. The ''lash'' symbolizes overt and covert white hostility to the black man's thrust for civil rights and first-class citizenship;

and the ''panther,'' political symbol of America's most militant racial group, symbolizes black anger and black separatism. Significantly enough, the volume is also subtitled ''Poems of Our Times,'' and of the eighty-six, twenty-six had been written and published at an earlier time. ''Christ in Alabama'' and ''Justice,'' for instance, were first published in *Scottsboro Limited* in 1932. Intended at that time to give an accurate appraisal of the brutal inequities of southern justice, the poems were still, in the 1960s, ''poems of the times,'' suggesting that despite the passing decades, nothing much had changed. Similarly, several poems of racial protest, previously published in *One-Way Ticket*, *Fields of Wonder*, and *Montage*, acquired a new meaning and significance during the turbulent years of challenge and change in the 1960s. Thus, in his last volume of poetry Hughes earned an accolade bestowable on few of his fellow poets: he emerges as an artist who not only had the gift for trenchant analysis of the present but who, at the same time, could contemplate future vistas and read the wave of the future. In other words, even though he was the poet of rapid insight and fleet impressions, he rarely became so immersed in the particularities of a given moment that he forgot the future's debt to the present and the present's debt to the past. . . .

> Richard K. Barksdale. *Langston Hughes: The Poet and His Critics* (American Library Association, 1977), pp. 119, 121–22

Unlike his contemporaries, ambivalence did not throttle his [Langston Hughes] ability to jubilantly portray the black experience. However, it is not his personal ambivalence with which I am concerned in this essay but that of Afro-America channeled through him and humorously illustrated by the ''Simple'' stories, especially those of his volumes: *Simple Speaks His Mind* (1950), *Simple Takes a Wife* (1953), and *Simple Stakes a Claim* (1957). . . .

As allegory, the ''Simple'' stories attempt to teach, in a humorous fashion, America's need to set its priorities in order, to respect human life and to achieve a wholeness of spirit that supersedes the base desire for power and wealth for manipulative or destructive purposes. They do this by affirming the simple, natural values of love, understanding, and compassion for one's fellow being culled from the black experience. Simple embraces these values in spite of his use of a brick or two to make his point at those times when he is disillusioned. He still hopes to get at least a *small* piece of the rock, but he wants to do so *and* maintain his identity. Even though Straight Man continues to hold on to his ideals, he does begin to weigh the incongruity between what is and what should be, and in the process becomes aware of his own invisibility.

The ''Simple'' series constitute a turning point in black American literature, for Hughes begins to liberate ''Negro America'' from the constraints of the ''cellophane bandannas'' imposed by the Euro-American vision. In his fifth volume, *Simple's Uncle Sam* (1965), Ambivalence begins to face the setting sun, and perhaps it is significant that Straight Man is named Boyd in this work. With titles like *Ask Your Mama* (1961) and *The Panther and the Lash* (1967), a collection of poetry produced during the heat of the black revolution, and *Good Morning, Revolution* (1972), a collection of essays and poems written between 1925 and 1957 but collected posthumously, Langston Hughes would continue to work toward creating a new cognitive level, one that could be easily integrated with a healthy affective one. In so doing, Ambivalence could hopefully be laid to rest forever.

> Dellita L. Martin-Ogunsola. ''Ambivalence as Allegory in Langston Hughes's 'Simple' Stories.'' *Langston Hughes Review*. Spring, 1988, pp. 1, 8

The one thing most readers of twentieth-century American poetry can say about Langston Hughes is that he has known rivers. ''The Negro Speaks of Rivers'' has become memorable for its lofty, oratorical tone, mythic scope, and powerful rhythmic repetitions. . . . But however beautiful its cadences, the poem is remembered primarily because it is Hughes's most frequently anthologized work. The fact is, ''The Negro Speaks of Rivers'' is one of Hughes's most uncharacteristic poems, and yet it has defined his reputation, along with a small but constant selection of other poems included in anthologies, ''A Negro Speaks of Rivers,'' ''A House in Taos,'' ''The Weary Blues,'' ''Montage of a Dream Deferred,'' ''Themes for English B,'' ''Refugee in America,'' and ''I, Too''—these poems invariably comprise his anthology repertoire despite the fact that none of them typifies his writing. What makes these poems atypical is exactly what makes them appealing and intelligible to the scholars who edit anthologies—their complexity. True, anthologies produced in the current market, which is hospitable to the African-American tradition and to canon reform, now include a brief selection of poems in black folk form. But even though Hughes has fared better in anthologies than most African-American writers, only a small and predictable segment of his poetry has been preserved. A look back through the original volumes of poetry, and even through the severely redrawn *Selected Poems*, reveals a wealth of simpler poems we ought to be reading.

Admittedly, an account of Hughes's poetic simplicity requires some qualification. Most obvious is the fact that he wrote poems that are not simple. ''A Negro Speaks of Rivers'' is oracular; ''The Weary Blues'' concludes enigmatically: ''A House in Taos'' is classically modernist in both its fragmented form and its decadent sensibility. . . . Nevertheless, the overwhelming proportion of poems in the Hughes canon consists of work in the simpler style; and even those poems that can yield complexities make use of simplicity in ways that ought not to be ignored.

The repression of the great bulk of Hughes's poems is the result of chronic critical scorn for their simplicity. Throughout his long career, but especially after his first two volumes of poetry (readers were at first willing to assume that a youthful poet might grow to be more complex), his books received their harshest reviews for a variety of ''flaws'' that all originate in an aesthetics of simplicity. From his first book, *The Weary Blues* (1926), to his last one, *The Panther and the Lash* (1967), the reviews invoke a litany of faults: the poems are superficial, infantile, silly, small, unpoetic, common, jejune, iterative, and, of course, simple.

Despite a lifetime of critical disappointments, then, Hughes remained loyal to the aesthetic program he had outlined in 1926 in his decisive poetic treatise, ''The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.'' There he had predicted that the common people would ''give to this world its truly great Negro artist, the one who is not afraid to be himself,'' a poet who would explore the ''great field of unused [folk] material ready for his art'' and recognize that this

source would provide ''sufficient matter to furnish a black artist with a lifetime of creative work'' [in *The The Nation*, CXXII, 1926, p. 692]. This is clearly a portrait of the poet Hughes would become, and he maintained his fidelity to this ideal at great cost to his literary reputation.

> Karen Jackson Ford. ''Do Right to Write Right: Langston Hughes's Aesthetics of Simplicity.'' *Twentieth Century Literature*. Winter, 1992, pp. 436–38

In *The Big Sea* Langston Hughes laments the close of the 1920s and the first years of the 1930s as the end of the period known as the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement of international significance which generated an outpouring of African American art, literature, and criticism. The final chapters of Hughes's autobiography strike a tone of sadness, markedly different from the live prose describing the writer's early years in vibrant Harlem. Hughes writes: ''The generous 1920s were over. And my twenties almost over. I had four hundred dollars and a gold medal'' (334–35). It is fitting that Hughes chose to mention his financial status in closing. With the Depression looming darkly over America, the hands of patrons who sustained many artists during the Harlem Renaissance were withdrawn. The prizes offered to promising writers by African American journals were fewer, and the stipends for submissions were of lesser amounts. Nevertheless, armed with the four hundred dollars that came with the 1931 Harmon Award (''Four hundred dollars! I had never had a job that paid more than twenty-two dollars a week''), Hughes scoffed at the national economic crises: ''I'd finally and definitely made up my mind to continue being a writer—and to become a professional writer, making my living from writing'' (335).

While Hughes was able to adhere to his goal of writing for a living, writing was certainly not the most pressing thing on his mind. The end of the Harlem Renaissance saw an increase in racial violence and economic hardship for the black masses in America. The beatings, lynchings, and daily humiliation of segregation which African Americans suffered in the South and elsewhere outraged Hughes. As a member of the African American community Hughes accepted the responsibility to speak out against these injustices in his writing and to fight them in his daily life, at whatever cost to his own personal welfare. The body of writing which resulted from these turbulent years contains the most searing, ironic, and powerful poetry and prose that Hughes ever wrote. Often overlooked by readers and critics, Hughes's radical writings assume great significance when viewed in the context of the ever-increasing racial tensions we are witnessing in the 1990s. . . .

Arnold Rampersad has demonstrated that by cooperating with Joseph McCarthy and the Senate Committee, Hughes was choosing the lesser of two evils. ''He could defy the body and destroy much of his effectiveness in the black world. Or he could cooperate, draw the disapproval, even the contempt, of the white left, but keep more or less intact the special place he had painstakingly carved out within the black community'' (2, 219). Given Hughes's love for his community which he had held since he began writing, Rampersad suggests that the choice was perhaps easy to make. Although Hughes repudiated a body of writing that was so important to a turbulent period in his life, the choice allowed him to continue doing what he loved best. After the hearings, he resumed the admirable task of making a living as a writer, perhaps subconsciously secure in the fact that his writings, including the ones he apparently repudiated, were tucked safely away in the archives of universities across the country.

> Christopher C. DeSantis. ''Rage, Repudiation, and Endurance: Langston Hughes's Radical Writings.'' *Langston Hughes Review*. Spring, 1993, pp. 31–32, 37–38

Langston Hughes is one of the essential figures in American literature. His career is much more than the body of his poetry alone. By his work and his example, he has enriched our lives; as Gwendolyn Brooks once put it he ''made us better people.'' His stature demands a collection like this [*Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel]. . . . Along with a useful chronology of Hughes's life and 77 pages of scholarly notes, *The Collected Poems* gathers 860 poems, some 280 of which Hughes published in periodicals but did not choose to include in books. . . .

It has long been recognized that Hughes believed strongly in the usefulness of poetry as a polemic; this collection makes even clearer his willingness to put his name to doggerel, as to inspired poetry, for the sake of a cause he believed in. It also helps to clarify some of the pressures to which he reacted at various times; in the 50s, for example, he was to omit most of his radically Communist verse from *Selected Poems*. . . .

Plenty of readers will wish that more of these poems could have been better than they are; yet it seems impossible to wish that Hughes could have been anyone but who he was. . . . His range of tone was broad, from loving portrayal of brave people living private lives to heavy-handed but sometimes hilarious daydreams turning Orval Faubus and James O. Eastland into the stick figures Mammy Faubus and Mammy Eastland. There was a great deal of anger in between, and pain, but somehow Hughes kept these emotions within the bounds of an amazingly generous heart.

> Henry Taylor. *New York Times Book Review*. Dec. 25, 1994. p. 15

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HUGO, Richard (1923–1982)

Richard Hugo loved Montana in a big way. He loved its mountains and plains, its rivers and lakes, its towns and its people. He lived right in the mountains in the university town of Missoula. He was a nationally renowned poet, as well as an essayist and professor of English and creative writing. When he wasn't writing or teaching, he went fishing. . . . He could outfish God and he loved to rub it in. . . .

Dick was first and foremost, and in the end, a poet. He left us ten books of poems and two books of essays about poetry and the life of the poet. In my earlier career, when I thought I was a poet, I believed a poet was a person who wrote poems. Now I know better. A true poet is a person who lives the poems, who is so obsessed with that world of the imagination and the need to write that it guides his or her life as surely as the stars guided that ancient mariner. Dick was a rare true poet.

About the matter at hand—his murder mystery, *Death and the Good Life*. Dick was tickled pink when it was accepted for publication back in 1980. He had always been a mystery fan. He had read every book by Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and Ross Macdonald. He had read John D. MacDonald, James M. Cain, and many others. He had written a murder mystery in his youth, the most interesting section coming when a young fisherman makes love to a lake. Perhaps it was the only interesting part. By Dick's own account, it was not much of a mystery, not well written. So he put aside his secret ambition to pursue his career as a poet for the next thirty years. But he never gave up his love of mystery. It can be found in poems such as ''The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir'' and ''Living Alone.''. . .

The success of *Death and the Good Life* convinced him that he had more mysteries inside him. We'll never know what he might have written. But we do have this one. And it's got all the elements—sex, violence, murder, great characters, wonderful plot, and Al ''Mush Heart'' Barnes. Like Dick Hugo, he's a guy you'd love to have on your side.

> James Welch. Preface. In Richard Hugo, *Death and the Good Life* (Livingston, Montana: Clark City Pr., 1991), pp. iii, viii-ix

Like James Wright, a slightly younger mentor, Hugo eventually transmuted his [Theodore] Roethkean strain into an obsession with graphic details and deep image, metaphoric ripples set in motion by archetypal specifics. The strength of Hugo is always precisely that, the acid-etched accuracy of the portraits and self-portraits he inscribes on a debased semirural landscape. . . .

Assisted by Lois and James Welch, the poet's widow [Ripley S. Hugo] has assembled and chronologically arranged a series of Hugo's personal essays, which culminate in an interview given shortly before his death [*The Real West Marginal Way*, 1992]. Hugo valued honesty and never hesitated to expose the melancholic underbelly of his anxiety-blighted beginnings and their enduring psychological effects. Like many analysands, he was at times too quick, almost glib, about baring private humiliations, interior lapses, but the candor he knew was foundational to whatever chance his poetry had to transcend mere circumstance. Further, he never doubted the value of his decision to enter psychoanalysis, a risky business for most artists and uncommonly brave for one of his background. ''It saved me, if not from death, certainly from a life of dereliction.''

The title essay, which identifies the ''West Marginal Way'' as the ''lower reaches of the Duywamish River'' before it empties into Elliot Bay, Puget Sound, site for many early Hugo poems, sketches in a deprived childhood. His biological father he would not meet until he was thirty, and his divorced mother dumped him on her parents before he was two—she visited him only sporadically after marrying Herbert Hugo two years later. Hugo describes his grandparents as worn-out by their hard life and raising five children, the grandmother possibly ''not right in the head,'' erratic in her affections and discipline. . . .

''By the time I was a young man I was a mess,'' Hugo concludes, unable to have ''normal relations'' with girls because of his fear and hatred of them, playing the clown or being obsequiously generous to secure male companions. His love of and skill at baseball and softball helped considerably in a macho, working-class environment that prized both. Literature, of course, provided the covert arena where he could salvage a truer, more integrated image from childhood's wreckage. His psychiatrist subsequently told him ''that writing was the luckiest sort of adjustment and that given my life it was a miracle I was not a criminal.''

Luck, I suspect, was not the pivotal factor, unless you tag as fortunate that touch of genius, a powerful ego, every artist summons up to defend the self against history's incursions. Moreover, as revealed in other essays, the grandparents were probably never as terrible as Hugo needed to recall them, capable of kind acts, obvious concerns, since they did, in their surrogate role, feed that love-starved ego fat enough to counteract their inadequacies. Hugo, for example, could accept a godless world with relative ease, substituting Erato for conventional religion.

> Edward Butscher. ''West of the Mississippi.'' *Poet Lore*. Winter, 1993, pp. 61–62

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HURSTON, Zora Neale (1901–1960)

Only to reach a wider audience, need [Zora Neale Hurston] ever write books—because she is a perfect book of entertainment in herself. In her youth she was always getting scholarships and things from wealthy white people, some of whom simply paid her just to sit around and represent the Negro race for them, she did it in such a racy fashion. She was full of side-splitting anecdotes, humorous tales, and tragicomic stories, remembered out of her life in the South as a daughter of a travelling minister of God. She could make you laugh one minute and cry the next. To many of her white friends, no doubt, she was a perfect ''darkie,'' in the nice meaning they give the term—that is a naïve, childlike, sweet, humorous, and highly colored Negro.

But Miss Hurston was clever, too—a student who didn't let college give her a broad *a* and who had great scorn for all pretensions, academic or otherwise. That is why she was such a fine folk-lore collector, able to go among the people and never act as if she had been to school at all. Almost nobody else could stop the average Harlemite on Lenox Avenue and measure his head with a strange-looking, anthropological device and not get bawled out for the attempt, except Zora, who used to stop anyone whose head looked interesting, and measure it.

Langston Hughes. *The Big Sea* (Knopf, 1940), pp. 238–39

Out of her abundant stores of vitality Zora Hurston fashions an autobiography [*Dust Tracks on a Road*] which shoots off bright sparks of personality. . . . A woman of courage and action, she would scorn any academic retreat from the touch and feel of ordinary life. Not only is there nothing of the recluse in her nature, but there is, to state it positively, a preference for the jostling of the crowd. She feels a challenge to elbow her way along her traffic-jammed road with a roving eye for adventure. Tracks she leaves behind her in the dust, witnesses of her presence which only she among all those people can make. Mixing with others only enhances her individuality. . . .

Free of many routine moral obligations, Zora Hurston busies herself with unwrapping the happiness contained in each moment. She engenders an atmosphere of surprises both for herself and others who know her. Shrinking from the dullness of dogmatism, she blossoms out with an originality of thought and conduct. Although the author can hardly inform us that this originality is the secret of her charm, we can quickly detect it on each page of her autobiography. Even her literary style shows an out-of-the-ordinary quality, a concrete and earthy imagery, an uneven rhythm which reflect imagination, warmth, and impulsiveness. It is a safe guess that few people were bored in her presence. Angered sometimes, amused often, at least they must have responded positively to the unexpected course of her behavior. Sustained by her unflagging spirit, Zora Hurston is enabled to present a strong case for the doctrine of individuality in her own person.

Rebecca Chalmers Barton. *Witnesses for Freedom* (Harper, 1948), pp. 101, 114

Jonah's Gourd Vine has style without structure, a rich verbal texture without dramatic form, ''atmosphere'' without real characterization. . . . The style of the novel is impressive enough. Zora Neale Hurston, whom Langston Hughes has described as a rare *raconteuse*, draws freely on the verbal ingenuity of the folk. Her vivid, metaphorical style is based primarily on the Negro preacher's graphic ability to present abstractions to his flock. . . . The danger is that . . . folk sayings may become the main point of the novel. Overdone, they destroy rather than support authentic characterization. In *Jonah's Gourd Vine* they are too nonfunctional, too anthropological, and in the end merely exotic. Miss Hurston has not yet mastered the form of the novel, but her style holds promise of more substantial accomplishment to come.

The genesis of a work of art may be of no moment to literary criticism but it is sometimes crucial in literary history. It may, for example, account for the rare occasion when an author outclasses himself. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is a case in point. The novel was written in Haiti in just seven weeks, under the emotional pressure of a recent love affair. . . . Ordinarily the prognosis for such a novel would be dismal enough. One might expect immediacy and intensity, but not distance, or control, or universality. Yet oddly, or perhaps not so oddly, it is Miss Hurston's best novel, and possibly the best novel of the period, excepting *Native Son*.

Robert A. Bone. *The Negro Novel in America* rev. ed. (Yale Univ. Pr., 1965), pp. 127–28

Despite the psychological limitations which color her works, her novels deserve more recognition than they have received. While publishing more books than any Afro-American woman before her—four novels, two collections of folklore, and an autobiography—she was one of the few Southern-born Afro-American writers who have consistently mined literary materials from Southern soil. Gifted with an ear for dialect, an appreciation of the folktale, a lively imagination, and an understanding of feminine psychology, she interwove these materials in deceptively simple stories which exhibit increasing artistic consciousness and her awareness of the shifting tastes in the American literary market. . . .

Her relative anonymity may be blamed on two causes. First, during her most productive period—the 1930s—widespread poverty limited the sale of books. Second, her tales of common people form a seemingly quiet meadow overshadowed by commanding, storm-swept hills on either side. To the rear, in the twenties, stands the exoticism of the Harlem Renaissance—Claude McKay's lurid depictions of Harlem, Wallace Thurman's satirical invective, Langston Hughes's jazz rhythms, and Countee Cullen's melodious chauvinism. On the other side, in the forties, stands the lusty violence of Richard Wright, Frank Yerby, Ann Petry, and Willard Motley. Most of Zora Neale Hurston's stories, in contrast, seem to be quiet quests for self-realization. . . .

Because of her simple style, humor, and folklore, Zora Neale Hurston deserves more recognition than she ever earned. But, superficial and shallow in her artistic and social judgments, she became neither an impeccable raconteur nor a scholar. Always, she remained a wandering minstrel. It was eccentric but perhaps appropriate for her to return to Florida to take a job as a cook and maid for a white family and to die in poverty. She had not ended her days as she once had hoped—a farmer among the growing things

she loved. Instead she had returned to the level of life which she proposed for her people.

Darwin T. Turner. *Zora Neale Hurston: The Wandering Minstrel* (Southern Illinois Univ. Pr., 1971), pp. 98–99, 120

Miss Hurston's awareness of the uniqueness of her experience, the ways in which it sets her apart from the rest of the rural Deep South as well as from the growing experience of blacks in the Northern cities—Chicago or New York City's Harlem—. . . is apparent everywhere in her work. It is clear that she sees herself, in her fiction and in the occasional articles she wrote specifically on racial matters and the experience of the American black, as someone particularly qualified to see the truth. Further, in the self-conscious use of a ''down-home'' idiom—''hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick''—which she quickly explains in her next two sentences, we can recognize whom she conceives her audience to be. It is an audience not familiar with the circumstances of the South, nor with the idiom she draws from it. Her audience is white. And she is attempting to charm that audience, both with her authenticity and with her good cheer. It should not surprise us that *Dust Tracks on a Road* ''won the Anisfield Wolf Award for its contribution to improving race relations.'' . . .

Jonah's Gourd Vine is in large part the story of Miss Hurston's parents, as we learn when we read her autobiography. Her father's history closely parallels that of the protagonist of *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, John Buddy Pearson; the account of her mother's death in the autobiography could have been taken from the novel. The plot of the novel is that of a man's full growth and failure, but it is probably fair to say that our interest is not focused on the plot, anyway. It is focused on the breathtaking recreation of a particular and specified dialect, and, through that, the particular and intensely realized life of a Southern black man, removed from the world of overt racism halfway through the novel, struggling against the weaknesses of his nature—and losing. . . .

The vitality of the book comes entirely from its folkloristic reporting of a language, a dialect, of the black rural South. The plot construction, the sense of time in the novel, the acting out of imagined scenes—all these qualities are deficient, which is not surprising in a first novel. . . .

It is finally the immediacy of these details of the novel which makes *Jonah's Gourd Vine* worth reading; it is hard to find sources which convey more directly the particular quality of black life in the rural South in the first half of the Twentieth Century.

James Rambeau. *Markham Review*. Summer, 1976, pp. 61–63

To herself, she was a failure. Fortunately, no critic wholly supports this view. While a few lampoon her for what they consider her lack of social consciousness, her tendency to transcend racism and prejudices by disallowing them a major role in her works, and for technical and narrative deficiences in her fiction, most praise her for her ability to tell a good story well, for her vivid and unforgettable figurative language, for her staunch individualism, and for the sense of ''racial health'' that permeates her fiction. . . .

What really made her premature, however, was all the beauty and struggle of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* where marriage is largely defined in sexual terms; where one mate must remain petal open and honest for the other; where mere sex may take place without consummation of the marriage since consummation only takes place when the right dust-bearing bee comes along; where the quality of one's life counts more than the quality of it; where poetry is more essential than prose, love more essential than money, sharing paramount to dominating; where one's dream is the horizon and one must ''go there to know there.'' All that and more made Hurston extraordinary; all that makes the beauty of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* almost unbearable today, makes one wonder if even today the world is ready for Zora Neale Hurston.

Her works are important because they affirm blackness (while not denying whiteness) in a black-denying society. They present characters who are not all lovable but who are undeniably and realistically human. They record the history, the life, of a place and time which are remarkably like other places and times, though perhaps a bit more honest in the rendering. They offer some light for those who ''ain't ne'er seen de light at all.''

Lillie P. Howard. *Zora Neale Hurston* (Twayne, 1980), pp. 170, 174–75

Zora Neale Hurston is another figure whose movement between the cultures of black and white, female and male, is instructive in a consideration of women's humor as minority humor. Hurston, whose fiction and nonfiction drawing upon black Southern culture and folklore have been rediscovered in recent years, grew up in the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, where she absorbed the speech patterns that she would later transform into the rollicking, high-spirited prose of novels such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), and her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942). Hurston's work is typically located in all-black communities, and her humor differs sharply from that of Alice Childress and Mari Evans in that instead of using irony and wit to confront racism, Hurston celebrates black culture with its jokes, its linguistic exaggerations, and its flamboyant storytellers. . . .

Hurston . . .revels in the colorful language of the black community. She describes her father's family as having ''no more to 'em than the stuffings out of a zero.'' yet she defines bitterness as ''the underarm odor of wishful weakness'' (280). Her youthful contacts with white people are described in terms that affirm black solidarity and assumed superiority. Some of the selections in the hymnal given to her by wealthy whites do not please her: ''If white people liked trashy singing like that, there must be something funny about them that I had not noticed before'' (52). And when white visitors come to her school, the black students and teachers are all conscious that they are putting on an act. . . .

Yet as an adult during the Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston was resented—even by members of her own race such as Wallace Thurman and Langston Hughes—for her verbal humor. She was accused of playing the role of the funny ''Darkie'' for the amusement of whites, and of refusing to let go of her Southern folk heritage to be assimilated into Northern black society. It is likely that Hurston used humor as a shield, and just as likely that she was resented for it because she was a woman. In ''Hurston, Humor, and the Harlem Renaissance,'' John Lowe points to Hurston's contemporaries' portrayals of her as opportunistic, willing to play the ''Darkie'' role for white benefactors, and notes that many of the Harlem literati were eager to eschew their rural origins and behave with a seriousness that befitted their positions as the black literary

''elite.'' Thus Hurston's boisterousness was an embarrassment—not least because she was female. ''At first charmed by her wit and appearance,'' Lowe says, ''they began to have reservations about her 'seriousness.' . . .Hurston's humor was enjoyed, but found suspect, partially because it was 'unladylike.'''

> Nancy A. Walker. *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Pr., 1988), pp. 111–13

While a considerable amount of scholarly work exists on the writing career of Zora Neale Hurston, the bulk of it concerns her novels, in particular *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), which is considered by most to be her finest literary achievement. Her other works, including short stories, folklore studies, and the autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), occasionally attract some critical attention, especially in the last decade. Other dimensions of Hurston's long career, which spanned nearly forty years, have largely been ignored altogether or at best afforded only a passing mention. This is true of her several early poems, her journalistic work, and especially her plays. That Hurston's plays have not triggered any critical interest to speak of is interesting enough in itself, particularly when we consider that it was a play that brought her to the attention of Harlem Renaissance circles, and when we consider her life-long interest in drama and the stage. . . .

Hurston's entry into the Harlem Renaissance circle was marked by the publication of several short stories and the 1925 prize-winning play *Color Struck*. The play marked the beginning of a strong interest in writing and producing dramatic art that was to stay with Hurston throughout the remainder of her career. Shortly after *Color Struck* won second prize in the drama division of the 1925 literary contest sponsored by *Opportunity*, the official magazine of the National Urban League, a second play, *The First One*, was entered in the 1926 *Opportunity* contest and ''later printed in the Charles S. Johnson's collectanea of Renaissance writing, *Ebony and Topaz* (1927) [as quoted in Robert Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*]. Actually, Hurston had submitted another play in 1925 along with *Color Struck*. Nothing is known about it except its title—*Spears*—because, according to Robert Hemenway, it was lost.

In subsequent years Hurston—in addition to writing novels and compiling folklore collections—produced shows that included drama, native dance, and music gathered during her folklore expeditions. More important, Hurston was involved in several collaborative efforts: her 1930 collaboration with Langston Hughes produced the play *Mule Bone* and resulted in a major dispute between the two collaborators. In 1939–40, Hurston worked with noted North Carolina playwright Paul Green. And in 1944 Hurston's collaboration with Dorothy Waring produced *Polk Country: A Comedy of Negro Life in a Sawmill Camp, with Authentic Negro Music*. Sadly enough, neither of the plays written with Hughes or Waring has been published or widely produced, and the intended collaboration with Green never came to fruition, although Hemenway reports that ''she and Green toyed with the idea of collaborating on a play called 'John de Conquerer.''' . . .

Hurston was primarily concerned with authenticity in drama, a concern no doubt made more urgent by her training as an anthropologist. She felt . . . that while white playwrights like Eugene O'Neill, Paul Green, and Dubose Heyward were well meaning, their re-creations of black life were not as realistic or as actual as they ought to be. . . .It is clear . . .that Hurston indeed tried wherever possible to present the real, the pure essence of black life in her work.

> Warren J. Carson. ''Hurston as Dramatist.'' In Steve Glassman and Kathryn Lee Seidel, eds., *Zora in Florida* (Orlando: Univ. of Central Florida Press, 1991), pp. 121–22, 123, 128

Toward the end of her life, Zora Neale Hurston was involved in three legal entanglements, one as a defendant, one as a short-story writer, and one as a reporter. The first one was so devastating that she considered suicide in the midst of it, and it affected her writing after that; the second one allowed her to objectively explore the difficulties of a black maid facing a white accuser in a court of law; the third one enabled Hurston to write two long pieces about a black woman who killed a white man, not exonerating the woman but trying to understand the motivations behind such an act. Taken separately, as they usually are, the three legal entanglements seem merely episodic in the life of a writer who had many different experiences. Taken separately, . . . they present a different picture of a great writer; at least one of them may help explain why she lost her creative abilities at the end of her life.

In some of her early fiction, Hurston had written about judicial trials, but from a different point of view from that of later in her life. In her 1937 work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston wrote about a black woman going before a jury of twelve white men. After Janie Crawford was accused of killing her husband, Tea Cake, when he was about to attack her in his rabid state, she had to go into court and be tried before a jury of white men. . . .

In 1948, at the peak of her career and just when she was collecting material for another work, something happened that brought an abrupt end to Hurston's success. In September of that year, New York police arrested Hurston on the charge that she had committed sodomy with a ten-year-old boy. It turned out to be a trumped-up charge—she was actually in Honduras when the alleged incident took place—but she had a difficult time getting anyone to listen to her. . . .

Two years after the first incident, when she was falsely accused of sodomy, she published a short story entitled ''The Conscience of the Court,'' in *The Saturday Evening Post* (1950). Earlier Langston Hughes had written that Hurston's ability to adapt to circumstances was the keystone to her success as an anthropologist. The same might be said of her as a writer. . . .

The story might have been autobiographical to some extent since both Laura Lee [the heroine] and Hurston were middle-aged when they were accused of a crime, and both were abandoned by their friends and had to defend themselves alone. Both women refused to let marriage tie them down and restrict their growth, both ended up working as a maid, and both had a close, personal relationship with a white woman who paid their wages. . . .

Three years after ''The Conscience of the Court'' was published, an event happened in Live Oak, Florida, that involved Hurston once again with a judicial proceeding, but this time as a reporter for a black newspaper. On August 3, 1953, a black woman named Ruby McCollum shot and killed a white doctor in the small north Florida town. . . .

Hurston may have become interested in the particular case because white reporters were ignoring it, but also because Ruby McCollum was a black woman who did not fit the stereotype of

black southern women. . . . Hurston did not try to prove that Ruby was innocent of the killing, because that would have been impossible. But she did try to explain the motivations behind such an act whereby a black woman would commit a crime that would destroy the unity of her own family and imprison her in a mental hospital for many years. . . .

As Mary Jane Lupton [in *Southern Literary Journal*, 1982] has pointed out, in all three legal entanglements the black woman, whether Hurston herself or Laura Lee or Ruby McCollum, survived, as did many of Hurston's characters; but the women were certainly deeply affected by what happened in the courts of law. Hurston had come a long way from her early humorous depiction of a trial and had experienced something that made her angry and bitter, especially in her own encounter with the law. How deeply she was affected may never be known, but she never published works comparable to her earlier ones. Her legal entanglements marked the beginning of the end of a great career.

> Kevin McCarthy. ''Three Legal Entanglements of Zora Neale Hurston.'' In Steve Glassman and Kathryn Lee Seidel, eds. *Zora in Florida* (Univ. of Central Florida Pr., 1991), pp. 174–75, 177–78, 180–81

Janie Crawford, the heroine of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is an exceptional mixture of tradition and innovation. Although published during the Harlem Renaissance, Janie's story has received most of its deserved interest in the years following Robert Hemenway's 1977 biography of Zora Neale Hurston, and her novel has recently been critiqued in terms of its themes of feminism, black-determination, folklore, *Bildung*, and self-identification. Hurston's story of Janie Crawford's search for her place in her world unquestionably encompasses all these motifs. An additional—and perhaps closer—examination, however, will reveal that the pattern of Janie's experiences closely parallels that of the traditional literary romance. Her quest for an understanding of her purpose for existence leads her down the same mythical path as that of the heroes and heroines of the romance, with the same types of experiences along her way. . . .

In examining Hurston's story . . . what we find is that her romance is distinctive in a special way. Whereas the romance mode relies on the episodic method, Hurston maneuvers into her storytelling the use of psychological realism. In order for the reader to understand fully Janie's quest and for Janie to understand it herself, Hurston wants us to be aware of outside influences that either advance or impede Janie's progress. . . .

An understanding of this influence of others on her advancement is essential in order for us—and Janie—to comprehend fully the impact of the success of her quest. Just to accept that she has discovered her identity is not enough; we must perceive the process and believe that it is not isolated from those with whom she relates. In much the same way, Janie explains to her friend Pheoby the need to interpret what has happened during the past few years: ''So 'tain't no use in me telling you somethin' unless Ah give you de understandin' to go 'long wid it'' (19). Thus, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Hurston combines elements of the traditional romance with the unexpected innovation of psychological realism in order to give her reader ''de understandin' to go 'long wid it.''

> Janice Daniel. *Southern Literary Journal*. Spring, 1993, pp. 66–67

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HWANG, David Henry (1957–)

David Henry Hwang's 1979 play *FOB* [''fresh off the boat''] centers on the enmity between a modern-day FOB, Steve, and an ABC (American-born Chinese), Dale. Deliberately contextualized through historical flashbacks, the play suggests that for Asian Americans the struggle for self-acceptance and self-integration is an ongoing one. . . .

Steve . . . is an unusual, because role-played, variant of the racial shadow. In the Asian American stories we have examined up to *FOB*, the double is always seen solely from the outside; not so Steve. Does Hwang's focus on the inner operations of Steve disqualify the latter from being a real shadow? The term *shadow* has connotations of parasitism and secondaries, which certainly do not describe Steve's *actual* position relative to Dale. Nevertheless, what counts in this question is his *perceived* status and attributes in Dale's eyes. While confinement to the first self-viewpoint follows naturally from the essence of projection. Hwang's treatment underscores even more clearly that the double is always, to some extent, a figment of the first self's imagination. . . .

It is true that Hwang's overt didacticism differs substantially from the kind of subtle and strenuous psychological drama that gives many traditional stories of the double their special flavor. Moreover, learning in *FOB* is not limited to Dale but is experienced by Steve as well; their common teacher is Grace, an ex-FOB who has had time to ''thaw out'' and attain self-acceptance. By the end of the play both young men have lost some of their rigidity and gained receptiveness toward the opposite persuasion. *FOB* thus branches off in more directions than most of the episodes and stories examined [here]. On the other hand, the structural constituents derived from other examples of the racial shadow are unequivocally present in *FOB*: an American-born, assimilated first self-internalization of white judgment and disowning of one's Asian identity; psychological and/or physical violence against a character who personifies ''Asian'' qualities; and forced questioning, if not revision, of the first self's original concepts of acceptability. By this set of criteria Steve is a racial shadow.

> Sau-ling Cynthia Wong. *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Pr., 1993), pp. 106, 108, 109

Positing sexuality as *the* privileged signifier of identity in modern Western epistemologies, [Eve] Sedgwick . . . provide[s] a preliminary starting point in our investigation of Gallimard's ''alternate identity.'' We begin by invoking questions of sexuality in *M. Butterfly*: what is the language of sexuality in the drama? How should we evaluate Gallimard and Song's sexual relationship? How does this relationship constitute and transform the terms of exchange by which we ultimately judge the value of the play?

These questions, germane for current critical commentaries and theatrical reviews generated by *M. Butterfly*, are notable for their collective sacrifice of issues relating to homosexuality. Focusing on the drama as a testimony to cultural misunderstanding and sexist ignorance on the part of the white man, the majority of readings are remarkably uniform insofar as they examine these issues of racism and sexism within the exclusive regime of a compulsive and compulsory heterosexuality.

The concerted privileging in these critical analyses of an inveterate heterosexuality over the implicit and explicit residues of a queer sensibility motivating the play from Gallimard's opening lines restricts, then, like the prison cell, any useful implications of *M. Butterfly* for a gay antihomophobic politics. This elision is particularly damaging for the issue of race and homosexuality as they intersect in the figure of Song (and Gallimard's desire for Song) imputes additional consequences of a racist homophobia against the gay male of color—in this instance, the Asian and Asian American homosexual. . . .

In restricting the locus of *M. Butterfly*, Hwang mimics ''straight-minded'' critics in his suppression of the homoerotics of the drama. Showing little tolerance for sexual difference by banishing homosexuality ultimately into the realm of the unmentionable, the suppression of the sexually ''Extravagant'' by Hwang in his play seems to become a move of ''Necessity'' for mainstream heterosexist commercial success and critical acceptance.

But if homosexuality lies in the realm of ''Extravagance,'' it is no more unnecessary than ''Necessity'' itself. The erasure of homosexuality from the arena of Asian American literature is finally limiting, denying both a rich artistic heteroglossia and a fecund political opportunity for Asian Americans to once again vex majority expectations of well-worn stereotypes. Indeed, as Eve Sedgwick notes, the alienation of individual authority to name one's own personal sexual desire at a time when sexual discourse ''has been made expressive of the essence of both identity and knowledge . . . may represent the most intimate violence possible. . . . It is, of course, central to the modern history of homophobia oppression.'' . . .

In the final analysis, who in *M. Butterfly* is afforded the last laugh? Who is the ultimate artist and trickster figure, the queen in control? Is it the caustic Song whose provisional foray out of the paternal order is quickly suppressed by Gallimard's heterosexual conversion and homosexual abjection? Or is it Gallimard, the white Frenchman diplomat, whose flawless performance as the awkward straight lover subdues the oriental diva and assures us that all will be well in status quo sexual and racial politics?

David L. Eng. ''In the Shadows of a Diva: Committing Homosexuality in David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*.'' *Amerasia Journal*. No. 1, 1994, pp. 94, 110, 111

HWANG: I think my ethnicity plays a huge part in [my] work, but it's simplistic to say that because I'm an Asian American that that would mean I would necessarily always write about Asian American characters. Nonetheless, I think my perspective is shaped a great deal by the fact that I'm Asian American in the same way that it is shaped by my being a man and being from Southern California. There's a lot of different things that go into making us who we are, and the experience of being Asian American, the experience of being a minority group on the one hand and on the other hand growing up very upper-middle-class, creates a balance there that contributes a lot to my seeing the world. At various points I've taken a very explicitly rebellious stance and said, ''Just because I'm Asian American I shouldn't necessarily have to write about Asian characters.'' In the case of *Rich Relations*, I essentially did it wrong; I wrote an autobiographical play about my family, but I made them all white. That's not where it's at either. On the other hand, with a piece like *1000 Airplanes* or the other [Philip] Glass collaboration or some of the movies I'm working on, they are not explicitly Asian American; but I recognize I do come from a particular perspective that helps me see the world in a certain way and that goes into the work.

INTERVIEWER: Has being an Asian American in the theater changed in the ten or so years that you've been working?

HWANG: Ten years ago, when you said someone was an Asian American writer or a black writer or a Latino writer, there was much more of a sense of second-class literary citizenship. When I first began writing, there was the notion that Chinese American or Asian American literature represented something that had sociological importance, something that had political importance. It was useful if you were going to work in Chinatown, but it somehow didn't achieve the same kind of literary heights or the same universality as ''mainstream'' work did (mainstream equaling Caucasian culture). I think that that's changed a lot in the last ten years; there's much more of a recognition now that American literature encompasses a great many groups. With someone like August Wilson, for example, most people feel that his work is just as valid and just as universal as a work by someone of the ethnic group called European; so I think that's changed.

Jackson R. Bryer, ed. *The Playwright's Art: Conversations with Contemporary American Dramatists* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Pr., 1995), pp. 134–35

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I

IGNATOW, David (1914–1997)

[''An Interview with David Ignatow'']

Q. It is of course up to the reader to make sense of the poems as individual items, but also the bulk of your writing as both a continuous and discontinuous developing philosophy of life. Taking into account that there is hardly any constancy, would it be possible for you to talk about your most fundamental beliefs, somewhat more comprehensively than in your poems?

A. I was reared as a Jew of the Reform Temple, and while attending Hebrew School, I told my father I would like to become a rabbi. He laughed heartily—he a socialist and agnostic—and so I abandoned the idea, influenced by his authority. However, having become a teacher and a poet, I guess I finally did circumvent his authority without realizing it and became what I wished to become in my earliest wanting. As you know, ''rabbi'' translated into English means teacher, and all our prophets were teachers.

I am no longer a Jew in the practicing sense, nor as a believer. I believe in compassion, in helping one's fellow man and woman. Are you familiar with the Mahayana branch of the Buddhist philosophy? I am closer to that branch in thinking, belief, and practice than to any version of the Jewish or Christian religion. . . . The Mahayan philosophy insists on the universality of salvation: The Mahayanist takes his duty toward his less developed fellow beings most seriously. And it goes on to explain what is meant by emptiness. As I understand it, it is to say that no ideas and no beliefs are firm and of permanent meaning, since all is absorbed in the one absolute there is, Life and Death. Such thinking suits my temperament perfectly. I am content with such thinking, and it allows me the widest possible embrace of life and death as they are manifested in me and in my fellow creatures—for good, evil, or joy.

> Leif Sjoberg. *Contemporary Literature*. Summer, 1987, pp. 160–61

Anyone who reads Ignatow's *Selected Poems* can see that he carries his load of spiritual heaviness. But he doesn't try to smear it over the entire universe in the name of Jewish contemporaneity. I suppose he does show a particularly Jewish sort of whimsy sometimes. His ''Love Poem for the Forty-Second Street Library'' is Chagall-like, I'm a little sorry to say, though I do like it. . . . And then there's ''The Bagel''—least tragic of Jewish themes—in which he imagines himself chasing a runaway bagel and then doubling over and rolling after it in great somersaults ''like a bagel'' and ''strangely happy with myself''. . . .

I have wished mainly to suggest that we make no a priori assumptions about the nature of that sweet beast, Jewish poetry, but that we simply read if for what it has to show us. Traditions intermingle in Jewish as in other sensibilities, and the truest Jewish poetry will be written out of the inward preoccupations of people who happen to be Jews.

> M.L. Rosenthal. *Our Life in Poetry* (New York: Persea Books), 1993, p. 539

Several forces have conspired to bring about the general neglect of Ignatow. One mentioned by several commentators is the difficulty of ''categorizing'' his work. In addition, his association with both Whitman and [W.C.] Williams at a time when formal considerations determined literary worth may have worked against Ignatow's wider acceptance earlier, when others of his generation were being identified as major American voices. Several decades have intervened during which the importance of Whitman and Williams has been reevaluated. Still, Ignatow's work, although published by many major presses and also—especially—by small ones (to which he, like Williams has been has always been generous), was not well received by the so-called establishment, whose values Ignatow has consistently challenged over the years—another reason, no doubt, for the Establishment's lack of approval. Louis Simpson observed some time ago that the ''influence of social snobbery'' may well have affected the literary judgments made by the entrenched elite especially in regard to its critical reaction to the poet's work. Ignatow began as a working-class poet, not only in his choice of subject matter but also in his use of language, at a time when social realism in literature had already peaked and the New Criticism predominated. Although Ignatow's working-class—read ''people-oriented''—sympathies persist to this day, the subject at the center of his poetry has shifted toward the more historically enduring themes of literature—love, death, and humankind's place in the cosmos.

Nevertheless, in frequent instances, the mantle of earlier critical attitudes seems still to enfold him. Considered by a number of critics to be a major voice in American poetry, and the recipient of major literary awards, Ignatow, despite the depth and uniqueness of his vision, continues to be viewed by many as a mere runner-up in the hierarchy—Williams denied its existence—of contemporary verse. Some believe that he has published too extensively and that severe editing would have shown his strengths to better effect. Although this argument may have merit, the essential work remains, and Ignatow should be judged by this essence.

Ignatow is as relentless in confronting the large philosophic issues underlying human experience as he is in portraying the daily experience out of which all philosophic speculations arise. The way in which the individual exists in and beyond this world and its appearances forms the crux of his work.

> Virginia Terris. Introduction in V. Terris, ed. *Meaningful Differences: The Poetry and Prose of David Ignatow* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Pr., 1994), pp. 1–2

Since David Ignatow began publishing in the early 1930s, his career has spanned ten presidential administrations, and four wars. He has witnessed the waxing and waning of literary modernism, and has come to enjoy the status of Grand Old Man. With the exception of Stanley Kunitz, no prominent American poet of today has been gifted with such a long career; but Ignatow's longevity seems not to have tempted him to play the role of wearisome cultural custodian in the manner of many other Grand Old Men. He possesses none of the later Frost's hectoring Cold-Warrior conservatism, and none of the aged Sandburg's treacly populism; Ignatow

plays the Grand Old Man only so far as to congratulate himself for his sturdiness, his plainspoken dependability. His odometer has turned over several times, but he still runs surprisingly well. And what other American poet has explored the possibilities of the plain style with Ignatow's tenacity?

Against the Evidence gathers work from seven decades, work notable less for its development than for its tough-minded consistency, for the relentlessness in which Ignatow reiterates his pet themes. His manner has always been deadpan and self-effacing, but this is less a form of modesty than a wryly Darwinian way of insisting that the fittest have indeed survived. As he puts it in his preface, ''for *Against the Evidence* I have gathered from the most resonant of my work. The poems speak of sixty years of a contribution to American poetry, the significance of which awaits judgment.'' Hardy, in his introduction to his final volume, *Winter Words*, is similarly coy, ''though, alas, it would be idle to pretend that the publication of these poems can have much interest to me, the track having been adventured so many times before today, the pieces themselves have been prepared with reasonable care.'' Like Hardy, Ignatow is less a poet of old age than a poet who seems to have prepared for old age even in his twenties; he can now play his role with supreme self-confidence. There are, to be sure, aspects of Ignatow's method which limit his expressive range, not the least of which is an utter lack of music. But when he is writing at his best, Ignatow is a true American original, with a voice gravely urgent, realistic, and prophetic by turns.

David Wojahn. *Poetry*. January, 1995, pp. 219–20

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INGE, William (1913–1973)

Come Back, *Little Sheba* (is) a mean tragedy in which the aftermath of a youthful sin is shown with merciless precision and a Belascan realism which includes a succession of assorted snacks, a prominent garbage pail, dirty dishes and water left running in a sink to the shocked murmurs of the audience.

Euphemia Van Rensselaer Wyatt. *Catholic World*. April, 1950. p. 67

It is the supreme distinction of Mr. William Inge's world to exist solidly as an imaginative fact, with more energy and vitality than that of any American dramatist of his generation. Neither deliquescent as is that of Tennessee Williams, nor shaped by Arthur Miller's blunt polemic rage, it is a world existing solely by virtue of its perceived manners. . . . The poetry, in Mr. Inge's plays, is all in the pity; he gives us the hard naturalistic surface, but with a kind of interior candescence.

Richard Hayes. *Commonweal*. March 20, 1953. p. 603

He is probably not a great playwright (at least I doubt that anything he has done thus far will be included in the archives of our century), but he is an acute, compassionate, and amused observer who has trained himself to write approximately perfect theater. Like all good craftsmen, he makes it look as easy as instinct.

Robert Hatch. *The Nation*. March 19, 1955. p. 245

As much as one admires and enjoys *Bus Stop*, one feels that Mr. Inge has done not much more than interweave a trio of not very startling sketches. True, they all deal with the conflict between insecurity produced by selfishness and true love, but what happens in any one sketch doesn't have much effect on what happens in any other. The play's chief distinction lies in the way Mr. Inge has served up banal characters with most of their sentimental fat trimmed off. On the other hand, he avoids rich dialogue, colorful eccentricities, and the theatrical exploitation of dramatic situations. While this makes his comedy an honest etching of life, one sometimes wishes that Mr. Inge might more completely free himself from the demands of the commonplace.

Henry Hewes. *Saturday Review*. March 19, 1955. p. 24

Prior to the Freudian revolution, men and women discovered sex through love. Nowadays love is discovered through sex. This theme has come to obsess William Inge, and he ought to realize the essential limitations of this theme before it dissipates one of our most promising dramatic talents. In *Come Back*, *Little Sheba*, his most moving play, the idea of love through sex was a minor motif. In *Picnic*, although sex was more rampant, it was still only one thread in a larger pattern. In *Bus Stop* the noble savages are the predominant and, in fact, the only point of the story. Inge is fascinated by the problem of two healthy animals of the opposite sex lusting after each other. It is perhaps an indication of my debility that I find this problem one of the less significant issues of our times.

Maurice Zolotow. *Theatre Arts*. May, 1955. p. 22

Panic illustrates the most mature level of the American drama in the fifties, able to draw upon Freudian insights without succumbing to the obvious or the trite, able to extract ever fresh and original patterns of human relationship from contemporary life and to view with psychological as well as aesthetic perception the life around us.

W. David Sievers. *Freud on Broadway* (Hermitage). 1955. pp. 355–6

The mark of Inge's method is its modesty. He never goes beyond his depth, he never promises more than he can fulfill, he ventures only into what he can master. He writes sparsely, almost laconically, but his choice of words and of situations is so shrewd that he makes them go a long way in creating a stage life far more potent than the written page may indicate. His work is very telling for us, too, because it is peculiarly American—in its setting and characters, in its sadness and humor, in its folksiness and in its Freudianism which is never pressed to the point of declamatory ''revelation,'' but is tempered by a certain cautious optimism.

Harold Clurman. *The Nation*. Dec. 21, 1957. p. 483

Mr. Inge is a writer of literate soap opera. . . . This is in no way intended to deprecate Mr. Inge's work, for his soap is of the best French-milled quality. His writing is adult. He is incapable of schmaltz. His characters are funny when he wants them to be funny, sad when he wants them to be sad, and always touching and understandable.

Patrick Dennis. *New Republic*. Dec. 30, 1957. p. 21

William Inge . . . is now contributing his fourth smash hit to Broadway. It is certainly his best play since *Come Back*, *Little Sheba*; and because its scope is broader than that of the first play, and its attitudes even warmer, the new one doubtless may be said to be the best of the lot. . . . Mr. Inge's ''dark at the top of the stairs'' represents the terrors of growing up, the unknown fears which taking adult responsibility entails. Primarily he has tried to show us that dark through the eyes of children, but the original thing he has to say is that even grownups still face that dark and must wrestle with its fears.

Tom F. Driver. *Christian Century*. Jan. 1, 1958. pp. 17–8

. . .if *A Loss of Roses* is a failure it is not without merit. For all the faults of the script and the production I found myself touched by it. Inge has a true sense of a certain (symbolic) American environment, ''I hate to see lovely things go to waste,'' one character says in this play about the loss of innocence. This sense of the inherent like ability of the least conspicuous people of our land, and of the factors that muddy their sweetest traits, redeems even the least of Inge's plays. They are about ''the depression of the heart''—the lack of steady values, social expression, spiritual freedom, the abiding traits of our civilization.

Harold Clurman. *The Nation*. Dec. 19, 1959. p. 475

A study of loneliness, *Come Back*, *Little Sheba* describes the journey of a couple from loneliness to complete isolation (through a series of incidents involving a boy and girl somewhat representative to them of their own youth) and back to a sense of loneliness, modified by a feeling of belonging to each other because of the suffering each has undergone. Neither is a heroic figure; both are failures according to magazine advertising standards. But in a sense they radiate a kind of optimism at the end because they have broken through the wall of separation, and are about to eat breakfast together—a solid American breakfast of eggs and bacon, fruit juice and coffee, toast and marmalade.

Winifred I. Dusenbury. *The Theme of Loneliness in American Drama* (Florida). 1960. pp. 14–15

The Dark at the Top of the Stairs, considered both as a play and a production, had all the ingredients of the masterpiece which its author has repeatedly been on the verge of writing. But these ingredients were not blended by a sufficiently determined intent. Whatever his actual intention in *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, he appears to have been most deeply concerned with traumatic family rifts and their devastating effect on children. But his group play technique tends to dissolve this central drama in favor of peripheral themes, chiefly the mistakes that women make in trying to run men's lives. . . . William Inge needs a larger and more original vision than psychotherapy affords if his fine symphonic gifts are to come completely into focus. Even when the psychoanalytical motivations on which he relies are absorbing and compelling in the dramatic action, he does not carry them to the ultimate tragic conclusion. Instead he contends himself with such questionable solutions as the return of the father in *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* or the successful exorcism of a fixation by one night of love in *A Loss of Roses*.

John Gassner. *Theatre at the Crossroads* (Holt). 1960. pp. 172–3

I could throw a handful of paper clips out of the window on the third-floor walk-up in which I am now writing and hit a half-dozen ordinary people who have more life, more vitality, more originality, and more serious problems than the lonely, longing people who infest the Inge plays. My disapproval is too blanket, of course. There are characters in the early Inge plays, particularly Lola in *Sheba*, who are strong enough, in their pathos or comedy, to insist that their ties to life are stronger than their ties to soap opera. Inge, who has an ear for Midwestern speech, apparently built Lola consciously out of the clichés of common usage, but they are only the vehicle of her expression; she transcends them—and not simply in Shirley Booth's performance of the role—because Inge can allow himself a certain comic indulgence that would be impossible with Doc, whose pretensions really demand a satirist. The result is that Lola is more endearing and more unpleasant than Doc; she is, in short, a realized character in a way that Doc never is. . . . By *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, in which everyone is something and no one is, the casebook had triumphed over characterization. This is nowhere more evident than in *A Loss of Roses*. . . .

Gerald Weales. *American Drama Since World War II* (Harcourt). 1962. pp. 44–5

It is virtually impossible to find a single Inge play—full-length or one-act—in which the characters are able to communicate with each other in any but the most rudimentary way. And genuine attempts to communicate are usually awkward beyond description—as in the case of Bo's attempt to communicate with Cherie in *Bus Stop*, or Professor Benoit's attempt to communicate with Ben in *The Strains of Triumph*.

From the themes of loneliness and personal isolation grows the theme which indicates that man must compromise if life is to have any hope for him. None of the plays ends on a note of real optimism, for even in *Summer Brave* and in *Bus Stop* the heroines follow their men to very uncertain futures; and one comes away from these plays not with the feeling that Inge has solved any problems but that he has chosen to end the play right at the beginning of a major problem. . . .

Inge has been severely criticized for the emphasis upon sex in his plays. Eric Bentley asks, ''Why can't he see through the popular fallacies of priapism and give himself to his own impulse for genuine domestic comedy?'' However, a large part of Inge's thematic development is dependent upon the every priapism which Bentley objects to. The loneliness and isolation of Inge's characters lead them to reach out for whatever human contact they can achieve, and this contact is more often achieved through sex than through real understanding.

R. Baird Shuman. *William Inge* (Twayne). 1965. pp. 168–9

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IRVING, John (1942–)

John Irving is twenty-seven years old. A native of New Hampshire, he attended Phillips Exeter Academy and the University of Pittsburgh, then went to Vienna, where he stayed long enough to become thoroughly hung up on Europe before returning home. At some point during these adventures Irving conceived a novel that would combine the horrors of World War II with the far gentler troubles of a youth stumbling into self-awareness and manhood. *Setting Free the Bears* is the result, and it represents a puzzling, often astonishing literary debut.

The puzzling—and completely unresolved—aspect of the book is its lack of identity with either the Jamesian tradition or the American mainstream of the 1960s. *Setting Free the Bears* simply isn't a contemporary American novel; the language could almost be a European translation from an original by a European writer.

There are no Americans in the book at all, and the few references to racial troubles in the United States, obviously drawn in as parallels to the inhumanity of the war, seem curiously out of place. The tone of the novel, in short, is determinedly consistent with its setting—Vienna and the Austrian countryside.

This would be no problem were it not for nagging reminders throughout the book that something important—apparently the author's American identity and sensibility—is missing. . . .

After an unfortunate beginning, Irving proves in *Setting Free the Bears* that he is a writer of uncommon imaginative power. Moved by what must have been the awful reality of Vienna's memories, he has transcended, though not without serious difficulties, the limbo of his European years. He is back in America now, teaching at a small college in New Hampshire; perhaps he will decide on an identity and produce an American novel. Whatever he writes, it will be worth reading.

Henry S. Resnik. *Saturday Review*. Feb. 8, 1969, p. 26

John Irving is a young, eccentrically talented novelist with a singular rage to instruct. His books—funny, cleverly written, sometimes oddly endearing—provide a wealth of information about subjects one hardly expects to encounter in works of fiction. . . . [In *The 158–Pound Marriage*] the title and many of the episodes derive from wrestling, a sport that, as far as I know, has been unnoticed by contemporary authors. From Irving's previous book, *The Water-Method Man*, one learned a great deal about a rare ailment of the male urinary tract, and that particular pain in the human condition has also been neglected by novelists in droves. In each case, of course, Irving's pedantic exposition is eventually linked to a subject that does indeed interest novelists—marriage, with all its devious sexual and emotional permutations—but one must wade through a lot of words about wrestling and urology before coming in sight of the human heart behind these awkward symbols. . . .

But although he can graphically convey the special ambiance of a college gymnasium, his characters elude him; for all their sexual energy, they remain bloodless, ghostly lovers without bone and muscle. If, in the end, Irving seems to spell out his lesson. . . . , along the way he has lost control of the affirmations his story is presumably meant to offer. Swathed in a tangle of irresolute hints and guesses, neither the wrestling nor the sex bestows sufficient substance or meaning to *The 158–Pound Marriage*, and one is left with a mood of shambling inconsequence.

Pearl K. Bell. *New Leader*. Nov. 25, 1974, pp. 13–14

The World According to Garp is a book of dimensions. It is entertainment on a grand, anyway stylish, scale. It is bravado transfigured into bravery—or maybe the other way around. In fact, I think quite often the other way around—which is not to damn, but to wonder. . . .

Murder is a frequent occurrence in *Garp* (both Garp and his mother die in this fashion), but it isn't about murder really, it's about how to breathe life into life. Mayhem and mutilation are on every other page, but the theme of the book is addressed to making things whole. The Ellen Jamesians can't speak (and Garp himself smashes his jaw and must communicate by notes), yet the novel is concerned with articulation as perhaps the only saving grace. One of the most unforgettable characters is a football tight end turned transsexual (there is homoerotic awareness everywhere), yet *Garp* is profoundly centered on heterosexual urges and itches and relationships and fulfillments, and, out of these *and* beyond them, on families and children. Garp is a true romantic hero: he wants the world safe, not for himself, but for them. . . .

Garp's world is so bizarrely and completely dangerous that while one nods how true, how true, one never quite suspends disbelief. Like the accident, everything awful *could* happen, but that it does is somehow too neat. Part of the manipulation is disarmament by irony—for an awareness of ironic possibility accompanies every disaster, every shock. . . . Garp's second son was conceived as, in a sense, a reserve—in case the first son became a victim of the unsafe world. It is the second who is killed.

So, the world (Garp's) is horrendous; yet his struggle to make it sensible—accountable, as it were, to a human sense of order—is strangely unnecessary. For the world (Irving's) works just fine: It is a marvelous invented contraption. . . .

With *Garp*, however, it's the reader who pulls aside the curtain, and it is not Garp who is revealed at the controls, but John Irving. He is a master magician, and the show is great. But we see too much, and both Garp's dread and Irving's optimism fade away into what one too sharply realizes is an illusion. A grand illusion, very powerful; the book can freak you out. But, in the end, the interest of *The World According to Garp* lies not in that world, but in the wondrous mechanics of its invention and the deft manipulation—while the show goes on—of our awe and tears and laughter.

Eliot Fremont-Smith. *The Village Voice*. May 22, 1978, pp. 77–78

The World According to Garp was, of course, 1978's *Ragtime*, which is to say that it is the most recent manifestation of the greatest-novel-of-the-decade. . . . *The World According to Garp* does indeed have ''extraordinary'' qualities. Its plot, for one thing. Like so many extraordinary things, the story lacks, shall we say, credibility. That is not necessarily a criticism: John Irving has never been able to construct a believable plot, but he has always tried to make a virtue of this chronic deficiency. Which is to say that, like other formless novelists—Pynchon, Barth, Doctorow—he abandons any pretense at narrative (and therefore psychological) realism, and seeks instead to attract and maintain the reader's attention with random monstrosities and grotesque occurrences, chiefly sexual or violent in nature, frequently both. The idea, in other words, is to horrify or titillate the reader to such an extent that he or she will be compelled to continue reading, even without the promise of any realistic development of story or explication of character. . . .

Irving's talent is primarily comedic, and his purposes are best served by his dialogue, which is well done and often amusing. It is important to note at the outset that his style as a whole is *not exhibitionistic*, not even mildly tortured: it does not seek to function as a smokescreen for the author's views and perceptions. More than anything else, however, Irving's prose is the prose of a poorly educated man—his vocabulary is uninspiring, his knowledge of the grammatical proprieties is severely limited. He is a child of his time in his lack of respect for lucidity (''Garp was an excessive man,'' and ''Garp felt a peculiar feeling of unfairness overwhelm him''). In Irving's case, however, the sporadic incoherence and the syntactical sloppiness seem to be simply the consequence of the author's unwillingness—or, perhaps, his inability—to polish his output, rather than a deliberate smog-policy. The carelessness, in other words, is in the expression, not in the sentiments which seek that expression. Like all other Major American Novelists, Irving says his ambition is to write ''accessible'' fiction, and he has done so. His style is simplistic, almost childlike—it is, in other words, what has come to be referred to as ''readable.'' What *Garp* is, is a funny book. Or rather, it tries to be. But it is a low humor, based chiefly on the prepubescent assumption that conscientious vulgarity is by definition amusing.

The immature quality of John Irving's comedic sense is worth mentioning primarily because of its subsidiary effect, which is to conceal, or at least to disguise, the novel's more fundamental flaw. What we are talking about, of course, is Irving's obsession with kinky violence (or violent kinkiness, it is hard to say which), and what concerns us here is the perverse enthusiasm with which many American critics have embraced that eccentric quality.

Bryan Griffin. *Atlantic Monthly*. June, 1979, pp. 50–51, 55

John Irving's first four novels suggest that to him structure is *nearly* everything. All his novels are structurally complex, and they all incorporate remarkably similar settings and experiences, somewhat like those in Irving's own life. Writers, former wrestlers, New England colleges, Vienna, Iowa—we find them in all the books. Similar characters appear in all four works, and the same characters also appear. The same aging but elegant Viennese prostitute, for instance, with a fur muff to hide her sparkling ringed fingers, appears in *The Water-Method Man* and *The World According to Garp*—only her name has been changed. Yet these novels are worlds apart, as different from each other as their main characters are from the author. Irving uses his own experiences ruthlessly to create self-contained worlds within each novel—worlds of exaggeration populated with bizarre, sometimes absurd characters—in order to compel us to recognize the truths that underlie human existence. Regardless of the world in which we find them, the truths Irving magnifies are unchanging. . . .

Like Garp, Irving has been trying to find a personal vision, a way to tell his stories with his imagination and not his memory. In a large sense, the narrative techniques and perspectives that Irving employes in his first three books are all included in *The World According to Garp*, but the narrator in that novel is omniscient, unlike the others who are involved in the stories they narrate. . . .

The World According to Garp is the closest that Irving has come to writing a selective autobiography—which is important in one very strong sense. By exaggerating events and characters from his life, Irving has made them more interesting and better adapted to his own needs. He has found both his personal vision and celebrated its arrival in *The World According to Garp*. Through an omniscient narrator, Irving has imposed order and structure upon the ''lunacy and sorrow'' of the world within the novel. . . .

Despite his remonstrations and attempts to espouse traditional literary values, Irving has up to now written a combination of modern and traditional fiction. In *The World According to Garp* he combines traditional story-telling and literary modes (chronological sequence, omniscient narration, and the epilogue) with modern techniques (writing-within-writing and self-reflexive narration). All four of his works contain writing which Irving uses to explain his own intentions and explicate his own text.

Michael Priestley. *Critique*. 23, 1, 1981, pp. 94–96

It's extraordinary what a little feeling can do for a novel. To prepare for *The Hotel New Hampshire*, I read *The World According to Garp*, and disliked it intensely, not for its slapstick sex or for its ''comic and ugly and bizarre'' preoccupation with mutilation and death, but for its shallowness, its quality of energy without feeling. The novel conveyed only one emotion—self-love. Garp, Irving's writer-hero, was so taken with himself that the title of the last chapter jarred: how could there possibly be ''Life After Garp''? Who would want to go on living without that paragon? I frankly hated *Garp*, and picked up the new novel expecting to hate it too. Instead I liked it. Feeling made the difference. In *Garp*, it all flows

back on Irving's alter ego; in *The Hotel New Hampshire*, it flows out, bringing a whole family to life on a wide current of care.

John Irving is a talented but facile writer. His prose never encounters those resistances—emotional, moral, epistemological—that energize memorable statement. It never strains at meaning; it just sweeps you along, its easy momentum lulling your critical faculty and rocking you back to a childlike state of wonder. In this 400-page book, for example, I can find only one moment of verbal felicity: ''Harold Swallow, darting through the trees, guiding us like a hush up the path. . . .'' One pauses over that ''like a hush up a path,'' to admire it. But that is just what Irving doesn't want, for if we stop we might start asking questions that would undermine our pleasure in a novel so willfully unrealistic. So Irving keeps us moving, sacrificing rhetoric to pace, as in the most primitive narrative forms, the fable and the fairy tale. In fiction like this, meaning lies near the surface of the story and in the voice of the storyteller.

The Hotel New Hampshire is a family saga; the storyteller is John Berry, the middle child, a brother and sister fore and aft. Not a novelist like Garp, he is the family annalist, the compiler of its collective story. . . .

The novel has the manic rhythm of a cartoon; crisis follows crisis in a spiral of woe; and, at each crisis, the Berry family comes together in a moving tableau of solidarity. Family is one of the novel's values; imagination is the other. That faculty is seen in a double light. On the one hand, it is a defense, a way of coping with troubles. The lack of it can be disabling, and one character commits suicide when her imagination fails. On the other hand, the attempt to realize everything you imagine can be dangerous. . . .

Someone calls John ''a weight lifting maiden aunt''; in another vocabulary, he would be a *mensch*. His moments of caring, together with the larger set pieces of family solidarity, make the human element in a novel otherwise unbearably farcical. John Berry and John Irving remind us that the imagination is not simply a Rube Golberg faculty of invention; it is also a moral force, a way of sharing others' lives, others' burdens. We all want to check in to the Hotel New Hampshire. It is ''the sympathy space'' where we can be fully known and yet fully loved, and where a powerful imagination holds us fast and won't let us die.

Jack Beatty. *New Republic*. Sept. 23, 1981, pp. 37–38

The narration of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, [John] Irving's latest novel, shows the author experimenting still further with the relationship between narrator and text. Owen, the focus of the first-person narrator's, Johnny's, memoir, is said to have an extraordinary memory, but memory is also the narrative method which shapes Johnny's text and adds layers to his discourse. In one example Johnny juxtaposes the town's production of *A Christmas Carol* and his memory of the baseball game that kills his mother. After quoting Christmas Past's warning to Scrooge, the narrator leaps into memory, writing, ''With a shudder I realized that it had been *my father* in the bleachers—it had been *my father* she waved to the instant she was killed.'' The number of pages given to the brief episode of his mother's death is inordinate to actual time, but memory works by selectively expanding and contracting time. Similarly expanded is the Christmas Pageant, in which Owen plays the Christ Child, and the *Christmas Carol*, in which Owen plays the Ghost of the Future, events which establish Owen's ''special'' quality. Irving's text weaves more than twenty-five of his present-tense diary entries into his past-tense text. The three selves, shown in memories reached through events in the past time of the narrative, in memories reached through the present time of the narration, and in journals representing the coexistence of those selves, suggest the influence that the past has on the present and that memory has on the individual, major themes in the novel.

Irving's handling of the narration is clearly essential to his success as a writer. In *A Prayer for Owen Meany* the elongated layers of memory that are punctuated by diary entries provide the perfect narrative vehicle for a text concerned with time and memory. The power of the third-person narrator in *Cider House Rules*, as seen in the manipulation of time, the proximity to the characters, and the weaving in of journal entries, enables Irving to shift from subjective to objective vision, a movement that supports that novel's theme of one's responsibility to others. In *The Hotel New Hampshire* the first-person narrator's presumed task doesn't give him the power of the narrator in *Cider House Rules*, but he claims the freedom of a third-person narrator anyway, a fitting approach for his American fairy tale. . . . The narration of [*The World According to*] *Garp* re-creates the character's conflict as a writer through its use of incorporated genres, manipulated tense, and shifting proximity to the characters. On the other hand, Irving's *The 158-Pound Marriage* lacks the techniques displayed in the other novels, resulting in a single-level narrative without the force to give substance to the characters portrayed. Yet in the earlier novel, *The Water-Method Man*, the mix of voices, incorporated genres, and tense shifts provides a suitably fractured surface with which to portray its main character. Even in his first novel, *Setting Free the Bears*, Irving found that incorporated genres present other voices that can serve any number of relationships to the main voice, allowing the novelist to accent theme through narrative style. Irving's power to create fascinating plots has long been accepted; these plots depend to a large extent, however, upon a handful of narrative techniques and the layers of discourse they bring to the text.

Kim McKay. ''Double Discourse in John Irving's *The World According to Garp.*'' *Twentieth Century Literature*. Winter, 1992, pp. 473–74

Irving emphatically states that his latest novel [*A Son of the Circus*] is not *about* India and that he has only visited the country once, for less than a month's stay. Rather, he writes, his choice of India as venue is for purposes of exploration of themes of alienation, rejection, and lack of identity.

Irving is remarkably perceptive in capturing the multiflavored essence of Bombay. The vivid scents of street vendors, their fried food spiced with cumin, coriander, tumeric, and chilies, come off the page. His sharp ear catches local dialogue and intonation—both the gin and tonic chatter of the Club set with its rarefied air of ex-British colonialism and the street argot of urchins. Irving also catches the shades of the city's undersides—its brothels, slums, and meeting places of transvestites, transsexuals, and prostitutes of both sexes. He makes his reader privy to corruption and scandal on a grand low scale.

Like his previous novels, this one is infused with humor and sarcasm. There are plots and subplots aplenty. There are mini,

atomic, and cellular developments that add up to more confusion than fusion. The protagonist, Dr. Farrokh Daruwalla, is a respectable, well-meaning naive orthopedist, born in India, schooled in Vienna, living and working in Canada. Periodically he returns to India to do good work at the orthopedic hospital for children in Bombay. At the same time he tries to advance his own research project on the genetic component of dwarfism, but he encounters resistance from the dwarfs he believes he is trying to help. They find him suspect, they fear having their blood drawn from them. . . .

Several of Irving's vignettes invite loud laughter. . . . Yet, granting Irving's extraordinary gifts of humor and satire, his characters remain essentially paper figures. They engage in rampant sex but exude no passion. Irving provides a world of violence but no compensatory feelings of horror. The book might be described as farce with opinions on any number of social issues. . . . His fans will relish this manic romp; others will notice again that he fails to edit himself.

Lee Mhatre. *Confrontation*. Summer–Fall, 1995, pp. 361–62, 363

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J

JACKSON, Shirley (1919–1965)

The middle-class emotion of embarrassment has been substituted for many of the human passions and passion itself is very often treated in such a way that the reader is only embarrassed by it. The mixture of the macabre and the familiar—hell yawning beneath the commonplaces of life—and especially the combination of cruelty and the childlike is a standard theme, which Miss Jackson treats, not as a source of macabre humor, as Saki treated it, but as a source of macabre embarrassment.

Donald Barr. *New York Times Book Section*. April 17, 1949. p. 4

She sees life, in her own style, as devastatingly as Dali paints it, and like Dali also, she has a sound technique in her own art. There is a beguilingness in the way she leads her readers to the precise point at which the crucial shock can be administered.

The stories are of varying length and quality, but there is in nearly all of them a single note of alarm which reminds one of the elemental terrors of childhood—as when the pages of a book are unsuspectingly turned upon a frightening picture, or a shadow moves into sudden shape upon a wall.

James Hilton. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. May 1, 1949. p. 4

The short stories of Shirley Jackson . . . seem to fall into three groups. There are the slight sketches like *genre* paintings, dealing with episodes which by means of her precise, sensitive, and sharply focussed style become luminous with meaning. . . . In these she is completely successful. . . . The second group comprise her social-problem sketches. . . . Here she has, in addition to an enlightened point of view, a penetrating understanding of the subtle ways . . . prejudices operate. . . . Her final group deals with fantasy ranging from humorous whimsey to horrifying shock. Her method is to establish with meticulous detail a concretely realistic setting, and then to allow the story to crumble . . . into unreality.

Robert Halsband. *Saturday Review*. May 7, 1949. p. 19

Magic is the word that has been woven around the literary personality of Shirley Jackson, the latest to join the select corps of triumphant women short-story writers who apparently flourish in America. Of the stories that make up her surprisingly high-selling collection—entitled *The Lottery*—critics have said they signalled a return to the era of witchcraft and magic, the supernatural and some sort of devil worship. . . . True, Miss Jackson believes in magic. She says it works for her, both the black and white varieties. But she also says it's a silly thing to talk about. Obviously, Miss Jackson was able to be natural even about the supernatural.

Harvey Breit. *New York Times Book Section*. June 26, 1949. p. 15

There is, throughout *The Lottery*, a ghostly teasing resemblance to the work of people like Aubrey Beardsley and Algernon Blackwood—there is the same air of the fantastic, the improbable, the cruel and the evil, all overlaid by a veneer of the commonplace, but the final impression is that even this surface shines, not with the sheen of polish, but with the iridescence of decay, so that one is left believing that even the commonplace is fantastic. This is, of course, the modern romantic belief that nothing is ever right or happy or genuine.

E.G. Langdale. *Canadian Forum*. July, 1949. p. 94

The collected short stories, *The Lottery* . . . left little doubt anywhere of the distinctive order of Shirley Jackson's talent. Even so, it is a rarity when a novel by a writer as young Miss Jackson (she is just 30) turns out to be a work of artistic maturity; a novel within its own brief, but not shallow limits, of courage, integrity and persuasion. Such, happily, is the case with *Hangsaman*.

The language of *Hangsaman* . . . is alive, complex and clear. Its perceptions are piercing beyond the ordinary. The characters are true to themselves (and to life) with every breath they draw; the situations are true to the characters and, in turn, subtly affect and alter them. One cannot doubt a word Miss Jackson writes.

Alice S. Morris. *New York Times Book Section*. April 22, 1951. p. 5

Having delighted untold thousands with her recent account of life among the savages in Bennington, Vermont, Shirley Jackson the housewife and mother has once more yielded to Shirley Jackson the literary necromancer, who writes novels not much like any others since the form was invented. . . . Sinister, sardonic, and satirical by turns *The Bird's Nest* is what one might expect from the author of those frightening stories in *The Lottery*. And yet, as the book races from one astonishment to the next, we come to feel that the other Miss Jackson must have had a hand in it, too. The drama repeatedly turns into farcical comedy, and under the comedy lies pathos. . . . And the climax of the story and its conclusions are curiously moving.

Dan Wickenden. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. June 20, 1954. p. 1

Miss Jackson shocks her readers into instant attention by the effective juxtaposition of startling incident and unusual characters. . . . In addition to being a first-class story-teller, she has always been concerned with the conflict between good and evil in a world deplorably deficient in common sense, kindness, and magnanimity in the Aristotelian sense.

William Peden. *Saturday Review*. March 8, 1958. p. 18

It is the preeminent virtue of Miss Jackson's story [*The Haunting of Hill House*] that she is never didactic, never even explicit. The real tragedy of Eleanor's helpless liaison with Hill House is only

shown, dramatized from page to page, as her fantasies usurp more and more of her sense of reality. At the end she is totally ''possessed'' by the house, and can even hear ''the duet drifting gently in the attic, the wood aging'' in the walls. It is a goosepimple horror story, and a good one; it is also a pathetic portrait of a needful creature on the edge of the unknown, crying out to belong and be loved.

Roger Becket. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Oct. 25, 1959. p. 14

Perhaps the best thing one can say of this author is that she offers an alternative to the canonical view of ''seriousness'' in literature. Like the late Isak Dinesen, she is a meticulous storyteller who can evoke the reality of the times without invoking its current cloying clichés. Her work moves on the invisible shadow line between fantasy and verisimilitude; it also hovers between innocence and dark knowledge. Above all, her work never averts itself from the human thing, which it quickens with chilly laughter or fabulous imaginings. . . . The effect depends on her ability to specify a real world which is at once more sane and more mad than the world we see.

Ihab Hassan. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 23, 1962. p. 5

Despite a fair degree of popularity—reviews of her books were generally enthusiastic, reprints and foreign publications were numerous, and her last two novels, *The Haunting of Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, became modest best sellers—her work has been very little understood. Her fierce visions of dissociation and madness, of alienation and withdrawal, of cruelty and terror, have been taken to be personal, even neurotic, fantasies. Quite the reverse: They are a sensitive and faithful anatomy of our times, fitting symbols for our distressing world of the concentration camp and The Bomb. She was always proud that the Union of South Africa banned *The Lottery*, and she felt that they, at least, understood the story.

Stanley Edgar Hyman. Introduction to *The Magic of Shirley Jackson* (Farrar). 1966. p. viii

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JAMES, Henry (1843–1916)

I am tired of hearing pettiness talked about Henry James's style. The subject has been discussed enough in all conscience, along with the minor James. Yet I have heard no word of the major James, of the hater of tyranny; book after early book against oppression, against all the sordid petty personal crushing oppression, the domination of modern life; not worked out in the diagrams of Greek tragedy, not labelled ''epos'' or ''Aeschylus.'' The outbursts in *The Tragic Muse*, the whole of *The Turn of the Screw*, human liberty, personal liberty, the rights of the individual against all sorts of intangible bondage! The passion of it, the continual passion of it in this man who, fools said, didn't ''feel.'' I have never yet found a man of emotion against whom idiots didn't raise this cry.

Ezra Pound. *Little Review*. Aug., 1918. p. 7

He was a critic who preyed not upon ideas, but upon living beings. It is criticism which is in a very high sense creative. The characters, the best of them, are each a distinct success of creation. . . . The general scheme is not one character, nor a group of characters in a plot or merely in a crowd. The focus is a situation, a relation, an atmosphere, to which the characters pay tribute, but being allowed to give only what the writer wants. The real hero, in any of James's stories, is a social entity of which men and women are constituents. . . . James's critical genius comes out most tellingly in his mastery over, his baffling escape from Ideas; a mastery and an escape which are perhaps the last test of a superior intelligence. He had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it.

T.S. Eliot. *Little Review*. Aug., 1918. pp. 45–6

The Wings of the Dove, *The Ambassadors*, and *The Golden Bowl* are like the faintly audible tread of destiny behind the arras of life. The reverberations are almost microphonic; it is spiritual string-music, with the crescendo and the climax not absent. We must go to other novelists for the roast beef and ale. The Jacobean cuisine is for cultured palates, and most precious is the bouquet of his wine. But characterization and the power of narration inform his every book. To use his own expression, he ''never saved for the next book.''

James Gibbons Huneker. *Bookman*. May, 1920. p. 367

The tiny movement that is the last expression of an act or a fact carries within it the history of all it has passed through on the way—a treasure of interest that the act, the fact in itself, has not possessed. And so in the social scene, wherever its crude beginnings have been left furthest behind, wherever its forms have been most rubbed and toned by the hands of succeeding generations, there he found, not an obliteration of sharp character, but a positive enhancement of it, with the whole of its past crowded into its bosom. The kind of life, therefore, that might have been thought too trifling to bear the weight of his grave and powerful scrutiny was exactly the life that he pursued for its expressive value.

Percy Lubbock. Introduction to *The Letters of Henry James* (Scribner). 1920. pp. xxiv–v

His outward appearance developed in accordance with his moral and intellectual expansion. I have said that in early life Henry James was not ''impressive''; as time went on his appearance became, on the contrary, excessively noticeable and arresting. He

removed the beard which had long disguised his face, and so revealed the strong lines of mouth and chin, which responded to the majesty of the skull. In the breadth and smoothness of the head—Henry James became almost wholly bald early in life—there was at length something sacerdotal. As time went on, he grew less and less Anglo-Saxon in appearance and more Latin.

Edmund Gosse. *Aspects and Impressions* (Cassell). 1922. p. 41

The extreme and almost tantalizing charm of his talk lay not only in his quick transitions, his exquisite touches of humour and irony, the width and force of his sympathy, the range of his intelligence, but in the fact that the whole process of his thought, the qualifications, the resumptions, the interlineations, were laid bare. The beautiful sentences, so finished, so deliberate, shaped themselves audibly upon the air. It was like being present at the actual construction of a little palace of thought, of improvised yet perfect design. The manner was not difficult to imitate: the slow accumulation of detail, the widening sweep, the interjection of grotesque and emphatic images, the studied exaggerations; but what could not be copied was the firmness of the whole conception.

Arthur Christopher Benson. *Memories and Friends* (Putnam). 1924. pp. 218–19

He had emerged as an impassioned geometer—or, shall we say, some vast arachnid of art, pouncing upon the tiny, air-blown particle and wrapping it round and round. And now a new prodigy had appeared, a style, the style that was the man Henry James had become. He had eschewed the thin, the sharp, the meagre; he had desired the rich, the round, the resonant, and all these things had been added unto him; everything that he had thought and felt and tasted and touched, the fabrics upon which his eyes had feasted, the colors that he had loved, the soft sounds, the delicate scents, had left their stamp upon the house of his spirit. . . . Metaphors bloomed there like tropical air-plants, throwing out branches and flowers; and every sound was muted and every motion vague.

Van Wyck Brooks. *The Pilgrimage of Henry James* (Dutton). 1925. pp. 130–1

To James's intimates, (his) elaborate hesitancies, far from being an obstacle, were like a cobweb bridge flung from his mind to theirs, an invisible passage over which one knew that silver-footed ironies, veiled jokes, tiptoe malices, were stealing to explode a huge laugh at one's feet. This moment of suspense, in which there was time to watch the forces of malice and merriment assembling over the mobile landscape of his face, was perhaps the rarest of all in the unique experience of talk with Henry James.

Edith Wharton. *A Backward Glance* (Appleton–Century). 1934. 178–9

In most writers their works exemplify their ambitions; Henry's were about his ambition, as they were, in one sense, only his ambition written large. Just as William (James)'s vision always came back to a loose sea of empiricism in which man could hold on only to his own plurality, so Henry's was to decline and to fill out the moral history of composition. His theory of art was not preparatory to a manipulation of experience. . . . The story of Henry James was the story of Henry James writing his novels.

Alfred Kazin. *New Republic*. Feb. 15, 1943. p. 217

That James's sensibility was essentially moral is made clear at once if we set his work beside that of, say, Proust. James was concerned with moral issues as they emerged in social behavior, while Proust's interest was in social behavior as such, a purely psychological interest in social mannerisms. Both writers, however, were novelists of sensibility: what interested them in human affairs was determined not by any public standard but by a sense of values peculiar to themselves for the communication of which they depended on technique—on style, on pattern, on the way emphasis was distributed throughout the narrative. And the ''story'' did not in any real sense exist apart from the technique.

David Daiches. *Kenyon Review*. Autumn, 1943. pp. 572–3

Loyalty to the pledged word, kindness as against cruelty, honor as against expedience—these are not the only specific values with which James concerns himself in his books; but they are basic to his vision of the world; and it is in his clear apprehension of what these values mean in a world in which intelligence is usually the tool of a self-assertive or sometimes merely meddlesome, but always immoral, will, that the quick of his interest lay.

Eliseo Vivas. *Kenyon Review*. Autumn, 1943. p. 585

James did not deal with etiquette detached from deep feeling. . . . Most of his novels and tales deal with middling people pursuing the two simplest objects of human concern—love and money. . . . It is true that James's mind is engrossed by the complexities and refinements to which passion and greed give rise in a world of elaborate laws and subtle modes of communication. But even in the course of inventing and unmasking the numberless disguises which these passions can assume, James holds to a simple view of their meaning: in acting out their feelings, people turn out either good or evil—a moral attitude which, taken with James's addiction to violent plots, leads me to say that he is a writer of melodrama.

Jacques Barzun. *Kenyon Review*. Autumn, 1943. p. 509

James perceived what was lacking in his father's world. His father's concern with what was universal rather than with what was individual had diffused itself so widely that it ended by losing the image of any actual man. Hence James was impelled to believe that the primary obligation for the artist was to start with the tangible, with what he had seen for himself. And if his image of man is restricted, if it has little of the radiant aura of his father's or of Emerson's aspirations, it possesses the indispensable quality of mature art: it is compellingly concrete. Therefore, although James did not advance the empirical attitude with the simple vigor of his brother, the world portrayed in his novels is of substantial value to

us in recharting our own world, if only by providing us with a target to shoot against.

F.O. Matthiessen. *Henry James: The Major Phase* (Oxford). 1944. p. 150

No one of his books has the survival value, in and by itself, of the great masters of life in representative portrayal—Dickens, Shakespeare, and in his limited field, Twain. But James did create a cult which gives his books a significance outweighing sometimes even their interest. It was not, as his enemies said, a cult of difficulty and obscurity. Difficulty was his personal choice. Obscurity is the fault of the reader who lacks, as James complained, the faculty of attention. . . . The true cult that Henry James founded was the cult of awareness. . . . James has educated his readers in *seeing* much as the psychologists and psychiatrists have educated us in *explaining*, new aspects of behavior.

Henry Seidel Canby. *Turn West, Turn East* (Houghton). 1951. p. 296

Henry James stands astride two centuries and reaches backward to a third; with him the American novel, in a single leap, attained a precocious maturity it has never surpassed. And it is now recognized that with Henry James the novel in English achieved its greatest perfection. By some queer irony, a writer from the New World—in an era when Americans were preoccupied with ever-widening frontiers and material things—arrived upon the scene of the Old World to set the house of fiction in order. To this Henry James dedicated the whole of his life. He became, in his time—and reaching over into ours—the first great theorist and scholar in the art which he himself practiced with such distinction.

Leon Edel. *Henry James: The Untried Years* (Lippincott). 1953. pp. 10–1

The extremes with which Henry James was obsessed had largely to do with the personal human relations and almost nothing at all to do with public relations except as they conditioned, marred, or made private relations. It may be said that James wooed into being—by seeing what was there and then going on to create what might be there in consciousness and conscience—a whole territory of human relations hitherto untouched or unarticulated. So excessive is this reach into relation, there is no escape possible for the creature caught in it except by a deepening or thickening of that relation until, since it cannot be kept up, it must be sacrificed. That is to say, its ideal force becomes so great that its mere actual shade becomes intolerable.

R.P. Blackmur. *The Lion and the Honeycomb* (Harcourt). 1955. p. 281

During the last third of the century James was engaged in doing something so different, so quintessentially American rather than European, that we have no terms in which to describe it. He was engaged in celebrating a triumph, the triumph of the vision of the moral life founded on personal freedom and unsupported by institutional props which the generation of his father and Emerson had elaborated. In this respect he was very nearly the contemporary of Hawthorne, Whitman, and Melville, each of whom, like himself, had worked out a version of tradition, a more or less complete apologetic, which incorporated in their works, had served to define the very criteria by which they wished to be judged.

Quentin Anderson. *The American Henry James* (Rutgers). 1957. p. 7

I do not like critics who attack James for having ''failed'' to treat life, for being sensuously thin, or for not dealing, in more blatant terms, with sexual love. These are the people who mistake the smell of the manured field for the harvested crop. James's fictions are the record of men and women, bleakly deprived through their Puritan, democratic, and American traditions of much that constitutes life for the European artist, searching for means to satisfy their spiritual and emotional needs without sacrificing what good they already possess, and which Europe cannot provide. It is a search for life, but it is a search in which, by the nature of the case, most are bound to fail. It was only a single couple, after all, that Hawthorne permitted to glimpse the Great Carbuncle, although many began the search. And even for that couple, the vision of the mystic jewel forced them to recognize that the reality they sought was in their own hearts. Europe is a symbol that acts in James's fictions rather like Hawthorne's Great Carbuncle. It shows everybody up for what they really are. In the end, those characters discover life who look for it in themselves, and in this sense Strether and Isabel find it. But it is not a version of ''life'' which everyone will find refreshing.

Marius Bewley. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1958. pp. 180–1

It is the particular achievement of Henry James that he was able to transform the moral color of his personal vision into the hues of his famous figure in the carpet; that he found a form for his awareness of moral issues, an awareness that was so pervasive it invaded furniture and walls and ornamental gardens and perched upon the shoulders of his people, a dove for spirit, beating its wings with the violence of all Protestant history; so that of this feeling, of the moving wing itself, he could make a *style*. This endeavor was both aided and hindered by the fact that, for James, art and morality were so closely twined, and by the fact that no theory of either art or morality had footing unless, previous to it, the terrible difficulties of vision and knowledge, of personal construction and actual fact, of, in short, the relation of reality to appearance had been thoroughly overcome. James' style is a result of his effort to master, at the level of his craft, these difficulties, and his effort, quite apart from any measure of its actual success with these things, brought to the form of the novel in English an order of art never even, before him, envisioned by it.

William H. Gass. *Accent*. Winter, 1958. p. 63

James, the least cynical of novelists, is also one of the roughest in his handling of a good number of his characters. His inherently idealistic temper is most active when least directly apparent, especially in his contemptuous attitude towards those he calls 'the fools who minister, at the particular crisis, to the intensity of the free spirit engaged with them.'

His comedy in these instances is invariably used in defence of the human capacities which he sees being thwarted not *within* the fools but by them, in their dealings with his favourites. Considering this aspect of comedy in James, we come to recognize features of his style that are seldom noticed: the witty and pointed verbal play, the exaggerated expression, the hyperbole in description by which . . . he satirizes all those who are not capable of reverence for impractical aspiration.

Richard Poirier. *The Comic Sense of Henry James* (Chatto and Windus). 1960. p. 249

With *The Sacred Fount* Henry James concluded his close occupation with British society. In *The Spoils of Poynton*, *What Maisie Knew*, *The Awkward Age*, and in this novel, he had castigated current greed, indifference to the young, licentiousness, destructive gossip, and the depraved tone of society, and none has dared to say that he was mistaken, for there is too much supporting evidence for his point of view. Further, he had richly and convincingly documented his cases, though without the bigotry of too many professionals moralists, as his sympathetic treatment of the emancipated Nanda Brookenham shows. He had, furthermore, greatly advanced his art by adept experimentation which makes the epithet applied by F.W. Dupee, ''the awkward period,'' to this passage in his work one of the most gratuitous of critical blunders, confuted by the attention, in the main, that Dupee gives to it. Save for *The Sacred Fount*, possibly, who would wish one of these novels unwritten? They not only helped Henry James to increase his skill for the major tasks ahead of him, but they have taught two generations to understand and appreciate technique in the novel, and thus prepared the way for the comprehension of modern fiction, unappreciable to some degree without an instructed taste.

Oscar Cargill. *The Novels of Henry James* (Macmillan). 1961. p. 296

He was not a major writer not only because of the narrow—if immensely elevated—range of his work; but because his chosen area of art was completely artificial and fanciful; neither British nor American at base, but only compounded of adolescent, or preadolescent, visions of what such a world *should* be like. Wasn't it composed at least half of a gloried British ''aristocracy,'' just beneath whom a few proletarian butlers perhaps, like the famous ''Brooksmith'' so often commended by the Jamesian critics; or the ''revolutionary'' little bookbinder Hyacinth Robinson of *The Princess Casamassima*; or the murky journalist Densher of *The Wings of the Dove*; beneath whom a few, as I say, of the Jamesian ''working-class'' protagonists simply yearned to ape this spurious nobility? Now this was also a world of rentiers and inheritors, for the condition of human freedom, according to James, was primarily to have inherited a fortune. Even his less successful heroes and heroines have a *little* fortune. And when they don't, they must be adopted by the British or American nobility which does have a fortune, as with Isabel Archer of *The Portrait of a Lady*. Or else, as with Kate Croy of *The Wings of the Dove*, they must set out to gain a fortune illegitimately, evilly, corruptly—and hence (to James) sexually.

Maxwell Geismar. *Henry James and the Jacobites* (Houghton). 1963. pp. 4–5

The formal means he uses to arouse interest, to woo the reader, to make the reader believe or entertain the fiction and be entertained by it, create moral issues for both author and reader which James was keenly aware of. He neither ignored the reader out of concern for the objective integrity of his novel nor was content simply to tell and show the reader things. His aims were more in keeping with the activist conception of art that is characteristic of American Thoreaus and Melvilles: he wanted not only to *show* things to the reader but to *act upon* him. The result in James's fiction is an intimacy of address to the reader which has all the contingencies and moral resonance of intimacy. By splicing the conventions of the novel of manners and the Gothic novel, he virtually created the *intimate* novel in English, though this is not to say that intimacy takes the form of exposed nakedness in the lives of the characters he depicts. It is both notorious and true that James's characters—probably even their innermost psyches—remain costumed. Moreover his concern for his own privacy and for that of others impelled him to convert an habitual reticence into the controlled tact of his narrative mode. James's intimacy is the intimacy of a novelistic form, placed in the near presence of the reader with a strange combination of caution and candor.

Laurence Holland. *The Expense of Vision* (Princeton). 1964. pp. x–xi

James was frequently preoccupied with obsessed types, possibly because they lend themselves so well to intense and dramatic situations and are intrinsically interesting. Sometimes their obsessiveness proceeds most explicitly from sexual frustration, as in the slight and dated but intense little story called ''The Visits'' (1892), or in *The Other House* (1896), where Rose Armiger commits a murder in order to remove an obstacle between her and the man she wishes to marry. Sometimes self-assertion, the establishment of one's own identity or one's own rights, lies at the core of such a character, for example Olive Chancellor in *The Bostonians* (1886) and, especially, Mrs. Gereth in *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897). And at other times these characters have some kind of ''intellectual'' objective, that is, they desire to know, to find out, to discover, an elusive truth. Of course these kinds of motives constantly intermingle within individual stories.

Jean Frantz Blackall. *Jamesian Ambiguity and The Sacred Fount* (Cornell). 1965. p. 162

There are explosive elements in James's fiction, and there is a good deal of (often surreptitious) passion; there are moments of sudden and extraordinary illumination, and there is perhaps a larger degree of sheer melodrama than one would like. These are aspects of James's essential dramatism, but the latter is not adequately defined in terms of them and even works, paradoxically, to reduce their traditional ''dramatic'' effect. James's dramatism was above all a principle of fictional form—but a principle rooted in a vision of human life.

James was a dramatist in fiction on the formal side because he sized up life as dramatic on the human and experiential side. He composed his best novels according to the principles of dramatic construction—almost, one sometimes feels, according to the principles of Aristotle's *Poetics*—because he believed it to be the purpose of fiction (as he once told a symposium on ''the novel'') to

give an impression of life. And it was his impression that life—life truly lived, and not squandered or simply not attempted at all—revealed the shape, the rhythm, and the slow relentlessness of classical and especially of neoclassical drama. . . . the most intense and accessible action for James was that of the aroused consciousness, as it expanded and came into focus through conflict with the consciousness of others. The ground of experience, in the Jamesian view, was the theater of consciousness, and the person most fully alive was the one who saw himself as a histrionic participant on that stage. The achievement of that special Jamesian kind of histrionic awareness and vitality is at the same time . . . an act of transcendence that partakes of the religious.

R.W.B. Lewis. *Trial of the Word* (Yale). 1965. pp. 112–3

His prose flowed over bounds, now recording talk, now summarizing it, now recording thought, now summarizing it; and as I have said before, were it not for the punctuation and some slight syntactical clues, one could not distinguish the tongue's utterance from the mind's flow. This is more acutely the case with James than with most of his contemporaries because in his work a single tone already informs the whole. James is always present (even when he is most scrupulously absent), animating his characters with his sensibility. Those characters are not puppets by any means, any more than Becky Sharp is, but they all are fragments of the parent organism. And because they are emanations of the experience James absorbed and transformed, the prose with which they are created necessarily reflects his controlling will. On the bread-and-butter level of techniques this means that almost all of James's later prose would be a form of talk: his talk, his characters' talk, his characters' inner talk: narrative, dialogue, rumination. James's late work is particularly marked by colloquial signs such as simple words, repeated words, parallel structures, emphasis by italics, emphasis by punctuation, and discursiveness.

Richard Bridgman. *The Colloquial Style in America* (Oxford). 1966. pp. 98–9

The thick sprawling profusion of James's fiction, the increasingly familiar drone or beguilement of the tone of his writer's voice . . . distract the reader's attention from the state of the author's heart or arteries. His youngest tales, in any case, have a mature magniloquence; and even his least attractive later morbid tales of self-pity are never devoid of delightful phrases or a thumb-nail sketch to surprise the reader to open laughter; so that an engaged reader is more conscious that 'this is James and nobody else,' rather than 'this is early James and not late James.' Finally, to tackle such a massive work of fiction as, say, *The Golden Bowl*, is to take on a whole new country: the reading is itself a sufficiently formidable task, and one forbears to inquire how, why or when it came to be written. . . .

One can more readily accept the limitations of James's life and art—and without the danger of joining those who, like foxes without tails, revere him just *because* of those limitations—if one grasps that from his very childhood it was quality of vision, rather than range of vision, that obsessed him.

S. Gorley Putt. *Henry James: A Reader's Guide* (Cornell). 1966. pp. 417, 422

In the 1890s Henry James passed through the flames. He began the decade having bid adieu to the social theme in favor of the eminence of the private experience, only, in his own life, to seek out, disastrously, a public career in the theater. He had emerged from this fiasco at mid-decade to experiment widely with his technique in order to realize the lessons his theatrical experience held for him, and he closed the decade on the threshold of one of the most significant achievements in the history of the novel in English. His themes over the decade modulated from freedom to the nature of art to the need for passion, each successive theme retaining the motifs of the earlier ones and building upon them. By the flames of the nineties he was refined as few American artists have ever been refined. But if they made of him a master they also made him increasingly inaccessible to the troubled young writers for whom the activities of the nineties were not tests of maturity but calls to youthful action. He was generously interested in those who would do what he could not or would not do—in [Stephen] Crane, in one direction, in [R.L.] Stevenson, in another—but his career, finally so passionately free and private, was not one which offered the quick lesson, the only these younger men had the patience to learn.

Larzer Ziff. *The American 1890s* (Viking). 1966. p. 63

What we miss in Henry's fiction is not morality but the ''over-beliefs'' that we generally associate with morality. Henry's religion, as Eliot said, is marked by an ''indifference to religious dogma'' but an ''exceptional awareness of spiritual reality.'' Henry's tolerance of formal religious structure is just as real as his brother's, but his true sympathies are just as obviously with the ''free'' religious elements that make up the individual human mind. If we see Henry's famous ''rejections'' in his brother's terms, then perhaps what are often thought of as their weaknesses become virtues. Fleda Vetch's hyperconscientiousness, Strether's amiable withdrawal, Catherine Sloper's prescinding from all vital life are valid precisely because they do not proceed from a fixed moral code but from unique moral beings. By contrast, those Jamesian people who remain even loosely within an orthodox moral framework seem shallow and predictable—Mme. de Vionnet, who maintains her nominal Catholic marriage; or the prince in *The Golden Bowl*; or Christina Light. The typical Jamesian protagonist is an Emersonian individual who exists in an unintellectualized faith-state that will lead him to unique moral action. He is not in touch with law but with the divine.

Robert J. Reilly. *American Literature*. March, 1967. p. 25

In literature—in ''going in for impressions,'' as he puts it—he found the way to turn his openness to advantage. No impression was wasted, no discussion, venture, excursion, or relation lost on the self that could variously respond to each and thus be perpetually redefined and enlarged. ''Nothing,'' he would write in response to a reviewer of *An International Episode* (1879), ''is my *last word* about anything.''

Henry James's essential theme, then, was the exploration of his own ego in the wide-ranging exploration of other selves. Aspiring to make a literature possessing a range of facts as wide as of Balzac's, Zola's, and Trollope's, yet as personally intense as Turgenev's, he exposed his visiting mind to the varieties of human

experience, drawing its wayward elements together in the focusing glass of his imagination.

Jay Martin. *Harvests of Change* (Prentice). 1967. p. 312

At the end [of *The Portrait of a Lady*], Isabel feels again, talking to Ralph, ''the good of the world.'' To reconcile the demands of the imagination with the impositions of the world is a delicate exercise; especially if the natural idiom of the imagination is a language of freedom, mobility, and range, and the idiom of the world is, for the most part, deception and abuse. In the great conversation with Madame Merle, early in the book, Isabel said that she could not consider herself expressed by anything. ''Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one.'' But she does not insist upon a Platonic poetry. Indeed, the momentum of James's fiction works against that recourse. To be an old woman without memories is dreadful, but the worst escape is in transcendence, where the good of the world, such as it is, cannot be felt. James was sure of little, but he was sure of this. It is the informing principle of his fiction.

Denis Donoghue. *The Ordinary Universe* (Macmillan—N.Y.). 1968. p. 74

In most of the late fiction, the real focus of James's story is on the effect experience has upon a ''registering consciousness,'' upon what this sensitive observer and participant can make of what he slowly, gropingly ''sees'' happening to him. However, though many readers of James fail to grasp this, ''seeing'' is never enough; the Jamesian hero, to be a hero, necessarily utilizes his newly gained insight in some kind of ethically meaningful action. . . . These positive actions which occur after awareness has been achieved counter a common view that James's heroes are ''trapped spectators'' of their fate. Correspondingly the *Autobiography* argues that as both artist and man James did not consider himself a passive victim of his intelligence.

William Hoffa. *Sewanee Review*. Spring, 1969. pp. 288–9

In Proust's major work and in Faulkner's finest novels—*The Sound and the Fury* and particularly *Absalom, Absalom!*—James's experiments with unreliable narration, the romance of subjective perception, are magnificently adapted and vindicated. But in *The Sacred Fount,* one finally says to oneself, precious little else is going on; the story of a story that fails to become clear makes, in the absence of other interests, a thin literary diet. Passion and intimacy—the subjects of the obsession—are absent from the novel in all but the most attenuated, cerebral forms. In fact, passion and intimacy are so muffled that the reader may wonder if the distance of reverent protection is not also the distance of abhorrence and repulsion, if the narrator's inexperience of these things is also the novelist's, and if the imagination is the only prism through which he can come at them, both by default and by design. Is the obsessive imagination of passionate experience a substitute, through fear, for the experience itself?

The vision of life posited by the sacred fount theory, if taken seriously, is a fearful one—surely more appalling than sublime—and there is every reason to believe that James was consciously experimenting with it. The gain and loss implied by its version of passion and intimacy—the profit and the cost of a close personal encounter with others—were soon to reappear in Chad and in Marie de Vionnet [in *The Ambassadors*]. And the gain and loss that come from merely imagining rather than undergoing such experience, from being repelled by its violence and thus substituting the *vision* of intimacy for intimacy itself—this only too clearly continued to fascinate James. If he painted a partial portrait of himself and his artistic stance toward experience in the narrator of *The Sacred Fount,* he was within the next year to envisage his two most haunting figures of the imagined as opposed to the realized life: John Marcher in ''The Beast in the Jungle'' and Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors*.

Philip M. Weinstein in *The Interpretation of Narrative*, ed. Morton W. Bloomfield (Harvard). 1970. pp. 208–9

James's moral manichaeism is the basis of a vision in which the social world is made the scene of dramatic choice between heightened moral alternatives, where every gesture, no matter how frivolous or insignificant it may seem, is charged with the conflict between light and darkness, salvation and damnation—where people's destinies and choices of life seem finally to have little to do with practical realities of a situation, and much more to do with an intense drama in which consciousness must purge itself and assume the burden of moral sainthood. The theme of renunciation which sounds through James's novels—Isabel Archer's return to Gilbert Osmond, Strether's return to Woollett, Densher's rejection of Kate Croy—is incomprehensible and unjustifiable except as a victory within the realm of a moral occult which may be so inward and personal that it appears restricted to the individual consciousness, predicated on the individual's ''sacrifice to the ideal.''

Peter Brooks. *Partisan Review*. Spring, 1972. p. 200

That James found the Gothic tradition a means of quelling personal fears and tensions is further borne out by his activities after the shock of his theatrical venture in 1895. About this period of failure, James remarks, ''. . .I have the imagination of disaster—and see life indeed as ferocious and sinister.'' Not coincidentally, thus, the powerful middle group of supernatural tales—among them, ''The Friends of the Friends'' (1896), ''The Turn of the Screw'' (1898), and ''The Real Right Thing'' (1899)—appear in the nineties after the failure of *Guy Domville*. In fact, the first entry in James's *Notebooks,* one week after the opening of the play, contains the germ of ''The Turn of the Screw.'' To this extent, at least, James routs and exorcises his own ''ghosts'' in his tales of terror.

Pamela Shelden. *Studies in the Literary Imagination*. Spring, 1974. p. 125

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JAMES, William (1842–1910)

James's genius lay chiefly in this, that he had by nature,—and retained undiminished to the end of his life,—an extraordinary immunity to the deadening influence of those intellectual processes of classification and generalization in which, in one form or another, scientific and philosophical reasoning largely consist. He kept an unweakened sense for the particularity of the particular,—a sense which the occupations of the philosophical system-builder ordinarily tend in a peculiar degree to atrophy. Thus he was always prepared to see in each individual person, each separate fact, each immediately present aspect of experience, even in each distinct logical category, something unique, unshared, irreducible, ineffably individuated. And toward each new, not-yet-fully-examined fact he always maintained an attitude of liberal expectancy; because it was enough like certain other facts to be classified with them was no reason for assuming that it might not, if given a fair chance, develop wholly novel and admirable qualities and potencies of its own.

> Arthur O. Lovejoy. *International Journal of Ethics*. Jan., 1911. p. 137

Our nation since the civil war has largely lost touch with the older forms of its own religious life. It has been seeking for new embodiments of the religious consciousness, for creeds that shall not be in conflict with the modern man's view of life. It was James's office, as psychologist, and as philosopher, to give a novel expression to this our own national variety of the spirit of religious unrest. . . . James's own robust faith was that the very caprices of the spirit are the opportunity for the building-up of the highest forms of the spiritual life; that the unconventional and the individual in religious experience are the means whereby the truth of a superhuman world may become most manifest. And this robust faith of James, I say, whatever you may think of its merits, is as American in type as it has already proved effective in the expression which James gave to it. It is the spirit of the frontiersman, of the gold seeker, or the home builder, transferred to the metaphysical and to the religious realm.

> Josiah Royce. *Science*. July 14, 1911. pp. 38–9

In person he was short rather than tall, erect, brisk, bearded, intensely masculine. While he shone in expression and would have

wished his style to be noble if it could also be strong, he preferred in the end to be spontaneous, and to leave it at that; he tolerated slang in himself rather than primness. The rough, homely, picturesque phrase, whatever was graphic and racy, recommended itself to him; and his conversation outdid his writing in this respect. He believed in improvisation, even in thought; his lectures were not minutely prepared. . . . The logic of opinions, as well as the exact opinions themselves, were not things James saw easily, or traced with pleasure. He liked to take things one by one, rather than to put two and two together. He was a mystic, a mystic in love with life. He was comparable to Rousseau and to Walt Whitman; he expressed a generous and tender sensibility, rebelling against sophistication, and preferring daily sights and sounds, and a vague but indomitable faith in fortune, to any settled intellectual tradition calling itself science or philosophy.

George Santayana. *Character and Opinion in the United States* (Scribner). 1920. pp. 66, 94

Every one, I suppose, would cite his sense of reality as Mr. James's foremost trait. I would not say that philosophers as a class are lacking in this trait, but the business of philosophy is to generalize and to systematize; and philosophers are under a greater temptation than others to follow the bent of their own leading principles, to fill in missing considerations and to overlook contrary indications. Mr. James was extraordinarily free from this defect. He saw things in the varied aspects which they have by nature, and was content to report them as he saw them. . . .

This brings me to what I should name as the second of Mr. James's gifts—his power of literary expression. This power strikes both the layman and the professional philosopher, and strikes them at first glance. I shall not be so stupid as to enlarge upon it, and, not being a literary critic, I shall not attempt to describe it. But it is pertinent to remark that in Mr. James's case not only was the style very much of the man, but it was also of the essence of his vision and of his thought. The picturesqueness of reference, the brilliant accuracy of characterization, by which he has enriched philosophic literature, were a part of his sense for the concrete, and for the varied aspects of the world.

John Dewey. *Characters and Events* (Holt). 1929. Vol. I. pp. 108–9

Evidently, then, our American philosophers are somehow at fault for the stagnancy of our life; and indeed, to explain the lapse, the defection, the fatuity of our own intellectuals one need go no further back than their acknowledged master, William James, that golden man and poet whose every personal trait, even to his ''Gothic earnestness,'' as Mr. Santayana would perhaps call it, was lovable and magnetic. To trust a spontaneous self that has not been leavened either with great new values or great old values, to turn whatever values one actually has, whether great or small, into moral ''cash,'' to live the life not of thought but of will, such is the virtual fiat of the Jamesian pragmatism; and as thought is not too common in America, and our present values are as stale and musty as values can well be, this, for us, is to beg the whole question of philosophy. By giving a fresh *cachet* to the ordinary working creed of a pioneer civilization, James led his disciples back into the wilderness from which they might otherwise have emerged; and then he left them. And their impulses trickled away into the sand.

Van Wyck Brooks. *Sketches in Criticism* (Dutton). 1932. pp. 39–40

William James delighted [Gertrude Stein]. His personality and his teaching and his way of amusing himself with himself and his students all pleased her. Keep your mind open, he used to say, and when some one objected, but Professor James, this that I say, is true. Yes, said James, it is abjectly true.

Gertrude Stein. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (Random). 1961. pp. 78–9. [1933]

James's thought has remained green when that of many of his contemporaries is withered. This is due not only to the sheer quality of his work, but to its pioneering spirit and prophetic insight. There *are* elements of James's thought that are at present under an eclipse—psychical research, for example, and individualistic-humanitarian liberalism. But if we compare the year 1935 with the year 1885, in which James may be said to have come of age, and plot the movement of the human mind and spirit during this half century, it is remarkable how much of James falls on the line. The attention to ''experience''; the free intermingling of psychology and philosophy in the study of perception, thought, and other forms of knowledge; the revolt against the dualisms of subject-object and of body-mind; the passing of scientific dogmatism, in both its mechanistic and its evolutionary forms; the empirical study of religion, and the tendency to ascribe noetic value to the mystical consciousness; the rise of the theory of value; the recognition of the emotional and other personal contaminations of thought; the dethroning of the Absolute and the decline of all forms of extreme monism; indeterminism; the stream of consciousness; the clinical approach to psychology, with its emphasis on personality and on the unconscious; the rejection of associationism, together with the emphasis on integral motor response, and on the organic unity of the conscious field; the development of applied and of social psychology; relativity, in all its wide range of meanings—these are some of the ideas whose vogue would make it quite possible for James to breathe the air of the present time, and whose proponents find it natural to quote him.

Ralph Barton Perry. *The Thought and Character of William James* (Little). 1935. Vol. 2. pp. 668–9

In 1878, when William James was thirty-six, Lewis Henry Morgan expounded in *Ancient Society* what he took to be the law of progress. James in the same year contracted with Henry Holt and Company to write a book, which appeared twelve years later, *Principles of Psychology*. The volume was one of the most important of James's many attacks upon the type of philosophy giving rise to such concepts as that of Morgan. A law of progress that really existed would have done violence to every conviction that James held dear. It implied a cosmic orderliness and a determinism which left no rôle for the individual save that of an automaton. What would be the use of striving to advance, if the cosmos has stacked the cards of history in favor of progress? What is the moral

advantage to the individual of struggling to do what the forces of nature are compelling him to do? Were Americans, freed after many years from Calvinistic foreordination, to become slaves to scientific determinism? The danger, thought James, lurked in the growing prestige of Darwinism. The hypothesis of the great naturalist seemed to imply an automatic and irresistible advance through the geologic ages. Morgan was one of the first to attempt to discover whether social progress is analogous to biological change. James shouted an emphatic ''No.'' He strove to find for the individual a philosophic world in which he would be important because of his uniqueness rather than because of his similarities to his fellows.

Ralph H. Gabriel. *The Course of American Democratic Thought* (Ronald). 1940. p. 282

Henry was always an isolated figure even in the philosophic James house-hold, where William was its reigning heir, the versatile young naturalist who spoke in his father's hearty voice even when he revolted against his father's theology, the naturalist in a scientific era whose interests drew him everywhere. William could at least follow Henry's works and comment on them (he commented on everything)—praise the early style or deplore the later, admire a character and confer a judgment. When William's first book, the great *Psychology*, appeared in 1890, Henry could only fidget in embarrassment and complain that he was too absorbed properly to appreciate ''your mighty and magnificent book, which requires a stretch of leisure and an absence of 'crisis' in one's own egotistical little existence.''

Alfred Kazin. *New Republic*. Feb. 15, 1943. p. 215

The word ''creation'' is itself a symptomatic Jamesian word. The path that James took to reach philosophy, we must remember, was through psychology, after a fruitless attempt at an artistic career and a very fair start in the biological sciences. But both in biology and psychology, pure collecting and classifying was hardly James's forte; his mind was truly inductive but not statistical. He was interested in meanings, and psychology gave him an opportunity to exercise at once his experimental and his interpretative and metaphysical gifts. The result is well known: he revolutionized psychology by freeing it from both materialism and idealism. The mind was no longer a machine nor did it do any ''copying'' of a preëstablished order. The stream of thought revealed its objects with complete vividness, immediacy and continuity, for, like an artist, the mind had created its order. . . . The further consequence of James's pragmatism is his refusal to make thought or art end with itself. The passage is well known in which he suggests that if one's ego has been elevated into a sense of Olympian power by an artistic experience, one should try to discharge the feeling into some action—even if it be as slight as speaking a kind word to one's aunt.

Jacques Barzun. *New Republic*. Feb. 15, 1943. pp. 219–20

. . . between spurts of enthusiasm W[illiam]J[ames]'s young manhood knew not only boredom but the gravest sort of anxiety. He had his father's excitable nature without the steady lodestar of his father's faith. The strain upon him can be observed in the succession of neurotic symptoms that oppressed him so severely that it was for some years doubtful whether he would ever be able to adjust to a normal career. The general frailty that had kept him out of the Civil War grew far more marked during the latter half of his twenties. . . .

. . . His greatest natural gift, as much an artist's as a psychologist's, was for seizing upon and describing the qualities of the ''fugitive sequences'' of consciousness. His formulations have none of the pompousness or the dessication of the usual professorial philosopher. He was, indeed, forever warning his friends against the ''earnest search for coherency in a mind that is but a jumble of fragments.'' He often scandalized colleagues by what Perry has called ''a pathological repugnance to the processes of exact thought.'' But this repugnance rose from his ever living sense of ''the gaping contrast between the richness of life and the poverty of all possible formulas.'' He was thus a philosopher in Emerson's sense. He was Man Thinking, as a result of the impact of life and of the need to find his directions.

F.O. Matthiessen. *The James Family* (Knopf). 1948. pp. 209–10

Personally, James acknowledged, he wished always to live in the light of the world's concrete fullness. He was constantly sensitive to the gaping contrast between the richness of life and the poverty of all possible formulas. The perception of this contrast influenced both his thinking and his way of writing. It likewise justified—at least to him—those temperamental aversions which frequently spurred him into controversies and crusades. His distaste for systematic logic, formal dialectic and deductive analysis was so intense that some of his professional colleagues charged him with ''a pathological repugnance to the processes of exact thought.'' . . . Philosophers, James believed, had a social responsibility. It was their duty to address the largest possible audience, to reach and touch and move the common mind.

Lloyd R. Morris. *William James* (Scribner). 1950. p. 3

James argued that the inner life is far richer than philosophers and psychologists had supposed. Even *relationship*, a great stumbling-block in epistemology, is directly experienced, because experiences overlap. All rationalists had contended that *causality* must be deduced from succession, but James found it to be experienced in personal activity. He pointed out that conjunctions and prepositions, such as *and, but, as, if, because, then, for, neither*, etc., were not empty of sensory content but aroused definite feelings of motion, anticipation, proximity, etc., and therefore served as ''transitive states'' between the ''substantative states'' (perceptions: images, sensations, memories). By such concrete examples and close—even subtle—reasoning James presented his arguments for direct or *radical* experience. Everything real could be experienced, and all experience was real. Thus *experience* and *reality* were the same thing, and could be summed up as: ''a field of consciousness including its objects thought or felt, plus an attitude in regard to these objects, plus a sense of self to which this attitude belongs.'' Having to admit a ''sense of self'' was undoubtedly one of the problems in this theory.

Gay Wilson Allen. *William James* (Viking). 1967. p. 510

It is one aspect of the genius of James, and of his modernity, that to inquire into the psychological origins of his philosophy is not to imply even the smallest disrespect. He anticipated the inquiry. In a sense he was the first truly modern philosopher, because he hoped to understand the mechanisms by which philosophers, not excluding himself, project their inner conflicts and anxieties upon the universe, and because he was for this reason incapable of the pomposities which philosophers ordinarily use to protect themselves. He knew that his symptoms of conflict had often been the occasion of religious conversions: how natural that, in the emancipated James household, they should prompt an obsession with the freedom of the will and with the problems of personal identity and dual personality. He could not press his self-analysis very far, if only because he had not even the outlines of a tested theory with which to work. His phenomenology of philosophical attitudes was largely guesswork and literary intuition.

Stuart Hampshire. *New York Review of Books*. June 29, 1967. p. 3

In spite of being a better arguer than Emerson, James was just as prepared as the Concordian to give sentiment a central place in his theory of knowledge. Although James followed Locke on certain issues in his *Principles of Psychology* of 1890, James in that work gave sentiment a decisive, un-Lockeian role in the acceptance of metaphysical beliefs. In *The Will to Believe*, a collection of essays, published in 1897, he gave sentiment a similar role in religion. In his *Pragmatism* of 1907 he went further and made sentiment a factor in the acceptance of *all* beliefs; and in *A Pluralistic Universe*, published in 1909, one year before he died, James defended a form of anti-intellectualism which was very close to that of Bergson and the tradition of philosophical Romanticism. In *Pragmatism* James went well beyond Edwards and Emerson in making claims on behalf of the heart and the ''whole man,'' and thereby brought to a climax one of the most powerful strains in the history of philosophy in America.

Morton White. *Science and Sentiment in America* (Oxford—N.Y.). 1972. p. 172

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JARRELL, Randall (1914–1965)

Randall Jarrell is our most talented poet under 40, and one whose wit, pathos and grace reminds us more of Pope or Matthew Arnold than of any of his contemporaries. . . . Monstrously knowing and monstrously innocent—one does not know just where to find him . . . a Wordsworth with the obsessions of Lewis Carroll. . . . Jarrell has gone far enough to be compared with his peers, the best lyric poets of the past: he has the same finesse and originality that they have, and his faults, a certain idiosyncratic willfulness and eclectic timidity, are only faults in this context.

Robert Lowell. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 7, 1951. pp. 7, 41

His unflinching grasp of brutal events is dictated by a great compassion. He is like one who, in order to cut off the dragon's head, must grasp his sword below the hilt, and does so. . . . Along with such obvious victims as the Jews and the soldiers and their kin, his compassion includes the enemy, not only German children, but PW's. His work sometimes seems obsessively repetitive, and no single piece is as brilliant as his criticism, but nearly all are redeemed by a tender incisiveness.

Babette Deutsch. *Poetry in Our Time* (Holt). 1952. pp. 376–7

It has been clear for some time that Randall Jarrell is one of the most gifted poets and critics of his generation. . . . Jarrell goes beyond the standards and the discriminations of T.S. Eliot, which have dominated the criticism of poetry for the past twenty-five years, and he does so by including and assimilating Eliot's views. . . . He succeeds in being joyous, angry, contemptuous and gay as well as lucid, direct and colloquial with complete genuineness and ease. And when he is amusing as he often is, he is at the same time and unerringly illuminating.

Delmore Schwartz. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 16, 1953. p. 1

Mr. Jarrell's riches are of the mind; they consist in his passion for understanding and particularly for the understanding poetry embodies. . . . He makes fine wry jokes . . . which recognize both his painful awareness of undemocratic superiority and his discomfort at the maldistribution of intelligence which causes it. . . . But some of the time he is no better than the rest of us, failing to keep himself suspended between his two truths. . . . In these moods he alternates between oversimplified invectives against comic books and television sets . . . and exaggerations of the badness of literary criticism which would make you think—did you not know better—that all the critics in the country show up regularly at New York cocktail

parties in order to make it clear that they never read any book not recommended by *The Partisan Review*.

Arthur Mizener. *Sewanee Review*. July, 1954. pp. 504–7

Jarrell's verse . . . was promising. But it seems to me that the flaws in his early poems have become the mannerisms of his later work: a conscious sentimentality—flung, evidently, in the face of sophistication—and a conscious carelessness, a deliberate disregard of the means of control, whether in ''free'' or ''regular'' verse. His war poems have done the most to give him the reputation he now possesses, but it is difficult to understand why these particular verses have been so celebrated; perhaps they seem more realistic, concentrating as they do on the more obvious horrors. Bathos and sentimentality is what they contain for me.

Donald Hall. *New World Writing* 7. 1955. p. 238

His recurring themes are childhood, war and literature. The world of the child is his chief area of symbolism—Jarrell is practically the only living poet who insists on this world—and his almost obsessive return to the great childhood myths is sometimes as painful as a psychoanalysis. . . . In some of Jarrell's writing, criticism and fiction as well as poetry, there is a tendency toward sentimentality and cruelty, but in the major part—and the major part is certainly the poetry—there is a breadth of spirit which is wholly admirable and exemplary.

Karl Shapiro. *New York Times Book Section*. March 13, 1955. p. 4

In his 'civilian' poetry, Jarrell is often moved by the pathetic attempt of the child-mind to encompass death and life's harshness. No one can convey more sympathetically than he that hazy, dreaming state in which fantasy, dream, fairy tale, and reality are indistinguishable from one another and from the suffering in the speaker's mind. . . . Jarrell uses folklore as a rich source of insight into the 'unknown unwanted life' and its relation to innocent suffering. He sometimes seems to be echoing German Romantics like Ludwig Tieck and E.T.W. Hoffmann, whose interest in similar materials had morbid and sensational aspects and who at times seem to be foreshadowing modern psychoanalytic thought. Jarrell, however, whatever his subject, whether the death of a Negro girl in ''Lady Bates,'' or the hallucinatory wretchedness of the woman who speaks in *''Seele im Raum,''* or his own feeling of lost cultural possibilities in ''A Girl in a Library,'' is always seeking to evoke an acute feeling of violated sensibility.

Everywhere in Jarrell the world seems to be locked in a grisly dream of the endless victimization of man.

M.L. Rosenthal. *The Modern Poets* (Oxford). 1960. p. 246

Yet despite this preoccupation with suffering and death, this sad conviction that as ''The Place of Death'' concludes, '''Only man is miserably,''' Jarrell's poems in *Losses* and his other mature books are not depressing when taken as a whole, though the reader of this article may have so decided. For one thing, though Jarrell is often ironic, he is much less frequently satiric; irony may cut painfully to the bone, but at least it does not inflict the burning smart that satire does. Again, even while reproaching us and himself for our inhumanity, Jarrell usually tempers his anger with compassion: like Mark Twain he feels pity for the ''poor damned human race.'' Furthermore, he is aware of the humanity that may paradoxically exist in conjunction with or in spite of inhumanity. . . . Finally, Jarrell manages in some of his poems to convey a kind of irrational sense of limited hopefulness, a sense that, despite man's external subjection to the State or to economic forces and his internal subjection to his own nature, life is nevertheless an open affair rather than a closed one if only because of man's imaginative powers.

Walter Rideout in *Poets in Progress*, ed. Edward Hungerford (Northwestern). 1962. p. 169

The strength of Mr. Jarrell's vision [in *The Lost World*] is its inclusiveness, his ability to hold opposites together. The dark forest of myth and dream is just outside, in the woods behind the houses, the ''bottom of the world'' is just beneath the lids of sleep. It is the natural world of childhood, and it should be a part of ''the dailiness of life'' in the adult world as well. Mr. Jarrell's terms are not a simple opposition of innocence and experience, for the lost world of childhood contains both the innocence of belief and a darkness within or beneath the innocence, a primordial mindlessness, fertile with old experience, and symbolized in various ways. . . .

Samuel Moon. *Poetry*. Sept., 1965. pp. 425–6

Randall Jarrell had his own peculiar and important excellence as a poet, and out-distanced all others in the things he could do well. His gifts, both by nature and by a lifetime of hard dedication and growth, were wit, pathos, and brilliance of intelligence. These qualities, dazzling in themselves, were often so well employed that he became, I think, the most heart-breaking English poet of his generation. . . .

In his last and best book, *The Lost World*, he used subjects and methods he had been developing and improving for almost twenty years. Most of the poems are dramatic monologues. Their speakers, though mostly women, are intentionally, and unlike Browning's, very close to the author. Their themes, repeated with endless variations, are solitude, the solitude of the unmarried, the solitude of the married, the love, strife, dependency, and indifference of man and woman—how mortals age, and brood over their lost and raw childhood, only recapturable in memory and imagination. Above all, childhood! This subject for many a careless and tarnished cliché was for him what it was for his two favorite poets, Rilke and Wordsworth, a governing and transcendent vision.

Robert Lowell. *New York Review of Books*. Nov. 25. 1965. pp. 3–4

Randall Jarrell was difficult, touchy, and oversensitive to criticism. He was also a marvelous conversationalist, brilliantly funny, a fine poet, and the best and most generous critic of poetry I have known. I am proud to remember that, although we could rarely meet, we remained friends for twenty years. Sometimes we quarreled, silently, in infrequent letters, but each time we met we would tell each

other that it had meant nothing at all; we really were in agreement about everything that mattered.

He always seemed more alive than other people, as if constantly tuned up to the concert pitch that most people, including poets, can maintain only for short and fortunate stretches.

Elizabeth Bishop in *Randall Jarrell, 1914–1965*, ed. Robert Lowell, Peter Taylor, and Robert Penn Warren (Farrar). 1967. p. 20

All the voices in all of Jarrell's poems are crying, ''Change me!'' The young yearn to be old in order to escape from their nocturnal fears; the old long for the time of their youth, no matter how poor and miserable it was, for ''in those days everything was better''; life is moving toward the death; the dead are moving back into life, and wherever they come, they come in disguises. It is a world of shifts and changes, as in a fairy tale, and the only reason you suspect it is more is that Cinderella and the Dwarfs and the Frog Prince have had a curse put on them: they have real memories and real fears. Karl Shapiro once acutely observed that Jarrell's ''almost obsessive return to the great childhood myths is sometimes as painful as psychoanalysis,'' and that the subtitle of his work might well be ''Hansel and Gretel in America.'' What Hansel and Gretel tell us is that the woods are dark and that the creatures who inhabit them change their skins. In the mythic imagination metamorphosis is the great theme underlying all others. To the individual psyche it is the way out of the cage.

Stanley Kunitz in *Randall Jarrell, 1914–1965*, ed. Robert Lowell, Peter Taylor, and Robert Penn Warren (Farrar). 1967. pp. 99–100

I will always go on writing for Randall: that is, for an attention, ear, and spirit on which nothing was wasted, and which nothing escaped. A poem—including those very different from his own—was a natural environment for him; he entered a strange poem as a great naturalist might enter a strange forest, every nerve awake—but as a naturalist who was himself part bird, part liana, part jaguar. His influence on the poetry of his time has yet to be fathomed: it worked through his own poems, his published criticism, his teaching, his involvement with the work of his friends. For many of us, if asked that old question: ''To what or whom do you address your poems?'' the truthful answer would be: ''To the mind of Randall Jarrell.''

Adrienne Rich in *Randall Jarrell, 1914–1965*, ed. Robert Lowell, Peter Taylor, and Robert Penn Warren (Farrar). 1967. p. 183

Jarrell was not good with raw wounds. He needed, for the good of the poetry, a wound not quite healed and yet as close to healing as it would ever come. He needed to be able to go a little way off, far enough to talk about the experience. He was not a dramatic poet. Reading his poems is not like seeing *King Lear*: it is like the relief of breaking a wounded silence, letting the pain drain away in words, in companionable talk. When we say that his idiom is conversational, we mean that it is like the conversation that helps, in trouble; balm to hurt minds. . . .

Jarrell is a little Proust to whom, as someone has said, the only real paradises are lost paradises, spectrally recovered in memory and vision. Memory is compulsive in this poet, as if he feared that by losing anything he would lose everything.

Denis Donoghue. *The Ordinary Universe* (Macmillan—N.Y.). 1968. pp. 34, 37

At the center of *The Third Book of Criticism*, and of Jarrell's critical achievement as a whole, are his essays on modern poets: in this volume Stevens, Auden (twice) and Robert Graves. The ''method'' is unvarying: a setting out, from evidence of the poems and the biography, of the poet's main attitude (in Auden, it is the changes of attitude which interest Jarrell); an attempt to distinguish the best poems from the second- or third-best (with Stevens and Graves, as in the Frost essays, Jarrell provides lists—the invitation is to check out the list, not memorize it); an attempt to sum up and salute the poet's work, i.e. why and how it has given Jarrell so much reading pleasure. Nothing could be simpler; nothing more difficult of accomplishment. Throughout the essays, always in an offhand, metaphorically illustrative manner, run analogies with music that suggest why Jarrell is so secure in his taste, especially when it involves listening to effects. . . .

Then there are the satisfying ways that common sense, what any fool should know if he had a thought in his head, is made to reveal about the poet something we didn't quite know. . . . This common sense, which usually means for Jarrell comic sense, is not merely turned against an easy target like ''critics''; he is sure enough of his admirations to know that full and convincing praise of a poet's work means that some adverse comment on it, however slight, must also be involved.

William H. Pritchard. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1970. p. 375

While no Miniver Cheevy (his reputation as a nondrinker would preclude that), Randall Jarrell seems in some respects more suited to the heroic days of ''iron clothing'' than to the computerized society he reacted against in *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket*. His sensibility leads him to prefer a Renaissance mask just as surely as Pound in ''Histrion.'' Like his nineteenth-century idol, Goethe, he looked backward in time, at least in these analogies with art, for his inspiration. He is no more just a voice of his own age than Goethe's *Faust* is an exponent of the *Sturm und Drang* period wherein it was written. Jarrell's fondness for the Renaissance as incarnated into art caused him to cherish its works, such as Uccello's *The Battle of San Romano*, . . . brought back to him in a good reproduction by his friend Robert Lowell after a trip to Italy. As for Brueghel, he kept a copy of *Hunters in the Snow* in his office, in addition to the one in ''the little house in the woods.''

Like Goethe, Randall Jarrell had almost superhuman versatility, a mark of that intelligence which was the wonder of all his associates, and a Renaissance curiosity as well as desire for excellence, ranging from athletics, fashions, and sports cars to classical ballet, music, and painting. He fits the passage wherein Ophelia recalls the Hamlet she knew before his mission of revenge disordered his princely qualities. Harold Jantz in *Goethe's Faust as a Renaissance Man: Parallels and Prototypes* quotes the German writer as saying in 1826: ''As long as the poet merely expresses his own few objective perceptions, he cannot be called a poet but as

soon as he knows how to make the world his own and to express it, he is a poet.'' Jarrell knew how to, and was. . . .

No reason for Jarrell's devotion to *Faust* strikes one as more relevant than this further comment by Harold Jantz: ''We should turn to it [*Faust*] not to learn precepts for life but to learn life.'' Goethe had an uncanny ability to enter into the Renaissance. The heart of the Renaissance is Man; and into the heart of Man, in poem after poem, Randall Jarrell also enters.

Bernetta Quinn. *Randall Jarrell* (Twayne, 1981), pp. 90–91

As critics have variously noticed, much of Jarrell's poetry springs from the conflict between intellect and imagination. His remarkable genius for articulate form is felt to be struggling with the desire to yield to an upsurge of unconscious images and dreams. This tension between consciousness and the perilous realm of the unconscious—central to Jarrell's oeuvre—is not unrelated to the poet's lifelong concern with psychology and strongly colors his use of images and symbols. In fact, many poems directly enact this tension through the device of contrasting pairs like darkness/light, sea/island, forest/clearings, sleep/waking. The beginning of ''The Märchen'' is a case in point. . . . The reader quickly notices the structural opposition between forest, sea, and night on the one hand, and clearing, island, and sunlight on the other. The two groups of images (interchangeable in each set) clearly represent the underlying antithesis of the conscious and the unconscious. While the reference to the history of tools used by primitive man alludes to the phylogenetic evolution of the human mind, the ontogenetic development is implied as well: each individual clears his own space in the forest (''We felled our islands there'') encouraged by the illusory belief in the permanence of his achievement. However, at the end of day (both in terms of individual life and of human history) original darkness will once more prevail. In Jarrell's work, correlative pairs of this type always betray a latent instability; light, island, clearing, and their variants precariously maintain their existence against overwhelming odds. To Randall Jarrell the conflict between consciousness (form) and the unconscious (energy) is the very essence of the poetic process. In the act of writing the poet bravely attempts to win archetypal images from the dark source of the unconscious: ''. . . well water/Pumped from an old well at the bottom of the world./The pump you pump the water from is rusty/ And hard to move. . . .'' The poet appears as a mythmaker, and his creative act as a ceaseless struggle between unconscious drives and the conscious control of form. . . .

It has often been observed that Jarrell's poetry abounds with motifs from myths and fairy tales, as well as with psychoanalytic casebook studies and dreams. Like C. G. Jung, Jarrell regards myths, fairy-tales, and individual dreams as revelatory of the nature of the human psyche in general and of the creative act in particular. . . .

In his poetic world no child can rely on maternal help in a moment of distress or danger, for the mother is invariably depicted as either absent, dead, fainting, crazy, or thoroughly hostile. Throughout his life Jarrell was painfully aware that his character had largely been determined by his childhood experiences, in particular by the unbringing he received from his mother. Since his father left the family when Randall was still a little boy, his mother became his chief influence. And yet, the biographical evidence is not sufficient to explain the predominance of the mother figure in Jarrell's work. Although he repeatedly asserts that man cannot escape his own mother, whose image he carries forever with him, it is clear that the poetic significance of the mother figure far transcends that of any individual woman: ''Back far enough, down deep enough, one comes to the Mothers.''

Helen Hagenbüchle. In *Critical Essays on Randall Jarrell*, ed. Suzanne Ferguson (G.K. Hall, 1983), pp. 101–3

To read [Randall] Jarrell on a poet was to learn something not only about the poet but about poetry—about what it would look like if cornered. His unselfconscious, unapologetic, only slightly bullying assurance that he knew what ''real'' poetry constitutes had the backing of his spirited articulation. His plain-as-air sentences, his formidable if sprightly turn for satire, the persuasive reasonableness of his words, words in which you instantly saw what he saw, and as he saw—these made his prose the civilized equivalent of an action comic strip's BAMS! ZAPS! and POWS!

The finest poetry? It ''lives along the line'' (''like Poe's spider''). This means that ''a poet *has* to treat the concrete as primary, as something far more than an instance, . . . a member of a laudable category''; it means (and here Jarrell quotes his master, Goethe) that ''he who grasps [the] particular as living essence also encompasses the universal.'' It means too that the subject must individualize the poem (just so, Frost's poems, which are ''wonderfully alike,'' are also ''wonderfully different''). And it means that the subject will, in turn, be individualized by the poet, along with the medium (''personal distinction, . . . involuntary individuality. . . are marks of a real poet'').

Calvin Bedient. *Sewanee Review*. Winter, 1985, p. 129

A final poem from *Blood for a Stranger*, ''90 North,'' is one of the most memorable of Jarrell's early poems, and the one that contains what is probably, after his conclusion to ''The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner,'' his most frequently quoted line. The title refers to the North Pole, where the dreaming child arrives after clambering ''up the globe's impossible sides.'' For children of Jarrell's generation reaching the North Pole . . . had meaning as an ultimate adventure of the human spirit; and for a moment the child dreams that the achievement of that adventure is his. He stands at the point where all lines converge and the only direction left is south. His satisfaction quickly vanishes, however, as he perceives that the pole of his own existence is like that. And the pole of his life, too, all the lines and winds converge, but they do so in a meaningless whirlpool. He must live and die by accident, and whatever happens he must remain alone. The knowledge that he gained from his adventure in living, ''wrung [in pain] from the darkness,'' is what the world calls wisdom. He knows better: ''It is pain.''

J. A. Bryant, Jr. *Understanding Randall Jarrell* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina, 1986), p. 44

Randall Jarrell was a second-rate poet and first-rate critic. Most people would have been satisfied with this; not Jarrell. He had to be at the top in everything that mattered to him, and poetry mattered more than criticism, though first-rate critics may be even rarer than first-rate poets in America. The dimly sensed subaltern status in poetry could have been in large measure what killed him. Actually, of course, it was a car. The car sideswiped him as he was returning one evening from a hospital where he was being treated as an

outpatient for an improperly healing hand injury incurred when, in a fit of depression some months earlier, he had slashed his wrist.

Did that car hit him or did he hit the car? Most of his friends believe his death to have been a suicide; only his widow, Mary, has fanatically maintained it was an accident. I myself concluded a review of Jarrell's fourth and last collection of criticism (*New Leader*, September 8, 1980), ''Members of his family . . . who have tried to make his death appear an accident do him a disservice: They turn into a prosaic mishap what was a meting out of poetic, or at least critical, justice, mistakenly but gallantly applied.'' Now, however, William H. Pritchard has joined the widow's campaign by arguing at great length against the suicide theory in *Randall Jarrell: A Literary Life*. He then jejunely declares that ''it is not only impossible but also unimportant to 'decide' about Jarrell's death by labeling it suicide or accident.''

It seems to me, on the contrary, important to understand the nature of Jarrell's death, for it may hold clues to what his life was about. . . .

If we look at the chief American poets born just before or during World War I—Theodore Roethke, Delmore Schwartz, John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, and Robert Lowell—we are struck by the truth of Leslie Fiedler's observation in *Waiting for the End*: ''Sometimes, indeed, it seems as if the path which leads back and forth between the classroom and the madhouse is the one which the modern American muse loves especially to tread.'' In this quincunx, Jarrell would have appeared, until the last phase, the healthiest mentally. He did teach quite steadily, and did not go off on periodic binges or stays in nonacademic institutions. Yet to the careful gaze his discipline was hard-won, costly and relative; after 50 years, it cracked. Why?

John Simon. *New Leader*. May 14–28, 1990, p. 13

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JEFFERS, Robinson (1887–1962)

Mr. Jeffers . . . has abandoned narrative logic with the theory of ethics, and he has never achieved . . . a close and masterly style. His writing is loose, turgid, and careless; like most anti-intellectualists, he relies on his feelings alone and has no standard of criticism for them outside of themselves. There are occasional good flashes in his poems . . . but they are very few, are very limited in their range of feeling and in their subject matter, and they are very far between.

Yvor Winters. *Poetry*. Feb., 1930. p. 283

Jeffers is an important poet because of the exalted range and dignity of his thought. There is in all of his work a strain of nobility which is no more than a reflection of his own character. He has suffered (and does), and as a result some of his verse is too tortured and painful to endure. There are those who are shocked by his frank use of sexual themes; others disagree with his philosophy and values; some find his unorthodox faith to be sinful. But none can deny the simple forthright honesty and passion for truth implicit in everything Robinson Jeffers has written.

Lawrence Clark Powell. *Robinson Jeffers* (San Pasqual). 1940. p. 210

One must, somehow, separate the idea and its expression, remembering that the poem transcends the experience and the personality that prompted it. Between Jeffers the philosopher and Jeffers the poet there is a significant dichotomy. The philosophy is negative, repetitive, dismal. The poetry, even when bitterest, is positive as any creative expression must be. It is varied in movement and color; it vibrates with a reckless fecundity; it is constantly breaking through its own pattern to dangerous and unfathomed depths. . . .Here is a full-throated poetry, remarkable in sheer drive and harrowing drama, a poetry we may never love but which we cannot forget.

Louis Untermeyer. *Modern American Poetry* (Harcourt). 1950. p. 378

Mr. Jeffers's alterations are . . . distortions of the *dynamis*, the central drive, of the play itself. And the trouble lies in his language. With few exceptions, a heightening of the dramatic tension of a situation is the signal for the shouting to begin; and the shouting, like noises heard in delirium, drowns out the meaning of the poem. The passion of Euripedes becomes the Californian violence of Mr. Jeffers, and I must further particularize that violence as Hollywoodian. . . . (In *Medea*) he gives us a Grand-Guignol version of an oriental Hedda Gabler with the diction of Termagant and the manners of a fishwife.

Dudley Fitts in *Kenyon Critics*, edited by John Crowe Ransom (World). 1951. pp. 309–11

We stand tongue-tied before the poetry of Jeffers, not merely in awe of its primitive strength, but in bewilderment: what is one to think of these anachronisms? In an age that has forsworn prophecy, especially in art, Jeffers speaks always in the accents of Isaiah and Jeremiah, albeit invoking no deity. In a time of multiple meanings and ambiguous tropes, Jeffers speaks directly, with no mistaking his meaning. In a period of harmonic subtleties, he employs only the whole tone scale. . . . Jeffers, with a contempt for artistry that is as pervasive as his contempt for man, delivers his parables of violence and his hymns to hopelessness with a one-dimensional straightforwardness that is almost Homeric. And the similes he

uses, if not Homeric, are as primitively American as the flintlock and the Maypole.

Selden Rodman. *Poetry*. July, 1954. pp. 226–7

Jeffers does not always miss. He *can* convince our minds as well as our senses, and often the strength of his voice carries the day despite everything. As Sandburg sees the great theme of possibility implicit in American and modern life, so Jeffers sees the great tragic working-out of man's doom and tries to salvage a perspective which will render it less painfully significant. As Sandburg delights in the surfaces of our varied American world and plays lightly with common moods and themes, so Jeffers seeks out the solitary passionate figure, the hawk as symbol, the impersonal and nonsocial sources of value. . . . And Jeffers, like Conrad Aiken, John Crowe Ransom, John Peale Bishop, and a host of other writers all admirable in their several ways, has maintained a certain traditionalism in his art and thought—at a crucial cost, however. All these writers have forgone that ultimate expenditure of energy which can harness the past to new formal and psychological directions and thus give it truly renewed meaning and power.

M.L. Rosenthal. *The Modern Poets* (Oxford). 1960. p. 159

To those who, like him, were disaffected by the preciosities and pedantries of the New Poets, of Eliot and Pound and the Imagists, Jeffers seemed a sound American voice. Here was a sort of disillusioned Walt Whitman, rolling out nightmarish tragedies and marsh landscape studies of the California coast in long rhetorical lines. These were poems to be shouted aloud. . . .

Jeffers may have been the only public spokesman of our time actively anticipating the equivalent of a nuclear war. Man's story, for him, has been one of the pettiest, most hateful cruelties; his narrative poems are a bloody sequence of violent crimes; his ''lyrics'' are screaming with majestic birds and beasts whipped and mangled by their master Man. . . . But as years went on, and the self-same fulminations kept crackling out of Tor House—his annual burnt offerings to appease the hungry coastside gods, Jeffers once called them—fewer and fewer were shocked, or even listening.

David Littlejohn. *Commonweal*. Dec. 7, 1962. pp. 276–7

Thirty years ago Robinson Jeffers was a name to reckon with among American poets; the somber, almost exultant naturalism of *Cawdor*, *Roan Stallion*, and *Thurso's Landing* carried a powerful thrust for readers disillusioned by the dilapidated doctrines that set man squarely in the center of the universe. More than anyone else, at the time, he saw man as the despoiler of all he touched, the enemy not only of the world in which he must always be an alien but also of himself. But the depression years and the darkening shadow of political and moral crisis made it ironically easy to write off Jeffers' attitude as anti-intellectual and anti-humane, and he has never regained the popular or critical approval he had won in the late twenties and that lasted into the middle thirties. His present-day reputation rests largely on a handful of early lyrics and the translation of *Medea* which Judith Anderson brought to vivid life after World War II, since neither *The Double Axe* (1948) nor *Hungerfield* (1954) proved sufficiently commanding to re-establish him in his rightful position of eminence. Now comes his last book, *The Beginning and the End*, a year after his death. On its own merits and altogether apart from any pious atonement for the undeserved neglect he has suffered in his late years, this most modest of all his works should do much to make clear how remarkable his accomplishment was.

Samuel French Morse. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Summer, 1963. p. 510

Although Jeffers repeatedly described acts of tragic violence, neither his poetic theory nor his poetic practice was truly ''tragic.'' In spite of his expressed conviction, his fictional characters achieved neither the necessary heroism, nor the necessary self-awareness to ''face Him and speak,'' while they died. They remained, rather, the blind creatures of their instincts, like the heroine of *Roan Stallion*, ''moved by some obscure human fidelity.'' Because they could not believe in any idealistic morality, they could never die heroically for any purpose beyond themselves. And because their rebellion against existing society was instinctive rather than conscious, they never achieved the ability to ''speak'' while they died. . . . But the literary revolt of which Jeffers was the extreme exemplar, effected a liberation of this repressed violence. Although conservatives and moralists viewed this revolt with alarm, and still continue to denounce it, many other serious and religious men have born witness to its value. The powerful Catholic poetry of Brother Antoninus, for instance, is descended directly from the seemingly irreligious poetry of Jeffers—to whose memory the younger poet has published an eloquent ''Tribute.'' Readers, critics, and fellow poets have testified to the ''redemption'' effected by the ''remembered deaths'' of Jeffers' poetry.

But on a deeper level, the prophetic and historic importance of Jeffers' literary revolt is becoming increasingly apparent. The vision of violence which he first described in the 1920's has become the obsession of the 1960's. His realization of the absolute absurdity of the historic idealism which would make the world safe for democracy by inventing the bomb which could destroy the world, was prophetic in every sense. His repeated warnings that violence is intrinsic in history, and that this unpleasant fact must be faced, rather than repressed, was prophetic.

Frederic I. Carpenter in *The Twenties*, ed. Richard E. Langford and William E. Taylor (Everett Edwards). 1966. pp. 16–17

[Jeffers's] theory of the world was not borne out . . . by his behavior in it. He was two men in one—at least two—as Thomas Hardy was. Hardy had the bleakest possible view of nature and man, yet many of his poems seem to be written by a warm-hearted man who has forgotten what he was supposed to think. Few things are more attractive than this: than feeling in someone who has put feeling aside, than tenderness in a person of tough mind. The mind of Jeffers had been hardened in hot fires—just when, it may be possible some day to determine. In his Foreword to *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* he spoke of two ''accidents that changed and directed my life''. One of these was his meeting with Una, and the other was their coming to live near the Monterey coast mountains. There must have been other ''accidents'', too, including a collision with ideas that transformed him from the more or

less commonplace poet of his first two volumes into the stunning one of ''Tamar,'' ''Roan Stallion,'' ''The Tower Beyond Tragedy,'' and the other long poems that followed.

Mark Van Doren. Foreword to *The Selected Letters of Robinson Jeffers*, ed. Ann N. Ridgeway (Johns Hopkins). 1968. p. viii

For a number of reasons, Jeffers devoted a great deal of his time and energy to the cultivation of a subgenre—narrative poetry—to which his gifts were not especially adaptable. What is also distressing, though, is that the attention Jeffers has received has been so disproportionately weighted in the direction of these failed narratives and that his stock has fallen so badly as a result. What more signal instance have we of the capitulation of criticism to what is most gross and obvious in a man's work, and in a generation that has had the temerity to exhume and to sanctify an Emily Dickinson, a body of work at once fragile, restrictive, and yet upon examination singularly exotic and intense both in formal and human qualities? It is as though there had been a tacit agreement among all influential parties that Jeffers' shorter poems should be looked upon as nothing more than an adjunct to the narratives, perhaps even as something less, as filler for the volumes his publishers issued with remarkable regularity for so-many years. As it is, Jeffers' short poems, many of them rather lengthy by standards of the conventional lyric, will fill an enormous volume when they are collected, and an impressive volume it will be; for at his best Jeffers could blend passion and restraint, image and statement, contempt and admiration, as few poets of any time have been able to, and often with a music so ripe and easy that it is able to impress itself upon our senses without our ever remarking its grace and majesty, its sureness of touch.

Robert Boyers in *Modern American Poetry*, ed. Jerome Mazzaro (McKay). 1970. pp. 187–8

Robinson Jeffers used the various concepts of Nietzsche's philosophy to clear away outworn intellectual traditions and religious preconceptions in order to develop his own doctrine of Inhumanism. That Nietzscheanism was a useful—though sometimes limited—tool for Jeffers is now obvious. That his Lucretian-derived Inhumanism and its insistence upon transhuman magnificence flourished from inception is equally clear. Hence readers acquainted with both Nietzsche and Lucretius may achieve a more sensitive appreciation of the tumultuous grandeur and severe individualism of Jeffers' poetry. . . . The proper study for the reading of Jeffers, then, is *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *De Rerum Natura*.

Arthur B. Coffin. *Robinson Jeffers: Poet of Inhumanism* (Wisconsin). 1971. pp. 257–8

The value of Jeffers's poetry to the Sierra Club, both for the illustration of its books and for the confirmation of its philosophy, has contributed to the increase of his reputation. In celebrating his own ''Inhumanism'' he had proclaimed a ''transhuman magnificence''; the negative of his philosophy found its positive in modern conservationism. In a sense he prophesied the modern movement. But in a deeper sense his poetry had also been prophesied by the naturalism of George Santayana more than two generations earlier. The strangely eloquent address delivered by the Spanish philosopher to a University of California audience in 1911 has often been quoted at length, but one sentence is crucial. Invoking ''your forests and your Sierras,'' Santayana proclaimed that ''In their non-human beauty and peace they stir the sub-human depths and the superhuman magnificence'' of Jeffers. But the phrase ''sub-human depths'' has often been forgotten. In his most characteristic narrative poetry Jeffers explored the sub-human depths below as well as the trans-human beauty above. And modern criticism has focused increasingly on these sub-human depths. . . .

In all his mature poetry Jeffers sought to explore the realm beyond good and evil. In *The Women at Point Sur* his Barclay specifically announced this purpose. But in this realm there are no roads or reasons, and half-way through this poem Jeffers proclaimed that ''these here have gone mad.'' In their belief that they could live beyond evil, these characters became alienated from the world of reason and law. And this is the fate of all who believe that to go beyond evil means to deny the reality of evil. . . .

The world which Jeffers's poetry explores is not beyond evil, but beneath (or before) evil. In *Tamar* her heroine proclaimed: ''Time stands still, old man, you'll learn when you have lived at the muddy root/Under the rock of things.'' All his poems, in Santayana's phrase, ''stir the sub-human depths of the spirit.'' They recall those impulses which primitive myth once celebrated, and which early civilization sometimes practiced (the early Pharaohs practiced royal incest), but which modern civilization has put down. Buried beneath the level of modern consciousness, these impulses still exist beneath evil, ''at the muddy root of things.'' Only if the author fails to distinguish between the two realms do problems develop. Jeffers's early poetry had distinguished clearly: ''for goodness and evil are two things and still variant, but the quality of life as of death and of light/ As of darkness is one, one beauty. . . .'' (''Point Pinos and Point Lobos''). But his later poetry concerned itself more with the ''one.''

Modern criticism has done much to discover the distinctions of ''voice,'' style, and structure which these later poems include. Depth psychology and myth criticism have offered clues for exploring the depths. But whatever the ''voice,'' Jeffers continues to speak to us today.

Frederic I. Carpenter. *American Literature*. March, 1977, pp. 89, 95–96

In his best poetry Jeffers provides us with a world that is beautifully and sometimes terrifyingly real—or real in the sense that any artistic creation is real; the world of every artist is, of course, visionary; the degree of his success is in proportion to the reader's or viewer's or listener's being convinced that the ''world'' is real and, in addition, has meaning for the auditor. . . . Certainly no other American poet has approached him in the ability to endow character with life; his people, tormented and tormenting creatures, haunt the memory like grisly phantoms or spectral shapes rising from some atavistic depth of which we were unaware. Passing before the mind's eye, they reveal those gulfs over which we daily pass. In their strengths and weaknesses we see ourselves; they reveal to us, above all else, how slippery is our hold on reason and how tempting are the lures of irrationality in all its forms. Which is to say, Jeffers did what all great writers have done: he provided insight into the human condition.

Insight, above all else. And that insight does not stop with the human condition, but extends outward into the larger and, for Jeffers, more important natural world. No other poet of this century strove more successfully to ''catch the inhuman God'' in his lens. In this area, indeed, Jeffers had few peers in all of literature. The violence and extreme passion of the natural world color his lines in an unforgettable fashion. . . .

The human drama, whether comic or tragic, is little more than a relief against what he called in an early poem the ''divinely superfluous beauty'' of the natural world. And ''if the great manners of death dreamed up/In the laboratories work well'' and humans do succeed in killing themselves off, that beauty will certainly remain. The poetry of Jeffers enables us better to see and understand both ourselves and the shining glory of the world.

William H. Nolte. *Rock and Hawk: Robinson Jeffers and the Romantic Agony* (Univ. of Georgia Pr., 1978), pp. 199–201

A vast tradition flows through [Robinson] Jeffers, the ancient tragedians and the Stoics, Saxon saga and Elizabethan rhetoric, the English Romantics and the long surf beat of Whitman's line. Like all great poets, he made this tradition his own. The stamp of Jeffers's verse is unmistakable; no poem of his, good or bad, could be taken for anyone else's. He is the least imitable of poets, and perhaps, the dramas apart, the least translatable. For this reason he has left no school or easily traceable influence. For this reason too he has been denied certification by the academy, though whether this is a handicap or a distinction may be debated. One positive result has surely accrued: In the decline of his reputation from the mid-1930s (a decline haltingly but by no means decisively reversed since his death) he has been spared the fate of a premature classic. Jeffers is not force-fed to anybody; he is, almost, an underground poet. One discovers him for oneself; there is no reason to read him or write about him except that one wants to. . . .

Few poets have ever divided opinion more sharply. Serious critics have compared Jeffers to Sophocles and Shakespeare; serious critics have denied him the status of a poet at all. The very intractability of these judgments suggests a middle ground. It seems to me that a due estimation of Jeffers's place in American letters may lie in a comparison not with his fellow poets, from whom he stood largely apart, but in one with his great prose contemporaries, Faulkner and O'Neill. Like Faulkner, Jeffers made a region distinctively and indissolubly his own; like O'Neill, he was deeply haunted by the sea. All were part of the literary movement that responded to Freud's vision of Western culture and its vitalizing impact on the traditional themes of family conflict. All evolved an intense, convoluted, highly personal style whose strength lies more in the mass than in detail. A critic has suggested Jeffers's influence on the early Faulkner; no doubt O'Neill's dynastic plays and his handling of Greek mythology owes much to him as well. It may well be that these three great peers—poet, playwright, and novelist—will someday be perceived as a trinity in the literature of the first half of the twentieth century.

Robert Zaller. *The Cliffs of Solitude: A Reading of Robinson Jeffers* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1983), pp. 225–26

As prophet, Jeffers has set his face stonelike against the same future that Whitman, likewise as prophet, hailed. Only the future will decide between them, will determine which was right, which wrong. But as to the religious dimension, there can be no doubt that Jeffers, considered in the light of the essential archetype as Rudolf Otto analyzed it, is by far the more concentrated specimen of the species, the more *pure* example of *poetas religious*. What he lacks in devotional decorum he makes up for in the astonishing intensity of this primitivistic force, his grasp of the power, the wonder, the awe of a God palpably immediate yet unalterably beyond science's continuing probe of the cosmos. . . .

Jeffers, no enemy of science . . . reconstitutes, in the unifying symbols of his metaphors, the vast context of the cosmos that science has opened to the eyes of man. Loving it, he unifies it; fearing it, he reveals its wrath and its awe; worshiping it, he establishes it as the very throne of that unspeakable God who transcends it in excess even as He sustains it in being. It is in the celebration of the divine excess that Jeffers tacitly acknowledges the limitation of his avowed pantheism and places himself among the vast company of mystics and prophets and poets of all ages and all faiths—those who have seen to the plenitude beyond the registration of power, the vast and abstract reality that lies beyond nature, to the verifiable face of HIM WHO IS.

William Everson. *The Excesses of God: Robinson Jeffers as a Religious Figure* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Pr., 1988), pp. 168–69

Jeffers's neglect in the academic world has clear consequences for his reputation at large. The makers of critical judgment in America are graduates of schools that are, by and large, influenced by the selections that the New Critics made in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Many of the present educators in today's universities and colleges regard Jeffers primarily as a regional nature poet, or as an example of extreme American romanticism. They tend to see Jeffers as he was described by Randall Jarrell in 1942: ''An example too pure and too absurd even for allegory is Robinson Jeffers, who must prefer a hawk to a man, a stone to a hawk, because of an individualism so exaggerated that it contemptuously rejects affections, obligations, relations of any kind whatsoever, and sets up as a nostalgically awaited goal the war of all against all. Old Rocky Face, perched on his sea crag, is the last of *laissez-faire*; Free Economic Man at the end of his rope.''

Now, a hundred years after the poet's birth, the critical reception of Robinson Jeffers is at a crossroads. Undeniably, in the 1960s and 1970s Jeffers regained at least some of the popularity he had enjoyed in the 1920s. Environmentalists flocked to the Big Sur country, not least because Jeffers had first painted its splendors. Protesters against the Vietnam War and other American military inventions found confirmation for their convictions in some of his antiwar poetry. It is perhaps significant that *The Double Axe*, upon its reissue in 1977, outsold the other two volumes, *The Women at Point Sur* and *Dear Judas*, which appeared at the same time. Although interest in Jeffers was, to a degree, centered in California, Americans from all parts of the country found that Jeffers spoke to them clearly on relevant issues. Nevertheless, although a continuing number of graduate students write dissertations on him, often with scant encouragement from their mentors, Jeffers was, and is, not generally taught in the schools. Those who ignore him might say that they do so because he is not a major poet and they have

little enough time to cover the ''indispensable'' American poets of the twentieth century. It is often assumed as well that Jeffers's poetry is easily accessible, and hence in no need of the explication lavished on a Pound or Stevens. The recent Jeffers scholars and critics have responded to this argument. Through their detailed, analytical studies, they have demonstrated that Jeffers is not merely a teller of stirring violent stories or a poet of simple lyrics. They have demonstrated that Jeffers had more to say and often said it more profoundly and beautifully than the apparently more difficult contemporary poets so favored in most English departments. In the development of this solid scholarly foundation lies the way to a permanence based not on fads and fashions, but on an appreciation of Jeffers's stature and his unique contribution to the art of poetry and the development of thought in this century. The trend begun in the past two decades toward a careful critical reevaluation of his canon will eventually demonstrate the hollowness of Jarrell's ex cathedra pronouncements.

Alex A. Vardamis. ''Robinson Jeffers: Poet of Controversy.'' In Robert Zaller, ed. *Centennial Essays for Robinson Jeffers* (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Pr., 1991), pp. 62–63

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JEWETT, Sarah Orne (1849–1909)

Miss Jewett's character, and her purpose, which, of course, is an expression of her character, may be reasonably regarded as having also influenced, more perhaps than she knows, her choice of material. A woman of refined tastes, she naturally feels strongly the usual feminine distaste for crude tragedy and sordid detail. A writer anxious to win respect and liking for a special class in the community, she naturally chooses for emphasis the scenes in which it appears to the best advantage. There must, of course, be shade as well as light in the picture, but the reader is made to feel that if any of her people are hard-hearted and selfish,—they are seldom worse than that,—they are to be pitied as victims of hard conditions rather than blamed.

Charles Miner Thompson. *Atlantic Monthly*. Oct., 1904. p. 494

It was precisely this union of what was at once so clearly American and so clearly universal that distinguished her stories, in the eyes of both editor and reader, as the best—so often—in any magazine that contained them.

Her constant demand upon herself was for the best. There were no compromises with mediocrity, either in her tastes or in her achievements. It was the best aspect of New England character and tradition on which her vision steadily dwelt. She was satisfied with nothing short of the best in her interpretation of New England life.

M.A. DeWolfe Howe. *Atlantic Monthly*. Aug., 1909. p. 280

This intimacy with her material—an intimacy that sometimes approaches identity in the Wordsworthian manner—is shown at once as the reader looks out through Miss Jewett's eyes upon the face of the country. She never bores us with mere description for description's sake; nor does she seem to care very much about imparting information concerning New Hampshire hamlets and the coast of Maine. Least of all does she deem it necessary to catalogue beast, bird, and flower in its appropriate season. These things are all there. New Hampshire hillsides and Maine islands with their appropriate flora and fauna are as clear to see as though one had lived among them; but the grace of Miss Jewett's art appears in the fact that her references to them come to the reader almost as reminders of past experience. Instead of bald description, she chooses the gentler way of reminiscence.

Edward M. Chapman. *The Yale Review*. Oct., 1913. p. 161

Miss Jewett's stories are always stories of character. Plots hardly exist in her work; she had little interest in creating suspense or in weaving threads of varied interests. She presents people through mild desultory action, in situations seldom dramatically striking. The people interpreted live simple, inconspicuous lives, without great tragedy attending them, but made significant through the little things which, by reiterated irritation and pain, tax the spirit of endurance and shape character. The wisdom won from slow pondering of life is found on the lips of her men and women. And these persons speak the very thoughts and the very language of their region; thoughts expressed in a shrewd, picturesque, colloquial fashion, in a dialect directly true to life, not a romantic make-believe. But the best part, perhaps, of her delineation of these people is in her record of their silences.

Martha H. Shackford. *Sewanee Review*. Jan., 1922. p. 23

There is a stark New England Sarah Jewett does not show, sordid, bleak, and mean of spirit. She looked at nature in its milder moods, and at mankind in its more subdued states of tenderness and resignation. But she did not live in an unreal paradise. She was aware of all these aspects, she simply did not emphasize them. If the Almiry Todd you generally see is the humorous figure sitting heavily in the stern of a dory, you are not allowed to forget that

forty years before her young heart had been filled with an impossible love; and although she had since been handled with the commonplace marriage and death of her fisherman husband, it has not dimmed her memory.

Miss Jewett does not generally deal with the central facts of existence. You do not remember her characters as you do the atmosphere that seems to detract from their rusty corduroys and the folds of their gingham dresses. Her township was on the decline, and to her eyes it was a place where emotion was recollected in tranquillity.

F.O. Matthiessen. *Sarah Orne Jewett* (Houghton). 1929. p. 149

With this equipment—the close, sensitive knowledge of the people she wrote about, and the awareness of a larger world of culture and refinement—she went tranquilly about her work, carefully selecting whatever served her personal needs and her literary purposes. ''Écrire la vie ordinaire comme on écrit l'histoire,'' she copied out of Flaubert and pinned on her secretary. That is what she tried to do. But to write about ordinary lives as if one were describing the great pageant of history one must see in ordinary lives something of the grandeur and significance of historical events. That gift, so far as a certain limited kind or ordinary life was concerned, Miss Jewett had. . . .*The Country of the Pointed Firs*, a kind of miracle in pastel shades, varying between a delicate humor and a delicate pathos, is, within its limits, the finest American achievement in its genre and a work of which we can be permanently proud.

Granville Hicks. *The Great Tradition* (Macmillan). 1935. pp. 102–3

Much of Miss Jewett's delightful humour comes from her delicate and tactful handling of this native language of the waterside and countryside, never overdone, never pushed a shade too far; from this, and from her own fine attitude toward her subject-matter. This attitude in itself, though unspoken, is everywhere felt, and constitutes one of the most potent elements of grace and charm in her stories. She had with her own stories and her own characters a very charming relation; spirited, gay, tactful, noble in its essence and a little arch in its expression. In this particular relationship many of our most gifted writers are unfortunate. If a writer's attitude toward his characters and his scene is as vulgar as a showman's, as mercenary as an auctioneer's, vulgar and meretricious will his product for ever remain.

Willa Cather. *Not Under Forty* (Knopf). 1936. p. 84

The conventional judgment of Miss Jewett's fiction places her short stories on a higher plane than her novels. But the characters that make the deepest impression come from the longer narratives, for the obvious reason that she has had more time to establish them. As a matter of fact, her significance must be judged in terms of quality, not quantity. In both her short and her long narratives her achievement was to paint imperishably the decaying grandeur of New England, symbolized in the towns, once great seaports, which live on memories of former splendor. As is natural, her characters are largely feminine, members of families whose men have died or gone away. In the cities they are content to live on quietly, existing on narrowed incomes, cheered by the homage of other women who cherish them as the representatives of a more virile civilization. In the country, they have a harder struggle with the menace of the poorhouse ever present. This harder aspect of life is not so often stressed as it was later, but Miss Jewett did not shirk its presentation. She felt, however, that misery or lack of breeding was not necessarily of supreme importance in fiction.

Arthur Hobson Quinn. *American Fiction* (Appleton-Century). 1936. pp. 329–30

This little corner of Maine, with the islands northward, was Sarah Orne Jewett's peculiar realm. She travelled early and late,—as a girl to Wisconsin, and three or four times abroad, as far as Athens,—but she always returned to Berwick and the house and garden where she had lived as a child and where she died. . . .In this ''country of the pointed firs,'' with its long frost-whitened ledges and its barren slopes where flocks of sheep moved slowly, she found the Dunnet shepherdess and Mrs. Todd, the herbalist, and many of the scenes and persons of her finest stories,—stories, or sketches, rather, light as smoke or wisps of sea-fog, charged with the odours of mint, wild roses and balsam.

Van Wyck Brooks. *New England: Indian Summer* (Dutton). 1940. pp. 352–3

At the university Willa Cather had accepted the principles and admired the methods of Henry James, who seemed to her to do flawlessly what she wanted to aim at. In 1907, when she met Sarah Orne Jewett and her friends in Boston, the young plainswoman felt that she, ''an American of the Apache period and territory,'' might come among them ''to inherit a Colonial past.'' That past was all round them, throwing across them the shadows of memorable events. Though only the echoes of New England's heroic days were to be heard in Sarah Orne Jewett's stories, they were clear and fresh and simple in their versions of the actual life of the present which lay under that past. Miss Jewett's advice had more effect on Willa Cather than the example of Henry James. The elder woman knew from the first that the younger would sooner or later write about her own country. She must write about the life of the plains as it was, and make a way of her own in which to write. Willa Cather later found her way, in *O Pioneers!* (1913), by trying to tell the story of her characters as if she were talking about them to Miss Jewett.

Carl Van Doren. *The American Novel, 1789–1939* (Macmillan). 1940. pp. 282–3

As a rule, Miss Jewett artistically avoided all extremes. Her New Englanders are neither saints nor sinners: they are pleasantly human, with their worst fault a slight avariciousness. Many find it much ''easier to understand one another through silence than through speech''; if they go beyond this sensitivity, they merely revert pathetically to their childhood or seek refuge in solitude. The farm-women endure grinding poverty and hard work, but the unpleasant details of their existence are glossed over.

Babette May Levy. *New England Quarterly*. Sept., 1946. pp. 351–2

Her major interest . . . was centered in the misunderstood people of her countryside. The growth of the railway had gradually forced the small shipping villages into decay, and the young and the energetic had left for the West or for the manufacturing cities. Life for the remaining few was dull and inactive. Miss Jewett saw the decline in progress and the lives of the old people slowly ebbing away. . . . Thus, she was well aware that many of the summer residents held in contempt the elderly inhabitants of the little seaside villages and inland farms and regarded their lives as inconsequential, if not queer. To Miss Jewett their lives appeared otherwise. Her keen perception of human qualities penetrated beneath the oddity in dress and manner of these secluded folks and perceived the sterling qualities of character that were hidden from the casual observer.

Eleanor M. Smith. *New England Quarterly*. Dec., 1956. pp. 474–5

It is in these stories-within-the-story that the major themes of the book [*The Country of the Pointed First*] are most fully registered; the narrator's part is simply to describe the teller and the situation, to provide the occasion, to give notice of the passing of time—and, at the beginning and end of the book, to lead the reader sympathetically into the legended world of Dunnet Landing and safely, if equivocally, out again when the time comes. Jewett, it might be said, solved her inability to master a Jamesian art of the short story by abandoning it.

Or she apprehended at last that what she had to tell was one story and one story only, one that all the earlier ones lead up to or provide analogies for. Another way of describing the achievement of *Pointed Firs* is to say, in these terms, that she had finally discovered within her materials—anecdotes, incidents, scenes, special cases—the essential legend that was there for her to tell, and found for it an appropriate form.

Warner Berthoff. *New England Quarterly*. March, 1959. p. 36

Given her temperament, and also the time and the place in which she was born, Sarah Jewett's literary bearing is inescapable. She stands on the fringe of an era whose codes and rituals enthrall her, regrets its air of spiritual depletion, and determines to bring back to life—as far as pen and ink can—the simplicity and the strength that once underlay its daily existence. To this resolve she adds the aim of correcting the ludicrous mis-impressions that cityfolk have of countryfolk. These gigantic tasks of revival and interpretation she takes upon herself out of devout love. Steeped in the ethos of her native past and present, she sees no need to distort or embroider. ''Real life's interestin' enough for me,'' she has Abby Harran say in ''A Native of Winby.'' So she paints no extravagant pictures, nor does she interject grotesques for their own sakes.

Meticulously and without ado, Miss Jewett, with an art perhaps too serene to appeal to the uninformed city audiences she had in mind, superimposes upon each other two worlds—one lost and one misunderstood. The most frequent criticism of her rendition is that she screens out of it all the coarse and contemptible actualities of life in favor of a too pervasive charm and refinement. . . . A close examination of Sarah Jewett's world will reveal that none of these criticisms is entirely justified. She does not uniformly dulcify her scenes, nor do her people invariably demonstrate redeemable virtues. She knows the ugly underside of nature as minutely as its happier facets, and she seldom shrinks from presenting the despicable in human motives or behavior.

Richard Cary. *Sarah Orne Jewett* (Twayne). 1962. pp. 30–1

Yet out of the rhythm of her life there emerged the pattern of a larger order which became a primary fable for the revelation of her country world in its totality, a fable in its essence of the impact of experience upon the receiving mind, relating the individual to the community in which he lived, the village to the world beyond. This narrative design was that of the outsider who makes a visit to a village or country locale and has a series of brief experiences. This visit pattern, present in many of the stories and in all of the longer fiction except *The Tory Lover*, made its earliest important appearance in *Deephaven*, (1877); evolving slowly for many years, it received its most commanding, definitive statement in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896). The time limitations imposed by the visit fitted the modest dimensions of her personal experiences, and the presence of an outside observer provided additional justification for the practice of defining character in terms of external circumstances.

Paul John Eakin. *American Literature*. Jan., 1967. pp. 518–19

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JOHNSON, Charles (1948–)

It is ironic that [Charles] Johnson's book [*Middle Passage*] won the National Book Award in a panel that was accused, by a judge on it, of choosing ideology over merit. Johnson's merit is as obvious as his opposition to ideological formulas. In the novel as in his critical writing, Johnson resists the idea of expressing ''black experience'' as opposed to a black's experience of his or her inevitably multicultural world. In the ''Republic'' every person is changed for good and ill by the presence of all the other persons on the ship. The process remakes the passengers as the boat is itself remade, by the task of sailing on. Everyone aboard goes to school to the others' terrors. Even when he has cast his lot with the African rebels, Calhoun does not, like them, yearn back toward a home in Africa.

Garry Wills. *New York Review of Books*. Jan. 17, 1991, p. 3

Almost half of Charles Johnson's study *Being and Race* is gathered under the somewhat ironic title ''First Philosophy.'' The three

essays contained in the first part. . . survey and testify to the developments in the theory of fiction and black writing that have occurred during the last thirty years; they also create a basis of judgment that may not please proponents of black studies. . . .

The danger, for Johnson, is that the thrust for a cultural identity can produce a provincialism of outlook or a narrowing of available structures. . . .

Overall, Johnson emphasizes those who can innovate and operate within their own theoretical systems: Toni Morrison, Dave Bradley, Clarence Major, Alice Walker, James Alan McPherson, Al Young, and Ishmael Reed.

Johnson does not lament the passing of the 1960s with their often uncritical receptivity of partisan ethnic expression. He looks forward to an art ''enslaved to no single idea of Being, capable if necessary of unraveling'' all that has gone before. His own fiction and now his undogmatic criticism model some of the possibilities.

W. M. Hagen. *World Literature Today*. Spring, 1991, p. 308

Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* extends convention by showing an interracial romance that is not doomed to failure or fraught with unhappiness, and in doing so signals a new direction for a vexed issue in American fiction. *Oxherding Tale* shows an interracial relationship that quietly and matter-of-factly succeeds. Set in the antebellum South, . . . [it] conflates and juxtaposes past and present in Andrew Hawkins, the contemporary narrator. His origins are comic: one night, after sustained drinking, plantation-owner Jonathan Polkinghorne and his slave, George Hawkins, swap wives and the outraged Anna Polkinghorne becomes pregnant with Andrew. After a series of bizarre adventures and philosophical explorations—the novel is an entertaining mixture of picaresque and slave narrative forms (what Johnson calls ''genre crossing'')—Andrew decides to pass for white to escape to freedom.

Accompanying the freedom that Andrew finds is, unexpectedly, marriage to a white woman. . . . Remarkably, considerations of race play no part in their relationship. This is without precedent in American fiction, African-American or white, in novels written before 1982. . . . Remarkably, ''love conquered the illusion of race, this life-long hallucination that 'Thou' and 'That' differed.''

Jonathan Little. *Studies in American Fiction*. Autumn, 1991, p. 143

The art of writing for those who discover that the history of language and fiction is '''not' sympathetic with their sense of things'' becomes an art of writing against a tradition. . . . While recognizing that this is the situation of all writers in a minority tradition . . . Johnson employs the name ''Caliban's dilemma'' to describe it. This dilemma . . . is that of the ''solitary black writer'' who discovers that every attempt to express an ''experience'' is couched in a ''compromise between the one and the many, African and European, the present and the past'' (*Being and Race* 40). . . .

But the greater part of Johnson's achievement is to enact intersubjective relations in the making and to discover, in the phenomenology of the Allmuseri, a theory and a symbol for the postmodern condition discernible in much of the fiction written by those Johnson calls ''Americans who happen to be black'' (*Being and Race* 123). The discovery of the Allmuseri (*The Oxherding Tale* and *Middle Passage*) has been, one suspects, at least one of the reasons that his most recent novels have not only enjoyed a fate different from his first six, but have broken new and very fertile ground in the field of African-American letters.

Ashrel H. A. Rushdy. *African American Review*. Fall, 1992, pp. 374–75, 393

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JOHNSON, James Weldon (1871–1938)

The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, of course, in the matter of specific incident, has little enough to do with Mr. Johnson's own life, but it is imbued with his own personality and feeling, his *views* of the subjects discussed, so that to a person who has no previous knowledge of the author's own history, it reads like *real* autobiography. It would be truer, perhaps, to say that it reads like a composite autobiography of the Negro race in the United States in modern times. . . .

Mr. Johnson . . . chose an all-embracing scheme. His young hero, the ostensible author, either discusses (or lives) pretty nearly every phase of Negro life, North and South and even in Europe, available to him at that period. That he ''passes'' the title indicates. Miscegenation in its slave and also its more modern aspects, both casual and marital, is competently treated. The ability of the Negro to mask his real feelings with a joke or a laugh in the presence of the inimical white man is here noted, for the first time in print, I should imagine. Negro adaptability, touchiness, and jealousy are referred to in an unself-conscious manner, totally novel in Negro writing at the time this book originally appeared [1912]. . . . Jim Crow cars, crap-shooting, and the cake-walk are inimitably described. Colour snobbery within the race is freely spoken of together with the economic pressure from without which creates this false condition. There is a fine passage devoted to the celebration of the Negro Spirituals and there is an excellent account of a Southern campmeeting, together with a transcript of a typical oldtime Negro sermon. There is even a lynching. But it is chiefly remarkable to find James Weldon Johnson in 1912, five or six years before the rest of us began to shout about it, singing hosannas to rag-time (jazz was unknown then).

Carl Van Vechten. Introduction to *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* by James Weldon Johnson (Knopf). 1927. pp. v. xii-ix

The problem of the actual writing of these folk sermons [*God's Trombones*] is admittedly difficult: complete identification with the themes and idioms of a by-gone generation, a thoroughly incandescent revitalizing of its mood and faith, are perhaps impossible. At this late distance rhetoric must come to the rescue of a

lapsing diction and poetic fictions re-kindle the primitive imagination. It is a question of Ossian all over again. The comparison with genuine folk-poetry is constantly in mind and the poet judged by the hard epic standard of objectivity, impersonality and the extent to which he approximates the primitive originals or reproduces their authentic quality. That Mr. Johnson succeeds as often as he does in passages of really fervid and simple folk poetry is great credit to his artistry. At least three of these poems in my judgment have this quality and are really great: ''The Creation,'' ''Judgment Day,'' and in the main ''Go Down Death.'' To proclaim too enthusiastically the perfection of poems like the last-mentioned is to forget, in an age of personalism, the touch and tang of epic poetry. These are folk-things, and the epic standard must apply.

Alain Locke. *The Survey* Aug. 1, 1927. p. 473

Published anonymously in 1912 with a preface by Brander Matthews and reissued under the author's name in 1927 with an introduction by Carl Van Vechten, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* is note-worthy because of its restraint, its comprehensiveness, and its adumbration of the Negro Renascence of the 1920's. At a time when most Negro fictionists were giving blow for blow and painting extravagantly favorable pictures of members of the race, Johnson set out neither to glorify Negroes nor to malign whites but to interpret men and conditions as he knew them. . . .

Besides being more detached than any preceding novel of American Negro life, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* is ground-breaking in its introduction of a well-realized cosmopolitan milieu. Unlike most earlier Negro fiction, it is not localized in the South but moves out into the broader field of European and Northern urban life. . . .

In addition to being more impartial and more comprehensive than any earlier novel of American Negro life, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* is a milestone because of its forthright presentation of racial thought. Admitting the dual personality which some Negroes assume—one role among their own group and the other in the presence of whites—Johnson is himself not guilty of such a two-sided character. Not attempting to ''wear the mask,'' he gives a calm, dispassionate treatment of people and situations as he sees them.

Hugh M. Gloster. *Negro Voices in American Fiction* (North Carolina). 1948. pp. 79–80

Johnson indisputably anticipates the Harlem School by subordinating racial protest to artistic considerations. For the most part, the racial overtones of [*The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*] form an organic part of its aesthetic structure. While in one sense the racial identity of the protagonist is the central fact of his existence, in another, it is almost irrelevant. The protagonist faces a series of situations from which he flees; his flight into the white race is merely the crowning instance of his cowardice. To be sure, his tragedy is heightened because there are good objective reasons for his final flight, but these reasons in no sense constitute a justification. The focus of the novel is not on the objective situation but on the subjective human tragedy.

Compared to the typical propaganda tract of the period, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is a model of artistic detachment. Yet even Johnson cannot wholly repress a desire to educate the white folks. Artificially contrived discussions of the race problem mar the novel, and at times the author is needlessly defensive. But despite an occasional lapse, he retains a basic respect for his function as an artist.

Robert A. Bone. *The Negro Novel in America* (Yale). 1958. pp. 48–9

In the language of *God's Trombones* Johnson found a much more flexible medium than Dunbar dialect for the interpretation of folk material. Traditional dialect attempts (sometimes unsuccessfully) a strict fidelity in metre and in rhyme scheme; Johnson adapted to an artistic form the rhythms of an actual sermon, the accents of actual speech and intonation. He freed himself from the necessity to rhyme, thus subordinating strict poetic form to the artistic interpretation of his subject matter. In *God's Trombones* Johnson approximated the vivid imagery of the folk, an imagery far superior to any he attained in the *Fifty Years* dialect poems and certainly an imagery which rivaled the best of Dunbar's. Johnson used all the tricks of the folk preacher's trade—hyperbole, repetition, juxtaposition, personal appeal to his listeners, the knack of making Biblical happenings have an intense meaning to current life. Johnson even used punctuation and capitalization to achieve his effect—dashes to indicate the frequent and dramatic pauses, capitalization to emphasize important words, such as ''Old Earth'' and ''Great White Throne.'' The sensitive reader cannot fail to hear the ranting of the fire-and-brimstone preacher; the extremely sensitive reader may even hear the unwritten ''Amens'' of the congregation.

Eugenia W. Collier. *Phylon*. Winter, 1960. pp. 358–9

Although Johnson wrote no other novels, his achievement in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* deserves recognition. The book has a significant place in black literature because it overthrows the stereotyped black character, employed even by early black writers, in favor of one that is complex and many-sided. Johnson gains depth and subtlety by using the first-person point of view rather than the third-person favored by his contemporaries. Moreover, his skill in using an unreliable narrator who reveals more than he intends—indeed, more than he knows—adds important psychological dimensions to the main character and his story. Finally, Johnson's skill in conveying his vision of black life in America through irony rather than by means of the heavy-handed propagandistic techniques of his predecessors marks a new, more artistic direction for the black novelist.

Robert E. Fleming. *American Literature*. March, 1971. p. 96

Johnson had read and been greatly impressed by Du Bois's [*The Souls of Black Folk*], and it is not surprising that the mulatto status and the varying musical inclinations of his narrator act as symbolic projections of a double consciousness. The narrator modulates between the black world and the white (often with less than equanimity) and seems torn between the early melodies of his mother and the Chopinesque style that wins his white beloved. In a sense, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is a fictional rendering of *The Souls of Black Folk*, for Johnson's narrator not only stresses his bifurcated vision, but also his intellectual genius.

He maintains an open, critical attitude toward the many sides of black American culture, condemns in unequivocal terms the limitations of the black situation, and assiduously records his movement from a naïve provincialism toward a broad cosmopolitanism. The narrator, in short, is a black man of culture recording the situations and attitudes that have succeeded in driving him underground, to a position the larger society might define as criminal. . . .

The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man is both the history and the confession of one of the ''talented tenth'' (that class of college-bred black Americans in whom Du Bois placed so much faith); it offers the rehearsal of a ''soul on ice'' who draws substance from a world that could not recognize his true character nor sympathize with his longings. Each of its episodes is an effort at personal definition and a partial summing up of the black American past.

> Houston A. Baker, Jr. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Summer, 1973. pp. 438–9

The main story line of the work [*The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*] delineates the progress from childhood to maturity and marriage of the offspring of a Southern gentleman and his light-skinned mistress. In this progress Johnson gives us realistic pictures of Negro life seldom, perhaps never, treated in fiction up to that time: the activities of Pullman porters on the job and off; the life in a Key West cigar factory; a good old-fashioned camp meeting; and, most important, the bohemian night life of black New York before it moved to Harlem. In his night-life sketches Johnson was a precursor of much Renaissance literature of the next two decades. Johnson, again, was not the first to write about this life. In Dunbar's one Negro novel, *The Sport of the Gods*, he touches on the theme. But Johnson, as a part of the theatrical world of the era, had a much better knowledge of Black Bohemia than any other writer. . . .

The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man is different from earlier black fiction in other ways. First of all, his protagonist is almost an anti-hero. A decent person in every respect, he is also a weak and vacillating human. Facing a series of important choices in his life, he takes the easier way every time. Starting out to become a distinguished part of the Negro world, he ends up as an ordinary middle-class white citizen. First, his ''averageness'' and his humanness suggest that the protagonist's individual characteristics, and not race, shaped his career. And second, Johnson does not belabor the race issue as practically every other black novelist before him had done. He has to talk about segregation and discrimination, but he does not lose his perspective. He has to discuss the black-white sexual liaison that produced the protagonist, but he does not become bitter over the plight of black womanhood. There is no moral condemnation here, no lecturing. This race mingling is described as a fact of Southern life.

> Arthur P. Davis. *From the Dark Tower: Afro-American Writers 1900 to 1960* (Howard). 1974. pp. 30–1

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JONES, Gayl (1949–)

An especially powerful rendering of the Gothic is found in the novel, *Eva's Man* (1976), written by the contemporary black author, Gayl Jones.

Implicit in this novel is the Gothic monomyth, which, as G. R. Thompson defines it, ''is the embodiment of demonic-quest romance, in which a lonely self-divided hero embarks on insane pursuit of the Absolute. This self-destructive quest is metaphysical, mythic, and religious, defining the hero's dark or equivocal relationship to the universe.'' For the purposes of this essay, the principal interest of *Eva's Man* is the structural means for expressing this ''insane pursuit.''

The structural metaphor for the Gothic quest is, according to J. Douglas Perry, the downward, ever-tightening, ever-faster spiral of the whirlpool. He sees this image in three interrelated structural principles: concentricity, predetermined sequence, and character repetition. . . .

Eva's Man, though not specifically designed as a Gothic novel, follows this structural pattern very closely. The central character, Eva, describes for us her movement through ever more intense experiences that the reader can see are more and more destructive of her sanity. Repeated images, scenes, and words reflect the increasing restriction of her range of response. Finally, obsessed with an object that she believes to hold the secret of power and truth, she takes violent possession of that object. Specifically, she responds to her victimization in a male-dominated society by literally excising the root of that evil: she bites off the penis of her lover after poisoning him. This violence is taken as the evidence of her insanity, and her quest ends in the still center of a hospital for the criminally insane. She is last seen speaking to and uncertainly enjoying sexual favors from a mirror-image character, Elvira. Her journey has been through a Gothic whirlpool.

The structure of *Eva's Man* is very clearly defined, perhaps reflecting Jones's stated interest in abnormal psychology. In an interview, she commented on the narrative significance of psychotic characters:

> The person who is psychotic might spend a great deal of time on selected items, so there might be a reversal in the relative importance of the trivial and what's generally thought of as significant. In Eva's mind, time and people become fluid. Time has little chronological sequence, and the characters seem to coalesce into one personality.

The story is consistently told from such a point of view. The narrative voice is Eva's throughout. Judgments about characters and events are conditioned by the fact that the supplier of the information becomes less reliable as the narrative continues. Thus, the structure of the tale embodies not only the increasing intensity of events but also the increasing madness of the narrator.

The fluidity and coalescence mentioned above, which are necessary to the creation of this mad teller and her mad tale, are achieved in a variety of ways in the text. Within the chapters,

scenes that are initially easily distinguishable in time and place become increasingly interwoven and confused; the associative markers that make it possible to comprehend the connections within and between scenes gradually become so private and obscure that following the narrative is nearly impossible. Dialogue is not attributed, identical phrases and images are used in widely divergent contexts, and pronouns have ambiguous referents. The chapters themselves become shorter and more condensed as the narrative progresses, with the shortest chapters immediately preceding the most violent scene. All these devices serve to reinforce the confusing, intensifying, descending structure of the narration.

The major narrative elements, however, are the ever more extreme versions of very similar scenes and characters. The earliest scene chronologically, though innocent enough in itself perhaps, is a precursor and even model of the violence that occurs later. In that initial scene, Freddy, a prepubescent boy, is fascinated by the sexual differences between himself and the girl-child Eva. Too young for actual physical intercourse, he substitutes a dirty popsicle stick and uses it to explore Eva's genital area. Although Eva cooperates in this experience, she has no desire to repeat it, despite Freddy's persistent demands. . . .

This demand-rejection pattern continues until Freddy moves away. Just before he leaves, he gives Eva a gift, a pocket knife, symbol of the dangerous potency of the male. The entire sequence of events seen as threatening by Eva, is consistently laughed at and applauded by other members of the community.

All the other major scenes replicate this initial one. In each, a male attempts to dominate a woman through some forceful act. The woman responds with a combination of passivity and resistance. Both the man and the community assume that the woman is helplessly attracted to men and sex; resistance is a sign of perverseness. In each case, she receives what is considered her just deserts, either reward for cooperation, or punishment for her rejection of a particular man; and in each case, the society reinforces the actions of the man. The sequence is considered to be both inevitable and desirable.

The scene with Freddy also indicates the character of the narrator. Eva reveals an obsession with sexuality and, more specifically, with what she perceives as the brutal nature of men. She finds both sexuality and men simultaneously enthralling and repulsive; she is inexplicably drawn to them even though her encounters are consistently painful and unattractive. This aspect of her character lends an air of inevitability to her experiences. They are both inescapable and damning. Each encounter builds on and reflects earlier ones and makes the involvement and the repulsion more intense. While the scene with Freddy has a certain playfulness and innocence that limit its impact on Eva, she finds in it the potential arrogance and violence of men.

That arrogance and violence are more distinct in another scene from her childhood. This scene, though it only indirectly involves Eva, offers her a demonstration of actual violence that the encounter with Freddy did not. The conflict, between her father and her mother, is based on the assumption of a love affair between the mother and another man, Tyrone. Although Eva, a witness to many of the meetings of the ''lovers,'' claims never to have seen any sexual contact, the father presumes that the only explanation for male-female relationship is sexual intercourse. In this case the woman is punished rather than rewarded for her sexuality. . . .

This scene is the inverse of the one with Freddy. The nature of woman, according to these males, is to want sex unceasingly. But this belief means that she cannot be trusted to limit herself to one particular man. Though promiscuity is a necessary aspect of her character, she must be punished for it if male dominance is to be maintained. By inflicting that punishment with the organic equivalent of Freddy's dirty stick, the father forces upon his wife the knowledge that the instrument of pleasure is also the instrument of control. By entrapping Eva in a room where she must hear the conflict, he teaches her the violent and inevitable consequences of her womanhood.

This indirect experience becomes direct when Eva marries a man of the age and attitude of her father. Though she is told by others and sees for herself the neurotic character of James's personality, she adapts herself to him rather than challenge or avoid him. When they move to a new house in a new town, he refuses to allow a telephone to be installed because, he repeatedly says, he doesn't want her lovers to call. When a fellow student from the university visits her to discuss an assignment, James takes this as evidence of her infidelity and replicates her father's behavior. . . .

The virtual identity of this scene with the previous one illustrates three important points about the narrator of this novel. First, the exactness of duplication raises doubts about the reliability of Eva's story-telling: is she describing a discrete event, or is she simply changing the names in the original version? The former possibility indicates a coherent, reasonable narrator urging her listeners to accept an implausible coincidence. The alternative suggestion, that she is repeating herself, implies a narrative mind that is a hall of mirrors in which the reality of events is lost in distorted reflections. This reading, which is more consistent with the evidence of the text, is reinforced throughout the book, as identical bits of dialogue and narrative are associated with widely divergent characters and times. Eva's mind seems very much a sealed, mirrored enclosure in which facts and memory form illogical and often grotesque patterns.

The second point to be made about Eva's character is that her experiences are moving in an ever faster and tighter downward spiral. The conflict with James involves her directly, and it occurs much more rapidly than the parental one. Her father waited patiently, accumulating evidence of repeated rendezvous between his wife and Tyrone; he only became violent when he actually saw them together. In contrast, James, in his prohibition of a telephone, presumes guilt from the beginning and metes out punishment at the first sign of Eva's contact with another man. If this scene is a duplication of the earlier one, Eva has endowed it with much greater intensity.

The passivity of the female participant is the final point to be made about the conflict between Eva and James. The line which follows ''Naw, I'm not lying,'' reads: ''I squeezed my legs around his neck.'' Eva and the other women she describes not only accept but seem to approve the punishment they receive. Throughout the novel, female characters do not resist what they consider to be their destinies. An excellent example of this is the Queen Bee, a character that Eva identifies herself with late in the story. The Queen Bee is a sentimental woman who had the misfortune of falling in love with men who died shortly thereafter. Convinced that she is responsible for the deaths, she commits suicide after becoming infatuated once again. This fatalistic attitude is adopted in various degrees by most of the women of the book. This perception of themselves as objects caught helplessly in the flow of events and circumstance obviously strengthens the whirlpool structure of the novel.

Eva's next and climactic encounter would seem to contradict the idea of her passivity. During it she poisons and then mutilates the body of her lover. However, as shall be seen, this aggressiveness itself is an aspect of fate and does not bring relief but instead greater imprisonment. The sequence begins when Eva accepts the invitation of Davis to his apartment. Despite his clear intentions and insistence, she will not engage in sexual activity because she is having her period. He tolerates this delay but insists that she must remain until menstruation is over. He then locks her in the apartment whenever he leaves and refuses to allow her to go out for any reason. The various entrapments that she experienced with Freddy, her father, and James have now become a literal prison. The physical quality of her incarceration is reinforced by the imagery. The bodily functions of menstruation, sexuality, flatulence, urination, and defecation, all of which the tone indicates are to be considered unpleasant, are accompanied by foods that can be construed as parallel to these functions: sausage covered with mustard, beer, hard-boiled eggs, cabbage. Eva's existence has been reduced to the most basic level; all of the rationalizations and social amenities have been stripped away and what remains is a woman reduced to the dehumanized object of a man's unquenchable sexual desire. She is not even permitted to comb her hair, since such an attempt at attractiveness is irrelevant at the level at which Davis uses her.

She offers little resistance to this treatment and cooperates even when he takes her while she is still menstruating. Her only complaint about the constant pattern of eating, sleeping, and copulating is that Davis has no interest in her sexual satisfaction. She does not express hatred or even dislike for him or what he is doing to her. Nevertheless, after several days, she puts rat poison in his food. This act, which she makes no effort to explain, seems to come from some deep, unexplored compulsion. . . .

Eva has eaten of the fruit of this perverse, imprisoning Eden and in doing so has found revenge, relief, and pleasure. In the most intense, most exploitive of her encounters with men, she responds to her treatment by literally removing the source of their obsessive behavior. She demonstrates that she has gained knowledge, though her education is the inverse of the one intended by Freddy, her father, James, and Davis. Her solution to the cycle of sexual obsession is not her mother's silent acceptance, or the Queen Bee's suicide, or her own escape from James; rather it is the truly radical choice of excising the root of the problem. Ironically, she sees this as an act of love, in that it relieves Davis of the stress of his compulsive behavior. Her sexual enjoyment of his corpse suggests that she is not repulsed by him but only released from the burden of his domination. In wrapping his organ in silk and returning it to him, she indicates a respect for his manhood that is separate from her attack on his compulsiveness. In death and dismemberment, he becomes the ideal man she has been searching for.

The end of her search, however, does not mean the end of the whirlpool pattern. Eva does not liberate herself from the predetermined sequence, but rather is actively complicitous in the final turn of the spiral. She accepts the consequences of her act by calling the police and then returning to the scene of the crime. She in effect chooses her final prison at the still center of the whirlpool. Her cell in the women's wing of a hospital for the criminally insane locks her in, but it also locks out the madly whirling world she has experienced. She is left along with Elvira, another man-killing woman, who repeatedly offers to give Eva sexual satisfaction. Eva resists, but the patience and understanding of her alter ego finally win out. In the last scene, she finds the peace she has been seeking: '''Tell me when it feels sweet, Eva. Tell me when it feels sweet, honey.' I leaned back, squeezing her face between my legs, and told her, 'Now.''' Elvira's concern for Eva's satisfaction makes possible the only pleasurable sexual intercourse in the novel. In the most physical of her prisons, at the bottom of the whirlpool, Eva finds a quiet freedom. That the whirlpool still exists is evidenced by the intrusions throughout the last part of the book by police officials and psychiatrists who insist that she endlessly repeat her story. This mental violation by men can only be escaped by an inward turning, by holding the face of her double, Elvira, between her legs. The concentric, spiraling structure of the book comes to its inmost circle in the image of Eva deriving sexual satisfaction in the contemplation of herself.

That Eva is insane, is obsessed with sexuality in the telling of her story, is unreliable as a narrator, and is quite properly imprisoned for murder offer some counterpoint to her final satisfaction. Her act does not free her from her own or the world's obsessiveness, but only forces her into the self-imprisonment of narcissism. The constant duplication and circularity of her narration suggests a character who has escaped nothing, explained nothing. Though she tells her most private experiences, she does not thereby make herself comprehensible.

Thus, to argue implicitly, as John Updike and Addison Gayle have done, that *Eva's Man* is a feminist attack on men, or more specifically, on black men compelled to prove their manhood, is to read the book much too narrowly. On the one hand, the novel *is* a powerful ideological statement. Eva draws the reader into the whirlpool of her desire, frustration, and hatred; she has the narrative skill to make believable her anger at the mistreatment she and other women have endured. Her ability to find patterns and duplications give validity to the implicit ideology. The Gothic structure embodies Eva's dark vision in which all people are trapped by the irrational forces that are an inevitable part of their lives. For the purposes of her tale, the most basic of those forces is sexuality. This force is by no means attractive; Eva's sense of sweetness at the end is only an aspect of her latest mental disorder, narcissism.

However, it is exactly at this point that the distinction between author and character must be made. The dark vision, the ideology, the madness are Eva's, not Gayl Jones's. To confuse their values and purposes is to oversimplify the novel. Jones has dramatized an attitude toward, and a perspective on, life through the creation of Eva and her story. She has carefully complicated any ideological interpretation by making the narrator a forceful, articulate, but clearly insane character. The degree to which Eva's ideology is taken seriously is a measure of Jones's accomplishment as a storyteller and not a measure of her own polemical intent. The Gothic structure has the double purpose of drawing us into the tale and demonstrating at the same time its artfulness. The final turn of the whirlpool is the willingness of the reader to be drawn into Eva's story through Jones's art. (pp. 94–100)

Keith Byerman. *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.*. Winter, 1980, pp. 93–101.

Since the publication of her first novel, *Corregidora* (1975), Gayl Jones has figured among the best of contemporary Afro-American writers who have used Black speech as a major aesthetic device in their works. Jones also holds a prominent place among women

writers who have tried to rescue the Black female personality from the devastation and neglect it has suffered in a racist and sexist society. Like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Sherley Williams, Toni Cade Bambara, and such male writers as Ernest Gaines and Ishmael Reed, Jones uses the rhythm and structure of spoken language to develop authentic characters and to establish new possibilities for dramatic conflict within the text and between readers and the text itself. . . .

Jones's fictional landscape is the relationship between men and women, a field her characters mine with dishonesty, manipulation, mutual abuse. The battleground is sex, and Jones uses the right sexual vocabulary to strategize the warfare. Results vary; it can be the ambiguous yet healing reconciliation of a blues stanza shared between Mutt and Ursa in *Corregidora* or a lonely woman's solo cry at orgasm in *Eva's Man*. What Jones is after is the words and deeds that finally break the sexual bondage men and women impose upon each other. When language is drawn from the musical and sexual idiom and shared with the reader like a song or an incantation, there is a chance that painful wounds may be healed. Such reconciliation is possible through an evidence of words spoken, sung, communicated. Acts of language can be regenerative: predatory characters can recover their briefly lost selves by reconnecting to the textures of love and identity articulated in the Black American speech community.

Melvin Dixon. *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation,* Mari Evans Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984 pp. 236–48.

Gayl Jones's first novel, *Corregidora,* focuses on the lingering effects of slavery in black America—specifically on its sexual and psychological manifestations in the life of Ursa Corregidora, a Kentucky blues singer. The great granddaughter of a Portuguese plantation owner who fathered not only her grandmother but also her mother, and who used his progeny both in the fields and in his own whorehouse, Ursa is unable to free herself of painful and obsessive family memories. In each personal relationship she finds yet again the sickness of the master-slave dynamic. Her short-lived first marriage is convulsive with desire, possessiveness, humiliation, and violence; her second, safer, marriage fails as she cannot forget the first. In relating Ursa's story, Jones shows the difficulty of loving when abusive relationships have been naturalized by cultural continuity, when so much has been taken that one's only dignity is in withholding. Her taut and explicit idiom, sometimes plainly narrative, sometimes wildly stream-of-consciousness, captures the nuances of a tormented sexuality that is both specific to black experience and symptomatic of our troubled gender system. ''I knew what I still felt. I knew that I still hated him. Not as bad as then, not with the first feeling, but an after feeling, an aftertaste, or like an odor still in a room when you come back to it, and it's your own.'' The book's ending, almost unbearably intense but strangely hopeful, suggests that we may begin to heal ourselves only as we confront the deep sexual hatred that pervades our lives.

Whereas *Corregidora* allows us to perceive the construction of personality as historical process, *Eva's Man* offers a very different kind of experience, one that many readers have found profoundly disturbing. Eva Canada, the main character of the novel, tells her tale from an institution for the criminally insane, where she has been imprisoned for a hideous sexual crime of murder and dental castration. Like Ursa, Eva has been damaged by abuse and by a legacy of violence; unlike the protagonist of *Corregidora,* she has no sense of how her past motivates her present. As she speaks her disjointed narrative, an ugly story disrupted by flashes of recalled nastiness, she remains alien to us, a personality beyond promise or repair.

In *Eva's Man,* Jones takes us into the pathological mind, and we do not find ourselves there. As the tidy reader-protagonist identification is denied us, we are left with the horror of what we can't sympathetically imagine. Jones's unflinching violation of our strongest taboos—made all the more chilling by her starkly controlled prose—raises a number of questions about the roles of writers, readers, and cultural conventions. Beyond shock value, what does a writer achieve in presenting the truly sordid? Is our understanding necessarily dependent upon the protagonist's understanding? What do disturbing books demand of us that comforting ones do not? How must we see the world in order to change it? The stories that make up *White Rat* suggest that Jones is intent on keeping those questions before us. The majority of these pieces (''Legend,'' ''Asylum,'' ''The Coke Factory,'' ''The Return,'' ''Version 2,'' ''Your Poems Have Very Little Color in Them'') are about madness or extreme psychic alienation. Some (''The Women,'' ''Jevata'') address the painful complications of desperate sexual arrangements. The most attractive, of course, are those few (''White Rat,'' ''Persona,'' ''The Roundhouse'') that hint at successful human connection despite overwhelming odds. Like *Eva's Man,* most of the stories in *White Rat* challenge our notions of what fiction should do. What we make of Gayl Jones's work depends largely on what we are willing to perceive as the function of art—on how, as readers, we enter into the dialogue.

Janis Butler Holm. In *Contemporary Novelists, 6th edition,* ed. Susan Windisch Brown (St. James Press, 1996).

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JONES, James (1921–1977)

For the nonsequeamish adult *From Here to Eternity* is the best picture of Army life ever written by an American, a book of beauty and power despite its unevenness, a book full of the promise of great things to come. . . . The background of Prewitt's experience is saturated with the class struggle in America and the needs of its martyrs. In that, as in his style, Jones is like Dreiser. Prewitt, like his creator, is a man of utter honesty. And Jones, like Prewitt, has been there. When we have read him we have been there, too, and have been shaken and chastened by what he has made us feel. This is proof that, in spite of imperfections, *From Here to Eternity* is a work of genius.

Ned Calmer. *Saturday Review*. Feb. 24, 1951. pp. 11–2

James Jones uses the Army as the symbol of an abstract, dehumanized, soul-crushing institution which subjugates the individual by

imposing the fear of authority. . . . The value of a novel like *From Here to Eternity*, that is large in scope as well as in bulk, is that it operates on many levels at the same time. That is to say, it gives us shifting, kaleidoscopic pictures of different aspects of reality, some of which conflict, some of which are complementary, but all of which are fused and integrated to serve as a symphonic interpretation of American life. . . . (Yet) Prewitt's love for Lorena, a glorified prostitute, smacks of fake romanticism, and is as unconvincing as the author's attempt to define democracy in terms of the hero's attachment to the underdog.

Charles I. Glicksberg. *Phylon*. No. 4, 1953. 384–8

From Here to Eternity is a big, solid, and formidable novel; and only upon reading it a second or third time, maybe, do we begin to realize the brilliance of its craft. . . . *Eternity* is a definitive novel of the American peacetime Army. Despite the blasphemy of its content, the poetic obscenity of its speech (which becomes contagious), and its open description of certain sexual values which have not been prominent in our literature, it is both a heroic and an epic novel. Yes, and it upholds those ''eternal verities'' that are shared by novels of this class, and which the conservatives can never find in modern literature. Only the previous mold of thought has been broken here, and the new expression is momentarily surprising or shocking.

Maxwell Geismar. *American Moderns* (Hill and Wang). 1958. pp. 225–6

In James Jones's first novel, sheer intensity of feeling triumphed over crudity of style and mind. . . . In his new novel (*Some Came Running*) Jones is no longer working with materials as fresh or as highly charged. . . . The savage passion which energized *From Here to Eternity* is muffled, and there remains the yammer of self-pity, to which is now added the earnest drone of portentous banalities. Out of the author's hope chest of ideas come tumbling all the fuzzy bits and pieces of thought solemnly cherished by an essentially primitive mind. . . . There are enough forcefully realized episodes or scenes to suggest that Jones might do a lot better if he were to conquer his thousand-page-or-more complex. As it stands, however, his novel represents the dubious victory of six years' perspiration over lack of inspiration.

Charles Rolo. *Atlantic Monthly*. Jan., 1958. pp. 78–9

Does *The Pistol* indicate a change of heart, or did Jones write it just to show that he can be a disciplined writer if he sets out to be? So far as the book itself is concerned, his motives don't matter: for whatever reasons Jones wrote it, it is a good book, certainly a better book than either of its predecessors. But when one considers the future, one would be glad to know how Jones feels about what he has done. . . . The notion that a man can be a writer without knowing it or without having written, a notion that Wolfe's example has often and unhappily fostered, has been Jones's curse. He does have talents, and *The Pistol* proves that he can learn a lesson or two if he tried. But one wonders if he has yet outgrown the absurd notion of the born writer.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 10, 1959. p. 12

The army forms the matrix of Jones' world not only because it is what he knows best but because it must be what he loves and despises most. Jones is essentially a novelist of destruction and the military world seems to provide both a recognizable object to hate and a manageable subject by which blind outrage is metamorphosed into calculated detestation. *From Here to Eternity* was successful partly because it possessed a coherent image; *Some Came Running* failed partly because it lacked such an image. It showed that Jones was at home in the army and that his characters become unendurable only after they are mustered out. In *The Thin Red Line* he is at his destructive best. . . .

The Thin Red Line is impressive on several counts: first as an exciting narrative; second as an excellent job of imaginative reportage; and finally as a novel of great scope and scale. But what distinguishes the novel above and beyond its sense of brutal realism, is the clarity and fixity of its author's vision. In its depiction of war as a cold-blooded business operation *The Thin Red Line* resembles Mitchell Goodman's *The End of It*; in its portrayal of the battle area as ''a crazyhouse'' it is reminiscent of *Catch-22*; in its abhorrence of authority, officers and the terrible waste of war, it can be compared to many novels; but in its blunt description of war as perverted sexuality it is unusually penetrating.

Paul Levine. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1962–63. pp. 604–5

Jones's way of looking, his portrait of disjunction between society and the self, emerges least scathed by his prose, I think, in his first novel, *From Here to Eternity*. It is true that the central characters in his first two gigantic novels are all sturdy inhabitants of a subculture in our twentieth century, and outsiders to the proprieties of language and behavior of suburbia. The half-literate Regular Army men in his first novel, as well as the inhabitants of the beer joints of Parkman, Illinois, of his second, enjoy existence largely by gambling, drinking and casual sexual encounters with their own kind. But it is only in *From Here to Eternity* that we feel the author's power to stir our awareness of the slim margin of conviction that holds us to a more decorous life. Perhaps the first of his novels, based as he tells us upon real events and a real barracks, represents some combination of Jones's imagination and memory that could function well within the self-imposed limits of a small barracks world. At any rate, there is a genuine vitality in *From Here to Eternity* that is missing from the gross, spread-eagled substance of *Some Came Running*, from the fastidious smallness of Jones's novelette, *The Pistol*, and from the unrelieved, emotional bludgeoning of his most recent work, *The Thin Red Line*.

David L. Stevenson in *The Creative Present*, ed. Nona Balakian and Charles Simmons (Doubleday). 1963. pp. 200–1

In telling this story *Go to the Widow-Maker*, Jones has all his famous difficulties with English syntax. Still, although the most interesting things are not those he presents in his version of standard English, but rather in his vernacular of obscenity, he can do quite brilliant set pieces when they are called for. His descriptions of the sea, of diving recall and sometimes surpass in their figures and their visual imagery those of Lawrence Durrell, for instance. . . . But his use of the proletarian dialect of obscenity allows him an entirely new accuracy of fact and of valuation in speaking of sexual experience. No other writer has ever done this

so well. It is more than a matter of using obscenities, as we call them; it is a profound honesty, a willingness to connect physical experience with feeling that neither pornographers nor those who speak only of the feelings and obscure the physical can hope to manage. As he manages this about sex, so he does about aggression. Jones uses the language of masculine aggression, knows how to assess its undertones of sexuality, and in the action he presents, he shows the consequences of these feelings. Those who imagine he is simply praising the male world do not understand him at all.

John Thompson. *New York Review of Books*. June 15, 1967. pp. 16–17

James Jones writes abominably, like Dreiser, which is to say that his sentences are dismal monstrosities of kitsch, while his novels (some of them, anyway) render the world with great power. Jones is a typical product of a culture that finds it so easy to sneer at the mandarin finesse of Henry James and believes in its heart of hearts that the only art worth cleaving to at all is rough-hewn, untutored, and springs not from emotion remembered in tranquility—where in the true American life is that?—but from action remembered in the midst of still more action. In short, art becomes journalism, the writing that gets done with the guns still pounding outside: Stephen Crane, Hemingway . . . and James Jones at his best.

Raymond A. Sokolov. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 14, 1971. p. 7

Virtually alone among World War II novels, *From Here to Eternity* gives us a view from within of the old regular army, of the ''thirty-year man'' who enlisted because he was a Harlan County miner's son (Prewitt) who could not find work; a natural leader and organizer (Warden) who could play the game in the army; an old Wobbly (Jack Malloy), or a gutter rat (Maggio) who had nowhere else to go. These tough morsels—even the sadist, Fatso, who happily tortured prisoners in the Stockade—are ultimately a judgment on a society whose men have no real work, whose skills are the real lament of the book. Men are employed by the army, but *they* are not used.

Alfred Kazin. *Bright Book of Life* (Little). 1973. p. 79

The four war novels are naturally about war, but they also record the four phases of life itself. . . . First, in *From Here to Eternity*, come the dramatic encounters of youth, the first conflict of the individual with society, the struggle between freedom and order. In *The Pistol*, a more lyrical book, [James] Jones examines the special joy and passion of individual existence as it appears in the fights and rivalry among the soldiers for the magic talisman of the gun that gives its owner special powers. It is a novel about the illusion of young manhood and of human individuality. *The Thin Red Line* is the next step, showing how the individual becomes lost in the crowd, impersonalized, made to feel negligible. These themes are drawn in a military setting, but they exist as truly in the civilian world.

The final step occurs in *Whistle*, and this is the abandonment of hope that comes with the realization that, for most people, the truth about life is too much to bear. The four characters of *Whistle*, like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, step forth to present their vision, crying out what was already said in the Book of Revelation: ''How long, O lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?'' Jones's vision is as apocalyptic as that of St. John the Divine, with his earthquakes and the great day of wrath that he foretells. They are all corpses in the end.

Frank MacShane. *Into Eternity: The Life of James Jones, American Writer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1985), pp. 305–6

Jones's soldiers were at the end of an ancestral line of fictional characters who are misfits, the misbegotten who always get the short end of the stick. But they never dissolved into a social or political blur. The individuality that he gave to his people, and the stature he endowed them with, came, I believe, from a clear-eyed view of their humanness, which included their ugliness or meanness. Sympathetic as he was to his enlisted men, he never lowered himself to the temptations of an agitprop that would limn them as mere victims. Many of his soldiers were creeps, others were outright swine, and there were enough good guys among the officers to be consonant with reality. At least part of the reason he was able to pull all this off so successfully, without illusions or sentimentality, was his sense of history, along with his familiarity with the chronicles of war that were embedded in world literature. He had read Thucydides early, and he once commented to me that no one could write well about warfare without him. . . . He'd also linked his own emotions with those of Tolstoy's peasant soldiers, and could recite a substantial amount of *Henry V*. . . . But the shades of the departed with whom he most closely identified were the martyrs of the American Civil War.

George Henrick, ed. *To Reach Eternity: The Letters of James Jones* (New York: Random House, 1989), pp. xvi–xvii

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JONG, Erica (1942–)

Erica Jong's first novel, *Fear of Flying*, feels like a winner. It has class and sass, brightness and bite. Containing all the cracked eggs of the feminist litany, her soufflé rises with a poet's afflatus. She sprinkles on the four-letter words as if women had invented them; her cheerful sexual frankness brings a new flavor to female prose. Mrs. Jong's heroine, Isadora Wing, surveying the ''shy, shrinking, schizoid'' array of women writers in English, asks, ''Where was the female Chaucer?,'' and the Wife of Bath, were she young and gorgeous, neurotic and Jewish, urban and contemporary, might have written like this. *Fear of Flying* not only stands as a notably luxuriant and glowing bloom in the sometimes thistly garden of ''raised'' feminine consciousness but belongs to, and hilariously

extends, the tradition of *Catcher in the Rye* and *Portnoy's Complaint*—that of the New York voice on the couch, the smart kid's lament. Though Isadora Wing, as shamelessly and obsessively as Alexander Portnoy, rubs the reader's nose in the fantasies and phobias and family slapstick of growing up, she avoids the solipsism that turns Roth's hero unwittingly cruel; nor does she, like Holden Caulfield, though no less sensitive to phoniness, make of innocence an ideal. She remains alert to this world. . . .

Isadora Wing should be recognized as a privileged case, with no substantial economic barriers between her and liberation, and—by her own choice—no children, either. Edna Pontellier, the heroine of Kate Chopin's elegiac novel of female revolt, *The Awakening*, was a mother as well as a wife, and drowned herself to escape the impasse between her personal, artistic identity and her maternal obligations. Childless, with an American Express card as escort on her pilgrimage and with a professional forgiver as a husband, Isadora Wing, for all her terrors, is the heroine of a comedy. . . .

The novel is so full, indeed, that one wonders whether the author has enough leftover life for another novel. Fearless and fresh, tender and exact, Mrs. Jong has arrived non-stop at the point of being a literary personality; may she now travel on toward Canterbury.

John Updike. *New Yorker*. Dec. 17, 1973, pp. 149–50, 153

Erica Jong's first book of poems, *Fruits & Vegetables*, was one of those things rare in poetry: a new experience. I read these poems the way you watch a trapeze act, with held breath, marvelling at the agility, the lightness of touch, the brilliant demonstration of the difficult made to look easy. The poems were brief, swift, sure of themselves; they combined a cool eighteenth-century detached wit and a talent for epigram with a virtuoso handling of that favourite seventeenth-century figure of speech, the conceit, with body as fruit as body, poem as food as poem, man as Muse, Muse as man. They did not pose as straight-from-the-soul confessions; rather they posed as artifacts, beautifully *made*: china figurines which were really Iron Maidens, the spikes hidden beneath the painted foliage. They were literate without being literary. They toyed with the reader, refusing to reveal the extent of their seriousness—whether they *meant* it. . . .

In *Half-Lives* the tongue is out of the cheek, at least part of the time. This book's cover is not lush pink but stark black. The wit is still there, but it's less like a flirtation than a duel. There's less fun, more pain. . . .

Jong's poetry is sometimes tricky, like a well-performed conjuring trick; the props show only occasionally. But a good magician's best trick is to leave some doubt in the minds of the audience: perhaps the magic is real, perhaps the magic *power* is real. And in Jong's best poems, it *is* real. We may find the fool more entertaining, but the magician is, finally, more impressive.

Margaret Atwood. *Parnassus*. Spring/Summer, 1974, pp. 98, 104

In striking contrast to the fears of the body expressed in the fiction of Joyce Carol Oates, both novels by Erica Jong—*Fear of Flying* and *How to Save Your Own Life*—end with a kind of symbolic ritual baptism in celebration of the female body. . . .

As with all patterns of language, the writer after a while is imprisoned within a rigid enclosure of words in which, as in *How to* . . . , love is reduced to cunt and cock. We don't have a man and woman experiencing a warmly human relationship in which ultimately there is a sense of rebirth and a feeling of unity with the living universe (as that post-sexual love dialogue between Isadora and Josh would have us believe). There is only an impression of disembodied genitalia in which dripping cunt meets hard cock. . . .

In using this kind of sexual vocabulary, there is a sense of the writer beggared for expression and falling back on a vocabulary of male street usage. Woman needs a sexual vocabulary of her own—not one borrowed from men's street language. Such language is always self-limiting, because it is more geared to voicing frustrations than fulfillment. . . .

The world of *Fear of Flying* and its sequel *How to* . . . offers us a heroine who appears to be far more intrepid and confident than any of Oates's women. Yet, ultimately, we see that Jong's Isadora Wing is as helpless as the most timid of Oates's women characters—in the common avowal that man has the power. True, Isadora's discovery comes out of sexual need and not fear, but her conclusion is basically the same as the one affirmed in book after book by Oates. Woman is helpless. Man is powerful.

Ann Z. Mickelson. *Reaching Out: Sensitivity and Order in Recent American Fiction by Women* (Scarecrow, 1979), pp. 35, 46–48

Erica Jong is too fine a writer to care much about the accidental categories of the activists, categories that are a product of crippled imaginations. If Ms. Jong wrote a novel with a male protagonist-narrator, I would pick it up with respect and in the expectation of entertainment and even of enlightenment. If she said, in effect, ''Men are like this,'' I would know her to be right. I trust her insight and her imagination. So far, in *Fear of Flying* and *How to Save Your Own Life*, to say nothing of her poems, she has presented the pains and occasional elations of the Modern American Female. With the confidence in the exterior validity of introspection that marks the true poet (Keats for instance), she has extrapolated from her own life and her own fear an archetype that has had immense appeal, not only with the MAF, but also with the Modern European Woman.

In her new novel, Erica Jong has refused to capitalize on an outlook and an ambience that a less scrupulous writer could have exploited forever. She has gone to the British 18th century and contrived an authentic picaresque novel with a female protagonist. Her title *Fanny*, as well as the afterword, acknowledges a measure of indebtedness to John Cleland's erotic masterpiece, *Fanny Hill*, but the book is neither a pastiche nor a parody. It is, despite its allegiance to an antique genre, a genuinely original creation.

This brings me to an aspect of Ms. Jong's work rarely considered by her admirers or her detracters—its stylistic distinction. Style, indeed, must be regarded not as an aspect of a book but its totality: The intention, or pretension, to produce literature—as opposed to the book of a possible film—depends on verbal competence more than knowledge of ''life,'' whatever that is. Ms. Jong's first two books are highly literate. They show mastery, or mistressy, of language; they depend for their effects on verbal exactitude and the disposition of rhythm. Subject matter apart, they are models of what orthodox, as opposed to experimental, fiction ought to be in this final phase of the century.

Ms. Jong's concern with language has led her to a genuine experiment—the composition of a full-length novel in a mode of English no longer in use, though still capable of expressing a

modern sensibility. She has gone further than Joyce, who merely, in the ''Oxen of the Sun'' chapter of *Ulysses*, played brief passages in ancient style. Her 18th-century English is not a matter of restoring the second person singular, using tags like *prithee*, or slavishly following old orthography (*musick, logick*, capital initials for nouns). It is a matter of vocabulary, and also of rhythm. . . .

The female liberationists are going to be angry with Ms. Jong because she has not repeated what she has already done so well. Instead, Ms. Jong, who is a literary scholar and a specialist in the 18th century, has transmuted her learning into literature, a very laudable thing to do.

A few critics will condemn what she has done because the writing of 18th-century literature is the task of 18th-century men and possibly women, and there is nothing to add to what, by its nature, has already been completed. There are answers to that. The romantic movement began with a pastiche of the past—the Rowley and Macpherson fabrications—but also with *The Ancient Mariner*, which used the vocabulary and metric of the old ballads. Most of our best-selling novelists write, because they know no better, in a calcified Victorian style. But Bernard Malamud, with *The Fixer*, wrote a 19th-century Russian novel that literature needed, and Ms. Jong may be said to have filled a gap in the great tradition of the picaresque novel. *Fanny: Being the True History of the Adventures of Fanny Hackabout-Jones* had to be written, and Erica Jong was the right hermaphrodite to write or endite it. I am delighted to belong to her sex.

Anthony Burgess. *Saturday Review*. Aug., 1980, pp. 54–55

While quizzical poems on the topic of beauty versus truth as applied to cosmetics will admittedly weigh lightly in most literary scales, they typically embody two interesting stylistic decisions. First, these poems refuse rather than cultivate formal distance. No persona, no gloss of verbal refinement, intervenes between the poet and her sense of personal inadequacy or between herself and her audience. As readers we are asked to participate in the predicament of someone who wants to be beautiful while challenging, implicitly or explicitly, the standards or value of beauty for a woman, and who does not pretend to transcend the situation. It would be inappropriate to make the poem itself too beautiful.

Second, the poems are comic. Comedy prevents the poet from lapsing into naive self-exposure, and a comic stance enables writer and reader to agree that the predicament is, after all, innately ridiculous. Not a life or death matter, is it? Clowning shows that we have perspective. . . .

Possibly the funniest, certainly the most outrageous, poem of this subgenre is Erica Jong's tour de force, ''Aging,'' subtitled ''balm for a 27th birthday.'' . . . She imagines through several stanzas the advancing track of the wrinkles, as ''ruin proceeds downwards'' and the face begins to resemble ''the tragic mask.'' Her tone grows increasingly nervous. But the poem is undergoing a transformation of its own, from self-mocking panic to self-loving acceptance. . . .

When a woman is naturally narcissistic, she might as well go the whole hog. Beauty is, Jong reminds us, as beauty does. During the first half of the poem Jong provides us with incidental lexical amusements such as a play on ''lines'' and ''plotting'' in a woman's face or her writing, both of which show ''promise'' of ''deepening.'' The wicked four-letter term ''cunt'' at the poem's crux has been cunningly prepared for by suggestions that decline in one aspect may bring ascendance in another. If the term shocks, we may be obliged to ask ourselves what we thought feminine attractiveness was all about. The remainder of the poem gracefully offers the pun on ''what you were dying for'' and concludes with deft inversion of a centuries-old convention. Time, the enemy of love in lyric poetry since the Greek *Anthologia*, has become a sequence of lovers—blundering, presumably young and inexperienced lovers at that—to whom a woman, ripe with herself, can condescend.

Jong writes less successfully when she attempts to make narcissism look sublime rather than ridiculous, and poems of self-examination in this surface sense seem generally to need a Dickensian mail of mirth. Humor can effectively spotlight problems which are naggingly real if trivial; the comic autobiographical mode has become a major option in women's writing.

Alicia Suskin Ostriker. *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), pp. 106–7

When Erica Jong's fearless novel, *Fear of Flying*, took off in 1974, it seemed to crash through all the barriers that women's popular fiction had built around it. It had romance, guts, a demonic wit, and, more importantly for the post-pill, post-hippy generation of women, it made no apologies for the fact that its subject was sex. Or rather sexual gratification: the search for the big ''O.'' . . . *Fear of Flying* tapped a nerve, and in its wake came a whole new genre of novels with heroines shamelessly dedicated to the sexual picaresque without the apron strings.

Sixteen years later it seems that Erica Jong and her famed alter ego, Isadora Wing, have landed with a bump. *Any Woman's Blues*, like its predecessors, is written in the flip, punning style we have come to expect, but is here glossed with a tricksy, trend-grabbing narrative technique, and appropriately for this truth-seeking New Age, a clear moral imperative. . . .

Its theme of female masochism is certainly worth exploring, but the trouble with *Any Woman's Blues* is that, lacking a fictional integrity of its own, the novel reads like any number of the self-help manuals its heroine comes to accept. At odd moments we are reminded that the baby boomer generation of women were unprepared for the gains they won; there are hints of the guilt they carry for earlier generations, yet these complex issues are sacrificed on the altar of spiritual absolutes. More crudely, the narrative follows psychic and emotional immolation along the same trajectory as alcoholism or drug addiction. . . .

It seems that Erica Jong, like so many women weaned on and disappointed by the heady radicalism of the sixties, the promiscuity of the seventies and the hard-nosed eighties, has retreated, not like some, into the High Church of radical feminism, but into the self. Women may indeed love too much, but delivering sermons won't help us.

Helen Birch. *The Listener*. Aug. 23, 1990, p. 28

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JUSTICE, Donald (1925–)

From his first book, *Summer Anniversaries*, which won the Lamont Prize in 1959, to his third volume, *Departures*, which was nominated for a National Book Award in 1974, the work of Donald Justice has been consistently well received, and a few of his early poems have already become standard anthology pieces. Yet outside of his many students from the University of Iowa writing program, and a few outspoken critics who have been trying to tell us for years that he is an important poet, Justice has not been a writer who has been widely read.

Justice's work presents a uniquely difficult job in seeing as a whole because the poet has self-consciously tried to write in as many new and different ways as possible. There is not a poet in America who has mastered as many styles as Justice. At times, his most recent book, *Selected Poems*, reads almost like an anthology of the possibilities of contemporary poetry. There are sestinas, villanelles, and ballads rubbing pages with aleatory poems, surreal odes, and Williamsesque free verse. Yvor Winters once observed that Wallace Stevens was the only poet of his generation who could write equally well in both free and metered verse. That remark could be applied to Justice with almost equal exclusivity. This unsurpassed ambidexterity betrays years of discipline and work, but his remarkable technique never calls attention to itself in Justice's understated work. Justice rarely writes when he has nothing new to say. A new technique is often developed, mastered, and exhausted in one unprecedented and unrepeated poem. A new theme is handled definitively in a sequence or a pair of poems. Justice has published very little, but he has also distilled a decade of writing and experimenting in each new volume.

Despite its variety, Justice's poetry has several identifiable characteristics—a sense of form, a tone of understatement, and a high degree of self-consciousness. No matter whether he is working in formal or in open poetry, it is always possible to see an underlying form in Justice's work. Nothing seems arbitrary. Even when he is imitating Williams, his line breaks make a kind of sense his model's never do. His poems are also highly polished. There never seems to be a word uncertain of its place. Just as the form seems controlled, Justice's voice always seems objective and understated.

Under their highly polished surfaces most of Justice's poems deal with basic emotional themes like love, friendship, sorrow, and loss. He is specially concerned with the loss of his childhood world, and many of his best poems present the Miami of his boyhood and are filled with a brooding nostalgia for its lost people and places.

If it is now impossible to misjudge the shape of Justice's career, much of the credit must go to the author's editorial instincts. *Selected Poems* is a model of editorial judgment. Justice has gone over his entire work, from early uncollected poems to new unpublished poems, and rearranged it chronologically. Many of the older poems have been drastically revised. For example, the title poem of his first volume, ''The Summer, Anniversaries,'' has only two lines out of thirty six remaining from the original forty-eight line poem. Likewise Justice has dropped many of the original poems and rearranged and reordered the remaining ones. Many authors revise their early work, but the results are often mixed. Justice is unerring in his revisions.

What Justice has finally achieved through all the revision, rearrangement, and omission is a nearly perfect volume. There are almost no bad poems in his *Selected Poems* and quite a few perfect ones. Surveying Justice's finest work, it is hard to believe that either future readers or anthologists will want to pass up poems like ''On the Death of Friends in Childhood'', ''But That Is Another Story'', ''On a Painting by Patient B of the Independence State Hospital for the Insane'', ''American Sketches'', ''Men at Forty'', ''Unflushed Urinals'', ''Variations on a Text by Vallejo'', and many others.

If Justice has a remarkably high percentage of successes, he also has his limitations. There are no long poems in his canon, no epics, no dramas, none of those ambitious single poems on which most contemporary reputations are founded, not even any pieces of moderate length. About two pages seems Justice's maximum. Nor are there any extended sequences. Occasionally there is a pair of related poems or a short series like his ''Three Odes'', but even these groups are usually best read as a series of independent poems informed by the same technique. The decision to eschew longer forms must be deliberate in so talented a poet. Like his English contemporary, Philip Larkin, Justice is content to excel within very definite, self-imposed limits.

Dana Gioia. *Southern Review*. 1981, pp. 667–74.

Donald Justice has some kinship with Ashbery. The master to whom both seem deeply related is Wallace Stevens. But there is some difference between the author of ''Peter Quince at the Clavier'' and the one whom Jarrell named ''G.E. Moore at the spinet''. Justice recalls the music, elegance, and passion of Stevens, not his devotion to aesthetics. In Justice's latest book *Departures*, certainly his best, the poet keeps his old attachment to the community of vulnerable creatures—lovers, children, the old, the weak. And he bestows on them the richness of sound and cadence, the depth of feeling and subtlety of language that he displayed in his earlier collections.

What draws him to such people is not their dependence but their openness to affection and fantasy, to strong emotions and wild thoughts. For Justice, the receptivity of the artist feeds both his creative imagination and his human sympathy, two aspects of one impulse. Conversely, what seems to matter most to him, in the labors of art, is the chance the imagination offers us to keep in touch with those who share our world but not our neighborhood: the dead, the remote, those imprisoned by their frailty or foolishness.

Justice has marvelous poems about the way the creative process goes: the need to be tough, violent, and fearful at the same time (''ABC''); the difficulty of the effort and the littleness of the reward (''Sonatina in Green''). One that exemplifies his power to charm us is ''The Telephone Number of the Muse''. Here the poet feels his talent is dwindling; his muse has turned to other, younger lovers:

The unfashionable refinement of the syntax, like the unfashionable purity of the language, is typical of Justice. Both these features are

touching contrasts to his pathos when Justice gives in to the elegiac mood and turns to his central concern. This is with the class of people who sink in the trajectory of their wayward natures, who leave the tribe sooner than alter their own essence. I suppose that for him the poets belong to this class.

The circular patterns that Justice loves sound appropriate to the solitary character of such people, turned back on themselves, shut in willingly or unwillingly, caught in irreversible cycles. No wonder he finds so much occupation for mirrors, guitars, pianos, repetitions of words and syllables. Such images and devices, such iterative and musical designs, suit the meditations and recapitulations of the solitary life.

The dead belong here, because our relation with them must be circular. They prepare us for their place, and we have taken it. The hushed tone that marks Justice's voice mounts to reverence as he evokes his relation to his father in ''Sonatina in Yellow''. Here, the ambiguities, continuities, and repetitions move parallel to memory and forgetfulness, in a sequence impressively like a musical modulation. Love for the dead suggests love for the past, the poet's desire to keep with him the beauty and awfulness of the filiation that he will hand on in his turn; and the imagination then seems our one genuine weapon against mortality. . . .

Solitude falls into loneliness, isolation decays to imprisonment, repression gives way to murder, as Justice travels across his land of self-enclosures. And we meet the neurotic in the sanitarium, longing to get back to the way of life that sent her there (''A Letter''), or the love-hungry poet (not Justice), reliving in his poems his love-hungry youth (''Portrait with Flashlight''). Because he has the habit of understatement and terseness in an era when overexpression is normal, Justice may sound too reserved. But the intensity of vision that directs his work will be evident to those who care to observe it, as when the poet admits his complicity in the terrors he conveys.

In making these new poems, Justice discarded some of his old traits. He has given up regular meters for free verse. He has enlarged his allotment of dreamlike images and veiled meanings. But his ear and his sense of design are so reliable that the poems remain seductive in sound and shape.

He has not reduced his most engaging feature, the mixture of gentleness with power. The confidence Justice has in his own selfhood enables him to reach out to lives that would unsettle a thinner character.

> Irvin Ehrenpreis. In *Poetries of America: Essays on the Relations of Character to Style*, ed. Daniel Albright (University Press of Virginia, 1989), pp. 207–14.

Donald Justice's modest, almost cautious, output sets him apart from many of his contemporaries: it is also a conscious demonstration of the care taken in the making of his elegant and craftsmanlike poems. The achievement of his first three books of poems, *The Summer Anniversaries, Night Light,* and *Departures,* became clearer when gathered in the single volume of *Selected Poems* with later, uncollected work. The book was awarded the 1980 Pulitzer Prize in poetry. Since then Justice has published *The Sunset Maker,* which further added to his stature.

Justice is one of America's most subtle and sure poets, an artist whose care with and respect for language—he has a near faultless ear—enables him to achieve effects beyond the reach of all but a few of his contemporaries. His emotional and technical range is far wider than his modest output would have us believe, and his chief tool is a transparent technique always at the service of thought and feeling.

The early, celebrated ''Counting the Mad'' is a bizarre parody on the children's nursery rhyme ''This Little Piggy'' transposed to a lunatic asylum. Justice's formal skill and stylishness enable him to be at ease in complex verse forms and perform small masterpieces such as his ''Sestina: Here in Katmandu'' or ''Variations for Two Pianos,'' for the pianist Thomas Higgins, which is itself a variation on the villanelle. Justice is a noted translator from the French, and it may be that his work has been influenced by French literature as much as by his shared American and British traditions. He owes something to Wallace Stevens—an early poem is titled ''After a Phrase Abandoned by Wallace Stevens''; a later one, ''Homage to the Memory of Wallace Stevens''—and, if he belongs with any group of contemporary American poets, it is with such diverse writers as Anthony Hecht, Richard Wilbur, and X. J. Kennedy, all masters of prosody giving shape to emotion though the frame of traditional forms. Justice's own ''Early Poems'' ironically comments on the skilled early five-finger exercises of formalist poets such as himself.

It is characteristic that Justice, a poet whose skill is clearly demonstrated in the poem, should be so self-deprecating about his early prosodic talent. He is without pretension and is possessed of a rare humility before the craft of poetry which has allowed his gifts to develop and broaden. The riddlingly titled ''Poem'' might also be addressed to himself as well as his readers.

Quite different again is ''First Death,'' a sequence of poems on the death of a grandmother which, far from indulging emotion in the way of a confessional poet, instead clearly defines feeling for the reader by recording specific memories at the time of the death. In fact Justice writes consistently well on memory, and expresses it through a wide range of sensory perceptions. For example, his poem ''Memory of a Porch'' accommodates the ''thin, skeletal music'' of a wind chime and also the ''sighing of ferns/Half asleep in their boxes.'' Or there is the sensuous collage of ''Thinking about the Past,'' which is moving because the personal memories are free from egotism, so that they somehow exist as concrete images of relevance to all.

The Sunset Maker is a volume of both poems and prose, including short stories and ''Piano Lessons: Notes on a Provincial Culture,'' an autobiographical prose essay recollecting early music lessons. A memorable group of occasional poems center on the lugubrious character of Tremayne (perhaps reminiscent of Weldon Kees's occasional protagonist ''Robinson''), with titles such as ''The Mild Despair of Tremayne,'' ''The Insomnia of Tremayne,'' and ''Tremayne Autumnal.'' There are elegies, memories, poems on music, and others after Baudelaire, Rilke, Kafka. A sense of melancholy and nostalgia permeates the volume in titles such as ''Nostalgia of the Lakefronts,'' ''Psalm and Lament,'' and ''Villanelle at Sundown,'' this last a poem seeking to accept aging and the passing of time.

When many a larger name of today has slipped permanently from view, we shall still read Justice, who has produced many fine, enduring poems.

> Jonathan Barker. In *Contemporary Poets, 6th edition*, ed. Thomas Riggs (St. James Press, 1996).

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KANTOR, MacKinlay (1904–1977)

There is no book ever written which creates, so well as this (*Long Remember*) the look and smell of battle, the gathering of two armies, the clash, and the sullen separation. *The Red Badge of Courage* as a work of art is superior to *Long Remember*, but it is a study in the psychology of courage, not a spectacle. Mr. Kantor contrives to give us the movement of the whole spectacle in a series of sharply drawn scenes. We get glimpses of the great leaders done so naturally and unobtrusively that they are wholly credible. The appearance of Lee riding along his lines on Seminary Ridge is perfect.

Allen Tate. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. April 8, 1934. p. 2

Mr. Kantor's merit (in *Long Remember*) is his realistic treatment of a historical moment: the thing might have happened yesterday. No doubt the literature of the last war has helped to balance the mood and style. There is a sheer understanding of the horror of war and at the same time a sense that it happened so, inevitably, in spite of Bale's passionate protest; and the realism of his acceptance of the fighting, while still protesting against it, is the measure of his sanity. A soldier can understand the business of war, a civilian can only hope to stand it, and it is this long suspense of despair and discouragement of action that makes the character of Bale and makes the book.

Peter Monro Jack. *New York Times Book Section*. April 15, 1934. p. 6

Both in verse and prose, both in his monumental novel, *Long Remember*, and in his collection of ballads, *Turkey in the Straw*, MacKinlay Kantor has already given us much that is memorable concerning the American Civil War. Now he has well-nigh achieved a masterpiece in a short story . . . *The Voice of Bugle Ann*. . . . So far as atmosphere goes, the tale of this fabulous foxhound is a masterpiece. . . . The narrative ability of Mr. Kantor is greatly above the average. Here's a thoroughly American writer who deserves your salute.

William Rose Benét. *Saturday Review*. August 31, 1935. p. 4

MacKinlay Kantor, in *Happy Land*, takes us into an average small-town home, bereaved of its son in this war. It is a short book, yet into its few pages it packs the feeling and substance of several generations of simple, decent people. . . . *Happy Land* has been called sentimental. . . .And so perhaps it is, if sentimentality in a writer means abetting his readers' emotions in sneaking up on them. Perhaps Mr. Kantor strums the heartstrings a little too deliberately, though he does it with imagination and restraint. But *Happy Land* remains a book for which one has respect and affection.

Robert Littell. *The Yale Review*. Spring, 1943. pp. vi–viii

Of the established popular writers of our time—the writers, that is, whose main contributions are to the big magazines and to the movies—MacKinlay Kantor is surely one of the most attractive. Never pretending to be more than he is—a gifted and practiced story-teller—he has knowingly produced his full share of that artful blend of sentiment and melodrama which makes up the large part of our popular fiction. Yet he has also managed to bring forth on occasion work of genuine dignity and value. In a few of his short stories, and in at least one of his short novels, there is rich and memorable writing, unmarked by either contrivance or concession.

Richard Sullivan. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 9, 1947. p. 7

Twenty years ago, in *Long Remember*, MacKinlay Kantor gave us a moving picture of the impact of battle on the little town of Gettysburg. Even before he wrote that book his imagination had been stirred by the possibilities of a story that mirrored the whole of the Civil War, and *Andersonville* . . . is the product of a quarter-century of study and writing. Onto the warp of history Mr. Kantor has woven with the stuff of imagination an immense and terrible pattern, a pattern which finally emerges as a gigantic panorama of the war itself, and of the nation that tore itself to pieces in war. Out of fragmentary and incoherent records, Mr. Kantor has wrought the greatest of our Civil War novels.

Henry Steele Commager. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 30, 1955. p. 1

In 1934 a new writer, MacKinlay Kantor, seized our attention with his intense, compassionate story of Gettysburg, *Long Remember*. . . .

The Civil War was and is his first love. . . . I think it likely that the revulsion against the concentration camps of our time was the final imperative which compelled him to write his new long, heartfelt novel, *Andersonville*. . . . The novelist employs a thousand different episodes to bring the war within the focus of the prison, and there are times when his power of invention leads him too far afield. But in his pictures of tenacity, endurance, and cleansing mercy he has written with truth and power.

Edward Weeks. *Atlantic Monthly*. Nov., 1955. p. 88

Andersonville is a most impressive performance. This is obviously a book that Kantor dreamed of doing all his life. And he has turned in a stirring work, shaped of forty years of delving in Civil War material, a profound sense of identity with the American past, and a craft which, if not inventive or fresh, has been well sharpened over twenty-eight antecedent books. Both in its techniques and its

situation this novel is a cross between John Hersey's *The Wall* and Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*.

Sidney Alexander. *The Reporter*. Jan. 12, 1956. p. 40

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KELLY, George (1887–1974)

Not content [in *Craig's Wife*] with permitting his characters to tell their special story, he periodically steps to one side, pulls a ruler out of his pocket, and indulges himself in a blackboard lecture proving by statistics that there are thousands of persons in the world like his characters and that they are going through the same crises and vicissitudes. . . . Kelly takes a woman who has married for security alone and who sacrifices everything and everyone that security may not be threatened. This woman he presents illuminatingly, forcibly and convincingly; the character is painted with a sure hand and lighted up with sure detail. What is more, the collision of the character with the other characters strikes off the sparks of authentic drama. But then, just as these sparks set fire and begin to give life to his theme, the playwright jumps on the statistical hose-cart and clangs to the scene.

George Jean Nathan. *American Mercury*. Dec., 1925. p. 504

In one sense, the theater doesn't interest him at all—only plays. Considering that he knows the theater as actor, director, and playwright, he is a very slow worker. But there is no cause for haste: every word spoken by him must be clearly in mind, and every word spoken by him set down exactly where it belongs, before the MS. is released to the Director. . . .

Daisy Mayme, which was produced before *Behold, the Bridegroom*, deserves more than passing notice. For one thing, it proves that Mr. Kelly is not a one-play man, even though it is not so brilliant as *The Show-Off*. Without more than the shred of a story, with no big moments and with scarcely more than a single emotional climax, it is compact with authentic and highly entertaining scenes. . . .

Here is an unpretentious comedy of life written by a young man who is tired of the footlights and rarely goes to the theater, to whom no trick is new, no hokum that's not wearisome. . . . His somewhat bitter attitude toward life is occasionally tempered with indulgence, and his comedy at its best arises out of that combination of love and indignation that produced the masterpieces of Molière.

Barrett H. Clark. *An Hour of American Drama* (Lippincott). 1930. pp. 51, 59–60

A gift of observation and a knack for lines and character picked up in the Variety might bring box office profits but they do not make a dramatist of significance. Kelly's aim is higher than commercial returns. Ever since he began writing plays he has had something to say. It has sometimes been unimportant, sometimes mistaken but always definite and sincere. Indeed in his most serious and least effective plays he has verged on evangelism. He is at his best when delivering his ideas via satire. Our national *precieuses ridicules* wither before his attack. The silly technical phrases, the affected attitudes, the unfounded assumptions of America's poseurs are pitilessly recorded. Many a member of the audience squirms while he laughs. In this fact lies what is apparently his finest opportunity. If Kelly can now effect a union between a serious, well thought theme and his satiric method his work will immediately take on a new and greater importance. Unfortunately he has been least satiric in his most serious plays, most satiric in comedies of slight content.

Carl Carmer. *Theatre Arts*. April, 1931. p. 324

Like the earlier Sidney Howard, George Kelly has excelled in the painstaking, often slow-moving study of character, set in a kind of dramatic still life. The action in *The Show-Off* and *Daisy Mayme* is desultory. Instead, the talk is so real, so untheatrical that one seems to be actually listening to the conversation of a typical American family at supper with the fourth wall miraculously removed. The discussion revolves around a box of candy, cigarettes, the playing of a piano, a dusty detour by motor, an item of domestic routine. It is no part of Kelly's technique to condense or imply; his characters indulge in no mental or verbal short cuts. The result is a degree of realism overwhelming in its intensity, achieving its theatrical effect through sheer cumulative reiteration, rarely explicit in its point of view but undeniable in its implications. . . . But with *Craig's Wife*, Kelly took off his gloves and wrote one of the most devastating and effective plays of the decade. In it he showed how tragedy inevitably overtakes a woman whose sense of values has become so corrupted that she sacrifices everything to material security.

Eleanor Flexner. *American Playwrights: 1918–1938* (Simon). 1938. pp. 234–6

But what makes the play [*The Show-Off*] luminous is the completeness with which the playwright sees through his characters, the significant handling of their petty psychologies, their commonplace reactions, until out of it comes that thing which is life itself, which is not merely West Philadelphia, and not something particular, but something universal and bigger and more tragic and ironically humorous than Aubrey Piper: something of world character.

The effect is not gained by any chance trick on the part of the dramatist: it is due, first of all, to an excellent power he has of characterizing . . . from the inside out, so arranging his commonplace doings of commonplace people that every move will enrich the human material he deals with.

Montrose J. Moses. *Representative American Dramas* (Little). 1939. p. 611

Mr. Kelly had his great and apparently easy success a generation ago. Then, by what seemed like deliberate intent, he changed his whole manner, and after a series of failures stopped writing entirely until *The Deep Mrs. Sykes* had a success of esteem some eighteen months ago. The new play is lighter in tone than the last-mentioned piece, but it is obviously the product of the same usual kind of interest in the same unusual kind of character problem. . . .

The Fatal Weakness is neither commonplace domestic drama nor eccentric farce, but a character comedy whose charm as well as whose somewhat baffling quality depends upon the fact that it is a shrewd, cool analysis of a rather unusual woman looked at from an even more unusual point of view. . . .

Is this a subject too slight or too elusive for a play? Many would say so. . . . What he has given us is not precisely what I usually expect in the theater, but I was, nevertheless, very well satisfied to find it there.

Joseph Wood Krutch. *The Nation*. Jan. 18, 1947. p. 81

Like Roswitha the Nun composing her six plays to celebrate the virtue of chastity, George Kelly is a simple moralist using the theatre for simple moral purposes. The tenth-century dramatist leaned on the comedies of Terence for her inspiration; Kelly relies on his early vaudeville experience with the Keith-Orpheum circuit. The works of both rank among the curiosities of the stage. Separate from any conscious dramatic tradition, ingeniously adapting his own crudely forged means to his own blunt ends, Kelly, like Roswitha, is a figure comparable to the 'primitive' or 'self-taught' artist in painting. . . . Kelly is a moralist who cannot convincingly depict either good or evil; he cannot reckon with intellectual scepticism; and, although a realist, he cannot, in realistic terms, sustain character. Yet he remains without question our most invigorating and consistently valuable writer for the stage. He has at any rate the minimal dignity of taking experience seriously.

Edward Maisel. *Theatre Arts*. Feb., 1947. p. 39

This after-dinner sluggishness on the part of his public must explain the fact that he has been allowed to pass unremarked, for he is the queerest writer on view in America. His plays, though they are set in drawing rooms, are not polite comedies; though they make a fetish of observation, they are not realistic; though they are performed by actors, their complete cast of characters is not listed on the program, their real heroes and heroines being glasses of water, pocketbooks, telephones, and after-dinner coffee-cups. It is difficult to describe a George Kelly play to anyone who has not seen several, simply because it is not like anything else while on the surface it resembles every play one has ever been to. . . .

Early in Mr. Kelly's career, this pedantry of ceremonial and vacuous busyness was related to the official subjects of his plays. In *The Show-Off*, the hero is a ritualistic greeter who lives on small talk, idle boasts, and gratuitous lies; in *Craig's Wife*, the heroine is a house-proud woman who lives through her furniture and will not let her husband smoke in the parlor. Both of these people are mad; they are monsters in the Jonsonian manner; a human trait has been carried in them to the point of inhumanity. But they have at any rate a consistency of character that respects the conventions of the human personality; their personalities are over-developed but intact. Mrs. Craig is in love with her house, but she is not a house; Aubrey Piper is a compulsive stream of words, but he is also a man who listens to them. In *The Deep Mrs. Sykes* and *The Fatal Weakness*, however, character has become utterly disassociated, and it is hard to say whether this is an advance or a regression.

Mary McCarthy. *Partisan Review*. March–April, 1947. pp. 174–6

As Kelly gained in confidence, he discarded the medium of satire, and began to concentrate upon the role played by women in the American social scene. Presently it became clear that, although his social criticism took account of the significance of economic factors in shaping the prevailing mores, his standard of judgment expressed an austere, uncompromising, even puritanical moral sense. In *Craig's Wife* he studied one attitude to middle-class marriage which, though seldom explicitly acknowledged, is neither exceptional nor socially condemned. This portrait of a woman of the leisure class—Kelly drew her with cold fury and savage contempt—furnished an illustration admittedly extreme; but it represented a type so generally sanctioned by the social code that most Americans had ceased thinking of it as being singular or questionable.

Lloyd Morris. *Postscript to Yesterday* (Random). 1947. p. 193

He calls his play [*The Show-Off*] ''A Transcript of Life in Three Acts,'' and he employs the devices of the realistic theater to represent middle-class suburban life with utmost fidelity. In setting, characterization, and speech he is minutely faithful to his chosen milieu. Not only the diction but the very rhythms of his dialogue reflect the bourgeois society as accurately as the matters under discussion: marriage, and death, and making both ends meet. . . . The ending, the triumph of Aubrey Piper, is more than a farcical twist, more than a comic reward for the comic hero, more than irony. Aubrey's explanation for the capitulation of the company broadens the theme of the play to include a whole facet of American culture. . . . not just Aubrey, but big business is compounded of bluff, and theatricality, and bragging, and the mouthing of sententious proverbs.

Alan S. Downer. *Fifty Years of America Drama: 1900–1950* (Henry Regnery). 1951. pp. 122–5

The key to the mystery surrounding the fact that Mr. Kelly's most characteristic and most seriously meant plays do not quite achieve the success that they seem at times about to reach is suggested, I think, by the touch of coldness in his nature, by a certain stubborn negativeness in his moral attitude which lays a blight upon his plays. Essentially they are rather dour and frost-bitten, rather bleak

at the very moments when a grave beauty ought to emerge. He wants, like Milton, to express the grandeur of puritanism, but he is somewhat earthbound and cannot entirely escape from a certain unlovely rigidity. There is too much realism, too much prose, where a king of ecstasy is called for. When a puritan is also a poet, the result can be magnificent, but Mr. Kelly is not quite poet enough. He commands respect but he cannot quite inspire a genuine enthusiasm.

> Joseph Wood Krutch. *The American Drama since 1918* (Braziller). 1957. pp. 70–1

In the days when H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis were enriching our demonology with the Babbitt and the Boob, George Kelly's dramatized comment on American materialism was no less devastating than that of the best of his literary contemporaries. His inner ear, infallible as Ring Lardner's, captured every nuance of ''ordinary'' conversation; heightening the dialogue imperceptibly, he could pinion the middle class with its own trite homilies.

> Irving Drutman. *New York Times Theater Section*. Dec. 3, 1967. p. 5

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Finders-Keepers, 1923 (d); *The Torchbearers*, 1923 (d); *The Show-Off*, 1924 (d); *The Flattering Word and Other One-Act Plays*, 1925; *Craig's Wife*, 1925 (d); *Daisy Mayme*, 1926 (d); *A La Carte*, 1927 (sk); *Top o' the Hill*, 1927 (d); *Behold the Bridegroom*, 1927 (d); *Maggie the Magnificent*, 1929 (d); *Philip Goes Forth*, 1931 (d); *Reflected Glory*, 1936 (d); *The Deep Mrs. Sykes*, 1945 (d); *The Fatal Weakness*, 1946 (d)

KENNEDY, Adrienne (1931–)

One of the most provocative and least studied black American dramatists to emerge in the sixties is Adrienne Kennedy. Set in the surrealistic theatre of the mind, her dramas are rich collages of ambiguities, metaphors, poetic insights, literary references, and mythic associations, all of which provide a dramatic form unique to Miss Kennedy. Having the power of myths, her dramas suggest an awareness of reality contingent upon the images that man is conditioned to expect in his culture. Moreover, they draw upon that peculiar quality of myths which enables man to externalize his deepest feelings about his own nature, identity, and relationship with the sacred. In *The Owl Answers*, one of Miss Kennedy's most compact plays, this effect of myths is achieved through extending the metaphoric values of the owl. While on one level of literary meaning the owl stands for evil omens and darkness, in association with the fig tree it is the controlling metaphor in the play anchoring the heroine's problem of identity with the worlds of her white and black parents and her many self-images.

The Owl Answers, a one act play, takes place in a New York Harlem subway which changes at times into the Tower of London, St. Peter's Chapel, or a Harlem hotel room. As the action moves from the present time on the subway to the past time of memories and dreams, the setting becomes variously one of the other three areas. There are three major actions blurring and blending with each other so that setting as well as identity become fragmented and swirl through time and memory as in a dream. Characters pass from one role to another with the removal of an item of clothing or a change in hair. The heroine is named She, the bastard daughter of a black cook and a white man.

The first major action, created partly from memory and fantasy, takes place largely in London. According to She's fantasy, she and her white father, William Mattheson, visit London on a literary pilgrimage. There he dies of a heart attack, and she is locked in the Tower to prevent her attending his funeral. Her guards are Chaucer and Shakespeare, their names suggesting the white literary heritage she had studied. Another historical character appears, Anne Boleyn, who apparently reflects attitudes toward love as expressed in Western literature and political history. She turns to Anne and asks for her help.

Blending with the events in London and in the Tower, the second major action takes place in the past and, representing expository reality, communicates religious and social attitudes. In his home town in Georgia, the white father who had conceived She on his black cook calls his daughter a bastard and apparently rejects her. She is adopted and brought up by the Reverend Passmore and his wife, both of whom are black, who call her Clara. Occasionally, however, they refer to her as an owl and lock her in a fig tree. When her white father died, she wanted to attend his funeral and was told not to. She also wants to make a literary pilgrimage to Europe. Sometime in the past she had been married once and has become a school teacher in Savannah, Georgia. Her adopted parents, the Passmores, like She, are associated with specific attitudes. Seeing herself as God's bride, the Virgin Mary, the wife refuses to allow her husband to touch her. Her bed she turns into an altar by means of owl feathers and there she commits suicide with a butcher knife. As for her husband, Reverend Passmore believes in the white man's Christian religion and has as his symbol the white bird of the church which flies into a canary cage.

The blurring together of both actions develops when the Reverend Passmore's wife becomes successively She's real black mother and then Anne Boleyn. She's white father is presented just as ambiguously. In the events located in London and in the Tower, he is apparently emotionally close to his daughter; in those placed in the real past, he has obviously ignored her. As for his daughter, she appears at times as Clara; in other instances she is the Bastard, or the Virgin Mary, or the Owl. The consequent merging of the two actions emphasizes She's feeling of love and estrangement.

The third major action develops in the present time on a subway in New York. Here Clara sits, a thirty-four-year-old lonely school teacher who searches for love and spends her summers hunting men in New York to take to her hotel room. As Clara brings to life in her memory the events and actions of the first two plots, her latest pick-up, a black man, watches her. Eventually she calls him God and asks him to take her so that she can go to St. Paul's chapel. When he tries to undress her, the setting shifts to the hotel room and the bed transforms into an altar. Now she wants him to call her Mary and shows him her letters written daily to her dead father on her trip to Europe (it is not clear if she has really taken the trip or if it was made only in her fantasy). Then she takes a bloody butcher knife from the letters and attacks him. Frightened, he runs away. Now alone, she kneels at the bed-altar which catches on fire, and in its light gradually she begins to look more and more like an owl. . . .

The major thematic content of the play then is the problem of how She's fragmented identities relate to her quest for a stable and unified self-image. The problem is an internal one for She, and Adrienne Kennedy has externalized it by joining the metaphor of the owl with the mythic qualities of the fig tree.

It is clearly more than merely a bird of ill omen. In the more common mythologies of the world, the owl is, among many things, a symbol for non-believers in God who dwell in darkness; a messenger of witches or the bird transformation of a witch; another name for a harlot who works the night; one of the epiphanies of Athene, the Greek goddess of wisdom and the female domestic arts; or the metamorphosis of the baker's daughter who begrudged Christ her father's bread. Its hooting cry is the call of death; at night its voice is the spirit of a women who has died in childbirth and is crying for her dead child; its presence in a tree near a home presages ill fortune to the inhabitants. Its legendary associations with death, trees, ill fortune, anti-Christian nuances, quest for love, and a female principle thus make it a richly ambiguous metaphor suitable for Kennedy's intentions.

In the play the owl is She, the mulatto daughter of a rich white man. Her identity has historical roots both in the English literary, political, religious world of her white blood father and in the white-black world of her mother, the town's black whore. In addition her identity has an anchorage in the mythical world of folklore and legend from which Kennedy draws her controlling metaphors. If in the white world the owl has one set of governing associations, in the world of myths it has another.

The structure for Adrienne Kennedy's use of the owl and fig tree is one of association with different events, situations, attitudes, and persons. First, as a bird, the owl balances the white bird identified in the play with Christianity and the Reverend Passmore. Like a canary, the white bird prefers to fly into a cage. On the other hand, while the white bird is not related to She, the owl is. The obvious inference is that Christianity as a religion of white men is not psychologically and historically suited to She.

Second, in the play the owl is associated with a fig tree. As the bastard daughter of William Mattheson and the black whore (or as the adopted daughter of the Passmore's, the point of view not being clear on this matter), she is ''locked'' in a fig tree. The metaphoric term ''locked'' relates this action with her being locked in the Tower of London. Both situations suggest that what is important is not what happened but how she responds to or feels about the events. Thus as an owl, She sits in the fig tree.

Third, the bird is associated with the dead. In She's memory it occurs in relation to her white father, now dead, who had called her an owl, and somewhat like her white father, she is similar to a dead thing. She feels sterile, barren, loveless.

Fourth, the owl is presented in the context of the beginning of things and in relation to sacred notions. When her mother tells her that ''the Owl was your beginning,'' she says that she belongs to ''God and the owls.'' Her bastard birth is thus anchored by the owl. In addition the owl extends some of its meaning to her black mother who uses owl feathers to construct an altar. Exploring her responses to the owl, She says that she calls ''God and the owl answers.'' Later she exclaims that

> it haunts my Tower calling, its feathers are blowing against the cell wall, speckled in the garden on the fig tree, it comes feathered great hollowed-eyed with yellow skin and yellow eyes, the flying bastard. From my Tower I keep calling and the only answer is the Owl God. . . .I am only yearning for our kingdom God.

Fifth, the owl is presented against a background of personal and religious ritual which suggests the frustrations of the three black women who dominate the play in their tripartite roles as the biological mother, the religious mother, and the maiden. The black whore mother sits like an owl and pecks at red rice on the floor. She becomes more owl-like as owl feathers appear on her and as she drags in a ''great dark bed.'' At this point the real mother's identity fuses with those of Mrs. Passmore and of the owl. She acquires more owl feathers and her hair becomes black and long and straight like that of the Reverend's wife. In this transformation she turns her bed into a high altar with owl feathers and candles. There she sits. And now as all three concepts (mother, adopted mother, and owl), with a white dress and ''wild kinky hair,'' and partly covered with owl feathers, the figure calls to She, the ''Owl in the fig tree,'' and says that ''there is a way from owldom.'' That way, however, is to St. Paul's Chapel. As both figures kneel in prayer, a green light suffuses the tableau, and the mother image kills herself with a butcher knife.

Sixth, the owl is always associated with She, as can be seen in the many references already suggested. But especially is the association stressed in the final scene of the play. When the black man tries to undress She on the altar-bed, she ''screams like an owl,'' struggles, and begs to be allowed to go to St. Paul's Chapel to see her white father. Suddenly from her notebooks, she draws the butcher knife, bloody and covered with feathers and attacks him. As he runs away frightened, she falls onto the bed which begins to burn. In the background up in the dome, as though suggestive of the Chapel, the white bird laughs. She is transformed almost magically into an owl-like figure and can only say ''Ow. . .oww.''

Quite clearly the owl is intended by Adrienne Kennedy to be black woman lost intellectually and emotionally in a white world. Confused about her black identity and its related basic values of love, father, and religion, She becomes at times a harlot. As the owl who answers, she is the nonbeliever, the harlot, the woman anguished by the lack of love, the spirit of the dead. But being black she feels related to the night; she cries of the woe to come.

In the play She is the composite overlay of her father's cultural heritage and her mother's racial background. Her identity is fragmented because half of her physical roots are black but almost all of her intellectual heritage is white. The consequence is that she feels alienated from her many selves and cannot integrate them. She asks herself on her literary pilgrimage to London if this is her past. And she says that she is never going back there. When her white father died, he returned to the home of his ancestors, but she cannot.

Within the context of the play then, She is the owl for whom instead of solace Christianity offers only the vision of the white virgin Mary equated with a black Christian step-mother who had called her a child of darkness. She is a harlot who hunts for love at night time, a prophetess of death. Especially is she a barren woman crying for the love and children which she does not have. But the owl is also her alter ego, her bird sister, her epiphany. She sits in the fig tree and her presence reflects the death of her father and of Mrs. Passmore and of all those like them. The two metaphors suggest that her anguish is profound and timeless, growing from her basic sense of self. Sitting like an owl in the tree of knowledge about good and evil, she has learned about the white man's literature, but she has also acquired a sense of her personal loss.

Specifically, Adrienne Kennedy in *The Owl Answers* appears to focus on the concept that the black in America has no historical or literary heroes to identify with and to achieve personal unity through, a unity necessary to prevent the self from being alienated from the continuity of life. This is a theme that Amiri Baraka has developed many times also. But Kennedy has restricted the idea by treating it from a woman's point of view. In this way the owl and the fig tree become uniquely appropriate images because they are historically associated with the female principle and reflect the rootless aspects of She's nature. They strongly emphasize her mythic qualities as well as her need for a spiritual or sacred relationship with her dead. In addition they provide metaphorical comments on her problems as a woman in finding a love and a religion which can be meaningful for her within the framework of her two disparate worlds.

If she accepts herself as a Christian (Christianity being a religion which reflects white culture), then she can identify with the virgin Mary and become symbolically the wife of God. In this way her bed becomes an altar on which she surrenders to God, and every man whom she picks up is transformed by her into God. On the other hand if she accepts herself as an owl, her bed is the place of a sacred and non-Christian marriage that she has with both a real man and her ancestral spirit; it remains barren despite her yearning for life. This polarized ambivalence overlaps with her submergence at times in the identity of Mrs. Passmore who commits suicide to become God's bride, finding Christianity and release from the pains of the flesh in death. Here the owl metaphor suggests the confusion of the woman's role in sex, in love, and in religion when it is conceived in the frame of Christianity set against the awareness of its non-Christian associations. Uniquely She becomes a collage of many roles and in one of them must be the bride of God (an alien spirit in her owl transformation), literally and repetitively sacrificing herself (that is, her physical self). That belief forces her to repulse the real man before he can become her lover. In the end her search for love becomes hopelessly involved with religion, sex, and self. Perhaps then, her essence, her soul or her spirit, is the only positive thing that she has. But her essence also has to be owl-like because when she kneels at the altar confused by what she is, she looks more and more like an owl.

Adrienne Kennedy uses in the play the images of historical and religious figures and those of birds and the fig tree to make a bitter and satirical comment on the American black female trapped by the conflict of cultures and sexual roles in twentieth-century America. As a mulatto, an educated school teacher, the daughter of a white man, and an intellectual inheritor of his English historical and literary past. She can find no meaning or solace in that past, nothing to reassure the continuity of her own life. She finds kinship only with man's mythic assertions about his nature and its identification with the non-human forms of life.

In this view the setting of *The Owl Answers* is the mind of She and reveals through metaphors her internal responses to external events. Thus past and present and different places become one in a dramatic montage.

It is no wonder then that with her confused dream of love, She becomes lost in the insistence of the dream of the virgin Mary and can not find satisfaction with men. She calls God, but only the owl, the ambivalent fusion of non-Christian forces and of her alter ego, answers. Living in owldom, the land of ambivalence, the vague featureless past of darkness, she feels as though she is locked in a prison from which there is no escape. Because her mother in the role of Mrs. Passmore had denied life by approaching God through suicide, every embrace with a man becomes for She a perpetual religious sacrifice. Trapped in the mystery of the sacred, she sits alone in the fig tree and remains barren. For the Christian the dove as a symbol bridges the gap between the transitory nature of physical identity and the more permanent transcendental spiritual identity which extends like some power from the past into the future as a unifying element. But for the half-white, half- black, part-Christian, part-pagan, the owl and the fig tree emphasize the gulf between the physical self and the spiritual center. . . .

Robert Tener. *Studies in Black Literature*. Summer, 1975, pp. 1-5.

Playwright Adrienne Kennedy employs fantasy and dream-like images to portray the multi-faceted identities of her African American women characters as they struggle against an oppressive society. Heavily symbolic, hallucinatory, and filled with violence, Kennedy's plays operate in a fantastic milieu where troubled characters use psychodramatic means to confront racial and gender questions.

Kennedy's first play, *Funnyhouse of a Negro,* winner of the 1965 Obie Award, presents a young woman named Sarah as she unravels the complexities of her own identity as the daughter of a black man and a white woman. Her inner selves, characterized on stage by such varied figures as Queen Victoria, Jesus Christ, Patrice Lumumba, and the Duchess of Habsburg, dramatize the conflicting parts of Sarah's personality. These inner conflicts center on questions of gender and race as Sarah discusses her feelings with the various personas contained within her. Images of masks and skulls recur throughout the play, as Sarah rekindles buried memories of violence and rape that eventually lead her to commit suicide.

In *The Owl Answers,* Kennedy again presents a female character with multiple personalities. Clara Passmore contains within her the Virgin Mary, the Bastard, and the Owl—characters who appear to her while she rides on a New York subway car. The subway doors open to reveal such historical personages as Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Anne Boleyn, some of these visitors transforming in turn into her father and mother. Like Sarah in *Funnyhouse of a Negro,* Clara is of mixed heritage—her mother is a black cook in Georgia and her father is a wealthy white man. Her conversations with the characters inside and outside of herself become an exploration of her own past and a means of discovering who she truly is. Finally imprisoned within the Tower of London, Clara becomes an owl, a symbol of her mother. Filled with Christian and surrealistic imagery, *The Owl Answers* is an examination of one woman's attempt to find herself amid a confusing racial heritage.

In *A Beast's Story,* a young bride named Beast Girl is married to Dead Human by her father. Later she is raped by Dead Human when she refuses his advances. She then kills her baby to please her parents and, overcome by despair, murders her husband as well. More hallucinatory than Kennedy's earlier plays, *A Beast's Story* has a dreamlike quality and, like a dream, seems to circle around itself repetitively as obsessive images recur and the protagonist's confusion mounts. Also hallucinatory in approach, *A Rat's Mass* parodies the Catholic mass as it tells the story of Brother and Sister Rat, two siblings who find that their incestuous love for each other

has replaced the love they once had for Rosemary, a descendant of the Pope, Julius Caesar, and the Virgin Mary. Blood plays a prominent role as symbol of both guilt and religious sacrament. The play, Kennedy has explained, was inspired by a dream she had while riding a train in Europe. A religious dimension reappears in the play *A Lesson in Dead Language,* set in a classroom where a teacher dressed as a White Dog joins with Joseph, Mary, and two Wise Men to confront seven young girls with religious guilt.

In more recent plays Kennedy has often drawn on actual biography for inspiration. She was inspired by the death of black leader Malcolm X to write the short play *Sun: A Poem for Malcolm X,* in which a single actor stands before such changing symbols as a moon, a severed head, and various colored suns as he reads the text of a poem of homage. In *The Lennon Play: In His Own Write,* Kennedy adapted stories written by John Lennon as a stage play featuring a young British boy growing up in an absurdist small town. *A Lancashire Lad* is a fictionalized account of the boyhood of famed silent-film star Charlie Chaplin.

Denise Wiloch. In *Feminist Writers*, ed. Pamela Kester-Shelton (St. James Press, 1996).

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KENNEDY, William (1928–)

Horse-Shoe, like Walter Scott's prototypical early novels, is set in a temporal middle distance. In his preface, William Kennedy informs us that the Revolution, by ''common consent,'' has been open to ''our story-telling craft'' only since its fiftieth anniversary, ''that being deemed the fair poetical limit which converts tradition into truth, and takes away all right of contradiction from a surviving actor in the scene'' (11). It is interesting that Kennedy feels the need to explain and defend his use of the essential event of American political and cultural history on obscure ''artistic'' grounds. In part, this is an apologia for previous American failure to do anything particularly notable with the subject: Kennedy cites a convention which he has invented to endorse facts he wishes were different. In part, the talk about art is an attempt to clothe the naked nationalism of his subject. . . .

The achievement of *Horse-Shoe* is threefold. First, Kennedy bucked the prevailing tide of tub-thumping American nationalism by producing a balanced and moderate account of events which seemed to call for ideological mythologizing. He is thus one of the early practitioners of classic American realism. Second, Kennedy's nonpartisan stance replicates, as closely as any American did, that of Walter Scott, who measures out approval and blame to all parties in his romances. In so doing Kennedy shows that Americans could play the game; *Horse-Shoe Robinson* is the proof that ''our storytelling craft'' could indeed be brought to bear on the Revolution. Third, through his use of the frontier, Kennedy manages to be nonideological without sacrificing distinctive American character. By placing Horse-Shoe at the center of this realistic account of the revolutionary struggle, Kennedy establishes the plausibility of seeing the actions of an individual (and an individualist) as a microcosm of the historical actions of the nation.

Charles H. Brichford. *Southern Literary Journal*. Fall, 1988, pp. 65, 70

As a sidelight to ''Hail and Farewell, Jack a Champion like No Other'' [In *The Big Book of Irish American Culture* (Bob Callahan, ed., 1987),] Jim Murray writes that ''the first great Irish-American heavyweight was James Morrisey'' who on February 12, 1853, ''beat Yankee Sullivan in thirty-seven rounds'' and who afterward ''became a powerful gambler, a saloon keeper, a labor leader, a Fifth Congressional District Representative and an extravagant Saratoga racetrack millionaire'' (p. 211). Morrisey's life may be the basis for William Kennedy's characterization of John the Brawn McGee in *Quinn's Book* (1988). . . .

Kennedy translates fact into the magic of fiction by often transposing history for more dramatic effects. As instance, in *Quinn's Book* he amalgamates Albany's historic ice, flood, and fire cataclysms, and in *Billy Phelan's Greatest Game* and *Ironweed* he transposes the time frames for the O'Connell's political machine, and the regional blackout during Thomas E. Dewey's political harangue of the O'Connell machine. Thus, while John the Brawn's career parallels some details of Morrisey's life, through the magic of fiction, Kennedy uses John the Brawn's rise and successes to parallel the rise of the Irish to power and prominence, the success stories of the other characters, and the triumphs of Albany and the United States over the cataclysmic Civil War. In a larger sense, then, *Quinn's Book* becomes a ''moving mosaic'' of American as its cities and people move ''at inch-pace progress'' into the future (*QB*, 256, 258).

Edward C. Reilly. *Notes on Contemporary Literature*. May, 1989, pp. 4–5

Perhaps the greatest of contemporary Irish-American stylists is William Kennedy. Born in 1928, he has made most of his living as a journalist while turning himself by dint of steady labor into a writer of fiction. His first novel, *The Ink Truck* (1969), appeared when he was over forty, and the books that followed had more than their share of rejections. However, in more recent times solid publishing (including paperback) contracts, a MacArthur Foundation ''genius grant,'' and work in the movies have changed his situation dramatically. Kennedy's extraordinary fiction now has a considerable audience, and he is famous in a literary way, with a secure reputation resting on his ''Albany cycle'' of novels. Three of these, *Legs* (1975), *Billy Phelan's Greatest Game* (1978), and *Ironweed* (1983), share a setting, New York's down-at-heels capital city, a

time frame, roughly 1925 to 1938, and a vivid cast of characters both dead and alive, bums and bootlickers and honest working men, journalists, politicians, gamblers, and gangsters. A fourth, *Quinn's Book* (1988) is both a culmination and a new departure. Set in the middle of the nineteenth century, it involves ancestors of characters from the other novels and many crucial, shaping events of Irish–American history.

The Albany novels are strange, fascinating books, combining unillusioned realism in the Irish–American tradition of James T. Farrell, blaseé flights into the fantastic as in the ''magic realism'' of South Americans such as Gabriel García Márquez, and passages of compassionate lyricism, prose poetry, really, reminiscent of the fictions of William Goyen or Faulkner. Kennedy is also a prime example of a contemporary Irish–American light stylist, one who argues from plenitude and complexity toward affirmation. . . .

William Kennedy's clear Irish–American forerunners have also helped release him to look further afield for literary models such as García Márquez. Because certain trails had been blazed in his own ethnic neighborhood, Kennedy has been free to strike out on his own. . . .

The point is that Kennedy emerged from a solid literary context. [James] Farrell made himself and his style entirely out of his own working-class and lower-middle-class experience and literary insight. [Frank] O'Connor was the most talented novelist of the Irish–American bourgeoisie to come along, and he made his considerable mark by using traditional narrative modes. If he also ended up being something of a ''lace-curtain'' writer, that's at least in part because he too was plowing new ground. Thus, Kennedy charts his course by the lights of his predecessors, an advantage neither of them had. He wanted to be surreal in a way that Farrell was not, he wanted to be realistic in a way that O'Connor was not, and he wanted to explore different dimensions of Irish–American life. And so we have the Albany novels, which mix hard, gritty realism with a surreal lyricism of great beauty in the depiction of, among other things, an Irish–American underclass of ruthless criminals, gamblers, and homeless bums, the lowest of the low.

Charles Fanning. *The Irish Voice in America: Irish–American Fiction from the 1760s to the 1980s* (Lexington: Univ. Pr. of Kentucky, 1990), pp. 346–47, 351

Quinn's Book is characterized by rhetorical excess and an extravagant, melodramatic plot in which a sequence of calamities press upon one another: floods and fires, deaths and resurrections, riots and wars, secret societies and underground railroads, romances and ghostly voices all crowd the action. The scene is specifically Albany, but the surplus of incident tends to overwhelm the particularities of the setting. Quinn, like Bailey, finds himself in a puzzling world, but the puzzles lack the human, psychological complexities of those encountered by Diamond and Gorman, Billy and Martin, Francis and Helen. In *Quinn's Book* the poetics of memory and place give way to a rhetoric of social observation. The principal difficulties of Quinn's world—matters such as the treatment of immigrants, slaves, workers, and soldiers—are presented as sociological phenomena. *Quinn's Book* offers a largely objective panorama of a world full of representative figures and situations. Its main characters tend to be engaged with History and Society and the Meaning of Life and Love; its minor characters tend to be Typical People—the Black Slave, the Irish Worker, the Dutch Dowager, the Yankee Industrialist.

J. K. Van Dover. *Understanding William Kennedy* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina, 1991), pp. 102–3

Orson Purcell, a self-pitying writer manqué is a risky choice for a novel's narrator, but in *Very Old Bones* William Kennedy deftly moves beyond Orson's solipsistic concerns to create a compelling tale of five generations of Irish and Irish Americans (a much-appreciated genealogy chart helps keep generations straight for the reader). The narrative moves from July 26, 1958—the day of the reading of the will that opens and closes the novel—to other important events in the family, including Orson's presence in Europe during and after World War II; the death in 1934 of Kathryn Phelan, the family matriarch; and the bizarre and violent events of 1877, involving crazy Malachi and his wife Lizzie, ancestors of the Phelan family. Orson, and his relationships with his enigmatic wife and his artistic father (who refuses to admit that Orson is his son) are the central focuses of the novel.

Readers of Kennedy's previous novels about Albany and the Phelans will enjoy hearing anew the old tales, and filling in the details of that city and family. But everyone, even those reading Kennedy for the first time, will find that *Very Old Bones* is a very good book.

Missouri Review. Summer, 1993, p. 215

[*Riding the Yellow Trolley Car*] . . . The book is divided into six sections, the first three being reviews and essays on literature and the fourth specifically on 10 Latin American writers whom Kennedy championed early in their publication in English.

Kennedy defines his literary tradition in these essays, and it includes realists, Irish Catholic writers and great practitioners of creative writing: Joyce, Anderson, Hemingway, Dos Passos, Steinbeck, Caldwell, Farrell, Fitzgerald, Mailer, Algren, O'Hara, O'Neill, and Runyon. These men, along with Katherine Anne Porter and Flannery O'Connor, two women whose works he admires greatly, . . . each one's works imparted the lessons of the master to the young apprentice, who read extensively while he wrote his novels. The power of tradition is considerable for Kennedy—not only the literary forbears but the authority of family, ethnic identity, and home in the making of the writer. Religion left a strong mark on his personality, to the degree that he came to see writing as a kind of baptism.

James E. Rocks. *America*. January 29, 1994, p. 30

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KEROUAC, Jack (1922–1969)

This wolf . . . ravens down the raw streets of America, taking gladness in the fact that the Mississippi has lived up to its advance notice in Mark Twain, describing one haunt after another as ''storied,'' literary as literary can be, raised on the great books, as aren't we all? Where Thomas Wolfe broke his head butting against the world of intellectual highlife, Jack Kerouac is butting but unbroken against the world of hipsters. . . . Despite its drag race of words and gestures, *On the Road* does nothing, thinks nothing, acts nothing, but yet manages to be a book after all—a loving portrait of hip Dean Moriarty and his beat, cool friends as they run a hundred and ten miles an hour in order to stand still. It's a frantic book, and for that reason there is hope for Jack Kerouac.

Herbert Gold. *The Nation*. Nov. 16, 1957. p. 355

Some of the writing (in *On the Road*) is immediately attractive; but what is attractive about it is not its ''wildness'' or its ''desperation,'' but a certain unmistakable simplicity and openness of mind. . . . When Mr. Kerouac says ''Wow!'' he can convey a certain sense of wonder and innocence that is affecting. As the narrator hitchhikes or drives back and forth across the American continent, and never for any good reason, he meets fellow tramps and travelers, sees towns and cities that he approaches and lives in and leaves again, and the plains and mountains between—and to these he can respond with an engaging candor.

Dan Jacobson. *Commentary*. Dec., 1957. p. 478

The central character in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* is no hipster, even if the literary critics may call him one. That is, he is no hipster in the jazz musician sense. But he is a hipster in the Broyardian sense of trying to get somewhere. His motivation is the same and it carries with it the identification with jazz. The entire book is, on more than one level, the account of postwar youth trying madly to get somewhere somehow. . . . His book assumes a knowledge of the language and litany of jazz. . . . The jazz generation is marking time, being cool, waiting, disengaged, if you must, looking for somewhere to be. Meanwhile, writers like Kerouac and music like jazz are its voice.

Ralph Gleason. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 11, 1958. p. 75

Despite its unlikely subject, *The Dharma Bums* belongs in every fiction collection for the following reasons. Its prose is pure American of the sort William Carlos Williams has been asking for all these years; its philosophy, its anti-organization-man-ism is a precious and also radically American stand. Kerouac can see the panorama of American land- and city-scapes in broad, bright flashes and can say what he sees (some of his nature writing recalls Muir and Thoreau) and, at the very least, his book is a close sociological study of contemporary phenomena. Sometimes Kerouac seems a little foolish, often he is extreme, but he is genuine, he is alive, and he is native.

Dorothy Nyren. *Library Journal*. Sept. 15, 1958. p. 2441

Kerouac can describe a simple supper of pea soup and wild mushrooms, or even a spartan repast prepared from those little plastic bags of dried food carried by seasoned mountaineers, in a way to make your mouth water. He is at his very best in describing the smells, sounds, sights and general feeling of walking a Western trail.

In his often brilliant descriptions of nature one is aware of exhilarating power and originality, and again when he creates the atmosphere of lively gatherings for drinking, talking, and horsing around in those simple but highly stylized dwellings of his Pacific Coast friends.

Nancy Wilson Ross. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 5, 1958. p. 14

There are many aspects of post-World War II America about which Mr. Kerouac is as good and accurate an informant as any writer whose works the spacemen might find. Probably no one, for instance, could give them a better picture of the far west as seen from the freight car; the maze of tracks dim in the foggy night at the railroad yard, the passing flashes of station and town lights in the dark, the menacing railroad guards. Indeed, as far as cross-country travel goes, and especially travel of the free or cheap sort—hitchhiking, rod-riding, gasoline sharing in private cars, or even bus travel—Mr. Kerouac is the acknowledged prophet. His novel *On the Road* is the bible of such travel.

About jazz, too, Mr. Kerouac would be hard to beat, in any tempo. He gives us the music, the mad musicians, and the even madder people who crowd around to listen to them. . . .

Despite all this virtuosity, however, there is one large area of life where I do not trust Mr. Kerouac. With all his wisdom and experience, he gives a strangely distorted picture of American women.

Eliot D. Allen in *Essays in Modern American Literature*, ed. Richard E. Langford (Stetson), 1963. pp. 97–8

Out of all this material, I would single out only *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums* as reasonably fictional studies in disjunction. They represent Kerouac's view of things with the greatest freshness and vivacity, in spite of passages of intolerable innocence where every hobo becomes a cute little Dharma bum, in spite of the unmotivated sentimentality with which Dean Moriarty and Japhy Ryder are presented. These novels are made interesting to us, I think, because Kerouac's sense of his characters' being cut off, disaffiliated, is clearer here, more available to us as part of the malaise of our times than in his other works. As he moves away from the communicable excitement of these first two ''beat'' novels into *The Subterraneans* and then into the flood of his later work, one is aware of a falling off of imaginative drive, an accumulation of new episodes of disjunction to no new purpose. He seems to be consciously moving, in his fiction and his poetry, in the direction of greater and greater incoherence. . . . If one steps out of the lurch and stagger of this rhetoric for a moment, one sometimes has the notion that Kerouac is all set to unravel the verbal coherence of the Western world.

David L. Stevenson in *The Creative Present*, ed. Nona Balakian and Charles Simmons (Doubleday). 1963. pp. 210–11

All of us with nerve have played God on occasion, but when was the last time you created a generation? Two weeks ago maybe? Or instead did you just rush to your psychiatrist and plead with him to cool you down because you were scared of thinking such fantastic-sick-delusory-taboo-grandiose thoughts? The latter seems more reasonable if less glamorous; I've chickened out the same way.

But Jack Kerouac single-handedly created the Beat Generation. Although Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso and William Burroughs brought their separate and cumulative madness to the yeasty phenomenon of the BG (and you will find them in this book [*Desolation Angels*] under the names of Irwin Garden, Raphael Urso and Bull Hubbard) it was Kerouac who was the Unifying Principle by virtue of a unique combination of elements. A little boy tucked into the frame of a resourceful and independent man, a scholarly Christian-Buddhist who dug Charlie Parker and Miles Davis and ice cream, a sentimental, apolitical American small-towner who nevertheless meditated on the universe itself like Thoreau before him, Jack Kerouac threw a loop over an area of experience that had previously been disunited and gave it meaning and continuity. The significant thing about Kerouac's creation of the Beat Generation, what made it valid and spontaneous enough to leave a lasting wrinkle on history and memorialize his name, was that there was nothing calculated or phony about the triumph of his style.

Seymour Krim. Introduction to *Desolation Angels* by Jack Kerouac (Coward). 1965. p. ix

Given [Kerouac's] past habits as a writer, one knows what to expect from him. Although some have seen *Vanity of Duluoz* as a more disciplined work—Kerouac now uses commas because, as he says in the opening pages, no one liked his factotum dash—it is really the same old heap of prose. . . . All this we've had before, and, indeed, depending on one's mood, the awkward exuberance could even be fun and of some interest. But there is something else going on in *Vanity of Duluoz*, which may well have been present in Kerouac's earlier books, though hidden beneath the Love, scene-digging, and beautiful people: a bitterness and a petulance that change the top-heavy prose from an almost pleasant semiliterate excess into an ominous insistence that attention be paid to the man suffering and writing these lines.

Perhaps it is because Kerouac is getting middle-aged and beginning to worry about the younger generation that this cantankerous attitude peeps through more often than it did in the past. Perhaps he now suspects that a preference for the weird and subrational does not necessarily make one an artist. Perhaps he means now really to tell it to us like it is. Whatever the reason, I could not get over the notion that with every metaphor and incident in this autobiography, the author was desperately insisting that things *will* be as he intends them—even though his genius is not up to proving it.

Jack Richardson. *New York Review of Books*. April 11, 1968. p. 34

What about him inspired a generation of followers to idealize him as a rebel of social and political meaning? Was it because he told how he did not like the ''mean old cops'' he encountered on the road? Or that he did not like suburban houses and TV sets—though proud of having bought both for his mother? Was it because he liked Krazy Kat, hiding in an alley with a brick for the cop? But that, patently, is childish social criticism. When infrequently he faced political problems straight on, he resolved them by simple and sudden intuitions that ''everything would be all right.'' It just would. . . .

Political commitment assumes the possibility of power, and through power, of change. Kerouac lived with a profoundly defeated sense of helplessness, reflected in his prolonged, or rather his unending, adolescence. He had an appalled vision of life as empty, meaningless, and futile. His readers saw him as a modern Whitman affirming life and beckoning them to its open roads. But his obverse side was nihilistic, and his refrain that of Beckett—born to die.

Blanche Gelfant. *Contemporary Literature*. Summer, 1974. p. 417

Kerouac's characters are separated from the community and have no interest in social reorganization, much to the disgust of many of the author's critics. But to the Kerouac hero the world and its institutions are too absurd for personal involvement. Nature offers no lasting relief either. Essentially, it is blind and uncaring. The only answer seems to be to get beyond time and desire, either through annihilating the senses with sensation or by freezing them in mystic contemplation. Neither method is satisfactory, and Kerouac's focal characters oscillate endlessly between the two states until, with the publication of the last novel, *Vanity of Duluoz*, it is evident that the quest for ecstasy and oneness with God has perpetuated an incorrigible loneliness, the final position of the quintessential Beat.

What relief there is in mystical belief is due to Kerouac's study of Buddhism superimposed upon his early Catholic training. He longs to accept the dance of life, the play of the illusion that most consider their waking reality, while at the same time seeking contact with the spiritual center of existence. . . .

Fascinated by the play of his own mind, Kerouac tried to get down all of his experience into words, first in the manner of Thomas Wolfe and then more in the manner of Henry Miller and William Burroughs. . . .

He has left us a body of work including the novels of the Duluoz Legend, his poetry, and his long unpublished treatise on Buddhism, but it is probable that little of it will survive. Because of continuing interest in the Beat generation, *On the Road* will no doubt remain the novel to be read to get at the quintessence of Beatness. Complementary works on the Beats will also retain a certain appeal. *Dharma Bums* contains some of the memorable minor characters, such as Japhy Ryder and Sean Monahan, and some of the best description of nature. It also treats the hero's mystic quest with the greatest degree of detachment. *Big Sur* is the novel that sums up the futility of Beat existence.

Whatever the merits of Spontaneous Prose, and we might wish for prose better honed or more thoroughly revised in a number of his books, Kerouac's prose method did produce at least one remarkable book, *The Subterraneans*, in which the spontaneity of style is largely responsible for the strength of its effect. It is a novel

that is unique in its intensity, not only in all of Kerouac's work but in the work of the New Romantics generally.

> Robert A. Hipkiss. *Jack Kerouac: Prophet of the New Romanticism* (Regents Pr. of Kansas, 1976), pp. 133–35

Striding above the constraints of society, beyond sin, doubt, and complexity, Kerouac's heroes, who are in a state of grace that precludes any experience from soiling their souls, exhibit an antinomianism that in American literature is usually simply labeled innocence. But Kerouac's men are profoundly subversive of the tradition of Western innocence in one crucial respect—they are opposed to and commit no violence. Kerouac ignored the blood-soaked world of American literature and the notion of the saintly killer who is ''regenerated through violence.'' Guns hardly exist in Kerouac's novels. His characters do not even get into friendly barroom brawls.

Kerouac's males would prefer to live outside society, but they are inexorably entangled within it. Marriage, divorce, speeding tickets, even jails encroach upon their lives, but they continue to search for a permissive, individualistic society, such as they believe existed in the nineteenth-century West. In *Visions of Cody*, that search appears fruitless. . . .

Above all, Kerouac should be remembered as a seminal and major contributor to a contemporary myth of the West. Conjuring up a free territory in which gentle, spiritual people live in harmony, this latest version of the Isle of Fair Women had an incalculable influence on Americans in the 1950's and 1960's. For dreamers of a Western paradise, Jack Kerouac's books proved as indispensable (and often as inaccurate) as the guidebooks of the 1830's and 1840's had been for the original settlers. Finally, after a veritable epidemic of ''Donner parties,'' the myth was discredited, although some survivors continue to intone its dogmas.

> Harry Russell Huebel. *Jack Kerouac* (Boise State Univ. Pr., 1979), pp. 30, 43

[Jack] Kerouac's writing is an attempt to discover form, not to imitate it, and to discover experience in the act of writing about it, as if the language of the ''mental spontaneous process'' could expose some human experience as yet unknown simply because no writer had dared to set it down unimpinged by ''craft'' in the traditional sense. Yet the obvious irony of this stubborn refusal to revise is that any writer as concerned with the revision process as to oppose it so dogmatically must have this method of refinement keenly fixed in his mind.

Both Kerouac's style and his notion of legend in fact evolved out of his scrupulous avoidance of revision in the traditional sense. Kerouac's first novel, *The Town and the City*, written and rewritten in the late forties and published in 1950, was considered a promising first venture in prose, although imitative of the style of Thomas Wolfe. Kerouac reacted profoundly to this critique, and indeed to the anxiety of Wolfe's influence with *On the Road*. Kerouac liked to think his rambling second novel was written in a manner unlike that of any other, in a style and language commensurate with the rhythm and tempestuous speed he found in experience itself. *On the Road* is the exemplary case of Kerouac's conscious break with an unsatisfactory style, his expression utilizing the special techniques he was articulating in his essays on craft. Kerouac's ''spontaneous bop prosody'' shaped *On the Road*—which was typed on a continuous roll of teletype paper as if it were one long paragraph—as a nonstop statement of an experience that kept moving, the energy of the language bursting through any limitations imposed upon it by our notions of sentence form.

Even when the novel's publication in 1957 (already delayed seven years and heavily revised at Malcolm Cowley's insistence) brought him instant fame and success, Kerouac was distressed and all the more anxious to get the story down right. Hence the revision, published posthumously in 1973 and known as *Visions of Cody*, was conceived to rectify the distortion caused by editorial revision of material in the earlier work. Significantly, this insistence upon further clarification, to get to the truth about things, forced Kerouac's mind over the material again and forces the reader to recognize that by such repetition a stage of revision is already built into the supposedly ''spontaneous'' prose. Repetition in fact becomes Kerouac's control.

Repetition provides a critical category for the discussion of spontaneous prose. It suggests a double movement in the act of composition, a movement that progresses and repeats at the same time. As Kerouac wrote spontaneously, the elements of past experience were revised in the act of being recorded. Kerouac's legend-making material is a product of the details of his life repeated in each book. But the recurrence of the past does not only define the design of the legend as a whole, showing the relationship of each novel to the next. Recurrence also marks the interior structure of Kerouac's very language so that the pattern of his whole career reflects in large the more microscopic structure of his language from book to book.

> Regina Weinreich, *The Spontaneous Poetics of Jack Kerouac: A Study of the Fiction* (New York: Paragon House, 1990 [c 1987]), pp. 4–5

Despite his limitations as a writer and his own sense of failure, Kerouac exerted a powerful influence on those he associated with and those who never met him except through his books. Many of the memoirs and interviews assembled by Arthur and Kit Knight speak of Kerouac as a shaping force on the work of others. Ginsberg attributes his liberation from traditional poetic forms to Kerouac's theories of spontaneous bop prosody; Kerouac helped William Burroughs shape *Naked Lunch* as he typed it from Burroughs's various fragments and drafts. The aesthetics of spontaneous prose have even reached into freshman composition textbooks with their exercises in free writing.

Thus, the attempt to treat Kerouac seriously as a writer is worthwhile. Beyond his influence on others, his power in his best passages to render the energy of experience and the depths of despair has few equals. He had his major flaws too; his inability to render character convincingly or in depth; his inability to sustain narrative; his naiveté. But his output, for all its flaws, was prodigious—if somewhat monomaniacal in theme—and his oeuvre stands as a lightning rod for all the debates about art of the last quarter-century.

His influence was more than artistic. Whether Kerouac approved of the transformation of his life into a lifestyle, many, from

Tom Hayden to Bob Dylan, have spoken of the effect that *On the Road* had on their own lifestyles when it was first published. Perhaps one needs sociology as much as literary criticism and certainly more than mythology to establish Kerouac's place in contemporary culture, for, if anything, the significance of the Beat movement lies in its having demanded a breakdown of both the artistic and social categories that used to seem so firm and fixed.

Martin Green. ''The Loneliest Writer in America.'' *Literary Review*. Fall, 1988, p. 128

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KESEY, Ken (1935–)

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest by Ken Kesey is a Gothic novel. . . .It is not simply imitative. The important theme is . . . the compulsive design. The ''Big Nurse''—as the narrator calls her—is an authoritarian, middle-aged woman who tries to impose her will upon her lunatics—she must make them fear and respect her so that she can feel superior. She exerts power not to help others but to help herself: her compulsive design cannot stop—except through violence—because it is all she has. . . .

''Humor blots out the pain.'' Mr. Kesey gives us many amusing scenes which are ''black''—Big Nurse for example, informs Billy, the whore's betrothed, that she is going to tell his mother!—but he knows that if we can laugh at the unreality around us, we retain our humanity. Gothic and comedy are Janus-faced. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is an honest, claustrophobic, stylistically brilliant first novel which makes us shiver as we laugh—paradoxically, it keeps us ''in balance'' by revealing our madness.

Irving Malin. *Critique*. 5, 2, 1962. pp. 82, 84

In his first novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Ken Kesey demonstrated that he was a forceful, inventive, and ambitious writer. All of these qualities are exhibited, in even greater degree, in *Sometimes a Great Notion*. Here he has told a fascinating story in a fascinating way. . . .

Many novelists have experimented with the rapid shifting of point of view, and some have tried to blend past and present. . . . But I can think of no one who has made such continuous use of these two methods as Kesey. And he has made them serve his purpose; that is, he has succeeded in suggesting the complexity of life and the absence of any absolute truth.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. July 25, 1964. pp. 21-2

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest works better [than *Sometimes a Great Notion*] to the degree that it is dreamed or hallucinated rather then merely written—which is to say, to the degree that it, like its great prototype *The Leatherstocking Tales*, is Pop Art rather than *belles lettres*—the dream once dreamed in the woods, and now redreamed on pot and acid.

Its very sentimentality, good-guys bad-guys melodrama, occasional obviousness and thinness of texture, I find—like the analogous things in Cooper—not incidental flaws, but part of the essential method of its madness. . . .

Everywhere in Kesey, as a matter of fact, the influence of comics and, especially, comic books is clearly perceptible, in the mythology as well as the style. . . . What Western elements persist in Kesey are, as it were, first translated back into comic-strip form, then turned once more into words on the conventional book page. One might, indeed, have imagined Kesey as ending up as a comic book writer, but since the false second start of *Sometimes a Great Notion*, he has preferred to live his comic strip rather than write or even draw it. . . .

But *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* survives the experiments and rejections which follow it; and looking back five years after its initial appearance, it seems clear that in it for the first time the New West was clearly defined: the West of Here and Now, rather than There and Then—the West of Madness.

Leslie A. Fiedler. *The Return of the Vanishing American* (Stein and Day). 1968. pp. 183–5

We are left [in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*] with a somewhat sentimentalized over-simplification of moral problems. Admittedly, Kesey's opposition of Good and Evil is less bald and the Victory of Good less clear than might seem. The superhero McMurphy is sacrificed to the machine culture and Big Nurse remains in the ward. . . .

The book's beginning is too easily forgotten and we are pushed along by Bromden's optimism. We are to hope, not despair, and, more importantly, not define the line between. Kesey believes in the comic book world in spite of himself. This is the moral ground on which critical faultfinding must begin. Kesey has not avoided the dangers of a simplistic aesthetic despite his attempts to complicate it. He forgets that the comic strip world is not an answer to life, but an escape from it. The reader finds Kesey entering that world too uncritically in defense of Good.

Terry G. Sherwood. *Critique*. 13, 1, 1970. pp. 108–9

If hippies are, as Alan Harrington suggested to me, ''no more than Beats plus drugs,'' it may be worth studying the quantities of that

equation to see just how they happened to fall into place. It all began, legend has it, with Ken Kesey. He had a far more substantial and direct influence on events than did Timothy Leary. It was Kesey, they say, who made it all happen. . . .

Ken Kesey was . . . enrolled in the Stanford University creative writing program as a graduate student. He had come down from Oregon, where the year before he had come out as a champion wrestler in the AAU's Northwest Division and had barely missed qualifying for the Olympics. That was Kesey then, sort of an All-American boy in the old Kerouac mold. He had, in fact, out-Kerouacked Jack both as an athlete and a scholar, for he had managed not only to graduate from the University of Oregon, but had done so with distinction and had gone on to Stanford as a Woodrow Wilson scholar. And there he intended to prepare himself to write great American novels.

And he did produce a couple that, if lacking greatness, were at least grand, before turning his back on writing and becoming guru to a group of wacked-out psychedelic gypsies who called themselves the Merry Pranksters.

Bruce Cook. *The Beat Generation* (Scribner). 1971. pp. 196–7

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest is a modern fable pitting a fabulous kind of good against a fabulous kind of evil and making use of many of the traditional devices of American romance. . . . It does not return to the past, gaze toward the future, or travel to the unknown to get its ''romance'' setting. The setting is the static institution which sums up both the preoccupation of our age with the mystery of power, and the substitution of an image of the waste land for the image of a journey between Eden and Utopia. It is shot through with the vitality of its use of the here and now. We are constantly shocked into discovering how the book is really tied to the recognizable, not to the distant or strange, but to our very own—to technology we know of, to clichés we use, to an atmosphere possible only in the atomic tension of our times. Just as no one can confidently say who is mad and who is not in Kesey's novel, no one can say in what sense his story is real and in what sense it is fiction.

Raymond M. Olderman. *Beyond the Wasteland* (Yale). 1972. p. 48

It is not surprising that in *The Making of a Counter Culture* Theodore Roszak should be interested in Ken Kesey, the organizer of public LSD trips, rather than Ken Kesey, the author. For Roszak is correct in his assumption that, like J.D. Salinger's admirers in the 1950's, Kesey's admirers in the 1960's were concerned primarily with the style of life he seemed to represent, not the substance of his work. The difficulty is that in Kesey's case public admiration and the image of him created by Tom Wolfe in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* have obscured the depth of his accomplishment: specifically, the importance of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the novel on which his literary reputation depends.

The marrow of Kesey's art in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* lies in his description of a struggle for sanity that in its political implications denies the sufficiency of escapism or primitivism. Indeed, Kesey has found it necessary to reverse the myth of the Indian introducing the white man to a way of life that goes back to nature. Unlike Cooper's Chingachgook with his ''red skin and wild accouterments of a native of the woods'' or Faulkner's Sam Fathers, a ''wild man not even one generation from the woods,'' Chief Bromden, Kesey's Indian narrator, has lost complete touch with his tribe.

Nicolaus Mills. *Centennial Review*. 16, 1, 1972. p. 82

The contemporary cultural reaction against the ethic of the rational intellect, including an overriding distaste for ''content'' art, and the correspondingly pervasive commitment to sensorial experience, are exemplified in the career of Ken Kesey, erstwhile novelist and psychedelic superhero. Whatever became of that boisterous and brilliant young diamond-in-the-rough novelist who commanded the attention of middle-class American youth during the Haight-Ashbury era as prophet of the feverish *Now* religion? In 1962 Kesey published his bitter fable, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, still an extremely popular novel, and he was immediately included in the slate of highly regarded, challenging young American writers.

Like so much of the important literature of this century, Kesey's first book laments the destruction of America by the monstrous organizational Combine, and it defines that retreat to private, ''irrational'' satisfactions which has in the past decade become an extraordinarily widespread response to claustrophobic rational life in the social madhouse. Kesey then personally rejected the painfully logical, but thoroughly berserk machinery of orthodox space-age existence and followed his Indian refugee Chief Bromden back to the tribe. Of course, Kesey's noble savages were Indians only in spirit, social drop-outs who had discovered the primitive in themselves and who preferred the random life to the servile treadmill of community responsibility and business as usual. Kesey went native, went made by society's definition, which labels any man insane who is unable or unwilling to conform, and he found a new life as charismatic chieftain of the Merry Pranksters.

James O. Hoge. *Southern Humanities Review*. Fall, 1972. p. 381

Kesey and Vonnegut occupy different pulpits but both speak to the same congregation and proclaim similar messages of redemption. The two novelists are addressing themselves to those who, amid the conformity and barrenness of our time, are searching for some vestige of personal integrity and some measure of human kindness.

For Kesey the key word is ''courage.'' . . . Kesey grants that a Cross may be the price of personal integrity, but he also proclaims that crosses can be redemptive and that resurrection is always the final word. . . .

Kesey and Vonnegut would never be classified as ''religious writers.'' Yet each of them in his own way has made an important contribution to a contemporary understanding of Christian redemption.

James R. Tunnell. *Christian Century*. Nov. 22, 1972. pp. 1182–3

My own problem with this catch-all collection [*Kesey's Garage Sale*] is not that some of the material was twice published but rather

astonishment that most of it, largely detritus, was published in the first place. The more I see of the counter-culture, the more it seems to me an inverted Rotary, with its own tiresome rituals, glad-handers, oafs and uniforms. . . .

And filling something like Billy Graham's office in the inverted Rotary we have Ken Kesey, betting not on prayer and hard work, but chemistry (LSD-25) and idleness to save souls.

The largest chunk of *Kesey's Garage Sale* is given over to a sprawling, occasionally charming, more often inchoate, screenplay, ''Over the Border,'' starring Kesey and the Pranksters, thinly disguised as Devlin Deboree and the Animal Friends, on the lam in Mexico. . . .

Not every child raised on Wheaties grows up a champion; neither does every tripper return with ''Kubla Khan.'' Some merely check in with ''Over the Border.'' Engaging, and redeemed by humor here and there, but no more than a trifle.

Mordecai Richler. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 7, 1973. pp. 6–7

From all appearances, Ken Kesey is a hot item again. During the past year, Viking has released three Kesey-related titles, and more are on the way. Last summer, the Eugene [Oregon] Ballet Company staged an adaptation of his ''Little Tricker the Squirrel Meets Big Double the Bear.'' In October, Kesey read that Ozark fable over National Public Radio. . . . Kesey himself has attracted attention by venturing into collaborative writing with graduate students at the University of Oregon. And the Smithsonian Institution wants to acquire the psychedelically painted school bus that transported the novelist and his Merry Pranksters on their legendary 1964 pilgrimage from California to New York.

As most readers will recall, that drug-fueled odyssey was celebrated in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric-Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1986). The best-seller chronicled the wanderings of ''the Hieronymus Bosch bus . . . with the destination sign in front reading FURTHER [sic] and a sign in back saying CAUTION: WEIRD LOAD.'' Now we have been given two more accounts of the trip: Kesey's own *The Further Inquiry* and Paul Perry and Ken Babb's *On the Bus*. . . .

Perhaps the renewed interest can be explained by the simple passage of time. The notorious bus trip took place more than 25 years ago. Now hyperfranchised boomers who came of age during Kesey's original heyday are looking back nostalgically at that period when members of their generation defined themselves by whether they were, in a metaphysical sense, ''on the bus''—when, in short, there was still a bus to be on.

Kesey recently put it this way to an interviewer: ''We caught a wave back then. Drugs had something to do with it, but the wave happened in silence, cinema, art, music, and politics. Once you've caught that wave, you're addicted. You want to catch another one.''

George J. Searles. *New Leader* Jan. 14, 1991, pp. 20–21

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One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, 1962 (n); *Sometimes a Great Notion*, 1964 (n); *Kesey's Garage Sale*, 1972 (misc); *The Day Superman Died*, 1980 (s); *Demon Box*, 1986 (n); *Caverns*, 1989 (n [collaboration with 13 authors using pseudonym O. U. Levon]); *Little Tricker the Squirrel Meets Big Double the Bear*, 1990 (juv); *The Further Inquiry*, 1990 (n, scrp); *The Sea Lion*, 1991 (juv); *Sailor Song*, 1992 (juv); (with Ken Babbs) *Last Go Round*, 1994 (n)

KINCAID, Jamaica (1949–)

Jamaica Kincaid made an immediate impact on the literary scene when she first appeared in the early 1980s. Her two works so far are *Atlantic Monthly the Bottom of the River*, published in 1983, followed by *Annie John* in 1985. *Annie John* is a semi-autobiographical novel dealing with her experience of growing up in Antigua. *Atlantic Monthly the Bottom of the River* is a collection of pieces combining reflection and memories of that early experience. The two works are in fact companion pieces, the one in straightforward prose, the other poetic and intuitional in style. The substance of the experience in *Annie John* reappears in the images of *Atlantic Monthly the Bottom of the River*.

The reader is immediately struck by the originality of Kincaid's work, an originality that comes both from the peculiar character of the experience she recalls as from her singular rendering of it. In the more accessible *Annie John*, she re-creates a vivid picture of the Antiguan setting in which she grew up. It is the typical small-island environment before urban times. . . .

The preoccupation with childhood lies at the core of Kincaid's work and represents a very special achievement. In exploring it, she renews our understanding of the meaning of innocence and the value and possibilities of our first world. . . .One must look closely at what she recognizes in this innocence. It is not a state free from stain and imperfection. Growing up in *Annie John* involves an openness and receptivity to all manner of emotions and impulses, creative and destructive—love, dawning cruelty, generosity, possessiveness, instincts of hubris. In other words, the child is fully in touch with the complex motions of her own nature and being. It is also the freedom of the child's natural curiosity, the intentness with which it relates to the world around it, animate and inanimate forms alike. In Kincaid's testimony, the mother comes to contain and embody the world because of the totality with which the child lived that first relationship with her; and the struggle to be reconciled with her mother contained in embryo the struggle to be reconciled with life itself. In another piece entitled ''Blackness,'' Kincaid intimates the possibilities and depths of remaining in touch with these sources as she, now a mother, looks through the prism of her own child. . . .

And what has all this to do with Kincaid's roots in the Caribbean? Derek Walcott, in an early response to Kincaid's work, has this to say: ''Genius has many surprises, and one of them is geography.'' Kincaid grew up in an environment which helped give her a firm grounding in human relationships and their tenacity, an uncluttered landscape which kept her imagination in touch with primal realities. Her own work is proof of the power of that landscape. In reclaiming these roots she makes an explicit disavowal of the universe according to the twentieth-century view—a system that can be calculated, programmed and mastered, where the human spirit is left very little space to breathe. She puts it thus as she looks through the vision reflected at the bottom of the river:

''the sun was The Sun, a creation of Benevolence and Purpose and not a star among many stars, with a predictable cycle and a predictable end. . . .'' In the global scheme of things, Kincaid's native Caribbean, despite the brutalities of its past, is yet close to the state of childhood, and has the capacity to bring this message.

Patricia Ismond. *World Literature Written in English*. 28, 1988, pp. 336–37, 340–41

''Now I am a girl, but one day I will marry a woman—a red-skin woman with black bramblebush hair and brown eyes, who wears skirts that are so big I can easily bury my head in them. I would like to marry this woman and live with her in a mud hut near the sea.'' The magic of *Atlantic Monthly the Bottom of the River* (1983) comes from its language. It is as rhythmic and riddlesome as poetry. Lovely though the words are, they often read like a coded message or a foreign language. Throughout *Atlantic Monthly the Bottom of the River* the reader is left wondering how to decipher this writing. The decoder comes in the form of Jamaica Kincaid's novel *Annie John*. *Annie John* was published in 1985, two years after *Atlantic Monthly the Bottom of the River*. Its chapters had all appeared as individual stories in the *New Yorker*. *Annie John* tells the same story as *At the Bottom of the River*, that of a girl coming of age in Antigua, but uses straightforward novel talk and presents few comprehension barriers to the reader. *Annie John* is a kind of personification of *Atlantic Monthly the Bottom of the River*. It fleshes out the fantasy and the philosophy of *Atlantic Monthly the Bottom of the River's* poetry, and between the two books there exists a dialogue of questions and answers. They ultimately read as companion pieces or sister texts. . . .

Atlantic Monthly the Bottom of the River has been billed as ''Caribbean fiction'' portraying ''a childhood in the Caribbean'' that is ''partly remembered, partly divined'' (back cover, Aventura edition), but the most obvious alternative reading of Kincaid's collection of stories interprets it as being not so much about growing up on the islands as about growing up female. Every sentence of Kincaid's writing breathes this feminine sensibility. . . .

Atlantic Monthly the Bottom of the River is so strange and new that it often reads like not only a foreign language, but an entirely new kind of writing that could specifically be called a woman's writing. The name filling up her mouth is not only ''Annie John'' and not only ''Jamaica Kincaid.'' The name is also ''Woman.''

Wendy Dutton. *World Literature Today*. 63, 1989, pp. 406–7, 410

The works of Jamaica Kincaid, with their forthright acceptance of Caribbean identity (and of course the fact that she has legally renamed herself ''Jamaica'') present an explicit identification. Kincaid's works therefore begin at a different point on the identity/heritage continuum. Having already accepted Caribbean identity, she can then pursue the meaning of her woman self as she does in ''Girl''; her inner personal self as she does in ''Wingless'' and ''Blackness,'' which is a clear redefinition of the concept of ''racial'' blackness; her relationship to the landscape and folklore, as she does in ''In the Night'' and ''Holidays''; and all of these in the title story ''At the Bottom of the River.'' Both *Atlantic Monthly the Bottom of the River* and *Annie John* explore the female self in the context of landscape and Caribbean folk culture. Central to both books also is perhaps the best presentation in literature so far of the conflicted mother-daughter relationship.

Heritage and identity are intrinsic to the narrative and have as much significance as the gender issues with which she begins *Atlantic Monthly the Bottom of the River*. ''Girl'' begins with a catalogue of rules of conduct for the growing Caribbean girl/woman. These merge into surrealistic images of the Caribbean supernatural world but conclude with her woman-to-woman motif which recurs throughout both texts. . . .

Annie John is a *bildungsroman* marking the girl's growth from childhood to womanhood and only at the end of the work, close to the point of her departure from the island do we learn that she and her mother share the name Annie John. . . .

In the surreal landscape of *Atlantic Monthly the Bottom of the River* it is easy to see the maternal image merge with the image of woman love, for the imaginary female love she creates combines her Red Girl friend and her mother. The differentiation that is forced in *Annie John* with its solid autobiographical realism is allowed free poetic exploration into emotions and self in *River*. . . . In the haunting world of *Atlantic Monthly the Bottom of the River* where landscape collides gently with people, there is an Edenic quality to relationships and place and woman-to-woman identification is strong.

Carole Boyce Davies. In Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido, eds. *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1990), pp. 64–67

Derrida in *Positions* speaks of the necessity of ridding oneself of a metaphysical concept of history, that is linear and systematic. His claim is for a new logic of repetition and *trace*, for a monumental, contradictory, multileveled history in which the *différance* that produces many differences is not effaced. Jamaica Kincaid's *Atlantic Monthly the Bottom of the River* and *Annie John* represent examples of writing that break through the objective, metaphysical linearity of the tradition. At the same time, her voice manages to speak up for her specificity without—in so doing—reproducing in the negative the modes of classical white patriarchal tradition. Kincaid's voice is that of a woman and an Afro-Caribbean/American and a post-modern at the same time. This combination is therefore not only disruptive of the institutional order, but also revolutionary in its continuous self-criticism and its rejection of all labels. Perhaps we could say that it is a voice coming *after* the struggles of the women's movement first for recognition and then for separation; the voice of the third ''new generation of woman'' as Kristeva defines it: an effort to keep a polyphonic movement in process in the attempt to be always already questioning and dismantling a fixed metaphysical order, together with a determination to enter history. Her narrative, in fact, is a continuous attempt to turn away from any definitive statements *and* to utter radical statements. . . .

The theme of colonialism is treated by deconstructing the Master-Slave dialectics upon which it rests: After mocking the English who didn't wash often enough—''Have you ever noticed how they smell as if they had been bottled up in a fish?''; after having the English girl wear the dunce cap in class; after stressing that ''our ancestors''—the ''slaves''—''had done nothing wrong except sit somewhere, defenseless,'' she refuses to appropriate the Western conception of nation in order to express her anti-colonialism. . . .

Just like the imagery of death which pervades the ''paradise'' of the first chapters and dissolves as the problems rise in the central part of the book, everything is looked at in its multiple aspects. Grounded on personal experience, Jamaica Kincaid's writing nonetheless defies a realistic interpretation of her voice; it challenges any possibility of deciphering a single meaning by emphasizing multiplicity in what Roland Barthes would call,

> an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law.

But for Jamaica Kincaid it certainly does not mean to refuse love as we can know it.

> When I write I don't have any politics. I am political in the sense that I exist. When I write, I am concerned with the human condition as I know it.
>
> Giovanni Covi. In Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido, eds. *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1990), pp. 345–46, 352–53

One of the most intricate questions dealt with by the Caribbean writer in recent years has been that of identity. The issue of subjectivity, beset with problems such as recognition of self and other and oedipal conflict under the most conventional circumstances, is complicated further here given the additional factors of colonialism and pluralism which continue to mark Caribbean society and culture. One recent work which tackles such questions is Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*. Set in the Antigua of the 1950s, this autobiographical novel recounts a succession of experiences which culminate in the protagonist's almost palpable hatred for her mother. Underlying its apparent linearity, however, are various tropes and figures which trace Annie's desire to establish an individual identity within the complexities of Caribbean social structure. The specific psychoanalytical concepts which bear upon and explicate her wish for separation will be shown at several points to be impacted not only by the exigencies of Caribbean history, but by its racial pluralities as well.

The quest for identity in which the protagonist engages in this novel is mediated primarily by the Lacanian paradigm of the alienated subject. Lacan himself posits this alienation by delineating clearly the split inherent in subjectivity: ''Identity is realized as disjunctive of the subject . . . since it is the subject who introduces division into the individual, as well as into the collectivity that is his equivalent.'' In her exemplary work entitled *Jacques Lacan*, Anika Lemaire says of this split subject that ''the truth about himself, which language fails to provide him with, will be sought in images of others with whom he will identify.'' In this case the protagonist, unable to achieve assonance with the world around her, identifies with the images of the other in the form of her mother in an effort to establish a coherent self. This symbiotic relationship appears to function until the falseness of its premise is exposed to her, an event which is specifically precipitated by a primal scene. This in turn, gives rise to a new perception of the mother as being both racially and culturally different. The mother's creole Dominican past becomes opposed to Annie's Antiguan cultural formation, so that the mother's cultural separateness and ''foreignness'' are interpreted as a form of racial difference. This idea of racial difference as a subset of ''foreignness'' thus initially terminates the primary stage in which Annie seeks her identity through the (m)other. In conjunction with the primal scene, it also gives rise to Annie's perception of her mother's abdication of authority, precipitating her rejection of that unique sense of unity that had bound them together.

H. Adlai Murdoch. *Callaloo*. 13, 1990, p. 325

With *Lucy* Jamaica Kincaid continues a story of West Indian female development. Whereas the earlier bildungsroman-style works *Atlantic Monthly the Bottom of the River* (1983) and *Annie John* (1985) dealt with the adolescent years of a girl in the Caribbean, the new book presents a single learning year—the nineteenth—in the life of a character called Lucy, in the new setting of the United States. Lucy is an immigrant engaged to work as an au pair for a wealthy white couple and their four young daughters. Her year is complexly lived with its attendant difficult times, but it provides Lucy with learning experiences that enable her to manage the cultural change and her passage. By the end of this year she can appreciate the commitment of sisterhood (with her employer, for instance), has negotiated a social world of friends and lovers, and has embarked on an independent life provided for by a job as a photographer's helper. She has, moreover, survived the separation from her West Indian mother and upbringing, tasting an independence she has craved for many years. However, the persistence of unreconciled ambivalence toward her mother, guilt about her recently deceased father, and fears concerning her uncharted future becloud this newly gained freedom. The end of the work thus suggests a problematic future, though the fact that Lucy identifies herself as a writer—the act of inscribing her name, Lucy Josephine Potter, across the top of a journal notebook signifies this—indicates a self-authenticating, defining, and authorizing gesture of significance.

Compared to the earlier works, *Lucy* engages a thicker web of conflicts. Coming-of-age dilemmas in the preceding works involved the more limited parameters of home and small-island environment. Thus, conflicts were essentially the result of the circumstances of family (with the mother considered the most central aspect of ''oppression''), of the social world of peers and adults, of the adolescent's anxieties of physical maturation and sexuality. The later work complicates these conflicts, introducing cultural and geographic change and displacement as new factors in the life experience of the young girl. Lucy finds that she must negotiate an identity in a culture that is for all practical purposes an unknown to her, and one with operant discourses of race, class, and gender that she must quickly decipher. She focuses her alien's hostility to this culture upon Mariah, her employer. She is often enraged by the confidence of this all-American woman (whom she eventually comes to love, however), as for example in her need to wish to proclaim in great self-confidence, ''I have Indian blood.'' Lucy considers such racial acknowledgment as transgressive; it serves to deny history. She feels that ''victor and vanquished'' are historically separate events of being. Contemplating her own Indian heritage—she is part Carib—Lucy tells herself that to claim Carib status would be to totemize it.

As an immigrant, Lucy bears comparison with other immigrants. Similarly, she feels threatened in the U.S. (she is, she well knows, part of an economic underclass); similarly, she is heartened

by the prospects of freedom and choice there. When she first arrives, Lucy is the disappointed immigrant; the U.S. is ''ordinary'' and ''dirty.'' Unusually perceptive and sensitive, however, she forgoes superficial knowledge of the culture and instead engages in a dialogic confrontation with it. Not victimlike, she expresses rather than suppresses her differences and individuality.

Lucy also makes a strong statement about the difficult terms of living under colonialism. A good example of this comes in the first chapter, when Lucy is being pressed to show admiration for daffodils. As she vehemently protests, these flowers are for her a symbol of cultural imperialism. They bring back memories of her school days in the West Indies, when she had been expected to memorize a poem about daffodils—flowers, she reminds her employer, that are not native to the islands. That foreign material (in all respects) should have been dominant in the education she received, and native material made superfluous to education, evidenced for Lucy the cultural oppression that she had endured. Negative reinforcements were the patriotic songs, such as ''Rule Britannia,'' that tried to indoctrinate the West Indian into the discourse of European superiority and native inferiority. This past, too, Lucy seeks to escape.

The work ends with Lucy's statements, ''One day I was a child and then I was not'' and ''Your past is the person you no longer are.'' The fact that Lucy gives the appearance of believing this is indication, of course, that she is barely twenty years old.

Evelyn J. Hawthorne. *World Literature Today*. 66, 1992, p. 185

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KINGSLEY, Sidney (1906–1995)

Men in White is what might be called . . . a masculine play. That is to say it deals not so wholly with women, their interests, exaltations, and claims as it does with the male line of life, as centered in a profession, a pursuit, a ruling passion and the fellowship of men with men. The story involves love enough, with one betrothal and promised chance of marriage and one abortion and death. But love, nevertheless, is in this play one of the sources of life that feed the whole. If you did not feel so moved and satisfied by *Men in White*, you would feel somewhat complimented by it for taking you thus as a full human being in the midst of a living world. All through the three acts of *Men in White* the distribution of the stresses is admirable, the progression of the interest, almost a suspense, is unbroken, and good images are found for the dramatic expression of the points to be made.

Stark Young. *New Republic*. Oct. 11, 1933. p. 241

Sidney Kingsley had the imagination to transfer an aspect of modern science into dramatic terms so vividly and so rightly that the meaning is clear and thrilling to all. If he does it with steam sterilizers and bichloride and white robes and rubber gloves, in symbols of the eye rather than words for the ear, he is no less a dramatist and no less to be praised. . . . On the whole, *Men in White* captures reality with almost a passion of sincerity and breathes a spirit of idealism—the idealism of the medical profession at its best, which is probably one of the reasons for its great popular success.

Walter Prichard Eaton. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. April 1, 1934. p. 17

Mr. Kingsley's plays have always been completely devoid of what we call ''literary quality,'' and for that reason there is a kind of seriousness with which they cannot possibly be taken. Indeed, it is that fact rather that the undue prevalence of mere external violence which makes ''melodrama'' the inevitable label to apply to them. But I know no contemporary American who can take a topic—slum children in *Dead End* or doctors and nurses in *Men in White*—and then turn out a more stage-worthy piece, full of shrewd if not too profound observation crisply and humorously embodied in recognizable types.

Joseph Wood Krutch. *The Nation*. April 9, 1949. pp. 424–5

In a world behind the footlights Mr. Kingsley's ingenuity is not to be underestimated. He is a technician of outstanding abilities. His instinct for the stage is keen, his mastery of its means genuine. He happens to be a realist of the most painstaking sort. Everyone who saw *Men in White*, *Dead End*, or *Detective Story* must remember his inclination to hold the pier glass rather than the hand mirror up to nature. His fondness for the gadgets of realism remains undisguised even in *Darkness at Noon*.

John Mason Brown. *Saturday Review*. Feb. 3, 1951. pp. 23–4

Kingsley has a gift for making theatre out of local color and documentation in such dramatic milieus as hospitals, off-center neighborhoods, detective bureaus. Being a man of the thirties, Kingsley has also a penchant for liberal social preachment. He has, however, no psychological insight, no poetic eloquence, no capacity to convey the quality of any inner state.

Harold Clurman. *New Republic*. Feb. 5, 1951. p. 23

Mr. Sidney Kingsley's *Lunatics and Lovers* is all raw and garish surfaces; the dramatic equivalent of the magenta neon sign which shines relentlessly over this raffish cage in the moral zoo of Broadway. . . . The generous, comfortable bawdry to which it aspires never coalesces; the wit is as metallic and rasping as the chromium decor of the setting. . . . Mr. Kingsley, nothing if not ambitious, has privately invoked in support of *Lunatics and Lovers* the shades of Molière and Rabelais, Schopenhauer and Shakespeare, but no such distinguished presence seemed to me to haunt the play: what I caught was the stale whiff of a herring from Damon Runyan's net, a little gamy from over-exposure among the cardboard guys and dolls of this particular asphalt jungle.

Richard Hayes. *Commonweal*. Jan. 14, 1955. pp. 407–8

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KINGSTON, Maxine Hong (1940–)

Maxine Hong Kingston, a native of Stockton [California], is conceded to be a major American writer of her generation. She is a stylist whose original, rich view of California has enhanced literary possibilities for writers the world over. *The Woman Warrior* (1974), her breakthrough book, . . . was so singular that critics could not classify it: Was it fiction or nonfiction? Was it biography or a novel? Hong Kingston's portraits of Chinese life do not dwell on generalizations about Chinatown, but instead examine the experiences of individuals that can be extrapolated by readers. She has remained equally original in the two volumes that have followed: *China Men* (1980) and *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1990).

Gerald W. Haslam, ed. *Many Californias: Literature from the Golden State* (Reno: Univ. of Nevada Pr., 1992), p. 200

In *Woman Warrior* Kingston uses a narrator who has a child's passion for knowing. What is Chinese, and what is American? What is real, and what is make-believe? Do the Chinese despise women, or do they see them as potential warriors? Since we have an impressionable protagonist/narrator who feels bombarded by confusing stories in her childhood, this desire for definition is understandable and in character. Because the young protagonist single-mindedly pursues either/or options and because her voice dominates the book's first part, however, the unwary reader is easily lulled by her simplistic pronouncements. Due to her confusion, limited knowledge, desire for absolutes, and total subjectivity regarding people and events, this narrator is unreliable. . . . Kingston not only refutes traditional definitions of *autobiography* and *nonfiction* but also legitimizes genres such as memoirs, diaries, and journals (all ''female'' forms, according to some feminist theorists) that have been considered—at least in America—less ''literary'' than *the* autobiography. Given the value judgments implicit in issues of literary genre, the publication of Kingston's first book as *autobiography* with *memoirs* in its subtitle suggests conscious manipulation. As we have seen, the two terms are not synonymous. If Kingston believes she has written an exploratory, quasifictive memoir, why did she allow her book to be published as autobiography without qualification? Given the general public's tendency to view autobiography as gospel truth, is the author somehow responsible for misleading the reader? After all, the absolutist position implicit in ''American autobiography'' and the dominant narrative voice in the text seem a perfect match. When the narrator tells us that her ethnic culture denigrates women—equating females with ''slaves'' and ''maggots'' and thus forcing her to ''get out of hating range'' (62)—should we not take her word for it? And, if we do, can we then conclude that Kingston defends the lone female against her oppressive ethnic community?. . . .

A key element in Kingston's strategy of ambiguity is to offer alternative, often contradictory, versions of a story without value judgment. The narrator usually informs us when she is inventing; we are assigned the task, however, of sorting through her various ''truths.'' Because we are on shifting sand, it is a convenient anchor for us to have a naive narrator who seeks absolutes with life-and-death urgency. The young protagonist's desire for easy answers when confronting her mother's ''talk-stories'' about China reflects the reader's need for firm ground on unfamiliar terrain. But, this is a literary ''trick.'' Active participation in the text almost requires a level of confusion like the protagonist's.

Bonnie TuSmith. *All My Relatives: Community in Contemporary Ethnic American Literature* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Pr., 1993), pp. 48–49, 50, 52

In keeping with the general aims of the *Approaches to Teaching World Literature* series, of which this is the thirty-ninth volume, the editor has set out to call attention to a diversity of materials that can be drawn into mutually illuminating relations with *The Woman Warrior*, and to display a diversity of approaches to reading and teaching it. *The Woman Warrior* is an ideal choice for a volume of this kind in part because, as Shirley Geok-lin Lim points out in an introduction, the hybrid form of the text and other aspects of its varied nature have from the first elicited complex responses and encouraged readers to consider a wide range of contexts in which to understand and appreciate Maxine Hong Kingston's achievement. . . .

This challenge to the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction is at least touched upon by all of the contributors, including Maxine Hong Kingston herself, in a warm and witty ''Personal Statement'' that begins: ''I must write in a way that makes readers care about the people I create on paper. No matter that critics question what my genre is—fiction? nonfiction?—there is a reader in every audience who will ask: 'How's your mother doing?' '' (23)

Hardy C. Wilcoxon. *Amerasia Journal*. No. 2, 1994, pp. 93–94

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KINNELL, Galway (1927–)

[Kinnell] writes in looser cadences than Wright or Snodgrass: free verse, often conversational, and seldom rhymed. Following the advice of Dr. Williams and Robert Bly, he seems to prefer accentual rhythm to the time-hallowed iambics they resent so much. The syntax, as important a factor in his poetry as it is in Merwin's, is relaxed, save in a few poems where it swells into complex units for special effect; the clauses generally align themselves in the simple patterns of coordination, subordinate constructions being relatively infrequent. This makes for ease rather than

tautness in his diction and rhythmical movement. One could say he tends to build his poems by accumulation and expansion, not by compression as so many of his contemporaries do; an extreme example of this is the long descriptive piece on New York which concludes [*What a Kingdom It Was*], ''The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World.'' A Whitmanic spirit moves this expressionist endeavor to seize the throbbing and shrill variety of New York life, and the incidental failures of thickness, loose diction, and commentary are Whitmanic too. Failures or no failures, however, the poem represents a gesture of courage; one can see in it the pledge of greater future accomplishments on the part of a young poet who dares to write richly instead of curling up in early preciosity. Kinnell brings a gust of fresh air into American poetry, without indulging in vulgarity.

Glauco Cambon. *Recent American Poetry* (Minnesota). 1962. pp. 30–1

In much of Kinnell's poetry . . . the intuition of the sacred sets matter against spirit, concrete against abstract. But working against this instinctive dualism is an equally instinctive kinship with all suffering, an impulse which finds expression in his short story as the wish to serve. Countering the upward spiral of transcendence, of the ''flesh made word,'' his poetry also moves outward, horizontally, in sympathy with the commonest forms of life. This is the expanding consciousness of Whitman, who found the sacred not among the stars but in the streets. So in ''The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World,'' the kingdom is realized among the perishing humanity of Avenue C. It is a vision of desolating ugliness. Kinnell has ceased to make claims for the beauty of life. . . . So in this poem the poet has disappeared; the observer has become one with his subject; there is only the Avenue and the fullness and movement of its life. The tragic illumination of the poem does not come in any cumulative revelation but in ''moments of transcendence'' drifting in ''oceans of loathing and fear,'' traffic lights blinking through darkness and rain.

Sherman Hawkins. *The Princeton University Library Chronicle*. Autumn, 1963. p. 64

Even when he operates on just two cylinders (in disproportionately many of his new poems, unhappily), Galway Kinnell is the poet the young writer will now watch—for tips of voice and stance—as he might have watched W.D. Snodgrass five years ago. There are individual lines, images, and whole passages in nearly every poem in *Body Rags* that are unforgettably poignant. Kinnell's generosity of spirit—a keenly piercing reverence for society's derelicts—and his self-scalding empathy for the mutilated souls of the crushed, the beaten, the solitary proud victims of back alleys and backwoods, give all of his work the rare quality of that which has been profoundly seen, witnessed, lived to the bones, before being translated—however fumblingly or gracefully—into words.

Laurence Lieberman. *The Yale Review*. Autumn, 1968. p. 137

Each generation looks about to see who the great ones are in the arts, and in our time we can single out Galway Kinnell as one of the few consummate masters in poetry. His third book, *Body Rags*, is uniformly strong beside *What a Kingdom It Was* and *Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock*, and it takes some risks those books do not. In two of the three poems in the final section of the new book, ''The Porcupine'' and ''The Bear,'' there is some of the best poetry to be found any place today while the long, civil rights-concerned poem, ''The Long River,'' which makes up the entire second section, is one of the most pertinent and ambitious poems of the time.

John Logan. *The Nation*. Sept. 16, 1968. p. 244

Body Rags . . . should continue the disagreements between [Galway Kinnell's] English critics. The one large-scale poem, ''The Last River,'' is a baffling mélange of personal experiences, horrid anecdotes and social comment. This reviewer can take it, and admire it, in sections: the places where the poet manages (as in a number of shorter, less ambitious poems) an achieved clarity of image and statement that doesn't get mawkish or pretentious. Kinnell is least good where his point gets lost in gloomy, portentous scrutiny of the scenes and topics that most fascinate him, things about which he is often asking rhetorical questions that one wants to answer in a ribald way: dank rivers, frog-ponds, nastier bits of insect life. Kinnell has a precise, Roethke-ish sense of the natural processes, a disquieting feeling for the relation of these things to a thinking human being who feels part of them (see the very fine ''Night in the Forest''). He is best where these perceptions stay clear and unmelodramatic. And in the one or two places where he allows himself a little wit, it rather unexpectedly works.

Alan Brownjohn. *New Statesman*. Sept. 12, 1969. p. 347

With the advantages of hindsight we should not be surprised when we notice that the initial poem of *What a Kingdom It Was*, aptly entitled ''First Song,'' is located out of doors—in Illinois corn fields with frog ponds nearby—and that in the course of its three stanzas there is a movement from ''dusk'' into night. A large proportion of Kinnell's poetry is involved with the natural world, for he is drawn to it in profound ways, has been since childhood, and it provides him with an inexhaustible store for his imaginative meditation, if that phrase will do to distinguish a kind of thinking through images and particulars that is integral to the poetic act. But Kinnell's images from nature will become increasingly stark and rudimentary, their bonds with the ordinary range of human sympathies ever more tenuous, as he matures; for indeed his poems about killing a bird for Christmas dinner, shooting buffalo with a murderer for companion, mountain climbing, camping out alone in the mountains during winter, examining fossils in the cliff above a frog pond, seeking to define himself by identifying with porcupine and bear, bring him finally to the contemplation of what it is to be human in an extreme, one might say primitive situation. Under such fundamental circumstances he faces himself and the conditions of the world simultaneously, without mediation or disguise. It should be said, however, that Kinnell employs other means than nature for cutting to the bone of existence, though intimate acquaintance with other living creatures and with the earth is of primary importance to his work.

Ralph J. Mills, Jr. *Iowa Review*. Winter, 1970. pp. 67–8

I liked Galway Kinnell's poems mainly for their wholehearted commitment to themselves, and for what I can only call their innocence. Mr. Kinnell cares quite openly and honestly about almost everything he has ever seen, heard of, or read about, and finds it rather easy to say so. There is nothing very tragic or tearing about him, or nothing very intense, either. He seems to me a natural poet: humanly likeable, gentle, ruminative. But he is dishearteningly prolix. Prolixity is, of course, the foremost and perhaps only natural enemy of the natural poet, and Mr. Kinnell is going to have to do battle with it if he is to realize himself. . . . Kinnell realizes the difference between knowing something because you have been told it is so and knowing it because you have lived it. And this latter kind of knowing is what good poetry can give, and what Kinnell in some of his work gives, too. . . . Mr. Kinnell has made an authentic beginning, and many poets die without getting even this far. Perhaps to a degree more than is true of other poets, Kinnell's development will depend on the actual events of his life. And it is a life which I think we should watch. [1961]

James Dickey. *Babel to Byzantium* (Grosset). 1971. pp. 134–5

Kinnell has echoed all the great, sad questions of the past concerning our destiny, and he has summoned up the famous masks of the poet, especially the crucified, freely confessing sinner-saint and the sufferer beyond all telling. Something like an astrologically oriented prophetic role attracts him too, and so we have a renewal of the poet as seer. But the real power of [*The Book of Nightmares*] comes from its pressure of feeling, its remarkable empathy and keenness of observation, and its qualities of phrasing—far more than from its structural thoroughness or philosophical implications. It needs stripping down. But no matter. Whatever its weaknesses, *The Book of Nightmares* grapples mightily with its depressive view of reality and with essential issues of love, and it leaves us with something splendid: a true voice, a true song, memorably human.

M. L. Rosenthal. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 21, 1971. p. 77

Galway Kinnell's *Body Rags* (1968) was a major poetic event. ''The Bear'' and ''The Porcupine,'' which have already become anthology pieces, seem to me to have a peculiar excellence that goes beyond anything in *Crow*, for unlike [Ted] Hughes's witty but essentially one-dimensional moral allegories, Kinnell's animal poems are explorations of the poet's deepest self, a self he can only discover by identifying imaginatively with the sufferings of wild, alien creatures. Both poets are haunted by violence, but whereas Hughes views violence as an abstract concept, generic to the contemporary human situation, Kinnell sees it always in terms of himself.

Kinnell's new book, *The Book of Nightmares*, is somewhat uneven. It consists of ten long meditative poems, in form like irregular odes, each made up of seven sections of varying length. In each case, the poet begins with an actual situation—trying on old shoes in the Salvation Army Store (III), trying to fall asleep in a flophouse (V)—and then begins to meditate, moving backwards and forwards in time, as he tries to come to terms with the nightmares that confront the living. As in his earlier poems, Kinnell uses images of nature in its most elemental forms—bloody hen feathers, spiders, bare black rocks, skulls, the corpses of animals—to discover the deepest instincts of the submerged self.

Marjorie G. Perloff. *Contemporary Literature*. Winter, 1973. p. 123

Kinnell was . . . faced with the problem of how to bring his poetry out of the modernist cul-de-sac of irony into a postmodernist aesthetic. He did this in large measure by two actions, which may appear contradictory but are in fact complementary: self-discovery and self-destruction, the heuristic and the incendiary actions of poetry. Kinnell became a shamanist, rather than a historicist, of the imagination. . . .

Destructive though the element of fire may be, Kinnell's forms are always instructive. There is an almost didactic tone in some parts of this book [*The Book of Nightmares*], a didacticism close to the evangelical. (That alone should make the book distinct from the dominant modern mode of irony.) But the poet draws back from priesthood because he continually rediscovers himself, and discovers in himself ''the hunger to be new.'' Proposing new visions, like Adam he awakes to find them true: ''The witness trees heal/their scars at the flesh fire.'' Nightmares are incendiary, but the book is heuristic. Or, to put it another way, what we see in our nightmares will surely char us unless we can transcribe it. The shaman-speaker of the last poem in *Body Rags* ends his days wondering; but in this later book, the shaman-speaker is closer to the answer to that question, ''what . . . was the rank flavor of blood . . . by which I lived?'' Again, it is through dream that the answer is formulated. . . . Once more the human face and the poetic text coincide to register the vision. Learn, he tells his child, ''to reach deeper/into the sorrows/to come,'' anticipate the ''still undanced cadence of vanishing.'' Then, with the child soothed and put back to sleep, he adds a promise. The promise is to learn, even if the lesson is preceded by destruction, and the promise constitutes Kinnell's testament.

Charles Molesworth. *The Fierce Embrace: A Study of Contemporary American Poetry* (Univ. of Missouri Pr., 1979), pp. 99, 110

Galway Kinnell's career gives the impression of continuity despite his transformations of style and tone, perhaps because he has held fast to a certain idea of the possibilities of poetry. Throughout his career he has minded his matter first, in the faith that feeling sincerely will produce words adequate to experience, and has seemed pretty much content to cast his material in the received style of the day. Kinnell addresses the great and eternal themes in a contemporary idiom, convinced, it seems, that familiar emotions need only be rephrased with passion to be made new.

The poems in *Moral Acts, Mortal Words* partake of the autumnal mellowness that now threatens to become the standard for the poets of Kinnell's generation as they enter the ''late period.'' These new poems are as muted and personal as much of his previous work was hyperbolic and overscaled. That their burden is lighter does not mean, sadly, that Kinnell has succeeded any better at carrying it. He seems, as always, to arrive at resolutions he ultimately falls short of earning. Kinnell continually announces the familiar in the rhetoric of discovery; there is much of the inexplicable oddity of birth and death, and other such topics, in these poems. . . .

Kinnell hopes, by taking on the great, intractable facts of love and loss, to achieve the kind of embattled radiance associated with the line of grim realists exemplified by Robert Frost. Yet the ruthless skepticism that such a stance demands is not among the weapons that Kinnell brings to the struggle; too often he resorts to rhetoric as a substitute for imaginative energy. The result might be likened to a fixed fight; no matter how good the show, and much of Kinnell is not without a certain power, the outcome rings hollow in the end.

Vernon Shetley. *Poetry*. Feb., 1981, pp. 298–99

[Galway] Kinnell s *Book of Nightmares* is a single long poem of fourteen hundred lines that explicitly aspires to a single poetic vision. Its ten sections are interlinked in imagery. In this book, as in his earlier five, Kinnell writes like a man wandering by himself among mountains and cities, coming to himself outside society. His vision takes the form of a succession of related nightmares, each of which brings together images of the present and the absent, the living and the dead: the yearning to embrace a distant daughter or lover, the cadaver of a hen full of unlaid eggs, a pair of secondhand shoes that seem to guide the new wearer's feet, a hotel bed that sags under the weight of long-gone guests, a Vietnamese corpse that will not stop burning. . . . Death and life interact over and over, both in the poem's imagery and in its skeletal structure. Unlike most contemporary imagery, Kinnell's is evenly balanced between indoors and outdoors, between the radiance of the sun and the gleam of the lamp. We can feel the muscles of the poem moving with the intensity of the poet's visionary preoccupations as he asks his question. . . .

Visions as radiant and rhapsodic as Kinnell's have difficulty confining themselves within the bounds of language. Though the poet seems at first to have sacrificed clarity in the search for sweep, rereadings of the poem disclose an intricately managed structure that unfolds in clarity as well as in intensity. I am not sure its conclusion is altogether worthy of what has led up to it, partly because Kinnell's hortatory style is better suited to rising incantation than to the dying fall, and I had a feeling at the end of having been thrown off while at full gallop. But it's an impressive piece of work by any standard.

Peter Davison. *One of the Dangerous Trades: Essays on the Work and Workings of Poetry* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Pr., 1991), pp. 156–57

Finding flaws in Galway Kinnell is like fussing about the Matterhorn, or Monodnock—a magnificent presence should be enough to satisfy any cantankerous soul. Few poets have been as well-dined and admired on Poetry and Visiting Writers Circuits as Kinnell—the fact of his craggy presence and his memorized recitals of his work provide the chemistry for unforgettable appearances. One is carried away, as in a Fohn wind. His books sell, and young poets, particularly those attached to prestigious writing programs display them, garnering Brownie points for perspicacity and generating the uncritical reverence one bestows on natural wonders.

My sense of Kinnell's work, after several years of reading it with admiration, is that it has become repetitious; his self-critical sense seems diminished. He overstates here, is sentimental there, and overuses certain tags. He sets off an easy Existentialism. (The fact that Kinnell apparently knew Albert Camus is not beside the point.) *The Book of Nightmares*, here under review, has been almost universally praised. I make my complaints realizing that there is still enough power and originality in Kinnell to nurture numerous lesser poets.

Nevertheless, Kinnell seems here to have exhausted much of his bag of tricks, presenting too many old devices. They don't explode as they once did. Consider his diction: certain words appear with the inevitability of sightings of Cher Bono's navel. Here are some navel words: *darkness*, *light*, *bones*, *haunted*, *existence*, *dying*, *graves*, *scars*, *rot*. The most cursory reading of *Nightmares* reveals these overworked tags. . . .

Perhaps Kinnell is tiring. Perhaps, famous, he merely repeats what delirious readers expect. I once believed his poems the nearest modern equivalents for those Oedipean moments in Greek tragedy. I still respect his early work—and his personal courage on his trips to the South with freedom riders. And there are memorable flashes in *Nightmares*. . . . Too often, however, Kinnell lacks what the nineteenth century poets called tact—that poetic sense allowing the poet to know when he has violated form by pushing emotion too far (sentimentality); or by settling for mannered, dull writing; or by his overwriting and straining.

Robert Peters. *Where the Bee Sucks: Workers, Drones, and Queens of Contemporary American Poetry* (Santa Maria, California: Asylum Arts, 1994), pp. 128–29

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KIZER, Carolyn (1925–)

''I will speak about women of letters, for I'm in the racket. / Our biggest successes to date? Old maids to a woman.'' These lines from the long poem ''Pro Femina'' first appeared in Carolyn Kizer's *Knock Upon Silence* in 1965—the year Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* was published posthumously. ''Sister,'' Miss Kizer writes, ''forget yourself a few times and see where it gets you: Up the creek, alone with your talent.''

The admonition isn't addressed to Plath, but the punishment is reminiscent of her: sexual exile, loneliness, renunciation as the price of a writing life. *Mermaids in the Basement*, an anthology of Miss Kizer's poems for women, collected from previous books and including new poems, would benefit as a retrospective of her career, I think, if the poems were assigned dates, not simply gathered into bundles (''Mothers and Daughters,'' ''Female Friends'' and the like.) She wrote early about these feminist issues. And she didn't write safely in code; she spat it out.

For all its acuity and wit, the poem ''Pro Femina'' doesn't carry the authority of a lyrical, personal poem. Other, briefer poems are

more emotionally, if less rhetorically, eloquent, including ''Thrall'' and ''Where I've Been All My Life'' (which would have made a wonderful title for the collection).

The craft for which Miss Kizer is known serves her well in ''Thrall''; a remarkable compression allows her to review the entire disappointing history of her relationship with her father. The final lines are remorseless and steady:

> You feed him his medicine.
> You tell him you love him.
> You wait for his eyes to close at last
> So you may write this poem.

There are other attractive poems about family—insistent mother, silent father—and about women friends (including a respectful poem to her daughter; she says the two have ''learned to moderate our hates'').

She is drawn—as her versions of Chinese poems, also collected here, show—to refined patterns. But the long sequence ''A Month in Summer'' uses the Japanese haibun form, combining prose and poetry. This piece, about a doomed love affair, is less satisfying. . . .

Much of the pilgrimage of these poems moves from grudge to acceptance, from reiteration of griefs to the good grace of letting go. There is a great effort toward humor in these poems. But the tone is uneven; the humor, as well as the outrage, seems arch at times. . . .

Yin is a collection of new poems, some of them also found in *Mermaids in the Basement*. But the most striking offering, a real find, is the prose memoir, ''A Muse.'' This piece, about Miss Kizer's extraordinary mother, is not only a fascinating portrait, but a model of detachment and self-revelation.

Her mother, who had led a vivid intellectual life until her late marriage, settled herself into motherhood with her only child in her mid-40's as into a new, absorbing career. When her small daughter laboriously formed the letters A, R, T with a crayon, she decided this (''Her first word!'') meant she was ''fated to become an artist.''

Miss Kizer ''was entirely aware at the time that the conjunction of the letters . . . was wholly accidental.'' But like Sartre's account of how his family turned him into a miracle child in ''The Words,'' the great family creation had begun.

It is a testimony to Miss Kizer's generosity of spirit that her account of this relationship is not bitter, but astonished. The humor here is certain of its territory, and the tone modulates beautifully, arriving at a tenderness and acquiescence that are moving and memorable. If only it were longer; this is a story to read and read.

> Patricia Hampl. *The New York Times Book Review*. November 25, 1984, p. 36.

Women writing about men: can it be as hazardous, can they be as vulnerable to the judgments of history as men writing about women have proved to be? Carolyn Kizer's new book of poems about men [*The Nearness of You*], a companion piece to her collection of poems about women, *Mermaids in the Basement*, shows evidence that writing about the other sex involves different struggles than writing about one's own. Despite many local triumphs, the new collection is in many ways less striking, technically and psychologically more self-conscious, for reasons it begins to announce in its first poem. ''Afternoon Happiness'' addresses the poetic problems of romantic peace and monogamous joy. It consists of verse so light as to be nearly trivial. As Ms. Kizer writes, ''So how does the poem play / Without the paraphernalia of betrayal and loss?'' In the 20th century, serious poetry that celebrates happy heterosexual love is very hard to achieve.

Carolyn Kizer is extremely aware of this, as she is consciously aware of the formal possibilities of poetry; her art is highly wrought, as she plays with the forms of poems and her memories of men. In both cases the play can become a distraction, but often the strategies of the poet make the right magic. She handles the problem of depicting romantic love by describing it indirectly, embedding it in the world, the cruel world in ''Season of Lovers and Assassins'' and the elegantly transformed physical world in ''Streets of Pearl and Gold.''

In some poems the conceits and the general tone of affectionate amusement with men can get in the way of engagement. But this can hardly be said of the emotional center of this collection, the deeply engaging poetry and prose meditation on the poet's father. The mixed form serves her well, as it did in the prose and haiku account of love and loss, ''A Month in Summer,'' in the earlier collection. She introduces the father as a remote figure in ''Thrall'':

> The room is sparsely furnished:
> A chair, a table and a father . . .
> You tiptoe past as he eats his apple
> And reads. He looks up, angry.
> He has heard your asthmatic breathing.

This rather chilling figure is gradually humanized in the beautifully affectionate prose piece, primarily a letter to a friend, entitled ''My Good Father.'' Here the vision of the ''authoritarian and severe'' paterfamilias experienced by ''that stranger, his child'' resolves into the grown woman's softened memory of an extraordinarily good and loving man. For his insensitivity to her as child, she writes, ''I almost forgave him.'' ''Almost'' is the operative word in this portrait of the archetypal patriarch as a nice guy. The energy of the piece is generated partly by Ms. Kizer's stress on the tension between opposed characteristics in her father. But it comes perhaps even more from the duality in her own response: sentimental forgiveness works against the desire to tell it straight, not to sentimentalize. In the end the dance of opposites is resolved in love. The right to such lavish admiration is earned by the stylistic and emotional grace of the daughter as much as by the late forgiven father.

> Anthony Libby. *The New York Times Book Review*. March 22, 1987, p. 23.

Well, why can't a poet stay on the charts with a reissue of greatest hits? And, hey, just who says you can't remain a close personal friend of the Muse, and still keep an eye on your basic PR, networking and distribution channels?

These impertinent questions spring to mind from the acknowledgment page of Carolyn Kizer's new book, [*The Nearness of You*] where 9 of 38 poems have been booked before, including 4 from her Pulitzer winner *Yin* (1984). The title for her new collection is from a Hoagy Carmichael song, but although she is not drifting into any Hollywood or pop chart venues neither is she visiting any new neighborhoods. The new poems continue Kizer's cool and knowing observations on personal experience which often serve as the prologue for wider themes. She remains a clinician of the emotions and the little fates of daily life, and of a feminist perspective

perhaps more muted in this collection, which sees the trials of the sexes in the long reach of history.

The book is arranged in four sections: Manhood, Passions, Father and Friends. Section three, one of the most riveting parts of the book, includes a prose sketch of Kizer's father, a formidable gentleman, stern and wise. These prose pieces give the reader marvelous insights into Ms. Kizer's family and her formative years. Should one feel uncomfortable with such biographical disclosures? Or chagrin that they seem to overshadow the poems? Perhaps, but for those who like their poetry in a warp and woof of known history and experience, Kizer's familial histories are illuminating.

Dolph Corradino. *Western American Literature*. February, 1988, p. 371.

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KOCH, Kenneth (1925–)

Kenneth Koch is less immediately serious than this: ''I think I have three souls,'' he has announced. / One for love one for poetry and one for acting out my insane self.'' His poems are alive with wild, surreal comedy, rambunctious rhythms and verbal inventiveness; it is as if they were written by a Kafka with a slapstick sense of humor. His aim, he says, is to ''re-create the excitement,'' the spontaneity and exuberance, he has found in French poetry; and the main object of his aesthetic loathing are what he calls the ''castrati of poetry,'' ''Young poets from the universities'' who write ''elegant poems'' in ''stale pale skunky pentameters.'' At the heart of his writing is an absurdist sense that poets and readers alike are victims of ''an absolute and total misunderstanding (but not fatal)''; and the result is that nearly everything he has written, from parodies of other poets (''Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams'') through surrealistic love poems (''To You'') to autobiography (''Alive for an Instant'') is edged with a verbal grin that is simultaneously playful and grim.

Richard Gray. *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century* (Essex: Longman, 1990), p. 323

Kenneth Koch has been a conspicuous member of the New York School, often chronicling its exploits and mourning its losses in his poetry. . . . In fact, Koch may be credited with founding the school, since it was he who invited his Harvard classmate John Ashbery to come to New York, in the summer of 1949 and stay in his loft on Third Avenue at Sixteenth Street. . . .

While Koch's exuberant poetry has been influential and popular, he may be equally well known for his books about teaching children how to write poems—*Wishes, Lies and Dreams*, and *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red*?—in which he shows a Wordsworthian faith in the childhood springs of poetry. . . . These childhood virtues—spontaneity, carefree inventiveness, and the rest—are obviously aims of Koch's own poetry. . . .

Given all Koch's subversive tendencies, it's surprising that the didactic mode is such a major part of his poetry. Of course, Koch is a teacher—he has taught for decades at Columbia—who has given a lot of thought to teaching. But there's more to it. He is, in some of his most distinctive poems, an essayist in verse. There's something positively eighteenth-century about his whole way of writing: dispensing advice, mulling over subjects like ''The Art of Love'' and ''The Art of Poetry.'' Even his recurring subject of friendship is an eighteenth-century fixation. . . . His temperament—smiling, optimistic, gently parodic, with a sharp edge—is more reminiscent of Pope or Voltaire than of his outlaw heroes Byron and Rimbaud.

Koch's appealing new book of poems, *Our Times*, continues this Augustan trend. . . .

Koch seems to have such a good time writing poetry that any carping feels like party-pooping. Still, I'll risk two complaints. First, his poems are usually too long. Lists tend to lack obvious closure: that's what makes them lists. Koch's lists go on and on, for page after page. . . .

My other complaint is harder to define, though it follows from that jaunty, sleeping-with-women persona. (Not for nothing that Koch's favorite stanza is Byron's from *Don Juan*.) There's a self-congratulatory aspect to much of Koch's poetry. In his mode of advice-dispenser, he presents himself as a sort of master of the good life. Koch's liberationist ethos fit the '60s, but poems such as ''The Art of Love'' haven't aged well. . . .

The comic and the didactic coexist uneasily in Koch's poetry. On subjects about which he speaks with authority . . . one doesn't mind the horsing around. And when he's really funny, . . . one doesn't mind the implied message. . . .

Too many poems, though, leave one feeling not quite amused enough, or insufficiently instructed. . . . If you share his prejudices . . . you may find his poems as funny as he does. But in his mixed mode of pontificating jester, Koch himself is ripe for parody.

Christopher Benfey. *New Republic*. March 13, 1995, pp. 39, 40, 42

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KOPIT, Arthur (1937–)

With Arthur Kopit's *Oh Dad, Poor Dad*, the avant-garde fashion turns chi-chi. Jerome Robbins has obviously poured a fortune into his production, possibly to hide the thinness and immaturity of the play. But though the cash tinkles too loudly sometimes, let us be grateful for the things that money can buy. . . . As for the play—which Robbins has correctly directed like a cartoon—the final scene has a grisly humor, revolving as it does around a corpse which keeps falling on a girl while she is trying to make love; but the rest of the work is inadequate and derivative. Mr. Kopit shares with Broadway psychological playwrights an abiding distaste for mothers and potential mothers, expressed by displaying females in possessive, smothering, and emasculating attitudes. With Tennessee Williams, he evokes a predatory world populated by man-eating fish, man-eating plants, and man-eating women. And with a growing number of aspiring young dramatists, he has a tendency to ape the techniques of the avant-garde without adding anything original of his own. It is this desire to join a parade rather than to communicate a unique vision that tends to reduce the Absurd to the ridiculous. And though it offers excellent copy for journalists, it threatens to make the American Absurdist movement as arid a cultural phenomenon as the late, unlamented Generation of the Beats.

Robert Brustein. *New Republic*. March 19, 1962, p. 31

The Day the Whores Came Out to Play Tennis, the second of Arthur Kopit's pair of one-acters. . . , is a farce about the invasion of a Jewish country club by eighteen of the tennis players. The action takes place in the nursery of the clubhouse, and, with the exception of a snide English waiter who looks like a wax dummy, all the characters are members of the club's executive committee, which has been summoned at dawn to deal with the emergency. The ladies, according to a stumbling and overwrought report by the son of the president of the club, arrived in a couple of Rolls-Royces with one-way mirrors for windows, and immediately made for the courts. They never put in an appearance on-stage, but they make themselves felt in a number of ways.

The play is Mr. Kopit's first major entry since *Oh Dad, Poor Dad*. There is no plot. Again he makes use of all kinds of old movie and burlesque stunts for his effects. The club president's son spends much of his time rocking on a hobbyhorse. A couple of exploding cigars explode, and the wrapper on a chocolate bar conceals a pop-up butterfly. A panel in a door opens and a bottle of tequila flies in. Tennis balls bounce through the windows, and later bang rhythmically against the closed shutters. The tone of the comedy is more mocking than satirical (at least, I could see no indication that Mr. Kopit wants to change or do away with Jewish country clubs), and the targets of his mockery are varied. A lot of what is said is coarse and indecent, but it didn't strike me as vulgar or out of keeping, and some of it is funny. *Oh Dad* dealt in part with a namby-pamby young man and his rapacious mother. This time, we have a namby-pamby young man and his contemptuous father. The son is much more overtly sissy, as the part is written—and, God knows, as it is played by Anthony Holland, who is nothing if not overt in everything he does. *Oh Dad* was farce, too, but as performed by an expert and subtly directed company it was farce with an undertone of horror. In *The Day the Whores*, there is no undertone of anything. The play is better written than it sounded . . .—some of it is as harsh and unsparing as a tape recording—and perhaps Mr. Kopit's intentions (assuming he had any) would have become clearer if the acting had been better, which is to say less muffled, more on target, and not so distractingly and disagreeably broad.

Edith Oliver. *New Yorker*. March 27, 1965, pp. 146–47

Indians, in its approach to history, is wildly unprofessional. But in its boldness and its surrealism, it may get us closer to historical and psychological realities than ''factual'' histories about Indians. *Indians* is perhaps our domestic *Slaughterhouse Five* in its focus upon racism and genocide in the American character and experience, now and in centuries past. And like Vonnegut's novel, or Heller's *Catch-22*, *Indians* uses surrealistic technique to deal with certain American realities because no other technique—certainly not realism—will do. And that is because certain American realities are surreal. . . .

To object that *Indians* distorts history is to miss the point. Kopit has said, in his use of dramatic technique, in his stage directions, in interviews, that *Indians* is not all about historical Indians. *Indians* is about whites. About what they have made of Indians. About white myths. Perhaps the central message of the play is that bad as American actions have been in dealing with technologically weak minority and alien cultures—Indians or Vietnamese—worse yet is that white Americans have lied, not so much to others, but to themselves in insisting that their ends, their motives, were pure, pure enough to redeem their tainted means. . . .

Kopit's point is that Americans insist that what they do—whatever they do—is for the good of those to whom they do it. And this is because the superior mental and technological qualifications of white Americans enable them to see farther and deeper than ''primitive'' or ''underdeveloped'' peoples. If Kopit can somehow penetrate our psychological defensiveness and our historical defenses to that fundamental truth, then the validity of his unhistorical surrealistic method, and his deliberate and public distortion of historical facts in a morality play, will have been established.

Bruce Curtis. *The American Examiner*. Winter, 1973, p. 5

The language of the mind losing hold of words as it drifts off to sleep was first explored by Joyce in *Ulysses* at the end of the Ithaca episode. But it was Beckett who, in his plays and novels, evoked states bordering on, or representing, aphasia, albeit not literally reproducing clinical cases. [In *Wings*] Kopit pushes farther in that direction, but for all his research into and re-creation of actual defective speech by patients, he too keeps the verbiage within literary boundaries. Thus the work's master metaphor is wings, flying—symbolizing both speech winging its way from person to person and the psyche setting forth on perilous voyages into life and eventually, out of it.

The play has many virtues. The opening scene, which evokes a stroke by the simple flickering of lights and fading of sounds (the ticking of a clock) until there is both terrible silence and frightening clatter, is magisterial. So too is the use of several revolving black panels—now transparent, now opaque—combined with mirrors that distort and mislead to suggest the labyrinthine world of hospitals, sickness, inability to understand, be understood. By various verbal and visual means, Kopit achingly conveys the humiliations of a disability that isolates a mind from its peers and

makes of cross-purposes a spirit-breaking cross to bear. He gives us both charmingly wistful moments where patient and therapist become fellow ignoramuses before the mystery of words and moments of nervous humor when a speech-therapy group session yields funny contretemps amid tentative successes.

But, finally, the language of the play, especially in its supposedly most rapturously aerobatic moments, does not quite sustain the poetic flights and dramatic impact demanded from it. Moreover, the tragic conclusion, after strong promises of recovery, seems, though clinically possible, dramatically forced. Most serious of all, the several implications of the ''wings'' image never interlock completely with the blessed click of everything falling into place.

John Simon. *New York Magazine*. July 10, 1978, pp. 66–67

On 13 October 1969, two days before the first national moratorium to end the war in Vietnam, Arthur L. Kopit's play, *Indians*, opened in New York. Walter Kerr, in his review of *Indians*, wrote, ''We do not deserve a play in which the argument is unorganized, in which the conflict is undramatized.'' Indeed, to a nation plagued by upheavals at home and a surreal war abroad, *Indians* may have seemed as confusing as the milieu which helped to shape its theme and form. Between the London premiere of the play and its American debut in Washington, D. C., however, *Indians* had undergone numerous changes until Kopit had perfected a form which Lewis Funke described shortly after the Broadway opening as ''a sort of collage.'' Largely because of this non-traditional, collage-like form, *Indians* has emerged as one of the most accomplished plays of the Vietnam era. . . .

Dialectics, both on stage and off, were characteristic of the decade. It is a measure of the achievement of *Indians* that in seeking to develop a new dramatic form Kopit managed to avoid the excesses of the avant-garde of the period, shaping a play which is neither historical drama nor representational in a traditional way. Whereas once-heralded works such as Megan Terry's *Viet Rock* (1966) or the musical *Hair* (1967) now seem firmly anchored to that time in terms of both theme and structure, *Indians* remains vital. Kopit offers in the play a portrait of Vietnam-era America which interprets history theatrically to describe the cumulative effect of that history—contemporary life—in a new, dramatically viable way. Through Kopit's imaginative response to drama and to history, he discovered in *Indians* what Robert Brustein has called the truest poetic function of the theatre—''to invent metaphors which poignantly suggest a nation's nightmares and afflictions.''

To do so, Kopit created a play which he intended to be perceived as a mosaic. *Indians* transcends the artistic embroilment of its time to address the timeless issues of myth and power in the American character. The initial concept of the play conveniently accommodated itself to the synthesis of various dramatic styles and theatrical modes into a loose, but cohesive, whole. Kopit claims the idea for *Indians* came to him while simultaneously reading a statement on American policy in Vietnam issued by General William Westmoreland and listening to Charles Ives' Fourth Symphony: ''In it two orchestras play against each other. One plays chamber music, the other distorted marching band music. The idea and form for the play seemed to come to me in a flash.'' Organic from its inception, then, *Indians*, despite both its title and critical explanation of the play as a sharp attack on white America's treatment of the red man, is exclusively about Indians as much as Ibsen's *Ghosts* is about venereal disease. The play explores Buffalo Bill Cody's contrary impulses to help the red man and to destroy him—a situation analogous to the effect of an American presence in Southeast Asia on the people of Vietnam. The plight of the red man in *Indians* indicates, as does Oswald's disease in *Ghosts*, a larger, more destructive force embedded in the entire social structure. ''I wanted to expose the madness of our involvement in Vietnam,'' Kopit said of his intentions in *Indians*. ''I had believed for some time that what was happening was the symptom of a national disease.'' . . .

By using poetic license with history, Kopit makes an equation between the American past and the American present, while simultaneously placing *Indians* in a realm beyond the confines of a documentary drama, or the so-called ''theatre of fact.'' . . . ''I wanted to capture the nightmarish confusion of being bombarded by statements, by justifications, by historical references,'' Kopit has stated. ''The only way to present this in a play was to create a sense of disorientation in the audience.'' The earlier *Chamber Music* anticipates this approach. Like *Indians*, it blurs the distinction between the ''now'' of the play and the ''then'' of history. By reincarnating different epochs and different movements in art and politics through each inmate's mad delusion in *Chamber Music*, Kopit blends all of history into the single world of the play, a world which becomes theatrically viable because each member of the audience is forced to make referential connections, to step into history and back out as part of one continuous response, and thus complete the artifice of the play.

Michael C. O'Neill. *Theatre Journal*. Dec., 1982, pp. 493–94, 498

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KOSINSKI, Jerzy (1933–1991)

This semi-autobiographical account of a small Polish boy who was separated from his parents at the beginning of World War II traces his wartime wandering from village to village, horror to horror. *The Painted Bird* is unique among such chronicles in that scarcely any Nazis figure in it, nor are there any descriptions of concentration camps; nonetheless no book has delved so deeply into the ''Nazi mentality'' in its truest sense—which is to say, not confined to the narrow limits of a uniform or even a nationality.

So awful (in the gravest meaning of that word) is this book that I can scarcely ''recommend'' it to anyone, and yet, because there is enlightenment to be gained from its flame-dark pages, it deserves as wide a readership as possible.

Andrew Field. *Book Week*. Oct. 17, 1965. p. 2

Jerzy Kosinski was born in Poland in 1933. He lived through the war and then the Stalinist occupation of his country; at the age of twenty-four he came to the United States. He has since published two works of social commentary and two of fiction, *The Painted Bird* (1965) and *Steps* (1968). He writes in English, and by some miracle of training, which recalls the linguistic bravado of Conrad and Nabokov, he is already a master of a pungent and disciplined English prose. Simply as a stylist, Kosinski has few equals among American novelists born to the language. And I have also become convinced, after reading *Steps*, that he is one of the most gifted new figures to appear in our literature for some years.

Steps is an experimental work, which is partly to say that it follows upon the ''tradition of the new'' that has dominated Western writing for the past century but that it also deviates sharply in tone and technique from that tradition—otherwise it could no longer be described as experimental. It is a work highly problematic in aesthetic strategy and moral implication, and even after two careful readings I do not pretend to grasp it fully.

Irving Howe. *Harper's Magazine*. March, 1969. p. 102

In the decades since the close of World War II, both contemporary fiction and drama have recorded the devastating effects of that global conflict on man's moral consciousness. . . . Kosinski's brilliant fiction, like the works of Nietzsche, stand as a vivid warning to mankind, a warning to be heeded lest we too, like Dionysus Zagreus, suffer the fate of being torn apart. The moral descent of Kosinski's protagonists portrays the failure of both community and communication.

Unlike the plaintive hero of Shelley's poem, ''Alastor,'' Kosinski's figures do not seek to evade the gross and ''unseeing'' multitude; they do not yearn for communion or ''intellectual intercourse'' with kindred spirits. The powerful quest of the rejected and alienated romantic soul is not at stake in his fiction; nor is the Faustian desire for unbounded knowledge a striking motive. The world of the Kosinskian hero has a closer parallel to the dark irrational universe of Kafka—man trapped in a world of dissolving meaning, in which there are few fragments to shore up against his ruin. Without Kafka's power for symbolic absurdity or a similar rich vein of rational irrationality, Kosinski's imaginative writings proceed out of a varied and dense past of vivid and personal nightmare.

Daniel J. Cahill. *Twentieth Century Literature*. April, 1972. p. 121

In his ''attempt to peel the gloss off the world,'' Jerzy Kosinski [in *The Painted Bird*] so successfully reveals man's depravity that the reader is more affected by the shock of the intense cruelty depicted than aware of its real effect upon the boy-narrator. In fact, so intense is our response to the depraved world of the Eastern European peasantry that we are reminded of the universality of Yeats' profound poetic vision in ''The Second Coming'': ''Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.'' But what was a vision of ''mere anarchy'' for the poet is an accomplished fact for the novelist who is in part dramatizing the larger setting that permitted the occurrence of the grotesque, final solution of the Nazis. Without an understanding of the deep racial hatred of the Jews by the common people of Europe, we can never begin to apprehend the ''blood-dimmed tide'' (Yeats) loosed by the Third Reich; without an understanding of the human tendency to project guilt feelings on others considered alien, Kosinski is saying, we can never still the tide of hatred. . . .

Perhaps one of the most puzzling and persistent impressions one has upon first reading *The Painted Bird* is the curiously detached descriptions of brutal and perverted actions. This response by the boy is typical of the affective anesthesiatic who repels terror by aloofness, though the narrator's story demonstrates that he never becomes an anesthesiatic. Through his detachment, he creatively insulates himself against insanity by becoming remote from those events which he is utterly helpless to change in any way.

Meta Lale and John Williams. *Renascence*. Summer, 1972. pp. 198–9

The content of *The Future Is Ours, Comrade* is now less interesting than its method, for one reads it in 1972 not for Joseph Novak, Russian specialist, but for Jerzy Kosinski, incipient novelist. The structure of the book suggests the later novels, the gathering of parts that never quite become a whole. In *The Future Is Ours, Comrade*, Kosinski introduces a number of exemplary characters, each of whom contributes to the immediate subject of the chapter and the overall theme of Soviet conformism. There is, however, no attempt to bridge between figures. One conversation simply stops and the next begins. In form, then, if not in material, there is a suggestion of the self-contained tales in *The Painted Bird* and the fragments that make up *Steps*.

Each person in *The Future Is Ours, Comrade* is presented through what we are supposed to take as his own words, although, later, in *No Third Path*, Kosinski admits that he uses ''condensed and composite'' interviews and that ''the subjectivity of the quoted comments'' is filtered through ''the subjectivity of the author.'' This implies that the reported speeches are artificial concoctions which, even if one accepts the substantive truth of the interviews, are designed for a particular effect. Certainly, Kosinski manipulates his material in other, more obvious ways, uses journalistic tricks which are also novelistic devices. The two most in evidence, both ironic, are juxtaposition and the too-neat tagline closing off an anecdote.

Gerald Weales. *Hollins Critic*. Oct., 1972. pp. 3–4

Today, nearly ten years after its appearance, *The Painted Bird* continues to arouse fascinated horror, outrage and concern. Yet none of these responses is equal to its complexity. . . .

The Painted Bird is narrated by an unnamed boy who wanders during World War Two from village to village in Eastern Europe, suffering, witnessing, and inflicting atrocious cruelty. In all this, the novel evinces a high degree of fictional consciousness. This consciousness is explicit in an extremely interesting essay, the ''Notes of the Author on *The Painted Bird*,'' which appears at the close of the German edition of *The Painted Bird* and has been published in English by Scienta-Factum in New York (1967). In it Kosinski enlists writers like Proust, Valery, and Artaud to organize his theoretical account of composing his novel. Their names furnish the work with the right resonances and the affinities which are its due. These writers, whose work is marked by a thematic concern with the act of writing, evoke a poetic consciousness

essentially Romantic. Kosinski's novel shares in this tradition and helps define it further. This consciousness, for one thing, finds its correlative in the genre of the fictional autobiography, one, moreover, which affirms the constitutive activity of the act of writing in the self it narrates by concluding with the origin of this very enterprise of writing an autobiography.

Stanley Corngold. *Mosaic*. 6, 4, 1973. p. 154

Reading *The Devil Tree* one is aware of those things that Kosinski does with consummate skill: the mode that lies somewhere between Kafka and our own sense of daily reality; the flat, underplayed, uncomprehending style; the use of a kind of narrative parataxis, all of those short, unrelated bits of narrative, much of whose force lies in the art with which they are detached from each other. . . . It is a unique fictional method, so starkly inimitable that anyone who had ever read anything by Kosinski would know who had written those lines. The narrative parataxis, moreover, is a marvelously expressive device for Kosinski's purposes in *The Devil Tree*: wishing to show the rootlessness of his central character, he is able to move him from Manhattan to Nepal without transition or modulation; wishing presumably to show the particular shallowness of his quest for sensation, he is able to show unfulfilled sex, unmotivated drug use, and unresolved encounter sessions by the rhythms and omissions of his narrative segments.

Kosinski evidently intends for his novel to embody American myth and American reality, American dreams and American limitations, which means that *The Devil Tree* aims in a somewhat different direction from *Steps*, which locates all of its scarifying brutality in no particular place, and *Being There*, which projects a fatuous extension of American power without much attempt to place that movement in the solid texture of American reality. What such a purpose requires is a certain consistency of mode. Yet the book moves among a variety of modes: at one time it is neopicaresque, the central figure a bemused invisible man in the world of petty functionaries; at other times it seems a rather unfocused and old-fashioned piece of satiric realism; and at still other times it is cut loose altogether from social fact, in a country of the mind like Kafka's *Amerika*. So it is that its import is diffuse, its ability to move the reader is intermittent, its parts are better than its whole, and its voice is greater than its vision.

Philip Stevick. *Partisan Review*. No. 2, 1974. p. 305

[A] quality found in all of Kosinski's novels [is] a dispassionate rendering of the human condition, sometimes for the sake of possible correction, sometimes for the sake of simple understanding. One of the most fascinating outcomes of reading the modern parables that make up *Cockpit* is our insight into the ambiguities of the self. The very title, *Cockpit*, serves to point up man's ambiguous state. An actual airplane cockpit, the heart of a controlling mechanism designed to destroy people, appears only once in the entire novel, but one finds it a number of times in disguise. From that high perch, Tarden [the protagonist] can look down upon the rest of mankind: he considers himself to be free because everyone is his potential victim. He can act rather than he acted upon. On the other hand, the word ''cockpit'' is a sexual pun which ultimately suggests Tarden's entrapment in the human condition, part of which is death. . . .

According to Kosinski, the act of remembering operates in uncontrollable spurts with little linkage. He once suggested that one can create a montage of memories in much the same way that one can create a montage of celluloid shots. He noted that ''the cinematic image has become the key to modern perception.'' In *Cockpit*, the Eisensteinian theory of montage, shot A plus shot B creates a shot C of the imagination, is what the author counts on to structure both the novel and our recognition of its truths.

Gerald Barrett. *Michigan Quarterly Review*. Summer, 1976, pp. 357, 359

Jerry Kosinski is not *moraliste*. He is one of the post-modern novelists passed on by Dostoevsky as Evil, and turned Indifferent by Camus and Robbe-Grillet. Well aware of rejecting the Christian moral universe, Kosinski is not signing up with the affirmative traditions in literature, in which a man and his transcendence count, as they did even in the works of such nonbelievers as Jean-Paul Sartre, and as they still do in Saul Bellow's ''holy'' fiction. . . .

Jerzy Kosinski's novels lie in the area between the post-war European emotional lucidity and the hip coolness of American mid-generation. His is a non-judgmental, morally permissive fiction, in which action is meant not as salvation, but as making the most of life. In Kosinski's novels, man does not have a character by which he is doomed; he adjusts himself to reality by denying his civilized self and his moral judgment. He forms a personality-free character in a personality-free world.

Kosinski's novels are agitated, ghoulish yarns, told in dispassionate, icy language. They are void of realistic linearity and of emotional temperature. The untitled ''chapters'' form the unconnected units of narration, space and time are fragmented, little actions follow like digressions, the plotless plot converges rather than continues; words do not burn, as in passionate texts, but are lucid and conniving.

Kosinski's characterless characters have no fixed personalities, yet they do have consistent ego. Like a Pirandellian hero (it was Pirandello who finally got rid of characters, as Joyce did away with recognizably continuous storytelling), the Kosinski protagonist exists from moment to moment. Continually creating himself anew, he never achieves a solidified, hard-core reality of a continuous hero. The story line is the unfinished and unfinishable business of life; thus, it is not accidental that every novel ends inconclusively, with the hero looking out of the window into future spaces. . . .

As a ''vile'' Romantic, already acknowledged as a legitimate character of many authors who have declared war on the bourgeoisie, Kosinski is entitled to a denial of tragedy and suffering as useless; the best writers did that. Even Brecht in his Marxist period did not postulate that the conflict of the diseased business ethics of our times and decayed Christian morality was reconcilable through sacrifice. But he convinced us of the existence of a connection between people that goes beyond guilt, by the creation of vivid realities and vivid characters. The writers of the massive masterpieces, such as Balzac, Tolstoy or Melville, as well as authors of existential works such as Camus or Mailer, fleshed out the dangerous realities of consciousness and conscience. They created live people out of the dead matrix of words, endowed them with affective life, supplied them with gestures of desire. Without desire, without ecstasy, without failure purified in death (the death of the rebel, as well as his victim), the literature of cruelty does not restore the reader or renew society's vision. The most nihilistic

texts, brimming over with lacerating despair and rage, were informed by emotional fullness. Even when nothing could satisfy the desire, the repetitious pattern of desire sustained the life of the characters, the life of the novels.

Krystyna Prendowska. *Journal of Narrative Technique*. Winter, 1978, pp. 11, 13, 23–24

The five-book cycle from *The Painted Bird* to *Cockpit* has explored the relative values of personal security and power, from the orphan Boy cast loose upon the battlefield of World War II to the supremely confident agent controlling life from his self-contained cockpit. Kosinski's subsequent novel, *Blind Date*, is closest in spirit to *Cockpit*, for it details the similar adventures of another mature protagonist—this time named George Levanter. However, Kosinski has made this newer novel the closest record to his own experiences since *The Painted Bird*. . . .

The themes of Kosinski's novels, then, have shifted since *The Painted Bird*. In the social context of that novel, personal self-sufficiency was the goal. *Steps* tested this goal against the social union of two persons, who could best meet as equals within their own selves. But with *Being There* the problematics of life—especially life in America—began to assert themselves, and Kosinski's next three novels present a series of protagonists each more calculating and austere than the last, from Jonathan Whalen through Tarden to George Levanter. Yet the development was not entirely negative, for in *Blind Date* a new philosophy was offered.

Jerome Klinkowitz. *Literary Disruptions*, 2nd ed. (Univ. of Illinois Pr., 1980), pp. 214, 216

The issue of violence in Kosinski's work . . . is a complex one, and one which he knows touches the center of his achievement as a writer. Whatever that achievement is, his books are not so much a preoccupation with violence as they are complex studies in the shifting identity of victim and oppressor. Power, not violence, is what fascinates Kosinski. All of his main characters—the boy in *The Painted Bird*, Tarden in *Cockpit*, Levanter in *Blind Date*, Fabian in *Passion Play*, indeed Kosinski himself—have known powerlessness and victimization. Their natural impulse (and here is where Kosinski is most compelling as a writer) is to transform themselves from victim to oppressor. . . .

In the world of Kosinski, there are no other options open to the victim: he must seize power through deception or remain powerless. Divesting one's self of the identity of victim means assuming the identity of the oppressor. Or, as Mitka the Cuckoo explains to the boy in *The Painted Bird*, ''Man carries in himself his own justice, which is his alone to administer.'' Since each person is intensely alone, everything that is outside the individual self—political structures, nation states, business institutions, friends, lovers—represents a potential enemy, and must be constantly deceived or destroyed before it transforms that person into victim. . . .

Kosinski's personal vision, his insistence that we should develop ''an awareness of life as it happens in each of its moments, and that man must treat each of those moments as unique,'' is consistently and convincingly portrayed in his novels. But if the vision is new, it is not a moral one. A code of behavior that treats each moment as unique but excludes an evaluation of the meaning of that moment, especially the moment's possible ramifications of pain and suffering for others, can not also be a moral code. Granted, the moment is unique, unrepeatable; the question, and one which Kosinski begs continually in his fiction, is what to *do* with the moment. Rape Nameless? Help a refugee from a police state? Photograph Valerie being raped? Arrange to have an imprisoned writer released? The problem with the vision, and with the code of behavior derived from the vision, is that it is too simple: life is reduced to a series of unique moments that elude evaluation. Human relationships are reduced to power plays between victim and oppressor. But a moral vision implies awareness of complexity, the presence of doubt, ambiguity, involvement, despair, joy. Kosinski offers sequences of moments, each unique and powerfully narrated, but with all the complexity of life simply abstracted (Tarden's words came back: ''I could abstract myself from its power'') until the moment is nearly a hollow shell.

Paul R. Lilly, Jr. *Literary Review*. Spring, 1982, pp. 390–91, 400

[Jerzy] Kosinski's fiction, I am proposing, is about the art of writing fiction—but I qualify this statement in two ways. First of all, Kosinski has not been attracted to the self-conscious fiction we encounter in the likes of Donald Barthelme's *The Balloon* or John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*. Although at one point *Steps* was discussed in the context of writers like these, Kosinski does not invent new ways to underscore our awareness that a fiction is only a pattern of words after all. Rather, his power as a writer derives from the narrow rhetorical stance he chooses to impose on his material. He creates a voice limited by what it sees, a kind of eyeball, although certainly not a transparent one. Kosinski's fictive eyeball looks through a keyhole, as it were, seeing but not being seen. Thus Tarden of *Cockpit* describes how he once was forced to dress and undress himself repeatedly while, unknown to him at the time, he was being watched. His telling of the scene years later allows him to watch himself being watched—and the reader in turn watches that, completing this circle of a narration that comments on some of the ironies of narration while it continues to narrate.

My second qualification: Kosinski's novels confront the art of writing fiction from a unique and personal viewpoint. He is a writer whose past includes a rejection of his mother tongue in order to seize on an alien one. Although he has by now been a writer in English longer than he lived in Poland, the nature of his relationship to his ''stepmother tongue'' remains for him a persistent point of reference in a novel as recent as *Pinball* (1982). For all its practical wisdom in terms of survival (he had to learn English in 1957 simply to live), his determination to write in an alien tongue entailed a willed vulnerability, a conscious choice to exchange mastery of his native language for apprenticeship to an adopted one. His comment in 1971 that ''no prison is as impregnable as language'' can be taken two ways: it is difficult to break out of the prison of one's native speech, but it is also difficult for a foreigner to break into that prison from the outside. Freedom, imprisonment: his remarks during the early 1970s about using English for his art touch on not only the predictable difficulties of writing in another language (he claims his methods of composition once included dialing telephone operators to confirm the sense of his sentences) but the elation he felt at freeing himself from anxieties associated with his mother tongue. The writer in an alien language, he said on one occasion, is free from the trauma of childhood links with particular words. ''One is traumatized by the language when one is growing up. In our society the adults use the language as a

reprimanding device. A child often cannot help feeling that certain words hurt just as much as certain gestures do. A native, because of this, is at the same time more idiosyncratic to certain aspects of his language, of his self, than a foreign-born writer who adopted a new language long after his formative years.''

Because of the open-ended nature of Kosinski's continual probing of what it means to be a writer, and the unique and often bizarre range of personal experience he can bring to bear on that probing (as of June 1982 he is free to add what it is like to be a writer accused of not writing his own books, an issue which I address in the appendix), Kosinski's work needs a reassessment. It is not enough to rely on his often scintillating remarks on the nature of fiction he once made in his essay, *Notes of the Author on ''The Painted Bird''* (1967), because a number of these comments, such as those on Jung and the unconscious, do not illuminate his later work. His disdain for the use of plot, first advanced in *The Art of the Self: Essays a Propos Steps* (1968) does not survive the composition of *Passion Play* and *Pinball*, both of which depend on conventional understandings of the function of plot. Kosinski has spoken of the ''constant pruning'' he forces on his sentences as he composes, but the sparse, unadorned style we associate with *Steps* and perhaps *Being There* (1971) does not always characterize the pages of either *The Painted Bird*, written earlier, or *Passion Play* and *Pinball*, written more than a decade after *The Painted Bird*. Kosinski's own appraisals of his work, moreover, need to be looked at in the light of both his more recent comments and the direction of his fiction since *Blind Date*.

> Paul R. Lilly, Jr. *Words in Search of Victims: The Achievement of Jerzy Kosinski* (Kent: Kent State Univ. Pr., 1988), pp. 3–4, 15

The Hermit of 69th Street, at first glance, is a different book from its predecessors. (Even the dust jacket announces that this is Kosinski ''at his new and different narrative best.'') Certainly the longest and most overtly autobiographical of Kosinski's novels to date, its plot, like much of the best contemporary European and American experimental fiction, is deliberately thin; by contrast, however, its language is rich—at times overrich—and full of allusions (to people real and imagined), quotations (from Talmudic scholars to pornographic publishers), footnotes (at times up to five per page), and puns (some as banal as Karen's dialogues in *The Devil Tree* or as empty as Chance's witticisms in *Being There*). . . .

In fact, to summarize the plot of *The Hermit* is to state that it is precisely about Kosky's head. According to Stephen Schiff, the novel is ''an attempt to portray what goes on inside a writer's mind as he composes a novel—his sexual fantasies, the readings he refers to, the way he associates his own predicament with his character's and with the predicaments of history. It is a book of both impressive erudition and bizarre naïveté, the product of a brilliant and ambitious mind that has long since outstripped its owner's talent. It's Kosinski's unwieldy contribution to Joycean metafiction. And as far as he's concerned, he's hit upon The Next Big Thing.'' . . .

The novel is, in fact, both a departure and a return for Kosinski: a departure from the simple, unembellished prose of the early fiction, and a return to the experimental style he so successfully employed in *Steps*. Norbert Kosky is quite typical of Kosinski's other protagonists, especially the narrator of *Steps*, who is scarred by his wartime memories and experiences, and the characters of more recent works (Tarden in *Cockpit*, Fabian in *Passion Play*, Domostroy in *Pinball*), who have had to confront their failing health and creative energies.

Above all, like those earlier protagonists—and like Kosinski, for whom he is an ''autofictitious'' counterpart—Kosky is a man simultaneously obsessed with his need for privacy and his desire for popularity, a man who (according to the book's jacket) is a spiritual wrestler—''not a literary boxer—who wrestles his rebellious Self the only way he knows: by wrestling the art of narrative tradition.''

> Barbara Tepa Lupack. *Plays of Passion, Games of Chance: Jerzy Kosinski and His Fiction* (Bristol, Indiana: Wyndham Hall Pr., 1988), pp. 257–59

Nineteen-eighty-two was a tumultuous year for Kosinski. His eighth novel, *Pinball*, was published. There was a glowing front page profile in the Sunday *New York Times Magazine*. And then the backlash started. In June, the *Village Voice* printed ''Jerzy Kosinski's Tainted Words,'' an article that accused Kosinski of not being the actual author of his works, of having used editors, and even writers, ''to improve'' his work.

Kosinski denied the charges. Nonetheless, in November, the *New York Times* came to Kosinski's defense in a 6,000-word piece whose thesis was that Kosinski, as an anticommunist, had been under continuous attack by communists in Poland, and the leftists (including the *Voice* in the U.S.) since the publication of *The Painted Bird*. . . .

No matter, the damage was done. Kosinski seemed to take it personally. ''My political and moral credibility has been damaged,'' Kosinski told the *New York Times*. The charges continued to haunt Kosinski, and taint him. He took five years to write his last novel, *The Hermit of 69th Street*, an unnaturally long period for him. Twice as long as most of his novels, it sought to ''prove'' all the sources by which an author created his work. In it Kosinski explored autobiography and personal issues more deeply and extensively than he ever had before. This exegesis, however, did not make for great reading. It was both a critical and popular failure. That too seemed to have its effect. It appeared to most as though the writer who once said his novel *Cockpit* was inspired by Melville's *The Confidence Man*, had lost confidence.

In the late 1980s, Kosinski visited Poland and Israel, and the interview conducted by Mike Leiderman attests to the way in which Kosinski had come to terms with Poland and both his Polish and Jewish roots. He became involved also in several business ventures concerning Poland. Then on May 3, 1991, he committed suicide.

As much as interviewers were obsessed with Kosinski's life, in reading the interviews he gave, I found myself obsessed by his death. In each I was drawn to those remarks that indicated Kosinski's attitudes toward life, death, and suicide. In my own first interview with Kosinski, he said, ''My novels are largely concerned with characters pondering motives, inner decision makers faced with moral and ethical decisions.'' This resonates very differently for me now, than it did at the time. So too, Kosinski's comment to Gail Sheehy that, ''I guess I simply worship feeling alive.'' Should we focus on the fact that Kosinski said ''feeling alive'' not ''being alive''?

For as we know from the interviews, ''feeling alive'' had a specific meaning for Kosinski. It was the ''heightened moment''

that he brought to life in his novels. It was the tension that animated him. . . .

For me there is a central drama to the subject of a Holocaust survivor taking his life. Based on the interviews collected here, and my own conversations with him, I imagine Kosinski would probably have replied that he took his life, as any person has the power to take his own life, Jew or non-Jew, Holocaust survivor or not. He would insist, I believe, that he did not take his life as other survivor/authors Bruno Bettleheim or Primo Levi did, or for that matter as Goebbels did. No, I imagine the important thing for Kosinski was that it was he, himself, not the Nazis and not heart disease, who was the determinant.

When Kosinski took his own life on the night of May 3, 1991, he was once again reasserting himself as the protagonist in the story of his own life, taking away that which, in a sense, he had created.

Tom Teicholz. In *Conversations with Jerzy Kosinski* (Jackson: Univ. of Mississippi Pr., 1993), pp. xi–xii

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KREYMBORG, Alfred (1883–1966)

He trips about cheerfully among life's little incongruities; laughs at you and me and progress and prejudice and dreams; says ''I told you so!'' with an air, as if after a double somersault in the circus ring; grows wistful, even tender, with emotion always genuine even though not too deep for momentary tears. And always, whatever his mood, whatever his subject or purpose, he is, as becomes the harlequin-philosopher, entertaining. . . . I do not mean that Mr. Kreymborg is always a satirist. Even in his most serious moods, however, he keeps his light touch-and-go manner and his telegraphic, almost telescopic, style.

Harriet Monroe. *Poetry*. Oct., 1916. pp. 51–3

He chooses words with an apparently naive simplicity, only to combine them subtly into repetitions which form delicate rhythms not unlike the patterns of a fugue. With each repetition the theme develops, the harmonies deepen. He gains his effect as directly, as mysteriously as does music; there is indeed a kinship between Kreymborg's style and Bach's. I can think of no other musician combining his cerebral quality, economy of ornament and architectural sense of form. . . . Mr. Kreymborg, who is a thoroughly educated musician, has drawn upon the technique of counterpoint and melody in a wholly original manner, thereby greatly enriching his style, and introducing a new element into American verse.

Majorie Allen Seiffert. *Poetry*. Jan., 1919. pp. 226–7

Almost all of his plays possess that direct appeal to children, although they are often too abstruse or fantastical for older audiences. To enjoy them completely one must have one open mind, unprejudiced by stage conventions. The whole volume (*Plays for Merry Andrews*), with its delightful caricatures, with its humors, with its tongue-in-the-cheek bombast, is very reminiscent of Dickens.

Malcolm Cowley. *New York Evening Post Book Section*. Dec. 31, 1920. p. 5

Mr. Kreymborg's simplicity appears to be guileless, but there is always the suggestion under his naive surfaces. His rhythms and images are easy to imitate, but not his charm and his humor; and to capture his agile handling of suggestion is a challenge—the quiet glance with a keen edge back of it which points up to a dart and shoots through so deftly that we are unaware of its awareness.

Laura Sherry. *Poetry*. July, 1921. p. 219

Alfred Kreymborg deserves more than he has received of his country. An original craftsman in the aesthetic of the drama, he has been neglected by the American theatre of which he has more claim to be called a founder than Eugene O'Neill. A free, felicitous, versatile adventurer in the forms of the lyric, he has warmed up a public to smile upon such poets as E.E. Cummings. . . . A land which finds no use for the sensibilities of this fantastic lover, and provides him neither with satisfactory comrades in his isolation nor in sufficient nurture in himself to do without, is either a pathetic or a tragic land. Much as the social hunger of Mr. Kreymborg capering so featly before a dropped lead curtain of inertia and indifference affects one, the imperviousness of our land behind the curtain is more moving.

Waldo Frank. *Dial*. July, 1925. pp. 72–4

The whimsical in poetry has had in the work of Mr. Alfred Kreymborg its most entertaining contemporary expression. His work, first circulated through *Others*, encountered, inexplicably enough, a great deal of amazed ridicule. . . . The literate public supposed that Mr. Kreymborg and his confreres were trying to be profound. The public was wrong. . . . For the universe and the cosmic inflow and outflow of esoteric emotion have not visibly interested him. He has been said to express himself too indirectly; his poems have been charged with obscurity. This, too, is a mistake. He is casual, simple, direct.

Allen Tate. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. July 18, 1926. p. 3

It is easy to admit that Alfred Kreymborg's poetry has many shortcomings, and still turn to it with interest and relief. Granted that one must be in just the right mood and of the right temperament to enjoy the strange blend of intellect, intuition and childishness, and that this mood cannot be summoned at will; granted that apart from the appeal of their whimsicality only a half-dozen poems can hold one's admiration when read six weeks later, and that none of these plays the delicate bells of poetic ecstasy; granted that at their

worst the poems are irritatingly unclear, and disappointingly anti-climactic—still after all they are never banal and if they are affected it is at least never a saccharine or over-esthetic affection.

Margery Swett Mansfield. *Poetry*. Jan., 1927. p. 226

Mr. Kreymborg prefers the theatrical variety show and the stage effects rather than the inner play and subtlety of an art form. . . . Action or movement, combined with the public address, become the fulcrum of Mr. Kreymborg's early drive. A kind of simplified statement studded in a riot of nature and stars, with personalized items, is the usual background. . . . His themes . . . remain in 1944 what they were in 1912. The same light touch and free-style movement of words and phrases, and a dependence on sensory as well as surface awareness prevail.

Harry Roskolenko. *New York Times Book Section*. April 22, 1945. p. 44

No one can deny that the simple and essentially modest man who inhabits Mr. Kreymborg's physical shape has accomplished a body of work which—if compared with more sporadic efforts of poets much more frequently discussed—is impressive. Alfred Kreymborg has been, for thirty years at least, an intensely active force in the accomplishment of whatever achievement poetry in the United States may be credited with by literary historians. If he has never exactly stood at the center, the focus of any of the various currents of interest, Imagistic, regional, neo-classic, metaphysical, cosmopolitan, satiric, that have moved through American verse since he first began to write, he has never been removed from any—he has always remained aware of what was going on, and able to find an attitude of his own with which to meet it.

John Gould Fletcher. *Poetry*. July, 1945. p. 216

In our poetry Kreymborg has been at his best as acrobat and juggler, in a variant of the Pagliacci, *He Who Gets Slapped*, and *Laugh, Clown, Laugh* tradition. And he has created a troubadour personality for himself which is engaging and bears credentials to the Court of the Muses; he is a man with a big heart and a fantastic mind, in poetry a puppet-showman whose barbs (to mix metaphors) directed at the shams of society are always feathered.

William Rose Benét. *Saturday Review*. July 20, 1946. pp. 13–4

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KUNITZ, Stanley (1905–)

One feels in his poetry none of the awkward one-sidedness that one feels in nearly all of even the most brilliant poetry this side of Mr. Robinson. The experience in which Mr. Kunitz deals is normal, rich and complex; he is firm on his feet, and, now and again, quick on them. He has experimented with a syntactic instrument which, when he controls it, enables him to achieve tremendously vigorous synthesis. . . . Even at his second best, Mr. Kunitz will bear a great deal of careful reading.

Yvor Winters. *New Republic*. June 4, 1930. p. 78

Enough of the probing seriousness and curiosity of a keen poetic intelligence is exhibited in this first volume *Intellectual Things* to warrant a considerable confidence in the talents of the author, and in his future work. . . . Mr. Kunitz shares his faults with a large company of his contemporaries. . . .These weaknesses grow from an effort at stylization not always justified by the results. . . .The reader's patience, however, finds its reward in the best poems. . . .Mr. Kunitz possesses what in a musician would be called a melodic gift—a special ability to define and sustain fluently the verbal and tonal pattern upon which his poem is built. The presentation of such patterns necessarily involves a good deal of creative courage, and Mr. Kunitz plunges into his elaborate imagery, conceits, and phraseology with none of the hesitation that detains the poet stricter in matters of form and logic.

Morton Dauwen Zabel. *Poetry*. July, 1930. pp. 218–20

Passport to the Wars is a sincere and sound achievement. It is the work of a talented craftsman, with a sharp and elegant mind, and it concerns itself with the most significant problem of the modern world—the murderous and efficient mechanization of our environment that has invaded and corrupted the mind itself. This problem is implicit everywhere in Mr. Kunitz's poems, where under the pressure of our failure, energies that might have been concentrated upon the service of humanity or the love of God are dissipated in frustration and hysteria. . . . ''In the destructive element immerse'' has been the practical wisdom forced upon this poet, but the method, which has the virtues of necessity and honesty, has also its nullifying weaknesses.

A.J.M. Smith. *Poetry*. June, 1944. p. 165

Stanley Kunitz has a rich lyrical style; sometimes a redundancy of it. Rock-faults of feeling, however, thrust their way up through the smooth surface; and, as he confesses, he looses ''a gang of personal devils'' and makes them ''clank their jigging bones as public evils.'' The devils are brought to heel formally—Kunitz does not let them run away with his poems—but they are in evidence. . . .Though

the heavy Baudelairean sense of secular damnation and all-pervasive ennui does not altogether dominate Kunitz's work it has marked it indelibly.

M. L. Rosenthal. *The Nation*. Oct. 11, 1958. p. 214

Well over a third of *Selected Poems* is new . . . and I happily report that many of the new poems give evidence of a poetic personality that is growing both broader and deeper. The tension in the poetry has not slackened, but much of the strain (or straining) has disappeared. . . .Kunitz's imagery may often be far-fetched, but it is never obscure; it reveals rather than shrouds the subjects of the new poems. Like several of the greatest modern poets, Kunitz speaks more directly to us—and more richly, too—as he grows older. If the quantity of his output catches up with its quality, we may yet learn to rank him among the great American poets of this century.

Vivian Mercier. *Commonweal*. Feb. 13, 1959. p. 524

Most of Stanley Kunitz's poetry is in two concentrated books, *The Testing-Tree*, just out and green, and his familiar *Selected Poems*, published in 1959. There is a difference, not just in lapse of time; the books are landmarks of the old and the new style. The smoke has blown off. The old Delphic voice has learned to speak ''words that cats and dogs can understand.'' Others have grown clear, it is the drift of the age, but the powerful manner in which it is done here goes beyond my shrewdness.

I have read through the *Selected Poems* many times and at intervals, marking fine lines with a pencil. I have cut my way, and earned my exercise. The more ambitious poems are mostly in the toughest and densest style of the thirties and forties, and have the heroic concentration used forcibly by Allen Tate, Hart Crane, Dylan Thomas, William Empson, some of Auden and Roethke. Kunitz stands with the fiercest and most musical. Sometimes I find when I have worried out his deep meanings, the surface will again grow troubled. . . . What remains is the passionate gnarl. The slow, clinging fog and the stark bang of syllables are not in Kunitz but mostly in the reader's mind.

The Testing-Tree throws away the once redoubtable armor. All is unencumbered and trustful. One reads from cover to cover with the ease of reading good prose fiction, reads with such fresh confidence that even Kunitz's versions of Osip Mandelstam, darkest of the realistic masters, seem as open as Whitman.

Robert Lowell. *New York Times Book Section*, March 21, 1971. p. 1

Stanley Kunitz has had to go away further to exile, and to stay away longer, than perhaps any other major poet of his generation. *The Testing Tree*, Kunitz's first book in the thirteen years since the publication of his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Selected Poems*, resounds with the upheaval of a spiritual recluse coming back to the world, to voice, after a long self-banishment: the voice surprised at its own return from muteness with intense shocks of awakening like those of a body amazed to have exhumed itself from a premature burial. . . .

Kunitz's repatriations in his new book are wrenchings of the ''creature self'' (''he is not broken but endures'') out of its stony sleep of slow recovery from the ravishment—which drove his friend Mark Rothko to suicide—by the worlds of country, family, ''adversaries.'' His recovery occurs with the violence and rage of a self-disinterment, no less than a full return at the age of sixty-four to the ''fugues of appetite'' of his lost youth.

Laurence Lieberman. *The Yale Review*. Autumn, 1971. pp. 82–3

In a clear sense Akhmatova was lucky with her translator [in *Poems of Akhmatova*]. Stanley Kunitz turns out to be a person who is spiritually and technically qualified for the task. If he makes mistakes, the mistakes are more in technical details than in conveying the spirit of the poems chosen. And these mistakes, if they do lead the reader astray, at least do not take him in the opposite direction. . . . I repeat, this is a good book, but I would like to think that it is only the beginning. For the successes of this particular tandem are quite obvious, and I speak of the oversights which have occurred with a certain harshness, precisely because they are in such contrast to the generally high level of the work.

Joseph Brodsky. *New York Review of Books*. Aug. 9, 1973. p. 10

Through all the particulars of this volume [*A Kind of Order, a Kind of Folly*], a uniform quality of mind pervades—a quality marked by reasonableness, sensitivity, lucidity, and balance. One thinks inevitably of Aristotle's Magnanimous Man, of Camus' *homme du midi*. His materials he has arranged into associative groups which, like the stanzas of a poem, proceed processionally from one to the next. Just as in a poem we almost invariably have favorite passages, favorite isolatable lines, individual readers will no doubt find their sympathies unequally distributed among the components of this book. . . . Yet the volume, for all its diversity, is one. It is made so by Mr. Kunitz's persistent conceptualization of the nature of art, and by the tough and unfailing elegance of his style. . . .

It is no doubt a judgment of our age that we find good sense astounding. Mr. Kunitz has it, and to an astonishing degree. He says a great many things which, in this late frantic hour of our art, need desperately once again to be said—which is to say of course that they need desperately once again to be heard. . . . The spirit by which Kunitz's book is informed—the spirit of simple truthfulness, lucidity, and compassion—will survive to perpetually generate new works and new voices out of its ache.

Richard Vine. *Salmagundi*. Winter, 1977, pp. 120–21, 123

All of Kunitz's poems . . . , early and late, are lyrical, personal, emotional, and intense. None of his poems is public or occasional like Robert Lowell's ''Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket'' or ''For the Union Dead.'' Reading Kunitz, rather, one comes to know the persona of the poet and his feelings about the ''fable'' of his life, though still not in the personally identifiable, anguished way one does in the poetry of such ''confessional'' poets as Lowell himself (in his nonpublic aspect) or Anne Sexton or Sylvia Plath.

For Kunitz is not at all a confessional poet, and most likely he would himself, too, as he said about Roethke, ''vomit . . . at the thought'' of being called one. As he said, ''Secrets are part of the legend,'' the ''fable'' of his life. And his own ''emphasis isn't on spilling everything.'' Hence, although he writes about himself in

the main, he by no means tells ''all.'' Neither, on the other hand, are the figures that march through his poems masks or objective creations, the Tiresiases, Odysseuses, Prufrocks, Mauberleys, Crazy Janes, Catherines, or Kavanaughs of Eliot, Pound, Yeats, and Lowell.

Like theirs, of course, some of his poetry is allusive, but not greatly so. Allusions, particularly those to the classical tradition, are rather much a well-read poet's stock in trade—especially in his youth. And so some of Kunitz's poems make references to various mythic persons, places, objects, and events: Oedipus, Odysseus, Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Apollo, Zeus; Thebes, Point Lotus, Lethe; golden bough, laurel, and shower of gold—among others. Most of these do not seem to be obscure, are not central, and would appear to be used principally to recall eternally true stories and motifs.

In Kunitz's poetry such allusions become rarer as he turned his own life into fable and found therein such mythic parallels as the ''Lilith'' woman in ''The Dark and the Fair'' and the lost father in ''Father and Son.'' Both of these take on archetypal lineaments, though they are grounded firmly, it seems, in experience and in the poet's examination of his own life. . . .

Kunitz's work consists already of a few nearly perfect poems of great intensity, passion, and universality and a further body of good poems that ensure his reputation. Besides all these, his book of essays and conversations, rather neglected so far, and his translations from Russian round out a long, busy life that was remarkable in its single-minded dedication to poetry. Underlying everything he has done is his conviction as to the seriousness of poetry: ''Like Hopkins' bird of peace, a poem does not come to coo; it comes with work to do.'' Kunitz's own life has been, in his phrase about Keats's, not a career but ''a life of poetry.''

Marie Hénault. *Stanley Kunitz* (Twayne, 1980), pp. 29–30, 142

''The Lincoln Relics'' is among the most successful and convincing of [Stanley] Kunitz's political poems because it fuses both the personal and the political. . . .

The presence of the father-son legend in the poem does not reduce the poem. Lincoln is not a father surrogate. ''The Lincoln Relics'' bears the same relation to the father-son legend as ''A Blessing of Women'' bears to the mother/beloved legend. The legend has gone beyond its personal, psychological sources. The poet's self and identity are now sufficiently secure so that the creation of the identity through the encounter is no longer the poem's central drama. The son/self is now the perspective from which to explore deeper, impersonal themes present in the legends.

Father Spirit becomes here an ''ideal,'' that which (potentially) incarnates a kind of human perfection (toward which one might questingly aspire) and a moral perfection that Kunitz has consistently called ''noble.''. . . In early Kunitz, Platonic Kunitz, the human condition was tainted with mortality and one of the major enterprises was to rescue the father from decay and dissolution and establish him beyond and above time as an ideal principle. What the later Kunitz poem does with this idealized father figure is to reconcile mortality and nobility—to locate the legend in the life.

Gregory Orr. *Stanley Kunitz: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia Univ., 1985), pp. 270–71

Despite the greater openness that has characterized his work since the publication of *The Testing-Tree* (1971), Stanley Kunitz has remained reluctant to open the process of composition itself to public view. Once a poem of his has been published, later printings rarely exhibit the tinkering that has tempted so many of Kunitz's contemporaries. Kunitz even claims not to have shown unfinished work to Theodore Roethke, doubtless the closest friend he has had among his fellow poets. In 1975, however, Kunitz issued a collection of his prose, *A Kind of Order, a Kind of Folly*, protesting in the preface that ''in the medium of prose a poet walks more naked than in his verse,'' but conceding that ''he may as well own up'' to the forces at work ''beneath the scenes of his performance.'' Readers of the collection were taken furthest behind the scenes in the concluding section, ''Seedcorn and Windfall,'' which included passages from Kunitz's notebooks. One of these, evidently a ''seedcorn,'' reappears in Kunitz's latest volume, *Next-to-Last Things*, along with the poem that sprang from it, the volume's centerpiece, entitled ''The Wellfleet Whale.'' Comparison of the notebook entry with the poem affords a rare glimpse of Kunitz in the act of composition. In doing so, it also illuminates the problem most frequently cited for Kunitz's limited reputation: his relatively sparse production over a long career. . . .

''The Wellfleet Whale'' involves another problem, on a deeper level than the problem of style but related to it. . . . It appears, in this case, that Kunitz is out of touch not only with his rhetoric, but with the sense of touch itself. Comparison of ''The Wellfleet Whale'' with the notebook passage from which it arose demonstrates how literally it can be said that Kunitz refuses the sense to a single passage lifted out of context. Of the three senses, hearing (''terrifying noises''), touch (''my hands on his flanks''), and sight (''staring directly at me''), with which the notebook passage records the encounter with the whale, the poem removes the most immediate sense, touch. Sight, too, is blurred, not only by describing the whale as blind, but by generalizing the human viewpoint to a vague ''we,'' so that even if the whale can be felt to stare, that stare will not seem to be aimed ''directly at me.''. . .

Further pursuit of Kunitz's ambivalence toward touch should, then, further probe the ambivalence toward writing that may well be the underlying cause of Kunitz's sparse production. We do not know, of course, how many poems Kunitz actually writes and judges to be unworthy of publication. My point is that a more fundamental type of exclusion operates for Kunitz from the very beginning of the creative act. It gives a distinctive shape to what I would judge to be the best among the poems he has published. ''River Road,'' for instance, declares its subject to be the failure of a marriage ''on the eve of war,'' but it conveys the feeling of those traumatic events all the more powerfully by saying nothing more explicitly about them.

Terence Diggory. *Salmagundi*. Winter, 1987, pp. 155–56, 159, 168

Kunitz's output has moved at slightly faster than runic speed. Three poems a year for the last sixty, no more. Such minings in the earth cannot be hurried. Though he has traveled in recent years to Israel, Egypt, the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Britain, and to many parts of our own country as embodiment of dedication to the art of poetry, and though he has touched the art of dozens of younger poets by his intimacy in reading and *listening* to the music of their apprenticeship, he has never needed to nourish their aspirations at the cost of neglecting his own. Like his admired Anna Akhmatova, like all great teachers in the arts, he has taught by example—as his

example comprised patience, depth, care, uncompromising dedication to his art. He has known how to wait, and has tried to teach others to wait. . . .

In 1971, more than a decade after *Selected Poems*, Stanley came forward with *The Testing-Tree*, a hard-earned and richly deserved book, in which he hunkered down to an archaic simplicity of statement and to the bedrock of his own existence. In 1979 he put the last touches on the entire work of half a century, *The Poems of Stanley Kunitz, 1928–1978*. In between these mileposts, as the consequence of visits to the Soviet Union and a healthy collaboration with the late Max Hayward, he finished their bilingual version of *Poems of Akhmatova* (1973) and collected his fugitive essays in *A Kind of Order, a Kind of Folly* (1975). Throughout the years that I had a hand in publishing his books, while the Atlantic Monthly Press and Little, Brown watched him take on the patina of reputation, I marveled at the magical way he had grown in communing with the sources of his own work. To watch Kunitz fill with energy and ''illuminate'' while reading his own poems is to get as close to the sources of poetry as a listener is likely to.

Kunitz's work, about which much has been written, the best of it by younger admirers like Gregory Orr, Robert Hass, and Susan Mitchell, is not explicitly religious or, usually, heavily symbolic. Yet it seems to be attended by mysterious presences, by a nearly sacred aura. There are few poets left in our time who carry his bardic authority. To say one of his poems aloud, alone or with people listening, is to feel again the cold breath on the back of the neck, the sense of the real that only true poetry can bring us.

Peter Davison. *One of the Dangerous Trades: Essays on the Work and Workings of Poetry* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Pr., 1991), pp. 114–15

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KUSHNER, Tony (1956–)

As one who lives a life rather than a ''lifestyle,'' I'm not sure what a gay play, let alone a gay fantasia, might be. But there they fly, those miniprovocations and tiny half-thoughts, now glued permanently to whatever may be dredged from the experience of seeing George C. Wolfe's musical-comedy version of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*, subtitled ''A Gay Fantasia on National Themes.'' Well, if not exactly a musical-comedy, a play now underscored with so much musical blather instructing us what to feel or think, that it might just as well go all the way. . . .

Poor T.K., caught now in the national theme he's too astute to suffer gladly—the success that dislodges good work from its resolute rage so that a huge public might see it as a user-friendly temper tantrum. It's tiring to repeat Steven Marcus's captivating phrase from years ago—''In America, nothing fails like success''—but from one era to another, it's likely to rear itself again as the most succinct, if not the best, explanation. *Angels* is inescapably the newest case-in-point, moving from the usual fifteen minutes of famous workshops and readings where, if history is witness, it might have quickly reached the usual oblivion, to a groundswell of attention that followed hard upon Declan Donnellan's production last year at Britain's National Theatre. Suddenly it became flavor-of-the-year, just in time to attract the attention of all those producers—off-Broadway, regional, and Broadway—who had let it slip away while mounting their clone-seasons: *Oleanna Glen-Seagull Meets the Baltimore Waltzing at Lughnasa*. At last, went the newly coined, quickly conventional wisdom, a serious play both funny and—oh those words tripping off the press releases again—relevant, meaningful, haunting, about-something, desperately moving, movingly filled with meaning about the most desperate tragedy of our times short of Bosnia and Somalia, of course.

Not to be outdone by flacks, the dutiful army of reviewers has checked in by now with their own hyperbolic yelps, led by Warwick the Kingmaker, Frank Rich of the *New York Times*, forsaking his available dash and gift for the fluent, colorful line in favor of hard sell—''the most thrilling American play in years.'' And what a relief that must be for the 13 Broadway producers, already high on what one of them, shouting to the rehearsing company, referred to as ''our Pulitzer Prize.'' (The exact quote: ''We did it! We won the Pulitzer!'') Maybe Kushner feels a flashing moment of pain at his evident loss of ownership, but why should any American playwright begrudge his own hard-won 15 minutes on the yellow-brick road to movie contracts and half-ownership of Chemical Bank? Somebody has to be one of the Chosen, every few years at least, though it can't be easy to recall the last 20 years of Tennessee Williams, banished from Broadway and hounded as a failure, the curse of Marcus striking again.

The worst of it for Kushner is that he surely doesn't need Warwick to tell him he's good, though with the system what it is, he's not likely to be king without an official crowner. So once Rich's review was dispatched from London, the rest fell into place like all those dominoes that used to strike terror into the American imperium, still another reminder that, in, late-century America, battles are often won while wars are always lost. To be fair, Kushner's options were not enviable, however well he might reason from the evidence of his own play, in which similar tensions between heroism and sell-out loom over every decisive encounter.

Gordon Rogoff. ''Angels in America, Devil in the Wings.'' *Theater*. 2, 1993, pp. 21–22

Tony Kushner wrote *Perestroika*, the second part of *Angels in America*, in what he describes as ''an incredible eight days I spent at the Russian River, in Northern California, in April of 1991, ten months after my mother died.'' The play was a tape-measure job—three hundred pages, five acts—that would take six hours to perform. After finishing the epilogue, Kushner threw his belongings in his car and set off down through the Napa Valley toward San Francisco. Almost immediately, life began to imitate the play's marvels and resonances. . . .

Perestroika—the word is Russian for ''rebuilding''—dramatizes the work of mourning: the struggle to embrace both loss and change. The play is immense in its wisdom of the heart; every line

sings with hurt and humor. Although Kushner has cut the playing time and the number of pages by half, the five-act structure remains intact, parcelled neatly around two intermissions, and is crucial to Kushner's vision of the play's metaphor. . . .

Not since [Tennessee] Williams has a playwright announced his poetic vision with such authority on the Broadway stage. Kushner is the heir apparent to Williams's romantic theatrical heritage: he, too, has tricks in his pocket and up his sleeve, and he gives the audience ''truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion.'' And, also like Williams, Kushner has forged an original, impressionistic theatrical vocabulary to show us the heart of a new age. . . .

Kushner, in his big-hearted and almost reckless bravery, has told a great story. There will be those who will regret the subject matter, or the length, or the cosmic folderol. But the carping hardly matters. *Perestroika* is a masterpiece.

John Lahr. *New Yorker*. Dec. 13, 1993, pp. 129, 133

If, like Tony Kushner, you plan to write a second play wringing another three and a half hours of drama out of the same small set of characters, it is perhaps tempting fate to let one of your players in part 1 toss off a quip about ''the limitations of the imagination. It's something you learn after your first theme party—it's all been done before.''

But *Angels in America*, reviewers seem to agree, is no ordinary stage work subject to ordinary rules. It is an event: a theatrical event, of course, playing to full houses, with a sackful of Tony and Drama Desk prizes, as well as a Pulitzer; but also a literary, artistic, and moral event: a ''masterpiece'' (*The New Yorker*), ''the broadest, deepest, most searching American play of our time'' (*Newsweek*). Here, one might hope, is a long-awaited revival of the theater of ideas. As a ''Gay Fantasia on National themes'' that crossed over to charm many straight suburbanites, it might also be expected to contribute to mutual understanding on that vexed current issue.

Now, after much anticipation, the second half of *Angels* has been installed alongside the first at the Walter Kerr Theater in New York. The two productions share the same fine director (George C. Wolfe) and often-virtuosic cast, permitting a sort of double-blind comparison between the sugar-coated *Millennium Approaches* (part 1) and the more medicinal *Perestroika* (part 2).

The virtues of part 1, it turns out, are those of traditional entertainment: a steady flow of funny lines and clever observations, defying the gravity of its subject, AIDS, like a masonry bridge, by a sustained use of the arch. The pacing is sharp enough to keep you from caring that the poetic flights and recycled religious imagery don't really make much sense, or that little is happening by way of plot. (''Nobody even died yet,'' grumbled one patron on his way out.)

Even less happens in part 2. In the central dramatic situation of part 1, Louis Ironson (Joe Mantello), overcome by nursing his AIDS-stricken lover, has abandoned him. Now, not very surprisingly, he is failing either to find a new lover or be taken back by the old. The traditional playwright's answer would be to send him off to perform some great moral gesture, probably by stopping a bullet, but instead he's left to welter in guilt. . . .

We need not demand new ideas in a stage work, and we don't get them in *Angels in America*. But we might hope for a bit more of the advertised insight into the common humanity of both sides, rather than yet another shove toward the polarization and politicization of this subject.

Walter Olson. *National Review*. Jan. 24, 1994, pp. 71–72, 73

Tony Kushner's 1993 Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Angels in America*, is very gay. And Jewish. It's about assimilation, self-loathing, and men with lost souls: the betrayal of the faith and the abandonment of a moral vision. Depending on who the viewer is, there are two versions of the play, playing simultaneously. There's the deeply moving, virus-infected, *goyishe*-gay-who-divinely hallucinates; plus Mr. married-Mormon-coming-out-of-the-closet to pill-popping straight, soon-to-be-happy-ex, Mrs. Mormon—AIDS version. Then there's the culturally lost, wondering-in-secular-exile, ambivalent *treyf*, quasi-civil-libertarian-melting-pot-mess, full-of-self-deception, painfully revealing Jewish version, located in the extremely bizarre triumvirate of Roy Cohn, Ethel Rosenberg, and the imaginatively invented totally believable (character of) Louis Ironson. Ultimately, one plot informs the other as the characters move in and out of their tightly woven, interrelated narratives. But *Angels in America* will always be my *Jewish Fantasia on National Themes*. It resounds in my ears like the long, hard, final sound of the *shofar* calling the People of Israel to worship in a postmodern, Hillary Clinton–reconstructed, school-prayer–reinstated, third-wave-neo-Newt Gingrich era. Where, lying at the foot of the Statue of Liberty, Jewish identity is in fragments while lost Jewish (read *male*) souls seek solace in the exact same, singular, super-clean anus of a closeted, self-righteous, God-fearing married Mormon faggot. Yes, *Angels* is about Jewish male self-loathing in the twentieth century held tightly within the ever-expanding embrace of Miss Liberty's very tired, porous hands.

Jyl Lynn Felman. *Tikkun*. May-June, 1995, p. 27

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LARDNER, Ring (1885–1933)

For one thing, he has a ready invention—which most American realists have not; and for another thing—which is even rarer—he has a special personal accent which represents a special personal way of looking at things. . . . Lardner has imitated nobody else and nobody else could reproduce his essence: . . . there is scarcely a single paragraph of Lardner which, in its blending of freshness with irony, does not convey the sense of a distinguished intelligence and an interesting temperament.

Edmund Wilson. *Dial*. July, 1924. pp. 70–1

His studies, to be sure, are never very profound; he makes no attempt to get at the primary springs of human motive; all his people share the same amiable stupidity, the same transparent vanity, the same shallow swinishness; they are all human Fords in bad repair, and alike at bottom. But if he thus confines himself to the surface, it yet remains a fact that his investigations on that surface are extraordinarily alert, ingenious and brilliant—that the character he finally sets before us, however roughly articulated as to bones, is so astoundingly realistic as to epidermis that the effect is indistinguishable from that of life itself.

H. L. Mencken. *Prejudices, Fifth Series* (Knopf). 1926. pp. 51–2

Somewhere Lardner refers to ''this special police dog'' which ''was like the most of them and hated everybody.'' Lardner himself is the police dog of American fiction, except that his hatred is not the product of mere crabbedness but of an eye that sees too deep for comfort. As a whole his work is devoted to tearing down the stucco facade of certain familiar American types. He takes some recognized national trait which is ordinarily treated with good-natured humor and reduces it to its basic viciousness. . . . What Lardner . . . is interested in getting at is the core of egotism from which even our apparently most impeccable virtues spring.

Clifton Fadiman. *The Nation*. March 22, 1933. p. 316

Proud, shy, solemn, shrewd, polite, brave, kind, merciful, honorable—with the affection these qualities aroused he created in addition a certain awe in people. His intentions, his will, once in motion were formidable factors in dealing with him—he always did every single thing he said he would do. Frequently he was the melancholy Jacques, and sad company indeed, but under any conditions a noble dignity flowed from him, so that time in his company always seemed well spent.

F. Scott Fitzgerald. *New Republic*. Oct. 11, 1933. p. 255

There will be many to talk of his bitter hatred of the human race's selfishness and stupidity, but he was filled with a mighty compassion for the possessors of these qualities. But his loathing for pretentiousness and leering obscenity was uncompromising. And . . . he had a great effect upon journalism, for he, more than anybody else, made it possible for reporters to write, and to have printed, the words that people said instead of a lot of high sounding, mealy-mouthed phrases and sentiments.

Franklin P. Adams. *The Diary of Our Own Samuel Pepys* (Simon). 1935. p. 1174

In his light moments Lardner was . . . our greatest comic personality, in his serious work an incomparable artist, and for his new American literature Lardner fashioned a new American language. After him refined English can never be quite so respectable. Lardner the puritan scoffed at one immaculate conception: he deflowered the virgin word. As a Joyce is elaborating a new vocabulary from the top of our knowledge up, onward, beyond the esoteric, Lardner made one from the bottom, from the talk of the people, from the genuine base, and not the theoretical one, of our society.

Maxwell Geismar. *Writers in The Crisis* (Houghton). 1942. pp. 27–8

Others have written satire with more pretension, or with a greater surface scope; but to my mind no other American writer has achieved Lardner's mastery of satire. His knife was sharper; it cut more deeply—so deeply, in fact, that these people who seem so dreary, so banal, so self-centered, often emerge for us as yearning, unhappy creatures who are lost, deprived and vaguely unsatisfied.

James T. Farrell. *League of Frightened Philistines* (Vanguard). 1945. p. 35

There are times in reading Lardner when you feel his total sympathy with Swift's terrible verdict on humanity—that we are the most odious little race of vermin that ever inhabited the planet; you feel his sympathy with the half-hidden sardonic side of Mark Twain's temperament. He takes less pleasure in the accidents of human behavior than Twain did and is not so thoughtful as Swift; but like both of these, Lardner has the habit of catching human beings when they think no one is looking at them; and he touches them with tiny drops of acid to see what they do and how they react.

Gilbert Seldes. Introduction to *The Portable Ring Lardner* (Viking). 1946. pp. 1–2

Mr. Lardner does not waste a moment when he writes in thinking whether he is using American slang or Shakespeare's English; whether he is remembering Fielding; whether he is proud of being American or ashamed of not being Japanese; all his mind is on the story. . . . It is no coincidence that the best of Mr. Lardner's stories

are about games, for one may guess that Mr. Lardner's interest in games has solved one of the most difficult problems of the American writer; it has given him a clue, a centre, a meeting place for the divers activities of people whom a vast continent isolates, whom no tradition controls. Games give him what society gives his English brother. Whatever the precise reason, Mr. Lardner at any rate provides something unique in its kind, something indigenous to the soil, which the traveler may carry off as a trophy to prove to the incredulous that he has actually been in America and found it a foreign land.

Virginia Woolf. *The Moment and Other Essays* (Harcourt). 1948. pp. 122–3

Actually sport provides Ring with a serviceable framework within which he could examine quite a range of human behavior. In Ring's fiction baseball is an ordered world with definite rules of conduct; it demands skill and integrity and it has a code of honor. . . . His preoccupation with sport reflected a longing for an ideal world where the rules, if observed, guaranteed the triumph of merit; it also reflected his acute sense of the disparity between the way people were supposed to behave and the way they did. Sport provided Ring with a useful and significant scale for measuring his characters. Moreover the criteria of sport were especially valuable because everyone knew exactly what they were.

Donald Elder. *Ring Lardner* (Doubleday). 1956. pp. 205–6

Lardner had tremendous talent. Though he left behind no large work and he often fooled away his gifts on trifles, the sardonic brilliance of his comic imagination at its best is unsurpassed in American letters; though he is little noticed in contemporary criticism, he is still a vital influence on some of our best young writers—J. D. Salinger, for instance. His manipulation of language would have entitled him to the company of the foremost experimental writers of his time; his dazzling nonsense plays are among the earliest and best surrealistic literature produced in this country.

Paul Pickrel. *Harper's Magazine*. July, 1956. p. 92

Lardner's hypersensitivity to language was a hypersensitivity to human suffering, a fact which becomes clear only when his fiction is related to his humor. His acute sense of the disparity between the way people should behave and the way they do is very often expressed in his stories by translations from the Mastoid, the use of English that dramatizes the disparity between the way English ought to be used and the way it is used. Since the comic style of his humor is identical with the narrative method of his fiction, where the characters often damn themselves by their own account of human behavior, it is natural enough to overlook the depth of satirical meaning that characterizes his fiction and a good deal of his humor also.

Delmore Schwartz. *The Reporter*. Aug. 9, 1956. p. 52

His gift was for mimicry, burlesque, parody. He had no invention, little imagination, a very limited sense of style, and almost no sense of structure. His best work is accidents of talent. He was a humorist of course; but only two of the five [best] stories are at all funny, and he is not likely to keep on being known as a humorist. Humorists—except one very special kind I want to say something about in a moment—do not interest posterity as humorists unless they have also all sorts of more important gifts as well, such as Mark Twain had. Humor dies fast. Lardner was a realist, too, and interesting to his contemporaries as that, but this value has vanished already; after just thirty-odd years it is hard to imagine the initial effectiveness of *You Know Me Al*. As a satirist he is unimportant. There was not enough power of mind, and no imagination of a *different* past or future condition for the object satirized. A comparison with Swift make one's critical sense reel.

John Berryman. *Commentary*. Nov., 1956. p. 422

Ring Lardner was not a mere journalist nor a literary comedian. He was a literary artist, sensitive to the world in which he lived and to the problems involved in transferring that world to the realm of fiction. He once denied that he was a satirist: ''I just listen,'' he said. The statement was one of his finest ironies, for central to his art was his distinctive style, the Lardner idiom. This was not a transcription but a stylization of what H. L. Mencken has called ''common American'': a skillful blending of malapropisms, slang, confused pronoun and verb forms, mispronunciations, misspellings and rhetorical effects that describes socially and psychologically the characters who use it. Its essential function is to create and simultaneously to ridicule these characters. Lardner did not suddenly invent this style; he developed it over a period of some years. More than any other element of his work, it became his trade mark, and through it he has continued to exert an influence upon American writers.

Howard W. Webb. *American Quarterly*. Winter, 1960. p. 482

He knew above all else that he was not cheap or ordinary; the ungrammatical writing he occasionally affected has as much to do with his own ideas of style as the 1961 Minnesota Twins have to do with the 1927 New York Yankees. He was a great purist. (He offended Scott Fitzgerald by telling him that Fitzgerald used words incorrectly.) But Lardner did fool people . . . mostly because he didn't believe in making himself expensive. He was probably the only author ever born who wouldn't discuss his work with anyone, except, near the end of his days when he spoke to his son John about it in some detail. . . .

The point we are making is: nobody writes this way any more. For a golden while there was *The New Yorker* of the nineteen thirties. They printed pieces by Benchley, Thurber and Perelman that clearly showed the influence of the Master. But where are they now, the people with the perfect ear and the see-through eye? The only practicing author who approaches it is a man Lardner would have shot on sight: Vladimir Nabokov.

Babette Rosmond. Introduction to *Shut Up, He Explained* by Ring Lardner, edited by Babette Rosmond and Henry Morgan (Scribner). 1962. p. 2

Often Ring's portrayal of the common-man-as-wise-fool thus turns into bitter burlesque; the ''wise boob'' is continually becoming merely the obnoxious plain man with no wisdom in him but with a

good deal of sadism. Further, if Lardner did realize his closeness to his material, his uglier portraits become deliberate burlesques of himself. . . .

With regard to the social background of his characters, Lardner should not be considered class-conscious in the sociological sense; his overt emphasis is upon a particular kind of personality rather than a social class. . . . When these characters collide with reality, they become either merely ridiculous or, as in the case of Midge Kelly (in ''Champion'') and Conrad Green, ''Vicious paranoiacs.'' Such self-deluded persons may be found in any social stratum; however, Lardner confined himself to the middle-class type that he knew best.

This false image of self tends to destroy communication between man and man in much of Lardner's work. Shut up in his private self-image, the Lardner character often reacts aggressively to any contact tending to disturb that image. Lardner's fiction deals largely with such aggressors and their victims.

Norris W. Yates. *The American Humorist* (Iowa State). 1964. pp. 170–1

Lardner's half-dozen Nonsense plays in *What of It?* are as good as ever. For in his Nonsense writings, as elsewhere, he never lost his sense of character, not even when he had his people coming out of a bathroom faucet.

It was a period of experiment, when the editors of little magazines called solemnly for ''the revolution of the world.'' Their contributors might refer to themselves—half seriously, half mockingly—as ''word-fellows.'' But even word-fellows, tinkering with language, need substance. When the topside critics began digging for Lardner's literary ancestors, exhuming everyone from Mark Twain to Mr. Dooley (Lardner preferred Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll), the young were reading him for his mastery of language, for his directness and his immediacy. When his critics said he was a hater of mankind, the young pressed his stinging nettles to their hearts. For Lardner never indulged in diatribes against the human race. What he hated was the shoddy and the pretentious. He did not sweep away the solid as trivial or play around with mere verbal violence.

Josephine Herbst. Introduction to *Gullible's Travels, Etc.* by Ring Lardner (Chicago). 1965. p. xiii

In spite of this urging that he be a literary immortal, Lardner persisted in remaining trapped by the very conventions he had established to manage the vernacular. Quite aside from the fact that in order to use colloquial speech Lardner had to make the crippling concession of writing almost exclusively about people whom he regarded with contempt—the ignorant, shallow, arrogant American boobs and mongrels—he had imposed a stylistic handicap upon himself. His makeshift answer to the basic problem of the vernacular ultimately betrayed him. . . . Lardner was left with the dead weight of an acknowledged narrator. Although he honed the vernacular, sustained and even advanced colloquial rhythms, he could not escape that albatross of a fool narrator. The monologue might take the reader satisfactorily through breakfast in the newspaper, but in any quantity it became a tedious drone.

Richard Bridgman. *The Colloquial Style in America* (Oxford). 1966. p. 152

Lardner's great force in portraying the baseball world lay in his recognition that its essence, instead of being mythical or serious, was indeed play. It was not a play element in culture, but culture as play. Totally comprehending its meaning and fully committing himself to it, he accomplished the difficult task of humorously inverting his language and perspective, thereby equaling the genuine social reality he recognized in the world of sports. Freed from symbolic strategies of representing the serious reality behind the face of the game, Lardner gained the fine economy of having the game as it was. Thus, his players, except for his central characters, are ''real,'' bearing their historic names, personalities, and legends. And his bats, instead of being the phallic symbols which Malamud's characters swing [in *The Natural*], seem always to be genuine Louisville Sluggers.

It is not his world which is fictive, but his narrator, whose language must perpetually render the world of baseball not as his fiction but as his life—that form of childhood pleasure indulged by the adult society where, from within the confines of the ball park, adults both in the stands and on the field helplessly convert loss, despair, and boredom into direct and overt gains of pleasure. In the process of such a major conversion, it is small wonder that Lardner converted, and thereby redeemed, the epistolary novel, which Richardson had boldly used to keep middle-class virgins precarious maidens, into a form for keeping adult children from becoming mere adults.

James M. Cox. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Spring, 1970. p. 325

Lardner was a superb master of the spoken language and he created a long line of characters whose idiom was recorded with great precision, while the frequently vain and empty man behind the words stood forth sharply revealed. Lardner had a wild, delightful, manic quality that could erupt into nonsensical laughter. . . . In the early part of his career, this language gift was employed in drawing comic pictures of small-town people. His first collection of stories, *You Know Me Al* (1916), is a series of letters written by a baseball player Jack Keefe to his best friend. These letters capture perfectly the half-literate Middle Western speech of the protagonist, who is gullible, stupid, conceited, and totally ignoble. Hilariously funny, the tales can almost sicken the reader with their picture of human depravity. Lardner followed this book with many others, among the best being *Gullible's Travels*, in which Mr. Gullible recounts in the exact language of his Middle-Western world the tortures of a vacation trip that he and his wife make. . . .

As Lardner's career developed, he moved further and further from the provincial life which he began by depicting with precise ironic truth and he wrote more and more about the world of suburbanites and of life on Long Island, in New York City, and in Florida, but he never lost his skill with language, his comic sense of incongruity, or his pessimistic despair.

C. Hugh Holman in *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*, edited by Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (Rutgers). 1973. pp. 250–1

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LATTIMORE, Richmond (1906–1984)

This book [*The Odes of Pindar*] was a very bold venture and is an extraordinary success. Pindar is not only a difficult author to translate literally into English, he is a very difficult author to understand in Greek, if by understanding a poet one means actually penetrating the nature of his imagery sufficiently to recreate it in another tongue. To experience Pindar poetically is a test of both a scholar and a poet, and he has waited for the combination a long time, as far as English authors are concerned. To render Pindar as Professor Lattimore has done is to do a great service to those who care about poetry and cannot read Greek. The version is clear and lucid, except when Pindar himself is otherwise, and then Mr. Lattimore, like a true translator, reproduces the obscurity of the original by an obscurity transferred to the English.

A particular and very valuable quality of this translation is to have achieved in great measure the hard outlines and inwrought power and toughness of the original. Pindar attains some of his most startling effects by the adaptation or transmutation of peasant proverbs or old sayings. What was general and proverbial becomes sharpened into individual poetry, yet it never loses the strength of its origin in the mouths of simple and direct people.

David Grene. *Poetry*. Sept., 1947. pp. 340–1

The reason that Mr. Lattimore's Iliad seems to me such a big event is that it brings Homer back from the prose where he has been getting submerged for the past several generations and restores him to his proper element, which is poetry and magnificence. If some of the prose has been brought along in the process, that was to be expected, and in any case it has been transformed.

The feat is so decisive that it is reasonable to foresee a century or so in which nobody will try again to put the Iliad into English verse. Taste may change greatly, but it looks to me as if Mr. Lattimore's version would survive at least as long as Pope's, for in its way it is quite as solidly distinguished. To the ear and taste of this generation it is incomparably more readable as a whole, and speaking absolutely it is a much closer rendering of Homer, giving him line for line without elaborating him into a style of couplets remote indeed from the Ionic saga. Bentley could not remark of this Iliad as he did of Pope's that we must not call it Homer; it is produced with a scholarship that the great scholar would respect and with the intent and ability to render the meaning of the Greek. But it is also highly unlikely that Bentley would consider it, like Pope's, a ''very pretty poem''; on the contrary, Bentley and Pope alike would find Lattimore's ''numbers'' extremely hard to take, and even some contemporary readers may puzzle over the fact—but it is a fact—that this translation succeeds in its metric as well as otherwise.

Robert Fitzgerald. *Kenyon Review*. Autumn, 1952. p. 699

Mr. Lattimore turns Homer's hexameters into ''a free six-beat line,'' which ''is to be read with its natural stress, not forced into any system.'' We must do as he tells us and read his lines naturally as they come, and we shall then see that his metre is well chosen and well managed. Putting the Greek rhythm out of our minds and not worrying to scan each line as it comes, we soon see that this is an admirable vehicle for narrative verse,—straight-forward, rapid, and easy. It does not weary us as English hexameters do, nor does it fall into prose. How well it is suited for an exciting story is well illustrated from the mechanics of the action, the many scenes of battle which Homer provides. . . . Mr. Lattimore rises to Homer's great occasions with more than a mere translator's aptitude. Indeed, if we try him with the noblest passages we find that he is at his best with them.

C.M. Bowra. *Sewanee Review*. Summer, 1953. pp. 484–5, 490–1

Richmond Lattimore is one of the fine American scholar-poets of whom we have learned to expect a uniformly high level of performance, whether in their justly-celebrated translations or in their original verse. Lattimore's work is perhaps more akin to Robert Fitzgerald's than to that of Dudley Fitts or Rolfe Humphries. Like Fitzgerald, Lattimore is largely concerned with the contemporary scene, especially the city, and it is a strange and lively experience to see the most familiar features of the American landscape caught and turned timeless in the bright, wintry light of a superbly-assimilated classical discipline. As we might expect, there are also a number of poems dealing with mythology.

James Dickey. *Sewanee Review*. Spring, 1958. p. 305

Just as his translations of Greek poets are noteworthy for their recreation of traditional treasures in a quick and fresh contemporary idiom and rhythm, so his own poems are striking in their recreation of his own poetic vision in the same kind of language—always sensitive and alive. His occasional falterings and hesitations are simply evidence of his originality, his willingness to explore. I note the interesting fact that whenever he writes about railways or about the sea, his emotions seem most intense and his rendering of those emotions most precise. To point to any single poem is out of question. The entire book [*Poems*] is brilliant and moving. It is about time for Mr. Lattimore to receive the Pulitzer Prize, not only

for his translations, but also for this book of poems—which explain, as nothing else could do, just why those translations were real and thrilling poetry.

James Wright. *The Yale Review*. Summer, 1958. p. 612

Richmond Lattimore is a fine translator of poetry because he has a poetic voice of his own, authentic and unmistakable and yet capable of a remarkable range of modulation. . . . Lattimore's Homer and Aeschylus, Pindar and Sappho, are good epic and tragedy and choral or solo lyric, and they are good Lattimore too.

And now Lattimore gives us a poetic Hesiod, which is good Lattimore, but which could never be confused with his other versions. Transmuting Hesiod into English may indeed be the more remarkable achievement. However inartistic a version of Homer, a tragedy or lyric may be, their glory and color and intensity must still shine through. Hesiod is earthbound and dun-colored; indeed part of his purpose is to discredit the brilliance and the ideals of heroism glorified in the Homeric tradition. But Hesiod too is poetry, though of a different order, and Lattimore's is the only version that makes the English reader aware that it is.

Moses Hadas. *New York Times Book Section*. July 5, 1959. p. 6

Richmond Lattimore in *Sestina for a Far-off Summer* . . . exhibits the impulses of a painter. He is happiest when he fixes a scene full of light, depths, and colored objects. Chronological extension is not usually necessary to him. The few seconds or minutes that separate one occurrence from another in his poems could be represented simultaneously. When he wants to go back in time, it is to a morning, afternoon, or night, when episodes do not so much happen as express themselves in arrangements of people and things. Like a painter, too, he is as content with the close view of the small scene as the distant view of the large one. His descriptive words have a super-exactness—that is, they are appropriate beyond denotative adequacy—reminding one of the way thing-fond painters expend themselves on, say blades of grass in a background.

Charles Simmons. *Saturday Review*. March 30, 1963. p. 48

Finally, because it surprised and pleased me I shall quote a poem from Richmond Lattimore's book, *The Stride of Time*. Most of Lattimore's poetry is conscious artifice: sestinas, other complex forms, a flashy diction, intricate rhymes—what we would expect from a writer whose primary bent in translation (and I should add that I have admired and relied on some of his translations for years). But this poem, ''Witness to Death,'' moved me with its modesty, and gratified me with its right way, as opposed to the wrong I found in so much else I have read this quarter, of making literary allusions within a poem.

Hayden Carruth. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1966–67. p. 700

No great profundity of mind or soul illuminates itself in Richmond Lattimore's latest volume [*The Stride of Time*], but the conversation is stately, sophisticated, and precise. From *Finnsburg*, which deprecates the Anglo-Saxon harshness, to *Late Alone*, which dares an intimate sentimentalism, the poems and translations speak with a rational, sensitive voice. The skill never fails, even when the inspiration is flawed or the theme dissatisfies, as in *The Phi Beta Kappa Poem*, or when the simile seems decorative or the metaphor untrue (a dolphin is in no sense ''zippered'' into his skin). Nor is passion permitted to split the fluent art, though passion often inspires it. . . .Within the discipline of rhyme or traditional form, the sestina and sonnet, for example, Mr. Lattimore moves easily and expertly. But more than that, when he wishes he frees himself from the convention and lets his need invent its boundaries.

Donald W. Baker. *Poetry*. March, 1967. pp. 405–6

The many admirers of Richmond Lattimore's *Iliad* will not be disappointed in his *Odyssey*. His complete Homer is indeed a splendid achievement, and I shall be very far from being alone in regarding it as much the best translation there is of a great, perhaps the greatest, poet.

Homer has provoked among translators and critics of translation an enormous amount of controversy. One of the reasons, I think, for Lattimore's success is to be found in the moderation and modesty of his approach. It is true enough that few, if any, translators would venture to suggest that they are better poets than Homer, but very many act as though they thought they were.

Rex Warner. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 22, 1967. p. 36

The high stance and the grand manner are a distressingly large element of this 30-year sequence [*Poems from Three Decades*] but, happily, not all of it. Spare, hard-eyed, tersely spoken kinds of observation crop up now and then, and these signals, momentary at first, become something to watch for. The vigil is long but finally rewarding. To follow the progress of these three decades of work is to witness not merely a parade of poems from this year or that but a process of reduction and discard. Revelation follows upon surprise: somewhere in the professorial purview of Richmond Lattimore there lurks a little Caliban-shaped figure who wants to tell it straight and like it is.

When this slouching *Doppelgänger* gets going, the rhetorical bubbles break, things replace concepts and the scene observed is not merely emblematic of some idea but alive in its own details. Poems like ''Game Resumed,'' ''Scene from the Working Class,'' ''The Last Train out of White River Junction'' show the man as the poet he is and can be: sane, tough, graceful and on the lam from the ''bright captures'' and ''wingshimmers'' of all of his summery sestinas.

John Malcolm Brinnin. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 19, 1972. p. 48

The range of Lattimore's comment includes both Troy and Vietnam, small-town America seen from an airplane and Elpenor's identity crisis in Circe's cellar. But Lattimore is most comfortable in the occasional poem—more specifically, the academic address poem. One wants to hear him at Phi Beta Kappa or commencement ceremonies, for he fulfills such tasks perfectly: lucid on first hearing yet never trite, defending no insidious establishment, affording the young none but existential truth. . . .

If Lattimore finds himself in the same abyss as other poets, he falters by deciding that singing would be beside the point. And so one cannot point to anything wrong, certainly never to anything bad, in his poetry; but something is definitely missing, or at least missing in the new poems here [*Poems from Three Decades*]. . . .

Lattimore wants neither to condemn nor to celebrate, but to tame. He has the proper respect for our inscrutable savagery and our exhilarating inner demons, but he distrusts or ignores what he cannot ultimately domesticate. That this taming process is no glib academic evasion, but a necessary act of hardening and surviving for Lattimore, is best expressed in the early poem ''Invictus,'' which, in a survey of his career, stands out so outrageously as the most intensely realized of all his poems that one wonders why it is not famous on its own. In this vision, and a few other early lyrics, perhaps Lattimore has earned the right to be as dry as he has been in recent years. . . .

Robert Weisberg. *Parnassus*. Spring–Summer, 1973. pp. 166–7

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LAWSON, John Howard (1895–1977)

All through the last two thirds of *Roger Bloomer* I got little that really moved or convinced me. . . . But in the whole first act I got a fine, stirring impression of something fresh and vigorous and frank, of sharp eyes and a clear stroke. And, what of course is more important, I got there the sense of poetic implications and of a real tragic pathos and irony in the portrait of this tender boy. . . .

And it is exciting, the mere fact that, instead of the usual simplicities of our theatre, the high-lights and heavenly manna and raw meat, we should get in this play of Roger Bloomer some freedom to talk about the bewildered dreams of the mind and flesh, about society and education and family, that we should get this direct picture of a sensitive youth in an American community and of his onslaught against the dead levels of the unsaid, the unread, the taken for granted, the banal and even the deeply natural conditions and bounds of human living.

Stark Young. *New Republic*. March 21, 1923. p. 103

It is one thing to write a play about sophomores; another thing to write a sophomoric play about sophomores. While *Roger Bloomer* cannot wholly escape censure on this score Lawson's later play *Processional* . . . rises well above any such criticism. With a considerably larger theme this play also has a discipline of sardonic good humor and awareness that holds in bounds the excesses of passion that are its necessary substance. The earlier play treated the subjective life of a boy. *Processional* treats the subjective life of America as a whole.

Thomas H. Dickinson. *Playwrights of the New American Theater* (Macmillan). 1925. pp. 312–13

The reception of *Loud Speaker* suffered no little from the fact that its author is a serious dramatist. Those who had been thrilled by the passionate beauty of his *Processional* and stirred by his frequently intense but imperfect tragedy *Nirvana* seemed unable to surrender themselves to the boisterous mood of his farce. . . . But though the farcical element has been present in Mr. Lawson's previous plays as it is almost of necessity present in all plays which attempt to represent life under the ambiguous aspect in which it presents itself to most of us, *Loud Speaker* is the only one which has been pure farce. In it the politician, the reporter, the flapper and the vamp are divested of all possible significance and, reduced to the status of mere stock characters, appear before us as simple zanies.

Curiously enough the result is something which might not inappropriately be called an American example of the *Comedia dell'arte*.

Joseph Wood Krutch. Introduction to *Loud Speaker* by John Howard Lawson (Macaulay). 1927. pp. ix–x

Processional was a mad outpouring of the former jazz age, a study in vivid contrasts and thumping rhythm, with a strong theme of crime and punishment ending in a rumor of unborn greatness to emerge from the insensate whirl. It was distinctly a stage allegory. It showed that Lawson had both the reporter's instinct for summing up the characteristics of his time and the poet's intuition of things still to come. It was brutal both in language and scene, but it was also tender in its understanding of the havoc wrought by mental confusion. . . . Instead of forging ahead, however, Lawson produced a play called *Nirvana* which was a dirge of defeat and hopelessness, of a vague longing for some place of annihilation where there would be no more problems to be settled and no further need for a disciplined will. *Processional* was like watching a strong swimmer nearing shore in a swirling sea. *Nirvana* was like watching this same swimmer suddenly weaken and drown.

The chief trouble with *Success Story* (a wholly ironic title, by the way) is the rather un-obvious one that Lawson has simply sidestepped the problems raised, but not solved, in *Processional* and *Nirvana* and has jumped ahead to the problem of soaring egotism. Naturally, not having solved the problem of his earlier plays, he is unable to solve this new problem. He builds it up splendidly, with excellent pace and characterization, but finds himself blocked in the last act.

Richard Dana Skinner. *Commonweal*. Oct. 12, 1932. p. 566

Mr. Lawson, author of *Processional* and other works, has written the play with which the Group Theatre begins its second season. *Success Story* is worth doing. Its characteristic appears to be an intensity and expressiveness only now and then approaching creation: its manner, that is, is one of excitement and pouring out rather than settling into forms or images by which the play would

proceed. It is not quite written, then. But it has a conception, a sincere movement, and a serious method.

Stark Young. *New Republic*. Oct. 12, 1932. p. 233

We have used the word ''promising.'' It is a word which too often serves to dismiss Lawson's work entirely. But Lawson's ''promise'' must not be taken to signify a failure to achieve anything in the past. *Processional* is one of the outstanding pieces of this period; *Success Story* and *Gentlewoman* for all their shortcomings are important plays; Sadie Cohen, Sol Ginsberg, Annabel Sparks are true creations, and the world that these plays embody is more essentially the world in which we have been living than perhaps any presented in the American theater of the post-war generation. . . . True, in his crude voraciousness, Lawson has frequently bit off more than he could digest, he has been so much part of his environment that he has absorbed some of its hectic vulgarity, he is often entangled in the same contradictions that he has tried to describe, his artistic methods have sometimes been as raw as the brutalities of the racketeers he has put in his plays. Indeed, evidence of the thug and the rhapsodic mystic are often to be found in his work side by side.

Harold Clurman. Foreword to *With a Reckless Preface* by John Howard Lawson (Farrar and Rinehart). 1934 pp. xxiv–xxv

Marching Song . . . is a drama about a strike in an automobile factory, and the greedy fingers of distress and sorrow that reach out in all directions as a result of the long-drawn and bitterly-fought industrial struggle. It is essentially a group play, with the mass as protagonist, and, as such, it gives opportunity to a large number of players, many of whom do more than usually excellent work in their individual characterizations and in molding the acting ensemble. Over and over again, moments in *Marching Song* strike deep into your feeling and sympathy because of the pitiful and convincing reality the players give to their roles. These are men, women and children you have seen on city streets, often with just such anger and just such sorrow in their eyes.

If *Marching Song* did not continually try to go two ways or more at once, and with too much noise and too much insistence, it would have done its job better. Mr. Lawson does not believe in dramatic economy as a means to persuasion, which is his misfortune. He knows so much better than most how to take a dramatist's large canvas and fill it; it is too bad that he should almost invariably spoil his own composition by too many separate red spots that will not focus.

Edith R. Isaacs. *Theatre Arts*. April, 1937. p. 265

In the work of one dramatist in particular during these years we can see the origins of a new trend. John Howard Lawson's influence on the men who are writing in different vein today has been profound, and his work of greater significance, seen in historical perspective, than that of most of his more successful colleagues. Lawson's interest in experimental form dates from his earliest play; in addition, he is alone among his contemporaries in traveling the path from confused dissatisfaction with the theatre and with society at large to where, his point of view at last solidly integrated, we can expect from him his best work. . . . The importance of his earlier work lies largely in its influence on the slowly crystallizing forces of this new trend. The plays themselves are beautifully written yet lacking in dramatic clarity, lyric recitatives of emotion, moods, aspirations, rationalization. They want dynamic development and action, faults to which Lawson's lyricism, his addiction to the expressionistic technique and his mystical philosophy all contributed. Yet he succeeded in evolving a style compounded of vaudeville, slapstick, jazz and burlesque which projected, as did no other, the quality of the American jazz era, its tragi-comedy, its color and vitality, and which comes nearer to being a native theatrical genre than anything else created during the same decade.

Eleanor Flexner. *American Playwrights* 1918–1938 (Simon). 1938. pp. 285–8

Two plays from the twenties by John Howard Lawson show the playwright using expressionism increasingly to develop a less moderate criticism of society. In the first, *Roger Bloomer* . . . , Lawson dramatizes the adolescence of a young Midwesterner as he frees himself from the conventions of his childhood and faces the uncertainties and unanswerable questions of maturity. The play incorporates a dream sequence in the form of a symbolic ballet, and makes use of skeleton settings, ''space staging,'' and special curtains to suggest the atmosphere of each of the major locales. The action flows back and forth across the stage like the intercut scenes of a movie, yielding the same impression of movement, of panorama, of the *whole* truth.

Processional . . . is described by Lawson as ''a jazz symphony of American life.'' For his form he turned to vaudeville, a kind of theatrical entertainment which seemed, in 1925, to express the state of the nation in a native idiom. . . . The tone of the play ranges from burlesque to tragic.

Alan S. Downer. *Fifty Years of American Drama*, 1900–1950 (Henry Regnery). 1951. pp. 99–100

Presumably his conversion [to Communism] is permanent, but it is impossible not to remember that his past is a series of discoveries concerning the nature or the cause of his inward dissatisfaction and that he has been vehement in announcing each. Once, in *Roger Bloomer*, his hero's suffering was the result of a lack of ''sensitiveness'' in the American temperament. Once, in *Processional*, the difficulty lay in our failure to penetrate the real meaning of that spirit of jazz which reconciles vitality with confusion, and once, in *Nirvana*, it was the result of our need for a mystical faith. Then in *Gentlewoman*, Mr. Lawson announced definitively that the cause of all spiritual ills had been discovered in economic disorder and he seems to have rested in that conviction. The striking fact, however, is that he was all for sensitiveness in the day when everyone was discovering the crassness of American life and is now all for economics when that has become, in its turn, the fashion. . . . Mr. Lawson's distresses have been genuine enough, at least to himself, and if he has interpreted them in terms borrowed from the discussions taking place around him he is not the only dramatist who has been similarly misled.

Joseph Wood Krutch. *The American Drama since 1918* (Braziller). 1957. pp. 261–2

This uniqueness [of film] is the burden of John Howard Lawson's muddled, illuminating, maddening book, *Film: The Creative Process*. Lawson insists that the cinema is not theater, not fiction. Instead, it is a product of what he calls ''the audio-visual imagination'' which, using images and sounds as its basic elements, works with its own special rhythm and structure. He feels that cinema, along among the arts, can set its heroes meaningfully and critically into action at the same time as it defines and criticizes their environment. As a Marxist, this cheers him and fires his enthusiasm; like Lenin, he believes that cinema is the great socialist art, a new opiate of the masses perhaps, to stir them, teach them, form them. Lawson has all sorts of qualities working on his side to make him seem sympathetic: that enthusiasm, for example, and his determination to worry away at the problems of movie-making until they reveal their specialness; the fact that he has already written the definitive book on script-writing; above all, he was blacklisted, stood up to the House Un-American Activities Committee, and still apparently sticks by his Party principles.

A. Alvarez. *New York Review of Books*. Dec. 31, 1964. p. 16

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LEAVITT, David (1961–)

Nearly without exception, Leavitt's stories [in *Family Dancing*] deal with the contemporary catalyst of a declared homosexual identity in otherwise straight social structures—above all the family. In ''Territory,'' an enlightened mother (who works as a volunteer in a gay-parents-awareness group) doesn't quite find the equanimity she expects from herself—when her son, on a trip home, brings his pleasant-enough lover with him for the first time. A gay son figures prominently, too, in the title story and, as a destabilizing force, in ''The Last Cottage''—about parents breaking up in middle age. In ''Out Here,'' Leavitt's other primary concern—illness and death, how families contract around them—adds some multi-voiced tension to the portrait of a lesbian daughter. But the only story that rises above the one-dimensional formula here is ''Danny in Transit''—about the terrified, incoherent apprehensions of a boy whose parents (father coming out of the closet, mother becoming unhinged) are in the process of divorce. In this piece, with vivid contrast between the small boy and the crippled, selfish adults whirling above him, Leavitt shows strong potential. The rest of the collection, however, offers only chic attitudes, slick surfaces (upper-middle-class comforts, country homes, cordless phones, computer classes), and family-member stereotypes.

Kirkus Reviews. July 1, 1984, p. 590.

David Leavitt has a genius for empathy. I say ''genius'' because this 23-year-old writer can't possibly have had time to acquire the kind of knowledge that emerges from the best stories in ''Family Dancing.'' When Mr. Leavitt writes about a middle-aged woman with cancer, or a single mother of a problem child, or a wife whose husband lies paralyzed in a hospital, he *becomes* that character. ''Counting Months,'' for instance, describes a day in the life of Mrs. Harrington—the day she was scheduled to die of cancer, according to her doctor—and ends with a scene at a party given by friends:

> She looked down at the dwarf girl, who looked up at her. The dwarf girl held a glass of water in her tiny fat hand; the owl eyes in the huge head seemed gentle, almost pretty; in the bright light of the kitchen, she wore an expression that could have indicated extreme stupidity, or great knowledge. Unmoving, the dwarf girl stared at Mrs. Harrington, as if the big woman were a curiosity, or a comrade in sorrow.

Here we get not only Mrs. Harrington's vision of ''the dwarf girl'' but her sense of how that girl in turn sees ''the big woman''—an imagined mutual recognition that turns them both into curiosities or comrades. So we observe Mrs. Harrington in much the way this victim of a probably fatal illness observes herself, from both inside and outside, possessed and self-possessed. With the kind of linguistic delicacy that is typical of Mr. Leavitt's writing, ''unmoving'' balances with ''sorrow'' to produce an emotion that is neither sentimental nor ironic.

In another excellent story, ''Aliens,'' a mother tries to converse with her 11-year-old daughter, Nina, about the child's serious fantasy—her conviction that she comes from another planet. . . .

Mr. Leavitt captures, as few writers can, the self-preserving distance between even the most intimate parents and children. He is also very good on estranged husbands and wives, as in ''The Lost Cottage,'' a story about a couple's final vacation together. . . .

The stories in ''Family Dancing'' harp on the same themes. Chief among these is the telling of a difficult secret: a boy admitting his homosexuality to his parents, a husband confessing infidelity to his wife, a mother acknowledging that her youngest child must be told of the mother's cancer. The different families in which these events take place are remarkably similar. The mothers are vulnerable, sensitive and struggling for independence. The fathers are always absent—divorced, separated, away on business, permanently hospitalized. The daughters tend to be whiny or remote or aggressively over-weight or otherwise alienated from their mothers. The sons, if they are grown up, are often homosexuals.

Oddly enough—given Mr. Leavitt's age—the young people in his fiction are the least convincing. In fact, one can virtually predict the quality of one of his stories by looking at its cast of characters. When a story focuses on the emotions and activities of college-age men and women, it will frequently be strained or defensive or overly explanatory. This is the problem with stories like ''Dedicated'' and ''Family Dancing,'' both featuring a trio of young friends among whom the balance of affection is unequally distributed. Part of what makes these characters unappealing is that they are too self-conscious: they serve us their pain on silver plates, garnished with irony.

In such cases, Mr. Leavitt loses the ease of characterization, the genuine sympathy, that colors his portrayal of middle-aged women. It would appear that a certain distance is essential to his capacity for empathy. Like Mrs. Harrington looking at the dwarf girl in

''Counting Months'' or the mother confronting her daughter in ''Aliens,'' Mr. Leavitt achieves his moments of clearest perception when he faces a character who is completely different from himself. The stories that fall short of this peak tend to be merely clever, merely well written. But even Mr. Leavitt's less good stories show great talent, and many a writer would be grateful to have written them.

Wendy Lesser. *The New York Times Book Review*. September 2, 1984, pp. 7–8.

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LEE, Nelle Harper (1926–)

In her first novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee makes a valiant attempt to combine two dominant themes of contemporary Southern fiction—the recollection of childhood among village eccentrics and the spirit-corroding shame of the civilized white Southerner in the treatment of the Negro. If her attempt fails to produce a novel of stature, or even of original insight, it does provide an exercise in easy, graceful writing and some genuinely moving and mildly humorous excursions into the transient world of childhood.

Set during the depression, the story is recalled from the distance of maturity by Jean Louise (''Scout'') Finch, whose widowed father, Atticus, was a civilized, tolerant lawyer in a backward Alabama town. An older brother, Jem, and a summer visitor from Mississippi, Dill, share Scout's adventures and speculations among figures not totally unfamiliar to readers of Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty, and Truman Capote. . . . [The children] play their games of test and dare with ill-tempered old ladies, buzzing village gossips, and, most especially, with the mysterious occupant of the house next door who has never been seen outside since his father locked him up over fifteen years earlier. It is through Boo Radley whose invisible presence tantalizes the children, that Miss Lee builds the most effective part of her novel: an exploration of the caution and curiosity between which active children expend their energies and imaginations.

In the second half of the novel, Atticus defends a Negro accused of raping a white girl. The children add to their more innocent games that of watching a Southern court in action. They bring to the complexities of legal argument the same luminous faith in justice that sweeps through their games, and they watch, with dismay and pain, as the adult world betrays them. And here, perhaps because we have not been sufficiently prepared for the darkness and the shadows, the book loses strength and seems contrived. For everything happens as we might expect. The children are stained with terror and the knowledge of unreasoning hatreds but gain in insight and in compassion, and the author, deliberately using Atticus and an elderly widow as mouthpieces, makes her points about the place of civilized man in the modern South.

The two themes Miss Lee interweaves throughout the novel emerge as enemies of each other. The charm and wistful humor of the childhood recollections do not foreshadow the deeper, harsher note which pervades the later pages of the book. The Negro, the poor white girl who victimizes him, and the wretched community spirit that defeats him, never rise in definition to match the eccentric, vagrant, and appealing characters with which the story opens. The two worlds remain solitary in spite of Miss Lee's grace of writing and honorable decency of intent.

Harding LeMay. *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*. July 10, 1960, p. 5.

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* gives a friendly but for the most part unsentimental account of life in an Alabama town in the 1930s. The narrator, Jean Louise (commonly called Scout) Finch, is writing of a time when she was seven or eight years old, and the book is in part the record of a childhood. Their mother being dead, Scout and her brother Jem have been brought up by their father, a lawyer and legislator, and by a Negro servant, Calpurnia. The father, Atticus Finch, is an unusual man, and their childhood is in many ways a unique one.

Miss Lee, however, is not primarily concerned with childhood experience; she has, in her own way, written a novel about the perennial Southern problem. Atticus is assigned to defend a Negro charged with raping a white woman, and, to the dismay of his neighbors, he really tries to defend him. Through Scout's eyes we watch the growth of resentment in the community, and then we see the trial itself, in which Atticus is inevitably defeated. After that there is a melodramatic conclusion.

Miss Lee's problem has been to tell the story she wants to tell and yet to stay within the consciousness of a child, and she hasn't consistently solved it. Some episodes in the trial and the melodramatic conclusion seem contrived. But her insight into Southern mores is impressive, and in Atticus she has done a notable portrait of a Southern liberal.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. July 23, 1960, pp. 15–16.

One of the things about [T.S.] Stribling that disturbed Robert Penn Warren in 1934 when he was writing about the new Pulitzer Prize winner was that the author ''has never been interested in the dramatic possibilities of a superior white man brought into conflict with his native environment,'' a matter that has challenged many serious Southern novelists like William Faulkner and Caroline Gordon. A quarter of a century later Miss Lee has done precisely that for the Alabama scene [in *To Kill a Mockingbird*]. Even though it is usually easier to write about the spectacular, wicked man, Miss Lee has chosen the more difficult task of writing about the quiet, good man. Other novelists have been concerned with this type of man—the thoughtful, well-educated Southerner at quiet odds with his environment like the minor character Gavin Stevens in Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*. But Miss Lee has made him the central figure and hero of her novel and succeeded at the same time in writing an exciting and significant story.

The epigraph from Charles Lamb—''Lawyers, I suppose, were once children''—indicates the two aspects of *Mockingbird*, childhood and the law. The plot can be simply stated: Atticus Finch, one of Maycomb's leading attorneys, is the court-appointed defender

of Tom Robinson, accused of raping Mayella Ewell, a daughter of the town's notorious poor white-trash family. In this struggle he is unsuccessful—at least the all-white jury finds Tom guilty, and he is killed escaping from prison before Atticus can gain a hearing on the appeal. But to a certain extent the case is not altogether lost; certain precedents have been set. Instead of a young lawyer who defends only for the record's sake Judge Taylor appoints a distinguished lawyer who chooses to fight obvious lies and racial hatred so that he and his children—and ultimately Maycomb itself—can remain honest and honorable people. No one except Atticus Finch ever kept a jury out so long on a case involving a Negro. And in the process of the trial Atticus's children have matured in the right way—at least in his eyes.

The struggle of the children toward maturity, however, occupies more space than Atticus's struggle to free Tom, the central episode. Through their escapades and subsequent entanglements with their father and neighbors like Miss Maudie Atkinson, Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose, and particularly the legends about Boo Radley, the town's boogie man, Jem and Scout learn what it means to come to man's estate. In Part I, an evocation of the happy days of summer play, the process is begun. With their friend Dill Harris from Meridian they enact the weird stories about Boo Radley—how he sits in his shuttered house all day and wanders about in the shadows of night looking in people's windows, how he once drove the scissors into his father's leg, how as a not-too-bright adolescent he had terrorized the county with a ''gang'' from Old Sarum. Might he even be dead in that solemn, silent house, the children wonder. Miss Maudie gives, as always, a forthright answer to that question: ''I know he's alive, Jean Louise, because I haven't seen him carried out yet.'' Although Atticus forbids these ''Boo Radley'' games, the children go on playing. . . .

In the midst of these juvenile Gothic masques the children begin to learn something about the difference between gossip and truth. When Jem tears his pants and is forced to leave them behind on the wire fence during their night expedition to peek through the Radley's shutters, he later finds them crudely mended, pressed, and hanging over the fence. When Miss Maudie's house burns during a cold night, all the neighborhood turns out to help and to watch. Scout, who is told to come no closer than the Radleys' gate, discovers that during the confusion a blanket has been thrown round her shoulders. Jem realizes that this thoughtful act was not performed by Mr. or Mrs. Radley, who have long been dead, and he saw Mr. Nathan, Boo's brother and ''jailer,'' helping haul out Miss Maudie's mattress. It could have been only Boo.

One of the most interesting features of *Mockingbird* is the skill with which Miss Lee weaves these two struggles about childhood and the law together into one thematic idea. . . . [She] does a neat workmanlike job of dovetailing her plots. When Scout attends her first day at school, the morning session is devoted to explaining the Cunningham family to Miss Caroline so that she will understand why she must not lend Walter any lunch money. The Cunninghams are poor but proud. When the Sunday night lynching party arrives at the jail, it is Jem and Scout, who, having slipped off from home, see their father calmly reading a newspaper by the light at the jail door, sitting in one of his office chairs. Hiding in the doorway of the Jitney Jungle, Scout rushes forward in time to disconcert the Cunningham mob by asking innocent questions about Walter, her classmate—her father had always taught her to talk to folks about the things that would interest them.

The afternoon session of Scout's first day at school had been taken up with Burris Ewell and his dirt and defiance of Miss Caroline. It is Burris's father who brings the charge of rape against Tom Robinson.

This neatness that makes for economy of character portrayal is successful when it avoids the appearance of too convenient coincidental circumstances—a fault that *Mockingbird* does not entirely escape. But in the more important aspect of thematic development the novel is successful. Carson McCullers and Truman Capote have written with insight about Southern childhood, and William Faulkner has traced the legal and moral injustices done the Negro just as Eudora Welty has underlined the quiet patience of the Negro's acceptance of his bleak world. Harper Lee has united these two concepts into the image of a little child—schooled in basic decencies by her father even though ''ladylike'' manners of the superficial sort that Aunt Alexandra admires are sometimes lacking—who turns the tide to stop the Sunday night lynching. After the trial when Jem cannot comprehend the injustice done Tom Robinson by the jury, he asks his father, ''How could they do it, how could they?'' Atticus replies, ''I don't know, but they did it. They've done it before and they did it tonight and they'll do it again and when they do it—seems that only the children weep.''

Almost all readers will agree that the first two-thirds of *Mockingbird* is excellent fiction; the difference of opinion will probably turn upon the events after the trial. The major incident here is the school pageant about the history of Maycomb County as written by Mrs. Merriweather; the performance is the town's attempt at ''organized activity'' on Halloween. On their way home from the pageant, Ewell attacks the Finch children to get even with Atticus for making him appear a complete and guilty fool at Tom's trial. Scout is saved from the knife by her wire costume representing a Maycomb County ham; Jem receives a painful broken arm. And Ewell is killed with his own knife by Boo Radley, who again lurks opportunely in the shadows. Later that night after visits from the doctor and the sheriff when Scout is allowed to walk home with Mr. Arthur, she stands for a moment on the Radley porch seeing the knothole in the tree where Boo had once left them pitiful little presents of chewing gum and Indian-head pennies. She half realizes as a child of nine, and now as an adult she more fully realizes, what their childish antics must have meant to a lonely, ''imprisoned,'' mentally limited man like Mr. Arthur, and she recalls her father's word to Jem that ''you never really know a man until you *stand* in his shoes and walk around in them. Just standing on the Radley porch was enough.''

Thematically the aftermath of the injustice done Tom and the growing up of a boy and girl are brought together in the Halloween episode. The structural problem of joining Boo Radley and Tom Robinson into some sort of juxtaposition is solved, but the slapstick comedy of the school pageant and the grotesque coincidental tragedy and subsequent salvation are perilously close to the verge of melodrama. . . . To keep this section of *Mockingbird* from seeming altogether an anticlimax to the trial of Tom, it should at least have been denominated Part III. Then the story would have been set off into its three components of School and Summer Play, Tom Robinson's Trial, and Halloween Masquerade. Such a device would distribute the thirty-one chapters into the equal grouping of Miss Lee's apparent planning, and at the same time it would not force the Halloween tragi-comedy to seem quite so close to the climactic trial.

Maycomb and the South, then, are all seen through the eyes of Jean Louise, who speaks from the mature and witty vantage of an older woman recalling her father as well as her brother and their childhood days. This method is managed with so little ado that the average reader slips well into the story before he realizes that the best evidence that Atticus has reared an intellectually sophisticated daughter is that she remembers her formative years in significant detail and then narrates them with charm and wisdom. She has become the good daughter of a good man, who never let his children know what an expert marksman he was until he was forced to kill a mad dog on their street. Atticus did not like to shoot for the mere sport of it lest he kill a mockingbird like Tom Robinson or Boo Radley; and mockingbirds must be protected for their songs' sake.

This modification of a Jamesian technique of allowing the story to be seen only through the eyes of a main character but to be understood by the omniscient intelligence of Henry James is here exploited to bold advantage. The reader comes to learn the true meaning of Maycomb through the eyes of a child who now recollects with the wisdom of maturity. Along with Scout and Jem we may at first be puzzled why Atticus insists that Jem read every afternoon to old Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose in atonement for his cutting the tops off her camellia bushes after she taunted him about his father's being ''no better than the niggers and trash he works for.'' But we soon learn with Scout that Atticus believed Jem would become aware of the real meaning of courage when he was forced to aid a dying old woman in breaking the narcotic habit she abhorred.

Miss Lee, in a sense, has actually revealed more of Alabama history from the Simon Finches of old Saint Stephens to distrusted Republicans like the Misses Barber from Clanton than does Stribling in [*The Store*], his much longer historical novel. The spirit of history is as important as the events of history, and Miss Lee presents Miss Caroline as an outsider from Winston County because she represents to this Maycomb community what every South Alabama child knew about north Alabama: a place ''full of Liquor Interests, Big Mules, steel companies, Republicans, professors, and other persons of no background.'' Miss Lee has mastered an eclectic technique of a meaningful point of view along with validity of idea and freshness of material. She echoes Faulkner in her deep concern for the inchoate tragedy of the South, and like him she is not afraid to pursue the Gothic shadows of Edgar Allan Poe. But her eclecticism is her own: she has told a story of racial injustice from the point of view of thoughtful children with ''open, unprejudiced, well-furnished minds of their own,'' as the *New York Times* has phrased it. And in Atticus Finch she has created the most memorable portrait in recent fiction of the just and equitable Southern liberal.

William T. Going. *Alabama, Essays on Alabama Literature* (The University of Alabama Press) 1975, pp. 9–31

Harper Lee's only novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird,* won the 1961 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and established her place in young adult literature. Universal themes of justice, compassion, racism, and family love enrich this drama set in Maycomb, Alabama (inspired by Lee's Monroeville, Alabama, home) in the 1930s. Transcending place and time, this modern American classic celebrates the courage of people who face adversity with dignity.

Narrator Jean Louise (Scout) Finch recollects three years of events leading to her brother Jem's accident: one arm was broken so badly that it healed shorter than the other. Scout obviously has emotional scars from this event twenty-five years ago. She begins the story when she was six, the summer their friend Dill encouraged them to make the reclusive Boo Radley emerge from his house. Neighborhood legend said this six-foot-six-inch terror dined on raw squirrels and stray cats, had rotten teeth, and drooled most of the time. After the novel's climactic scene on a frightening Halloween night, the children know more about the mysterious Boo who does indeed come out, yet their questions about the greater mystery of racism remain unanswered. The events following that summer of innocent play initiate the children into the darker experiences of social prejudice, cruelty, and fears. Scout and Jem witness the tragic consequences of persecuting people who are different, for Boo was very nice once they met him.

Not only are recluses such as Boo unfortunately branded as menacing threats to society, but blacks also suffer from social injustice. Some of the novel's most dramatic scenes occur in the courtroom as their father, Atticus Finch, a highly respected lawyer and citizen, defies townspeople's prejudice and heroically defends a black man falsely accused of raping a white woman. Before the trial, Atticus explains to Scout and Jem his belief in personal integrity: how people conduct themselves in trying times shows their true character. Atticus defends his unpopular decision to defend a black man accused of a heinous crime by telling his daughter that the only thing that does not abide by majority rule is a person's conscience.

In a Southern town dominated by whites, the ultimate crime is said to have been committed when Tom Robinson, a poor black laborer, is accused of raping Mayella Ewell, a poor white woman. Atticus proves that Tom is clearly innocent, and Bob Ewell, Mayella's father, is obviously guilty of beating her for making sexual advances toward Tom. However, as Atticus states, social injustice will prevail in a system ruled by white men convinced from childhood that ''*all* Negroes lie, that *all* Negroes are basically immoral beings, that *all* Negro men are not to be trusted around our women. . . .'' His impassioned plea to let the court treat all races equally falls on the all-male, all-white jury's unsympathetic ears. Because ''a court is only as sound as its jury, and a jury is only as sound as the men who make it up,'' Tom is murdered—the scapegoat of society's prejudice and violence.

By the same token, racism also destroys the lives of whites. Mayella, victimized by her father, helps crucify an innocent man to save herself. Although Bob Ewell may be a victim of the poverty, ignorance, and bigotry that create racism, he proves to be a truly malevolent character who warrants no sympathy for his fate. In addition to the destructive impact on the Ewells, Scout and Jem also suffer from Maycomb's racism by enduring the insults of both children and adults. After Jem confesses to vandalizing Mrs. Dubose's camellias (retaliating for her saying that Atticus was ''no better than the niggers and trash he works for!''), Atticus explains that the sick old woman should not be held responsible for what she says; she is one more pitiable victim of society's bigotry. Jem is punished by having to read aloud two hours to the woman everyday after school and on Saturdays for a month; as a result, he gains greater insight into the woman he once despised. The lessons learned undoubtedly will strengthen his character as an adult.

All these experiences over the three-year period validate the truth of Atticus's remark that ''it's a sin to kill a mockingbird.''

The analogy between the senseless slaughter of innocent songbirds and Tom's tragic death becomes clear to Scout. She suddenly understands that not protecting Boo Radley from being implicated in Bob Ewell's death would ''be sort of like shootin' a mockingbird.'' Although Atticus fails to save Tom, he teaches his children about racial justice and human dignity.

Laura M. Zaidman. In *Twentieth-Century Young Adult Writers,* ed. Laura Standley Berger (St. James Press, 1994)

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To Kill a Mockingbird, 1960

LE GUIN, Ursula K. (1929–)

The Lathe of Heaven . . . is really a very neat performance, accomplishing what science fiction is supposed to do. The time is 2002, the hero a passive man who discovers that his dreams are out of control. George's dreams change reality. Whatever George dreams comes true as he dreams it; moreover, his dreams cover their tracks, changing the past and what people remember as well. Naturally people are reluctant to believe George's story—but George is terrified. His ''effective'' dreams, as he calls them, began in a small way—a relative killed, a picture changed—but in time he dreams of the alteration of the world and history. The earth's population is decimated; its wars intensified and then halted; an alien planet attacks . . . and all because George dreamed it. An ambitious psychiatrist discovers that under hypnosis George will dream what he is told and so the psychiatrist can play God, advancing both his own career and history as he wishes—except that, as we know from Freud, dreams like to play tricks.

Ursula Le Guin is extremely inventive. She shifts her continuum of the world and its past every few pages, playing expertly on alternative suggestions as to what we may expect from violence, war and overpopulation. She has a nice sense of irony, too: for all his tremendous power, George remains virtually a prisoner; for all the horror of his dreams, the world actually seems to improve. Science fiction is rarely able to offer a sustained view of an interesting alternative to the world we know, and Mrs. Le Guin does not attempt to do so; instead, she provides the brief glimpses, the partial speculations that I have suggested are essential to a story of this kind. Even her moral—that we cannot stand outside the world and direct it but must be content to be part of the whole—is gracefully developed. It is, after all, what the ecologists are still trying to tell us.

Peter S. Prescott. *Newsweek*. Nov. 29, 1971, p. 106

Her fiction is closer to fantasy than naturalism, but it is just as grounded in ethical concerns as [John] Brunner's work, despite its apparent distance from present actualities. Though some would argue that her political novel, *The Dispossessed* (1974), is her best work, and others might favor her ecological romance, *The Word for World Is Forest* (1972, 1976), or her young people's fantasy, *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), today's critical consensus is still that her best single work is *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969).

In *The Left Hand of Darkness* Le Guin moves far from our world in time and space, to give us a planet where life has evolved on different lines from our own. This world, which happens to be in a period of high glaciation, has evolved political institutions in two adjoining countries that resemble feudalism on the one hand, and bureaucracy on the other. But the most important difference between this world and our own is that its human inhabitants are different from us in their physical sexuality. All beings on the planet Gethen have both male and female sexual organs. In a periodic cycle like estrus in animals, Gethenians become sexually aroused—but only one set of sexual organs is activated at this time. These people are potentially hermaphroditic. Most of the time they are neuter, but then they may briefly become a man or a woman, and in that time beget a child or conceive one. Thus the same person may experience both fatherhood and motherhood at different times. . . . The major effect of Le Guin's imagining such a fictional world is to force us to examine how sexual stereotyping dominates actual human concepts of personality and influences all human relationships. . . .

Ursula Le Guin has been attacked by radical feminists for not going far enough, for using male protagonists, as she does even in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and for putting other issues, both political and environmental, ahead of feminism. In fact, it is probably wrong to think of her as a feminist. But I know of no single book likely to raise consciences about sexism more thoroughly and convincingly than this one. And that this is done gently, in a book which manages also to be a fine tale of adventure and a tender story of love and friendship, makes the achievement all the more remarkable. There are few writers in the United States who offer fiction as pleasurable and thoughtful as Ursula Le Guin's. It is time for her to be recognized beyond the special province of fantasy and science fiction or feminism as simply one of our best writers.

Robert Scholes. *New Republic*. Oct. 30, 1976, pp. 39–40

''*An die Musik*'' and *Orsinian Tales* are acts of imagination that transform the calamity of history that is Central Europe into a celebration of the individual's ability to survive bad times. . . . Le Guin has consistently occupied herself with her own inner life. She has always written fantasy, searching not in the outside world, but in her own creative unconscious, for the subjects of her fiction. The course of her development from the early sixties into the middle seventies has been a series of attempts to develop for herself the means of expressing her own suffering (which, of course, can be ethical and political as well as psychological) and its conquest more precisely and clearly. She would probably agree with Rilke's repeated assertion that we are ''only just where we persist in praising.'' But she also feels the need to blame. The strength of her convictions and her ethical principles demands that. When her fiction blames, however, as *The Word for World is Forest* does, it is less just.

Ultimately, the real subject of ''*An die Musik*'' and the rest of Le Guin's fiction that explores ethical problems is not a group of ethical questions. These are means, not ends. Her purpose is to ask them, not to answer them. The real subject of ''*An die Musik*'' is celebration; the tale is a celebration of Gaye's devotion to his art,

and beyond that, a celebration of art itself. That is the meaning of its title. Like . . . many other Le Guin characters, Gaye is an ''enemy of the feasible.'' Le Guin places so many obstacles between him and his music not merely to wrestle with questions about the duty of the artist and the function of art, but to dramatize more vividly Gaye's capacity to endure and survive, and to pursue an ideal without compromising either himself or his goal.

James W. Bittner. *Science Fiction Studies*. Nov., 1978, p. 235

The Dispossessed . . . has both implicit and explicit connections with anarchism and utopian tradition. Its very title recalls the English title of Dostoevsky's controversial satire (*The Possessed*) on Nechayev and his nihilist gangsterism, a movement related to anarchism through its influence on Bakunin. In its more obvious sense, though, ''dispossessed'' refers to the freedom from property that is central to anarchism and which is actualized in Odonian society. Indeed, elsewhere Le Guin has indicated her partiality for anarchism as a political ideal, stating that the thematic motivation of *The Dispossessed* was to accomplish for the first time the embodiment of that ideal in a novel. Similarly, the novel's subtitle (''An ambiguous Utopia'') indicates that it is to be read as a contribution to the utopian tradition, while its structure, which alternates chapters narrating Shevek's experiences on Urras with episodes from his life on Anarres, conveys the dialectic of old world and new world that is central to utopian satire and vision.

John P. Brennan and Michael C. Downs. In *Ursual K. Le Guin*, ed. Joseph D. Olander and Martin Harry Greenberg (Taplinger, 1979), p. 117

It is not uncommon, as a literary technique, to employ a critical individual who narrates as the action unfolds. Ursula Le Guin takes this device one step further, making of her protagonists participant-observers; in short, she transforms them into anthropologists. Her heroes all seem to have characteristics that separate them from the worlds in which they find themselves: they are either off-worlders whose job may be explicitly that of an ethnographer, such as Rocannon (*Rocannon's World*) or Genly Ai (*The Left Hand of Darkness*), or they are the skeptics and freethinkers in their native society, as in the cases of Selver and Lyubov (*The Word for World Is Forest*) and Shevek (*The Dispossessed*). Because they are outsiders with the outsider's critical viewpoint, they are cast in the mold of anthropologists, with the perspective and unique dilemmas of the discipline. Repeatedly in her fiction we confront individuals who are of society and yet not quite a part of it. The outsider, the alien, the marginal man, adopts a vantage point with rather serious existential and philosophical implications. For Le Guin this marginality becomes a metaphor whose potency is fulfilled in a critical assessment of society. . . .

Le Guin squarely confronts the isolation and loneliness of her protagonists. Themes such as xenophobia, a suspicion and mistrust of all that is different, are developed in all her work, but reach a clear culmination in 1972 in *WWF*. Here there is an explicit presentation of the heroes (Lyubov and Selver) as anthropologists in their roles as outsiders and translators. Consistently her portrayal is pessimistic. Such individuals suffer heartily. Abandoned, misread, and psychologically disoriented, they often sacrifice themselves or are sacrificed for their understanding. Yet often they represent the only hope.

Le Guin has, essentially, two modes for presenting her protagonists as outsiders: either they are true aliens (for example, Rocannon, Lyubov, Genly Ai, and Falk-Ramarren [*City of Illusions*]) or they are natives of a society, yet their perception of social life nevertheless sets them apart (for example, Shevek, Selver, Estraven [*LHD*], Jakob Agat [*Planet of Exile*], and George Orr [*The Lathe of Heaven*]). In either case, their problems, and more importantly their solutions, are of a similar nature. Their apartness precludes their complete membership in, or commitment to, any particular society. Yet their critical viewpoint gives them an insight into the nature of social relations that eludes their fellows. . . .

In the final analysis, however, Le Guin's anthropologist-outsiders have the edge over their fellows. For all their solitariness, their convictions are strengthened by their ordeals. They are no longer mystified by differences. They can grant humanity to others because they cease to glorify or stigmatize that which is not immediately comprehensible. The irony is that in their realization that opposition does not necessarily imply impenetrable boundaries, they erect barriers between themselves and their society. Because they recognize that the task of understanding is not impossible, they contribute to their own isolation. Their perception of balance is an appreciation of differences. And it is here that the paradox ultimately resides; for if there is an aloneness in the chaos of social life, there is even greater solitariness once order is achieved.

Karen Sinclair. In *Ursula K. Le Guin: Voyager to Inner Lands and to Outer Space*, ed. Joe De Bolt (Kennikat, 1979), pp. 50–52, 64–65

In the nine novels and numerous short works which she has written between 1962 and 1976, the exploration of imaginary worlds has provided a framework for an exploration of the varieties of physical life, social organizations, and personal development open to human beings. At the same time, this richness and variety suggest the ethical concept underlying her work: a celebration of life itself, through a joyful acceptance of its patterns. This concept is expressed not only in the works themselves, but in her vision of the artistic process which brought them forth. . . . In general, her characters are engaged in a quest, both a physical journey to an unknown goal which proves to be their home, and an inward search for knowledge of the one true act they must perform. The development of the plot, then, takes on a deeper significance than is usual in science fiction, with its emphasis on action for the sake of entertainment. The Le Guin character often initiates actions which have personal and social consequences. . . . More important than the pattern of plot, however, is each character's movement to an understanding of this pattern: to an acceptance both of the integrity of each individual life, and of the place of each individual within the overall pattern of life. . . .

Le Guin's weakness is a paradoxical tendency to impose moral and ethical patterns on her work, so that form and content work against her philosophy. This didacticism is most evident in ''The Word for World Is Forest'' (1972), ''The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas'' (1972), and passages of *The Dispossessed*. The

author's statement of values precludes their discovery, in contrast to the process, most notable in the Earthsea books, whereby the reader shares naturally in the characters' growing awareness of the right direction of their lives. Such a tendency is inevitable, however, given Le Guin's serious concern with human experience and conduct. It is this concern, usually embodied convincingly in individuals' actions and perceptions, which has made her one of the most notable writers to choose science fiction as a framework for discovery.

Ursula Le Guin's work, then, is mature art: rich and varied in content, skillful in presentation, joyous in its celebration of life, and, above all, thoughtful in approach, rooted in and developing a significant personal philosophy. The maturity is literal as well as literary.

Susan Wood. In *Voices for the Future: Essays on Major Science Fiction Writers*, Vol. 2, ed. Thomas D. Clareson (Bowling Green State Univ. Popular Pr., 1979), pp. 154–56

Surely one sign of the serious artist is the willingness to subordinate the part to the whole. Somehow, through her faithfulness to the controlling conception of the work, the artist hopes to create a whole that transcends the sum of its parts. I think Le Guin has done this in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, but that is not all of her accomplishment. The artist's desire for coherence can lead to dogmatism; in this case, unity can easily become sterility. Freud observed that life resists order, that perfect order is synonymous with death. This observation is germane to *Left Hand*, not only because the dualism it implies is thematically relevant to Le Guin's holistic vision but because the book offers us both the satisfaction of artistic unity and the richness of a complex diversity. For almost every statement she gives us, Le Guin supplies a counterstatement. No truth is allowed to stand as the entire truth; every insight is presented as partial, subject to revision and another perspective. . . .

Such subtle but pervasive insistence that every truth is a partial truth is, of course, wholly consistent with Le Guin's controlling vision for this book, since if she allowed any truth to stand as *the* truth, the sense that wholeness emerges from a tension between dualities would be lost. The delicate balance of conflicting possibilities that Le Guin posits means, for one thing, that the book is rarely in danger of becoming dogma. It also means that, for a complete expression of Le Guin's holistic vision, nothing less than the entire structure of the book will suffice. The final whole that emerges is the book itself. And this kind of unity, which encompasses within itself all manner of diversity, makes *The Left Hand of Darkness* itself an example of the creative fecundity that is possible when differences are not suppressed but used to create a new whole. For all these reasons. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is one of Le Guin's finest books, and an enduring literary achievement.

N.B. Hayles. In *Ursula K. Le Guin*, ed. Joseph D. Olander and Martin Harry Greenberg (Taplinger, 1979), pp. 113–15

The importance of Ursula Le Guin's contribution to science fiction lies in her ability to use a distinctly Western art from to communicate the essence that is Tao. In many of her novels, Tao is the universal base upon which societies and individual characters act. The fact that Tao exists not in rational systems but in life and the imaginative construct of life that we call art makes the critic's task of revealing the methods and materials of Le Guin's imaginative integration a very difficult one. . . . The Taoist mythos . . . permeates the three novels—*City of Illusions*, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and *The Dispossessed*—which I think best communicate it. . . .

Le Guin is a deliberate, conscientious writer who not only creates fully developed cultures in each of her novels, but who has woven them together into an entire cosmogony, giving, in the course of all her novels and stories, a history of the spread of civilization from Hain-Davenant to the Ekumen of eighty worlds, of which Terra is a part. She weaves social and political commentary into her cultural presentation, as in the conflicts between Karhide and Orgoreyn in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, or Anarres and Urras in *The Dispossessed*, always set within the larger scale of humanity as an integral part of the balance of the cosmos. Finally, her style mirrors the balance of her themes. Her writing moves gently but inexorably. To use another analogy from Lao Tzu, it is like a deep pool of water, seemingly inactive, but actually teeming with life. She, too, like the Sage, influences by actionless activity. The value of her work lies in the combination of all these elements, and others, into a complete overview of what it means to be human, no matter on what world, in what cultural subdivision, humans find themselves.

Dena C. Bain. *Extrapolation*. Fall, 1980, pp. 209, 221

Le Guin is a seeker who uses her imagination. If she returns again and again to fantasy and science fiction, it is not only because these genres are traditionally ones that make use of journeys and marvels. It is also because they offer great scope to the creative mind. Le Guin is convinced, as she explains in her essay ''Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons?'' that we must use imagination, as long as it is disciplined by art, for our minds to be fully alive and well.

She says this in defense of fantasy. But what is true of fantasy is, for her, also true of science fiction. She recognizes that they are different forms and, after her early novels, she has tried not to mix them. But, all the same, she feels that there is a similarity between them. . . .

Le Guin is a romantic, and as a romantic she values love, nature, adventure, marvels, dreams, the imagination, and the unconscious. Like the romantics, she is aware of the dark side of things and is attracted by it, even when she prefers the light. She values the individual and his or her struggle for personal liberation. And she expresses that struggle in a language that, while straightforward, makes use of poetic metaphor. But like the Brontës, she manages to be romantic and realistic at the same time. Her early apprenticeship to the description of people's daily lives, even if those lives were led in a country that cannot be found on any map, taught her skill in handling specific detail. She uses that skill to good effect in her fantasy and science fiction.

However, it is hardly surprising that she did not find a publisher for her first novels. Romantics are not welcome nowadays in mainstream literature. It is in fantasy and science fiction that such an unfashionable attitude can find a home, since these genres offer a great deal of liberty to the writer. Certain conventions have to be observed, but within these conventions there is scope for the widest variety of outlook, approach, and style. Because of her love of

personal freedom, Ursula K. Le Guin has chosen the genre that affords the greatest freedom to her mind, for which we can well be grateful.

Barbara J. Bucknall. *Ursula K. Le Guin* (Ungar, 1981), pp. 153–54

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LEVERTOV, Denise (1923–1997)

Nothing could be harder, more irreducible, than these poems [*Here and Now*]. Like the eggs and birds of Brancusi, they are bezoars shaped and polished in the vitals of a powerful creative sensibility. No seminar will break their creative wholeness, their presentational immediacy. No snobbery will dissolve their intense personal integrity. However irrefrangible as objects of art, it is *that*, their personalism, that makes them such perfect poetic utterances. Denise may not ever have pushed a pram in a Cambridge, Mass. supermarket, but these are woman poems, wife poems, mother poems, differing only in quality of sensibility from thousands of other expressions of universal experience. Experience is not dodged, the sensibility is not defrauded, with any ambiguity, of seven types or seventy. One meets the other head on, without compromise. This, I was taught in school, many years ago, in a better day, is what makes great poetry great. And the rhythms. The *schwarmerei* and lassitude are gone. Their place has been taken by a kind of animal grace of the word, a pulse like the footfalls of a cat or the wingbeats of a gull. It is the intense aliveness of an alert domestic love—the wedding of form and content in poems which themselves celebrate a kind of perpetual wedding of two persons always realized as two responsible sensibilities. What more do you want of poetry? You can't ask much more. Certainly you seldom get a tenth as much.

Kenneth Rexroth. *Poetry*. Nov., 1957. pp. 122–3

Although some reviewers of her most recent book (*With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads* . . .) affected to discover in her American poems a mere imitation of Dr. Williams' manner, she has actually moved beyond her amazing apprenticeship in the use of American speech-rhythms into an area wholly her own: a world where the ordinary objects of everyday American life are rediscovered and recreated from the inside, according to the spontaneously developing laws of a thrilling poetic imagination. . . . The music of her verse has something in common with that of [Robert] Creeley: it is spare, direct, measured more according to a voice speaking than a voice singing. But such restraint allows her to speak to the reader with inflections unmistakably her own in a poetry whose recognizable charm is all the more appealing for its being based upon an imagination of tough creative force.

James Wright. *Minnesota Review*. Winter, 1961. p. 252

. . . in presenting us with particularities, Miss Levertov is constantly trying to break down categories and dismiss them from our minds: she implies that if we are to feel sympathy with the flux of life (such sympathy is the dominant emotion of the book) we must disregard the classifications into which we have come to divide the constituents of the world and regard each thing and process as special, unique. The purpose of her very metaphor is often to get rid of our preconceptions. . . . She has abandoned the slightly tenuous fancifulness around which some of the early poems are organized, for a solid acceptance of the solid. It is not a glib acceptance, either, merely borrowed from the nineteenth-century romantics, but one which surely reflects (as any good poetry must) a manner of living, a personal discipline, in this case the discipline of tolerance.

Thom Gunn. *The Yale Review*. Autumn, 1962. p. 130

In *O Taste and See*, Denise Levertov demonstrates herself the true and worthy heir of William Carlos Williams. It is not only that she employs a free verse which at its most successful is more like his than like anyone else's, nor is it that she too writes poems that

sound, as many of his did, like fragments of experience. More than these resemblances, her spirit is like his, the female to his male, both of them praising and full of the power to live. No one of her poems in this book is as full and as marvelously satisfying as some of his late poems were; she has not yet the amplitude for such singing; but she is getting there. And she has a spiritual quality that matters more than any technical consideration in a verse this loose: sureness.

George P. Elliott. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1964. p. 461

Usually attention has been called to her technical accomplishments, which are great. Anyone interested in the composition of poetry can learn much, certainly, from her use of the line, from the way she has discarded mannerisms as she progressed, from her molding of the whole poem to a swift, wide gesture of sensibility (like a dancer's), and also from her diction. . . . She is commonly called a lyricist, for example, because her verbal sense is undeniably musical; but for me her poems are far less lyrics than epics, using the term as Brecht used it in his ''epic theater.'' They are moments in which the unenterable, unleavable drama of totality turns back upon itself, like a seasonal revolution; moments, in other words, when we who are totally involved are nevertheless permitted to see what has happened. The reason for Miss Levertov's success is clear: she stuck with her obsessive idea until, in a gradual fusion which is evident in the books, her esthetic mode of being combined inextricably with all her being and then with being itself. This is her modernity, her futurity; a remarkable feat in the era of self-consciousness. In technical terms she has projected the existentialist sensibility beyond anguish, and beyond any extemporaneous leap from anguish, to a simple—but how thoughtful and varied!—celebration of what is, to a spiritual but actual cognizance of reality, reasonable and joyous, arising chiefly from considerations of the body. This is what we have in a dozen or more of the best poems in *O Taste and See*.

Hayden Carruth. *Poetry*. Jan., 1965. pp. 259–61

Her poetry is frequently a tour through the familiar and the mundane until their unfamiliarity and otherworldliness suddenly strike us. Her imaginative gaze feasts on the small objects we usually treat as insignificant appendages to our lives, or pauses with affectionate interest on the seemingly trivial activities in which we spend so much of those lives. Thus she engages very naturally in a persistent investigation of the events of her own life—inner and outer—in the language of her own time and place, and completes that investigation in the forms emerging from what she discovers as it is translated into words. Miss Levertov shares the spirit of Martin Buber, for she always says ''thou'' to the persons, occasions, and objects she encounters; that is her imagination's essential humanizing gesture toward every aspect of existence.

Ralph J. Mills. *Contemporary American Poetry* (Random). 1965. pp. 177–8

Denise Levertov and Robert Creeley usually provide the third and fourth names of a list that begins with Charles Olson and Robert Duncan. Surely it is time to break up the list, at least to the point of distinguishing Miss Levertov from the boys, specifically from Mr. Creeley. Her new collection [*The Sorrow Dance*] should leave no doubt that she *is* different. . . . her energies go into the making of poems, into the forming of intense yet modulated presentations of life. She spends no time whatsoever in flattering, cajoling, or winking at the reader; nor does she carry on a self-regarding dialogue with us the better to coax us into assent. Furthermore, and perhaps most riskily, she is not inclined toward jokes, ironies—harsh or suave—directed at the self. I don't think the absence of such wit makes for solemn poems, mainly because she gets so much on-going suppleness into the lines; in [William Carlos] Williams' terms, she has Invention, and the things of her poetry are well-spaced and well-timed. In most of these poems a voice is overheard, serious—often to the point of grimness—(the poems on Vietnam are the most obvious case in point) yet musical too, on the move in various and interesting ways. Miss Levertov is preoccupied with the job of rendering, of Poundian presentation through powerful directness—the poem as well-written as good prose. . . .

William H. Pritchard. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1967. p. 310

Her earlier work, before *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads* (1959), involved a slightly painful process of dissolving a tendency toward over-complexity by imitation of the colloquial simplicities and the rhythmic discoveries of Williams. Her more recent work, beginning with the volume just noted and including *The Jacob's Ladder* (1961) and *O Taste and See* (1964), reveal her as freed from that struggle. Her characteristic expression had been, earlier, the indirect formulation of an abstract thought, perhaps set off by a literary allusion, and then its resolution in some concrete piece of narration or image. The obtrusive tendency of the whole Black Mountain group to call attention in their poems to the fact that they are writing poems, or to offer some nugget of aesthetic wisdom as the cream of a poem on a quite different subject, is present in Miss Levertov's work as well. But in *With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads* she begins to give us some vivid, simple impressionist poems, such as ''The Five-Day Rain'' and ''February Evening in New York.'' These show her able to catch the essential details of sensuous experience and to relate them so as to organize a world of insight and of emotional response with great economy and objectivity. In the same book, the poems ''Terror'' and ''The Wife'' introduce a confessional frankness and psychological immediacy that, together with the refined impressionist technique, have marked most of her best work ever since.

M.L. Rosenthal. *The New Poets* (Oxford). 1967. pp. 185–6

In her newest book, *The Sorrow Dance*, Denise Levertov beautifully demonstrates the mastery over her medium—words and the silences between them—which she has been able to achieve. . . .

She has an instinctive feeling for shaping a poem, letting out the lines easily. Her poems seem to flow effortlessly, nothing jars, you cannot imagine them contrived or rounded any other way. She knows the rhythm of the language, and when to end a line, when to end a stanza. How does she know so well when to say and when to stop saying? It's a kind of tact unspoken in the placing of each word, each line and stanza.

Miss Levertov has learned a great deal from [William Carlos] Williams, and pays tribute in the poem ''For Floss.'' But she has

her own voice, and a European discipline underlying an American idiom and expansiveness.

Kathleen Spivack. *Poetry*. May, 1968. pp. 123–4

The Sorrow Dance, by Denise Levertov, is a striking collection, and one which is a welcome addition to her already significant body of work. Her rhythms here are unerring, her voice true and original. She forces her reader to read at her pace, to emphasize the words she wants emphasized, to participate in the poem. . . . Word by word there is transformation as her poems take shape. Her voice is delicate, feminine, but rugged, not the voice of the ladies Roethke saw as stamping a tiny foot against God.

In her best work she creates a concrete physical world. The structure of her precise imagery becomes the thematic center of her work, and she instinctively knows when it is necessary to stop talking. She does not burden us with comment, does not underestimate her audience's ability to taste and see, or to think.

William Heyen. *Southern Review*. Spring, 1970. pp. 547–8

The contrast between Denise Levertov and the women poets of the early part of the century is startling. In comparison with her poetry, theirs makes being a woman in itself at the best a form of neurasthenia. Denise Levertov writes at ease as a woman about love, marriage, motherhood, deaths in the family. The universal round of domestic life is transformed by the sensibility and moved into the transcendent setting of ''wholeness, harmony, and radiance,'' yet this is only a portion of her work, a group of subjects lying naturally to hand and left easily for other subjects as diverse as can be—poems of social protest, of nature, of meditation and contemplation, of vision. The last three categories are the experience of a visionary at home in the world, with a wider range of knowledge and more different kinds of experience than most poets, let alone most women poets in the past. It's almost invidious to so accentuate her sex, but it is very significant because her poetry, in a far different sense from that of the distraught contributors to *Pagan*, is a poetry of sexual liberation of a human person moving freely in the world.

Kenneth Rexroth. *American Poetry in the Twentieth Century* (Herder and Herder). 1971. p. 163

[*To Stay Alive*] resolves itself into a rehearsal of common twentieth-century experience, but is unaware of the fact. It is as if the poet's self intervenes in an ongoing horrible process, needs to bear witness, and needs self-immolated people as lights ''to show us the dark we are in.'' One point of view would say bluntly that this is the crux of ego-tripping liberal consciousness-raising. Who is this ''we'' that needs burning human bodies for enlightenment? How come nonrevolutionary liberals are awakening to the nature of totalitarianism as late as 1968?. . .

But, immediately, one feels reluctant to continue like this: the poet is in genuine anguish and that is to be respected, especially since suicidal impulse is always encroaching. Part IV of the first ''Entr'acte'' is an instance of her strength: the careful record of thinking and feeling processes, placed within careful intonational controls. But this is immediately followed by the kind of insistence on traditional universals which withdraws attention. . . .

A chronicle of political coming of age depends on accurate understanding of the global attack on totalitarianism—*To Stay Alive* is too parochial to convince through such detail and analysis.

Eric Mottram. *Parnassus*. Fall-Winter, 1972. pp. 158–9

Any new work by Denise Levertov should awaken the reader's anticipation. No poet of her generation, it seems, not even Robert Bly, has been more involved in political activism or the anti-war movement and they have naturally enough dominated her writing in the last few years. Yet this involvement, which she has defended in essays and prefaces with eloquence, has not fundamentally damaged her poetry—though some may think so—by engaging it with public themes. Miss Levertov is a poet of flexibility, depth and imaginative growth. She has become one of those figures around whom a large part of our sense of what has occurred in American poetry in the past fifteen or so years revolves.

Footprints is Miss Levertov's tenth book; it picks up threads of her work which had been partially set aside in favor of the urgency of political commitment prevailing in *Relearning the Alphabet* and *To Stay Alive*. It is, however, false and misleading to compartmentalize her poetry, with one place for a more rhetorical kind of writing, *engagé*, and another given to the sacred speech of the true imagination. The poet herself would deny any division of this sort, for in her opinion the artist's involvement with public affairs is part of a total involvement with the life he lives and the world in which he lives it.

Ralph J. Mills, Jr. *Parnassus*. Spring-Summer, 1973. p. 219

The Poet in the World is an interesting, uneven, occasionally exasperating and always sincere collage of essays, criticism, fiction, political statement, articles on teaching and on other poets.

Of its five sections—''Work and Inspiration,'' ''Life At War,'' ''The Untaught Teacher,'' ''Perhaps Fiction'' and ''Other Writers''—by far the most interesting is the first. Miss Levertov can, and does, write lucidly of the blunders, prizes and tenacities of the poet sweating out her poem; and her discussion of other writers (Creeley, Williams and Duncan are those she most admires), though highly subjective, is alive and uncompromising. She is at her most happily typical when she takes on the questions of the nature of poetry, and when she describes poetry in terms of a *translation*, a word defined in her 1865 Webster's as ''being conveyed from one place to another, remove to heaven without dying.''. . .

But that earlier word ''uncompromising'' shades uncomfortably, in other sections, into the sort of single-mindedness more admirable in a crusader than in a writer. However compassionate or enraged she may be, the difference with which a writer wears her rue must be the evidence of an openness to the unwelcome intrusion of the conditional, to that complexity which is always cutting down the self-indulgence of the simplistic. In Levertov's prose, this problem is mixed up with the absence of that sense of proportion which is humor. Irony, slapstick, self-mockery and wit are temperamentally uncongenial to her. Unwilling to distinguish between that healthy skepticism which ultimately is the protection against cynicism's dry rot, once she quits prosody, her conclusions are often accompanied by a disconcerting overkill.

Josephine Jacobsen. *New Republic*. Jan. 26, 1974. p. 30

Levertov's poetry derives most directly from the masculine tradition that dominates modern poetry, although both its recurrent ambivalence and frequent flashes of vibrant strength seem to me to arise out of an engagement with her feminine experience. . . .

Levertov . . . occupies a significant and transitional position in the history of poetry by women because her work contains elements of both the dominant masculine and the emerging feminine traditions. She seems to see herself as poet, not as woman poet. Over the twenty-five years of her poetic career, her work has grown in skill and refinement, but there has been little change in either her aesthetic theories or the forms in which they are rendered. Writing closely within a mainstream of modern poetry—''imagistic,'' ''organic''—she also brings to her work a spiritual, religious element and particular kind of personalism (that of her feminine experience). Sometimes these elements work together in harmony; at other times they struggle with one another, affecting the unity of a given poem. A need to abstract and to generalize upon the greater significance of an experience (a distancing movement found in both the poetic and the spiritual traditions in which she works) is sometimes at odds with an involvement and an immediacy that arise most strongly in poems that deal with intense personal experience (in particular, the feminine and the political). . . .

Levertov's poetry constantly explores the relation between the inner world of dream and the outer world of action precisely because this dynamic is the very source of poetry itself. . . .

Because she is a woman, the experience that her poems require for their existence is feminine experience. The dominant qualities of those experiences of nature, art, people, and politics that make up her poems are their personal and private nature and their circumscribed boundaries. Such qualities have come to be associated with women's experience, so on that level Levertov's poetry seems very feminine. Even when her poetry becomes more public in its involvement with political issues, such as the Vietnam war, it continues to explore these problems in relation to everyday and private life.

Suzanne Juhasz. *Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women—A New Tradition* (Octagon Books, 1976), pp. 58–61

[Levertov's] poems have been an important part of the contemporary literary scene for twenty years. When the formalist 1950s relaxed to accept Allen Ginsberg's ''Howl'' and Robert Creeley's short-lined love poems, Levertov's work offered a kind of middle ground: poems in which rich sound patterns balanced ''natural speech'' poems in which a humanistic credo—and the need to express it—overshadowed the mere presentation of an image. From the first, Levertov had insisted that a poet had to use all language resources available. She had also declared that every poet had firm social responsibilities. . . .

The tone of many of the poems in *The Freeing of the Dust* is quieter, more satisfied—not with the physical or social circumstances of life, but with a human being's ability to cope with those circumstances. There is much emphasis here on exploring the fullest ranges of consciousness and psyche, and I was reminded of her 1972 essay on Ezra Pound in which she praised his writing because ''He stirs me into a sharper realization of my own sensibility. I learn to desire not to know what he knows but to know what I know: to emulate, not to imitate.'' Poems here echo with this completion of earlier promise, with the sense of Levertov as person knowing herself, being, and becoming, through both life and poetry. *The Freeing of the Dust* is an amazingly rich book, giving us the image of Levertov as fully realized poet, humanist, seer and—not the least—as woman. In the process of complete engagement, a poet who is also a woman must, finally, speak with a woman's voice: any denial of that primary identity would play havoc with the self-determination of the poem. There are perhaps too many women who use the crutch of sexual identity to make bad poems effective, but when Levertov creates the feminine identity, as in the evocative ''Cancion,'' its use is powerful. . . .

In countless other ways, this 1975 collection re-states Levertov's strengths as poet. It impresses with its versatility: there are seven groups of poems, ranging from the political commentaries to poems about love and divorce; from masterful sequences to the single-image poems that reach further than any image poems have any right to. Not a collected or selected work, *The Freeing of the Dust* gives a reader the sense that the searching vicissitudes of American poetry during the past half century have brought us to an art capable of expressing (and first recognizing) both ''despair'' and ''wildest joy.''

Linda Wagner. *South Carolina Review*. Spring, 1979, pp. 18–21

Over the past three decades, no poet has urged her readers more consistently toward the elsewhere of their uttermost humanity than Denise Levertov. Like Akhmatova, she has invented a language in which desire is indivisible, in which the oppressive precedents of bad faith, bad custom, and bad government disintegrate under the pressure of a will to ecstasy so strong and sincere that it fuses liberty and humanity into one luminous object of desire. And again like Akhmatova. Levertov's ecstasies communalize rather than isolate the experience of human freedom, abandoning the habitual inattention that nurtures repression in favor of a synthetic restlessness in which to see is to move outward and to imagine is to join. In *A Door in the Hive*, the revisionism of desire moves deeply into political and intimate venues: into the mendacious terrors of El Salvador (''Land of Death Squads''), into hagiography (''St. Thomas Didymus''), into the most private mind imagining its own mortality (''A Sound''). In each venue, the metaphor of the collection's title works beautifully, commending the pluralism that results from the poems' attentions which are themselves means of escape *into* an ever more various material world. Every piece originates at a brink. . . .

A Door in the Hive offers us the alternatives of uncertain, prospective commitments. Even in those poems that most explicitly detail her Christianity, Levertov accentuates not the consolations of faith, but its speculative perils. The saint's vision is an ''unraveling.'' The Annunciation of the Virgin draws its meaning not from God's design for salvation, but from young Mary's ''consent,/ courage unparalleled'' which ''opened her utterly.'' Such openness best characterizes both the motives and the forms of Levertov's espousal of desire. Each moment and each utterance verges on an unknowing more beautiful than any closure. And we, as readers, are urged yet never directed into that unknowing. As ''The Book without Words'' concludes, ''You have come to the shore./There are no instructions.''

Donald Revell. ''The Memory and Future of Ourselves.'' *Ohio Review*. Spring, 1990, pp. 92–93, 96

Ultimately, perhaps, ''Pig Dreams,'' is a Christian story of immortality achieved through faith. It is, therefore, a strong indicator of the two volumes to follow *Candles in Babylon*. . . . I wish to suggest that the poems in *Oblique Prayers* (1984) and *Breathing the Water* (1987) pursue the same themes of awakening, seeing, and transforming a world of suffering. However, while Sylvia's salvation is in her ability to transcend human boundaries, with strength given to her by her goddess Isis, Levertov's more recent works suggest that we should look specifically to the Christian God for salvation. Therefore, ''Pig Dreams'' is one idea within a continuing chain of thought. As this continuum grows and develops, it initially shifts what already exists and invites the reader to see the whole anew again. If there is a consistency of development in a poet's career, which Levertov says there is, then ''Pig Dreams'' exists as part of her movement toward a new idea of pilgrimage.

Diane C. LeBlanc. *Essays in Literature*. Spring, 1991, p. 120

If the new book [*Evening Train*] answers repeatedly to earlier ones—sometimes overtly, more often by allusion—this is in part because our times answer to earlier times; our right hands have *not*, despite the poet's wish in *Freeing of the Dust*, lost their cunning: by the Gulf War, the ''smart bombs'' of Vietnam days have been refined into ''Immaterial weapons / no one could ever hold in their hands'' (*ET* 76). We live in the most numbing of times: our leaders are bought and shameless liars, our press their craven lackies. Levertov's poems, as usual, forget neither these conditions nor that we ourselves permit them. Perhaps we need to tear our children from their video games (it is Levertov's, and probably the Pentagon's, notion that they are learning ''new speeds of reflex (*ET* 77) necessary for modern automated warfare'') and introduce them to ''the unfamiliar while it is there—*sky*, *tree*, *bird*'' (*ET* 78).

Ronald R. Janssen. *Twentieth Century Literature*. Fall, 1992, pp. 263–79

The final poem in *A Door in the Hive*, ''Variations on a Theme by Rilke,'' is a subtle interweaving of the major threads in Levertov's poetry since the 1960s: the world on the brink of destruction coupled with society's often appalling indifference; the presence of a transcendent Power: omnipotent, omniscient; and finally the guarded hope that man will endure as a part of the grand design of the universe of which he once was a part. The key terms in this poem in which Levertov's themes coalesce into an invisible whole are construct, hope, seek, conceive, hungers, and imbedded. Juxtaposed in the opening lines are the destructive forces threatening the fragile life of man and earth and the need to define the indefinable. Like Job who cannot penetrate the all-powerful God to whom he pleads as advocate, the poet reveals man's insubstantiality and God's illimitable dominion. The end of the poem poignantly returns to a motif Levertov has touched upon before: man's hunger to return to the universal design. Closing, as it does, an artistic work that balances social awareness with the need to restore man's dignity in the ''vast mosaic,'' the poem is itself a design of eloquent power. . . .

The images in this final poem are often shattering in their power; the ironic contrasts numbing. The view of man, awesome in his ability to both invent and destroy, is balanced by the view of man against time and the cosmos: ''flies on a windowpane.'' *Yet*, in the end, the poet casts her lot with mankind ''to be ourselves, imbedded in its fabric, / as if, once, it was from that we were broken off.'' It is fitting that Rilke again haunts this poem, for the duality of his vision: what man is and what he is capable of being are at the core of Levertov's own perception. *A Door in the Hive* is additional proof that Denise Levertov's sensibility, her artistic gifts, and her warm affection for a wayward modern world continue to impel her to express her experiences in this ''Fragile Paradise.''

Audrey Rodgers. *Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Engagement* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Pr., 1993), pp. 210–11

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LEVIN, Meyer (1905–1981)

The Old Bunch . . . is one of the most ambitious novels yet attempted by any fiction writer of his generation, a work which demands a discipline and intelligence that are as yet unmatched by most novelists of his age. . . . Mr. Levin's treatment must be extensive rather than intensive. The novel is written in a series of brief episodes, the greater proportion of them from half a page to two pages. He switches from character to character, from tendency to tendency. . . . *The Old Bunch* impresses me as being one of the most ambitious novels yet produced by the current generation of American novelists.

James T. Farrell. *Saturday Review*. March 13, 1937. p. 5

The ''bunch'' were probably men and women with whom Mr. Levin grew up; he thinks of them tenderly, he pities the ones he saw fall, he has a neighborly admiration for those who succeeded. . . . There is a legend to the effect that all Jews are cousins; Mr. Levin

often writes as if he thought that happily true. The novel is friendly and gay. . . . Mr. Levin has not written the definitive novel of the contemporary generation of American Jews, he has not written a powerful novel. . . . But he has written a supple novel that furnishes swift and enjoyable reading.

Alfred Kazin. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. March 14, 1937. p. 5

The Old Bunch is a landmark in the development of the realistic novel. . . . Meyer Levin does for a group of Chicago Jews what James Farrell did for the Chicago Irish. But while Farrell got inside of the mind of Studs Lonigan and stayed there for three volumes, Meyer Levin looks at the world through the eyes of ''the bunch,'' eleven boys and eleven girls who went to school together and lived in the same neighborhood in Chicago. . . . It is a loose galaxy of experience, mirroring in its form the form of the bunch. . . . Although *The Old Bunch* must be called plotless, nevertheless, incident by incident it makes vivid and exciting reading.

Harold Strauss. *New York Times Book Section*. March 28, 1937. p. 6

Intrinsically this (*The Old Bunch*) is the classic American story of defeat and frustration so often presented in American literature by novelists like Dreiser, Farrell, and Dos Passos. Mr. Levin's particular distinction lies in having discerned and recreated this story within the Jewish American milieu, of which scarcely a detail of background or development escapes him. And, ironically enough, it is through showing the failure that they share with their American hosts that Mr. Levin naturalizes his Jews within their new homeland.

Philip Rahv. *The Nation*. April 3, 1937. p. 385

(*The Old Bunch*) is a collective novel with the group as hero . . . and it tells the whole story of the spiritual and financial plunder of Chicago. *The Old Bunch* is written in good, hard-driving colloquial prose, and is full of sharp characterizations, though the cinematic shuttling of the technique makes it hard to establish character in the round. The book suffers from defects most collective novels have suffered from, chiefly in its lack of psychological depth. . . . But on the whole it is a very fine novel, with the speed and lustiness and brawling of the world's fourth largest city.

Harry T. Moore. *New Republic*. April 7, 1937. p. 273

As a writer, as American, as Jew, he seeks his seminal culture and his place in a world that, he thinks, regards him suspiciously and without full understanding. . . . Among Americans writing of Jews he is pre-eminent. His novel, *The Old Bunch*, while not quite the literary landmark we may have thought it during the Thirties, remains a very significant benchmark to those surveying that decade's fiction. He has produced two remarkable motion pictures on Israel's magnetism and its fulfillments for European Jewry. He has tracked down the indescribably terrible saga of Europe's Jewish survivors.

Peter R. Levin. *Saturday Review*, July 8, 1950. p. 14

Levin has a swift, economical and unpretentious style, but he also has the inner eye which relates the outer event to the psychic demands of a devouring heart. . . . There is no question that Levin was ''oversensitive'' to his Jewishness, whether in flight or in militancy, but it's exactly this over-sensitivity that makes the material of literature.

Max Lerner. *New Republic*. July 24, 1950. p. 19

He was among the first of the young American-born intellectuals to go to Palestine. . . . And long before the rise of Israel made Zionism fashionable, he was personally involved in its struggles. It is therefore natural that he proved to be one of the most effective reporters of contemporary Jewish history from Dachau to Israel. . . . Despite an unpretentious, almost haphazard style, Levin succeeds in conveying the scope of the events that he describes. This unfailing sense of perspective constitutes the difference between journalism and history.

Marie Syrkin. *The Nation*. Aug. 12, 1950. p. 152

Compulsion can take its place with *Dreiser's American Tragedy*. To its telling Levin brings a compelling creative power rooted both in subjectivity and objectivity. As a campus contemporary of the two criminals . . . he writes with the immediacy and intimacy of first-hand knowledge of the principals in the case. To this he adds the maturity of a man and novelist who probes the influences, the motives and compulsion, the psychological forces, that led to the monstrous crime.

Rose Feld. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Oct. 28, 1956. p. 5

Levin retells the Leopold and Loeb story to recapture a sickness that is part of our times; retells this tale of murder and depravity to tell us about ourselves. . . . Levin has slapped together a strong indictment of our ignorance, our malice, our inhumanity; but he has done so in what is often painfully awkward stumbling prose. . . . (Yet) in his concern for his story, and in his understanding of the importance of the crime and the trial, Levin is writing his way to the truth. He has given us an important novel.

Charles Shapiro. *The Nation*. Dec. 1, 1956. pp. 483–4

Mr. Levin tells his story [*Eva*] in the first person, always a doubtful procedure when the sex of the narrator is not that of the author, and particularly so when the male writer presents himself as a woman—one remembers the hideous embarrassments of *Kitty Foyle*. But I think that Mr. Levin has been unusually successful with his device. Although his Eva is entirely female—an attractive girl, wanting to live as a woman—he is so deeply aware of the essential humanity in her situation that even when he is, as he sometimes must be, specific about feminine feelings and functions, the reader accepts *this* knowledge of her because all his other knowledge of Eva has proved acceptable.

Marghanita Laski. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 29, 1959. p. 13

Some years ago Mr. Levin was the plaintiff in a lawsuit concerning a dramatization that he had made of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. His novel [*The Fanatic*] deals with a young American rabbi-writer who brings a lawsuit about a dramatization he has made of a posthumous book by a (male) Jewish concentration-camp victim. There is the usual disclaimer of resemblances in a preface—no, it is unusual: it goes on longer than most, and with Levin's weight implores us to confine our thoughts to his characters.

Confine them, then, and you find yourself listening to the dead hero-author, narrating the story in the first person from beyond the grave, as he watches the dramatist (now married to his ex-sweetheart) deal and bicker with theatrical agents and producers and lawyers, testifying in court, all of which Levin believes would be of interest to the dead man. The ghost even keeps an eye on a radio program in a Broadway restaurant. *Hic etubique?* Then we'll shift our ground—to spare ourselves criticism of this clumsily earnest but eventually spurious novel. For Levin is the kind of author whose sententiousness and poor writing derogate his doubtless sincere work to the level of the big books on ''important'' subjects cynically contrived by fiction-mongers.

Stanley Kauffmann. *New York Review of Books*. Feb. 20, 1964. pp. 5–6

The Fanatic is about as thorough an exploration of a single situation as one could desire. The story of the novel is comparatively slight. After preliminary accounts of a rescue from a Nazi death camp, a marriage, and the introduction of a German Jewish girl to a new life in America, the narrative deals with a single point: the efforts of a harassed, persecuted playwright to get his work produced. Meyer Levin spends much time and thousands of words on the thoughts of his characters and their reactions to the central situation. The result is a thoughtful, searching work. Not subtle in itself, it is so fully detailed that it exposes even the most subtle operations of the minds of its characters. . . .

Mr. Levin has a thesis in his book, but it does not become overbearing. His center of interest is a man's frustration in his struggle for literary and personal integrity, and he exhibits a certain rage against the power of the clever and unscrupulous few. Because the story is too full and not sufficiently disciplined, Mr. Levin may have given the very people his work exposes a means for quietly discrediting it.

William B. Hill. *America*. April 25, 1964. p. 576

Levin is a facile and popular writer, but this book [*The Stronghold*] seems to lack power, from the divisiveness of his viewpoint—the first half of the book is seemingly a novel of ideas, the last a drama of action—and from the rather obvious and superficial opinions he expresses. The characters for the most part are mouth-pieces for points of view, with little individualization.

Riva T. Bresler. *Library Journal*. Oct. 15, 1965. p. 4362

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LEVINE, Philip (1928–)

Who does not know the poems of Philip Levine? Can there be any point to reviewing his two new collections, *Ashes* and *7 Years From Somewhere*, if there is no radical, visible change? Maybe one simply likes what one likes, for my opinion is that I would as soon stop reading as give up Mr. Levine's poems. Still, what accounts for such delight? Especially when I have not altogether dismissed objections. Some have said he has written the same poem for years, that he lacks variety and vision. True, many of his poems possess one doleful cadence. True, his vision is such a relentless denunciation of injustice that he has occasionally engaged in reductive oversimplifications. For example, the political underbelly of *The Names of the Lost* comes uncomfortably close to cadres of the good, the bad, and the ugly. His prose piece, ''To My Brother on the Death of A Young Poet,'' . . . seems irresponsibly blindered thinking and is, I think, reprehensible. Mr. Levine has a polemic streak which makes some of his work strident, manipulative, and at least ungenerous. And, some note, there is a level of violence in his poems few poets equal, whether it be objectionable or reflective. In spite of these objections and others, I cannot help believing his poetry is nearly a national treasure and many of the new poems are as good if not better than anything he has written.

Ashes contains 13 poems from the long out of print *Red Dust* . . . and 19 new poems. The former have been characterized as surreal by way of the Spanish, an influence Mr. Levine admits. The analysis is based on images and phrasings, rather than entire poems, which are more dream-like and associative than rational and linear. For example, ''Blood runs to the heart and finds it locked;'' or ''rifles are brooding/in the closet;'' or ''the grave blooms upward/in sunlight and walks the roads.'' I suspect there is less surrealism here than a vitally alive and active landscape whose every particle possesses the ability and need to express itself and a nearly symbiotic integrity. Another way of saying this is that Mr. Levine seems to have an extraordinary capacity to sense and give witness to a man's relationship with all that exists. He is no painter of mindscapes nor a primitivist nor a canting ecologist, though dream life, fundamental states of being, and an impure world matter greatly to him. He is distinctly American, a consumer and a mensch. When he writes, ''The clouds go on eating oil,'' he indicts industrial greed as well as projects an emotional abuse beyond individual proportions. But it is the activity of his metaphor, its visual accumulation and poisoned ingestion, which causes a visceral rather than a mental response. He does not, even in *Red Dust*, rely very much on flashed and extra-worldly conjunctions but on the charged interaction of all things which he so acutely feels.

Importantly, Mr. Levine's poems always begin and remain grounded in a single, highly receptive consciousness which is a man's alone. The language, the figures of speech, the narrative progressions of this consciousness are never so private, so obscure, so truncated as to forbid less sophisticated readers. Though he takes on the largest subjects of death, love, courage, manhood, loyalty, etc., he brings the mysteries of existence down into the ordinarily inarticulate events and objects of daily life. His speaker and subject is the abused and disabused spirit of the common yet singular self. He risks the maudlin, the sentimental, the banal, and worse because he cannot live in the world fully enough; because the world is so much with us all we must sing or die of its inexpressible presence.

For me, Mr. Levine has been writing this way throughout his nine books, granted the shift from regular verse after *Not This Pig* and some slight re-orientation after *Red Dust*. With *They Feed They Lion, 1933, The Names of the Lost* and now *Ashes* and *7 Years From Somewhere*, he has shown increased technical control, a growing mastery of image and phrase, a deepened power to dramatize the suffering and potential of each moment. But there is no radical change in ''A man alone, ignorant/ strong, holding the buring moments/for all they're worth.'' The style of a man's poem need not change in pace with Detroit's assembly lines. It might be said that Mr. Levine has a formula and I would answer that we should all be so fortunate, for what he has is a style patiently developed to fit his need to speak the hurt and the joy that in all of us remains unshaped and embryonic.

Dave Smith. *American Poetry Review*. November-December, 1979, pp. 36–7.

By now the virtues of Philip Levine's poetry are well known: his poems are deeply humane; they are eloquently persuasive in their convictions, both personal and political; and they are fiercely concerned with their accessibility to unacademic readers. Although Levine, in his early work, exercised a variety of voices in his poems in his attempt to give voice to a whole realm of everyday working experience for which there was no voice, it has been his most recent books, *The Names of the Lost*, *Ashes*, and *7 Years From Somewhere*, that have fixed him in the minds of most readers. For that reason, when most readers think of one of Levine's poems, they think of a very personal first-person poem, generally serious and impassioned, sometimes gently lyrical, sometimes politically charged and rhetorically urgent.

In Philip Levine's most recent book, *One For The Rose* . . . , those recognizably Levine poems are present. Yet, for me, some of the most exciting poems of the book belong to those that issue out of an exuberant sideshow of voices; they are full of such sassiness and wit, such buoyancy and good humor. . . . These are wonderful, rich, and funny poems. In fact, *One For The Rose* is filled with Levine's marvelous humor, at times burlesquing his subjects or speakers and at times creating a remarkable poignancy.

Yet I don't mean to slight the work in a vein more expected of Levine. Two of the poems in *One For The Rose*, ''Having Been Asked 'What Is A Man' I Answer,'' and ''To Cipriano, In The Wind,'' stand among the best poems—the most beautiful and powerful poems—Levine has ever written. And there is of course no need to feel one must choose between the poems of the personas here and the poems of the more recognizable serious-minded poet. All of these voices speak for the same man, just as he is speaking in them all. I've come to feel that *One For The Rose* is one of Philip Levine's finest, richest books.

David St. John. *Antioch Review*. Spring, 1982, pp. 225–34.

[Philip Levine has] been publishing poetry of high quality for more than two decades and . . . has not yet become a household word—not that many poets have. The Pulitzer Prize, for example, has eluded him, the American Academy of Arts and Letters has not elected him, and his work is not widely anthologized. He has, however, been twice honored by the National Book Critics Circle, and he won the American Book Award in 1980. He is, if not a major figure (*are* there any major living poets?), clearly an artist worth attending to.

Selected Poems contains representative work from 10 collections, beginning with *On the Edge* in 1963 and ending with *One for the Rose* in 1981. Reading through the book consecutively is like stumbling through a forbidding woods finally to emerge in a sun-dappled field. Levine seems to have gone through the reverse of a mid-life crisis; I would describe it as a renaissance except I'm not sure about the ''re.'' Call it a mid-life emergence.

His early books are grim, documenting a sensibility accustomed to failure, loss, bigotry, and violence.

In suggesting that the work of Levine's middle age (he is now 56) presents a more hopeful view of things, I do not want to imply that he suddenly turned into Pollyanna. Far from it. The imagery is still dark, the world still full of pitfalls. He does, though, seem to have laid to rest some of the events that haunted him for years, including his father's death when he was five. . . .

Joel Conarroe. *Book World—The Washington Post*. August 5, 1984, pp. 3, 11.

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LEWIS, Sinclair (1885–1951)

The texture of the prose written by Mr. Lewis gives one but faint joy and one cannot escape the conviction that for some reason Lewis has himself found but little joy, either in life among us or in his own effort to channel his reactions to our life into prose. There can be no doubt that this man, with his sharp journalistic nose for news of the outer surface of our lives, has found out a lot of things about us and the way we live in our towns and cities, but I am very

sure that in the life of every man, woman, and child in the country there are forces at work that seem to have escaped the notice of Mr. Lewis.

Sherwood Anderson. *New Republic*. Oct. 11, 1922. p. 172

Sinclair Lewis does love the essential humanness of people. He can be savagely against the ideas they may hold; just as he can scourge and has scourged America, for many things. But when he said, as he did recently, that he loved this country, he said the truth. He is fundamentally an American. No other soil could have grown him. And he is a better thing than a humanist, he is a human-beingist.

William Rose Benét. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 30, 1934. p. 422

A tolerable and beautiful life for everyone was the old American dream. . . . Beginning with *Main Street*, Sinclair Lewis' most important novels were to expose with savage humor those facets of American society which contradicted this ideal. But his moral scorn often obscured for readers the fact that their pitiless indictment of failure was dictated by passionate faith. He believed in the genuine possibility of a personal kinghood, an education in brotherhood and responsible nobility. He became, as it were, a nostalgic gadfly tormenting the nation—himself tormented by its repudiation of his exalted youthful ideals.

Lloyd Morris. *Postscript to Yesterday* (Random). 1947. p. 137

Where Sinclair Lewis will eventually stand in the hierarchy of American letters is not for this generation to decide, but there is no doubt that *Main Street, Babbitt*, and, I think, *Arrowsmith* will survive, if only as *genre* pictures. It is my own belief that future generations will find in them a good deal more, but that may be a prejudiced view because I believe that the American philosophy of life is going to have a long run. We are not ready for quietism. We still believe that when something is wrong, something can be done about it; and a raucous voice bawling out the wrong is not yet for us mere sound and fury, but a trumpet blast summoning the mighty men of valor to stand to their arms.

Gerald W. Johnson. *New Republic*. Jan. 29, 1951. p. 15

Though Lewis had to a remarkable degree mastered his method, that method is a good deal like the one so successfully employed in the writing of many present-day best-sellers—the method, I mean, which produces books that are not so much naturalistic novels as ''documentaries,'' pseudofiction in which everything is recognizable as true but with the fidelity of a waxwork and no suggestion of any sort of autonomous life. . . . The literary gift that he developed to an extraordinary degree was, of course, the gift for mimicry which is as definitely something more than mere naturalistic reproduction as it is definitely something less than imaginative recreation. . . . The typical fact or the typical gesture is one step above the merely authentic. But it is also one step below the symbolic.

Joseph Wood Krutch. *The Nation*. Feb. 24, 1951. p. 180

Lewis was a born story-teller. When he had no memorable story to tell, he told one that wasn't memorable. The urge to tell some kind of story was so strong that it kept him always at work. In this he differed sharply from American writers of his day who were far more self-consciously artists and had far more to say, as the expression is. Lewis, with his unappeasable itch to tell stories and his conviction that the most important characteristic of a writer was the ability to apply the seat of the pants to the seat of a chair, went right along pouring out stories when a writer of a different cast of mind would have brooded and hesitated and struggled with thought and form.

C. Hartley Grattan. *New Republic*. Apr. 2, 1951. p. 19

What Lewis loved so passionately about America was its potentiality for and constant expression of a wide, casually human freedom, the individual life lived in honest and perhaps eccentric effort (all the better), the social life lived in a spirit that first of all tolerates variety. And what he hated about America, what made him scold it, sometimes so shrilly, was everything that militated against such a free life: social timidity, economic system, intellectual rigidity, theological dogma, legal repression, class convention. These two, the individual impulse to freedom and the social impulse to restrict it, provide the bases of his plots.

Mark Schorer. *New Republic*. Apr. 6, 1953. p. 19

It is interesting that the cultural lag in Lewis's work should be so marked. Just as the real social forces of his time are placed for the most part quite outside of his literary scene, so the real social changes of his time are reflected cursorily and later. The ordinary mark of a first-rank author is that his writing is generally in some degree ahead of its time. The typical characteristic of Lewis's writing is that it is generally, to a marked degree, behind its time. Very likely this is the final key to Lewis's achievement—the key which opens the secret chamber in this otherwise absolutely uninspiring middle-class mansion.

For it would appear that Lewis's whole literary world . . . *is* in the end haunted by the sense of its own unreality.

Maxwell Geismar. *American Moderns* (Hill and Wang). 1958. pp. 113–4

Has America outgrown Lewis? The banker, I said, goes to Yale and the storekeeper to the State University. A thousand increments of commercially or altruistically motivated lessons in culture, in learning, in sophistication, have transformed the social scene in America; yet hypocrisy, provincialism, prejudice, all forms of materialism, have only changed their clothes to mingle, as they have always done, with the crowd. New writers—Mary McCarthy, for example—are better equipped to describe these clothes. But the face—is it not the same face that Lewis saw? Perhaps also we ought to remember, when we use Lewis's novels in order to point sarcastically at America, that the attitudes of mind in *Main Street, Babbitt, Arrowsmith*, and *Elmer Gantry* are not peculiar to America. To point at America is also to point at ourselves.

Geoffrey Moore in *The Young Rebel in American Literature*, ed. Carl Bode (Heinemann). 1959. p. 76

Dickens's dramatic instincts, basic to his fiction, expressed themselves in his early attempts at acting before they were absorbed by his writing. Lewis, too, felt a great pull toward the theater; in fact, he worked in it for a number of years as playwright, actor, and director. More important, Lewis's habit of acting out his character creations, absorbing his own personality in them, closely resembles Dickens's imaginative mode. Lewis's characters are also typed and flat, yet ''Babbitt'' and ''Gantry'' have passed into the common speech. There is not much stronger evidence of the vividness and truth of a writer's conceptions.

Certainly both writers were convinced that the story should be lively and amusing. Both writers also ran to bulk in their work, a bulk deriving from largeness and looseness of creation rather than overwriting, although both were frequently guilty of that. Both operated by a method of accretion, making their points primarily through reiteration. Neither was distinguished by subtlety. Their tools, heavy and blunt, were swung with gusto.

Sheldon Norman Grebstein. *Sinclair Lewis* (Twayne). 1962. p. 34

The four or five major novels retain, even today, a gaily gruesome attraction, and while *Elmer Gantry* is by no means Lewis' best work, there are many better American novels one would more willingly relinquish. In odd and oblique ways, American art would be much poorer without these artless books. . . . Part of Lewis' appeal arises from the fact that he seems to write from a much earlier American world than that of his contemporaries, and his satiric bitterness is qualified by a nostalgic glow.

Marius Bewley. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1962. p. 143

''Play'' and ''work'' form a simple dichotomy, yet they summarize much about Lewis' emotions and ideas, his evolution and regression, his rise and fall. In the context of the 450 pages which portray the frustrations society can set against Dr. Arrowsmith's pure pursuit of science, ''play'' and ''work'' seem to oppose degeneracy with vitality. But the opposition was not always so clear. At the opening of his career Lewis was youthfully sympathetic with the yearnings of young ladies who wanted to play. Midway, however, he discovered and then revealed in fiction that beneath a lovely exterior his idealized girls could be annoyingly self-centered. Meanwhile, his young workers, whom he had portrayed as eager, hopeful, but necessarily naive and even dull, became redefined to disclose important strengths and hidden sensitivities. One way of looking at Lewis' novels—individually or as part of his development—is to recognize that in large part they get their structure as well as their tension from the juxtaposition of playmate, proper helpmate, and doer.

Martin Light. *University Review*. Dec., 1963. p. 151

Though he understood that real individuality would have to shake loose from mass produced conformity, he himself could not give up the monuments of modernity—or even its gadgets. They constituted his style, and he had no real desire to do away with them, or at least no power to do away with them. He knows, as he says in *Main Street*, that the days of pioneering are deader than Camelot in the Midwest of the Twenties, and he bases his satire on that knowledge; but he writes only of the indubitable, bland facts of the present. *Dodsworth* seems, when the novels are read in sequence, a crucial attempt to inform modern America of its old values. But its vague ending prefigures a group of lumbering and flatly drawn heroes in the later novels. *Ann Vickers*, the novel which follows *Dodsworth*, returns for the most part to journalistic issues, presented in great surface detail, but without quite the satiric bite of *Elmer Gantry* or *Arrowsmith*, as though Lewis knew that he had pushed his talent to its furthest reaches and that the rest would be mere work.

Maurice Kramer in *The Twenties*, ed. Richard E. Langford and William E. Taylor (Everett Edwards). 1966. p. 68

The continuing debate over Lewis' ambivalence—his savage ridicule as against his ''happy endings,'' his deadly effects as against his protestations of sympathy—is perhaps due to the fact that Lewis was a humorist first and a satirist only secondarily. Furthermore, he was attempting to transform the brief hit-and-run method of newspaper humor into the sustained form of the novel—a feat at which no one but Mark Twain had really succeeded before him. . . .

It is not necessary to exclude other views in order to view Sinclair Lewis as a humorist. But it helps to clarify our conception of his total achievement to see him as a novelist working with the journalistic and folk materials of native American humor to arrive at a culminating expression of that humor as it had developed in the upper West. Like much of the humor of that region, Lewis' humor reflects the contradictory pulls of regional loyalty and realistic clear-sightedness, of pride and complaint, of a dream and a disillusionment with that dream.

James C. Austin in *American Dreams, American Nightmares*, ed. David Madden (Southern Illinois). 1970. pp. 104–5

It has often been observed that one of the great contributions of [*Babbitt*] was that it succeeded in naming an American phenomenon, and the act of naming, of course, has always been one of the primary functions of the poet or artist conceived in the widest sense. By this I do not mean that all Lewis did was to catch the essence of the smug, complacent booster or joiner, the self-satisfied and unimaginative small-town businessman. This he did, of course, but if that were the limit of his achievement, *Babbitt* would be to us today a faded novel, its chief character a mere curiosity of second-rate American literature. The truth is that Lewis had hit upon, and long struggled to understand, a deeply rooted disease of the American spirit. . . .

It has often been remarked that he could never work up a fair and complete portrait of his fellow Americans because he despised them so heartily that he had no detached perspective on them. But he was no Jonathan Swift. Indeed, he was an imperfect satirist precisely because he could never really hate the Babbitts and Elmer Gantrys he went after, but was always searching for something good to come from them, a search which, nevertheless, continually proved futile.

George H. Douglas. *The Nation*. May 22, 1972. p. 661

There is a level of accomplishment in Lewis's five major novels that cannot be explained in terms of the way he used the tools of his trade as a popular novelist (although it must be remembered that he, more than any other twentieth-century novelist, is responsible for developing those tools). He conceived heroes who became essential reference points for students of American culture. He wrote at least four novels (*Main Street, Babbitt, Arrowsmith*, and *Elmer Gantry*) that are *tours de force* and that have not been outclassed by any subsequent novels on the same topics. He successfully responded to and caught the mood of his times, a point that is underscored by the first Mrs. Lewis who asks and answers: ''Were the 1920's really the Jazz Age except for a few? Most Americans at that time lived more like Sinclair Lewis characters; there was more substance to life than Fitzgerald's glossy version.'' Our idea of the 1920s as an era is likely to be influenced by Lewis's depiction of it for a long time to come. And the range of his interest, the primal quality of his imagination, and the sense of plight that is pervasive in his writing, all in combination with a style that however erratic nonetheless fits the clattering internal-combustion society he describes, add up to an achievement that demands, yet defies, appreciation.

Perhaps the best way of all to deal with Sinclair Lewis is to think of him as a one-man *Sturm und Drang* movement; such a conception would at least allow for a justification, in terms of art, of the strong nationalistic and folk element, the adolescent fervor, the restlessness, the agony of repressed passion and the spiritual struggles in his writing. It would also enable one to accept a critical fact about Lewis that might otherwise be difficult to swallow; that he is a law unto himself.

James Lundquist. *Sinclair Lewis* (Ungar). 1973. pp. 85–6

[Lewis], unlike any other major writer of his time, presents initial obstacles for the reader which are so spiky that one wonders how one is to surmount them to approach an evaluation of the enduring qualities of his work. There are, first, the books established on the mushy ground of such trivial notions as ''play.'' There are the badly conceived books even after his apprentice days had ended—books like *Mantrap*, *Work of Art*, *Bethel Merriday*, *The God-Seeker*, *World So Wide*. In his best books there are many pages of poor prose and absurd notions. But I have tried to suggest that Lewis, born in a transitional age in American literary history and being a brash youth with few of the ''standards'' which in the Nobel speech he lamented were needed in American literature, had to fight his way through the appeal and the repulsion of cults and fads before he could establish a position from which, first, to direct his satire, and, second, to sustain his documentation of reality. If, now, . . . we have gained some understanding of the evolution of Lewis's imagination and have examined his skill in reporting some of the argument of American society and some of the concerns of American individuals, then we can ask, hasn't Lewis left us one additional gift? For it his idol, Dickens, served him well. The search for the value of American life continues—in society and within ourselves. In fact, it has intensified. His representation of it can move us by its terrible sense of pain and urgency. Furthermore, though the atmosphere of language in which his seekers wandered was noxious, by pushing his fantastic power of mimicry to the limit, he prophesied the crazier oratory of our day. The editorialist; the racist preacher; the retired militarist; the professional hireling; the rationalist for defoliation; the ad-writer for half-empty boxes; the ''poemulator'' who sells millions of books and phonograph records; the leering sexologist; the inciter of violence; the astrology cultist; the talkers, talkers, talkers—they all pollute the air. But whether they know it or not, they squawk through loudspeakers and gesticulate before distortion mirrors that Sinclair Lewis set up a generation ago.

Martin Light. *The Quixotic Vision of Sinclair Lewis* (Purdue Univ. Pr., 1975), pp. 143–44

If it is true, as E. M. Forster noted, that Sinclair Lewis managed to ''lodge a piece of a continent in our imagination,'' it would be no less true to observe that in a sense this achievement required constant appeals to his image of another continent. That continent, of course, was ''Yurrup,'' or, more conventionally, Europe. Though ranged against the entire *oeuvre* few of the novels address the European question directly, all reflect the influence of what Lewis believed Europe to be and to mean. Certainly it is not without significance that the bulk of events in both his very first book, *Our Mr. Wrenn*. (1914), and his very last book, *World So Wide* (1951), should occur in a European setting, a setting not sketched in as accidental background but treated in such a way as to constitute an important strain in the novels' thematic structure. Moreover, that he should have turned at the end of his glorious decade, presumably secure in the feeling that he was at the height of his powers—having with *Main Street* (1920), *Babbitt* (1922), *Arrowsmith* (1925), and *Elmer Gantry* (1927) persuaded his critics that his apprenticeship had made way for a certain mastery and not yet suspecting that this mastery would soon disintegrate—to a direct confrontation with Europe in *Dodsworth* (1929) testifies to a compelling interest in the subject. . . .

His Europe, never to enter his thinking totally divested of a romantic halo, was from the beginning rarely a reality objectively considered but an object of vague desires and dreams which neither the observed actuality could completely contradict nor his own maturity entirely dismiss. It is why he so often appeals to the European past, a medieval and chivalric Europe, or a Europe as incarnated in a woman, the Dodsworthian ''Not Impossible She.'' But with the Europe, say, which, by the time he was writing *Our Mr. Wrenn*, was soon to be the muddy and bloody terrain of the First World War, or with the Europe which, by the time he was writing *World So Wide*, had recently suffered the ravages of the Second World War, he preferred not to deal. And since the needs of his inner life were answered only by an imaginary Europe, contrasting the actual Europe with his native land (a task attempted with *Dodsworth*) could scarcely result in a rationally reached conclusion in favor of one or the other. Neither as proud patriot nor as determined expatriate was Lewis to resolve that history of discontent which was his life. If a choice was made, and in a real sense it was, we must look for the grounds of that decision (and the possibilities for justifying it) in the recesses of his inner life, the psychic depths where his dreams took shape. . . .

Finally, then, Lewis's romantic dreams, indisputably adolescent, inevitably frustrated, did issue in—and are somehow validated by—a vision of America which, however dimly glimpsed and weakly articulated, was at bottom maturely conceived, a vision no longer the result of fanciful dreams but the result of a struggle to define an ideal, a vision which, proceeding from our actual past could point to an actual future, a vision of a potential America whose realization might be unlikely but whose inspiration would immeasurably improve the quality of American life. If in his

imagination, if not in his person, Lewis *did* ultimately affirm America, he did so on the basis of that ideal vision of its possibilities. Though no ''promised land,'' America remained for Lewis the land of promise.

Meanwhile, Europe, no longer significant for him as a place either where one's dreams of a romantic life might be enacted or where a genuine alternative culture had its life, became for him a sort of asylum, a retreat where weary Americans like Sam Dodsworth (and himself) could drift toward death with a minimal amount of external disturbance.

Dick Wagenaar. *American Literature*. May, 1978, pp. 230, 235, 249

In an editor's Introduction to *Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1962). Mark Schorer wondered why Lewis had not been able to attract first-rate criticism, remarking that Lewis hadn't captured the attention of Eliot, Levin, Brooks, Warren, Trilling, Rahv, and others. Schorer quickly acknowledged, however, that the essays he had collected in his anthology did include criticism by Mencken, Rebecca West, Forster, Blackmur, Geismar, Kazin, Cowley, and Edmund Wilson—not an insignificant group of commentators. Affirming that the duty of a critic is to run the risks of evaluation, and surveying Lewis's career from its successes to its failures, Schorer went on to affirm that Lewis ''unquestionably helped us into the imagination of ourselves as did no other writer of the 1920's.''. . .

Schorer may have meant that Lewis served an essential function in the twenties, examining the manners and eccentricities of America and sending out reports on the condition of the nation's health. But when readers—shocked, amused, angered, or uninterested—had grown used to his images and saw repetition take hold of his later work, they decided he had little else of significance to say. To a considerable extent the critical problem of the past fifteen years has been to search out the ways we might validly expand this constricted view of Lewis's accomplishments. . . .

He scolded Americans harshly for their hypocrisies, their pretenses, and their outright deceptions, whether committed in villages or in cities, whether in novels or in ads, whether in sermons or in their belief that a great accumulation of possessions would bring them happiness. He transcribed for us what we sound like in expressing our false promises, our trivial remarks, our contradictory political ideas, and our despair. He did it loudly, flamboyantly, and lengthily. But how else could he make enough of us listen? He showed us our empty intimacies and our dispirited sex, hinting at what he dared not portray, and revealing that all was devoid of friendship and love. He did so forthrightly. In spite of our impatience when some of his books seemed overly long, his abuse was sharp, uncompromising, and relentless. There was little time for relaxation in his world, no place for lyricism in his style. These may be the reasons for Schorer's suggestion that it was for the shock of what Lewis forced people to see and for the direct way he put it before them rather than for niceties of phrasing or subtlety of characterization that he had been read in his day and can be read in ours. He made Americans look especially hard at themselves in the twenties, when his technique best served his themes in the compelling mirror of his novels.

Martin Light. ''Introduction to Sinclair Lewis.'' *Modern Fiction Studies*. Autumn, 1985, pp. 480–82

Sinclair Lewis seems to have dropped out of what remains of world literature. The books are little read today, and he's seldom discussed in his native land outside his home town, Sauk Centre, Minnesota. Although Sauk Centre holds an annual Sinclair Lewis Day, the guide to his home recently admitted, ''I've never read *Main Street*. . . . I've been reading the biographies.'' Elsewhere, the Associated Press (July 18) tells us, ''About forty copies of Lewis's books are on the shelves of the town library. For the most part, that's where they stay.''

''I expect to be the most talked-of writer,'' Lewis boasted before he was. But the great ironist in the sky had other plans for him. In the end, Lewis was not to be talked of at all, but his characters—as types—would soldier on: in fact, more of his inventions have gone into the language than those of any other writer since Dickens. . . .

Lewis . . . produced a great amount of work. He turned to the theater; even acted on stage. He married the splendid journalist Dorothy Thompson, who never stopped talking either. They opposed America's entry into World War II, a war in which his son Wells was killed. It is painful to read of Lewis's last days as recorded by [Mark] Schorer. Drink had estranged him from most people; and so he was obliged to hire young secretaries to play chess with him and keep him company; among those paid companions were the writers-to-be Barnaby Conrad and John Hersey, who has prepared the exemplary Library of America *Sinclair Lewis*. . . .

Whatever Lewis's faults as a writer he never knowingly wrote a bad book or, indeed, one on any subject that he could not at least identify with an imagination.

Gore Vidal. ''The Romance of Sinclair Lewis.'' *New York Review of Books*. October 8, 1992, pp. 14, 20

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LEWISOHN, Ludwig (1882–1956)

To us newer Americans, *Up Stream* is not merely a book. It is vision, revelation. It is our struggles, our hopes, our aspirations and our failures made articulate. It is the cry of young America to old America not to confine literature, education and thought to the formula of a small group. *Up Stream* is a dynamic protest against the sanctification of a priest craft in education, a revolt against the

existence of an Anglo-Saxon intellectual aristocracy in a country that is the gathering together of a people from every corner of the earth.

Anzia Yezierska. *New York Times Book Section*. April 23, 1922. p. 22

The author is a thoroughgoing individualist. He urges, as the true end and aim of life, the happiness of an unfettered emotional and aesthetic self-expression in the here and now. . . . He would have us seek what he calls Life, the life of the finer senses, the more delicate emotions, the life of this present world at its best and richest, and seek it through an unashamed self-expression; through art and poetry and passion and feeling and beauty; yes, through a behaviorism in which yellow beer, free love, and birth-control play a not inconspicuous part.

Charles E. Park. *Atlantic Monthly*. June, 1922. p. 12 (sup.)

Nature is abominably undemocratic, and has made him an intellectual aristocrat. He is endowed with the power of competently appreciating the masterpieces created by the spirit of man in literature, music, and the plastic arts. The price invariably exacted for this is precisely that excessive sensitiveness to commonplaceness and ugliness which America has so often tortured in him. In no land and at no time could he have escaped the exasperating sense of the gulf between himself and the large majority, which denied by nature his power of appreciation, his subtle and versatile intellect, can never understand or adapt themselves to the feelings of those who possess them.

Horace James Bridges. *The God of Fundamentalism* (Covici). 1925. p. 282

There is probably no distinguished writer in our time for whom the life of the mind is so much an affair of the passions, for whom the intellectual life is a love affair, which the reader is made to share. There is also no writer who is so frankly, sometimes so embarrassingly, and on occasion so annoyingly intimate in his self-revelation. . . . Mr. Lewisohn is a romantic German as well as a passionate Jew.

Irwin Edman. *The Nation*. June 5, 1929. p. 674

It is a mistake to describe Lewisohn as either a propagandist or a special pleader. He is rather a prophet for his people who makes use of parable, in Biblical fashion, for the emphasizing of his message. He has become somewhat too much the prophet to be a true novelist.

F. L. Robbins. *Outlook*. Jan. 14, 1931. p. 67

He knows literature because he has loved it, and he is fascinated by the great figures because of his concern with what they have to say. Hence he treats the best of them as though they were his contemporaries, and he is really concerned only with that part of them which is still living in the sense that it still raises living issues. . . . Mr. Lewisohn's mind happens to be. . . . a mind both born and trained to respond to the appeal of literature. The language of literature is his language in a sense by no means always true of those who are concerned primarily with its substance, and because of that fact he escapes the usual limitations of the doctrinaire as well as the usual limitations of the academician.

Joseph Wood Krutch. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. March 13, 1932. p. 1

There lurks behind the caustic discernment of Mr. Lewisohn's critical and prophetic genius a sort of compassion for the author of anything, be it what it may. Loving literature as he does, he can never be entirely harsh with its sources; loving humanity as he must, he can never be entirely heartless toward his fellow-man who is his brother-in-literature, after all.

Minnie Hite Moody. *Sewanee Review*. Oct., 1932. p. 507

At his most exalted Mr. Lewisohn is a curious and sharply memorable figure. Few writers command so superb a dignity. He startles majestically, he arraigns loftily, he draws centuries of learning and spiritual experience together in flashing, bitter, or tenderly wise generalizations. At such moments his characters breathe the air of mountain tops; they sense divinity in the atmosphere, they feel themselves drawn to greater and perhaps not insurmountable heights. They possess a rather wonderful humanity; one is a bit disconcerted by so deep an immersion in selflessness, but one respects so unusual a nobility and so intense an effort.

Alfred Kazin. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. May 2, 1937. p. 2

Though Mr. Lewisohn is a notable figure in both contemporary American literature and in certain Zionist circles, he shows not a trace of the humor of either Josh Billings and Mark Twain or of Mendele Mocher Seforim and Sholem Aleichem. He always maintains the humorless and rigid self-importance that is so often found in his native Prussia. And I venture the opinion that no one who has not laughed at himself and at pompous human ignorance generally is a safe leader for member of the genus *homo sapiens*.

Morris Cohen. *Reflections of a Wondering Jew* (Free). 1950. p. 123

Mr. Lewisohn doesn't care much for modern intellectual poetry. . . . Lewisohn's attitude toward poetry in general is affirmative and spiritual. His poets must be prophets with a sense of public obligation, never doubters of the ultimate high destiny of mankind. His style produces effective epithet and a resonant oratory.

A.M. Sullivan. *Saturday Review*. May 20, 1950. p. 40

Lewisohn is a scholar, a creative critic, a scrupulous craftsman whose work is informed with high seriousness and moral passion. His books, he maintains, are not the expression of purely literary opinions but personal confessions rendered in more or less objective terms, weapons used in the unending struggle of life. . . .

Lewisohn endeavors to communicate what he considers unimpeachable and eternal truths; his mission, he feels, is to redeem and preserve those immemorial virtues of freedom and justice which constitute the good life.

Charles I. Glicksberg. *American Literary Criticism* (Hendricks). 1952, pp. 198–200

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LINDSAY, Vachel (1879–1931)

He has crude gestures, this emerging poet of Illinois. He has intonations of the preacher and fancifulness of the infant wearing a paternal silk hat.

He finds it hard to forget Hathor, the Rose of Sharon and ambrosial nouns. He forces his note. But to say these things is not to reach the kernel. Where else in this country of emergence is there in combination nationalism so free and swinging, religion so vigorous, human contact so unprejudiced, beauty so adored?

Francis Hackett. *Horizons* (Huebsch-Viking). 1919. p. 295

Mr. Lindsay . . . can whoop like a whale. He is a poet in search of superlatives beyond the superlatives. He cannot find them, but he at least articulates new sounds. As one reads him, one is reminded at times of a child in a railway-train singing and shouting against the noise of the engine and the wheels. The world affects Mr. Lindsay as the railway-train affects some children. He is intoxicated by the rhythm of the machinery.

Robert Lynd. *Books and Authors* (Putnam). 1923. p. 243

He is a reformer, an evangelist. He lifts his standard for all who gather round it; he spreads his arms to all who will come to them. His business is not, as that of a different poet might be, to find only the purest gold or the clearest gems. It is rather to spade up new sod and see what unexpected flowers will spring from it; to peer into dusky corners and see that nothing precious has been hidden there; to explore the outer boundaries of the regions of poetry and see if they cannot be extended to include virgin territories hitherto unoccupied.

Carl Van Doren. *Many Minds* (Knopf). 1924. pp. 164–5

The good black earth of Springfield, Illinois, seeped into his bones, and all the prejudices and idealisms of the ''valley of democracy'' went into the formation of his mind and philosophic temper. William Jennings Bryan was the product of the same locality, and he and Lindsay had striking points of similarity. Both were ardent democrats and champions of the commoners. Both burned with fervant idealism, both earnestly desired that all men be happy and virtuous, both had unbounded faith in the efficacy of political and moral evangelism, and both interpreted politics, economics, and diplomacy in terms of middle-western morality.

Russell Blankenship. *American Literature* (Holt). 1931. pp. 594–5

With his belligerant assertion of the noisier and cruder phases of the American inheritance Lindsay seems a throwback to some of the earlier comedians of the last century. He is often oratorical, theatrical, evangelical. But when he began to write, about 1910, that fundamental past had receded farther away than the Revolution; bringing this into view, he may be counted one of those writers who sustain a tradition and in large measure re-create it, for at his best he succeeds in writing a fresh poetry.

Constance Rourke. *American Humor* (Harcourt). 1931. p. 275

That Vachel was primarily an evangelist is obvious not only from his program but from his performance. . . . He combined, in his poetry as well as his personality, the free improvising of the minstrel with the fervor of the missionary. He never ceased to be a propagandist for the preservation of the spirit. Just as he believed that every slum might become a part of a holy city, so he insisted that every person housed a poet.

Louis Untermeyer. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 12, 1931. p. 368

Lindsay's rebelliousness . . . was the rebelliousness of a Christian finding himself in a pagan country. And it was also the rebelliousness of an artist who finds that people expect him to live in an ivory tower and who refuses to do so. Lindsay's fundamental attitude is that of a natural piety—Christian in him, to be sure, but of the sort which we associate with classical antiquity: a piety towards ancestors and one's hearth and city, as well as towards the Gods. . . . For

Lindsay the essence of religion was this personal continuity: something you have inherited by tradition and even by blood.

Llewellyn Jones. *Christian Century*. Dec. 23, 1931. p. 1619

Poetry for him was still a chant, and his sonorous, slightly nasal chanting, with upraised face and dropped eyelids, like a blind Illinois Homer, still lingers in our memories. His rhythms sought the rhythms of native speech, but unlike the cool and humorous colloquialism of Robert Frost, it was an excited speech, like the shouts at camp meetings, or the boasts of oxmen and boatmen. Listening to him one was carried backward not forward, back of the American folk history now being so extensively written, back of Walt Whitman . . . back into an authentic minstrelsy.

Henry Seidel Canby. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 9, 1932. p. 1

Readers and critics have always misunderstood him, even thought him humorous or grotesque. But the truth is that his passion for rhythm led him into seemingly ludicrous situations, inspiring him to write literary monstrosities which in reality were not in the least funny to their author, but were only his sincere effort to express in words the rhythms which he heard so clearly. . . . Life, to him, was rhythm, and the passion of his soul was to pass this on to others.

A. Longfellow Fiske. *Commonweal*. Feb. 10, 1932. p. 410

How little of the scholar he was, the man of conscious artistry, the precious jeweler of verse! How much the man who believed, who loved, who felt, whose character and moral fervor were his style, that style in truth which cannot be learned, but is bestowed at birth by the good fairy, even upon lame boys! His style was his love of America, and this was his wonderland too. But above that were his dreams of America and his city. . . . The land he sang can be lost, because in so many fundamental, even phenomenal senses, it never existed. But the song he sang, and by which he created a land and a State, belongs at least to the history of literature.

Edgar Lee Masters, *Vachel Lindsay* (Scribner). 1935. pp. 374–5

Like Whitman and every true American, Lindsay believed that the good things of life were meant to be shared, and that without sharing they ceased to be good. His poetry was therefore communal, emotional and scarcely ever intellectual. It was written, like the purple patches of Elizabethan dramatists, to arouse the feelings of crowded, popular audiences: it deliberately appealed to the groundlings.

Arthur Bryant. *The American Ideal* (Longmans). 1936. p. 261

No one loved adulation more than did Vachel Lindsay, and no artist has ever seen more clearly that he was being ruined by it. He lived for his audience; he loved reciting his poetry, he loved the applause that he always got, and yet he knew that applause was his poetic destruction. Unable to deny himself the temporary pleasure, he saw his stream of inspiration dwindle, die, while helplessly he bemoaned the conflict within him. No one has seen more clearly the necessity for discontent, an ideal and the quietness in which to pursue it.

C.P. Lee. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 10, 1940. p. 7

Vachel Lindsay has long been out of fashion. His reputation began to decline during his not very long lifetime, and it has never been revived. No poetry could differ more from that which is currently esteemed than his. He was exuberant and open, whereas the moderns are disciplined and intricate. He was a preacher, and though it was often difficult to say what he was preaching, there was no mistaking his fervor. He was enthusiastic and hopeful; the moderns are secretive and dark. . . . Lindsay speaks to us out of the innocence of the years before the First World War, but there is, as W.B. Yeats observed on the occasion of their first meeting, a strangeness in his poetry that lifts it above provincialism.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 21, 1959. p. 39

As twenty years earlier he had written home from Hiram his revolutionary letter, explaining how it was a necessity of his very soul to be free of the formal education meant to mould scholars (''I do not care to be such a one, I cannot be such a one''), so now to Harriet he wrote passionately: ''I do not want to be the slave of past performances or habits, I cannot endure to be such a slave, *I care not what the apparent praise or reward.* I am a dead man in my own eyes, and the only resurrection is in the new vista.''

There was a point in his life to which he must return and the return would be a going forward. Again his soul was in revolt, his creative impulse struggled for freedom. He must go back to the time of dedication. He must join hands with the Vachel of the years before 1913: the young prophet who stood at night on the great bridge, the tramp by the long trail's border, the preacher of the gospel of beauty.

It was the past seven years that were yesterday. Out of his visions from the days when visions came to him he would build the new dream and write the new song.

Eleanor Ruggles. *The West-Going Heart* (Norton). 1959. p. 287

The end of an outer material frontier to explore in the west and midwest has helped cause the increasing inner explorations of the spirit. Vachel Lindsay represents a transition. Apparently still an outer explorer, an evoker of picturesque place-names and loud American noises in the fashion of an older school, yet in reality an inward voyager of the religious imagination and the aesthetic imagination, Lindsay remains the finest religious poet produced by America's most local native roots. He is the Dante of the Fundamentalists.

To call Lindsay a mouthpiece of Fundamentalism, is nothing new. What will here be suggested as new (and as fruitful for future application to other writers) is a conservative hypothesis about the three-fold interaction between Lindsay's human crack-up, his Ruskin-aesthete mission, and his self-destructive attempt to maintain, against increasing qualms, his Rousseau-Bryan utopian faith (the faith of his Fundamentalist religion and Populist politics).

Peter Viereck. *Modern Age*. Summer, 1960. p. 269

Though between 1912 and about 1916 he was regarded in this country as one of the leading ''new poets,'' he was an innovator only in his attempt to get poetry out of ''unpoetic'' subjects and to make himself the mouthpiece of the latent creativity of the American farmer and small-townsman. He had a considerable natural talent, a big tender heart, no taste, and no brains. He was too proud of the fact that he had never grown up. Even more than Sandburg he was torn between his realism and his sentimentalism. . . . He had both too much and too little education for his aims: his desire to seem rustic and popular and his desire to seem ''cultured'' were mutually destructive. So few of his poems possess intrinsic literary merit apart from the familiar anthology pieces . . . that we shall consider him only as an illustration of a particular aspect of spiritual pathology.

Hoxie Neale Fairchild. *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, vol. 5 (Columbia). 1962. p. 505

His best creations are unlike anything else in our literature. He evolved a medium well suited to his gifts, used and thereby encouraged the serious use of popular language, and favored American themes; for, as he said, his life's quest was the soul of America. At a time when our poetry had fallen very low, he poured life, enthusiasm, purpose into it, made it an oral art again, taught the public to listen to it, and by reciting his poems throughout the land and through many years, prepared the way for poets coming after him. His Gospel of Beauty . . . has probably been far more fruitful than we suspect; and his advocacy of a universal church may have some relation to our interest in that problem today. . . . His listeners, far more numerous than his readers, remained fairly constant to the end; but when, in 1931, death stilled the voice with which they identified his poetry, it dispersed the audience and left the poems stranded and scattered.

Albert Edmund Trombly. *Southwest Review*. Autumn, 1962. pp. 301–2

Had anyone entrusted me with this task in 1945 my choices would have been different. I would have selected those poems which most directly address obvious social ills, for I began, of course, as Lindsay began, with the intention of doing nothing less than rehabilitating—absolutely reforming—a gross and greedy civilization. Young men who do not begin life in this way are despicable. But one learns, as one grows older, that a poem is a useful instrument of social reform only in proportion to its excellence *as poem*. ''Art is pre-eminently didactic,'' Lindsay told his journal. ''Artists always preach, if it is nothing more than their school of art.''

These poems are a record of the illusion of Vachel Lindsay, which may well be the only possible illusion: are we not now absolutely compelled to resolve the divisions he defined, East, West, white, black, rose, lotus?

Mark Harris. Introduction to *Selected Poems of Vachel Lindsay* (Macmillan). 1963. p. xxii

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LOCKE, Alain (1886–1954)

[*The New Negro*] in many ways marks an epoch. It is in many respects sprawling, illogical, with an open and unashamed lack of unity and continuity, and yet it probably expresses better than any book that has been published in the last ten years the present state of thought and culture among American Negroes and it expresses it so well and so adequately, with such ramification into all phases of thought and attitude, that it is a singularly satisfying and inspiring thing. . . .

With one point alone do I differ with the Editor. Mr. Locke has newly been seized with the idea that Beauty rather than Propaganda should be the object of Negro literature and art. His book proves the falseness of this thesis. This is a book filled and bursting with propaganda but it is propaganda for the most part beautifully and painstakingly done; and it is a grave question if ever in this world in any renaissance there can be a search for disembodied beauty which is not really a passionate effort to do something tangible, accompanied and illumined and made holy by the vision of eternal beauty.

Of course this involves a controversy as old as the world and much too transcendental for practical purposes, and yet, if Mr. Locke's thesis is insisted on too much it is going to turn the Negro renaissance into decadence. It is the fight for Life and Liberty that is giving birth to Negro literature and art today and when, turning from this fight or ignoring it, the young Negro tries to do pretty things or things that catch the passing fancy of the really unimportant critics and publishers about him, he will find that he has killed the soul of Beauty in his Art.

W. E. B. Du Bois. *The Crisis*. January, 1926, pp. 140–41.

[Alain Locke] was a scholar in philosophy in which he took for his chief concept the theory of values. The doctrine of values, which Thoreau pursued with such dismay to the Puritan skeptics, has always seemed to me the key-stone of philosophic thinking, for if the function of philosophy is to estimate and appraise the worth and inevitability of human thought and action, then it is only by determining values can standards be established for the guidance and operation of human conduct and relationships. These standards serve the interests of society, interchangeable as they are with heritage and tradition which are the props of conformity; but it is the individual that counts in the maintenance of standards, for out of reason and emotion, the imagination and intuition, with their interactions of reality and illusion, is compounded the kind of

society that prevails in one era or another. I never have been able, though I confess that better Hegelian minds than mine can, to separate aesthetics from philosophy—philosophy to my belief being the science of Truth, if I may use the term science as connoting method rather than formula or finality, and aesthetics being the science of Beauty. Thus we have the two motivating energies, as Henry Adams would say, sustaining the spirit of man. . . .

[The New Negro] was the expression of a mind and spirit that had been tutored in the universal law of humanity—that law of ''unity in diversity,'' as Locke called it. A law whose highest doctrine, he adds, may be, to quote him, ''carried out to a practical degree of reciprocity.'' This was the demand that Locke made of Negro authorship, and along with it, the concomitant demand for its recognition by the white world. We can interpret the writings as contained in *The New Negro* as specifically of literary interest, and, perhaps, its greatest importance lies not always directly on the surface, but indirectly in the potentiality of a new literary concept in the intellectual and imaginative development of the Negro in authorship. For Locke's discerning spirit elevated the worth and significance of Negro life, and he included in the work essays dealing with the subjects of social, economic, artistic and civil importance woven into the fabric of human relations which give design to the patterns of American democracy.

William Stanley Braithwaite. *The Phylon Quarterly*. Second Quarter, 1957, pp. 166–73.

The rise of a genuine New Negro Movement was fostered and encouraged by one person, Alain Leroy Locke, who became its creative editor and its chronicler. It may be true that the term Renaissance, as Sterling Brown has so perceptively pointed out, is a misnomer because of the shortness of the life span of the Harlem movement. Also, the New Negro writers were not centered only in Harlem, and much of the best writing of the decade was not always about Harlem, for most of the writers were not Harlemites. Yet Harlem was the ''show window,'' the cashier's till, though it is no more ''Negro America'' than New York is America. The New Negro had temporal roots in the past and spatial roots elsewhere in America and the term has validity only when considered to be a continuing tradition. . . .

No one could have been better equipped for the leadership and sponsorship of the New Negro Movement than Locke, who described himself ''more of a philosophical midwife to a generation of younger Negro poets, writers and artists than a professional philosopher.'' For years he [encouraged] . . . artists and musicians to study the African sources at first hand. He was an avid collector of Africana. He wrote expertly about the lost ancestral arts of Africa and traced the influence of African art on European artists in the early twentieth century. He knew a great deal about African influences in Haiti and other Caribbean islands and he consistently pointed out African influences on the Negro American, both before and after the abolition of slavery.

Alain Locke did not make many original researches into American Negro history or into the golden lore of African history, but he grew in stature as he learned more and more of this history. It taught him that the Negro scholar's ability to withstand the infirmities of the American scene is a dialectic phase of the democratic process. And this dialectic must necessarily aid in bringing into fruition the dream of a community of Negro scholars. This was his sensitivity about American history and it led him to an identity with the great leader, the self-taught Frederick Douglass, about whom he wrote a biography. Locke was deeply appreciative of Du Bois' scientific approach to history and Carter G. Woodson's pioneer scientific work in the history of slavery and the Negro past. His contributions to the New Negro Movement always turned out to be re-evaluations of Negro history as it affected the Negro writer, the Negro scholar, and the lives of all sensitively aware Negroes.

As an author, Locke knew that the story of the Negro writer had to be told, because of the social history involved. He came to see that the position of the Negro in American culture had come to mean a great deal more than merely the artistic activity of the Negro minority. It came to mean for him a pointing toward a goal of a ''natively characteristic national literature as being one of the crucial issues of cultural democracy.'' And this had to be evaluated against the slavery and anti-slavery background from which this literature emerged. . . .

The Harlem Renaissance, substantively, transformed the Negro as subject and as artist from the old stereotype into the New Negro, militant, no longer obsequious, more of a paragon because he had shown that he was nearly on equal terms with his white counterpart. He won coveted prizes, fellowships, he was being published and he won his spurs the hard way in creative writing. These artists were not organized but theirs was a strong spirit of cohesion, a bond of group consciousness, toward some goal of achievement which would make the Negro artist proud of his work. It was a self-confidence which grew and proliferated into an outburst of emotional expression, never matched by any comparable period in American history. The new generation of writers began to carve out a niche in the hitherto impermeable walls of American literary culture. Hence the self-confidence, the self-assurance and the pride of craftsmanship. . . .

The New Negro Movement produced the first really competent novelists—Fisher, Walrond, Cullen, McKay, Thurman and Hughes. The forefield of this New Negro literature was an artistic awakening. Publishers may have had only one Negro on their lists, but as the late E. Franklin Frazier pointed out, the audience was not Negro, but white. These writers were very important in the development of the Negro novelist as a craftsman. With these new writers there was great fire and enthusiasm, a creative dynamism of self-conscious racialistic expression which at the time was a healthy manifestation of the problems which beset the Negro people. Thurman, in *Infants of the Spring* satirized the exaggerations and Bohemian aspects of the movement. Fisher, a physician, the first Negro to write a detective story and a writer of social comedy, in *Walls of Jericho*, wrote of Harlem jive, a socially intelligent satire of the foibles of the new Negro middle class.

The Negro had come to stay as a novelist and the novelists of the New Negro Movement prepared the way for all of those who were to come later. The genius of Wright burgeoned out of the thirties. Many, like Ellison, relied heavily on the New Negro novelists' experiences. The writers of the Federal Writers Project of the thirties looked back only a decade to their New Negro precursors. As Sterling Brown wrote in his essay, *The New Negro in Literature (1925–1955)*, ''Negro authors of the thirties, like their compatriots, faced reality more squarely. For the older light-heartedness, they substituted sober self-searching; for the bravado of false Africanism and Bohemianism, they substituted attempts to understand Negro life in its workaday aspects in the here and now. . . . Alert to the changing times, a few critics—Alain Locke among them—charted new directions.''

In 1930, James Weldon Johnson in *Black Manhattan* wrote: ''Harlem is still in the process of making. It is still new and mixed; so mixed that one may get many different views—which is all right so long as one view is not taken to be the whole picture. This many-sided aspect, however, makes it one of the most interesting communities in America. But Harlem is more than a community, it is a largescale laboratory experiment in the race problem and from it a good many facts have been found.''

And Alain Locke, more prophetic and Cassandra-like than he could have ever known, in the last article written before his death said, ''It is to this mirror that I turn for the salient changes of majority attitudes toward the Negro, and equally important, for a view of the Negro's changed attitude toward himself. For the Negro seems at last on the verge of proper cultural recognition and a fraternal acceptance as a welcome participant and collaborator in the American arts. Should this become the realized goal, the history of the Negro's strange and tortuous career in American literature may become also the story of America's hard-won but easily endured attainment of cultural democracy.''

Eugene C. Holmes. *Freedomways*. Summer, 1963, pp. 292–306.

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LOCKRIDGE, Ross (1914–1948)

Mr. Lockridge, indeed, gets by with a good many things because his novel, as a whole, has a sort of mountainous integrity which must have sustained the writer during his years of labor no less than it impresses the reader. It has moments of naivete but never of cheapness; it is as moody as the weather and as capricious as life; it teems and sprawls; it is glowing and somber, earthy and poetic by turns. The author is often infatuated with words . . . ; he has also that delight in catalogued abundance which, from Walt Whitman to Montgomery Ward, is part of the living legend of America. The entire novel is a hold-all of myth, musing, songs, poems, dreams, political argument, history, archeology, and variegated lore. . . . Mr. Lockridge has, first of all, a deep awareness of America as part of space and time, so that the youth of his hero in *Raintree County* becomes a sort of tanglewood tale, sun drenched and garlanded, but with roots far more pagan than Hawthorne cared to portray. And the life-size Indiana of the last century, with its lonely farms, its revivalist preachers, its foot races and markets and river picnics, becomes more than life size in this golden mythological focus.

James Hilton. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Jan. 4, 1948. pp. 1–2

Latest candidate for that mythical honor, the Great American Novel, *Raintree County* displays unflagging industry, a jerky and sometimes magnificent vitality, a queer amalgam of pattern and formlessness, and an ingenuity of structure that is at once admirable and maddening. The engineering of this huge volume arouses one's admiration, although the problem of organic form is by no means solved. . . . There is great narrative and comic power in about half of these 1,066 pages. (Such is the historical symbolism throughout, one begins to wonder whether the Battle of Hastings isn't involved with the page numbers!) But in the last third of the volume his characters cease to be individuals and become in too many cases individualized symbols. A single exception is the ''Perfesser,'' whose language, it is evident, Mr. Lockridge had particular pleasure in creating. Stiles is consistently himself throughout; and though the heart of his formula is the newspaper cynic, he is a genuine comic invention.

Howard Mumford Jones. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 4, 1948. pp. 9–10

This first book [*Raintree County*] is the impressive result of a bold, if not wholly successful, effort to write the Great American Novel. It is also the latest and plainest sign that native American and recent European traditions of art and thought can flow together and that this cultural Mississippi, though full of snags and shallows, may be one of the brightest things moving in the world. *Raintree County* is a historical novel of Indiana by an Indiana boy; it is also a philosophical novel (a rare thing in U.S. fiction), and a studied work of art that is striking enough to court comparison, in method at least, with the *Ulysses* of James Joyce. . . . The unvarying use of some techniques becomes faintly annoying, and the work as a whole has the quality of an assignment brilliantly completed rather than a vision that demanded this and no other form.

As an original, spacious and significant work of the second order, however, *Raintree County* is a success. It is elaborately ingenious and it is fun.

Time. Jan. 12, 1948. p. 85

They ''got'' Ross Lockridge, Jr., because he was a sweet person, lacking ruthlessness, the prerogative of genius. If he had cut more ruthlessly into *Raintree County*, the book would have been better. He was no one-book author; he never would have been content to live as a Margaret Mitchell lives. But he could not find a remedy for the let-down that invariably comes after completing a big job, the let-down Trollope understood so well he never submitted a novel until he was deep into the next.

Obviously, Ross Lockridge, Jr., should have escaped, if only for a while, from the environment that constricted him. He should have boarded a ship for South America, for China, anywhere but Hollywood. No matter where he went, he should never have lugged Bloomington along. But even if he had left it physically, he probably would never have been able to escape it mentally. Like his own Johnny Shawnessey, he knew ''his victory was not in consummations but in quests.'' So the inner conflict stretched and tore him to bits. He ''could no more uproot himself from this memory-haunted earth than he could pluck body from soul.''

Nanette Kutner. *Saturday Review*. June 12, 1948. p. 31

Another novel of ideas was Ross Lockridge, Jr.'s *Raintree County* (1948), an allegory of the American tradition and a prose epic on the theme of fertility, combining comedy and tragedy, the past and the present, the vulgar and the fine. Lockridge perished from his own success, but his story of a tree, a county, a divided personality (J—W—S—), against the full sweep of American social, political, and military history, will remain to challenge and perplex his fellows for a long time.

Literary History of the United States, rev. ed., edited by Robert E. Spiller *et al* (Macmillan). 1953. p. 1402

On the dust jacket of *Raintree County* appears this statement: ''*Raintree County* is not an historical novel. Indeed it evades definition, for it attempts no less than a complete embodiment of the American Myth.'' In this one instance, at least, the ad-man has not overstated his case, for Ross Lockridge's massive novel is one of the most important recent attempts at mythmaking in American literature. . . .

No one who has read *Raintree County* can doubt that Lockridge was attempting to win that elusive and nebulous prize, The Great American Novel. His outlook is that of the proud American, his language is that of the poet, and his technique is that of the mythmaker. The Johnny Appleseed story, the Lincoln legend, the John Brown saga are only a few of the myth materials to be found in Lockridge's only published work. . . . the central theme of *Raintree County* is an extension and elaboration of the mythical elements in Hawthorne's ''The Great Stone Face.''

Boyd Litzinger. *Tennessee Studies in Literature*. 1963. p. 81

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Form or subject that he happens to choose to write in or about matters little. It is the same vivid, virile personality pouring itself out in a wealth of words that mean warmth and strength or pitiless cold and pitiless cruelty—extreme in either case; exaggerated, but alive, always alive. This is Jack London, and it is of very little importance whether he is writing a story about a man or a dog, about a wolf or a whaler; whether he gives us a sociological treatise on the city slums or a love story in letters. We enjoy it all because it is Jack London, not because it is whatever it happens to be in outer form.

Grace Isabel Colbron. *Bookman*. Feb., 1907. pp. 599–600

Ordinarily one takes a febrile over-excitement and love of excessive violence to be signs of weakness; but in Jack London they were not—he really did have strength. So likewise in his writing: his fury of language and intemperance of emotion have led some critics to deny that he possesses genuine vigor and power. But to do so is surely an error; those who are not too offended by his excesses can hardly fail to feel his force. Only, in his books as in his own life and character, the strength he had is turned, as if he could realize it only in fighting, coercion, and destruction, not to creation, but to violence.

T.K. Whipple. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 24, 1938. p. 4

Jack London had been one of the three young pioneers who at the turn of the century had blazed the literary trails into modern American literature. Although a few predecessors had shown the way, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Jack London had vigorously insisted upon introducing themes, characters, and styles of writing previously unheard of in American literature, but already large and vital in American life. All three died young, but Jack London lived longer in the twentieth century. All were timely, catching unerringly the drumbeats of the new day, which was to develop swiftly into a day of struggle, but Jack London was a Socialist, and with conscious social perspective he had inquired into history for pattern or lack of pattern. Before he fell victim to the competitive spirit and commercialism of the times, he had described more boldly and with more fundamental insight than Frank Norris the real protagonists in that struggle and its causes and had foreseen its end.

Joan London. *Jack London and His Times* (Doubleday). 1939. p. 377

He remains one of America's most significant writers because he concerned himself with the vital problems of his age. Of working class origin, he was the first American writer to portray his class sympathetically and one of the few to use literature for building the foundations of a future society. He was not educated in the formal sense, but his comprehension was so great that he rose above educated men in ability and power to portray in his writings the fundamental issues of our times. The spirit of the common people of America, heroic, fiery and adventurous will live forever in the pages of his rebel stories, novels, and essays.

Philip S. Foner. *Jack London, American Rebel* (Citadel). 1947. p. 130

In the literature of protest in America from John Woolman to Richard Wright, the writings of Jack London must occupy a place very near the top. To London the brotherhood of man was no mere exercise in economic adjustment but a passionate gospel and he preached it with an intensity and dialectical skill that made his books virtual manuals among Socialist readers of his day. Although the number of his readers has diminished from the time he was known as the ''Kipling of Alaska,'' the vigor and energy of his narrative, and his tender and exact portraits of the poor in his autobiographical writings are insurance that these readers will never entirely disappear.

Thomas Lask. *New York Times Book Section*. Jan. 18, 1948. p. 24

I think part of the reason for London's popularity in Europe is that he is a very intense writer at his best, and the great élan and vigor

that are properly associated with this country and its people emerge often from his pages. To a Europe drained dry of such faculties, it is understandable that London's people, their concerns and their virtues, should have a nostalgic appeal, that Europeans might even read of them as other more credulous generations read of such heroic figures as Roland and Hector.

Harry Sylvester. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 19, 1951. p. 18

Jack London always insisted that his books were not mere adventure stories; they had a meaning. Theoretically, he was a materialist, Socialist, Darwinian, Nietzschean—all in one; and many of his admirers have trustingly envisioned him as perched upon the backs of all these horses, even when they were galloping furiously in different directions. Temperamentally he was closest to Nietzsche, as his supermen and superdogs attest.

Edward Wagenknecht. *Cavalcade of the American Novel* (Holt). 1952. p. 224

A subhuman world of instinctual emotion and, in its purest expression, of complete animal identification was the one in which he moved so easily and so instinctively himself. And the dominant mood was of primitive fear or, at its best, of brief and still terror-haunted and transient pleasure amidst all the horrors of the jungle.

Maxwell Geismar. *Rebels and Ancestors* (Houghton). 1953. p. 185

London's instinct was to feel life as chaos and battle and to exult in the strength which produced both, but his intelligence, which was not of the most acute, tried to rationalize instinct, to fit jagged pieces into a design, and so he found laws operating in the vast spaces of the far North: the law of natural selection, the law of Eskimo and Indian whereby iron sank in water and women obeyed men, and the law of the white man, enforced by stalwart Mounted Police. Since London's eye was not single, since he could not decide whether he was a disciple of Nietzsche or of Marx, he compromised a narrative gift originally distinguished by vigor, freshness, and dramatic proficiency, and eventually wrote some of the poorest novels of the day.

Grant C. Knight. *The Strenuous Age in American Literature* (North Carolina). 1954. pp. 222–3

The world was still knee-deep in Victorian morals, traditions, and ideals when Jack London burst upon the literary scene. To the generations exposed to the sentimental pap of the popular writers of the day, his stories of savage realism and heroic conflict had the effect of a tidal wave, sweeping before them the false, romantic idealism that was the vogue. The world as he saw it (as reflected in his writings) was hostile and cruel, with only the brave and the strong having any chance for survival. He refused to shrink from life's unpleasant and brutal side, yet his work retained more than a good measure of romanticism. He bridged the gap between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and blazed the trail for a new, more realistic school of writing. . . .

The passage of almost half a century has had little effect on the dramatic, forceful, unique character of Jack London's work; it retains its ability to enthrall, excite, and entertain. He remains one of the most successful writers in the history of American letters. As recently as 1952, as a result of a world-wide survey, the United Nations agency Unesco reported that Jack London was the most popular, most widely translated American author in Europe, Russia, and the Iron Curtain countries.

Irving Shepard. Introduction to *Jack London's Tales of Adventure* (Hanover House). 1956. p. vii

Even though *Martin Eden* and *John Barleycorn* differ from London's ''unique'' contributions which brought him fame, wealth, notoriety and a place in literary histories, in some respects they must be considered the key books in an understanding of London and his fiction. On one level, these two most personal of London's books present a synthesis of the theories of socialism and raw individualism between which London vacillates throughout most of his work. To be sure, the protagonist in each is racked by his contradictory allegiances, but the focus of each book is on an individual in torment, not on conflicting ideologies. In presenting this individual whose values have disintegrated, London goes beyond a concern with social theory to make a final comment on life. Essentially this comment is—the horror. Underneath Martin Eden's dudgeon that he had been misunderstood, underneath London's insistence that the ''long sickness'' is behind him, it may be observed that to London socialism, individualism, materialism—nothing matters: the essential feature of these two books is the description of the youth full of zest for life who has become the adult without desire as he makes the debilitating self-discovery that he is hollow and his values are illusions.

Sam S. Baskett. *American Quarterly*. Spring, 1958. pp. 76–7

Fifty-five years have passed since *Before Adam* was written. Within that time many men have tried their hands at picturing the lives of our remote ancestors. Most have confined themselves to those later folk whom London called *The Fire People*. In all this long half-century, though our knowledge of human evolution has increased tremendously, it is my belief that no writer has since produced so moving and vivid a picture of man's primordial past as has Jack London.

As a half-grown boy I reveled in the book, opening as it did vast vistas of the human past with which I was unfamiliar. Reading it today as a professional anthropologist, I find that none of that old thrill has departed. Scientific details, it is true, have altered, and for those changes I will shortly account. But there is a strange and wonderful quality about this work upon which no reviewer has ever commented. It is this: Jack London has made the lives of our uttermost ancestors, Big-Tooth, Lop-Ear, the Swift-One, for all their speechless inadequacy, more appealing than those of the true men, the Fire people who destroyed them. It is plain where London's sympathy lies: It rests with the underdog, the arrowless ones, the people who had not acquired the deadly killing nature of

the true men. The great swamp that is the scene of Big-Tooth's final flight, that waste which caused my flesh to creep even as a boy, I as a man now mentally perceive as a symbol of man's long journey, harried by his own ferocity from age to age.

Loren Eiseley. Epilogue to *Before Adam* by Jack London (Macmillan). 1962. pp. 147–8

Jack London's stories still compel the reader to read on. He learned to tell a tale, he says, when he was bumming across the United States and had to decide exactly the right story to pitch in the moment between the housewife opening the door and her asking what he wanted. A slip-up meant no food, perhaps even having the dog set on him. He tells his stories like a tramp. At the end you are left with no distillation of truth, no new vision of life. But you have experienced something vicariously; frozen to death in the Yukon, knocked senseless in the prize-ring, tossed by storm in the Pacific.

Arthur Calder-Marshall. Introduction to *The Bodley Head Jack London* (Bodley Head). 1963. p. 8

He survives today chiefly as a storyteller with a vigor and freshness that carries over, with a recurring sense of discovery, to each new generation of readers. Undoubtedly that appeal will increase. In the appallingly overcrowded world predicted for the near future, his vivid word-pictures of empty seascapes and uncluttered lands, and of the free and self-reliant individuals who contended with them and each other, will be a breath of fresh air from the simpler past. No one excelled him as a reporter-participant on the retreating remnants of our frontiers. As a self-made intellectual, he will be interesting only as a curiosity, as an example of the social ferment in the early part of the century. His Socialism shrivels into absurdity against the searing light of Soviet reality. His prophecies—the triumph of a capitalistic oligarchy in *The Iron Heel*, for instance—appear no less doomed in the dry air of actuality.

Richard O'Connor. *Jack London* (Little). 1964. p. 400

The enduring force of London's works derives from his peculiar mythopoeic genius, as well as from his talent for telling a surpassingly good story. London possessed what Carl Jung has called the ''primordial vision,'' and this vision manifests itself nowhere more brilliantly than in his strangely moving, unforgettable tale of men and dogs struggling heroically against the awesome forces of nature in the ''White Silence.''

London employed myth in still another way in his writings about the American West. Like James Fenimore Cooper and Charles W. Webber before him—and William Faulkner more recently—London perceived the symbolic possibilities of the American wilderness. He saw in the West, particularly in the virgin forests and fertile valleys of California, a new Eden, where a city-sick, machine-corrupted civilization could restore its impoverished spirit.

Earle Labor. *Arizona and the West*. Summer, 1964. p. 95

It would be impossible to gauge the total effect of London's hobo experiences or to trace all the literary uses he made of them. There is no doubt that his experiences on the road provided him with material which later found its way into the backgrounds of innumerable stories and novels in which he sketched the characters of prospectors and adventurers, sailors and laboring men. More important, the year he spent on the road, first with Kelly's detachment of Coxey's Army and later by himself, exposed him to conditions and ideas which changed his thinking and altered the course of his life. What emerges as significant out of the experiences of that year, in addition to familiarity with the details of the hobo's existence, is a conscious formulation of a life-view which was to put its imprint in one way or another on everything he ever wrote.

Frederick Feied. *No Pie in the Sky* (Citadel). 1965. p. 28

The writings of London which have shown the greatest vitality are . . . his books about the Far North. Products of a winter in the Klondike during the great rush, experienced when London had not yet started on his writing career, they constitute not only the earliest but the best of London's contribution to letters. They are great adventure stories partly because they catch the spirit of the last (and the most insane) mass rush towards a new frontier, partly because they embody London's perceptive view of the difference between the wilds and civilization. They appeal because they embody every man's desire to get away from daily routine, to gamble on a quick success, and to cope with nature in its more rugged aspects.

Whether London's hero is a man, or a man disguised as a dog, he is full of vigor, there is a sparkle in his eyes, and he escapes the dull features of a humdrum existence. So it is that there continues to be a steady world audience for *The Son of the Wolf, The Call of the Wild, White Fang*, short stories such as ''Love of Life'' and ''To Build a Fire,'' and even *Burning Daylight* and *Smoke Bellew*, in spite of their weak endings. London's Yukon fiction reveals him at his best.

Franklin Walker in *Essays on American Literature in Honor of Jay Hubbell*, ed. Clarence Gohdes (Duke). 1967. p. 261

Judging by the number of his titles that remain in print, some in editions of quite recent vintage, Jack London is still widely read more than a half-century after his death. His stories and novels of adventure in the Far North have lost none of their vigor, and his depiction of the ''dominant primordial beast'' in man still touches the American psyche—the Russian psyche as well, since for years he has been as popular in that country as any other American writer.

But if London's reputation rests upon his swashbuckling tales of men and animals battling each other and nature, he was considerably more than a mere storyteller. He was one of the most ardent and controversial Socialists of turn-of-the-century America, whose philosophy was a fascinating and unresolved jumble of Nietzsche and Marx. He was a bitter critic of the American middle and upper classes, yet he cruised the world in an extravagant yacht, the *Snark*, and built himself a $70,000 mansion in California. He wrote about the underside of society in which as a young man he had lived, but his popular success as a writer enabled him to move among the well-situated and powerful.

Nowhere in London's fiction are the complexities and contradictions of his life and mind more intimately revealed than in

Martin Eden, the most personal of his novels. It is a curious and in some respects unsatisfactory work, but it has all the power of his more popular fiction and a poignancy with which he is not ordinarily associated.

Jonathan Yardley. *New Republic*. June 2, 1973. p. 31

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LORDE, Audre (1934–1992)

[Audre] Lorde can be seen to anticipate, even as her textual strategies challenge, the white lesbian aesthetic of the moment. Lorde's text [*Zami*] surely operates both as the story of a search for identity and—in its meticulous rendition of the willful blindness of the lesbian community to its own complicity with the world it professed to reject—as a rewriting of that 1970s utopianism which claimed the possibility of an identity unsullied by external cultural influence. But Lorde's textual complexity also invites a reading of Audre's search as much a subversion of the politics of identity as it is a successful grasping of ''the real me.'' Audre's final repositioning within an accepting community depends . . . not on a rediscovery of Black lesbian origins but on a reimagination of them, one that is self-consciously fictive, laying claim not to the natural or essential but to the revision of these terms to provide a constructed—and therefore always at once endangered and negotiable—ground for being. On the one hand Lorde asserts that there is a difficult safety, finally, for the outsider, only in the visibility of differences, differences that require categories, distinctions and the identification of the self as participating in these categories. It seems that there is an identity to find. But this is crucially complicated by Lorde's refusal to settle on any particular difference, for within the ''house of difference'' aspects of identity are always in relation to each other in a pattern that is constantly shifting. Even visibility, the supposedly essential creator of difference, is reconstrued as sameness; thus it is in Mexico that Audre finally finds—and loses—herself, for in Mexico she is *seen* because she is *the same color* as everybody else.

Lorde's challenge to current aesthetic inquiry lies in her assertion of an abiding connection between individual and social identity. This is how she is able to maintain a connection between political subversion and textual subversion, a link that in contemporary discussions of a lesbian aesthetic seems to have become an abyss. Unlike that of the postmodern lesbian Subject, Audre's identity is never established only by the transgressions of the bedroom; it is from the bedroom that Audre and Kitty emerge, and it is from this ''lesbian narrative space'' that Audre goes out to refigure the Black family of Harlem as including her; but the reconstruction that happens in the street is as crucial as that in the mythic bed.

Anna Wilson. ''Audre Lorde and the African-American Tradition: When the Family Is Not Enough.'' In Sally Munt, ed. *New Lesbian Criticism: Literary and Cultural Readings* (New York: Columbia Univ. Pr., 1992), p. 90

In works published during the 1980s—her biomythography *Zami* (1982), her two collections of essays, *Sister Outsider* (1984) and *A*

Burst of Light (1988), her nonfiction, *The Cancer Journals* (1980), her poetry collection, *Our Dead behind Us* (1986), Audre emphasized the intersections of oppressions—that racism, sexism, homophobia, stem from the same source, from ''*the inability to recognize the notion of difference as a dynamic human force which is enriching rather than threatening to the defined self*.'' Even those in search of social change tend to be intolerant of differences among their own constituents and thus recreate the societal pattern they claim to be opposed to.

What Audre learned from her outsider position in society is that real change cannot occur unless we ''stop killing / the other / in ourselves / the self that we hate in others.''

Her analysis of this fear has had ramifications for just about every area of our lives, from our sexuality to education, from the meaning of our identities to political coalition work. A poet-thinker, Audre enlarged the race-feminist theory of that period, so much so that the concept of difference as a creative force is today as ''natural'' a part of our analyses of the world as the notion that oppressions exist.

> Barbara Christian. *Women's Review of Books*. March, 1993, p. 5

Sometimes Audre Lorde referred to herself as a ''black lesbian feminist warrior poet.'' Other times she called herself a ''black lesbian lover mother.'' She also was a Caribbean-American, a teacher, and the state poet of New York (a fact she found ironic considering the high incidence of violence toward blacks and toward homosexual people in her home state). She was one of the founders of Kitchen Table: Woman of Color Press and the writer of fifteen volumes of poems, essays, and an autobiography. Finally, she was a woman who died on November 17, 1992, after a fourteen-year struggle with cancer.

But above all else, Audre Lorde was a truth teller.

While she was recovering from a mastectomy in the late 1970s, Lorde wondered what truth-telling might mean to her future. ''I wonder what I may be risking as I become more and more committed to telling whatever truth comes across my eyes my tongue my pen—no matter what I will have to pay someday for that privilege.'' She never shrank from what she articulated as her own purpose in life; to speak the words that came to her, unedited and uncensored for the sake of other people's comfort.

This push to speak the truth was intimately linked to being a poet for Lorde. Her essays are often strident and sharp, filled with rhetoric that is at once personal and political. Her poetry, on the other hand, speaks its truths in more intensely human, universal terms. . . .

What is surprising in this volume [*The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance*] of her final thirty-nine poems is the absence of finality. In the end, Lorde practiced dying in the same way she practiced living: by getting to the heart of the matter, by telling the truth as she saw it, and by refusing to shrink in the presence of something bigger than herself, whether that thing was an unfeeling capitalist, a politician spewing forth platitudes, or even death itself. Every one of these poems was written during the last five years of her 14-year battle with cancer. But the word ''cancer'' rarely appears, and for this we are in awe of Lorde. She is able to see more than her personal reality; she is able to be concerned with the politics of Soweto even as she undergoes chemotherapy in Berlin. . . .

The landscape of these poems is a bleak one: lovers are absent, nature is unloving and harsh, and large communities are uncaring about the plights of the needy. In this bleakness, Lorde's connection with her world is plain. The world does not reflect Lorde's personal pain; rather, it is the other way around: Lorde's situation simply mirrors the inequities the world. . . . Even in the midst of personal and universal pain, she remains attached to her life, her communities and her world—always, always refusing to look the other way.

> Barbara Bolz. *New Letters Review of Books*. Spring, 1994, pp. 5. 13

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LOWELL, Amy (1874–1925)

Amy Lowell . . . is perhaps the least formula-bound poet now writing. She is an Imagist, but she does not see the world exclusively in the terms of Imagism; she feels, and makes the reader feel, its enormous variety. Her historical sense does not permit her to despise the past, nor to fear the future because it lies around a bend in the road. So she writes freely and flexibly and experimentally, as a poet should who springs from a free, flexible, and experimental people. . . . It is not enough to say that she is a realist, it is scarcely half the truth. She is rather a veritist, and a romantic veritist at that, not seeking to relate the fact to the phantom, but to incorporate the phantom with the fact. She accomplishes this by bringing to bear upon the fact, civilized, conventional, artificial as it must be in her accepted world, senses as acute and unsophisticated as those of a savage.

> Helen Buller Kizer. *North American Review*. May, 1918. pp. 739, 742

The style she has chosen to use, whether regarded with a view to rhythm or to colour-distribution is essentially pointillistic. Now Miss Lowell should have known that the pointillistic style is, in literature, suited only to very brief movements. A short poem based on this method may be brilliantly successful; Miss Lowell has herself proved it. A long poem based on this method, even though sustained brilliantly and perhaps in direct ratio to its brilliance,

almost inevitably becomes dull. . . . This style, obviously, is ideal for a moment of rapid action or extreme emotional intensity. But its effect when used *passim* is not only fatiguing, it is actually irritating.

Conrad Aiken. *Scepticisms* (Knopf). 1919. pp. 121–2

She has camouflaged an inherent feminine sensibility, so that it appears aggressive, and masculine. *Au fond* she is soft and gentle like Francis Jammes, who excites her profound admiration. Somewhat unfairly to her frank generosity and sensitive appreciation, she will go to remarkable lengths at times to convince us that she is insensitive to the feelings of others, contemptuous of their convictions, disdainful of their beliefs. She has the aggressiveness of Samuel Johnson, the daring of George Borrow and the tenacity of John Bunyan.

Joseph Collins. *Taking the Literary Pulse* (Doran). 1924. p. 61

Miss Lowell . . . comes on things full-face. She walks around them and looks at them. She recognizes them. She knows their names. They belong in her world and she in theirs, and it is a sane, balanced, homogenous world. . . . Miss Lowell is one of the great personalities of our time and one of the great aristocrats of literature. No one who has heard her talk will ever forget it. But . . . Miss Lowell's great achievement as a poet lies in precisely the fact that her poems are the most important thing about her. She has succeeded in creating poems which owe her nothing but their creation, poems which are not the publications of her heart nor the revelations of her philosophy, but finalities, entities, existences.

Archibald MacLeish. *North American Review*. March, 1925. pp. 509–10

That Amy Lowell's creative spirit occupied a large and unwieldly body is important because the triumph lay with the spirit. Her handsome head, unflinching in its carriage, had much to reckon with. First, perhaps, a passionate and untrammeled heart. Next, physical illness, disability and a kind of fleshly discomfort that no woman could bear in youth without suffering self-consciousness, and the sense of a lost paradise. Yet I doubt if I have known a maturity as full-flavoured and wholly sustaining as Amy Lowell's. Every twisted strand, every quirk in her destiny which earlier challenged normality and happiness, became woven into the warp and woof of a noble and dedicated career.

Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant. *Fire Under the Andes* (Knopf). 1927. p. 11

The lack of personal emotion in Miss Lowell's verse is due in part to two elements in her nature, her aristocratic ancestry and her great intellectual power. Her inherent pride keeps her from opening her heart too wide in public, and emotion is always somewhat alien to people of marked intellectuality. Emotion Miss Lowell had in plenty, but it was the emotion of the critic and controversialist, not the emotion of the creative artist. Her brilliant mind and her wide reading gave her an immense amount of material for her poetry, so much that it would have tended to crowd out personal experience, if she had been inclined to use it, and her fine critical powers made her labor on the surface of her poetry until it shone like burnished metal.

Russell Blankenship. *American Literature* (Holt). 1931. p. 618

She got away completely from her predecessor's doleful egoism, effeminacy, and conventional moralizings, by recording life as one knows it, not as former poets had written of it. Her flowers came from the gardens of Sevenels, or the fields of Dublin, not from the limited *hortus siccus* of the literary past. Her five senses ranged freely in her search for sharper and more inclusive perceptions of reality. . . . Amy Lowell was the first of our poets to take full advantage of the civilizations across both the Atlantic and Pacific, and yet remain thoroughly American.

S. Foster Damon. *Amy Lowell* (Houghton). 1935. p. 724

I like you in your poetry. . . . Why don't you always be yourself. Why go to France or anywhere else for your inspiration. If it doesn't come out of your heart, real Amy Lowell, it is no good, however many colors it may have. I wish one saw more of your genuine strong, sound self . . . full of common sense and kindness and the restrained, almost bitter, Puritan passion. Why do you deny the bitterness in your nature, when you write poetry? Why do you take a pose? . . . When you are full of your own strong gusto of things, real old English strong gusto it is, . . . then I like you very much.

D.H. Lawrence. In S. Foster Damon's *Amy Lowell* (Houghton). 1935. p. 278

No poet writing today, I think, save Thomas Hardy, saw and heard with more acute perception, or saw and heard and felt so many shades and tones and shapes of things—brilliant and subtle and fugitive and firm. And joined with this quick sensitiveness to physical impressions was an intellectual honesty as sensitive—a passion for truth which never knowingly falsified the report of what was seen. And that alert and vivid sense of beauty, restless with a poet's craving for expression, yet in expression lucidly exact, has schooled us, skeptical and reluctant scholars, to a quickened vision of strange loveliness in familiar things.

John Livingston Lowes. *Essays in Appreciation* (Houghton). 1936. p. 162

She remained a challenging and interesting figure of many and various talents, but not essentially a great writer, if one classifies only those writers as great who are able to extract out of the common and universally human themes of birth, love, loss, death, struggle, achievement, and failure, new meanings of universal import and new notes of perpetual poignancy. She was, and is, a writer well worth reading from every point of technical interest; but it was only towards the very end of her life that she began to use her

technique on themes of universally human import. . . . That she had the capacity to do so is abundantly proven. She did not care to exert it often; and this was not so much her own fault as the fault of the public and the critics, who demanded only too often from her a showy brilliance of surface at all costs.

John Gould Fletcher. *Life Is My Song* (Farrar and Rinehart). 1937. p. 208

The rakish cigar and the abnormal stoutness were forgotten five minutes after she had seated herself. One noticed only the marvellous neatness, the fine hands and delicate ankles, the small mobile mouth, the coolly modulated voice, the quick-appraising but not unkind eyes, the fine features and almost transparent skin. One saw a woman who was not only intelligent but—there is no other word for it—pretty.

Louis Untermeyer. *Harper's Magazine*. Aug., 1939. p. 266

The central figure of the poetic life of the twenties, though not of its literature in general, was Amy Lowell. Yet not so much as a poet as a dynamo, sending impulses of energy wherever interest and excitement were needed. A good poet, an erudite and sometimes insolent critic, a rich and aggressive personality, she would have become a renowned bluestocking in any age. . . . Invalid in body, often moving with difficulty, I have seen her sitting at home like a chained eagle, lunging at what she called the pedantries of Harvard, of which her brother was president, or crushing with one claw some reviewer who lacked scholarship and a gentleman's education.

Henry Seidel Canby. *American Memoir* (Houghton). 1947. pp. 313–4

She touched a fuse wherever she went, and fire-works rose in the air; and there were no set-pieces more brilliant than hers, no Catherine-wheels or girandoles or fountains. There was no still, small voice in Amy Lowell. Her bombs exploded with a bang and came down in a shower of stars; and she whizzed and she whirred, and she rustled and rumbled, and she glistened and sparkled and blazed and blared.

Van Wyck Brooks. *A Chilmark Miscellany* (Dutton). 1948. p. 265

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LOWELL, Robert (1917–1977)

It is immediately apparent that Robert Lowell's poetry does not make for easy reading; the images are so congested, the allusions so complex that the uninitiated reader is likely to be confused. But it is also apparent that this is a poetry of deep passion and fierce tension; the impact is violent, the intensity of a traditional Protestant turned Catholic. Beneath the surface formalism of the verse, there is a deep protest against what New England has become, against the commercialism of the age and degeneration of the community. . . . His is a tortured outcry against the corruption of the times; a grim need to find a faith in a world torn between frivolity and failure.

Louis Untermeyer, *Modern American Poetry* (Harcourt). 1950. p. 693

His poems are shaken with the cold reverberant roll of the north Atlantic. He hears it with the ears of a familiar of the Nantucket coast. But what, louder than sea water, batters at his mind is the memory of the old whalers and of the meaning that Melville read in their bloody work, and the sound of the guns thundering for the new Leviathan. . . . Lowell is under no illusion about the power and the terror of the sea and, with the possible exception of Eliot, who has enlarged its significance symbolically, no living poet can realize it more terribly.

Babette Deutsch. *Poetry in Our Time* (Holt). 1952. pp. 368–9

Lowell's violence and individuality come almost as much from prosody as from imagery and idea. Though his syllable regularity is extreme, his licenses within the control of syllables are numerous. He is fond of the eccentric caesura; time and again he ends a sentence after the ninth syllable, and begins a new one with the rhyme word. He is also fond of medial inversion, and his enjambment, often coupled with early or late caesura, is more extreme than any other syllabic English poet. His assonances abound. . . . Harsh and consonantal monosyllables . . . also serve to clot the line and slow its pace. Initial inversion occurs in about twenty percent of the lines, a relatively huge proportion. . . . The master of variation within rigidity, he can make his lines rush, slow, hurtle, and come to a quiet halt, always fully under his control. . . . One might say that Lowell forces the Law upon himself in his syllabic strictness, and within this rigidity, this self-created confinement, hurls himself like an animal at the bars, achieving the definition of an emotion in the struggle of interior opposites.

Donald Hall. *New World Writing* 7. 1955. pp. 234–5

Mr. Lowell has a completely unscientific but thoroughly historical mind. It is literary and traditional as well; he can use the past so effectively because he thinks so much as it did. He seems to be condemned both to read history and to repeat it. His present contains the past—especially Rome, the late Middle Ages, and a couple of centuries of New England—as an operative skeleton just under the skin. . . . He does not present themes or generalizations but a world; the differences and similarities between it and ours brings home to us themes, generalizations, and the poet himself.

Randall Jarrell. *Poetry and the Age* (Knopf). 1955. pp. 192–5

Lowell . . . continually dwells upon scenes of death and burial. . . . To Lowell, man is clearly evil and a descendant of Cain and Abel is the eternal forgotten victim, hustled away from sight and consciousness. . . . These are the themes. . . . Lowell does not state them so much as present himself in the act of experiencing their weight. It is impossible to read his poems without sharing his desperation.

Louise Bogan. *Selected Criticism* (Noonday). 1955. p. 391

Robert Lowell is an outstanding pioneer extending the frontiers of language, making notable conquests of material which often seems too eccentric for poetry and consolidating it in very strong and compact form. . . . He has taken a lot of facts, observed or remembered (each of them strikingly separate as brittle shape or anecdote), and made from them his own truth. This truth is obstinate, moving and sometimes even tragic. . . . What these poems point out is the possibility of a humanist kind of poetry, in which disparate experiences are bound up within the sensibility of a poet who has himself an immense compassion combined with clearness and hardness. Tension is supplied by the reconciliation of very opposite personal qualities of the poet within his poem.

Stephen Spender. *New Republic*. June 8, 1959. p. 17

The voice of Robert Lowell's poetry has always had the authority of the extreme. No conflict is glossed over or rationalized by a system of ideas. His religion was always entirely eschatological: the world he describes, ancient or modern, is never influenced by religion but only threatened by it. It is as if he could bear to contemplate this world because he could momentarily expect its total destruction or total delivery.

Thus, the one thing this poet never worried about in his writing was how to go on living. This has given him great strength, which he still has. The new poems have abandoned the myths of eschatology and the masks of heroes, but the violence and the guilt, the unalleviated seizure of experience, these remain. This is why, perhaps alone of living poets, he can bear for us the role of the great poet, the man who on a very large scale sees more, feels more, and speaks more bravely about it than we ourselves can do.

John Thompson. *Kenyon Review*. Summer, 1959. p. 487

The persistent refusal of happiness, the constant indulgence of a guilty conscience, would make a dreary spectacle if it were not for a certain knowing humor and a certain poise of style in the offender. But Lowell is not only the hunger artist practicing an art of famine because he doesn't like food; he knows he is something like that and makes a conscious role of it. The prose memoirs are the most triumphant example of his essential composure. The surface of them is all anecdote and caricature, malign and dazzling; but the interior is solid social analysis of a family, a society, a period; and when completed the work will probably excel any poet's autobiography since Yeats's. The portraits and memories in verse are excellent in their command of a cadenced as opposed to metrical medium and they are exceedingly lively. But given their intense response to what they describe, they suffer a little from being inconclusive as to the meaning of it all. . . . They represent, perhaps, major poetry pulling in its horns and putting on big spectacles and studying how to survive.

F.W. Dupee. *Partisan Review*. Summer, 1959, p. 475

Lowell is still the wonderful poet of ''The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,'' the poet of power and passion whose striving aesthetic of anguish belies the ''frizzled, stale, and small'' condition he attributes to himself. He may be wrong in believing that what has happened to New England's elite is necessarily an embodiment of the state of American culture, the whole maggot character of which he feels he carries about in his own person. But he is not wrong in looking at the culture through the window of psychological breakdown. Too many other American poets, no matter what their social class and family history, have reached the same point in recent years. Lowell is foremost among them in the energy of his uncompromising honesty.

M.L. Rosenthal. *The Nation*. Sept. 19, 1959. p. 154

Robert Lowell is a . . . Lowell, and comes out of the heart of Lowell country—Beacon Hill. His memoir (*Life Studies*), though acerb and wise and tender, has above all that extraordinary subtlety of upper-class commentary on itself (something you don't find in so good a book as *The Late George Apley*) that is possible to Americans who don't really know anyone beyond themselves but who have the gift of experiencing and expressing their own situation to the depths. It is this that made Henry Adams, with all pretentiousness, such a marvelous autobiographer; Robert Lowell has only, poker-faced, to write ''In 1924 people still lived in cities'' for us to know exactly where we are. . . . He specializes in place, in eloquent vertigo, in stylizing the communion with self that is the essence of dramatic monologue, and I can't think of any poet of his generation who has polished the dramatic sense, rare enough, to such acuteness.

Alfred Kazin. *Contemporaries* (Little). 1962. pp. 226, 228

. . . *Imitations* offers us a further sense of Lowell's achievement, takes us back to his earlier work, and also asks us to read this new poetry as part of wider contexts. To read *Imitations* is again to be impressed with the ability of Lowell to make of poetry something magnificent. If in some sense the poet has traditionally spoken for the most enduring significant qualities of his group, has transmogrified through his work the experiences of himself and his time, then it seems to me that within the space of his first twenty years of poetry Lowell has capsuled one important phase of our literature and culture. From a religiously charged and traditionally formed poetry to an unrelenting secular search for the self in terms of a language that clamps into place like a razor blade, Lowell has dramatically given us our rueful and sometimes dazzling ties with the past, our contemporary puzzlement, and our vertigo sense of possibilities we don't even know how to spell out yet.

Richard Fein. *Sewanee Review*. Winter, 1964. pp. 135–6

The Old Glory consists of two short plays (formerly three), held together by the unifying symbol of a flag—*My Kinsman, Major*

Molineux, based largely on the Hawthorne story, and *Benito Cereno*, after the novella by Herman Melville. Mr. Lowell has accomplished the extraordinary feat of adapting these stories with relative fidelity to the originals while making them wholly and uniquely his own work. Invested with the author's sharp historical sense and marvelous gift of language, the source materials assume the thickness and authority of myth; American history takes on the quality of metaphor and ritual; traditional American literature begins to function like Greek mythology, as the source and reflection of contemporary behavior. What Mr. Lowell has done so subtly is to superimpose the present on the past so that the plays manage to look backward and forward at the same time. The works are not easy, for the author has purposely adopted a style which is chilling, measured and remote, but they are charged with flinty intelligence and taut emotion, and they work on the spectator with the suggestive power of non-discursive poems.

Robert Brustein. *New Republic*. Nov. 21, 1964. p. 28

For the Union Dead (1964) continues the conceptual break with the image of man Lowell formed with such metaphysical certainty in his early volumes. Its thesis, a further expansion of sentiments which earlier introduced the noncontemplative pursuits of plot and character, constitutes a reversal of centers of importance and marks the triumph of ''mere secularization and a craving for mechanical order'' which had long been part of his vision. Formerly, grace made the soul the active force in the universe, but now the universe acts upon man, and what had been a religious concern for man's soul becomes a psychological concern for his mind. Thus, man, like the Cain figure of *Land of Unlikeness*, is robbed of his free will, and his feeble attempts at right choice are spiritually meaningless. This works to reshape Lowell's style which here moves away from a willed poetry to a poetry of impressions.

Jerome Mazzaro. *The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell* (Michigan). 1965. p. 120

Life Studies has, over and above the success of many of its poems, the virtue of being a wholly integrated book in which all the parts fit and the prose supports the poetry. It further shows Lowell directing his work away from the elaborate, the baroque and metaphysical, and aiming for a more open statement and form, a language nearer to ordinary speech. The complete disappearance of religious elements and symbolism may be counted an aesthetic loss of sorts, since it removes a center of moral vision from the poetry. Still, as Lowell suggests, religious symbols do not of themselves make a poem religious, and we can justifiably think that sometimes in *Land of Unlikeness* and *Lord Weary's Castle* they obscure a clear apprehension of experience or manufacture a rhetoric of their own. *Life Studies* brings its author firmly to earth, to his individual life, and to a fresh look at the rudiments of poetic style.

Ralph J. Mills. *Contemporary American Poetry* (Random). 1965. pp. 158–9

As in the past, Lowell has included [in *For the Union Dead*] two or three poems that I cannot understand. I used to think this was my fault, but now I am not so sure: I cannot find in the poems, in their form or substance, anything that *requires* them to be so elliptical. Finally, taking all the new poems together, my feeling about the way Lowell has loosened his style in search of greater spontaneity is that he has produced in most cases exactly the opposite effect. When I finished reading the new poems I turned back to his early book, *Lord Weary's Castle*, to confirm my feeling. . . . His work was individual, but not mannered. The exact contrary seems true of the new poems. . . .

Hayden Carruth. *Poetry*. Aug., 1965. p. 359

Unlike many of his colleagues, Lowell is fascinated by ''the prose grip on things,'' and some of his elegiac essays of the past year—notably on Randall Jarrell, Ford Madox Ford, and Sylvia Plath—are as fine in their way as his verse. In *Life Studies* he attempted to recapture a portion of the territory that poetry has for so long yielded to the novel. He wanted to see how much of his personal story, memories, family history he could pack into his verse. In the best of these constructions there is so much art that it is misleading to refer to them as ''confessions.'' Now, as he says, he seeks another music and elegance and splendor. We tend to forget, when we praise the speed and immediacy of his work, that he established his reputation with a poetry that was at once controlled and fierce, hammered out line by line, of a superb metrical density. A sampling of his latest verse testifies that he must still be counted among the sons of Milton.

To comment in this abrupt and detached manner on a poet is to make him sound like a machine for producing verse. One of the disarming features of Lowell's work is that it does not seem to strain for greatness; rather the poems slide into it. He tells us the time in the right kind of voice for the day. He does not try to overpower us with a show of strength; instead he patiently builds a chain of fortifications out of sand, or even dust.

Stanley Kunitz. *Salmagundi*. 1966–67. p. 23

I don't think that the true *aficionado* of the ''theater of the irrational'' would be at all troubled by the willful elimination of form, meaning, and style that troubles me in this show [*Prometheus Bound*]: The attitude, or passion, of unspecified but ubiquitous resentment would, I suppose, suffice to authenticate the work and guarantee its profundity. The most advanced cults in the arts, whose pull affects a great many highly gifted artists just now, are as compulsive and all-sufficient and unassailable as any other new religion: *credo quia absurdum est*.

Francis Fergusson. *New York Review of Books*. Aug. 3, 1967. p. 31

I am not faulting Lowell's characters because they are not true-to-life, as the cliché has it, but because they lack theatrical validity. They are somewhat hedged in by his virtues—his intellectuality, his irony, his sense of language, his emphasis on theme, his preoccupation with the major concerns of our or any time. It may be that this deficiency will limit him as a playwright, not let him break through to a large audience where he can work on several levels at once. Even so, it is already clear, on the evidence of the two ''imitations'' [*Phaedra* and *Prometheus Bound*] and *The Old*

Glory that Lowell is one of the most impressive dramatists to turn up in the 1960's.

Gerald Weales. *The Jumping-Off Place* (Macmillan—N.Y.). 1969. pp. 179–80

The fact is that in this book [*Near the Ocean*] Mr. Lowell is concerned less with the mystery of man's destiny than with the dilemma of the times in which the poet finds himself, or, perhaps more accurately, the times in which the poet seems to be lost. Clearly Mr. Lowell wishes to interpret our time. His desire for a way is an anguish for which one feels sympathy and respect. His agony and his sense of inadequacy and loss are truly what hold this book together. Yet his is not the agony of a Juvenal watching the wanton destruction of something fine by men of egregious appetites for the material and the carnal, but rather that of a man who cannot decide, who cannot make up his mind, who sees nothing to believe in, who is forced back on his own reserves and judges these to be too slender. Mr. Lowell searches the present without understanding and without at all liking what he sees. He searches the past without comfort; all he finds there are ancestors whom he cannot follow, whose love he has lost or somehow forfeited, and for whom he has found no substitute.

F.H. Griffin Taylor. *Sewanee Review*. Spring, 1969. pp. 300–1

[Lowell] has moved with his culture. Like earlier New England poets, his sensibility first found itself in opposition; but unlike them, he has been forced by the rapid changes in American life repeatedly to reconstitute his principles of opposition, and thus always to define freshly his relation to his fellows. He has developed three basic directions for his work: a critique of public action and attitude in America; a critique of the state of the individual ego; and a sense of the historical, religious, mythological, and literary contexts which provide perspectives whereby to understand the possibilities of public or private life at any time. As his society has shifted during the last twenty-five years, Lowell has emphasized various combinations of these. . . .

His work, in short, has been a mirror to his culture, supplying society with elements for advance. He has criticized the poets of his generation whose ''writings seem divorced from culture.'' Culture, he came to see, provides the necessary background for art: neither, without the other, can endure. Constantly updating old poems for inclusion in new volumes, he moves with culture and refuses to let society catch up with him.

Jay Martin. *Robert Lowell* (Minnesota). 1970. pp. 44, 46

It is this successful marriage of ancient and modern that makes *Prometheus Bound*, like *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, a truly autonomous work of art, and not merely an interesting footnote to Robert Lowell's own poetry, as certain ''imitations'' are. Yet I am tempted to see the language of the play not only as a successful immediate tool, but as an indispensable stage in Lowell's stylistic development; its atemporality, its ability to incorporate surrealistic vividness into sentences fluid enough for the stage, all prepare the way for the weird yet comprehensive style of *Notebook, 1967–68*. *Prometheus Bound* in turn seems to derive from the recovered grand style of *Near the Ocean*—a most appropriate interplay, for the two original books undertake an inquiry into the first causes of our civilization, more than a little Aeschylean in its scope.

Alan Williamson. *Poetry*. Jan., 1970. p. 282

In *Life Studies*, which marked the beginning of what has been called confessional poetry, Lowell's techniques of self-discovery exclude myth; he concentrates on the personal and intimate episode, and his language is direct and sometimes colloquial. Important as this volume is as an expression of Lowell's new voice and his growing power to elicit from the absurd remark or the pathetic incident a link to the deepest levels of human suffering, and vital as it was in influencing younger poets, such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, it represents only one phase of his development as a poet. Lowell has gone on in later works to combine the mythical method of his early poetry with the direct and sometimes shocking psychological revelations of *Life Studies* and, in so doing, has reached beyond the compulsive inner probings of that book for a deep and intimate knowledge of human feelings as they are manifested in the larger realm of natural, social, or political life.

Lillian Feder. *Ancient Myth in Modern Poetry* (Princeton). 1971. p. 408

While all these aspects of *Notebook 1967–68* recommend notice for their own sakes, one comes away from Lowell's latest volume with the conviction that he has, in effect, drawn together, in both content and technique, the essential unity of his whole work. One of Randall Jarrell's early reviews of Lowell . . . speaks of the ''conflict of opposites'' in his work, a conflict between what Jarrell calls ''the stasis or inertia of the stubborn self'' and ''everything that is free or open, that grows or is willing to change.'' Jerome Mazzaro in his book on Lowell sees the same dichotomy in Nietzschian terms, a division between the Apollonian and Dionysian drives in man. The Robert Lowell who emerges at the end of the 1960s still offers no reconciliation between the two forces that he sees as constituting the nature of man, but neither has he abandoned the search for it. In the larger sense, all of Lowell's verse is ''confessional'' in that he has found the truest metaphor for the division of the nature of man to be within himself—though the same tensions extend outward to embrace American, and particularly New England, historical predecessors; his own family, both ancestors and now descendants; his literary colleagues; and, finally, the whole of twentieth-century society.

George Lensing. *Southern Review*. Winter, 1971. p. 344

It is impossible to make the transition . . . to Robert Lowell's revised *Notebook* without insisting that in fact there is no just transition, that the world of Lowell's poems is utterly more engrossing, dazzling, breath-taking even than could be believed on the evidence of his previous volumes. The *Notebook*'s sonnets are incredibly audacious and roomy in their willingness, their eagerness to speak about all the things a fully alive person should care about. . . . The speaker of *Notebook* is more nearly always ''half-balmy,'' devoted to ''unrealism'' (Lowell earlier called it ''surrealism'') which is ''about'' something, though always obliquely and often puzzlingly.

The last adverb is meant seriously, since many of these poems resist the intelligence very successfully indeed, sometimes in a manner similar to moments in the *Cantos* when Pound is muttering on about something into which we're not quite let; other times when Lowell entertains what he calls some ''bent generalization'' that lodges in the mind, yet whose precise weight doesn't reveal itself. The poems ask to be read again and yet again: never have I moved through a book the second or third time with less of the feeling of familiarity, confident that I'd ''done that one'' before.

William H. Pritchard. *Poetry*. Dec., 1971. pp. 166–7

On the one hand, the will to discredit and destroy the past; on the other, prophetic denunciation of or sorrow over that destruction. Our past destroys us, but we must not lose the past. Here, it seems to me, is the tragic center of Lowell's work, the moral stance that dominates his later writing, brings the political and the personal into a single perspective, and perhaps accounts for the elegiac tone that, in *For the Union Dead* and *Near the Ocean* particularly, has largely displaced the erupting violence of *Lord Weary's Castle*. . . . Something has been resolved, if only in the sense that the poems of these late volumes admit of no resolution, whether in religion, in psychotherapy, or in a moral understanding of history. These things remain important, in their way; but their way is not, as in ''At the Indian Killer's Grave,'' to transform circumstances or to provide answers. The past is irrevocable, as it was for Milton in his later years; as with Milton, human history is a record of disasters, and the problem is to survive, remaining sensitive to both personal and public terror but resisting those forms of destruction that can be resisted. . . .

Lowell's real subject in these later poems is, finally, the difficulty of remaining individually human and morally responsible in a world that offers increasingly compelling occasions for surrendering either or both.

George W. Nitchie. *Southern Review*. Winter, 1972. pp. 126, 130

[In *The Dolphin*] Lowell no longer quite succeeds in transforming his life into art, and his revelations, sometimes embarrassingly personal, sometimes boring, should indeed have remained ''sealed like private letters.'' Here, if anywhere, the famed confessional mode, inaugurated by Lowell's beautiful *Life Studies* of 1959, reaches its point of no return. . . . The complex web of realistic images and evocative proper names that characterized the *Life Studies* poems is replaced by flat statement: ''I cannot play or sleep,'' ''We have our child.'' The lines give us no particular image of the speaker; he is simply what Yeats called ''the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast,'' a real-life Lowell addressing his real-life wife. . . .

For Lizzie and Harriet contains, in revised and rearranged form, what may loosely be called the ''love poems'' of the *Notebooks*. *History* incorporates the remaining *Notebook* poems, again in revised form, and adds 80 new topical sonnets. The organization is now chronological: *History* begins with Biblical themes and ends with Lowell's most recent history, the book's final sonnets thus overlapping with those in *For Lizzie and Harriet*.

Future bibliographers will have a monstrous time with these books. Since neither the *Notebooks* nor *History* have alphabetical indexes, it is often difficult to find which *Notebook* poem turns up where in the new volumes. Titles have been changed, sequences altered, lines from one poem stuck in the middle of another, and it takes a good bit of detective work plus some simple arithmetic to figure out that everything in *Notebook* (1970) is used again somewhere in the two ''new'' volumes.

In itself, this procedure is perfectly acceptable. Lowell, as Stanley Kunitz has said, ''doesn't so much write his poems as rewrite them . . . he is never done with a poem.'' The impulse to rework and improve a poem is surely admirable—Yeats, say, did it all the time—but the depressing truth about the revisions in *History* and *For Lizzie and Harriet* is that they almost invariably make the poem in question less effective.

Marjorie G. Perloff. *New Republic*. July 7 and 14, 1973. pp. 24–6

The casual reader will hardly bother to search the varying editions of *Notebook* for Lowell's changes. But to do so is a lesson in sharpening and clarification: ''Mary Stuart'' and ''Revenants'' are only two examples out of many in which final success has been brilliantly won. Lowell goes as far back as *Lord Weary's Castle* to recast his earlier rhetoric into barer, demotic speech. He has condensed some of his controversial ''imitations'' of poets from other languages—notably his Sappho, his Villon, his Heine dying in Paris—into definitive Robert Lowell poems.

In all this work of the last six years, he can be seen exercising and renewing his power over the basic line of English poetry most congenial to him, the Marlovian-Shakespearean pentameter. During a difficult period of his life, safety-belted into his fourteen-line stanza, he has been playing with it, deepening his grasp, seeing what it can accommodate in the way of mundane fact, prose loosening, supple understatement.

Walter Clemons. *Newsweek*. July 16, 1973. p. 86

Each edition of *Notebook* carried a clear warning that in Lowell's usage, ''plot'' was an unusually capacious notion: ''Single poems and sections are opportunist and inspired by impulse. Accident threw up subjects, and the plot swallowed them—famished for human chances.'' . . . Which enables us, leaving all sorts of questions unanswered, at least to begin answering one question we've posed already: what sort of game Lowell is playing with us. We can begin by saying that it's an exceptionally *intimate* game: we are to be with him, we *have* to be with him, as he runs a distracted hand through his hair, leafing through his old files and trying to see what his recent writing amounts to; where and how, if at all, it ''adds up.'' As much with *History* as with any of the *Notebooks* we are really left to do the adding up for ourselves—*if we can*, the poet himself having virtually admitted that for his part he can't. And so, for ''intimate'' in this sense we might as well read ''democratic.'' From that demotic idiom which has become, since Williams, ever more *de rigueur* for American poets, Lowell is excluded because of his early schooling in the drumming decasyllable, ''the mighty line'' his coquettish habits of publishing are his way of achieving by other means a sort of unbuttoned welcome of the reader in the workshop, something that other American poets have achieved through a low-key idiom that he's debarred from.

All the same, ''coquettish'' is an abusive word, and it has to be. For as readers we just don't know where we are, or what is expected

of us. For instance, if from one point of view these procedures are democratic, in another light they are just the opposite, for the poems seem to come to us under the lordly rubric, ''Never apologize, never explain.''

Donald Davie. *Parnassus*. Fall-Winter, 1973. pp. 51–2

Robert Lowell is a poet of politics in this largest sense; as such, he is now commonly and, I think, justly acclaimed as the best, the most inclusive, the most deeply intelligent American public poet of his time. He is *the* poet of our advanced—or late—industrial civilization: of the iron bestiary of Victorian Boston fading into the pure geometries of New York; of the manic energy of presidents, and the obscure sadness of the citizen coddled and threatened as never before; of the intelligent mind enmeshed in institutional commitments that no longer automatically justify themselves as right and human, or even as harmless. In Richard Poirier's words, Lowell is ''our truest historian.''

Lowell's preeminence can only partly be explained by those external enabling factors he shares with many narrower writers: his close personal involvement in politics, both Establishment and non-Establishment, at several crucial moments in recent history; his gifts as a poetic realist, his eye for detail, his historian's grasp of the past. What gives life to these events, these faculties, is the complexity of mind and personality that ''sees'' the world by means of them; a complexity which—even if we ignore its personal side for the moment and speak only of ideology—is rather unusual. Lowell harbors within himself an Eliot-like conservative's insistence on forms of integrity lost in historical ''progress''; a revolutionary's vision of apocalyptic community and hunger for poetic justice; and a liberal's sharp, impersonal scruples (blunted to an essentially conservative *laisser aller* in so many lives, but not in this one). By his faithful recording of himself (or his selves) responding to history, Lowell records a history that is never easy, one-sided, or blinded by the temper of his times. But neither does it conduce to quietistic withdrawal; Lowell continues, almost desperately, to seek images of ethical action, even when the world he perceives gives a compelled, impersonal, and guilty shape to almost every emphatic action it contains.

Lowell's vision of civilization—being a product both of the man he is and of the time he lives in—is particular, painful, and dark. It is redeemed neither by an Eliot's faith that an adequate, if authoritarian, utopia may have existed in the past, nor by a revolutionary's faith that one can be abstractly yet accurately designed for the future. Consequently, Lowell must necessarily leave more questions of value, of cause and responsibility, of fundamental ''human nature,'' open to poetic inquiry than did his nearest predecessors. But it is this very appalling fundamentalness of Lowell's questions, combined with his honesty about historical terror, that make him a modern epic poet, and (to my mind) a more satisfying poet of history than Eliot or Pound, Auden or Berryman or Olson.

Alan Williamson. *Pity the Monsters: The Political Vision of Robert Lowell* (Yale Univ. Pr., 1974), pp. 1–2

To no little extent . . . Lowell seems already to have achieved what he once admired in the work of Eliot. Not only have all his poems become one poem—both in the broad sense that they make up a context that serves a maieutic purpose for any one of them and in the narrower sense that they have all in effect contributed to *History*—but his one poem has increasingly become his life. The latest books point the difficulty: the achievement groans under its own weight. Precisely because his career has developed in a manner comparable to that of one of his poems or one of his volumes, each new work labors directly under the burden of the past. How almost inconceivably difficult it must have been to reshape this burden as it appeared in *Notebook* into *History*. Nor does it seem—not that there is any indication that he would prefer to be able to do so—that there is any easy way for Lowell to retrench at this point. Given the vast echo chamber that he has constructed, every word that he utters must reverberate on and on for him, and consequently it is no wonder that he sometimes sounds as though he were sealed off from common experience by his ordinary personal experience. He has used virtually all the available material in weaving the net in which he is enmeshed; and yet he is convinced, this unlikely Penelope of the littoral, that it is his obligation to go on knotting and undoing the tarred rope.

Stephen Yenser. *Circle to Circle: The Poetry of Robert Lowell* (Univ. of California Pr., 1975), pp. 322–23

Writers have used lyric verse to write oratory, diaries, prophecies, natural history, philosophy and theology. Since Lowell is using it to write autobiography, we expect from him what we ask of all literary autobiographies—subjectivity, vivid self-presentation, subtlety of analysis and some detachment (whether scientific or ironic). On these counts alone Lowell ranks very high. He has largely given up one of the most solacing aspects of conventional lyric—that transcending of past and future in favor of an intense present moment of love, or grief, or happiness. Lowell forces us to read the emotions of the moment in the knowledge of emotions past and anticipated. Nothing is unshadowed; nothing is forgotten; no moment but reaches out to another on the farther shore. The burden of reading *Day by Day* comes from this weight of autobiography everywhere pervading a verse which is itself, paradoxically enough, almost transparent. . . .

Even in Lowell's most obscure moments, the presumption of story and sentence held fast, no matter how murky the story nor how rapid the utterance. He did not adopt those discontinuities of the modern poem and the modern line—collages, fragments, typographical dislocations and unpunctuated reveries—which were the external signs of an attempted mimesis of inner, rather than outer, reality. Lowell was wedded, like Milton, to syntax, and was unwilling to forgo that powerful resource for the weaker glue of Poundian associativeness. *Day by Day* seems to me to have broken the hold of tidy narration and chronological sentences without abandoning conventional English writing—an altogether remarkable sleight of hand.

Helen Vendler. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 14, 1977, p. 1

To borrow one of his own metaphors, Lowell's poetry ''clutches only life,'' for it is based on his belief that ''art and the life blood of experience can't live without each other.'' . . . [His] major poetic changes . . . grew out of his deepening sense of the relationship between art and experience. In his youthful period, under the direct

tutelage of Allen Tate and the pervasive influence of T.S. Eliot, Lowell fit his personal experience into impersonal mythic patterns. He conceived of his life as being in service to the poetic idea, as needing to be depersonalized and transformed into art. He constructed verbal icons out of his experience, the most ambitious and powerful of these being ''The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket.'' In his second, ''revolutionary'' phase, he learned, under the approving eye of William Carlos Williams, to bring his undisguised personal experience to the forefront of his poetry. Exercising a brilliantly original art, he produced an album of ''photographs'' of experience, his Confessional masterpiece *Life Studies*. In the third, long period of his maturity, Lowell continued to explore the domain along the boundary where life meets art. He now conceived of experience as being more inward than in his *Life Studies* stage: not isolable events from the past but a fusion of immediate impressions with consciousness itself. Experience in this sense, as T.S. Eliot wrote long ago, is indefinable except that it is ''more real than anything else.'' In the great poems of this period—''For the Union Dead,'' the ''Near the Ocean'' sequence, and *The Dolphin*—Lowell revealed the truth of a human heart and mind, his own.

Lowell's poetry of experience presents both danger and opportunity. The very word ''experience''—signifying a trial, a putting to the test, an experiment, in Lowell's phrase a ''working through''—implies risk. There is point in the fact that ''peril'' lies half-hidden within it. Yet the peril is redeemed by the reward: a poetry that unites the values of artistic creation with more universal human values. Lowell's poems plunge into, and thereby affirm for himself and for us all, the infinite possibilities for human life in the actual world. They embody a complex process of clarifying and thus culminating his experience; and then, since poems are themselves real, they take their rightful place within experience, leaving author and reader alike altered. Lowell once said of Thoreau that the most wonderful and necessary thing about his life was the courageous hand that wrote it down. The words apply equally to himself.

Steven Gould Axelrod. *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* (Princeton Univ. Pr., 1978), pp. 11–12

[*Day by Day*] What remains when imagination fails is a series of snapshots. In a number of poems it looks as if [Robert] Lowell has bid the muse go pack and taken painting or photography for a friend, media more likely than words to provide neutral description, ''description without significance'' (*DBD* 120), of moments that are vivid in the memory. There is mention of pictures, cameras, photographs, and negatives. Poems may convey tableaux or glimpses of frozen action: Lincoln ''clad for the moment in robes of splendor'' (32); a goose swaying in ''stationary anger'' (119); details in a Dutch interior. . . .

But then if we turn from ''The Day,'' which opens the last section, to ''Epilogue'' (127), which closes it, we find the poet weighing in his hands the style of the faithful literalist painter against that which he himself had deployed in the past, the act of naming. . . . ''He seeks,'' says Axelrod, ''to restore the lost connections between human beings and the world they inhabit so fleetingly.'' And it is the imaginative act of naming that will effect that restoration, while ''description without significance,'' the prelapsarian acceptance of things without their names, the act described in ''The Day,'' is not enough. The poet is recognizing at last that there is no substitute for the glorious fallen powers he has lost through infirmity.

A. Kingsley Weatherhead. ''Day by Day: His End Game.'' In S. G. Axelrod and H. Deese, *Robert Lowell: Essays on the Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1986), pp. 227, 229

The theme of *Imitations*, then, is a romantic one. Ennui spells death; mania brings enlightenment; suffering is the matrix of poetry. This is self-justification: quite as much as T.S. Eliot's doctrine of impersonality, though at the opposite end of the spectrum. . . . At his most apparently personal, Lowell is most literary. *Imitations* nevertheless has to be read as a set of original texts. . . . From various European texts Lowell has extracted themes congenial to his troubled spirit, and made them his own.

Philip Hobsbaum. *A Reader's Guide to Robert Lowell* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988), p. 123

[''*For the Union Dead*''] . . . Photographs confirm that the safe ''that survived the blast''—which Lowell compares to the ''Rock of Ages,'' a metaphor in Isaiah for God—was actually a double-door vault. The Japanese bank manager's letter provided the documentary evidence that was used in the crass advertisement showing ''Hiroshima boiling / over a Mosler safe.'' The manager ignored the ghastly circumstances, congratulated the company on their sturdy product, expressed delight that the precious cash was saved and boasted that the vault was ''stronger than the Atomic Bomb.'' His letter expresses, with unconscious irony, the humane theme that Lowell makes explicit: the amoral technical achievement that preserved the safe led directly to the destruction of 150,000 people.

Jeffrey Meyers. *American Notes and Queries*. January, 1990, pp. 24–25

Harriet Lowell is a domesticated example of the dangers and possibilities of creating one's identity that are the anguished subject of ''Death and the Maiden.'' Now that Lowell is an adult, situated at the powerful center of his own poems, both a husband and a father, he demonstrates a desire to stem the freedom of absolute fluidity of form for others' sakes as well as for his own. In the early *Life Studies* poems, Lowell expanded toward that freedom away from the powerful presences who had shaped him; in the later *Life Studies* poems, he reduces his stature and his possibilities in order to preserve others from himself. Both are finally impossible dreams: absolute freedom and absolute control are beyond the powers of any child, any parent, any spouse. And they are surely beyond any writer, of necessity caught between the fixed and the free, struggling to keep warring families of words from the ''inkfish stain'' that is a necessary condition of their birth.

Terri Witek. *Robert Lowell and ''Life Studies''* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri, 1993), pp. 111–12

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LURIE, Alison (1926–)

I imagine Alison Lurie puts on surgical gloves before sitting down at the keyboard of her typewriter. She comes equipped with scalpel, hemostat, forceps, rongeurs. She operates on her characters. Their hopes, illusions, pretensions and rationalizations are tumors to be removed. Whether, after the operation, they will recover or relapse is generally left to the reader to decide. In her four previous novels—*Love and Friendship*, *The Nowhere City*, *Imaginary Friends, Real People*—she seems to have wearied of her elegant work and to have gone home before the anesthetic wore off. *The War Between the Tates* is no exception. . . .

Now there are a great many pleasures to be found in *The War Between the Tates*. There is, for one thing, the faultless prose, like an English lawn. One could play polo on such prose, swatting ideas with a mallet up and down the pastoral field. There are brilliant scenes, dozens of them. . . . After the horses have galloped through each scene, Alison Lurie slips back on the lawn, tamps down the divots, smoothes the way for the next chukker.

There is, as we've come to expect from a Lurie novel, a detachment so profound that we might be looking at tropical fish in a tank instead of people in extremis; an irony so heightened that we're embarrassed for her characters and for ourselves; a comedy so grey that it tickles the frontal lobes while chilling the gut. On her turf—the evasions and self-deceptions of our upper middle classes, the strangled cries of artists and academicians—she is masterful and savage. She bends conventional narrative techniques to her scourging purpose; it is surprising that they do not break, that her well made novels can support so much disdain.

And yet *The War Between the Tates* is an annoying book. Alison Lurie is punishing the Tates for their having thought themselves better than other people, ''exceptionally handsome, intelligent, righteous and successful young people.'' They end up the novel ''ugly, foolish, guilty, and dying.'' Then why was it necessary to drag in the Vietnam war? Analogies between that war and the war between husbands and wives drag through the pages; the metaphor weighs a ton. Containment, escalation, guerrilla warfare, hostages are not so much alluded to as forced down the reader's throat. Even the rapprochement of Erica and Brian is made to occur at a peace demonstration. Yes, adultery is *the* obsession of American novelists, and maybe it has something to do with our finding out that we aren't the perfect children of the Enlightenment that we believed ourselves to be, but, no, our foreign policy is not an extension of our boredom in the bedroom or our loathing of teenaged ingrates or our self-righteousness about marriage vows.

More significantly *The War Between the Tates* is populated by people who are never permitted to experience their own possibilities, cerebral or visceral. Alison Lurie's clamp is on them. . . .

In their different ways John Cheever and John Updike have covered this turf, too: Updike seeking some lyrical equivalent of the joy of discovery and the pain of betrayal, Cheever finding even in our failures a redeeming humanity, sorrow instead of disgust. Alison Lurie refuses to sympathize, and so this marvelously polished, splendidly crafted novel creates an antiseptic space in the mind: no one can live there.

> John Leonard. *The New Republic*. August 10 & 17, 1974, pp. 24–5.

If Alison Lurie's novel [*The War Between the Tates*] is a triumph in familial realism executed by the use of an extraordinary, scornful intelligence, it is also a beautiful example of good writing, perfectly suited to what it is saying. The device of sliding back and forth between the present and the past tense, so annoying in the hands of a lesser writer, here suits her purposes exactly. It gives the novel a simultaneous past and present, moving it at crucial moments out of the narrative past and bringing it into the often-painful immediacy of the current moment. Further, her ear for dialogue at every age level is impeccable, from the shrill ingratitude of adolescents to the self-absorbed egoism of faculty members. Every word of the speech she records rings true. So, there is no possible way we can escape the truth of her observations about the discontents and disappointments of their lives; the shock of recognition is absolute.

Lurie has taken a set of ordinary characters, or at least not exceptional ones, submitted them to the strains and battles of time, sex, legal alliances, generation gaps, politics and work: all the ingredients of a popular novel. But her sensibility and talent are so superior that she has given us an artistic work, which every one will read because it is ''common'' to us all, but which some will perceive to have the crafted look and feel of first-rate work.

> Doris Grumbach. *Book World—The Washington Post*. August 11, 1974, p. 3.

There is some firm evidence in the five novels she has so far published that Alison Lurie should be a better novelist than she is. Her reputation up to now does not indicate that she has been widely appreciated for the qualities she does possess, although she has acquired over the years a certain small cult following, and . . . *The War Between the Tates* appears to be winning her the kind of popular attention which may prove only that her limitations have at last begun to be recognized as seeming more attractive than her virtues. That novel, at any rate, represents a descent from some relatively serious level of intention into a flossiness which was only occasionally detectable in her before and which may well be attracting her natural public.

Yet from time to time even here and in the best of her earlier work Miss Lurie reveals qualities that merit—and have seldom been given—close critical consideration. She has a satirical edge which, when it is not employed in hacking away at the obvious, is often eviscerating. She writes a prose of great clarity and concision, an expository language that efficiently serves her subject but that does not stylize upon it. She has many true things to say about the various modes of self-deception and distraction by which we endure the passage of life in these peculiarly trivializing times, and she often says them in a manner she has earned entirely by herself and that represents an authentic fictional voice. Yet there is also

something hobbled and hamstrung about her engagement of experience, something that causes her again and again to fall short of what one feels to be her full capacity to extract the truth of her materials. She seems regularly to be aware of more than she can imaginatively comprehend, to be able to describe more than she can make thematically significant. Above all, there is a lack in her of the kind of adventurousness usually associated with important talent, a conventionality or timidity that frequently causes her to make formulations of reality which in a part of her mind she must know to be clichés, and to pass over without examining certain possibilities for satire which a more radical talent would recognize as the most fertile possibilities to be found in her chosen subject.

These deficiencies manifest themselves perhaps most clearly in Miss Lurie's heavy dependence on sexual intrigue for the dramatic complication of her fiction. In all her novels except *Imaginary Friends*, which seems to have no recognizable place in her canon, there is a monotonous sameness of situation which might appear to represent a ringing of changes on, and a progressively deepening exploration of, an obsessive subject until one sees that really there is no changing or deepening. *Love and Friendship*, *The Nowhere City, Real People*, and *The War Between the Tates* all have to do with the experience of adultery . . . [in] the university community or artist colony . . . and as a rule the sexual drama is given such force as it possesses through being played out against the background of the dreariest middle-class respectability, boredom, child-breeding, and generalized spiritual and material shabbiness. What usually happens is that as a result of having good sex with somebody not one's legal spouse, the errant husband or wife achieves some temporary sense of rejuvenated identity which may or may not be to the ultimate advantage of marriage and community.

It is one of the older saws of criticism that extramarital sex in literature is not of terribly much interest in itself, however graphically it may be described. Its value lies in the illumination it gives to character and in the extent to which it poses some fresh challenge to the always fragile balance of tensions existing between the erotic imperatives of the self and the official hypocrisies of the public world. The penetration of the illusion that snobbery generates is, in Lionel Trilling's excellent phrase, the proper aim of the social novel, and adultery is one of the traditional, if hackneyed, modes through which this aim is accomplished. But Miss Lurie seems never to grasp the implications of the melodrama around which four of her five novels are constructed, and there are insufficient moral prohibitions in the society she describes to give it the depth of implication she is unable to perceive within it. She appears to feel that it is enough if her characters dare to commit the heresy of climbing into bed with one another. That is enough to insure their meaning as characters and to justify their presence in her novels. Her treatment of adultery suffers, in short, from arbitrariness and inconsequence. The insight it affords us into the natures of the people who commit it is finally reducible to some idea of the beneficial or destructive effects of orgasmic liberation, which is repeatedly seen as in and of itself an apocalyptic experience. . . . [The] lives of these people either do or do not undergo some important change—a sufficiency of meaning perhaps in the one-dimensional world of the soap-opera serial, where what happens next may finally be all that matters, but a gross insufficiency in novels that seem to promise some genuine revelation of character on a plane subtler and more complicated than that simply of the variety of sexual things one does to others or others do to one.

Miss Lurie can be seen to share the dilemma of any satirical novelist of manners whose work must depend for its vitality in some direct way upon the vitality of the life he is attempting to satirize. The dilemma is deepened, furthermore, when the novelist's subject is contemporary academic manners, for nothing is more obvious to anyone familiar with the university scene of the last twenty years than that the dramatic possibilities for a fiction dealing with academic life are not what they once were—nor has the gradual growth of an encrustation of cliché around some of its most typifying characters and situations made the problem any less difficult. It seems scarcely conceivable that a novelist of whatever degree of talent would be able to write academic fiction today without being obliged to write *through* the precedent established by such classic practitioners of the genre as Helen Howe, Mary McCarthy, Randall Jarrell, Robie Macauley, and Bernard Malamud, at the same time that he would necessarily be writing without most of the advantages which these writers possessed. . . .

In Miss Lurie's fiction of academic life a situation that may once have been crucial may seem to be of uncertain significance or to have a merely hoked-up significance just because the actualities of academic life have depleted it of drama. . . . [In *The War Between the Tates*, the] problems would seem to be swollen with dramatic, not to say melodramatic, possibility. But they actually are not because we recognize that behind them there is absolutely nothing at stake—no risk, no threat, no anguish. The society in which they and the characters exist is much too limited, drab, and morally diffuse to give them consequence. . . . It is a society made for and by the burgeoning new population of academic Babbitts, and it is the ideal medium for their relentlessly bourgeois pursuits.

There is evidence in Miss Lurie's novels that she has some awareness of this aspect of academic life, but she treats it as little more than stage-setting for her favorite drama of sexual intrigue. Perhaps it would require a talent the size of Mailer's or Bellow's to recognize that just here, in the contrast between the professional function of academics and their way of life, is to be found what little remains of interesting literary material in the university scene . . . and it could form the basis of a great subject. But Miss Lurie's novels do not engage it because her imagination remains trapped amid the clichés of academic life, in situations which history has rendered obsolete and crises which have lost their power, in both actuality and art, to matter very much.

John W. Aldridge. *Commentary.* January, 1975, pp. 79–81.

It's amusing enough simply to recall some of the events of *Foreign Affairs*, the seventh and latest work of fiction by Alison Lurie, who teaches English at Cornell University and has quietly but surely established herself as one of this country's most able and witty novelists.

At the beginning, Virginia (Vinnie) Miner, a tiny spinsterish Ivy League professor of children's literature, boards a plane for a six-month period of study in her beloved England, trailed by an imaginary mutt ''known to her privately as Fido and representing self-pity.'' Fido will shortly be howling and putting his paws on Vinnie's lap, for not only has she just discovered a paragraph disparaging her in a magazine of national circulation, but she is about to be accosted conversationally by a folksy sanitary engineer from Tulsa, Okla., against whose friendliness her only defense is the copy of *Little Lord Fauntleroy* she offers to lend him.

The possibilities of this situation will develop beyond our most intricate imaginings. It will be helped along by a younger colleague of Vinnie's named Fred Turner, an excessively handsome young man who is visiting England to do research on the 18th-century poet and dramatist John Gay, and who, in chapters that alternate with those recounting Vinnie's triumphs and tribulations, gets steadily more involved in a Jamesian love affair with a beautiful and aristocratic English television actress.

But besides amusing us with its story, *Foreign Affairs* is wonderfully stimulating for its sheer performance as a novel. Perhaps by stressing this I'm admitting nostalgia for a classical approach to literature, but as I read *Foreign Affairs* I couldn't help visualizing a diagram with the rise of Vinnie's fortunes superimposed on the decline of Fred Turner's. There's something almost musical in the way the two plots interplay, like two bands marching toward each other playing consonant music.

I have the urge to digress on Miss Lurie's treatment of the classic themes of love and illusion, of innocents abroad (as well as the guilt-ridden), and of American boosterism colliding with Anglophilia. I want to take apart her marvelous language and see what makes her witty metaphors tick. I'd like to paint a map of her London, for she has taken its familiar features and made them glow with the special colors of her art.

I will take as a sample of the novel's technique one passage in which Professor Miner assays her future. As she sits on a bench outdoors in London, having been released anew into physical passion, she realizes not only that she is free of the ''demanding and defining voices of her colleagues and students and friends,'' but also that ''English literature, to which in early childhood she had given her deepest trust, and which for half a century has suggested what she might do, think, feel, desire, and become, has suddenly fallen silent. Now, at last,'' she continues to ruminate, ''all those books have no instructions for her, no demands—because she is just too old.''

''In the world of classic British fiction,'' she reflects, ''almost the entire population is under fifty, or even under forty—as was true of the real world when the novel was invented.'' Even today, in most novels ''it is taken for granted that people over fifty are as set in their ways as elderly apple trees, and as permanently shaped and scarred by the years they have weathered. The literary convention is that nothing major can happen to them except through subtraction.''

But in real life—or the real life of Alison Lurie's fiction—Vinnie has many years to live and much to experience. Why, therefore, she concludes, should she ''become a minor character in her own life? Why shouldn't she imagine herself as an explorer standing on the edge of some landscape as yet unmapped by literature, interested, even excited—ready to be surprised?''

This passage works in several different ways. First, it is interesting as an observation about literature. Second, being typical of the way Vinnie Miner thinks, it contributes to our interest in her as a character. (Fred Turner, her foil, also has an original turn of mind.) Third, the passage is typical of the way the novel calls attention to what it is up to—for indeed the book is unusual in the way it focuses on a person ''over fifty'' without patronizing or pitying her. But more important still is how by calling attention to itself the scene reminds us of the book's self-consciousness and thereby highlights not only its dazzling artistry but also the highly artificial world in which both its major characters are living.

Finally, the passage resonates because, with irony characteristic of the book, its insight comes too late for Vinnie. Unknown to her, a tragedy has occurred. Except it somehow isn't tragic. With Alison Lurie's alchemy it is transmuted into comedy. So deft is the touch of her intricately playful fiction—so securely fixed are her characters at just the right distance between the pathetic and the ridiculous—that we can both like them and laugh at them.

I forgot to mention that it's at the London Zoo that Vinnie Miner realizes she has been freed from the constraints of literature to express her physical being. On the other hand, she happens to be watching the polar bears at the time. In *Foreign Affairs* no detail lacks its special piquancy. And none can be savored without leaving you with a mouthful of barbed hooks.

> Christopher Lehmann-Haupt. The *New York Times*. September 13, 1984, p. C21.

Alison Lurie's wit is robust enough to give the so-called academic novel a good name. The two principal characters in *Foreign Affairs* teach in the same English department, and both come to London on sabbatical. . . .

Lurie traces their unsuitable love affairs in alternating chapters; Henry James looms in the background. A BBC serial of a James novel is turned on in one scene and recurs to Fred when he's invited to a house party James might have relished. This is a wonderful comic idea. The Jamesian expatriates who once had the money to trip through British society have become academics, on limited budgets, whose heads are stuffed with literary notions of England as The Great Good Place.

Foreign Affairs is good enough to argue with. One of the pleasures of Lurie's fictions is her habit of commenting tartly on her story in Jane Austen's peremptory manner. But some of her asides on the love affair of Vinnie and Chuck have the schoolmarmy click of a pointer tapping on a blackboard: ''The media convention is that people like Chuck and Vinnie—especially Vinnie—don't enjoy sex very much or experience it very often . . . In books, plays, films, advertisements, only the young and beautiful are portrayed as making love. That the relatively old and plain do so too, often with passion, is a well-kept secret.'' Isn't that just a little preachy?

Another objection: at the climax of Fred and Rosemary's love affair, Lurie explodes a plot contraption that has been so elaborately prepared that one applauds its cunning instead of wholly believing in it. It involves a charwoman named Mrs. Harris, a boldly Dickensian clue. I confess I was had. I was so busy spotting Eng. Lit. references in the higher realm of Henry James that I was hit in the back of the knees when Lurie snuck up and pulled a piece of Agatha Christie humbuggery. High and low, this is a very literary comedy. . . .

But it's an ingenious book and, surprisingly for Lurie, a touching one. She has not been famous for mercy. I liked *The War Between the Tates* for its fury, which won her Gore Vidal's accolade as ''the Queen Herod of modern fiction.'' Here she does a magnificent number on an awful baby as terrible as the monstrous teen-age children of the Tates. But acidulous, snobby Vinnie Miner is granted a moving acknowledgment of love. Vinnie is an entirely successful creation, Chuck almost as good. Rosemary is an unstable compound. A plain woman's (Lurie's) meditation on the problems of beauty, she has a stinging scene with Vinnie. ''You think a lot of men want to sleep with me,'' says Rosemary. ''Men don't want to sleep with me, they want to have slept with me.'' While I don't quite buy what Lurie finally does with Rosemary, I

keep thinking about her. I'll be surprised if another novel this year amuses and bothers me so.

Walter Clemons *Newsweek*. September 24, 1984, p. 80.

In *Foreign Affairs*, although Lurie leaves her American setting behind and ventures into the bowels of the British Museum and the drawing rooms of country estates, she carries along many of her old belongings. The two characters at the center of the story, Vinnie Miner and Fred Turner, are by now familiar types in her fiction: professors from Corinth University who are painfully aware of their own provincialism, but seemingly incapable of overcoming it. . . .

There is potential here for the kind of sharp social satire Lurie excels in, and the novel contains flashes of her distinctive wit and style. But *Foreign Affairs*, like its two protagonists, is hampered by an inability to surmount its own pettiness. The plot is mechanical and cluttered with unpolished jottings on everything from tourist disorientation to the ways in which specialists in Vinnie's field relate to real children; and the characters are both overwrought and undeveloped. Even Lurie's keen ear for colloquial speech and her eye for revealing mannerisms frequently fail her: in characterizing Chuck and Rosemary, Lurie vacillates between joining Vinnie and Fred in their crude typecasting—Chuck talks in an exaggerated Western twang; Rosemary flutters and giggles and pouts—and taking them to task for it.

All of Lurie's novels are programmatic: like most comic writers she relies upon formal contrivances to heighten irony, to create startling juxtapositions, to make a larger point about the individual's accommodations to the demands of society. In *The War Between the Tates* Erica and Brian's marital battles were punctuated by a sonorous voice-over narration which compared them to the social and political upheavals accompanying the Vietnam War. In *Only Children* Lurie failed in her occasional attempts to blend the naïveté of two little girls with her own stinging cynicism. But Erica and Brian were energetically and realistically drawn; and Lolly and Mary Ann, if somewhat limited as narrators, brought a fresh glimpse into the old themes of marital boredom and infidelity. In both novels Lurie credibly evoked a chapter on American social history. Alas, in *Foreign Affairs* the characters are so unappealing and the contrivances of plot so labored that the ironies are leaden rather than leavening. And, its title notwithstanding, the only affairs she addresses here are carnal.

As for the lessons Lurie lays out, they are of the most rudimentary sociopsychological sort. Yet these two reputable professors are maddeningly slow learners. Fred, filled with self-love, can't find happiness until his obsession with what Lady Rosemary represents is replaced by a clear-eyed recognition of what she is. . . . It is during a game of charades—what else?—that he has his first vague glimmerings that Rosemary is not quite the fragile English flower she seems. Suddenly she and her cultivated friends appear raucous, even depraved. . . . Vinnie, for her part, filled with self-hate, must not only cease to see Chuck Mumpson as a source of revulsion and pity, but herself as well. . . . In the end, of course, it becomes clear to Fred that Lady Rosemary, far from representing ''the best of England,'' actually embodies the destructive self-indulgence of a decadent class society; and to Vinnie that Chuck, who reminds her of all that's shameful and ugly in America, in fact personifies American openness and stolid decency.

Still, simplicities and stereotypes aside, Lurie is as deft as ever when she turns to the mortifications of romance. She is an uncannily accurate observer of the ambivalent emotions that enter into unconventional sexual alliances, and when she abandons her gimmicky plot devices and moral posturing, *Foreign Affairs* is funny, touching, and even suspenseful. As Fred's affair with Lady Rosemary is being consumed in horror (the final revelation scene is a weirdly appropriate combination of Hitchcock suspense and Lurie humor), Vinnie's affair with Chuck is being consummated in a moment of poignant farce. This odd couple is finally brought together thanks to a suitably ludicrous matchmaker: Chuck's plastic fold-up raincoat.

At last, a character with integrity. This homely garment not only has a perverse charm of its own, it also helps to transform Vinnie, the perpetually peevish man-hating snob, into a flustered, touchingly vulnerable woman. When Vinnie and Chuck first bump into each other in London, she disdainfully notes that he is wearing ''a semi-transparent greenish plastic raincoat of the most repellent American sort,'' and registers it as an emblem of his personality: coarse, tasteless. Yet the raincoat comes to show Vinnie more about her own shortcomings than it does about Chuck's. Her hatred of it festers over the weeks, and she turns on it in furious embarrassment after Chuck's first bumbling embrace in her tiny kitchen, in which he knocks a bowl of watercress and avocado soup over them both: ''If he only had a decent raincoat instead of that awful transparent plastic thing—she gives it a nasty look as it hangs in the hall—then he could wear that while his clothes dried, or even go home in it.'' In several quick scenes the raincoat explains Vinnie's social pretensions and fragile dignity; and in the scenes that follow, it gives credence to the evolution of her contempt for Chuck into tolerance, affection, and—most remarkably of all—hearty sexual appetite.

In *Foreign Affairs* Lurie shows once again that she is a farsighted observer of human fallibilities, but an odd kind of moralist. Hers is a particularly brutal form of mockery: she forces her characters into compromising positions and then denies them any real escape. The end of the novel superficially follows the traditional comic pattern—the characters are sent back home; the social order resumes—but Lurie doesn't think much of spiritual regeneration. . . .

Of course, neither Fred nor Vinnie has essentially changed at all: he is still impossibly obtuse, she has reverted to whining self-pity. This elaborate novel is more of an exercise in verbal and structural ingenuity than it is a full-fledged comedy or melodrama. The snugness has become oppressive, and the secrets Lurie invites us to share, no longer enticing, are for the most part trivial, sordid, and sad. . . .

Dorothy Wickenden. *New Republic*. October 8, 1984, pp. 34–6.

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MACDONALD, Dwight (1906–1982)

Dwight Macdonald has hardly written an impartial book about Henry Wallace. But he has written a brilliant, slashing attack with a cogency of evidence and a keenness of insight which may give the book much more than the fleeting interest of campaign polemics. Political journalism in this country has become a neglected art, with too little departure from the hired eulogy and the aimless gossip fest. Mr. Macdonald's essay tosses away the conventions of current political writings. The resulting portrait is etched in acid, but that does not necessarily mean it will not endure.

Macdonald conducts his assault from a complex and isolated position which probably few of his readers will share. In his time he has pretty much boxed the compass on the left; a Yale man who flirted with Stalin and then with Trotsky, he next became a free-wheeling, left-wing deviationist and is now apparently on his way to some form of Christian anarchism. From his private shooting box he can take pot shots at anything that flies along.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 22, 1948. p. 3

While Macdonald's book [*Henry Wallace—The Man and the Myth*] is more than a cut above the usual campaign document, it misses being a definitive study by a good deal. It is hasty, padded, and sometimes remarkably careless for a journalist of his caliber. . . . And he is not beyond some rather weird theorizing of his own, such as the linking of Wallace, Upton Sinclair, and Bernard Shaw to show a possible connection between health faddism and a leftist political orientation ''highly uncritical of Stalinism.''

Robert Bendiner. *The Nation*. March 6, 1948. pp. 179–80

The meat of Mr. Macdonald's book [*The Ford Foundation*] is the extraordinary collection of information he has put together, with the continuity and clarity of the true craftsman, about the people and the policies that run the modern mammoth among institutional Maecenases. . . .

Here are the twin themes that dominate the Macdonald deflation of Foundations in general and the Ford giant in particular. Granted the donors are well-meaning (as well as corporate-control-conscious and tax-shrewd), granted that attacks from the political Right (as against the Fund for the Republic, Ford's ''wholly disowned subsidiary'') are stupid, granted it is a Good Thing to raise college teachers' salaries (though quite indiscriminately), still it is individual intelligence, not group grubbing, that has produced practically all of the world's great creative ideas, and even a fresh idea from a member of a subsidized team must be stultified when cut to the least common denominator of a concurring crowd.

Fred Rodell. *Saturday Review*. June 2, 1956. p. 17

All in all, Dwight Macdonald's book [*The Ford Foundation*] is consistently entertaining, and at times it is, in fact, desperately funny. It is somewhat unsatisfactory, however, if one is looking for a fairly balanced appraisal of the Foundation's work. When Macdonald is ridiculing the zany pretensions of the Institute for Philosophic Research headed by Mortimer Adler and describing other esoteric projects; when he observes that ''a philanthropoid would deal with the problem of a man trapped in a burning house by subsidizing a study of combustion''; when he draws attention to the Foundation's fondness for sponsoring large schemes of research whose findings have proved totally sterile—in sum, when he is discussing what he considers the Foundation's weaknesses, Mr. Macdonald is a thorough and in the main persuasive critic. But it is clear that he has channeled most of his energies into the diverting job of faultfinding, and has skimped on the more laborious task of checking conscientiously into the positive results of many of the Foundation's donations.

Charles J. Rolo. *Atlantic Monthly*. July, 1956. p. 85

This book [*The Memoirs of a Revolutionist*] is largely a collection of editorials and articles which Mr. Macdonald wrote for *Politics* between 1944 and 1949. If you did not keep a file of your own copies, here is your chance to acquire some of the magazine's best pieces between hard covers. If you have never heard of *Politics* before, the book will give you a glimpse into political writing that was refreshingly off-beat and into a mind that, in those years, was delightfully nonconformist. This was Dwight Macdonald's finest hour. . . .

Political satire is almost extinct, which is perhaps only another symptom of the decline of politics itself; but Mr. Macdonald was very good at it. He was not a deep thinker, but a practising journalist; and he pulled some big boners, as in his analysis of the problem of Germany after the last war. He often misjudged the realities of a political situation because he was too preoccupied with the moral issues involved. But his critical faculties never failed him when he used them for the purpose of satirizing and lampooning the passing scene of national and international events.

Hans Meyerhoff. *Commentary*. Nov., 1957. pp. 464–5

In the end, then, the book [*The Memoirs of a Revolutionist*] has to be read as the autobiography of an idea—it belongs with those memories of the Marxist left which in American writing correspond to memoirs of the early Progressive period. It takes its place on the shelf with the memoirs of other old revolutionists; it has the immediate quaintness of material to which the author himself looks back with incredulity, as who should say—Was *I* there, in Paterson, in Passaic, at the time of the great strike? Was it really *I* who wrote that pamphlet appealing to the workers and peasants of the Bronx?

It is this extraordinary and unexpected irrelevance of the ''radical'' experience that is so striking in Macdonald's book. In retrospect, it is the unreality of old issues, old quarrels, the utter insignificance of American Communism, Lovestoneism, Weisbordism, Trotskyism, that is the most profound impression he leaves. But why is the impression so much of triviality, boredom and fatigue? Actually, the irrelevance of the radical tradition to current politics

is far less obvious than the insignificance of the conservative tradition. And in any event, the editorials in the *New Republic*, the fights on *Partisan Review*, the letters-to-the-editor in the *New International*—all this, though it seems to him now only vacuous, must have been important enough to Macdonald, since an essential part of his life was invested in it. Yet vigilant and unsparing as he is about himself, eager to be honest, to avoid exaggeration, he writes as if he cannot disguise from himself the utter meaninglessness and triviality of what it means to be an old ''revolutionist.''

Alfred Kazin. *Partisan Review*. Winter, 1958. p. 137

Dwight Macdonald has made the whole province of culture that lives by words and ideas the subject of his wit—that is, his intelligence. As readers of his book reviews in *The New Yorker* will know, Mr. Macdonald is profound as seldom as he is daunted or dull. This collection of essays [*Against the American Grain*]—they have all appeared in one form or another before—proves no exception. The book is full of verve and vinegar: it is astute, quarrelsome, funny, and prolix. Its targets are significant, its passions largely reasonable. . . . Mr. Macdonald is at his best when he is performing on some enemy of culture a definitive operation, with instruments ranging from hatchet to scalpel. The sections entitled ''Pretenders'' and ''Betrayals'' (note the differences in nuance) include the famous and devastating critique of Cozzen's *By Love Possessed* (a Pretender), as well as the equally thorough and remorseless essays on the Chicago Great Books *mit* Syntopicon, the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, and the third edition of Webster's New International Dictionary (betrayals all). Mr. Macdonald is so effective in these pieces that he manages to make his conclusions about the most controversial subjects seem final; or, better still, to make the most hallowed subjects seem controversial.

Ihab Hassan. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 15, 1962. p. 20

As a commentator on masterpieces, the author of *Against the American Grain* is brisk but crude. He speaks often of the critic's need for ''sensibility,'' but he himself offers Midcult substitutes—including Critical Shivers, Sophomore Survey platitudes, Careless Superlatives, and a disposition to accept as final the standards of style set by publications (*Fortune* is one) on which he served his journalistic apprenticeship. Nor could it be said that Macdonald is without weaknesses as a thinker. . . .

When all this is said, however, it needs to be added that the issues Macdonald raises are not bogus issues. . . . Less than the sage that his current tone indicates he aspires to be, livelier than dozens of writers in the coherent English literary world that he extravagantly admires, this critic stands forth at his best as a keen, effective witness against meretriciousness, and, as such, an invaluable literary man.

Benjamin DeMott. *Harper's Magazine*. Jan., 1963. pp. 90–1

Dwight Macdonald, who takes exception to Raymond Williams as a theoretician, said of *Culture and Society* that it ''was interesting and valuable as long as it was specific.'' The same thing might be said of *Against the American Grain*. Although Macdonald has strange lapses in taste, a number of dirty rhetorical tricks and a tendency to go on too long, face to face with an individual work, particularly one he can attack, he is often correct in his judgments (that is, he agrees with me) and amusing in presenting them. Unfortunately, he introduces his new collection of essays with the now famous *Partisan Review* article ''Masscult & Midcult'' and the rest of the book inevitably becomes part of the polemic.

Once upon a time—so begins the Macdonald story of the decline of culture—there existed a fine and workable division between high art and folk art. Starting in the eighteenth century, stampeding in the nineteenth, masscult supplanted folk art, which, by Macdonald's definition, means that the impersonal replaced the individual, the produced-for-market edged out the self-created.

Gerald Weales. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1963. pp. 157–8

Mr. Macdonald's prose is always clear and definite (and very often charmingly witty), but its clarity has been bought by simplification and its definiteness is without depth: it is the best two-dimensional prose now going, the prose of someone who has found what can be at any time the most convenient substitute for taking thought—a position. . . .

More than he is anything else, Mr. Macdonald is a critic of style. To be precise, he is a critic of prose style, and he tends habitually to regard writing with the jaundiced but good-humored eye of a teacher of Freshman Composition. In his unwavering regard for the standard, traditional virtues of English prose, Mr. Macdonald takes his place along with Hazlitt and Orwell as one of the caretakers of the language. Yet his sense of prose is less adequate than that of either of them and tends to be merely standard in its insistence upon what can be thought of as the externalities of prose (indicating again both the strengths and shortcomings of the neo-classic temperament of mind). This deficiency of inwardness is characteristic of Mr. Macdonald's writing in general, and we find it first of all in his own prose. . . .

In the end, his objections to mass culture and modern society are also aesthetic—that is to say, Mr. Macdonald regards society as essentially a work of art. This is the classic conservative position, and a respectable one; but it must be added that Mr. Macdonald is a conservative only in cultural matters and has not taken to himself the other beliefs which add substance if not final strength to the traditional conservative attitude.

Steven Marcus. *Commentary*. April, 1963. pp. 351–3

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MACDONALD, Ross [Kenneth Millar] (1915–1983)

Just at the time that the tough genre in fiction needs revitalizing John [Ross] Macdonald turns up. There is nothing startlingly new

about Mr. Macdonald's plot (though there is great technical dexterity in his interweaving of three levels of criminal endeavor). . . . The outstanding freshness of this novel comes, instead, from the fact that Macdonald as a writer, as a weaver of words and an observer of people, stands head and shoulders above most of his competitors. He can evoke pity and terror for his ''foreshortened figures with blood and money on their minds,'' and probe the social and psychological implications behind crime and detection—and do this without sacrificing for a minute the impact of a tautly paced, tightly constructed story.

Anthony Boucher. *New York Times Book Section*. April 3, 1949. p. 28

It has taken Macdonald ten years and as many novels, all about private eye Lew Archer, to learn finally how not to imitate Raymond Chandler. Chandler came close at times to being the great California fabulist, but his metier was the seedy and the criminal, and Macdonald has gradually created his own form, after a number of attempts to rewrite Chandler's, by turning to the lives of quiet bourgeois desperation that are the legacy of California's passionate belief in unreality. Anthony Powell uses coincidence marvelously to show how people who speak the same language are never far apart; Macdonald uses coincidence equally marvelously to show how a life gone out of control, moving as fast as California makes it move, must intersect with countless other lives of which it knows nothing. The only honest mode of address in such a world is the interrogative, and so Lew Archer asks questions and listens to answers which can be connected only by someone not committed to having a life himself.

Roger Sale. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1963. p. 148

A few years ago Ross Macdonald wrote a series of stunning psychodramas that still remain generally neglected: *The Galton Case*, *The Wycherly Woman*, *The Zebra-Striped Hearse*. But subsequent books fell into repetition of these successes, and now the latest, *Black Money*, sets out to do something different. It begins—and few writers create the sense of starting out as well as Ross Macdonald—with what seems a standard tale about the way underworld money corrupts the respectably wealthy, and proceeds to show how Lew Archer, Ross Macdonald's private detective, wrongly assumes, as if because he watched too much television, that when you find the underworld king you solve the case. Archer has the rug neatly pulled out from under him—the solved case leaves everything unsolved—but then, author and hero, sadly, have nothing left except shreds of a worn-out tangle and some not very clearly articulated anti-academic biases. Someone coming to Ross Macdonald first via *Black Money*, then, has every right to feel he is only another private eye novelist. But those who know this curiously modest and pretentious writer can still invoke his entire career and say he may be started on something new.

Roger Sale. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1966. pp. 127–8

Ross Macdonald writes detective novels, so he is seldom dealt with in serious literary quarters. This is everyone's loss. He is a skillful and intelligent novelist, albeit a minor one, who provides those essential insights into character and milieu which are the major functions of his craft. . . . bourgeois America is depicted quietly and mercilessly as a place in which human aspirations are lost in a shuffling movement toward surfing, gambling, senseless academic or business achievements, and suburban status. Though the violence of the third-rate private detective thriller is conspicuously absent, Macdonald's universe is replete with malevolent activities and psychological violence—more convincingly frightening as the reader realizes the veracity of the account.

Henry A. Woodfin. *New Leader*. April 11, 1966. p. 26

More and more critics, not only of the suspense novel, but of general fiction, are coming to discover that Ross Macdonald is an important novelist of the American scene in the 1950's and 1960's; and they have particularly noted that Macdonald is one of the very few novelists in any genre to write with genuine insight and perception about the peculiar microcosm that is labeled ''Hollywood.'' . . . In 1951 I noted of [*The Way Some People Die*] that it ''manages somehow to fuse Swift's contempt for humanity with Saroyan's love.'' This combination of two inescapable emotions characterizes most of Macdonald's work. And perhaps as Macdonald comes to be esteemed as a serious writer, I should add the reminder that he also writes beautifully plotted detective stories, with a precise balance of action and character.

Anthony Boucher. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 19, 1967. p. 46

Archer from the start has been a distinguished creation; he was always an attractive figure and in the course of the last several books has matured and deepened in substance to our still greater pleasure. Possessed even when young of an endless backlog of stored information, most of it sad, on human nature, he tended once, unless I'm mistaken, to be a bit cynical. Now he is something much more, he is vulnerable. As a detective and as a man he takes the human situation with full seriousness. He cares. And good and evil both are real to him.

Archer knows himself to be a romantic, would call it a weakness—as he calls himself a ''not unwilling catalyst'' for trouble; he carries the knowledge around with him—that's how he got here. But he is in no way archaic. He is at heart a champion, but a self-questioning, often a self-deriding champion. He is of today, one of ours. *The Underground Man* is written so close to the nerve of today as to expose most of the apprehensions we live with.

In our day it is for such a novel as *The Underground Man* that the detective form exists. I think it also matters that it is the detective form, with all its difficult demands and its corresponding charms, that makes such a novel possible.

Eudora Welty. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 14, 1971. p. 29

The development that one hoped for has not quite taken place. Macdonald's later books are in many ways better than the early ones. They are composed with less violence, more subtlety, more

satisfactory plots. The quality of the observation gives pleasure; the view of California as a place of immense beauty made ugly by man is expressed with passion; there is a lot of sympathetic and discerning characterization, particularly of the young. . . . Yet an impression that Macdonald has repeated too often the quest for personal identity and the investigation of the past that marks these books, that he has been too easily content with the things he can do well, remains.

Julian Symons. *Mortal Consequences* (Harper). 1972. p. 191

In *The Underground Man* Macdonald keeps entirely within the formula but broadens it by providing a great California fire as the background of his book. This fire is an ''ecological crime'' linked more than fortuitously to the cigarillo dropped by Stanley Broadhurst, the murdered son. Stanley belongs to a ''generation whose elders had been poisoned, like the pelicans, with a kind of moral DDT that damaged the lives of the young''. By combining ecological and moral contamination Macdonald creates a double plot that spreads the crime over the California landscape. . . . Superb in snapshot portraiture of California life, Macdonald gives us a sense of the wild life flushed out by the smoke, the way people lean on one another when they fear crime and fire.

Geoffrey Hartman. *New York Review of Books*. May 18, 1972. pp. 31–2

As always in the Lew Archer novels a great many people [in *Sleeping Beauty*] are linked together by avarice, adultery and anger; all are suspect because in the closed world of a family's affairs those who do not breed corruption are eroded by it. In this novel, too, we see all of Macdonald's other motifs elegantly developed—the search for the lost child; the idea that family determines fate; the need to restore order to the past as well as to the present; the balance between natural and moral disaster; scattered images suggesting the imminent end of man and his endeavors; and a harmony of structure: the bird that is washed up from the oil-slicked ocean at the book's beginning is paired a little later with a man who is similarly oiled and destroyed.

Peter S. Prescott. *Newsweek*. May 7, 1973. p. 101

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MACKAYE, Percy (1875–1956)

Still another poetic drama which attempts, like *The Firebringer*, the justification of the ways of God to man, is Percy Mackaye's *Fenris*, *the Wolf*. . . . Certainly, Mackaye has individuality almost to the point of being fantastic. Individuality is a necessary part of the poet's make-up, but convention is equally necessary. By convention he enters into the sympathies of his readers and avoids giving shock and repulsion. Mackaye impresses one as a poet with growth ahead of him, with many large ideas still partially in embryo and with some roughnesses to smooth. The alliteration of all Fenris's early speeches is overdone. A little more hesitation about extravagance, a little more classical restraint would add distinction to the undeniable originality and power.

Louise Collier Willcox. *North American Review*. May, 1906. p. 753

Considered as a poem to be read, Mr. Percy Mackaye's *Sappho and Phaon* surpasses all his earlier productions. Considered as a play to be acted, it does not pass beyond their ineffectiveness. . . . In all of his work thus far, Mr. Mackaye has shown talent as a poet and lack of talent as a playwright. He seems to sense his themes as narrative, instead of drama; and he writes in closet-verse, instead of theatre-verse. Even *Jeanne D'Arc*, which evoked considerable commendation when performed by Miss Marlowe and Mr. Sothern, was a transitory panorama of narrative and lyric episodes; instead of a firmly builded play, marching through a clash of character on character to a culmination and a consequent catastrophe. Mr. Mackaye will never be an effective dramatist unless he learns to appeal to the mind of the multitude instead of the mind of the individual; unless he learns to care more for his people than for his poetry; unless he learns to write for the sake of his scene rather than for the sake of his writing; and unless he learns to build for the spectator instead of for the reader.

Clayton Hamilton. *North American Review*. Aug. 16, 1907. p. 880

The central conception of this play [*The Scarecrow*] is loftily imaginative and profoundly real; for it embodies that ludicrous and tragic incongruity between what we are and what we will to be which overwhelms us all in those deep hours when introspection holds before our eyes the glass of truth. This concept is universal in its human implications; and in Mr. MacKaye's play it is unfolded in a manner that is deeply impressive. Moreover, as a vehicle for acting, the piece is admirably adapted to the exigencies of the stage. Ravensbane is a very striking part and afforded a gifted performer an opportunity for the most imaginative and poetic piece of acting that has graced our stage this season. The scene of the magic manufacture of the scarecrow is highly picturesque, and the transformations of the devil are cleverly conducted. Much of the dialogue is beautifully written; and in Ravensbane's long soliloquy before the mirror, the text rises to a lofty and memorable eloquence.

Clayton Hamilton. *Bookman*. March, 1911. pp. 28–9

No one living has done more than MacKaye for this super-art form of the people's theater. And yet MacKaye is bound to forms of expression that have shown themselves to be utterly futile in production. He is a poet of remarkable facility of phrase. His great masques are built upon a framework of literature. This means simply that they are built upon a structure that is out of sight and out of mind of the audience. The use of megaphones to magnify speech has so far only introduced an element of the grotesque. MacKaye has been quick to seize every new expedient and to give it imaginative use. The effects of lighting, of massing, of chorals, the use of great puppets have been justified in his work. Nevertheless, he would be the first to admit that everything achieved so far is but the first draft of an experiment toward a new form. . . .

Percy MacKaye has all the defects of his virtues, the virtues of his defects. No man can be all things. He has tried to be all things. I hold for him that he is possessed of the most fecund imagination in the American stage of today. Against him I hold that this very imagination, this superfluity of energy, this belief that he can set all things right has led him into activities that have ill served his cause. He has surrendered to the fallacy that by lecturing the people he can create a people's art. With much of the patience of greatness he has much of the rashness too.

Thomas H. Dickinson. *Playwrights of the New American Theater* (Macmillan). 1925. pp. 47–8, 53

During nearly a quarter of a century he has striven to awaken in the American people a sense of civic consciousness, and through his plays, operas and pageants, has shown the way to a realization of his own high ideals. . . . Though few of his plays have been commercially successful, MacKaye's influence has, on the whole, been wide and beneficial.

Barrett H. Clark. *A Study of the Modern Drama* (Appleton-Century). 1930. p. 381

Mr. MacKaye stands in our drama for high standards of dramatic writing. He represents the movements for a civic and national theatre, untrammelled by commercial considerations, and he has brought into recent prominence the idea of the community masque or pageant, in itself one of the most significant dramatic movements of the time. At the same time he is not simply a theorist, but has proved his ability to write plays that succeed upon the stage.

Arthur Hobson Quinn. *Representative American Plays* (Appleton-Century). 1938. p. 809

The tendency of [the early twentieth-century theatre], as has become evident, was towards increasing realism, even though it was largely a realism of the surface. Something of an anomaly is *The Scarecrow* (1910), the most successful of the plays of the indefatigable experimenter, Percy MacKaye. But it is also prophetic, looking forward not only to the whole tradition of experimental drama which would flourish after the first World War, but to the fruitful attempts of the folk-playwrights to draw materials from American legend, history, and tradition.

Alan S. Downer. *Fifty Years of American Drama*, 1900–1950 (Henry Regnery). 1951. pp. 35–6

The play itself [*The Scarecrow*] presents a far-reaching idea and, what is more remarkable, presents it in a peculiarly theatrical image, that of an automaton or doll learning to be human. . . . *The Scarecrow* was worth writing if only to place this single moving image before an audience, but one can't help regretting that Mr. MacKaye hedged it around with the kind of verbiage that theatre people call literature.

Eric Bentley. *New Republic*. June 29, 1953. p. 23

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MACLEISH, Archibald (1892–1982)

The Hamlet of A. MacLeish is frequently fiercely subjective and therefore romantic; but from time to time, at the close particularly, it broadens into universal utterance, becomes in a way selfless, classical in its dignified acceptance of the burden laid upon man by life. That there are flaws in the poem I should not deny: here and there ill-chosen words, now and then a too facile line. But the conception of the poem is lofty, the design pure, the accent moving and true, the vocabulary rich and poetical. It will betray nobody's

taste to affirm Mr. MacLeish a poet of true distinction, and, incidentally, the finest craftsman in verse now writing in English.

Lewis Galantiere. *The Nation*. April 17, 1929. p. 472

Through all (his) books the poet's philosophy of life—or perhaps one should say the instinctive feeling about life which becomes the underlying motive of his art—is less hard in texture and brazen in tone than most of the Parisian-American group could sympathize with; there is room for human pity in it, and even for human love—that love of the race which, implying the merging of the individual in the mass, may be the democratic, or at least the communistic ideal—an ideal difficult, perhaps inaccessible to the poet, who is always by instinct an individualist. . . . I have much faith in the ability of this poet to interpret his age. . . . There is perhaps only one fundamental doubt—it would take gusto to express this age, a shout of driving rage and laughter, a rush of god-like or demoniac power. . . . Can MacLeish, shy, sheltered, melancholy by temperament, compass all this?

Harriet Monroe. *Poetry*. June, 1931, pp. 154–5

The point of departure, one might say, is the nostalgic, the note of self-pity, the ''pathos of distance,'' which everywhere cries and rings in these poems—so much so that one eventually thinks of them as all one repetition of the same theme. . . . It is like somebody speaking to himself in a mirror. . . . Mr. MacLeish can do better than this—he has already proved it. He has the means, he only lacks the aim. Already a poet to make us all envious, if he could only break this glass and walk inward on himself or outward to the world, he could perhaps say what no other contemporary poet could say.

Conrad Aiken. *New Republic*. Jan. 17, 1934. pp. 287–8

Clear realization of the necessity of living up to one's ideas emotionally has led MacLeish, in a kind of desperation to value deeply his own beliefs. . . . MacLeish's career, considered in terms of the ideas he has held, has the appearance of being a series of unconnected allegiances. . . . (But) continuity of fundamental feeling is one of the great rewards of MacLeish's approach to the world. His sensibility may develop—it has done so continuously up to the present—but there is never any sharp break. . . . There is an organic and continuing relationship in MacLeish's poetry because he has so very rarely been false to what he felt, no matter what the cost.

Arthur Mizener. *Sewanee Review*. Dec., 1938. pp. 511–8

Two currents of poetic attitude can be traced through the poetry of Archibald MacLeish: his sense of the past and his deep loyalty and passion for the American land. . . . Although he disdains classicism as a formal motive of art, MacLeish is a traditional poet in the same way that Eliot and Pound are also in the stream of tradition. That is to say, he is not lacking in the historical sense which links his work with the literature of the past. . . . For MacLeish himself the problem of man's fate depends upon the preservation of a national tradition. His Americanism is as far removed as possible from the easy nationalism of a Walt Whitman or a Paul Engle, and his poetry makes evident the fact that his choice was deliberate and difficult.

Dayton Kohler. *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Oct., 1939. pp. 420–1

Mr. MacLeish . . . fail(ed) in his attempts to write affirmative public poems, patriotic poems, poems inspired by liberal enthusiasms. He succeeded, it is true, much better than many other poets who, during the depression years, were trying to do the same thing, but still he failed. . . . Mr. MacLeish's short lyrics are his best poems. . . . The love poems, and there are many of them, written during every phase of the poet's career and in every aspect of feeling, are all excellent; they are composed with a restraint and an exactness of language that make them songlike, Elizabethan. Among the latest poems are several that challenge with vigor, bitterness, and yet with good taste the cheapness and stupidity of public life today.

Hayden Carruth. *The Nation*. Jan. 31, 1953. p. 103

If we count T.S. Eliot as English, then it can be said that among American poets Archibald MacLeish has been the most serious in his efforts to write verse drama and that *J.B*., his adaptation of the Book of Job, is probably the best American verse drama so far. . . . The constant shifting from the play through the play-within-the-play to the reality within the play is first-rate theater as are the sudden interpositions of Biblical language. . . . It is a sign of how good *J.B*. is that in reading it one keeps visualizing it on the stage and wishing to see it there.

Robert Langbaum. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. May 11, 1958. p. 31

In these poems of the Fortunate Fall the symbol at the core of the metaphor is first the green tree, then the Distant Voice. The Fall is alienation by assertion of human personality. The redemption is through the dry tree: through suffering and love. . . . Throughout his career MacLeish has himself been seeking the metaphor by which to give meaning to the modern age. Of late, like so many contemporaries, he has sought the larger metaphor of myth. Nothing he has written has been more moving or more meaningful than the proud humanism of *Songs for Eve* and the tragic reconciliation of *J.B*.

Eleanor M. Sickels. *American Literature*. May, 1963. pp. 216–17

As I read the play [*J.B*.], above all it builds to a declaration that man must confront his predicament. Everywhere MacLeish batters at the smugnesses and the assurances which keep us from knowing the truth. We see MacLeish's intention in the change that comes over J.B. during the course of his experience. We see it in the contrast between Zuss and Nickles. We see it in the blindness of the three comforters, with their persistence in clinging to a single creed. In that one sense alone the play justifies human suffering. Before man can come to a full realization of his predicament,

MacLeish suggests, he must have all the certainties shorn away—home, children, wife, wealth, health, creeds—as well as the certainty that suffering has a meaning. His choice to go on, live, and love, has validity only if he knows that there is nothing he can count on.

Sheldon Norman Grebstein. *University of Kansas City Review*. June, 1963. p. 260

Herakles, I am glad to report, is rather more successful in ''being'' than *J.B*. was. It is deftly constructed as one large-scale metaphor: of man's achievement resulting in a sharpened confrontation with what is tragic in his destiny. The play has two acts, and it presents two great achievers: powerful, driving males, flanked by their ministering, suffering and disbelieving females, and by their various offspring both present and absent. . . . MacLeish has got hold of a real subject, and he is too experienced to miss the opportunities inherent in it. Also, since there is no one clearly defined masterpiece, like the Book of Job, towering in the background, but only a tangle of stories which can well bear being told again, there isn't that crippling sense of secondhandness.

John Wain. *New Republic*. July 22, 1967. pp. 25–6

In a time when kindergarten drama such as *MacBird!* is acclaimed by the organized ''avant-garde,'' a play such as *Herakles* will probably be passed over or damned with faint praise. That would be a pity. Archibald MacLeish's new play is as virile and as stageworthy as *J.B*.—which is saying a great deal. What it will be like on the stage is one thing. As a dramatic poem, it fulfills its intentions.

J.B. affirmed the pathos of the human condition and the dubious rewards of submission to the blind will of Creation. Herakles, a kind of anti Job, by virtue of superhuman labors becomes a god in his own right, only to discover that he has murdered his own children in his pride. MacLeish draws from the tangle of the myths and cults of Hercules the parable of the antihumanist modern—the scientist who brags that he shall conquer death itself, even at the risk of exterminating life.

Karl Shapiro. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 6, 1967. p. 8

MacLeish in phase is a poet who deals most congenially with affirmation, nostalgia and their delicate affinities. In the crisp, emotionally charged shorthand which, for a time, was his own personal convention, he recorded—and, to a degree, created—the semimythical character of the well-bred, well-heeled young American who lived in that state of mind called Paris at the end of World War I. . . .

When MacLeish did finally embrace America and became in person, in rhetoric and in Washington the most ''official'' of our poets, something essential had been sacrificed. Since much of what he wrote was easily consigned to that limbo where a determined will toward the poetic results only in poesy, many of his admirers felt that the poet had lost himself to his *view* of himself. Much of his ''public speech,'' they felt, was crimped by grating assumptions about the nature of America, ''brotherhood'' and the audacity of Communist fellow travelers; that many of his vatic utterances were memorable not because they were persuasive but because they were just so darned pretty.

Yet, even in the midst of his speeches to the multitude, MacLeish's earlier voice was still able to register, like a needle on a graph, those nicer nuances that had once defined his talent.

John Malcolm Brinnin. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 19, 1972. p. 6

MacLeish has, finally, fashioned an eminently readable poetry in a considerable number of his poems, endowed as he is with linguistic and musical facility and a gift for the suggestive image. But he lacks an innovative poetic imagination. If we place his poetry next to that of Eliot, Pound, Williams and Stevens—to all of whom he appears indebted—we will perceive that it takes over features and practices from theirs to make a pleasing work that yet neither sustains nor engages the intelligence and sensibilities of the reader in the manner of those pioneers. We may delight in MacLeish's lyrical gifts, be drawn into the celebratory or elegiac moods he casts, but where in his writing can we locate—except at second hand—anything like the dynamic, individual, complex wrestling with language and form, with history, myth, personality, mystical experience and the modern environment so prominent, so much a shaping force (though differing in disposition and degree) of artistic practice for such poets as Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Stevens, or Williams? Theirs was the deep, desperate, wholly engaging struggle which brought about innovation, often from an eccentric, unpopular, isolated, or even wrong-headed perspective. MacLeish has lived and written from a more commonsense center, as befits a man of long and distinguished public service.

Ralph J. Mills, Jr. *Parnassus*. Spring–Summer, 1973. pp. 214–5

It is to the art of poetry that Mr. MacLeish has given the best part of his mind and heart, and it is to the poetry that we must turn—and return—for a sense of his true accomplishment.

Yet even in this sacred precinct, in other writers so distant from the hurly-burly of public affairs, it is sometimes difficult to know exactly what kind of poet is addressing us. For in his poetry, too, Mr. MacLeish is often a public figure, easily lured into debate on the issues of the day and frequently tempted to construct those elephantine historical scenarios that have so often proved to be the graveyard of noble literary intentions. The writer who gave us the lengthy *Conquistador* and *Frescoes for Mr. Rockefeller's City* and *America Was Promises* will always, perhaps, have a place in the cultural history of the 1930's, but it is not primarily as poetry that such works survive today. . . .

One has no doubt that it was in the lyric mode, with its inward examination of private experience, that Mr. MacLeish found his true vocation. The poems addressed to public issues are simply not in the same class, and not only those of the 1930's but the recent ones, too. The voice of civic rectitude in his verse is pious, stentorian, false—less so in the later poems, perhaps, but it is still a voice that is a poor surrogate for action or impotent rage. And the odd thing about Mr. MacLeish's career is that two of his most famous poems—''Ars poetica,'' written in the 20's, and ''Invocation to the Social Muse,'' written in the 30's—are eloquent warnings against precisely this sort of tendentious sermonizing. As

he wrote in the latter poem: ''The things of the poet are done to a man alone/As the things of love are done—or of death when he hears the/Step withdraw on the stair and the clock tick only.'' The wisdom of these lines was, for some years, little heeded by the poet himself.

Archibald MacLeish is, then, a contradictory and paradoxical poet, and his *New and Collected Poems, 1917–1976* is a book, a big book, very much divided against itself. One would like to see some day a slenderer volume of short lyrics culled from this large book—a book made up of the poems of the ''man alone''—for it looks very much as if it will be by those poems that this writer will live.

Hilton Kramer. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 3, 1976, pp. 27–28

Ten years ago Archibald MacLeish published a prose collection called *A Continuing Journey*, it was a public book, addresses and essays on topics ranging from literary theory to the fate of the nation. Now he has published a new prose collection, *Riders on the Earth*; this one is a private book, filled with MacLeish's reminiscences, meditations, and convictions. They reveal behind the fine mind a generous spirit.

There are two kinds of essays here. In the more formal ones MacLeish examines the course of humanism in the last decade and makes a case for its future. In the others he discusses, fondly but with unsoftened clarity, his own past and the lives and careers of some of his friends and colleagues. He is the last of the race of literary giants that created modernism, and he has had to write these eulogies for some time now. . . .

MacLeish has, and has long had, a bad name in literary circles that call themselves sophisticated because he is an optimist. Indeed, examining the events of the late sixties, MacLeish finds grounds for hope where many have seen despair. The resentment of the young was valuable, he says, because it was ''not a resentment of our human life but a resentment *on behalf* of human life.'' He makes an essential distinction between this spirit and any of the particular forms rebellion may happen to take, some of which threaten the order necessary for a human life. . . .

MacLeish's optimism is not born of naiveté; we should be naive to presume it of a man whose close friends have included not only Ezra Pound and Ernest Hemingway but also Niels Bohr and Franklin Roosevelt. The very range of his experience is astonishing. Perhaps the best reason we might have to take heart about our own futures is the optimism of a man such as this.

Tom Johnson. *Sewanee Review*. Fall, 1978, pp. cxxvi–cxxx

Art encompassed experience: so believed Archibald MacLeish; and since politics was part of experience, art encompassed politics. On the contrary, politics encompassed art: so contended the Fascists and Communists of the 1930s and their spiritual successors who used the power of the state to brutalize art and artists. MacLeish condemned them for what they thought and what they did. He also exhorted his fellow American artists to abandon their posture of political neutrality and accept the responsibility of art for action. Only action would protect the freedom of the individual and of the states that nurtured that freedom from the attacks of the new barbarians ravaging Europe in 1940. Later, MacLeish again exhorted Americans, artists not the least, to protect their tradition of freedom from the barbarians among their countrymen who were ravaging the politics of democracy in the postwar decades. As MacLeish saw it, a poet had no other choice. A responsible artist, a man or a woman of letters, had to be a man or a woman of action. . . .

Though he wrote some beautiful poetry, MacLeish was not a great poet—particularly in his longer works. In both *Nobodaddy* (1925), a play in verse, and *The Hamlet of A. MacLeish* (1928), he went about ''the business of poetry . . . to make sense of the chaos of our lives. . . . To compose an order which the bewildered . . . heart can recognize. To imagine man.'' *Nobodaddy*, his contorted version of the Fall, put Cain and God's curse upon him at center stage. Burdened by his knowledge of good and evil, Cain, ''a fugitive and a vagabond,'' had to survive outside the Garden of Eden. That was also the burden of mankind—to endure in spite of the knowledge of human depravity, a lesson imparted to MacLeish by World War I. But MacLeish did not mention the war even by implication, and he did not express in any way what he meant by evil. The play anticipated his responses to later demonstrations of a lost past of ''golden innocence'' but it did not succeed either as drama or as blank verse.

The Hamlet also failed. Here MacLeish exposed his own bewildered heart, blamed himself for seeking fame, and urged himself to set more selfless goals. He bared his grief over the deaths of his son, his brother, and several friends; he also lamented his fear in times of danger. But there was a shallowness about his lamentations: he seemed to bewail his sins without recognizing the possibility of evil within the human heart. Critics, many of whom had found MacLeish's lyric poetry derivative, repeated and expanded that charge in their reviews of *The Hamlet*.

John Morton Blum. *The Yale Review*. April, 1993, pp. 106, 112

By the time Archibald MacLeish won the second of three Pulitzer Prizes for his *Poems 1924–1933*, he was esteemed by many critics as being among the finest poets of his generation. The volume demonstrated that MacLeish could write engagingly in a variety of lyric and narrative styles. . . . He would be a famous poet and man of letters for another fifty years till his death in 1982. And yet, in the everyday ongoing conversation of poets and readers, and in recent literary criticism, his reputation seems to have shriveled to the didactic couplet that closes his poem ''Ars Poetica'': ''A poem should not mean / But be.''

Any effort to rehabilitate MacLeish will probably have to begin with that couplet and move outward circumspectly toward the epic intentions of *Conquistador*, a poem that will sit better with readers persuaded by the polemics of neonarrative theory than with those raised on the New Criticism and deconstruction. ''Ars Poetica'' is one of many poems from that period that skillfully moves from image to image in the modernist manner, offering self-contained ''shots'' in quick succession without the connective tissue of exposition, impressionistic rumination, or logical argument—all the verbiage that poets have quarreled with since Verlaine in *his* ars poetica (''Art poétique'') vowed to strangle rhetoric by the neck in order to purify verse of everything that was not poetry. It hardly needs demonstrating that this method became the dominant structural form for verse in this century. Workshop instructors still recommend cinematic form as an antidote to the sluggish meditation or the protracted description. Poetry as the dance of the intellect, the swiftly moving scenario of consciousness, eliding and crosscutting in order to draw the reader into the dynamic act of

imagination—this is the dogma of our century's poetics and should make us more sympathetic to the author of exemplary lyrics like ''Way-Station,'' ''Signature for Tempo,'' and ''Nocturne,'' as well as extended Poundian experiments like ''Elpenor.''

> Lawrence Goldstein. *The American Poet at the Movies: A Critical History* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Pr., 1994), pp. 61–62

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MADHUBUTI, Haki R. [Don Lee] (1942–)

Out of the sixties emerged a group of black poets with a new vision. With a new pair of eyes given to them by Malcolm X, and a neoteric sense of self transfused into them by Imamu Amiri Baraka, they were armed with the wisdom that comes from having looked on destruction. It was a wisdom that permeated their forming sensibilities, which were seared with the heat of the Birmingham bombing, weary from the futility of the Sit-Ins and damp from the river of blood which began to systematically sweep north, having high tides in California and Chicago.

With this wisdom came the realizations that the perpetration of violence upon black people was not only the favorite sport of some half-crazed, dull-eyed cracker, but a government-subsidized phenomenon, and that blacks were particularly vulnerable because an inner destruction was also taking place. A destruction which reflected the actions of anti-self—the internalization of values belonging to the same people who oppressed them, and whose verbal standards of ''good'' were opposite to their intrinsic ones.

Of the young poets who sought to forge out a new set of values to deal with this reality, Don L. Lee is probably the most widely read. His goal is to make the concept of a national black literature a reality, to become a ''culture stabilizer'', retrieving the values blacks have lost, realizing that ''The rejection of that which was/is ours has been the basis for the acceptance of that which is someone else's.'' An acceptance that he feels has made ''Negro'' synonymous with ''a reflection of another man's fantasy, a nonentity, a filthy invention.''

But *new* values for blackliving must also be found, and with both needs planted firmly in his mind—and his verse—he has redefined the role of the poet as well as that of the poetry, which must be responsive to black people.

If we peer deeply into the center of Don Lee's poetry, we can see a force kneading at its core, like hands kneading a part of the body that tingles with the threat of ''going to sleep.'' That force is a concern for survival. Black survival. A survival which is spiritual as well as physical, concrete as well as abstract, circling on the rim of the future as well as sinking deeply into the present. . . .

There is another aspect of survival in what Don calls the ''realworld'' that is not as concrete as keeping a bullet from penetrating a brother's head. The concept of the ''eye'' has a dual vision in his poetry. The first serves as a guard for the physical well-being of the community (''the seeing eye should always see''). The second focus seeks the control of images. For he says that ''The eye is always out to define: the question of vision is who has the imagination, foresight, and ability to control the images of the world, thus giving the world its prepackaged, canned packet of icons.'' Icons that black people were forced to become subordinate to; that were alien, thus emptying our love of self as we looked at ourselves through alien eyes, which never really was us. . . .

''You see,'' he often points out, ''who controls the image, controls the mind, so I see the role of the writer as, one, correcting distorted images'' [as in ''The Primitive'']:

> taken from the
> shores of Mother Africa.
> the savages they thought
> we were—
> they being the real savages.
> to save us. (from what?)
> our happiness, our love, each other?
> their bible for
> our land. (introduction to economics)
> christianized us.
> raped our minds with:
> T.V. & straight hair,
> Reader's Digest & bleaching creams,
> tarzan & jungle jim,
> used cars & used homes,
> reefers & napalm,
> european history & promises.
> Those alien concepts
> of whi-teness,
> the being of what
> is not.
> against our nature,

this weapon called
civilization—
they brought us here—
to drive us mad.
(like them)

''Two, reviving lost images and bringing into effect new images'':

Soultrane gone on a trip
he left man images
he was a lifestyle of
man-makers and annihilator
of attaché case carriers.
. . .
she was ''uneducated,''
wore the long-dress
talked the native tongue
and has a monopoly on black beauty
when we met—she smiled & said: ''i'm the true gold,
i'm the real gold.''

''And three, being in those images—which can be the most important thing of all. I feel that poets must be their own poems, in fact, poets are their own poems.'' To Don Lee the ethics of the poem and the poet are the same. They are inseparable.

The idea of synthesizing the art and the artist goes back to the relationship of the two prescribed in African societies. There, as Leopold Senghor states, ''Art is not a separate activity, in itself or for itself: it is a social activity, a technique of living, a handicraft in fact.'' It is through this ''technique of living'' that Lee hopes to redefine herohood in the black community. For he remembers *his* childhood heroes in the Black Bottom section of Detroit, where he grew up. They were the pimps and the pushers—black people who exercise some control over their environment and their lives. But in the final analysis their effect was negative to the community. So Lee frequently writes about those who have benefited the community while he himself exercises an almost Ghandian self-discipline, including a strict Muslim diet. He is a hater of excesses.

He is usually serious, as are most of his poems, reflecting the conscience of a man who can't/won't forget a painful past that is always feeding the present, who is always carrying pictures in his mind—testaments to the values and acts which, as he says, are making the ''realpeople like the 'unpeople.''' Often reflected in his eyes is the weariness of a person trying to heal all of the brokenness that he sees and has felt—brokenness whose jagged ends stick out in his verse; of dreams and promises, of spirits and families, of emptied bottles and emptied people. It is this loss of continuity that his poetry tries so intensely to restore. His poetry never leaves the sometimes seemingly disjointed fragments of the black experience strewn carelessly about, but makes them wholes, integrating them into some kind of meaning, into a historical and cultural context. It is never open-ended or linear, but rather circular. His verses are mind-vessels which may take you to an unfamiliar shore, but never abandon you there, groping for your way. Instead his poetry has a quality which returns you to your point of departure, but with the benefit of having gone.

In the presence of Don Lee, you instinctively feel that he was meant to be a gentle man who could always possess the inner tranquility of a Gibran poem. But there is another side of him which also surfaces—one which reminds you more of Bigger Thomas than Gibran.

R. Roderick Palmer.CLA Journal. September, 1971, pp. 25–36.

Looking at the continuum of his writing, one is impressed by Haki R. Madhubuti's matured technical independence, worldview, awareness of the social implications of technology, and abiding love for his people. The result is poetry that successfully conveys spontaneity and emotional compulsion as well as thoughtful ideological commitment. Beginning as one of the young African-American poets who emerged during the Black Arts movement in the late 1960s, Madhubuti (known at the start of his career as Don L. Lee) proved to be one of the most powerful in content and one of the most creative and influential in technique. Some earlier perceptions of him as brash, irreverent, or almost fanatical served to divert attention from certain qualities and habits that underlie his revolutionary stance—intellectual thirst, broad and intense reading and study, high seriousness, thoughtful reflection, and a predilection for both analysis and synthesis.

His artistic outlook has always been consciously utilitarian and informed by sociopolitical concerns centering in black people's self-definition, self-determination, self-help through collective and institutional efforts, and humanness. Examples include ''In the Interest of Black Salvation,'' which shows disillusionment with orthodox Euro-American religion; ''Back Home Again,'' an account of an excursion into an alien (white) ''establishment'' world and a subsequent return to blackness; ''But He Was Cool,'' a satire on vapid, faddish, and showy lifestyles affected by some African-Americans; and ''Re-Act for Action,'' a cry for aggression against racism.

While his focus is socioethnic, Madhubuti's thematic concerns may be considered universally relevant. A people's needs, he asserts, are food, clothing, shelter, and education. In the context of this worldview, he believes that the miseducation of African-Americans has conditioned them to ''do what/they/have been taught to do.'' Thus, because African-American men find themselves ''walking the borders/between/smiles and outrage,'' they must see clearly and act responsibly and morally. He writes that ''conscious men do not make excuses/do not expect their women to carry their water,/harvest the food and prepare it too./world over it is known that/breast sucking is only guaranteed for babies.'' As a corollary he points out the inherent power of women: ''if black women do not love,/there is no love.'' Of their inherent beauty, he writes that ''dark women are music/some complicated well worked/rhythms/others simple melodies.'' To both men and women, he advises, ''. . . be what you want your children to be.''

An example of Madhubuti's particular interest in the African diaspora is shown by the dedication of the title poem in his collection *Killing Memory, Seeking Ancestors* to Nelson and Winnie Mandela. Thinking in international terms, he foresees ''The End of White World Supremacy'' as ''The day, hour, minute/and/second that the/chinese/and/japanese/sign/a/joint/industrial/and/military/pact.''

Madhubuti prefers the speech of the African-American urban masses, much of it well suited for oral delivery. (He is in demand for public appearances.) Particularly in his earlier poetry, he frequently achieves desired aural effects through extra vowels or consonants, phonetic spellings, and elisions. In his earlier work he is partial to spatial arrangements, broken words, unconventional

syntax and punctuation, and the ampersand and diagonal. Throughout his corpus he is fond of playing with words, particularly syntactic reversals and the breaking of words into components—for irony, purposeful double meaning, emphasis of discreet components of meaning, aural effects, and other reasons. His imagery is strong, concrete, and specific. Occasionally his late poetry, most noticeable in *Killing Memory, Seeking Ancestors,* moves toward prose poetry, as in ''Poet: Whatever Happened to Luther.'' Frequently he builds a poem's tension incrementally, withholding its point or resolution until the end, at which time the poem's logic or impact is made manifest.

Madhubuti illustrates the office of poet as shaman, griot, priest, prophet, and seer.

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MAILER, Norman (1923–)

Among the war novels, Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* remains a monument to destructiveness and to man's inhumanity to men. No book with its range of characters, its emotional impact, its fierce contempt for human beings, its anarchical conception of any noble cause, its disparagement of any virtue, whether of honor, or kindness, or love, or justice, has been published for many a year. This long novel of the assault and capture of the small Pacific island of Anopopei was grimly ironical, but it had no humor; it was savage without the ameliorating touch of satire; its three hundred thousand words were so many bullets fired into the reader's mind; and yet for months it headed the best-seller lists everywhere.

Harrison Smith. *Saturday Review*. Feb. 12, 1949. p. 9

Norman Mailer's new novel (*Barbary Shore*) . . . is genuinely comic and bawdy, and yet succeeds in capturing the flavor of a New York summer with a careful attention to the psychological complexities of metropolitan people strongly reminiscent of Saul Bellow's *The Victim*. But Mailer's story, like Bellow's is a parable of our time. Layer is on layer. . . . Mailer's prose is plain and powerful, but the complexities of his theme will unavoidably make portions of the book obscure to even the most patient readers. . . . We must pay him honor for spurning the easy success that could so obviously have been his, in order that he might dare to fail, grappling with questions of man's fate as a serious writer.

Harvey Swados. *New Republic*. June 18, 1951. pp. 20–1

In *The Deer Park* Mailer has made a real advance over *The Naked and the Dead*, which must have been a comparatively simple novel to write. Given its grandly simple theme—the war in miniature, or the conquest of a single island—and given the decision to include every element in the picture, from the commanding general down to the private in a rifle squad, the rest depended chiefly on patience and understanding. In *The Deer Park* the characters are treated more in depth, the structure of the novel is more complicated, and the author had to make up his own rules as he went along. He has taken risks and made mistakes, but not cheap or shameful ones. . . . The book leaves us with the feeling that Norman Mailer, though not a finished novelist, is one of the two or three most talented writers of his generation.

Malcolm Cowley. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Oct. 23, 1955. p. 5

The general similarity between the narrators in *Barbary Shore* and *The Deer Park* suggests that Mailer, as should be clear anyway, is a highly self-conscious, though often wild-swinging novelist. He seems to have taken up a convention practiced so far with much greater success by Europeans than by Americans—that of projecting oneself into one's novels as an emerging novelist. . . . One cannot say that he has brought off the difficult trick, or even that it is necessarily desirable that he should. Still, he is making a serious attempt at one of the accomplishments that have to be included in a complete art of the novel. The least one can say in general about *The Deer Park* is that it is written by a novelist who is still very obviously going places.

Richard Chase. *Commentary*. Dec., 1955. pp. 582–3

Norman Mailer is one of the few postwar American writers in whom it is possible to detect the presence of qualities that powerfully suggest a major novelist in the making. Anyone trying to describe these qualities would be likely to dwell on Mailer's extraordinary technical skill, or on the boldness and energy of his mind, or on his readiness to try something new whenever he puts pen to paper. What seems even more remarkable, however, is that his work has responded to the largest problems of this period with a directness and an assurance that we rarely find in the novels of his contemporaries. Mailer is very much an American, but he appears to be endowed with the capacity for seeing himself as a battleground of history—a capacity that is usually associated with the French and that American writers are thought never to have. He is a man given to ideologies, a holder of extreme positions, and in this too he differs from the general run of his literary contemporaries, so many of whom have fled ideologies to pursue an ideal of sensible moderation both in style and philosophy.

Norman Podhoretz. *Partisan Review*. Summer, 1959. p. 371

Norman Mailer, trying in *The Deer Park* to compose a novel about the malaise of our years, avoided the cumbersomeness of the traditional social novel but could find no other structure that would give coherence to his perceptions. Mailer tried to embody his keen if unstable vision in a narrative about people whose extreme dislocation of experience and feeling would, by the very fact of their extreme dislocation, come to seem significant. But in its effort to portray our drifting and boredom full-faced, in its fierce loyalty to the terms of its own conception, *The Deer Park* tended to become a claustrophobic work, driving attention inward, toward its own tonal peculiarities, rather than outward, as an extended parable.

Irving Howe. *Partisan Review*. Summer, 1959. p. 431

Mailer's novels, at least for me, personify the dilemma of novelists who are deeply concerned with history but dangerously oversimplify it; if they seem consumed by their interest in sex it is because they are always seeking some solution for ''the times.'' In many ways Mailer seems to me the most forceful and oddly objective novelist of his age, objective in the sense that he is most capable of imagining objects to which a reader can give himself. . . . Yet Mailer's interest in the external world has dwindled to the point where the theme of sexual power and delight—which Mailer feels to be a lost secret in contemporary life—has become a labyrinthian world in itself. Mailer now seems bent on becoming the American marquis de Sade, where once he seemed to be another Dos Passos.

Alfred Kazin. *Harper's Magazine*. Oct., 1959. p. 130

On one of his sides he rejoices in that ''appetite for life'' which he admires in James Jones. Sheer experience, experience for its own sake, leads him on. And just as this makes him a comparative rarity among younger writers today, so it constitutes his living relation to the older American writers—his living one, that is, distinguished from the relation by way of familial piety and emulation. But on another side he has an equal hunger for ideas, a hunger that is not so well satisfied by what he can produce in the way of intellectual nourishment. The various forms of enlightenment which the older writers brought to bear on their experience seem to have crystallized for Mailer, into a vague, self-conscious sort of wisdom. This has sought to express itself in appropriate ideas, Marxist or Nietzschean (hip has Nietzschean roots, as Norman Podhoretz implies) or Freudian. Of these the Freudian is Mailer's most pervasive source of ideas and images. . . . But the Freudian ideas, like those of other derivation, often operate not to reinforce and clarify his experience but to embarrass and devitalize it.

F. W. Dupee. *Commentary*. Feb., 1960. p. 131

Among other things, Mailer's unexpected triumph, at the very outset of his career, rendered him cruelly dependent on the opinion of reviewers, whose praise had assured the success of *The Naked and the Dead*. The result was that when the reviewers with one voice consigned his next work, *Barbary Shore*, to the ash-heap of literary reputation—Anthony West in The New Yorker said it was a book of ''monolithic flawless badness''—Mailer was oppressed with a sense of failure out of all proportion to the actual defects of the book. He not only read the reviews, he compulsively returned to them again and again, and when he compiled *Advertisements for Myself*, in 1959, he printed long excerpts from them, as he printed all the other derogatory comments on himself that, over the years, he had carefully saved. Already obsessed with the dream of becoming a ''major writer,'' he was driven more and more to define his goal in terms of popular and critical acclaim; in terms, that is, of celebrity itself.

Christopher Lasch. *The New Radicalism in America* (Knopf). 1965. p. 338

By taking the risk of abandoning himself to the fantastic suggestiveness of every person, every object, every smell encountered during the thirty-two hours he writes about, Rojack [in *An American Dream*] discovers fantasy as a source of imaginative richness in himself instead of fearing it as an ominous signal from mysterious, external powers. He moves, in other words, from fantasy as a psychological illusion about the world to the use of fantasy as a somewhat self-conscious but exuberant display of his own inventive powers. Every menace becomes the occasion for a verbal performance, and his fluttering nervousness about being deprived of his ''center'' is rather humorously belied by the incredibly dense and diversified self which his language reveals and creates. Nothing in the book (not even Rojack's moving attempt to know love as something sane and decent with Cherry) except the virtuosity of the writing itself indicates a way out of the nightmare Rojack seems to be telling. The nightmare would be nothing more than a nasty story if Mailer, like his critics, had allowed it to separate itself from the virtuosity, from, especially, the metaphorical exuberance which is, I think, a way of mocking and outdoing the dangerous inventiveness of a magic-ridden world.

Leo Bersani. *Partisan Review*. Fall, 1965. p. 606

Like the writers of the old Modern Literature days, like Yeats and Pound and Joyce and Mann, he has to invent systems of thought. He makes up for himself a theology, an economics, a politics, an architecture, a psychology, and even a pharmacopoeia. As Norman Podhoretz, one of the few good critics who have given Mailer serious attention, has said, Mailer seems to have to learn everything for himself, to recapitulate all intellectual experience no matter how outmoded it may be. And he puts it all in, piece by piece, as he learns it. His chief current preoccupation is the theology, which Podhoretz describes as a ''fantastic collection of ancient Christian heresies.'' These heresies, a kind of homemade Manicheanism in which God and the Devil struggle in various ways, provide a theme of sorts for *Cannibals and Christians*. The book is another of Mailer's miscellanies, like *Advertisements for Myself* and *The Presidential Papers*. It contains some of his political reporting, for which that worn word ''brilliant'' ought to be reserved from its easy misuses; this writing really is ''brightly shining, glittering, sparkling, lustrous . . . splendid, illustrious, distinguished, striking the imagination.'' He picks off the Republican leaders one by one with a total and merciless accuracy, physical description so intense that the entire soul seems to be laid bare in every visage.

John Thompson. *New York Review of Books*. April 20, 1967. p. 15

Comment on Norman Mailer has become an active subsidiary of the US literary industry, even between reviews of his new books. Partly, this is because Mailer is as much of an epitome as he is a creator or thinker. Consciously and self-consciously and willy-nilly, he epitomizes much of our American condition; and one of the things he epitomizes is the American inability—as artists, as intellectuals, as individuals—to handle our material. . . .

What Mailer means the book [*Why Are We in Vietnam?*] to be about is its texture—free-wheeling, obscene, rocking-rolling, sometimes funny, rambling (one sentence runs four-and-a-half pages), as it tries to sweep *everything* along—everything in this boy's experience, fantasy, hope, and loathing of himself, his father, his mother, and his environment. As Mailer sweeps, he is also trying to give us a phantasmagoric Texas-eye view of the America we are in. Despite its continuous sweat to be lively, the book is sometimes alive. This novel comes as close as any of Mailer's fiction to ''action'' writing—an encounter between man and typewriter to see what comes out of the machine; but because the man is Mailer, even his gabbling on paper captures much of the money-missiles-missionary modern temper.

Stanley Kauffmann. *New Republic*. Sept. 16, 1967. p. 28

[*Why Are We in Vietnam?*] is not a charade, nor a ragbag of Maileriana. If it is loosely strung, it is not casual. For convenience we take the story and the voice as if they were independent, but in fact a relation between them is powerfully maintained. D.J.'s voice is the syntax of the novel, in the sense that it commands whatever it invokes. The unity of the book depends upon a commanding voice rather than a controlling consciousness, because there is no gap between subject and object. . . .

. . . Josephine Miles has studied the American Sublime, a high style of praise and panegyric lavished upon the American land, its scale and variety. In poetry this style features ''a long free cadenced line, full of silences, symbols, and implications.'' In prose, I suggest, it comes to us as a voice, recognizable even before we have taken the local meaning of the words. We attend to a voice speaking, rather than to something being said. So the first problem is to deal with the voice, to accept or reject its claim upon our attention. Only later on, and gradually, do we fasten upon the words, their meanings, one by one. Mr. Mailer's style in the new novel is the American Sublime, but the rhetoric is now inverted. What we hear is a voice denouncing everything shoddy and mean that corrupts the land.

Denis Donoghue. *New York Review of Books*. Sept. 28, 1967. p. 5

The public life of the past decade has not only given [Mailer] subjects worthy of the most vehement ambition, it has had the effect also of justifying themes, attitudes, that earlier seemed freakish or fantastic. Mailer has been saying for years that the great contemporary subject was totalitarianism. Now we are all saying that, or something like it, and feeling it with a paralyzing oppressiveness. His obsession, as it used to seem, with conflicts of power and brute force, with pitting himself against rivals (not just other writers but more ferocious antagonists like Sonny Liston, the Kennedys, Lyndon Johnson), with combat to the death against some vast imaginary Thing called various names but most ominously ''cancer,'' no longer strikes us as ersatz Hemingwayism but as a kind of nervy common sense; and we read him now with all the interest a witness-bearer deserves whose obsessions have been borne out by the explosion of actual events. . . .

In both *The Armies of the Night* and *Walden* the use of the writer's own self-projected image or self-conceit—in large part through comic exaggeration and a broad yet dead serious social mockery—is tactically central. Mailer is not the first American literary talent to be accused of throwing itself away in egotistical rant. . . .

Warner Berthoff. *Fictions and Events* (Dutton), 1971. p. 303

Few writers tell us more [than Mailer] about the America in which we live, its impulse toward indiscriminate power, its need for idealism and personal courage. And after all, after the mist of Mailer's own rhetoric and self-indulgent bombast clears, the works do bear close attention: *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Deer Park* are among the finest novels since the Second World War; essays like ''The White Negro,'' ''Superman Comes to the Supermarket,'' and the commentary on *The Deer Park* in *Advertisements for Myself* are composed with great care and perception; ''The Man Who Studied Yoga'' and ''A Time of Her Time'' are successful accounts of the conflict between the will and the idea, remarkable pieces whatever Mailer's larger ambitions may have been: and his recent political journalism, *The Armies of the Night* and the report of the political conventions, illuminate the terror of authority in contemporary America with an immediacy and eloquence not felt in other writers—he makes so many of his contemporaries seem simply dull.

Theodore L. Gross. *The Heroic Ideal in American Literature* (Free). 1971. p. 273

Mailer is a writer as yet without the ultimate serenity that is probably needed for the great book he wishes to write. I say this out of the conviction that he is nonetheless the only writer of prominence in English who can be expected to deliver a work that deserves comparison with the best of Faulkner or James. Some of his contemporaries have written more shapely books, almost everyone who might be compared with him has avoided his excesses, but none has displayed his mastery of contemporary English as it has been fashioned not only in literature but in a multitude of media. No one now gives more hope that language may still be the potent instrument of human need in its confrontations with the benign as well as the wicked forces of institutionalized life.

Mailer's writings are best considered as one large work. However thematically repetitious, it is a work which constantly comes alive with extraordinary accumulations of intensity and brilliance. It is nonetheless a chaotic mixture that awaits some larger redemptive effort, so that despite *The Armies of the Night* and *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, Mailer now is like Melville without *Moby Dick*, George Eliot without *Middle-march*, Mark Twain without *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The present danger is that he is applying to new issues and circumstances methods that he has already worked to exhaustion and, even more, that his achieved self-explanation has come to precede him to experience. In treating

the moonshot, the Ali-Frazier fight, or women's liberation, he seems locked into a system that one hoped he could have transcended.

Richard Poirier.*Norman Mailer* (Viking). 1972. p. 3

[Mailer] uses his gifts meanly [in *Marilyn*]—and that's not what we expect of Mailer, who is always billed as generous. This brilliant book gives off bad vibes—and vibes are what Mailer is supposed to be the master of. *Marilyn* is a feat all right: matchstick by matchstick, he's built a whole damned armada inside a bottle. (Surely he's getting ready to do *Norman*? Why leave it to someone who may care less?) But can we honor him for this book when it doesn't sit well on the stomach? It's a metaphysical cocktail-table book, and probably not many will be able to resist looking for the vicious digs and the wrap-up on the accumulated apocrypha of many years, many parties. To be king of the bums isn't really much. What are we actually getting out of *Marilyn*? Good as the best parts of it are, there's also malevolence that needs to be recognized. Is the great reporter's arrogance so limitless that he now feels free to report on matters to which he's never been exposed? Neither the world nor Marilyn Monroe's life should be seen in Norman Mailer's image.

Pauline Kael. *New York Times Book Section*. July 22, 1973. p. 3

In essence, Mailer sees the machine technology and those who contribute to the furtherance of its power as the villains and the whole man as the victim. Leo Marx has shown us that the theme of the machine in the garden has been present in American literature since its inception, but in Mailer's version the machine has a human face, for finally the machine is man himself, product of a lengthy technological process, whose mind is divided into a complex of isolated compartments, whose senses have all but atrophied, and whose instincts are all but extinct, whose body functions at a remove from its mind, and whose spirit can scarcely be believed to exist. Through a revolution of his own making, in the manner of the God of Genesis, Mailer wishes to breathe life into this robot, to change it back into a man with all of his faculties reintegrated who is once more capable himself of producing life. While analogues to this ''new man'' may be found in the Renaissance, in frontier America, and in Romantic literature when human possibility seemed limitless, the Mailer hero will emerge from the crosscurrents of his times. The recreation of the human consciousness which Mailer envisions is to be accomplished through a series of small but meaningful victories over the death impulse. The basis for this view is Mailer's self-developed existentialism, considered by him and well documented to be American rather than European in nature and origin, which can be summarized as follows: since death is the end of our lives both biologically and as the product of the process which moves our culture, the only way to live is to face the fact of that death and fight it off with all of one's resources. . . .

Mailer, . . . like many a hero in modern literature who must create the value of his own life, conceives of life as constructed on an existential plane from a series of moments, with growth taking the form of a line of movement which he has described as drawn by ''going forward until you have to make a delicate decision either to continue in a different situation or to retreat and look for another way to go forward.'' The line has breadth as well as length, for growth is expansive: it pushes back the boundaries of consciousness and enlarges meaning and possibility. And ''in widening the arena of the possible [for oneself], one widens it reciprocally for others as well''. . . . In this sense the Mailer hero has more in common with the traditional hero than the contemporary antihero or nonheroic protagonist: he embodies what he believes the normative behavior of his society ought to be.

Laura Adams. *Existential Battles: The Growth of Norman Mailer* (Ohio Univ. Pr., 1976), pp. 5–7

The fiction of Norman Mailer up to and including *The Deer Park* concerns man trying to achieve a self-fulfilling autonomy that takes into realistic account the social and biological forces of life and guards against the delusive security of conventional moralities. The early fiction asks: what is the world that man may understand it? But when the mixed reception of *The Deer Park* turned Mailer into an impassioned outlaw, his fiction underwent a radical change. The emphasis shifted. A new question was asked: what is man that the world may understand him? In the early fiction, reality acted upon consciousness. In the later fiction, consciousness acts upon reality, or rather transforms it through the egocentric imagination. The direction of Mailer's fiction, then, has been from the mimetic to the expressive, from a world described to a world envisioned. . . .

Whatever formal or artistic differences we find among Mailer's works, we should not imagine a thematic difference when, in fact, none exists. An essential conflict undergirds all Mailer's books and makes them indivisible: the conflict between will and external power.

The real moral power of Mailer's writing derives from his depiction of human will and human imagination battling against the forces of constraint. The only thing that operates for good in Mailer's world is the individual fighting alone against the institutional powers that be. . . .

A spiritual fervor kindles the heart of Mailer's rebellion; for ultimately it is not what men make or do that evokes his opposition, but the very terms of human mortality itself. He insists on believing that man is supernatural, not natural. His struggle, then, has been mythic, epical. On the basis of *Advertisements for Myself*, *An American Dream*, *Why Are We in **Vietnam?*, *The Armies of the Night*, and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, a fair claim can be made: the magnitude of Mailer's imagination and his extraordinary powers of expressiveness have restored to English literature the fertile, energetic grandeur it has seldom known since the seventeenth century.

Philip H. Bufithis. *Norman Mailer* (Ungar, 1978), pp. 131–33

When we consider that Mailer's themes focus on the battle between Life and Death, when we see that the dream is the foundation of his concept of robust art, when we understand that Mailer's concern over the survival of the human race urges him to write books that are intended to generate action, it should not be improbable that Mailer writes allegorically. . . .

It is in his recourse to the dream, to perceptions generally termed *visionary*, and to the allegorical mode that Mailer's work is to be distinguished from realism as well as from the fabulism (the conscious or mechanical appropriation of specific parables, epics, or myths) associated with many of his American contemporaries. . . .

Like Jung, Mailer is interested in the unconscious as a primitive source of psychic truth and a potential source of psychic integration or wholeness. Both Mailer and Jung believe that the self (the total personality) has both somatic and mental bases, and that psychic phenomena are rooted not only in body and mind and not only in conscious and unconscious mind, but in the personal and transpersonal psyche. . . .

After *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer began to emphasize the unconscious elements of his work, just as he continually disparaged the reductive, mechanical appropriation of psychological theory in some of his contemporaries. Mailer admits that in writing *The Naked and the Dead* he thought in terms of symbols, forms, allegorical (or rational) structures, and classical myths and that he could barely write a sentence without convincing himself it was on five levels. But as soon as he jettisons such ''lower academic literary apparatus'' in favor of simple writing without ''a formal thought'' in his conscious mind, he starts writing what I believe to be true (or archetypal) allegory, though he gives every reason to believe he is unaware of it. . . .

Mailer's opposition to the dominant values of our culture during his lifetime is precisely what places him in a major American literary tradition. He has joined the long lineage of writers who have sought to awaken the moral consciousness of their people, who have sought to attach words, through image and symbol, as Emerson said, to visible things, who have allegorically depicted the journey of the individual soul as somehow connected to the journey of America—as both an existence and an ideal—itself.

Robert J. Begiebing. *Acts of Regeneration: Allegory and Archetype in the Works of Norman Mailer* (Univ. of Missouri Pr., 1980), pp. 5, 7–8, 200–201

At least since the appearance of *Advertisements for Myself* more than twenty years ago, we have come to expect an aggressively personal and flamboyant voice in Norman Mailer's writing. In *The Armies of the Night*, *Of a Fire on the Moon*, *Marilyn*, and other works he has gone for a self-consciously ambitious style which pits the resources of his formidable imagination against the great figures, myths, and issues of our time. Mailer has tried to make his words into the matrix of modern life, so that his work does not simply comment on the contemporary; it shapes our sense of what is contemporary and significant. Furthermore, in writing about himself, and about the process of his interaction with his subjects, he has produced keen theoretical insights about the nature of writing and interpretation. For example, in *The Armies of the Night* he ingeniously writes history, historiography, and fiction while shrewdly reflecting on the nature of all three. In *Marilyn* he writes a biography about biography, and the character of the biographer, as viewed by the novelist. Nearly every subject he manages suggests new facets of meaning and surprising ambiguities. Whether or not we are always convinced by Mailer's imaginative probing seems less important than his compelling demonstration that his subjects and his style are inseparable and indispensable.

Set against this background of self-reflexive writing, *The Executioner's Song* seems to be a startling book. Its sentences are simple and clear, with an occasionally striking but not elaborate metaphor. Absent from the narrative is Mailer's characteristic sentence or paragraph, which is long and comprehensive—an encyclopedic attempt to gather all of reality in one magnificent statement. . . .

The Executioner's Song is for Mailer biography in a new key, since we hear as never before the author attending to the integrity of individual lives without quickly elevating those lives into symbolic significance. At the same time, the continuity of Mailer's concerns over the last twenty years is apparent in his ambitious desire to show that true life must be mediated through the imaginative power of a singular intelligence. He understood that *The Executioner's Song* required a voice, flexible and comprehensive, in order to embody the myriad voices that make up reality. The book hinges on that old philosophical problem: how to understand the many and the one, how to interpret the parts by a sense of the whole, how to interpret the whole by a sense of the parts. There is no resolution to this problem, and no resolution to the dialectical tension of the book. We must read the work in the spirit of its contrarieties, and absorb both its sounds and silences.

Carl E. Rollyson, Jr. *Chicago Review*. Spring, 1980, pp. 31, 39

Swiftly *Ancient Evenings* pulls its reader inside a consciousness different from any hitherto met in fiction. A soul or body entombed is struggling to burst free, desperate not alone for light and air but for prayer and story—promised comforters that have been treacherously withheld or stolen. Dwelling within this consciousness we relive the ''experience'' of an Egyptian body undergoing burial preparations, sense the soul's overwhelming yearnings, within an unquiet grave, for healing that no physical treatment can provide. All is strange, dark, intense, mysteriously coherent.

A second voice speaks. Offering a kind of taunting succor, it commences a story of the gods—the myth of Isis and Osiris which in this telling is made utterly new, indeed seems to have been given utterance by the strewn bones and limbs themselves. I looked up at the end of this section of the book, simultaneously moved and (I am speaking seriously) ashamed—troubled by my own habitual skepticism, my trained resistance to whatever is heavily promoted. Would it not prove impossible for a work so well begun to be anything but magnificent over all? Was not the book in my hand certain to prove the truth of its author's contention that he was capable of producing a masterpiece totally unique and incomparably splendid?

The answer to both questions is no. *Ancient Evenings* turns out to be neither magnificent nor a masterpiece. What is more, describing the book simply as a failure—a near-miss earning respect for noble ambitions and partial triumphs—will not do. The case is that, despite the brilliance of those first 90 pages, this 700-page work is something considerably less than a heroic venture botched in the execution. It is, speaking bluntly, a disaster. . . .

The farther one proceeds in *Ancient Evenings* the longer one lingers over any page or passage bare of embarrassments. Here is a carefully researched chapter on the tactical maneuvers preceding the Battle of Kadesh: Pause, speculate about its sources. Here is a chariot charge, vigorously evoked: Pause, savor. Here the Nile rises and the river-bank folk sense the change: Stiff old school historians, such as J. H. Breasted, had their own eloquence on the subject, but Mailer's eloquence is at least not negligible. Here is the Charioteer catching his first glimpse of the Pharaoh: Concentrate on the fine phrases.

But in truth release and escape are elusive. Arguably the obsessions that control this work, considered abstractly, possess dignity. The writer who gives himself up to them is, at the

minimum, a challenger—someone admirably scornful of the diminution of his humanity that arid decorum, politic timidity and the like seek to enforce. . . .

The ambition to teach has often been visible in Mailer's books, and it has seldom stifled either wit or self-awareness. The writer's ruling assumption has been that, regardless of subject or form, all his feeling and remembering, inventing and reporting, must be accompanied by critical activity. In *The Armies of the Night* the hero's contempt for others is set under examination—shown to be a feeling traceable not just to their fatuity and self-delusion but to the hero's own vanity, arrogance and snobbism. In *The Executioner's Song* the heroine, risking her life in her murderous male's apartment to recover an Electrolux and attachments, is seen by herself as courageous, and seen by the reader, owing to the critical activity in progress, as someone perilously naïve, tranced, victimized by commodity fetishization, and so on. The surprising perspective—the leap offering instant release from bondage to cliché—is what we have come to expect in even the shortest piece from this pen. But that expectation is nowhere satisfied in *Ancient Evenings*.

Benjamin DeMott. *New York Times Book Section*. April 10, 1983, pp. 1, 34–36

[Norman] Mailer's style in *The Executioner's Song* is meant to mirror the meaninglessness of the event. Our experience as readers of the book—tedium, frustration, the inability to discriminate—is itself figurative. The tediousness of the book is a long, sustained irony, even a parody. Mailer's flatness and refusal to interpret guarantee him against the hyperbole of the press. The voice of the recorder, which contains all the exaggerations and distortions of the major news networks and news magazines, is meant as parody of the effort to generate rather than discover the drama. But even more important than that is Mailer's parody of the pointlessness and vacuousness of Gilmore's voided, empty life—and the voided, empty, drab, unimaginative, life of the Mormon middle class he grows up in. At first glance it may seem that Mailer would identify with Gilmore as psychic outlaw, a rebel against psychological constraint and sublimation. But Gilmore's language, and Mailer's, gives them away. Form for Mailer is always a response to the nature of the material, changing depending on the subject. In *The Executioner's Song* the subject is vacuum, and the language is dangerously, but appropriately vacuous itself.

Thus Mailer is still fighting the war that is form, despite the initial indications that he has given up or entrenched himself. In the broad ironies of the structure of this text, he vouchsafes himself against the meaninglessness he is imitating. He tropes meaninglessness, thus making it meaningful. As a strategy this is risky. It requires much greater participation from us as readers than before in Mailer's work. Gone is the self-dramatizing narrator who makes it clear how we should understand and war against the apocalypse. . . . Mailer's tone has changed. He has been ''humbled,'' beaten back perhaps in the battle against unmeaning. Yet he makes clear that authorial silence is a rhetorical gesture designed to elicit the reader's participation. It is not a capitulation to nihilism but a demand for reading. Throughout his work Mailer has struggled to elicit reaction and participation—through insult and challenge, through obscenity, through self-parody and confession, through stylistic density and metaphorical baroqueness. Authorial silence is another weapon in his arsenal.

Indeed, to the extent that we accept Mailer's invitation to participate in the making of meaning, we ourselves move inside the text. The threshold Mailer is trying to penetrate is that which exists between writer and reader, text and reader. Silence heals that breach. As readers we begin to fight the war ourselves. We begin to create order.

Chris Anderson. *Style as Argument: Contemporary American Nonfiction* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Pr., 1987), pp. 130–32

More than any other writer of his generation, Norman Mailer has made America his subject. Throughout his career he has written with an acute sense of the millennial assumptions that helped create from the very beginning of the country a uniquely American consciousness. These assumptions have created the myth of America, and, as Mailer has repeatedly shown, they are responsible for producing the amazing dialectic of extremes in American life so that indeed ''the best of our history is coupled as in no other nation with much of our worst.'' In relating both the promise and the debasement of the millennial idea of America to the complexities of the contemporary American scene. Mailer has amassed a body of work that enjoys undeniable cultural centrality. He has therefore assumed at the very least the kind of significance that has always been attached to James Fenimore Cooper, whose work embodies the central conflicts in nineteenth-century American attitudes toward the competing values of nature and civilization. As this book has sought to establish, however, one can make much greater claims for Mailer's work. For Mailer has compiled far and away the most challenging and exciting body of work of any contemporary American prose writer. And it should finally be stated, in evaluating Mailer's writings, that his novels need not defer to his nonfiction. . . .

Having pressed these claims, one must also say that Mailer's flaws are largely those of a great writer. Like Blake, Yeats, and [D.H.] Lawrence, he is at times ironically limited by the rigorous eccentricities of a comprehensive system of thought. At times too, as in *Barbary Shore* and *The Deer Park*, which remains, despite it faults, a fine novel, he attempts more than he can manage. But. . . these attempts were crucial to the development of Mailer's style and the creation of protagonists who could embody a significant response to totalitarianism. Finally, one can certainly find Mailer guilty of being obsessively repetitive in his themes, but such obsession lives at the very heart of American romanticism.

In the final analysis Mailer has revealed more about America than any of his contemporaries, having had the moral courage and artistic integrity to write about the threat of totalitarianism in the land of the free and the home of the brave. The sustained quality and range of his work place him well within the first rank of American prose writers that includes Faulkner, Melville, James, Hawthorne, Emerson, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Twain, Poe, and Thoreau.

Joseph Wenke. *Mailer's America* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Univ. Pr. of New England, 1987), pp. 237–39

As Mailer moves into his fifth decade as a writer, the voice of the performer that antagonized by its arrogance *has* been silenced more and more. ''I think as you get older you make peace with who and what you are,'' he said in 1986. ''It doesn't help my day to see a

good photograph of myself in the paper, because there *are* no good photographs any longer.'' Unfortunately, when he turns his attention to activities like filmmaking, the scribe who attracted so many admirers is silenced as well. ''Something had gone out of the writing,'' he conceded a year later, ''maybe the belief that it makes a difference.'' ''Turning professional'' is what Ron Rosenbaum called it. ''It means learning to choose good works over profligate grace. It means accepting the idea that he may be the historian of our time, but not its hero.''

Yet if ''turning professional'' also means replacing the ambitiousness of a planned trilogy with the two-month alacrity of *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, ''an example,'' as Mailer put it, ''of what happens when you have to do what is necessary,'' I'd rather have the lapsed hero than the lauded historian. The ''difference'' that Mailer's work has made should never be determined by ordinary standards of critical or commercial success, the warfare of the literary marketplace. The ''difference'' that his work makes needs to be measured by other criteria of combat, as he himself realized: ''A commando raid is not measured by its aesthetic perfection. It's measured by the amount of life it generates, by the amount of stimulation it gives in military history and the amount of time professional soldiers will spend in discussing it afterward.'' The words ring as true today as they did when spoken in 1970. If, after forty years, discussion still continues, how great were the territories its guerrilla leader conquered—and how great remain the lands to be commanded by his presence still.

Stacey Olster. ''Norman Mailer after Forty Years.'' *Michigan Quarterly Review*. Summer, 1989, pp. 414–15

Curiously . . . Mailer's work is still not generally admired. He has won awards, made money, and publicized himself with remarkable success. *The Armies of the Night* (1968) won many coverts among his critics, *The Executioner's Song* was one of his best-received books, and even the controversial *Ancient Evenings* was thought by many to be (finally) the major novel Mailer has been promising since the late 1950s. Yet too many of Mailer's friends and foes tend to agree that his achievement is not ''literary.'' Much writing on Mailer concerns the man, his ideas, or his relationship to his period (his ''representativeness''). Mailer's critical reputation is therefore suspect, for a writer's work must be respected for its artistic value if it is to enjoy a critical status commensurate with its popular success or notoriety. . . .

It is not very fashionable to praise Mailer as a storyteller. . . . To do so is to invoke ''traditional'' literary approaches supposedly irrelevant to Mailer's achievement. Laura Adams presents this point of view in its purest form: ''What the work of Poirier and others has established by now is that traditional approaches to Mailer are inadequate. An existential criticism is needed for purposes of evaluation even more than of interpretation of Mailer's work, and such a critical approach would have to accept Mailer's givens as its own and judge him by his own standards rather than insist that he conform to accepted literary tastes and practices.'' Adams clearly wants to protect Mailer from judgments based on ''accepted literary tastes and practices.'' She assumes that Mailer must inevitably be found wanting if judged by such old-fashioned ''approaches.'' I can only say again what I first said some 15 years ago: if Adams is right, so much the worse for Mailer. I think it is perverse to argue that traditional critical approaches are irrelevant to Mailer, as if his works were so sui generis as to be quite outside the boundaries of normal critical analysis. In any case, I have assumed throughout this study that Mailer's works must be judged by the same literary standards we bring to the study of other writers.

The irony is that, judged in these terms, Mailer comes off very well indeed. Mailer has published almost 30 original volumes, and so it is hardly surprising that he has written a number of books that are unsuccessful by any standard. If we cut away what is palpably ''minor'' in Mailer's collected works, however, there remains a body of writing for which relatively large claims can be made. Mailer has written at least four important novels (*The Naked and the Dead*, *The Deer Park*, *Ancient Evenings*, and *Tough Guys Don't Dance*), two of the best works of nonfiction in American literary history (*The Armies of the Night* and *The Executioner's Song*, if indeed we count *The Executioner's Song* as a work of nonfiction), and a body of essays that will stand comparison with the best nonfiction in this century.

Robert Merrill. *Norman Mailer Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), pp. x, 211–12

[*Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man: An Interpretive Biography*,] his twenty-ninth [book], is a copiously illustrated account of the span from the artist's birth in 1881 to the start of World War I. Picasso emerges in a familiar guise, as a selfish, superstitious, sometimes cowardly and combative prodigy who moved chameleonlike from one style to another, through one relationship after the next. Mr. Mailer has called his work ''an interpretative biography,'' to distinguish it from a work of original scholarship. This is fair enough, but most of the interpretations are not original. . . .

[Mailer] of all people would seem equipped to write a vivid and original book about Picasso, since he shares with the artist, if not the same degree of talent, then the characteristics of a long public career, prolific output, Rolodex of styles, sexual fixation, narcissism, will to power and compunction to parlay his own life into art.

Mr. Mailer's career, for better or worse, has been a project of self-mythology—assuming greatness by proxy. And his willingness to rationalize away Picasso's disregard for, even violence toward, lovers and friends will ring a bell with readers of such Mailer classics as *The Naked and the Dead* and ''The White Negro.'' But the links between him and Picasso must be gleaned with some effort from the book. If anything, Mr. Mailer doesn't put enough of himself into it, relying on the idiosyncrasy of his prose to carry readers along. . . . Mr. Mailer might have written a more distinctive book about Picasso if he had observed his own maxim: ''It's impossible to truly comprehend others until one's plumbed the bottom of certain obsessions about oneself.''

Michael Kimmelman. *New York Times Book Review*. Oct. 15, 1995, p. 16

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MAJOR, Clarence (1936–)

My Amputations is a dense and complex work, as readers familiar with Clarence Major's four previous novels . . . might expect. A book in which the question of identity throbs, like an infected tooth. *My Amputations* is a picaresque novel that comes wailing out of the blues tradition: it is ironic, irreverent, sexy, on a first-name basis with the human condition, and defined in part by exaggeration and laughter.

Mason Ellis, the protagonist, is an endearing character who's gone through periods when, were it not for bad luck, he'd have had no luck at all. He is a writer whose muse has deserted him. His first marriage results in five children, for whom he and his wife have difficulty providing. Told by a welfare worker that the father's absence would mean larger checks for the family, the parents agree to split up. . . .

Early in the novel, Mason is in a Kafkaesque predicament. Serving a sentence in Attica for a crime he didn't commit, one day he sees on television an award ceremony during which a writer he is convinced is passing for him—but using an assumed name—accepts a prize meant for Mason.

Upon his release, Mason goes searching for the impostor, accompanied by acquaintances who include a pornographic film actress, an American Indian and a man named Jesus. He finds the impostor, kidnaps him and subjects him to tortures designed to extract a confession. But the man, Clarence McKay, won't break, and Mason, his certainty shaken, is suspended in a frustrating twilight zone—holding a man who he believes has stolen his identity and who won't (or can't) give it back. In a caper worthy of good adventure novels, Mason disposes of the impostor and creates an identity by appropriating the latter's assumed name (and cash award). He also complicates what by now has become his consuming question: who am I, really?

Is Mason suffering from delusions? Is he just another recidivist ex-con? These legitimate questions fade in the face of his obsession with who he is; all that matters for readers, as for him, is *his* question.

Possessing money and acclaim, but tormented by fear that he'll be exposed, Mason goes looking for an answer. His quest, like that of more than one American writer before him, takes him to Europe, where he encounters underworld thugs, neo-Nazis, literary groupies and several Greek citizens fond of antebellum Southern costume parties. Ultimately, Mason arrives in Africa, where he meets a Liberian tribesman who holds an envelope in which, apparently, the secret of Mason's true identity is enclosed.

Mr. Major has said that one of his objectives in writing is to ''attempt to break down the artificial distinctions between poetry and fiction.'' *My Amputations* is distinguished by a rich and imaginative prose poetry of evocative power. Sometimes the effect is spectacular, like the eruption of fireworks against a dark, featureless sky. . . . At other times the language is a distraction that calls attention to itself and delays the unfolding of a story I want very much to continue reading.

One of the most provocative aspects of *My Amputations* is Mr. Major's third-person narrator. Street-smart, versed in the blues, jazz, literature, art, European classical music and philosophy, this narrator is familiar with the cultural signposts of Western civilization. Not only is he hip and learned, he is brash, often injecting himself into the novel by commenting on the action or blurring what small distinctions exist between reality and dream. He strikes me as a voice who knows who he is, an ironic and sometimes disconcerting counterpoint to the tale of a man whose thirst for identity literally threatens his life.

The narrator doesn't reveal the source of his identity, at least not directly, and for good reason. Were we able to isolate him outside the novel, he would probably smile and say that the question of identity is extremely personal and not easily deciphered. Perhaps, sometimes, it is not decipherable at all. But Mr. Major has demonstrated in *My Amputations* that the attempt to do so can prove the stuff of an imaginative and compelling tale.

> Richard Perry. *The New York Times Book Review*. September 28, 1986, p. 30.

At the end of this review, I will do the unforgivable and reveal the punch line of Clarence Major's new novel, [*My Amputations*], since that may be the only way to convince you to read the book. Mere description cannot convey the wild humor and audacity to be found here, nor the anxiety and cunning. The virtues of *My Amputations* are all active ones, best summarized, perhaps, as jumpiness. Only a demonstration of them will do. Major . . . has produced as his fifth novel a fantasy of the black writer as con artist, kept on the run over three continents. Part travelogue and part imaginary self-portrait, the book begins with its protagonist huddled in a closet in New York and ends with him in a hut in Liberia, having by that point met the Devil and worse. He has, in fact, met himself. Mason Ellis, the character on the run, is a half-mad ex-convict who imagines himself to be, of all people, Clarence Major—or perhaps Clarence Major, huddling in the closet, fears he's really Mason Ellis.

''The background of such a madman is at least of clinical interest. I strain to find something good to say.'' Thus the narrator, early in the novel, about Mason. Raised in South Chicago by a stepfather who's the Man of Rules and a mother who's the Woman of Blues, Mason does a tour in the Air Force, reads everything he

can lay his hands on and, after his discharge, makes the mistake of going home. . . . In the space of three pages, Mason fathers nine children with two women and then lights out for New York, where the police pick him up on the Lower East Side for looking wrong. The charge sticks, and Mason does his next tour of reading in Attica. There, he becomes convinced that he is not merely the reader but the author of certain books, and that an imposter has stolen his identity and his $50,000-a-year grant from the Magnan-Rock-ford Foundation. . . .

Released from jail, Mason sets out to collect. With the help of a private eye—who turns into the Claire Quilty of the book—he tracks down the Impostor, who is living on the Lower East Side under the assumed name of Clarence McKay. . . .Soon Mason has kidnapped CM and is holding him in a closet on West 72d Street.

It is not enough for Mason to capture CM. He must also claim, or perhaps reclaim, his identity. For that, he needs money. In the company of petty crooks, Mason undertakes a series of crimes that might well have been planned by Laurel and Hardy. The narrator, it seems, takes a malicious pleasure in subjecting Mason Ellis to slapstick; perhaps this is the only revenge CM can exact for being represented by such a lowdown ME. Mason is just capable enough to buy a fake passport from the Mob. With that in hand, he diverts $50,000 from the Magnan-Rock-ford Foundation, signs up with a speakers' bureau and sets off on a lecture tour.

Perhaps the summary I've given so far seems crammed with incident. Forget it. That was merely the setup—an artful setup, granted, but ultimately just so much machinery. *My Amputations* begins in earnest when Mason hits the road, and the riddle of his identity becomes secondary to the puzzle of what the hell is going on in the world. . . .

But what kind of puzzle is it? In Florence, ''He looked into the facade of the city: workers in stone had made it a towering monument to something he reluctantly understood. Well, even *he* was beginning to realize the real subject of his story wasn't this damned quest he'd thought he was on.'' He goes to the Uffizi, kneels on the street before Dante's house, spends hours at the Medici Chapel. In Athens, he appeals to the sculptures in the National Museum. They, too, give no help. It seems that Mason, like poor Claude McKay, has aspirations to the universal. . . . [Several] esoteric experiments fail as well. He locates oracles, all right, but they tell him things such as, ''Father Divine is the supplier and satisfier of every good desire.'' It later turns out they have been restored by the Magnan-Rockford Foundation.

Magnan-Rockford, like the shadowy detective, keeps turning up in unsettling places. Mason knows he is being followed, but how is he being used? ''He refused to believe himself a Pynchon yoyo or an Ellison dancing Sambo paper doll.'' Yet, before he leaves for the ultimate destination, Africa, he accepts a commission from the head of the speakers' bureau—quite possibly a Magnan-Rockford front. The man gives Mason a sealed envelope addressed to Chief Q. Tee, who can be found near Monrovia. His instructions are to deliver the envelope unopened.

Before Mason goes to his fate, let me ask: Just how universal *is* he? The question seems appropriate for two reasons. First, the earlier parts of the book, with their recollections of Mason's youth, have an urgency that's missing from the rest of the novel. Much of the later travelogue is entertaining, even brilliant; but its emotional life is on loan from the first sections, the ones that are not universal but personal, right down to the street addresses. Second, the novel is supersaturated with names, allusions, quotations. Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Chester Himes, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison—these are some of the more obvious and specific progenitors of the text. Some of the more unexpected are Gertrude Stein (who supplies the epigraph), William Carlos Williams, Daniel Defoe, Herman Melville and (I swear it) Joyce Kilmer. When a writer loads a book with so many references, the reader is entitled to ask whether he knows what he's doing.

Believe me, Clarence Major knows. He has fashioned a novel that is simultaneously a deception and one great, roaring self-revelation. It has the accent of a black American—of precisely *one* black American, in fact—but its tone should be recognizable to anybody who's ever gotten nervous looking in the mirror. Mason is not the first character to venture into the world playing a role, only to be mistaken for someone playing still other roles. Nor is he the first to try to go home, wearing a mask as self-protection. It is interesting, though, that in his case the mask is a real one, of carved wood, and the home is a hut outside Monrovia.

He has sought first money and fame, then wholeness, then wisdom, and as a result everything that could be amputated from him has been lopped off. Now he has come to the end of his world. Though he should know better, he tamely produces the Magnan-Rockford letter for Chief Q. Tee. He is about to receive the punch line; read it, if you need further demonstration.

''The old man spoke: 'The envelope, please.' Mason pulled it from his pocket and handed it over. The old man ripped it open and read aloud: '*Keep* this nigger!'''

Stuart Klawans. *The Nation*. January 24, 1987, pp. 90–2.

''In a novel, the only thing you have is words,'' Clarence Major told the interviewer John O'Brien. ''You begin with words and you end with words. The content exists in our minds. I don't think it has to be a reflection of anything. It is a reality that has been created inside of a book.'' Major's fiction exists as a rebellion against the stereotype of mimetic fiction—that telling a story, one of the things fiction can do, is the only thing fiction can do.

His first novel, *All-Night Visitors,* is an exercise in the imaginative powers of male sexuality. Major takes the most physical theme—the pleasure of the orgasm—and lyricizes it, working his imagination upon the bedrock and world of sense not customarily indulged by poetry. The pre-eminence of the imagination is shown by blending Chicago street scenes with fighting in Vietnam—in terms of the writing itself, Major claims that there is no difference. His second novel, *NO,* alternates narrative scenes of rural Georgia life with a more disembodied voice of fiction, and the action advances as it is passed back and forth, almost conversationally, between these two fictive voices. In both books, language itself is the true locus of action, as even the most random and routine development is seized as the occasion for raptures of prose (a fellatio scene, for example, soon outstrips itself as pornography and turns into an excuse for twelve pages of exuberant prose).

Major's best work is represented in his third and fourth novels, *Reflex and Bone Structure* and *Emergency Exit.* In the former, he describes an action which takes place legitimately within the characters' minds, as formed by images from television and film. ''We're in bed watching the late movie. It's 1938. *A Slight Case of Murder.* Edward G. Robinson and Jane Bryan. I go into the

bathroom to pee. Finished, I look at my aging face. Little Caesar. I wink at him in the mirror. He winks back./I'm back in bed. The late show comes on. It's 1923. *The Bright Shawl.* Dorothy Gish. Mary Astor. I'm taking Mary Astor home in a yellow taxi. Dorothy Gish is jealous.'' Throughout this novel, which treats stimuli from social life and the output of a television set as equally informative, Major insists that the realm of all these happenings is in language itself. ''I am standing behind Cora,'' he writes. ''She is wearing a thin black nightgown. The backs of her legs are lovely. I love her. The word standing allows me to watch like this. The word nightgown is what she is wearing. The nightgown itself is in her drawer with her panties. The word Cora is wearing the word nightgown. I watch the sentence: the backs of her legs are lovely.''

As a result, the action of this novel takes place not simply in the characters' behavior but in the arrangements of words on the page. Here Major makes a significant advance over the techniques of his innovative fiction contemporaries. Many of them, including Ronald Sukenick (in *Up*) and John Barth (in the stories of *Lost in the Funhouse*), took a metafictive approach, establishing fiction's self-apparency and anti-illusionism by self-consciously portraying the writer writing his story. In *Reflex and Bone Structure,* however, Major accomplishes the task of making the words function not as references to things in the outside world but as entities themselves; the action is syntactic rather than dramatic, although once that syntactic function is served the action, as in the paragraph cited, can return for full human relevance. Indeed, because the activity is first located within the act of composition itself, the reader can empathize even more with the intensity of feeling behind it.

Emergency Exit is Major's most emphatic gesture toward pure writing, accomplished by making the words of his story refer inward to his own creative act, rather than outward toward the panoramic landscape of the socially real. The novel's structure makes this strategy possible. *Emergency Exit* consists of elementary units of discourse; words, sentences, paragraphs, vignettes, and serial narratives. The novel is composed of equal blocks of each, spread out and mixed with the others. At first, simple sentences are presented to the reader. Then elements from these same sentences (which have stood in reference-free isolation) recur in paragraphs, but still free of narrative meaning. The plan is to fix a word, as word, in the reader's mind, apart from any personal conceptual reference—just as an abstract expressionist painter will present a line, or a swirl of color, without any reference to figure. Then come a number of narratives, coalescing into a story of lovers and family. When enough sections of the serial narrative have accumulated to form a recognizable story, we find that the independent and fragmentary scenes of the sentences and paragraphs have been animated by characters with whom we can now empathize. Forestalling any attempt to rush off the page into incidental gossip is the memory and further repetition of these words—whether they be of black mythology, snatches of popular song, or simply brilliant writing—all within Major's arresting sentences and paragraphs. A word, an image, or scene which occurs within the narrative leads the reader directly back to the substance of Major's writing. All attention is confined within the pages of the book.

Silent as a writer for the better part of a decade, though actively engaged in teaching, speaking, and world travel, Major takes the occasion of his fifth novel, *My Amputations,* to comment on his own identity as a writer and person. His protagonist, named Mason Ellis, has a biography which matches Major's own, and his responsiveness to black music and folklore recalls the techniques of *Emergency Exit.* Mason's writing is like a closet he steps into in a recurring dream: a ''door to darkness, closed-off mystery'' through which his muse leads him in search of his personal and literary identities, both of which have been assumed by an ''Impostor'' nearly a decade ago (when Major's last novel was written). Mason's personal struggle has been with ''the unmistakable separation of Church and State,'' which for him produces an unbearable polarity between spirit and body, mentality and sexuality, and eventually a contradiction between ''clean'' and ''dirty'' which he refuses to accept. His muse must guide him away from this middle ground of separation where he languishes; imprisoned in various forms of life (which correspond to Major's background growing up in Chicago and serving in the Air Force), he must literally ''write his way out'' by constructing a different paradigm for God's interests and Caesar's. Falsely jailed while ''the Impostor'' continues his career, Mason joins a group of urban terrorists who rob a bank to finance their dreams—in his case, the recovery of his role as novelist. To do this, Mason adopts the pose of the black American writer abroad, living in Nice and speaking at various universities across Europe. But at every stage the concerns of State intervene, as each country's particular style of political insurgency disrupts his visit. Even his idealistic goal of Africa is torn by conflicts of body and spirit, and he finds himself either caught in the crossfire of terrorists or imprisoned as a political suspect. These circumstances, while being complications in the narrative, prompt some of the novel's finest writing, as Major couches Mason's behavior in a linguistic responsiveness to the terroristic nature of our times. The achievement of *My Amputations* is its conception of Mason Ellis as a creature of the world's signs and symbols. He moves in a world of poetic constructions, where even crossing the street is an artistic adventure: ''Mason Ellis sang 'Diddie Wa Diddie' like Blind Blake, crossed the street at Fifth Avenue and Forty-Second like the Beatles on the cover of *Abbey Road* and reaching the curb leaped into the air and coming down did a couple of steps of the Flat Foot Floogie.'' Not surprisingly, Major points his character toward a tribal sense of unity in Africa, pre-colonial and hence pre-political, where the separations of ''Church'' and ''State'' do not exist.

With his novels *Such Was the Season* and *Painted Turtle: Woman with Guitar* Major makes his closest approach to narrative realism, yet in each case the mimesis is simply a technical device that serves an equally abstract purpose. *Such Was the Season* is ostensibly a gesture toward that most commercially conventional of formats, the family saga, as a nephew from Chicago returns to the Atlanta home of an old aunt who helped raise him. His visit, however, entails not just the usual thematics of family history and a touch of matriarchy but rather a spectrum study of African-American culture in its many forms, from bourgeois society to political power-playing. Because the narrator is Aunt Eliza herself, the novel becomes much more a study in language than social action, however, for the emphasis remains not on the events themselves but upon her blending them into an interpretive narrative. That Major is ultimately interested in these aesthetic dimensions rather than in the simply social is evident from *Painted Turtle,* in which the story of a native American folksinger's career is told only superficially by the episodic adventures surrounding her work; at the heart of her story is the nature of her poetic expression, passages of which are reproduced as transcriptions of

her songs—which are unlike any folksongs the reader may have heard, but much like the linguistic constructions Aunt Eliza fashions in the previous novel as a way of making the emerging reality of her family meaningful to her.

Jerome Klinkowitz. In *Contemporary Novelists, 6th edition,*, ed. Susan Windisch Brown (St. James Press, 1996).

In an epigraph to his novel *Reflex and Bone Structure* Clarence Major announces that the book ''is an extension of, not a duplication of reality. The characters and events are happening for the first time.'' The statement describes equally well the poetry in which Major's deliberate opacity discourages our attempt to track his language as references to an empirical world. Even when reading verse we expect words readily to demonstrate a correspondence to outside things or events, for our linguistic competency develops through the code of usage. Like other postmodern writers, however, Major uses language as a newly constructed code.

Major's poems are cast subjectively as dramas of feelings, sometimes in conflict, at other times their complexities resolved by time. Always, though, the dynamic comes from a logic of emotional knowledge that, more often than not, conceals the subject—what the poem is about. Such verse holds that the structures of feeling have been shaped uniquely, and it follows that the patterns of expression must be intrinsic to poetic execution. . . .

The absence of conventional punctuation makes ''Overbreak'' an uninterrupted utterance intensely felt; yet, the original stimulus has been absorbed into abstractions, the currency of mental constructions that nevertheless stop short of concept.

Major's code regularly employs eccentric punctuation and unusual typographical arrangement so that the poems must be seen as well as heard. Clotted lines, such as ''O supreme sledgehammer of reposing verbal stacks of/nouns verbs adjectives charming,'' insist upon the primary sensation of words as sounds. These eccentricities, and others, then reinforce the premise implied by such fused syntax. . . .

If conventional syntax asserts the dominance of rational order, then this disruption argues the existence of an ''extension of reality,'' its integrity requiring designation of a new, arbitrary system of signs.

Because it stakes all on the tone conveyed by a linguistic code we can never entirely decipher, Major's verse risks obscurity. But, of course, the risk is well taken. The discontinuities between his verse and the patterns of conventional usage become an experiment in poetics as well as poems.

John M. Reilly. In *Contemporary Poets, 6th edition*, ed. Thomas Riggs (St. James Press, 1996).

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MALAMUD, Bernard (1914–1986)

The Natural is an unusually fine novel . . . although I don't know how the professionals are going to take it. For Bernard Malamud's interests go far beyond baseball. What he has done is to contrive a sustained and elaborate allegory in which the ''natural'' player—who operates with ease and the greatest skill, without having been taught—is equated with the natural man. . . . In his telling and always deliberate use of the vernacular alternated with passages evocative and almost lyrical, in his almost entirely successful relation of baseball in detail to the culture which elaborated it, Malamud has made a brilliant and unusual book.

Harry Sylvester. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 24, 1952. p. 5

The appearance of an intelligent novelist who finds it possible to say something about a popular—''mass''—phenomenon through the medium of a popular literary form is a very healthy sign. Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* is the first serious novel we have had (after Ring Lardner's *You Know Me Al*) about a baseball player. . . . Mr. Malamud suggests that baseball is the American way of providing for needs which our culture generally refuses to satisfy. . . . But the ball park in itself is not enough for the writer. . . . *The Natural* is loaded with Homeric parallels and suggestion of myth—overloaded in fact. . . . The habit of symbolizing everything, from baseball bats to men and women, and of multiplying allusions to the point where they begin to crowd out reality altogether, is one of the more unfortunate legacies bequeathed by Joyce and Eliot to contemporary writers.

Norman Podhoretz. *Commentary*. March, 1953. pp. 321–3

It is a commonplace that a writer of true talent will take commonplace material and produce through it in the reader a sense of utterly fresh discovery of human qualities. This, Bernard Malamud has achieved in his new novel, *The Assistant*. He has succeeded also in individualizing his people to a point where one feels able to continue conversation with them outside the book, and yet he has kept for each of them a symbolic role, so that the tale has moral echoes, indeed almost a runic quality; it is essentially a parable. . . . Malamud creates an amazing tension in his story of the growth of conscience. . . . He is a writer who certainly will count amongst the literary figures of our day.

Meyer Levin. *Saturday Review*. June 15, 1957. p. 21

Malamud is naturally a fantasist of the ordinary, the commonplace, the average. He writes, a little, the way Chagall paints—except that the natural course of Malamud's imagination is not to seek the open

and the lyrical but symbols of the highly involuted personal life of Jews. He loves what he himself calls ''violins and candles'' in the sky, old-clothes-men who masquerade something sinister yet unnameable; he has a natural sense for the humdrum transposed to the extreme, of the symbolic and the highly colored. He tends to the bizarre, the contorted, the verge of things that makes you shiver, not laugh.

Alfred Kazin. *Commentary*. July, 1957. p. 90

In *The Assistant*, which seems to me one of the important novels of the postwar period, Jewish experience is used as a way of approaching the deepest, broadest problems of love and fear, of communion and isolation in human life. So, too, in *The Magic Barrel*: the more faithfully Malamud renders Jewish life, the wider his meanings are.

Malamud's stories often have a legendary quality whether his method is realistic, as ''The First Seven Years,'' or fantastic, as in ''Angel Levine''. . . . The question Malamud asks more often than any other is: what are the limits of human responsibility?

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. May 17, 1958. p. 16

It would be merely sentimental and pious to suggest that those qualities of his work (following *The Natural*) which have been so steadily remarked upon—the pity and the tenderness, the compassion and love, as in *The Assistant* and many of the stories in *The Magic Barrel*—are Jewish properties and that the writer who expresses and conveys them is, therefore, a Jewish writer. They do not in themselves make for art; without art they may, indeed, only suffocate; and Malamud, whose instinct is for that center of passion where feeling is most exacerbated, is almost always in absolute control of his difficult art, though he takes the greatest risks in creating his rarefied atmosphere.

''Levitation,'' in fact, is one of his favorite words. In that thin air between natural earth and outer space everything is permitted, all rules are suspended, but only so long as the artist can keep his characters there by his own centrifugal force. If we say that Malamud's world is like no other, it is because the world he creates occupies the air exactly between the real and the absurd, where only saints and lunatics are, and where the right gesture—of movement, of language, of syntax, of metaphor—can save one's life, or some other.

Saul Maloff. *New Republic*. Nov. 18, 1961. p. 407

In general, the special achievement of Malamud's technique has been the movement back and forth between the grimly plain and the fantastic, the joining of the natural to the supernatural, the endowing of the abstracted version of the commonplace with the entanglements of a dream. His most impressive prose has been a similar mixture of a hard common speech, twisted by Yiddishisms or by his own syntax so that it vibrates, and lit here and there by a sudden lyrical image. The solidity of his best work has come from an obsessive mood and vision which from moment to moment seems to take the place of the realist's eye for physical detail. . . . Bypassing contemporary reality, then, and the techniques of realism, Malamud has relied instead mainly upon his memories of ghetto life and his idiosyncratic imagination to create situations of sufficient density—and intensity—for his moral concerns. His excursions beyond the ghetto life have been noticeably less sure and distinguished.

Theodore Solotaroff. *Commentary*. March, 1962. p. 201

Idiots First is a roundup of short stories, some of which go back a decade or so. One of them, in fact, provided the imaginative base for *The Assistant*. As such, this volume does not maintain the striking level of excellence of *The Magic Barrel*, but it is good Malamud, and that is very good indeed. Collections of short stories are dangerous enterprises. There is no cumulative power, and each successive story is a new risk. What is ultimately reassuring about *Idiots First* is that, although the stories are uneven, there isn't a false note in any one of them. Malamud's voice is quiet, his storyteller's instincts in superb control. . . . there is no stylistic bravura about Malamud. It is his very simplicity that ensnares. Like the baseball player about whom he wrote in his first novel, Malamud is a natural.

What is the source of his appeal? Essentially, Malamud has redeemed failure, a valuable service in our hard-lunging success culture.

David Boroff. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 12, 1963. p. 33

Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* and *A New Life* are novels of ironic affirmation. Both novels offer a similar affirmation for the possibility of human salvation and identity through a consciously constructed personal ethic. The central character in each book discovers this personal ethic and is redeemed, but redeemed only after he has suffered, only after purgatorial fires have refined him during his search for self-discipline and a new, meaningful life directed by humanistic values. Malamud's vision, in effect, offers the possibility for living a moral life. . . .

The affirmation itself is ironic in that the state of grace is unaccompanied by paradise. Redemption is at once hopeful and hopeless, a redemption realistically conceived for a world where a personal set of humanistic values does not effect a change in society and does not offer material comfort for the ethical man. Rather, it offers personal grace accompanied by continual suffering and a constant challenge. . . .

Ruth B. Mandel. *Critique*. Winter, 1964–65. pp. 110–11

He has invented and altered significantly [in *The Fixer*]. But where externals are concerned, he has been surprisingly faithful not only to the larger political circumstances of the case in Russia, in Kiev at that time, but faithful to more intimate details, the name Zhenya, the arrangement of the brick yard, the blinding of a lover. Malamud seems to want to impress on us the fact that though this is a work of the imagination, history or reality provided the *imaginata*, the facts to imagine. . . . But a universalizing purpose is served by Malamud's concentration on a jail cell in which men very unlike ''you,'' the reader, visit such arbitrary torments and humiliations on a man who, so reduced and limited, can more easily be ''you'' the reader. Jail symbolizes a now small world of multiple barriers and kinds of confinement in which some men impose extreme limitations on the lives of other men, occasionally with active cruelty, more often with the cruelty of indifference. It is a world in which a strange

complex of customs, science, greed, ideology, overpopulation and historical chance determines so apparently arbitrarily who shall gorge and who shall starve, whom we should be polite to and whom we should kill, determines when something written on paper can carry a man in luxury through a dozen countries, when something on another paper can send him to an ignored and ignoble death. This is a complex which novelists ideally should be best equipped to understand.

Robert Gorham Davis. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1966–67. pp. 663, 665

The Tenants is a superb novel, whose mastery of tone, language, and characterization can only enlarge the stature of Bernard Malamud, one of our best writers. . . . A writer's frustration, ecstasy, and enforced solitude, his envy of people who seem to lead happier, more useful lives, are themes invoked by Mr. Malamud in a book that quickly assumes greater dimensions.

As Harry [the chief character] sits at his desk, wondering why he can't finish his novel, or as he roams through his deserted building, listening to the wind make almost human noises, *The Tenants* broadens its focus to contain material more violent than anything in *The Assistant*, though far less expressive of man's power to redeem himself than in *The Fixer*. A magnificent story is told with grieving insight into some of life's more damaging conflicts and betrayals. . . .

There seems to be little love in this taut, highly concentrated novel. Its fierce symbols—jungle vegetation, flora that surrounds human beings who stalk each other like beasts—create an Eden not so much lost as ravaged by man's passionate enmity toward his kind. The complex integration of symbolism and realism reminds us how prophetic *The Natural*, Mr. Malamud's first novel, was in influencing the direction his writing would take.

Joseph Catinella. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 25, 1971. p. 36

As short fiction goes, middling Malamud is merely exemplary—models of artisanship aglow with a special vision; at its best it works magic: Malamud is our principal necromancer and fabulist.

The eight tales of his new collection [*Rembrandt's Hat*] run the course from middling (he has never written below that mark) to spectacular: a few fine, though repeat, performances, variations on themes reverberating from *The Magic Barrel* and *Idiots First*, as well as the novels; a few tentative departures—delicate, interesting, admirable, though not particularly memorable; and at least two, which happen also to be the longest in the volume, that are commanding examples of his art. . . .

But what is most notable here is a quality as much moral as artistic: Malamud's distinguished grace of absolute integrity, his refusal to evade a story's smallest inner necessities: his requirement of himself that he *write*, where he could have elided, each turning and gesture of the spirit.

New Republic. June 6, 1973. p. 32

In *Pictures of Fidelman* Malamud sets out to turn the tables on himself and, gamely, to take a holiday from his own obsessive mythology: here he imagines as the hero a Jewish man living without shame and even with a kind of virile, if shlemielish, forcefulness in a world of Italian gangsters, thieves, pimps, whores, and bohemians, a man who eventually finds love face-down with a Venetian glassblower who is the husband of his own mistress—and most of it has no more impact than the bullet that Yakov Bok fired in his imagination had on the real Czar of Russia [in *The Fixer*]. And largely because it has been conceived as a similar kind of compensatory daydream; in *Pictures of Fidelman*, unfortunately, natural repugnance and constraints, and a genuine sense of what conversions cost, are by and large dissolved in rhetorical flourishes rather than through the sort of human struggle that Malamud's own deeply held sense of things calls forth in *The Assistant* and *The Fixer*. It's no accident that this of all the longer works generates virtually no internal narrative tension (a means whereby it might seek to test its own assumptions) and is without the continuous sequential development that comes to this kind of storyteller so naturally and acts in him as a necessary counterforce against runaway fantasy. This playful daydream of waywardness, criminality, transgression, lust, and sexual perversion could not have stood up against that kind of opposition.

Philip Roth. *New York Review of Books*. Oct. 3, 1974. p. 26

Because he is so vitally concerned with matters of conscience, the allegorical use of character is especially important in Malamud's fiction. The use of a character near the protagonist to represent conscience, a device commonly used by Malamud, is nearly as old as literature itself, and there is ample precedent in the American tradition. . . .

In Malamud's fiction objectification by character operates on two levels—for the central character by other characters, and for the reader by the central character. In most of his fictions, there is at least one character who provides ''the test,'' who brings the lingering internal question to the surface, who forces the central character to the question of conscience: bumbling innocence is caught up by the collar and vague, good intentions are not enough—''Who are you?'' and ''What do you stand for?''

Malamud uses several different patterns in dramatizing this confrontation, each presenting to the reader a slightly different moral. One sort of test is that presented by the ''loathly lady,'' as Edwin M. Eigner and others have labeled this figure. Many, if not nearly all, the women that Malamud central-character males have romantic encounters with show themselves to have some severe defect. The test, which is among other things a criticism of the ''girl-of-my-dreams'' syndrome, consists of a challenge to the depth of the protagonist's love—will he reject the woman because she does not match his superficial criteria? . . .

Our culture holds that happiness and security come from wealth and the acquisition of goods. Malamud's fiction suggests that the struggle to acquire wealth or to keep it makes us insensitive, selfish, and unloving, and that there is no joy except in loving. There are not very many wealthy people in Malamud's fiction. . . .

Malamud's best work shows us the human soul in conflict with itself on a stage stripped bare of cosmetics, media myths, and the junk of affluence. He cuts away, cuts away, down to the bone, through flesh and bone to essence of human need, agony, and joy. Everything is so minimal—so little is needed, and yet so little is

given. Just a ''little living,'' just a little mercy, for Christ's sake. He can tear the reader's heart out for the pity of it.

Jackson J. Benson. In *The Fiction of Bernard Malamud*, ed. Richard Astro and Jackson J. Benson (Oregon State Univ. Pr., 1977), pp. 21–22, 38–39

At the heart of Malamud's fiction is a reverence for the family, a fragile unit forged from affection, loyalty, and above all duty. Malamud's perspective reveals the importance of his own immigrant Jewish background. In a personal letter, he pays tribute to his parents as ''compassionate'' people who influenced him. Although he emphasizes that his ''father always supported'' them, he describes both his parents as ''hardworking.'' Reminiscent of the Bobers in *The Assistant*, the Malamuds worked together in the store and developed something of a partnership in their marriage as well as in their business. His father fulfilled the role of a gentle patriarch. He guided and supported the family with the assistance of his well-meaning but somewhat protective wife (whom the author remembers as fearful of ''gypsies''). In their compassion, in their dedication to the family, and in their perseverance, the senior Malamuds resemble some of the author's couples who, despite difficulties, are bound to each other in relationships evocative of European Yiddish life. . . .

In America the Jewish father's power is eroded. No longer the distant scholar, the fountain of wisdom, he does not inspire awe as he used to. Toiling alongside him, his wife is emboldened to assert herself more openly. Instead of quietly advising him, she may loudly nag him. Nevertheless, at least in Malamud's fiction, the man still makes the important family decisions. In *The Assistant* Morris Bober quietly determines the family's fate. He hides unpleasant news from his wife, continues to operate the store the way he wants to, and ignores her complaints and demands. Ida realizes that the grocer is ''a hard man to move. In the past she could sometimes resist him, but the weight of his endurance is too much for her now.'' When he decides to shovel snow, she cannot stop him, nor can she persuade him to take advantage of an unsuspecting refugee. Despite her fears, Morris retains his Italian assistant, Frank Alpine. But the grocer rules with a gentle hand. He accepts the changes initiated by his ambitious assistant, who remodels the store to improve profits. But even in this enterprise, Morris has the ultimate veto and refuses to sanction deceptive business practices. He is clearly the family head, mourning for his dead son, worrying about his daughter's future, guiding his young helper, and operating the store. Though an American citizen for many years, Bober resembles many Eastern European Jewish men in his idealism and in his relationship to the family. A poor provider, he nevertheless retains their compassion and loyalty. As the practical wife, Ida complains, but she also loves Morris and blames herself for his failure to become a druggist. Helen's daughterly devotion makes her sacrifice her education to help support the family. It also makes her initially avoid Alpine, a non-Jew, so as not to hurt her parents. Despite poverty and suffering, the Bobers remain a family. Not surprisingly, then, Bober's death creates a vacuum, which will need to be filled by Frank Alpine, who becomes a surrogate father. . . .

In Malamud's fiction it is rare, though not impossible, for men to desert or abuse their families. In ''The Mourners'' Kessler is an aging recluse who had abandoned his family years before. Oskar Gassner, ''the German refugee,'' had fled Hitler and left his wife behind to die. In *The Assistant* the tough, brutal Detective Minogue, who nearly kills his warped son, is probably Malamud's worst father figure, but he is also an exception. Most of Malamud's male characters learn to be responsible family heads. Those who do not, suffer severely. Kessler makes a pathetic figure as he confronts his past sins and hopeless future. Oskar Gassner, unable to forget his gentile wife, gasses himself to death. And Detective Minogue is tormented by his son Ward, a hard-core criminal resembling Bigger Thomas.

Evelyn Gross Avery. *Rebels and Victims: The Fiction of Richard Wright and Bernard Malamud* (Kennikat, 1979), pp. 58–61

Bernard Malamud sometimes gets obscured by flashier American writers. He isn't a formal innovator, he doesn't construct what one might call fictional ''fortresses,'' those huge novels bristling with erudition which have intimidated critics and readers alike. He isn't ''zany'' or exquisitely sensitive or grandly perverse. But he writes superbly most of the time, at least as well as any living American writer of fiction, and time will pardon him for violating the categories.

For he does do that, and reviewers, whose categories they largely are, are often uncomfortable with him because of it. His narratives, which we are told ought to be shapely and lucid, are often lopsided and indistinct. He can be abrupt, impatient with the demands of plot without being willing to scuttle plot altogether; so he'll take shortcuts. His situations sometimes fail wholly to convince on sociological grounds—*The Tenant* is an example—and his tense, loving, troubled appreciation of life, with its concomitant of occasional desperation, can lead him to sentimentality, an excess of willing; *The Fixer* suffers from that. In short, he isn't a tidy novelist, but loose and erratic, someone struggling.

But how well he writes! His great gift is that of using language so as to bring about the narrowest possible spaces among experience, thought and utterance, to come as close as one can to eliminating the discrepancy between experience and its recovery as literature. This near unity of instrument and object results in a quiet eloquence, a nearly inaudible one at times, since to be determinedly eloquent is to weight language toward a celebration of itself, with a consequent diminution of actuality. And Malamud's fiction, even the seemingly fantastic short stories, is one of actuality, which is to say that it esteems and mourns what exists, without wishing to add to it. He is a realist in the sense of Dostoevsky was, a writer true to the structures of experience.

I find all this necessary to say because there are things wrong with Malamud's new novel, *Dubin's Lives*, but I don't think they matter. They are malfeasances only from the perspective of an educated, reasonable notion of fiction, a notion of elements in their proper relation: plot, structure, style, everything in balance, everything ''convincing,'' no room for dubiety, incompleteness, disjunction. But it isn't through satisfying a preexisting set of standards that fiction triumphs. The ''felt life'' of Henry James's dictum is what counts: life sensed deeply, made conscious, within such structures as are necessary for its more or less rough shape. The best fiction spills over, protrudes; heretical as it may sound, the best fiction has nothing much to do with the critic's categories. . . . One of [Malamud's] great strengths . . . is his ability to move the reader by an alternation of tones, a subtle passage from statement to evocation. The world of his fiction emits a glow of consciousness;

things making themselves known, gamely, lovingly. No other writer we have celebrates so well the hard-earned nobility of the literary imagination as it makes its conquests.

Richard Gilman. *New Republic*. March 24, 1979, pp. 28–30

In his fiction Malamud considers the moral evolution of his characters. They grow in ethical depth through various kinds of suffering, intellectual as well as physical. Using such techniques as mirror images, symbiotic pairs of characters, and the double vision of Jewish humor, Malamud often succeeds in showing us the human soul, stripped bare of romantic dreams, pretense, and materialistic aspirations, in conflict with its own divided nature. It is no exaggeration to say that spiritual conflict dwells at the center of Malamud's moral universe. Freedom can be achieved, but only through moral awareness, which, paradoxically, binds a person to others in a web of commitments.

Each of the protagonists of Malamud's novels faces a trial of conscience or a spiritual test and triumphs only by accepting fatherly spiritual guidance or by listening to his own troubled conscience, an acceptance that must be accompanied by an expression of mercy, love, charity, or forgiveness. . . .

The implied lesson is, quite simply, that people can change. Their circumstances may remain the same but spiritually they transcend their surroundings. This recurring theme in Malamud's writing is simple but efficacious. For example, as a corollary Malamud implies that life is relative. A store can become a prison for one man and a means of deliverance for another. Things, in and of themselves, are neither good nor bad; they are what we make of them. In the world of Malamud's fiction compassion, love, and understanding—the humane values—rather than physical circumstances give meaning to one's life. It is a world that blends hope with despair, pain with possibility, and suffering with moral growth. Out of the everyday defeats and indignities of ordinary people, Malamud creates beautiful parables that capture the joy as well as the pain of life; he expresses the dignity of the human spirit searching for freedom and moral growth in the face of hardship, injustice, and the existential anguish of life in our time.

Sheldon J. Hershinow. *Bernard Malamud* (Ungar, 1980), pp. 145–46

Bernard Malamud is a writer who early on established an emphatic paradigm for his fictional world and who ever since has been struggling in a variety of ways to escape its confines. His latest novel [*God's Grace*] is his most strenuous stratagem of escape, moving beyond the urban horizon of his formative work into an entirely new mode of postapocalyptic fantasy—with intriguing though somewhat problematic results.

When I say ''paradigm,'' I am not referring to the explicit Jewish themes or to the morally floundering Jewish protagonists that have been trademarks of Malamud's fiction, with the exception of his first novel, *The Natural*. In fact, *God's Grace* is the most self-consciously Jewish of all his books. . . .

Gore Vidal's *Kalki* (1978) provides an instructive contrast to *God's Grace*. It is also a post-apocalyptic fantasy, though the bulk of the novel is devoted to a brilliantly suspenseful account of the plot to bring about the apocalypse. Here, too, the relentless egoism of some of the survivors ends by subverting the possibility of survival. There is, however, a kind of purity of witty misanthropy in Vidal's treatment of this whole subject. No ''prophetic'' or moralistic claims are made for the story; it is an end-of-the-world thriller that reveals the essential nastiness of the ingenious human animal, something about which the author has never been seriously in doubt. This is probably too glib and too limited a view of mankind to generate anything like major fiction, but it does give the work in question a certain consistency, even a kind of circumscribed integrity. *God's Grace*, by contrast, invites us to take it as an impassioned plea for kindness and pity for all living creatures in the face of man's enormous capacity for murderous destruction. The moral message is unexceptionable, but the vehemence with which the brutish counterforce to kindness and pity is imagined at the end is disquieting. Instead of holding a prophetic mirror to the contorted face of mankind, the novelist—at least so it seems to this reader—has once again taken his lovingly fashioned creatures, bound them hand and foot, and begun to play with axes, knives, tearing incisors, and other instruments of dismemberment.

Robert Alter. *New Republic*. Sept. 20 and 27, 1982, pp. 38, 40

[Bernard] Malamud is perhaps the purest storyteller since [Nikolay] Leskov. I read on always to learn what will come next, and usually in at least faint dread of what may happen. The dreadful in Malamud is not what already has happened, not at least until the horrible final page of *The Tenants*. Perhaps the sense of impending dread, even in the comic mode, is one of the genuinely negative Jewish qualities that Malamud's work possesses. ''Every Jew is a meteorologist,'' says the Israeli humorist [Ephraim] Kishon, and certainly Malamud's creatures live in their sense that lightning bolts will need to be dodged.

The Jewishness of Malamud's fiction has been a puzzle from the start, as his better critics always indicated. Malamud's vision is personal, original, and almost wholly unrelated to the most characteristic or normative Jewish thought and tradition. As for Malamud's style, it too is a peculiar (and dazzling) invention. It may give off the aura of Yiddish to readers who do not know the language, but to anyone who spoke and studied Yiddish as a child, the accents of memory emerge from the pages of *Herzon* but not of *The Fixer*. Malamud's idiom, like his stance, is a beautiful and usurping achievement of the imagination. His triumph is to have given us Malamud, and somehow then compelled us to think, as we read, how Jewish it all seems. I can summon up no contemporary writer who suffers less from the anxiety-of-influence, whose books are less concerned to answer the self-crippling question: ''Is there anything left to be done?'' Like his own first hero, he is a Natural.

Harold Bloom. Introduction in Harold Bloom, ed. *Bernard Malamud* (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), p. 1

Much of Malamud's fiction depicts a struggle of his main characters to realize the kind of life he . . . describes as Jewish. The extent to which it can be fully realized is doubtful. The suffering aspirant is hemmed in by doubts and frustrations and relapses. To symbolize these obstacles to realization, Malamud often employs the image of the prison. For instance, in *The Assistant*, the image of a prison and an alternative form, the coffin, recurs. . . .

This imagery appears in the next novel, *A New Life* (1961). Although there is only one allusion to the Jewishness of the central

figure, Seymour Levin, it is a highly significant element of the plot, which again pursues the theme of redemption through suffering. . . .

The same themes as those of the novel are adumbrated in Malamud's short stories, of which he is a master. Surely one of the finest of these stories is ''The Magic Barrel.'' . . . As in so many of the stories, the atmosphere of the Yiddish folktale pervades it, but they exceed the folktale in subtlety and, above all, in the ambiguity that marks them as modernist. . . .

Most of the stories depict the suffering of a *shlemiel* character, who endures continual frustration but is redeemed by his transcendence of that suffering, often through love. Despite the depth of suffering, the narration never loses its humanity and sympathy for suffering felt and inflicted.

> Louis Harap. *In the Mainstream: The Jewish Presence in Twentieth-Century American Literature, 1950s–1980s* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Pr., 1987), pp. 124–25

In an interview in the *New York Times* in 1971, Bernard Malamud observed: ''A Malamud character is someone who fears his fate, is caught up in it, yet manages to outrun it. He's the subject and object of laughter and pity.'' ''The purpose of the writer,'' Malamud later added, ''is to keep civilization from destroying itself.'' ''My premise is that we will not destroy each other. My premise . . . is for humanism—and against nihilism.'' Throughout Malamud's writings, the contrary perspectives of human advancement and destruction—as well as the reader response of joy and sorrow—come into confrontation. The positive side continually seems to be countered by a ''shadow side,'' an angry, ironic side that is fraught with absurdist humor. *God's Grace* is the most violent and bleak expression of black humor anywhere in Malamud's fiction.

In *God's Grace*, published in 1982 (four years before Malamud's death), all human beings except Calvin Cohn have been destroyed either in a nuclear holocaust (caused by mankind's machinations) or, following this, in a second flood (created by an angry God). In *God's Grace*, perhaps more a fable than a novel, Cohn survives in the womblike bathysphere of the research ship *Rebekah Q* and eventually makes his way to an island on a raft, with a chimpanzee Buz swimming nearby. With hope for the future, Cohn tries to engage the remaining inhabitants on earth (they are chimpanzees who have been taught to speak English) in a dialogue offering moral teachings. The opposing perspectives of humanism and nihilism are dramatized in the experiences of the absurd hero Calvin Cohn, who is an ''object of laughter and pity.''

The novel depicts Cohn's desire to affirm deep religious belief, the ability to place faith in God even if He wipes out humankind. It shows how Cohn stresses the teachings of the Bible, particularly passages from Genesis and Exodus, and plays recordings of ceremonial songs that his father, a rabbi, sang. Concomitantly, the novel seems to parody—and virtually deconstruct—the biblical works that Cohn praises and the Jewish humanism that he stresses.

Cohn's continual yearning for meaning and purpose comes into confrontation with failure and frustration. This sets up an absurd perspective. It is absurd by Camus's definition which is based upon a ''divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints [the] nostalgia for unity, this fragmented universe and the contradiction that binds them together.'' Cohn's quest for meaning is a constant reminder of what has been defined as the nature of the absurd: ''The senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach.'' . . .

In many ways *God's Grace* seems to be a parody of traditional biblical exegesis; it is a text that seems to yearn for religious affirmation at the same time that it parodies central biblical passages from Genesis and Exodus. It is a book that sets up alternating perspectives. A tension between faith and pessimism is evident in many works of Malamud, ranging from the early novel *The Assistant* (1957) to his unfinished novel *The People* (published posthumously in 1990).

> Elaine B. Safer. ''The Allusive Mode, The Absurd, and Black Humor in Bernard Malamud's *God's Grace.*'' *Studies in American Humor*. 1989, pp. 104–5, 106

At the time of his death in 1986, Bernard Malamud was at work on what must surely have been his most curious novel, the tale of a Jewish carpenter named Yozip who, one day while traveling in the American Northwest, finds himself kidnapped by a tribe of Indians who call themselves simply ''the People.'' The aging chief of the tribe, having witnessed Yozip bravely defending himself in a fight with two cowboys in front of a town saloon, explains to the itinerant carpenter that he has been selected to become ''a red man of this tribe.'' The chief asks Yozip to help the People, to plead the Indians' case before the white men in Washington who have been breaking promises and treaties with them for years. . . .

In his introductory remarks to *The People*, Robert Giroux tells us that the genesis for the novel apparently came from a joke about ''a Jewish Indian'' which Malamud had heard as a young man in the 1940s. Indeed the novel moves, like much of Malamud's prose, with the lurching, twisting cadences of a long joke. And while there is considerable humor to be found in Yozip's predicament—a Jew who is no longer (in his own eyes at least) a Jew, leading a tribe of Indians in their battle against the white man—it is unfortunately a joke which the author has stretched beyond its own parameters.

The idea is rife with comic possibilities, but the ironic juxtapositions of the early chapters . . . soon become cloying: a vaudevillian sketch gone on too long. And Malamud's attempts to establish an affinity between the immigrant Jewish sensibility and that of the tribesmen are too often heavy-handed. . . .

[Even] the completed chapters we have been given were clearly left by Malamud in the state of a first draft. And one wonders whether the author would have appreciated the appearance of the novel in its present state. *The People* is not representative of the highest level of Malamud's art; nowhere in it do we find the clean-lined brilliance of his best prose, nor the comic magic of his sharpest imagery. . . .

Along with *The People*, this posthumous volume includes sixteen of Malamud's uncollected stories, some previously unpublished, spanning the entire length of his career. ''The Place Is Different Now,'' first published in 1943, depicts an alcoholic drifter who comes back to his old neighborhood to confront a brother who has threatened to kill him. It is one of the most powerful of the pieces in the collection, and of particular interest in that it was the story Malamud considered to be the forerunner of his masterful early novel *The Assistant*.

> Douglas Century. ''The Chief in Spite of Himself.'' *Midstream*. July, 1990, p. 43

''You bastard, don't you understand what it means to be human?'' With this challenge, Malamud's desperate character Mendel, in ''Idiots First,'' demands from Ginzburg, the anthropomorphized figure of death, a commitment to compassion and pity. Mendel's defiance of death's merciless indifference reaffirms *rachmones*, the Yiddish term for compassion, a fundamental concern of Jewish ethics. *Rachmones* is emphatically preoccupied with human motives and choices. It is the singular distinctive feature of Malamud's authorial voice. Moreover, this emphatic plea for compassion is nowhere more apparent than in his short stories, where formal constraints show his characters in the stark, unadorned, and precarious conditions that define and delimit their moral choices. As Mark Shechner points out with reference to Malamud, ''the short story remains the purest distillation of his abiding leitmotif: the still, sad music of humanity.'' In story after story, Malamud, like his character Mendel, demands that we ''understand what it means to be human.'' As Malamud himself put it, in a 1966 interview with Haskell Frankel: ''My work, all of it, is an idea of dedication to the human. . . . I'm in defense of the human.''. . .

Such pleas are not uncommon in the history of Jewish literature. Job pleads with God for some justification for his suffering. Sholom Aleichem's narrators characteristically beg their audiences to hear them out, hear their stories and complaints. Such demands by no means carry with them the fakery of the sentimental. They are, finally, no more but no less than appeals to a human moral conscience, without which there can be no meaning to suffering. In all cases, despite obvious differences in form, in readers, and in intention, narrators and speaking characters are able to tell their stories to someone else, to an internal addressee who, in their sense of just causes, cares. Like Job and the host of characters who people Sholom Aleichem's vignettes, Malamud's characters speak for vindication, for some proof of human compassion and mercy. . . . Malamud's characters, similarly, speak to others whom they believe to have some control over their fates, their suffering.

Victoria Aarons. '''In Defense of the Human': Compassion and Redemption in Malamud's Short Fiction.'' *Studies in American Fiction*. Spring, 1992, pp. 57–58

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MALTZ, Albert (1908–1985)

Very significant indeed is the acclaim bestowed on *Merry-Go-Round*, a play of 1932 which handled directly and honestly, if somewhat crudely, a situation now being forced on the public's attention. Its portrayal of municipal corruption, with Mayor and District Attorney, Judge and Police Commissioner alike taking their orders from the ''Chief'' of the political organization in control of the unnamed city, while every one of them is in terror of a threatened legislative investigation, is enough to shame us all. But when to this is added the dread they have of the tell-tale document in the possession of the racketeer-murderer, the already dark picture becomes blacker still. . . . the two young authors of *Merry-Go-Round*, Albert Maltz and George Sklar, have had the courage to carry their play to its logical conclusion. . . . This stinging play, which, according to Mr. J. Brooks Atkinson of the New York *Times*, has ''caught the spirit if not the fact of contemporary politics,'' is one of the few which have notably succeeded in this matter of translating general problems in terms of the individual.

Louise Maunsell Field. *North American Review*. August, 1932. pp. 171–2

What I like about the Theatre Union and their play *Peace on Earth* is that it is something real done, and I think well done. The play itself is vital and alive. It is full of the curious dramatic realism of everyday American life right now. There is the pathetic hungryness of the kindly intentioned man—author, college professor, liberal—dramatically set over against the realism of men shot, broken heads—the thing so likely to happen when men and women stand up against the combined little fears of a frightened society. Whiff of cold mornings by factory gates—half-crazed young girl radicals screaming with shrill voices at stolid-faced citizens on street corners—smell of sweaty overalls—horror of prisons where men are locked up and sometimes hanged for dreams. Do you like it? The Theatre Union has proven that it is good drama.

Sherwood Anderson. Foreword to *Peace on Earth* by Albert Maltz and George Sklar (French). 1934. pp. v–vi

Albert Maltz's play of the coal mines [*Black Pit*], while far from a master-piece, has vitality both of character and incident, and, up to the last scene when the author in the person of Tony Lakavich gets on a metaphorical soapbox and delivers an oration à la Union Square, it is exceedingly effective theatre. It is a pity that in this last scene the propagandist in Mr. Maltz should have gotten the better of the artist, but this is apparently to be expected from most proletarian writers. . . . But Mr. Maltz has a flair for depicting the Slavic mine worker and the more brutal type of native mine superintendent. In proletarian plays there is of course little need for subtlety or distinction of acting; we are given life in the raw. What is needed is force, vitality, pathos and animal feeling, and these Mr. Maltz, Mr. Gordon [the director] and the actors and actresses give us in superlative degree. This is not the highest type of art, some might say it is not art at all, but probably the Theatre Union cares little for art for its own sake, just as it apparently is blind to the fact that virtue may not always lie entirely with the proletariat. Your radical dearly loves a villain, and this villain is capital and the tools of capital.

Grenville Vernon. *Commonweal*. April 5, 1935. p. 654

Albert Maltz's favorite subject is pain—the appearance of pain, the conditions of pain. Yet it is because he writes out of a hot, lacerating fury that never rises to a scream that these few stories [*The Way Things Are*] are so burningly effective. He is a good technician, but not an impeccable one; yet the occasional crudity that would ruin another writer is easily passed over. For though he

is a humble writer, a taker of notes, the sense of his own anger is the most powerful element in these stories; yet he never enters them visibly. He is rather a witness of the American landscape, a recorder of the break in the dream, of the swelling heartbreak that comes over people struggling with their fingertips against disaster.

Alfred Kazin. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. July 24, 1938. p. 2

Albert Maltz has written a labor novel [*The Underground Stream*], a novel about the struggle for union recognition in Detroit in 1936, before the C.I.O. had validated the Labor Relations Act. But as the story takes a powerful hold on the reader, one realizes that here is a book that has nothing in common with other labor novels. Here is no morbidity, no grim hopelessness. Mr. Maltz has dared to discard the familiar slogans and dogma, and even the basic materialism, and has built his story around his sure sense of human values, around a knowledge of the things for which men strive and which make their lives worth living. He passes beyond the mere tendentiousness of ordinary social novels, and makes a just claim to the calmer and more enduring perspectives of history. . . .

The rigid economic determinism that infests most labor novels relieves individuals of responsibility for their acts, of moral choice, and hence of the need for positive action. This limitation Maltz boldly rejects. He has granted freedom of action to Princey, and thereby he has been able to return to the heroic pattern which makes for fine novels.

Harold Strauss. *New York Times Book Section*. July 7, 1940. p. 7

The Cross and the Arrow is a kind of allegorical detective story written with considerable verve and skill and making for exactly the same kind of impact as Maltz's well known labor plays. It is obtained chiefly by a dramatically effective reduction of personality into sharp ideologic crystals and the manipulation of these for a maximum of pure emotional friction.

William Poster. *New Republic*. Oct. 9, 1944. p. 468

In this tightly plotted short novel [*The Journey of Simon McKeever*], Mr. Maltz achieves an effect all too rare in current fiction—an affirmation of faith in man's courage, in man's will to put things right in a badly off-center world. Set in that gloomy trap for the unwary writer (an old mans' home), the story he tells is always engrossing—and, at times, inspiring, in the best sense of that misused word. Dealing with a bravura project that is doomed in advance (the attempt of a spunky septuagenarian to hitch-hike from the quasi-prison of the ''Home'' to a doctor who has a ''sure cure'' for his arthritis), *The Journey of Simon McKeever* insists and shows that man the individual has at least an outside chance of survival.

William Du Bois. *New York Times Book Section*. May 8, 1949. p. 5

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MAMET, David (1947–)

Sexual Perversity in Chicago, the first of two one-acters by a remarkable writer named David Mamet which are now playing Off Off Broadway, is one of the saddest comedies I can remember, but it is a comedy, all right. It seems at first to be just a series of absurd, sexy blackouts, but one gradually becomes aware that a quite substantial theme is in progress—the growth and subsequent disintegration of a fragile love affair between two young people who were formerly anchored (whether aware of it or not) in homosexual partnerships; after a period of intense happiness they break up, as much because of inexperience and bewilderment at the small abrasions of daily living as because of the unceasing disparagement of their new lovers by their former ones. In the last scenes we see the downcast young woman back home with her bitchy roommate, who gives her a short, brutal lecture on her young man, and the young man with *his* roommate, girl-watching at a beach, to the accompaniment of the roommate's equally brutal, dirty, monosyllabic observations on the girls being watched. Boy and girl have taken a chance and muffed it; they may or may not get a second chance, but their confidence has been impaired.

Looking back I can see I've made everything sound too glacial and too solemn; actually, the subtly pointed incidents are so unobtrusively put together that for quite a while the audience is unaware that any story is being told at all—or even, perhaps, that these couples are homosexual. Also, one spends so much time laughing at the funny lines that the underlying sadness of the play comes as an aftertaste. The piece is written with grace. . . .

The second piece, *Duck Variations*, is, strictly speaking, a poem in the guise of the desultory conversation of two old Jewish men . . . pottering around a bench in a park presumably facing Lake Michigan. There is a marvellous ring of truth in the meandering, speculative talk of these old men—the comic, obsessive talk of men who spend most of their time alone, nurturing and indulging their preposterous notions. There is more here than just geriatric humor; there is also imagination and understanding, as these old parties grow impatient with each other, quarrel, make up, reveal their need for each other, and talk glorious nonsense with impassioned solemnity. They never become ridiculous or pathetic; their dignity remains intact from beginning to end. Mr. Mamet is a true and original writer, who cherishes words and, on the evidence at hand, cherishes character even more.

Edith Oliver. *New Yorker*. Nov. 10, 1975, pp. 135–36

There's a new generation of unheralded playwrights about to burst forth with major works . . . but most of us felt that only Mamet had done work worthy of major critical recognition at this point, and recognition not so much for his plays as for the potential they represent, especially in his careful, gorgeous, loving sense of language. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that at the age of 28 Mamet

is the most promising American playwright to have emerged in the '70s and that he has the most acute ear for dialogue of any American writer since J.D. Salinger. . . . Mamet's extraordinary promise resides not so much in his insights into male-female relationships, or in the comic manipulations of his understanding, as in the exhilarating perfection of the language with which he expresses it. It's a rarity in theatre to find the insights, the action, so deeply embedded in the dialogue itself.

It's a terrible burden to place upon a writer, but if Mamet can continue the astonishing advance in achievement from *Duck Variations* (1971) to *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974) to *American Buffalo* (1975), I feel confident his next leap forward will give us nothing less than an American masterpiece. . . .

It's a rare writer indeed who by the age of 28 has *both* such a distinctive voice and such a wide range of subject matter (from metaphysical reflections on death to sexual farce to an exploration of the relationship between money and violence in American culture).

Ross Wetzsteon. *The Village Voice*. July 5, 1976, pp. 101, 103

From the beginning, Mr. Mamet's most notable and noticeable quality was his extraordinary use of speech. He concentrated not upon cultivated expression but upon that apparent wasteland of middle American speech. It was the language of the secretary, the salesman, the file clerk, the telephone linesman, the small-time crook, the semiliterate college kid.

It was grotesquely realistic. . . . Spoken, it sounded both more natural and funnier. But there is something beyond realism there. There is a desperate energy behind these apparent incoherences, a passion for speaking that is so intense as to become authentically lyrical. (In Mamet's later plays . . . the lyricism is even more apparent without ever being anything but completely authentic. Among other odd thoughts that come up in wondering where Mr. Mamet may be heading is the notion that—if this process of intensification and refining continues—he might just possibly become our first true verse dramatist). . . .

His characters are not hopeful, though they are trustful. Their world is full of distorted wisdom, of lessons learned but learned wrong because of the unreasonable ferocity, the lack of shape or instruction of middle American life.

They have the kind of skewed philosophy that ants might evolve in the generations after the destruction of the anthill. God exists, He is dangerous and capricious, and He is a giant Foot. And just as ants keep surviving their precarious worlds, Mamet's characters barely preserve their damaged humanity. They yearn and hatch schemes; their feelers wave delicately in the wreckage. . . .

Mamet's language is pared down. There is humor and awkwardness in the speeches but it is stripped of virtuosity or self-consciousness. It grows naturally and expressively. He has never written better.

It is more than an ear for speech. It is an ear for heartbeats, evidence of his character's state of life and its constant transformations. The evidence is often indirect and evasive. In its awkwardnesses and silences, speech can testify to the opposite of what it seems to say. The gun flash is precisely not where the bullet lodges. Mr. Mamet reports the flash and shows us where the wound really is.

The Water Engine is less intense, more complex and more spacious. It is Mr. Mamet's most beautiful play though not necessarily his best, nor his most powerful. It has a story, many characters, a melodramatic plot. . . .

Even his best work has defects. *The Woods*, strong as it is, has problems of structure and clarity. The changes are perhaps too exclusively internal; apart from a rainstorm, nothing outside happens to test or stretch the couple. There is some airlessness there.

Mamet seems to reach out farther with each new play, but he has only begun, in *Water Engine*, to test his extraordinary command of mood, character and language—poetic and specific—with the real changes and stresses of a plot and external reality. But for what he has done already, and what he shows every sign of going on to do, his return to Broadway is another candle in what could turn out to be a long celebration for the American theater.

Richard Eder. *The New York Times Magazine*. March 12, 1978, pp. 40, 42, 45, 47

Structurally, *The Woods* is hack formula: a build to crisis for the act curtain, then escalation to a climax and final resolution. (Five minutes into Act II, I called the rest of the action: ''They're gonna goad each other for a while, then he'll hit her, and then we'll get the tearful reconciliation.'') Mamet creates the illusion of form and direction in the play mainly by bringing back snatches of early speeches later on, culminating in a monologue of facile, ''meaningful'' nonsense about a bear that can't open its jaws to speak.

But *The Woods* is not just a benignly lousy play by an overrated playwright. It is deeply infested with misogyny disguised as an enlightened, even feminist, examination of couple interactions. Nick is a self-centered taker with concerns like ''I can not sleep,'' ''I want to fuck you.'' Ruth is a giver, who tries to love Nick and place their relationship in a great cosmic scheme of human interaction. (''This is the best thing two people can do—to share things that they have gone through before.'') The only sex scene consists of Nick grabbing Ruth to the ground, ripping open her pants, covering her face with her poncho, and forcing his way in (ignoring her pleas to go indoors and ''get some stuff''), then grumping away when it doesn't work well—while she protests that the fact that she ''wasn't wet'' doesn't mean she doesn't want him. So we have woman as sensitive and abused, man as cad. Feminist, right?

Wrong. The play presents Ruth as an imbecilic, needy giver, and then vindicates that role by making it facilitate Everycouple's first real communication. It affirms female as victim. But, more disturbing, Mamet ultimately *dismisses* the woman. *The Woods* is not really about a couple: It is about a man. It's he who has the grand emotional breakthrough, he who has the center-stage finale speech. Ruth's function in the play's structure parallels her role in the relationship: She's the wifelet, the steady, self-effacing, supporting figure that nourishes the primary one. On every level, *The Woods* suggests that a couple consists of a man *with* a woman rather than a man *and* a woman.

Eileen Blumenthal. *The Village Voice*. May 7, 1979, p. 103

''Woman lives but in her lord/'' wrote Dorothy Parker, ''Count to ten, and Man is bored/'' and she concluded, sourly, ''With this the gist and sum of it/What earthly good can come of it?'' This question is the central focus of David Mamet's painful, sardonic, and engrossing new play, *The Woods*, and his outlook is, if anything, bleaker than Parker's for being less glibly cynical.

The play's elements are few. Nick and Ruth, about whom we know virtually nothing except that they have been seeing each other ''in the city,'' spend half a weekend—long enough for young love to turn rancid and finally explode—at a summer house owned by Nick's family. The woodsy area they go to is brilliantly designed by John Lee Beatty: Trees (made from bundles of ropes) dominate the stage, while Nick's cabin is nothing but a few slats nailed between two posts and a porch, surrounded by more trees. In metaphoric terms, there is no inside to escape to. . . .

It is the man who gets the worst of Mamet's critique. The woman's sentimentality about nature and about relationships is comic, but there is also a sense in which it is deep and sincere, while the man's pretense of being a skilled backwoodsman and experienced lover is a flat-out fraud. At the end, when her threat to leave has reduced him to a whimper and a fetal position, she stays to mother him, and the play ends with an unfinished sentence, continuing a fairy tale she has previously started about two little children lost in a wood, which brings out what their relationship has been all along but hardly bodes well for its continuing.

For a play which is half personal and specific, and half abstract parable, Mamet has made a dangerous choice in his language. His words are naturalistic—there is no single line in the play which you could not hear someone say on the street—but they are all selected from those horrible moments when, reaching for a simple phrase, we seize pomposity. Human beings often ring false, and this is part of the failure *The Woods* details. I suppose it is possible to believe, alternatively, that the junior master of Chicago bad-mouth who could compose a symphony of slang and swearwords like *American Buffalo* has aspirations to the Maxwell Anderson-Archibald MacLeish loftiness league, but I personally doubt it.

Michael Feingold. *The Village Voice*. May 7, 1979, p. 103

In any assessment of *American Buffalo* Mamet's use of language must be regarded as an achievement. If the vocabulary of men such as Bobby, Teach and Donny is impoverished, Mamet's rendering of it reminds us that vocabulary is only one of the resources of language. Teach does have an eloquence when expressing his sense that he has been abused. . . .

The urban nature of the language in *American Buffalo* is a matter not just of its street vulgarity, or expressions such as ''skin-pop'' and ''He takes me off my coin . . . '' but also of an abbreviation characteristic of urban pace. . . .

Besides the play's language, a second critical issue which has resulted in opposing assessments of *American Buffalo* is that of its content, or lack of it. . . .

To buffalo is as American as to bake an apple pie. Notions of the American way—democracy and free enterprise—become corrupted when they enter the look-out-for-number-one rationalizations of crooks and unethical businessmen. Down-and-outs in a democracy may feel they have been cheated because ''all men should be equal.'' Knowledge creates divisions among people, divisions of power and wealth, but such divisions can seem undemocratic, un-American. So robbing and cheating are attempts to restore justice. Or, ''In America one is free to make a fortune for himself'' turns into Teach's definition of free enterprise. My modest conclusion is that in satirizing such corrupt notions Mamet has written a play of intellectual content.

Jack V. Barbera. *Modern Drama*. Sept., 1981, pp. 271–72, 275

David Mamet is a playwright of the 1970s, and ever since his brilliant debut with *American Buffalo* and *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* he has been having a little difficulty getting a purchase on the problems of this decade. With his new play, *Edmond* . . . he has accomplished something of a breakthrough. As directed by Gregory Mosher, *Edmond* is a remarkably cruel play—ruthless, remorseless, unremittingly ugly. Written in that terse banal naturalism that has become Mamet's staccato trademark, it follows the spiritual journey of a stocky middle-class young man who wakes up one morning to tell his wife that he is deserting her. Leaving the safety of his home, he embarks on a terrifying odyssey through the urban landscape, looking for sexual and other satisfactions but instead finding violence and fraud. . . .

What Mamet has written is a version of *Woyzeck* in the modern city, displaying not only Buechner's hallucinatory power but also the same capacity to show compassion for lowly, inarticulate wretches without mitigating their awful fates. He has pushed our faces into a world which most of us spend our waking hours trying to avoid, finding a kind of redemption in the bleakest, most severe alternatives. I don't think he will be thanked much for this, but I for one want to express gratitude—for the play. . . .

Robert Brustein. *New Republic*. July 12, 1982, p. 24

[David] Mamet is a Chicago writer, and can be considered part of the vigorous Chicago literary tradition. He believes that his predecessors all finally wrote the same story, a story of possibility, because the idea in the air is that the West is beginning, and that life is capable of being both understood and enjoyed.

The more one examines Mamet's world, the more one is struck by its energy. While Mamet's characters are hobbled by their inability to free themselves from hand-me-down societal maxims which have wrongly directed their energies, some of them do surmount the masks which society has imposed on them. They struggle through pressures toward competition and one-upmanship to achieve relationships in which loyalty can operate. They struggle to become more than items in sexual commodity exchange to each other. Or, alone, they strive, like the protagonist in *Edmond*, to make a clearing-house for their true natures in a situation where professional and social obligations have straitjacketed them. Even when pursuing the wrong goals, they strive mightily to reach them, and not only through language. Mamet cautiously lets us celebrate their tentative success in getting together, with an avoidance of sentiment. And especially in production, through the underlying rhythm of the sometimes bald-looking words, he drives home his characters' powerful will to make contact with one another.

Mamet's importance, apart from the dialogue, lies in his unsentimental sense of personal and social morality, his wry but sharp sense of dialectic, and the vigor of his characters' intent. The plays reveal a richness under the spareness, a variety of perspectives, a traditional realism of Chekhovian density. This is not to say that Mamet writes the sort of plays that any earlier American realist could have written; his are indelibly colored in rhythm, structure and tone with the anxieties and disenchantments of post-Vietnam America. Each major play has the potential for many differing interpretations and productions. This is the mark of any major artist whose special qualities nag at the sensibilities, but who cannot be too easily pigeonholed or defined. His achievements already stamp

him as a major American playwright of his generation, whose work has both the vividness and the power to cross national boundaries.

Dennis Carroll. *David Mamet* (New York: St. Martin's Pr., 1987), pp. 154–55

Mamet's conception of himself as a writer governs his themes and theater practices. He has been described as a man never without a notebook. He writes every day, and he is tirelessly committed to practical theater, to seeing his work ''up on its feet.''

This pragmatic devotion to theater, together with his seminal experience watching the lightning-fast comedy blackout sketches at Second City—about which he has said, ''For the next ten years, none of my scenes lasted more than eight minutes,''—probably accounts for the most prominent technical feature of his work: a great reliance on the Classic French scene. This feature makes Mamet's work actors' theater in that it depends less on language than on performance. Things are lightly sketched in Mamet, and the actor gives his work its being.

The most famous element of his dramatic technique is a pervasive use of obscene language. Mamet has of course gone to school with Pinter and with Beckett, and his language has the minimalist cast of Beckett's dialogue integrated with the menace of Pinter's stage speech. The obscenity, however, is strictly his own and stems not just from an extraordinary ear. The obscenity is not in the service of a naturalistic surface. It is constructed in the service of his characters' deep need for concealment.

Mamet's obsessive themes are broken relations, the failure to form relations, the impossibility of forming relations, and yet the endless pursuit of these relations. It is as if his characters were possessed with an ontological weakness that can only be strengthened by the relations toward which they endlessly strive. One relationship his characters find themselves in—formed without the striving—is that of master and disciple, accompanied by an initiation ritual to cement the relation; this is often seen as a not quite desirable form of human interaction. All these themes are evident throughout his work. The master—disciple relation is especially prominent in *American Buffalo* and *A Life in the Theater*.

William Herman. *Understanding Contemporary American Drama* (Columbia: Univ. of S. Carolina Pr., 1987), pp. 129–31

David Mamet's characters, like [Sam] Shepard's, are unstoppable storytellers; their monologues dominate his plays so fully that words replace and even subvert the physical and visual elements of the productions. And, like Shepard, Mamet creates storytellers who are always on some level conscious that they are performing: to engage in monologue is to take center stage (figuratively, although not necessarily literally). But Shepard's monologues, even in his later plays, rarely serve as pathways to psychological revelations of character: they are, above all else, the projections of Shepard's theatrical imagination.

Mamet's case, however, is somewhat more complicated, as he simultaneously embraces and rejects the Shepardian notion of character. In an essay in *Some Freaks* (1989), Mamet writes, ''*Characterization* is taken care of by the author . . . [who] will avoid it like the plague, and show us *what the character does*.'' He nevertheless claims a concern with the inner lives of his characters; yet, as [Christopher] Bigsby says, Mamet ''seems to be arguing for the necessity of a humanism for which he cannot always find space within the plays.'' One might say that Mamet's works perpetuate a tension between this apparent *drive* for a traditional humanism and the constant *denial* of such a vision in favor of postmodernist ''tricks'' and ''devices,'' which, as has been shown, actually promote a Brechtian refusal of immersion in the characters and ''story'' in favor of alienation from them.

Deborah R. Geis. *Postmodern Theatric(k)s: Monologue in Contemporary American Drama* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Pr., 1993), pp. 89–90, 115

David Mamet is forthright with opinions, so it is fair to use his collected ''notes and essays'' [*A Whore's Profession*] as a bundle of sticks with which to beat his new play at the Ambassadors Theatre [in London]. *A Whore's Profession* . . . includes many prescriptions for drama on the stage and in film, emphasizing always advancement of the action. But any action in *The Cryptogram* is merely latent in its piecemeal, three-way conversation and some unresolved but imposing symbolism about a knife, a torn blanket, and ''issues of sleep.'' . . .

In his prose, Mamet is apocalyptic about social disintegration. Surprisingly reactionary, he believes that our age is violating necessary laws and disciplines. He is prepared to ''talk turkey'' about what men are like, about ''countercultural architecture,'' Muzak, and America's failure of nerve. He speaks out against the neglect of communication in favor of self-expression, but in this new play he is as indulgent as any performance artist. His antirhetoric—''And that's how it is on this bitch of an earth''—has always, hitherto, been about something, but what pious delusion is challenged by a play that says people betray each other?

In *Oleanna*, he wrote a first act in which nothing seemed to be happening, so that the acrimony of the second act, culminating in a provoked burst of violence, was the more shocking. People who didn't see the political correction coming went to the show twice, surprised to think that so much had happened without their noticing. In *The Cryptogram*, despite a comparable second-act outburst. . . , the fragmentary dialogue of the first half—which never sounds spontaneous—meanders on, without ever imparting or achieving significance. No one will imagine there is a meaning encrypted.

Jim McCue. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. July 15, 1994, p. 21

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MARCH, William (1893–1954)

The outstanding virtues of Mr. March's work are those of complete absence of sentimentality and routine romanticism, of a dramatic gift constantly heightened and sharpened by the eloquence of understatement. Your first impression is that of the ultimate ''low-down''. . . . A second, less favorable impression follows, not unnaturally, from the very advantage just mentioned. The author's freedom, that is to say, to pile horror on horror, cynicism on cynicism, ends by leaving one with a sense of that ''too much'' which defeats itself. . . . The continuous heaping up of bitterness and irony . . . results in a sort of reverse-romanticism.

Arthur Ruhl. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 28, 1933. p. 399

''The Little Wife'' . . . seems to be particularly illustrative of March's gift for opening the window of the universal upon the individual instance, for concealing extreme technical skill in an absence of conscious technique and for establishing almost unbearably close communication with his reader. . . . Mr. March's collected tales make a disturbing book. It possesses a unity that has nothing to do with locale, for though the author has largely confined himself to the boundaries of Mississippi his characters fill their beings with a common air that is not the malarial breath of the deep South but the deadlier and less indigenous one of frustration.

Elizabeth Hart. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Feb. 10, 1935. p. 3

His special gift as a story-teller is his faculty of catching on the wing some bit of penetration into human life, and creating about it a slight tale, a short narrative, an episode, a piece of realistic description, by way of elucidation.

These are superior stories; lacking the sensational qualities necessary for a journalistic success, they are sound to the core. . . . They are slight in surface compared to the best American short stories being written (and they are to be compared with the best) but they have intelligence, depth and quality.

Fred T. Marsh. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 17, 1935. p. 2

Not since Hardy died have we been given the same sense of the President of the Immortals having his sport with mortals. . . . I have had occasion to note before . . . William March's remarkable power in drawing psychopathic characters, characters driven beyond themselves by frustration, by feelings of inadequacy, by the complexity of life. The realists who copy life or caricature it can never give the illusion of a living world as can a writer of this kind, who has so few of the tricks of realism but who can take human passions, human longings for happiness and love and beauty and make a world for them.

Mary M. Colum. *Forum*. Jan. 1937. p. 35

William March is making a considerable reputation for himself, particularly as a writer of short stories. Apparently simple as these are, quite uncompromising and often more than a little bitter, they are quite unforgettable—sometimes uncomfortably so. . . . Above all, he never errs in saying too much or in pointing a moral: it is the reader who is forced into indignation, or pity, out of his own response to what is set forth with such seeming artlessness. In the world of this author the sun shines with a peculiarly revealing and sometimes cruel light on the just and the unjust alike but, if there are no bad people, there are some totally unbearable circumstances.

Iris Barry. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. April 2, 1939. p. 5

March, in the great tradition, is centrally concerned with the theme of guilt and expiation. . . . March seems to believe that all men must live in loneliness and isolation, their only possible communication ''lies,'' but that the threads of their lives are nevertheless inseparably bound together. He tends to see all people as either mentally or psychologically deformed, and all relationships between them, particularly close family relationships, as only endless variants of sadism and masochism, hatred and answering love, murder and expiation. His books may be lower-keyed than Faulkner's, but they are quite as lively.

Stanly Edgar Hyman. *New Republic*. Feb. 8, 1943. p. 188

Mr. March, unlike Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos, never escapes the defeatism of the war years of his young manhood. If one reads slowly through these stories, the growing power of their negative quality, however, becomes apparent. . . . From the start, he has been one of the finest technicians writing the short story in English. . . . His later stories show a gathering force and economy of method and also a stronger and clearer statement of his ideas. It seems to me entirely clear . . . that William March is one of our most flexible and most powerful writers.

John Farrar. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 13, 1945. p. 44

March's writing is classic in its undistracted realism, its bareness, its freedom from salable amenities. . . . We have a prose style rather old-fashioned in its grave, consequential way, describing in unhurried serenity life as he has known it since the late 1890's. Most of his characters, considered as historical types, appear to be Southerners of the years before and during the First World War. . . . His best work . . . reflects the alternate play of two qualities that Anatole France perceived in fiction that is to be classic: pity and irony.

Alistair Cooke. *New Republic*. Dec. 3, 1945. pp. 756–8

When I asked David Mynders Smythe . . . what (March) looked like David replied that he looked like a preacher with wicked eyes.

It was rather a neat description. I met a man of medium height, of slim physique and erect carriage, with a thick crop of wavy, graying hair. He looked much younger than what I knew his age to be, and his whole appearance was mild; his voice was soft, his manner gentle. Only his eyes were different. They gleamed from behind his glasses, probing, studying everyone in the room, and, as I became conscious of what the quiet voice was saying, I discovered it was a highly barbed monologue that was pouring out at us, witty, mischievous, brilliant.

Robert Tallant. *Saturday Review*. July 17, 1954. p. 33

In the late Nineteen Twenties he had achieved a complete and mature view of life, while some of the more famous chroniclers of the day now seem young and shallow, eloquent but narrow. During the social turbulence of the Nineteen Thirties, moreover, he went on writing quiet short stories, tragedies and comedies of Southern life. . . . It is difficult to do justice to the complex texture of these stories—indignant and ironic, witty, melancholy and resigned.

Maxwell Geismar. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 26, 1956. p. 5

Even in his comparative failures, there was that profound respect for the materials with which he dealt, and that faith in his chosen method of approaching them. In his best stories, I should say, he was closer to the Sherwood Anderson of *Winesburg, Ohio* than to any other contemporary. But there never was a time when he seemed to imitate any one at all.

He would not fake, or ''heighten,'' or pile on local color. He was a true writer who had mastered the simple declarative sentence. And it would be good to think that, by a happier irony than some of those he experienced in his lifetime, his deep, straight stories will outlive the showier writing that has tended to shade his own.

John K. Hutchens. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. March 4, 1956. p. 2

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MARKHAM, Edwin (1852–1940)

Mr. Markham is democracy's greatest living poet. His stately lines not only conform to the canons of art and are rich in melody, but they ring true at every point; they are instinct with the virility of democracy; they are vibrant with the spirit of justice and fraternity; they represent all that is best, truest and finest in the new social awakening which is battling against the rising tide of reaction, imperialism and class-rule based on privileged interest and acquired wealth.

B. O. Flower. *Arena*. Feb., 1906. p. 143

The idea of making a newspaper sensation out of a serious piece of blank verse (''The Man with a Hoe'') was probably the wildest that any journalist ever had; but, thanks to the swing of Markham's lines, I actually succeeded in doing that impossible thing, and soon it was speeding all over the land. California is, I believe, the only place in this country where such a sensation could have had its genesis. . . . Markham's mouth-filling words were soon being read aloud in nearly every house on the coast, ministers were preaching sermons on it, lawyers were quoting it in court arguments, and every orator and elocutionist in a land of countless spellbinders were spouting it from the platform. The labour unions became very much excited over the poem, and applauded it to the echo whenever it was read at meetings.

Bailey Millard. *Bookman*. May, 1908. p. 267

Markham with all his defects of platitudinous idealism, puritanical sex-prudence, sentimental metaphysics and dedication flap-doodle, is steeped in the ecstasy of eternals. There is a touch of crazy beauty in him, too. And he has caught the wild music of the Angel Israfel. But he is hopelessly of America, with its paste humanitarianism, its paste optimism, its paste culture.

He is productive but uncreative. He sticks to the old forms, the old metaphors, the old lilts, the old griefs, with suddenly a line or simile of mirific magic leaping forth from the page like a dazzling dragon-fly out of a New England mince-pie.

Benjamin De Casseres. *American Mercury*. Dec., 1926. pp. 398–9

Edwin Markham has continued to write as he always wrote, as his great predecessors wrote, particularly as Bryant on the one hand and Poe on the other, wrote. So it is not easy to do him justice, yet it would surely be exhibiting a merely fashionable mind to deprecate his work by a term so illegitimate in real criticism as ''old-fashioned''. . . . The most telling count that could ever be charged against him has been that his work is highly rhetorical. Much of it can be called ''rhymed rhetoric.'' But, so often, what gorgeous, thrilling, powerful rhetoric!

Shaemas O'Sheel. *Commonweal*. June 29, 1932. p. 251

Today Mr. Markham's poetry seems, in its rhetoric and in its romanticism, almost another language from that spoken by most of the troubled and disillusioned modern poets. . . . Although the

whole tradition of modern poetry has, seemingly, passed, we find this poet of eighty years still voicing his desire toward loveliness, the imperishable, still exuberant in a faith in mankind, still youthful and eager, clad in all of the old illusions which were the subjects for poetry so many years ago.

Eda Lou Walton. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. July 31, 1932. p. 2

His was the first authentic American voice in our time to be raised against the injustice that is in the world; and his most famous poem, ''The Man with the Hoe,'' swept through our land, and ultimately, in translation, reached the whole world. The power and pity of it have not diminished with the years. . . . He stood for nobility of character, for everything that is great in the American spirit.

Charles Hanson Towne. *Poetry*. April, 1940. pp. 30–1

No poem was ever better timed (than ''The Man with the Hoe''). The social conscience was just enough awake to respond to it, but had not been awake long enough and was still not wide enough awake to have heard any comparable clarion call. It was better than a thousand sermons on the ''social gospel.'' This poem was no mere trick of versification, and no exploitation of a popular idea. The idea was not yet popular, and Markham really meant it with a prophet's intensity of conviction.

W. E. Garrison. *Christian Century*. May 17, 1950. p. 618

Edwin Markham lived and died the bard. He was a prophet of his people, a poet in the tribal and traditional sense. No ivory tower could contain him. His ideas, his songs, his passion came from his association with people. He never asked adulation as the pet of society; all he wanted was an audience and he applied all of the techniques of the evangelist and humanist to gain the ear of the people. Let other people whisper or speak conumdrums. He shouted and was heard.

A. M. Sullivan. *Saturday Review*. July 22, 1950. p. 21

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MARQUAND, John P. (1893–1961)

He was a master of graceful satire that is at once healthy and humanely uncorrosive. In all technical matters relating to plot structure, economy of developing character, artistic control over every detail of the movement, however minute, and over the pace, the dialogue, the big scenes and the crises, Marquand was expert. And he had attained complete dominance over the method of narrating a story in the first person from the point of view of an observer or active participant in the action without straining the credulity or breaking the illusion, apparently subordinating him to his role as narrator but at the same time making him one of the most important characters in the dramatis personae.

Harlan Hatcher. *English Journal*. Sept., 1939 p. 514

He is entirely and unmistakably honest, about his work, about himself. The honesty is neither forced nor obtrusive but an essential part of the man. And with it—and with the protective coloration—goes an eye as mild as can be, and as deadly accurate as a very fine rifle. Agreeable, well-mannered, polite, he can bring down a Bo-jo-Brown at 3,000 yards and stuff him afterwards with neatness and dispatch.

Stephen Vincent and Rosemary Benét. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. March 16, 1941. p. 5

It is clear that intellectually New York is admirable to Mr. Marquand and Boston reprehensible and foolish, but there is an emotional difficulty: Mr. Marquand still likes Boston better than New York. The curious combination of satire and apologia which characterizes Mr. Marquand's tales of two cities, and which makes them so richly rewarding to the reader who knows both cities, is the result of this unresolved conflict of intellect and emotion. And since Boston has left an indelible mark on American life and New York is leaving a still more indelible one, Mr. Marquand is not to be dismissed summarily as a minor novelist or his Boston books as mere entertainment.

Thayer Donovan Bisbee. *Saturday Review*. July 5, 1941. p. 14

It is because Marquand is so acutely conscious of the changes time brings not merely to people but also to their values that all of his major novels move back and forth between present and past. . . . His sense of time is even more precise than his sense of place or his sense of class. He knows the past thirty-five years—on the social planes and in the places with which he is concerned—as unerringly as one of Mark Twain's pilots knew the Mississippi River. A serious anachronism in one of his books is almost unthinkable, not because he is a pedantic researcher but because his feeling for time approaches infallibility.

Granville Hicks. *Harper's Magazine*. April, 1950. p. 106

On the face of it, J.P. Marquand possesses all the attributes of a great novelist. He has a fine sense of milieu, technical skill to spare, and an acute insight into his main characters. . . . To the talents with which he was by nature endowed, to the blessings of worldly success, he has added a toughness of will, never permitting himself the luxury of happy endings or allowing his characters easy ways out of their dilemmas. They enjoy in fact no outs at all. . . . Yet

among so many virtues, Marquand's novels are almost exactly alike. They deal with a fixed problem, and pass through three identical stages in the course of working it out. . . . Here is the restricting element that has kept Marquand—and will probably always keep him—from reaching the level of his great predecessors.

Leo Gurko. *American Scholar*. Autumn 1952. pp. 444–5

As a writer Marquand is somewhat short on talent, imagination, brute ability, but is long on care, observation, directed curiosity, and is longest of all on personal involvement, subjective compulsion. Most of his books, under their veneer of patiently observed objective detail, seem versions of the same subjective fable, one designed to say to him and also to us: ''You were right to do as you did; or if not right, still, you had no choice; or if you had a choice, still, it's the choice all of us necessarily make wrong. . . .'' The fable is told in a series of flashbacks, of sighs as elegiac, nostalgic, and wistfully submissive—as mannered and unvarying—as a Puccini opera.

Randall Jarrell. *Harper's Magazine*. Nov. 1954, p. 96

He has been for most of his life a respectable member of the upper middle class and he has seen no reason hotly to renounce all its values merely because that was for a time the modish thing to do. Instead he has set himself to understand, without indulgence but also without aversion, the curious tragicomedy of that class. The circumstances that its tragicomedy is, though only partially, his own infuses into his best works a certain melancholy that gives them depth. . . . Of all the writers I can think of he most resembles Thackeray. He has Thackeray's fruitfully ambivalent attitude toward his own class, his irony, his good manners, his self-doubts and much of his humor.

Clifton Fadiman. Introduction to *Thirty Years* by John P. Marquand (Little). 1954. pp. x–xi

John Marquand is that rare kind of writer, a really good novelist of manners. He knows what only the best novelists of this kind do, how to make the reader see the customs and habits of large areas of a society through the realized life of the people who generate them and give them vitality. . . . Mr. Marquand's knowledge never exists apart from his perceptions of people—of the particular gesture, the precise expression, the exact phrase; and that is what makes his novels so good and makes us feel that even when he is not at his absolute best. . .he is much better than most of our novelists.

Arthur Mizener. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 27, 1955. p. 1

John P. Marquand as a critic of American society is something like a newspaper when its own political party is in office: he may be gently reproved, but his disapprobation is not harsh enough to occasion doubts among the faithful or to alienate any subscribers. . . . Mr. Marquand probably has at his disposal more information about American society than any other novelist now writing. He particularly excels in the kind of information sociologists are fond of—the size of people's income, the kind of cars they drive, the clubs they join, and so on—and he can fill many a not uninteresting page with this kind of detail.

Paul Pickrel. *The Yale Review*. Spring, 1955. pp. 476–7

Mr. Marquand is by now an old pro. . . . The old pros know all the tricks and they know them well enough to keep them out of sight. . . . Mr. Marquand has something of a reputation as a satirist, though only a gentle one, and it is with satire that the old pros tend to get soft. . . . The machinery is no less efficient, the movement as effortless, but that pleasant tang of irony which made the journey so exhilarating is on the way out; instead there is a cosiness that is on the stuffy side, an indulgence that is distinctly cloying.

Richard Lister. *New Statesman and Nation, later Statesman and Nation*. Dec. 24, 1955. p. 864

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MARQUIS, Don (1878–1937)

Those who have followed in the New York *Evening Sun* the excursions of Hermione and her little group of serious thinkers into the cosmic realms of advanced thought will be glad that her creator, Don Marquis, has gathered some of her delicious monologues into a volume.

The Nation. Nov. 16, 1916. p. 468

Mr. Marquis indeed is already recognized as a force in the lighter side of American letters. From the volume of his work, and it must be enormous, may be selected several books that would prove of infinitely more than transient value. He is spacious in his kindliness of mood, acute and perceptive in his sudden and illuminating flashes of humorous wisdom and exceptionally gifted in his style. There are times when the Old Soak indulges in frank slapstick humor, but underneath these scenes runs an undercurrent of clear characterization that somehow lifts the episodes into the realms of art. Mr. Marquis is never cruel in his humor, a fault that was to be

found frequently in the pioneer humor of America. At times he recalls Mark Twain.

New York Times Book Section. July 10, 1921. p. 14

As for Don Marquis, he walks habitually in a defensive cloud of the humorous butterflies that his brain gives birth to; behind his whimsy moods and his satirical laughter he is, you will find if you pry into the matter, reticent—for a lyric poet, very reticent—about himself. . . . Don Marquis has just proved by the severest of tests that he is a poet of very nearly the rarest sort—a dramatic poet. He has published a drama of poignant beauty and memorable reality on the betrayal, trial and crucifixion of Jesus, *The Dark Hours*. Whether any other poet in America could have approached his achievement on this theme, I do not know. No one has. He has accomplished what I had thought was impossible: He has thoroughly dramatized the chief narrative of the New Testament, developing with marked originality several of the principal characters, notably Judas, and freely inventing incidents and speeches for subordinate figures, yet—to my sense, which is reasonably sensitive—without striking a note which is not in harmony with the tone and atmosphere of the Gospels. . . .

The only trouble about bowing down ''open-eyed'' is that presently you notice every one else has his eyes open, too; and you see such funny things going on around you, that the first thing you know you are conducting a Column. And if you *will* insist upon giving people a choice between Jesus and the Old Soak—well, you know what people are.

Stuart P. Sherman. *Critical Wood Cuts* (Scribner). 1926. pp. 214–15, 221

Archy has written one of the outstanding biographies of the year. It was not easy for him; as half the world knows, each word that this sapient cockroach types out is accomplished only through grueling labor as he butts his head against the keys of Don Marquis's machine. He has made no progress toward using capital letters, though once he did find the typewriter set for upper-case and so achieved a whole poem in capitals. But most of his free-verse chronicle about Mehitabel, the incorrigible cat, is presented just as it used to appear in The Sun and The Tribune when Don Marquis as a columnist added considerably to the gayety of the nation.

Charles Poore. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 26, 1933. p. 12

He was, regardless of mediocre work done under pressure, a deeply mercurial intuitive artist and passionately concerned with the ardors and problems of art. A human being so largely and kindly planned moves always in widening rings of irony. It was tragic to realize that he, who uttered so many genial shouts in praise of idleness, was actually broken by overwork. He was, if I ever saw one, a victim of the constantly tightening strain and pressure of our present way of living. There was, in the last two years, nothing left of him but the look in his eyes, and it was grim to speculate how much he realized of what had happened. I cannot help thinking that he had a very special message to younger artists, a message which was implicit in many of his seemingly jocular paragraphs. It was this: energy is not endless, better hoard it for your own work. Be intangible and hard to catch; be secret and proud and inwardly uncomfortable. Say yes and don't mean it; pretend to agree; dodge every kind of organization, and evade, elude, recede. Be about your own affairs, as you would also forbear from others at theirs, and thereby show your respect for the holiest ghost we know, the creative imagination. I read him wrong unless I see that cry in many a passage.

Christopher Morley. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 8, 1938. pp. 13–14

This anthology [*The Best of Don Marquis*] is published in good time. Don Marquis has been dead nine years. It is time he was introduced to a new audience for what he is, one of the greatest humorists and satirists this country has known. His good friend Christopher Morley calls him accurately ''the closest spiritual descendant of Mark Twain.'' . . .Mark would have relished Don's selection of a cockroach to be the proper spokesman for his view on mankind. Dean Swift would have admired archy too. . . . Don Marquis had one great gift not vouchsafed to Mark Twain. Mark was not a poet. Don was a poet, and a first-rate one. . . .

He told me once that he was satisfied if he turned out a good column twice a month. There spoke the perfectionist. He did far better than that. His wonderful, humorous, sardonic fancy playing over the world and the events therein never produced a banality. He poured himself out with a prodigality possible only to one gifted as abundantly and richly as himself.

Frank Sullivan. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 1, 1946. p. 1

. . .Don had a deep sense of the futility of human effort. We should struggle bravely, he thought, but there would be no victory parade. We should struggle bravely because that was the best way of meeting life's challenge. Sometimes when remedies for national and international problems were expounded Don would brush them aside, gently but firmly. They would be such remedies (common in the 1920's) as that all the Mohammedan, Confucian, and Buddhist nations should abandon their foolishness, join the Baptist Church, the Rotary Club, and march forward to the millennium. Don would offer an alternative solution of the world's problems. It was that we should all gather and root for another ice age. Or cheer for the insects to take over the earth, displacing mankind, since mankind had obviously failed.

Chester T. Crowell. *Atlantic Monthly*. Nov., 1946. p. 131

There has never been anything like Archy or Mehitabel and there never will be. Don Marquis got all his rich and strange talent into a cockroach who had the literary urge because his soul was that of a *vers libre* poet, and a cat on her ninth life who had been Cleopatra and many other adventurous, unlucky dames but who was always a lady in spite of hell. Only fantasy was wide or versatile enough to contain him; his mind kept escaping through cracks in the sane, commonplace world out into dimensions that were loops and whorls and mazes of the unpredictable. And he would not stay put. . . .

Let us avoid offense by calling it literature, which is a uniform substance that reacts dependably to standard tests, whereas Don

Marquis is always slipping through your fingers. But the shelf his books stand on is not crowded. There is a small bulk of writing, winnowed out from the massive and rewarding, that people insist on reading for its own sake, regardless. They have always held it more precious than rubies and if it isn't literature, then literature be damned. There is no chart of the bay toward which the garbage scow is headed, but his fellow passengers will always find Don Marquis good to read. I'd say his books may be in the pilot house.

Bernard DeVoto. *Harper's Magazine*. March, 1950. pp. 51–2

Marquis moved easily from one form of composition to another. In this book *the lives and times of archy and mehitabel* you will find prose in the guise of bad *vers libre*, poetry that is truly free verse, and rhymed verse. Whatever fiddle he plucked, he always produced a song. I think he was at his best in a piece like ''warty bliggens,'' which has the jewel-like perfection of poetry and contains cosmic reverberations along with high comedy. Beautiful to read, beautiful to think about. . . . He was parodist, historian, poet, clown, fable writer, satirist, reporter, and teller of tales. He had everything it takes, and more. . . .

Marquis was by temperament a city dweller, and both his little friends were of the city: the cockroach, most common of city bugs; the cat, most indigenous of city mammals. Both, too, were tavern habitues, as was their boss. Here were perfect transmigrations of an American soul, this dissolute feline who was a dancer and always the lady, *toujours gai*, and this troubled insect who was a poet—both seeking expression, both vainly trying to reconcile art and life, both finding always that one gets in the way of the other.

E.B. White. Introduction to *the lives and times of archy and mehitabel* by Don Marquis (Doubleday). 1950. pp. xxii–xxiii

One notable phase of Don Marquis's work as a columnist was his facility as a paragrapher. In the early 1920s when I worked for the New York *Herald* (which was also owned by Frank Munsey and quartered with the *Sun* at 280 Broadway) I frequently saw the boss of ''The Sun Dial'' and once heard him refer to the aphorisms he published in such profusion as ''fillers.'' There were times when he ran from five to ten of them in sequence, sometimes more; at other times he would run one or two to separate a piece of verse and a long item featuring a member of his cast of characters—the Old Soak, archy, mehitabel, Hermione—depending on what his mood happened to be.

Edward Anthony. *O Rare Don Marquis* (Doubleday). 1962. p. 353

These early themes of free verse and reincarnation were never entirely neglected, but Archy and his feline friend soon were commenting on many other matters and playing several other roles. Through these two waifs Marquis could express provocative and even iconoclastic views without giving offense to the Dagwoods who chuckled over their newspapers on subway or streetcar. Who would mind what an alley-cat and a ''poor little cockroach'' had to say? Moreover, consistency did not bother Marquis much, and he freely changed the roles of his characters to fit his mood of the day. Archy most commonly vacillates among three separate though occasionally merging roles: the wise fool, the solid citizen, and the tricksteroutcast. As the fool he is versifier, hobohemian, philosopher, and vessel of conceit. As middle-class citizen he waxes cautious in judgment, conventional in morals, and middlebrow in taste. As social outcast he is cynical, and the values he emphasizes are the naturalistic ones of bare survival.

Norris W. Yates. *The American Humorist* (Iowa State). 1964. p. 199

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MARSHALL, Paule (1929–)

In the approach from Fort-de-France to Trois Ilet, the Martiniquan land lifts off the Caribbean in soft folds of tiered country. One imagines that the fictitious Bournehills of Paule Marshall's *Chosen Place*, *Timeless People* presents to the mind's eye a similar prospect from the vantage of the sea. But the perception of a specific geographical place in the Caribbean might matter less to Marshall's overall intentions for this novel than the sheer magnitude of mimetic life that it captures. A study of politics and society in an English-speaking Caribbean community and the turbulence that is stirred when representatives of corporate America are introduced to it, *Chosen Place* was published in 1969. The novel is now available again in Vintage paperback after having been out of print for several years. The plausible reasons why the novel was, for all intents and purposes, ''lost'' until the fall of 1984 will not occupy my attention beyond this note, but I observe the absence as more than odd, given the nimble orchestrations of this work. In fact, when I recall my own limited acquaintance with the fabled Caribbean ''Horseshoe,'' most northerly point projecting ninety miles off the southeastern tip of the United States, I imagine *Chosen Place* as its most definitive mimesis. . . .

In 1981, Feminist Press reissued Marshall's *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones*. *Chosen Place*, in perspective with *Brown Girl*, *Praisesong*

for the Widow (1983), and the writer's short stories, not only corrects the limited view of her career that we have at the moment, but also comprehends Marshall's project as a writer within an enlarged scope of fictional operations. With *Chosen Place*, it is as if Marshall brings to a head her own writing past and future in rich continuity with the present. To that extent, I would consider this novel not only the ''impression point'' against which we might gauge and contemplate Marshall's efforts up to the moment, but also one of the most engaging works of fiction created by an African-American writer within the last half century of American creative effort. With that in mind, we can well regard Paule Marshall's career as a significant point of intersection between feminist and creative discourse. . . .

Set against a background of vegetal lushness, *Chosen Place* might well have been inspired by the author's ancestral home Barbados that also provides the scenery for some of her short stories as well as the source of memory and myth in *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones*. Whatever Caribbean scene the novel brings to mind, we perceive Bournehills, the fictitious country of the novel, as a continuum of geopolitical and cultural moments surrounded by Marshall's order of the timeless. The Caribbean itself converges with the Atlantic, and their interaction describes a point of dramatic emphasis. This shifting tempo of breaking waters and altering colors in a confluence closes the links of the notorious ''Middle Passage''. The currency of exchange between waterways engenders a wealth of metaphorical referents. In that way, Old World, sub-Saharan Africa connects geographically and figuratively with Bournehills of the New World. The geographical nexus of motives is completed by Stanford and mainline Philadelphia, points of origin for two of the main characters; both the United States and the Caribbean are read, consequently, by way of the economics of captivity and their implications for the contemporary world. With Bournehills at the center of Marshall's scenic apparatus and Bourne Island and Spiretown related to it in triangular proximity, we move freely between seaport, hillside, and suburban aspects of a continuous cultural and geographical progression.

The sociology that Bournehills generates is as complicated as its terrain. There are the common people, who have names and faces in the novel, and there are more of them than most contemporary fiction attempts. The various ritualistic activities of Marshall's fictional world so refine our sense of the people that a reader's intimations of anonymity complements the affecting presences of the work rather than hinder their impact. Above the folk in the social hierarchy is the local ruling class, which dominates in the name of the absentee landlords. Treacherous both to their own people and the overlords, the local rulers are occasionally attractive, well-educated abroad, own expensive things, some of them droll and amusing. Beyond the surrogate rulers, or lateral to them, are the social critics of local society, Merle Kinbona among them, and they are the ''conscience'' of their people, even as their own is troubled. These free-floating agents, suspended between cultures, provide the basic stress points on which the action turns.

> Hortense J. Spillers. In Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers, eds. *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 151–52, 154–55

Like *Maud Martha*, the emphasis in *Browngirl*, *Brownstones* is on the black woman as mother and daughter. In an interview with Alexis DeVeau in 1980, Marshall recalls that she wrote her first novel in the late 1950s as a relief from a tedious job. She wrote the novel not primarily for publication but as a process of understanding, critiquing, and celebrating her own personal history. In understanding ''the talking women,'' who were the most vivid memories of her youth, Marshall also demonstrates through her portrayal of Silla Boyce how the role of *mother* for this black woman is in conflict with her role as *wife*, because of the racism that embattles her and her community. Marshall's novel, as well as Brooks's, was certainly affected by society's attitude that black women were matriarchs, domineering mothers who distorted their children who in turn disrupted society—a vortex of attitudes that culminated in the Moynihan Report. In attempting to understand her maternal ancestors, then, Marshall had to penetrate the social stereotypes that distorted their lives.

Few early Afro-American women's novels focused on the black woman's role as mother, because of the negative stereotype of the black women as mammy that pervaded American society. But instead of de-emphasizing the black woman's role as mother, Marshall probes its complexity. She portrays Silla Boyce as an embittered woman caught between her own personality and desires, and the life imposed on her as a mother who must destroy her unorthodox husband in order to have a stable family (as symbolized by the brownstone). This analysis of the black mother prefigures other analyses of this theme in the 1970s, especially Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Alice Walker's *Meridian*. And Marshall shows that racist and sexist ideology is intertwined, for Silla's and Deighton Boyce's internalization of the American definition of woman and man runs counter to their own beings and to their situation as black people in American society, and precipitates the tragedy that their relationship becomes.

Silla, however, is not an internal being like Maud Martha. She fights, supported by her women friends who use their own language to penetrate illusion and verbally construct their own definitions in order to wage their battle. As a result, Selina, Silla's daughter, will, by the end of the novel, have some basis for the journey to self-knowledge upon which she embarks, fully appreciating the dilemma which her mother and father could not solve.

Like Brook's novel, *Browngirl*, *Brownstones* emphasizes how the black community, its customs and mores, affects the process of the black woman's exploration of self. But Marshall's novel also stresses the importance of culture and language as contexts for understanding *society's* definitions of man and woman. She veers sharply away from much of the preceding literature, which emphasized advancement for black women in terms of white American values. She portrays the Barbadian-American community both as a rock her characters can stand on, and as the obstacle against which they must struggle in order to understand and develop their own individuality. Finally, though, Selina's decision to return to the Caribbean is her attempt to claim her own history as a means of acquiring self-consciousness. In *Browngirl*, *Brownstones*, an appreciation of ethnic and racial community becomes necessary for black women in their commitment to self-development.

> Barbara Christian. In Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers, eds. *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 238–40

Through Selina's physical journey, Marshall asserts the need for Blacks to make the spiritual and psychological journey back into

their past. John McCluskey, Jr., states: ''The refrain of the woman who with love and compassion must be willing to define herself and the responsibility such an act demands rings throughout her (Marshall's) work. The refrain is not flattened by resignation, but sharpened by affirmation, by an insistent 'I am!' All the while, however . . . the awareness of sociocultural history adds a new dimension to personal identity, defines quest and mission.'' Selina positively affirms her desire for individuality and independence that parallels her mother's. She asks Silla: ''Remember how you used to talk about how you left home and came here alone as a girl of eighteen and was your own woman? I used to love hearing that. And that's what I want. I want it!'' Selina has come to a deep realization of her personal and collective self, which she will incorporate in shaping her quest for meaning and fulfillment and in these ways the protagonist of *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones* has progressed from a fragmented individual self, through a turbulent awakening to a realigned whole.

Geta J. Leseur. *Obsidian II*. 1, 1986, p. 129

[The novels of Paule Marshal]—*Brown Girl*, *Brownstones* (1959), *The Chosen Place*, *The Timeless People* (1969), and *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983)—deal with female protagonists' quests for identity in different epochs of their lives. . . . Marshall highlights age, continual process, and female mentoring and its relationship to empowerment and subsequent articulation as significant elements of her women's quests. . . .

Whereas *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones* generally limits the interplay of divinity and everyday reality to Selina's consciousness, *Praisesong* extends the perceptions from the point-of-view character to the controlling, creative consciousness of the narrator and the very structure of the work. The whole ritual which leads to Avey Johnson's rebirth is for '''the Old Parents . . . The Long-Time People,''' as Lebert Joseph calls the vodun spirits. Eugenia Collier points out that Lebert Joseph himself embodies an African deity, Legba. The renewed belief in and experience of myth is essential to Avey's recovery of integrity.

To recover her wholeness, Avey must recognize her participation in a racially or culturally specific myth rather than a universalist structure. Initially, she resists this identification, considering it part of the streets which threaten her family: For over twenty years, after a dream about the death of her daughters in an incident like the Birmingham church bombing, she simply forces herself to stop dreaming. In a sense Avey desires that alienation which is forced upon so many modernist protagonists. But even this lifelong, chosen repression does not alienate the Marshall individual to the point at which Ellison's invisible man or Morrison's Sula begins to function; when the individual absolutely requires sustenance, the subconscious knowledge of kinship reemerges. During the crossing to Carriacou, the island where her true self is reborn, Avey recovers her connections to a defining element of her ancestral history, the Middle Passage: ''She was alone in the deckhouse. That much she was certain of. Yet she had the impression as her mind flickered on briefly of other bodies lying crowded in with her in the hot, airless dark. . . . Their suffering—the depth of it, the weight of it in the cramped space—made hers of no consequence.'' Avey finds her own suffering diminished, its meaning modified by the knowledge of her heritage. The Middle Passage occurs again and again as a touchstone in Afro-American writing. Equiano's and Douglass's narratives, Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Hayden's ''Middle Passage,'' and Baraka's *Dutchman*, to name but a few works, explore the Passage's literal history and figurative meanings for black identity.

The Chosen Place, *The Timeless People* shares this mythic resonance, but its presentation of each person as a cultural microcosm allows it to avoid *Praisesong's* thinness of characterization. Combining the myths of *Praisesong* and the convincing individuality of *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones* with an added political and social consciousness, *The Chosen Place*, *The Timeless People* is the most richly textured of Marshall's novels. The novel dispenses with the direct family resemblances so crucial to *Brown Girl* in favor of more inclusive connections. . . .

Paule Marshall's female questers . . . achieve energized, articulate identities, with each quester resolving the problems of her particular stage of life. An adolescent, Selina separates from her parents without rejecting them, acknowledges her community while denying its right to determine her personality. The middle-aged Merle recovers from her disappointments in her own character and her husband's personal rejection. Revitalized, she journeys to Africa to establish a relationship with their child; her renewed self-respect and consequent interest in her personal life does not signal a retreat from her political commitment, however. For Merle, Bournehills is home, and she intends to return to her political commitments there. As an older woman, Avatara must throw off the psychological bondage of many years' loyalty to a false ideal which had seemed the only means of survival. Instead of being handicaps, her age and family position grant her the authority to educate the youngest part of her immediate community, her grandsons. Marshall has thus expanded the nature and duration of the classical quest pattern. The quest is no longer an isolated if perhaps lengthy incident in the quester's life but a lifelong commitment and, in her first two novels, a continuous modification of identity. While speaking in her own voice of her own experience, each quester addresses a wider community, until, in the final scene of *Praisesong*, the empowered woman quester becomes a griot speaking in tribal language of universal concerns.

Missy Dehn Kubitschek. *Black American Literature Forum*. 21, 1987, pp. 44, 47–48, 59

The heritage/ancestry relationship is clearly worked out by Paule Marshall only in her most recent work *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983). In her first work, *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones*, the conflict for the girl Selina, arises from continual tension between her mother's rigidity and her father's contrasting emotionalism, between the conflicting worlds of Afro-Caribbean society in New York and her separate American experience. The girl's understanding of culture is shaped by the many conversations of the Caribbean working women in the kitchen, the Caribbean diet that is the mainstay of the household, the dialect from which she learns rhythm and poetry and relationships with other Caribbean people, like Suggie, who expose Caribbean sensuality.

Marshall herself spent vacations as a child and as an adult with family in the Caribbean. Her dedications tell the story of this connection with family still Caribbean-based, still strong. *Reena and other Stories* is ''In memory of my aunt Branford Catherine

Watson (Bam-Bam), a West Indian market woman who thought nothing of walking fourteen miles to town and back in a day.'' *Praisesong* is ''For my Grandmother'', the character she immortalizes in her short story of ''To Da-Duh in Memoriam.'' It is perhaps necessary to begin this discussion, as Eugenia Collier does, by charting the passage of Marshall's questing character. The child in the story has been taken ostensibly to one of those ''vacations'' home which we know have more to do with family identification and history than they have to do with holidaying. The story dramatizes the tensions between ancestry and youth, tradition and modernity, African civilization with its tradition of respect for humanity and Western civilization with its often callous disregard for life. The child's identity is a source of the debate which Marshall unfolds. Da-Duh is in a losing battle, pitted against the skyscrapers of New York and the war planes which swoop over Barbados towards the end of her life. For her part, Da-Duh wants to do no more than expose her granddaughter to all the features of her Caribbean, but the child has numerous examples of bigger and better things to counter Da-Duh's canefields. Yet, while the canefields are presented as idylic, the reality is much more complicated than Collier reads it. For the irony is that canefields are so wedded to Caribbean slavery and oppression of Africans that the child's rejection of them is an important departure from that particular experience and history. Yet her acceptance of America's technological might is another form of slavery. Importantly, Marshall captures that falling away that often occurs between generations. For whereas the grandmother's experience is of slavery and British colonialism, the insidious and also ''colonial'' relationship to America is also implicit in the child's acceptance of American dominance. Da-Duh's resignation evinces her understanding of this new master/slave dialectic. . . .

This struggle to maintain heritage in the path of encroaching Western values is pursued relentlessly in all of Marshall's works and is crystallized in *Praisesong*, where the struggle between generations begun in ''Da-Duh'' takes on greater significance. Here, the protagonist is engaged, with her Great Aunt Cuney, in a dream battle, the outcome of which is that Avey must have a complete immersion into her African heritage in the Caribbean in order to maintain equilibrium. Avey's journey is beset by psychological trauma and physical agony but ends in a soothing resolution during the phase of acceptance and belonging. There is a definite Pan-Africanist focus in the relationship to heritage in *Praisesong* and in several other Marshall works. . . . Just as *Brown Girl, Brownstones* ends in conflict and departure to the Caribbean, Praisesong ends at the point of return to the U.S.A., the journey having been completed. The difference is that a much more controlled protagonist makes the journey in the latter. Avey is now beyond the impetuousness of youth and more fully engaged in the rituals of identification.

Carole Boyce Davies. In Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido, eds. *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1990), pp. 61–62

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MASON, Bobbie Ann (1940–)

Some books are quotable, others are readable. Bobbie Ann Mason has always written the second kind. In her latest novel, *Feather Crowns*, the plain style never calls attention to itself yet the cumulative effect is mesmerizing. Mason's great ability is for the sort of highly particular, texture-of-experience details that give the illusion of real lives. Her characters observe and feel everything so acutely that as we read about them we have the sensation of watching people through a window.

But it is precisely the very human desire to peer into other's lives (the grosser aspects of it, at any rate) that the novel takes to task. *Feather Crowns* criticizes the kind of sordid, voyeuristic sensibility that feeds on the graphic details of ordinary people's tragedies.

Set in 1900, it tells the story of Christie Wheeler, a Kentucky farmwife and mother who, by giving birth to full-term, healthy quintuplets, instantly becomes a national celebrity. . . .

Oddly enough, this book is not entirely grim. It ends on a note of victory, and its opening chapters, before the quintuplets become famous, are a striking depiction of childbirth and the intimate physicality of nursing. Mason's careful research shows; *Feather Crowns* is a superb historical novel, as sharply detailed as her fiction set in contemporary times. It is also her longest and most ambitious book to date.

Missouri Review. Spring, 1994, pp. 191–92

The real strength of Bobbie Ann Mason's third novel [*Feather Crowns*] lies in its presentation of homely details—details that so often go unnoticed, the daily events that ultimately express the vast design of creation. Christie Wheeler becomes empowered through her capacity to ask questions and her ability to experience each moment of daily life to its fullest. And this long, satisfying novel offers readers who are willing to slow down the same chance to see ordinary life anew.

This is not a sentimental look at country living, by any means. Bobbie Ann Mason, who grew up in western Kentucky and now lives in rural Pennsylvania, clearly understands both the satisfactions and the claustrophobia of agricultural self-sufficiency. Farming within a tight-knit extended family is equal parts blessing and curse, just as Christie finds that being special is also a blessing and a curse. . . .

Like other Mason characters, particularly the long-married couple in her short novel *Spence+Lila* (1988), Christie Wheeler suffers from an ''excess of loving'' that both delights and bewilders in its intensity. This love is released in passionate, committed, marital sex, an unusual combination in modern fiction. It is a combination Mason has evoked vividly in the past, and she does so again in *Feather Crowns*. . . .

Most important, this great capacity for love also infuses ordinary moments. For Christie and other characters from Mason's stories, gardening, milking cows, or just being alive and observant

in the outdoors offer pleasures as transcendent as a loving sexual union.

Michele Clark. *Women's Review of Books*. March 1994, p. 19

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MASTERS, Edgar Lee (1868–1950)

It is apparently not yet agreed what Mr. Masters's book is,—except that it is ''free verse.'' Convinced that it is certainly not poetry, and horrified by its content and structure, the aesthetic Calvinists have exhorted Mr. Masters to be still, in the spirit of the command of the immortal shipcaptain to his mate: ''What I wants of you, Mr. Coffin, is SILENCE, and damn little of that.'' But Mr. Masters is unlikely to oblige. It is extremely doubtful if silence is his long suit. Certainly it is not a conspicuous characteristic of his *Spoon River Anthology*, which is nothing if not articulate and alive and what we have a fancy to call psychically reverberatory. In this village *comédie humaine* are assembled the life histories of the inhabitants of Spoon River, and the overtones of the jangling music of these spent lives reverberate from page to page, clash and re-echo, attaining at times a poignancy which we do not quite know how to regard or appraise.

Lawrence Gilman. *North American Review*. Aug., 1915. pp. 271–2

It is appropriate, no doubt, that Masters should be less selective than Frost—the West is less reserved than New England. . . . This is the prairie's exuberant way—one must look at this poet, not in close detail, but in the mass. Thus one may get from him, as from the prairies themselves, a sense of space and richness. One feels in him too the idealistic vision of a man accustomed to far horizons—that impatience with things near, things more or less faithless to the imminent beauty, and that relief in the contemplation of things remote, beauty's survivals or prophecies. This chaotic half-baked civilization, growing up out of these broad and fruitful plains into dull little towns and mad great cities all fitfully, inadequately spiritualized—this one feels in Mr. Masters's books.

Harriet Monroe. *Poetry*. Jan., 1917. p. 205

Whitman had his eye continually upon broad expanses and far distances, the land of his quest. Masters, too often perhaps, sees nothing but enclosing walls. Whitman is the romanticist. . . . Masters is the scientist, a sworn devotee of facts, confessing no *a priori* theories, I say confessing, because I suspect Mr. Masters of being almost as predisposed to pessimism as was Walt Whitman to optimism. . . . Masters is predisposed to see the weakness that is in human nature and the tragedy that pursues it, and he finds, of course, plenty of both. . . . To Whitman the world was a pageant, to be enjoyed; to Masters it is a drama, to be analyzed, and the motif is one of tragedy.

Julius W. Pratt. *South Atlantic Quarterly*. April, 1917. pp. 157–8

Like Jonathan Swift, Mr. Masters is consumed with hatred for insincerity in art and insincerity in life; in the laudable desire to force the truth upon his readers, he emphasizes the ugly, the brutal, the treacherous elements which exist, not only in Spoon River, but in every man born of woman. The result, viewed calmly, is that we have an impressive collection of vices. . . . I therefore regard *Spoon River Anthology* not as a brilliant revelation of human nature, but as a masterpiece of cynicism.

William Lyon Phelps. *Bookman*. May, 1918. pp. 265–6

Mr. Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* in the first years after its publication was altogether the most read and talked-of volume of poetry that had ever been written in America. . . . People who really knew poetry were interested and amused at their combination of a very old Greek form with the doings of an Illinois town. People who were allured but disappointed by the glitter and the hollowness of the new poetry were refreshed by the grim substance of this book.

Percy Boynton. *Some Contemporary Americans* (Chicago). 1924. p. 52

The Fate of the Jury carries on the Masters tradition of a writer more lawyer, psychologist, and story-teller than poet. A disciple of Browning, Masters has been using the dramatic monologue, and *Domesday Book* was patterned on *The Ring and the Book*. In *The Fate of the Jury* we have the story continued. . . . *The Fate of the Jury* is interesting reading, an intricate weaving of tale into tale, an account of lesbianism, masochism, and duplicity such as Jeffers himself might, very differently, have used. The blank verse is the best Masters has ever written, and he has denied himself the long passages of personal philosophy which weighted his earlier stories.

Eda Lou Walton. *The Nation*. July 17, 1929. p. 27

Spoon River Anthology remains in the face of all detractions the most original work—with the exception of Theodore Dreiser's novels—that American genius has produced since the death of Henry James. Nor could it have become what it is if its author had not in his own nature combined a deep Rabelaisian zest for the freer aspects of this gross village life with an infinite loathing of its cramped limitations. In the contrasted intensity of his love and his hate for this America of his, Mr. Masters's mind is an almost perfect medium for the precise enterprise that blind chance or his tutelary genius set him upon undertaking.

John Cowper Powys. *Bookman*. Aug., 1929. p. 650

Man as a social being; man as a sexual being. These are the subjects of Masters as well as of Dreiser and Anderson. The treatment and the conclusion of all three may be as outmoded now as a foreign

bond. Aesthetic considerations aside, however, it seems to me that Masters deserves as much praise for his stand as Anderson or Dreiser or anyone else of the younger radicals now in their sixties. He helped set the intellectual tone of the post-War period. He realizes that most things accepted by most people as true and just are in reality false and unjust, and that in these matters it is usually best to be a radical.

Herbert Ellsworth Childs. *Sewanee Review*. July, 1933. p. 342

Judged as poetry and not as sociology or any other variety of doctrine, *Invisible Landscapes* is Mr. Masters's finest book. The best pieces in it have a lyrical quality which he has achieved hitherto in only a few scattered lines. . . . Along with the late flowering of the lyrical gift, and perhaps in part as its cause, these poems breathe a serenity of mind. The crusty old fighter has found peace in nature and in contemplation of the past of the race. . . . I am not sure that Mr. Masters has found the most desirable type of serenity; there is much weariness in it, an undertone of defeat, and a resignation which to younger men will seem premature. . . . Mr. Masters will probably be continued to be remembered for his Spoon River books, which despite their stylistic flaws and crudities of perception had the stuff of life in them. *Invisible Landscapes* is nevertheless a memorable volume.

Philip Blair Rice. *The Nation*. Oct. 16, 1935. p. 445

He seems at home anywhere in American history, whether he is writing of Martin Van Buren or Daniel Boone or the Battle of Gettysburg. . . . One reads the later Masters more for the matter than the manner. . . . Masters has read enormously and experienced a great deal of life. His comments upon the past and present are therefore of more than usual interest. My own view of his technique is that it is inclined to be slipshod. He is rather the philosopher musing and moralizing than the artist trying to shape out of resistant material a work beautiful in its contours and elements, as well as full of meaning. . . . He appears willing to recede into his memories, and to be rather remote from the world of today. He cherishes his nostalgias.

William Rose Benét. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 12, 1936. p. 20

Edgar Lee Masters is very much like the mountain being chiseled by Mr. Borglum. He has left sharp nuances throughout the hard past of American life and letters, and as a poet has contributed along with some few others the sense of history which has been accepted and molded into a tradition. What Robert Frost and Robinson did for New England's folk essence and experience, Masters wrote into the plains of the Middle West, into the rivers, the valleys. Whitman had initiated the impulse . . . and Masters, along with Lindsay and Sandburg—for they were the folk singers—continued and spread the pattern.

Harry Roskolenko. *Poetry*. Jan., 1940. p. 211

Masters in his flouting of tradition, with his scorn for hypocrisy, with his sympathetic appreciation of the eternal problems of the artist as well as the eternal frustrations imposed by a materialistic culture, found himself the poetic voice of the age to much the same degree that Sinclair Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald were the fictional voices. Today we can still admire the skill and finish of the Spoon River portraits even though we turn increasingly to poetry with greater intellectual subtlety and a richer use of language.

John T. Flanagan. *Southwest Review*. Summer, 1953. p. 236

His life conformed to the curve of transition which dictated so much of the character of the Chicago Liberation, a curve which began in rebellion against the village, at first nurtured by the dissenting forces of the village itself, and proceeded thence through a departure for the city, a new frustration at the potency of the village forces within the city, further rebellion, the advent of Liberation, a brief ride on the crest of its wave, and the long drift after its wave had subsided enlivened only by mixed and often muddled nostalgias. . . . *Spoon River* was an expose published during the full summer of expose writing which, beginning with the earlier realists and continuing in the muckrakers, had been brought to a forced-draft of heat by the writers of the Liberation. Such a move, regarded in its purely literary aspect, was indeed a reaction against genteel inhibitions, but more important was the degree to which it returned truth to American literature as a basic ingredient. However, Masters' accomplishment in *Spoon River* did not rest in exposé. Assuming the realist's attitude, the poem proceeded to a view which allowed a genuinely tragic stability and penetration. This came not so much in any of the individual portraits as in the totality of the work—a totality in which complexity and balance stood as the leading features.

Bernard Duffey. *The Chicago Renaissance in American Letters* (Michigan State). 1954. pp. 145, 166

The Spoon River Anthology was an accident. This writer has no doubt that Masters intended his original *Spoon River* poems as a crude satire upon the uncouth productions of the *vers-librists*. This was the opinion of people on the Chicago literary scene, and Masters himself hinted at the truth when he confessed to Hamlin Garland that *Spoon River* was foreign to him and rationalized ''which only shows with many of us, if not with all, we do not what we dream, but what something beyond or over us dictates.'' Masters' success with the *Anthology*, his acceptance by Harriet Monroe into her *Poetry Magazine* circle, the friendship and encouragement of Sandburg and other *vers-librists* confounded him. He longed to be a poet of the old vintage, using poetic diction, invoking the Muses and the Gods, writing apostrophes to animate Nature, and striving for the sublime.

Michael Yatron. *America's Literary Revolt* (Philosophical Library). 1959. pp. 68–9

Masters' characters have reached their immortal destinies with a spiritual condition and frame of mind curiously similar to those they possessed in life. The question of ''Why Live?'' is not even implied. Life is a fortuitous gift or burden of time for one to employ as he chooses or to endure as he must. How can one make time *truly* a gift, or more easily endure it, if, through a quirk of fate, it becomes

a burden? How to live? The happiest Spoon River immortals are those who lived to the fullest of their capacities. A surprising number of complaints arise from those mourning the fact that they did not shine in use. Those who loved life and performed their duties in spite of their adversities were most content.

Robert N. Hertz. *Minnesota Review*. Spring, 1962. p. 357

Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* was the first thing of its kind and a phenomenon in American literature when it appeared in 1915. It is not less so today. . . . All in the cast are dead—''all, all are sleeping on the hill'' of a Midwestern cemetery—and from their graves they speak their own epitaphs, discovering and confessing the real motivations of their lives; they reveal the secret steps that stumbled them to failure, or raised them to illusionary triumphs while alive; it is as if the darkness of the grave granted them revelatory eyes for a recognition of their own souls.

Masters' conceptual frame for the work was as startling to American readers of the time as was his form—a blunt free verse considered graceless by many of his critics.

May Swenson. Introduction to *Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Masters (Collier). 1962. p. 5

Masters had cut wide open the U.S. small town—in particular the Midwestern town—to show base deeds and secret heartbreaks. He knew such aspects of the towns, of course. His father knew them. His mother knew them. So did tens of thousands of others who had lived or still lived in them. But use of the knowledge—especially in a mordant, even racy, fashion—was outside the American literary tradition. Thirty years ago a Kansas editor, E.W. Howe, had shown the grim side of the village in his novel *The Story of a Country Town*, and Hamlin Garland had dealt with harsh facts of rural life. But neither had gone directly to psychological conflicts, least of all to frankly sexual conflicts. Masters was in a sense free of traditions and pressures. After all, he had begun the verses for his own pleasure and release without worry about publication. And he wrote under the cover of a pseudonym.

Dale Kramer. *Chicago Renaissance* (Appleton-Century). 1966. p. 270

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MATTHIESSEN, F.O. (1902–1950)

A critical study of such an author [Sarah Orne Jewett], particularly if her memory has become a little obscure, should consist chiefly in an attempt to isolate her peculiar quality, to account for it by her life and environment, and to set it against the background of her contemporaries in an effort to determine its value. These things Mr. Matthiessen has very ably done. He excellently analyzes and communicates the flavor of her work, and his appreciation sends us back again to Miss Jewett's books themselves—something much to be desired. . . . His book is brief, sensitive, well written, and, like one of Miss Jewett's own stories, re-creates for us the atmosphere in which its heroine moved.

Theodore Spencer. *New Republic*. May 22, 1929. p. 49

The trouble [with *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot*] is, I think, that Mr. Matthiessen brings Eliot's poetry to judgment without, for the most part, having passed beyond the stage of reading it. He recites his adventure and represents its exciting details, and what he recites is an illuminating account of an immersion; but that is all he actually does, and it is not the equivalent of judgment. It is better than the application of a preconcerted formula of what poetry ought and ought not to be; and it is better, as Mr. Matthiessen himself ably argues, than judging poetry by some formula of politics or religion or of some snobbery of morals; it is better because it is at least an immersion in the poetry and not an immersion of the poetry in something else—to see, perhaps, what color it turns—which is what most judgment comes to.

R.P. Blackmur. *The Nation*. Oct. 23, 1935. p. 478

Mr. Matthiessen believes very strongly in Mallarmé's dictum ''that what matters is not what a poem says, but what it *is*,'' and in his attempt to show what Eliot's poetry really is, he has clarified, placed and appraised the poems both singly and as a whole, while continuing to emphasize those literary traditions that have had an influence on Eliot—the Elizabethan dramatists, the metaphysical poets, the nineteenth century symbolists and Dante. The values of Mr. Matthiessen's method are obvious: certain particular elements in the poet's experience, elements too often confused in the critic's mind as part of a general summary, can now be identified; there is also no need and in fact no opportunity for the trite generalizations that lead so many students of Eliot into speculating whether the man has or has not a heart. . . .

Where Mr. Matthiessen errs is in trying to draw too many parallels, to see continual ties of relationship, as in a hesitantly worded passage to the effect that Eliot is the heir of an involved, imported Puritan literary tradition. He is better taken up, I think, with problems of technique, and his chapter ''On the Auditory Imagination'' is the best account of non-romantic rhythm and diction anyone has written since Paul Elmer More deserted to the higher mysteries.

Alfred Kazin. *New Republic*. Jan. 15, 1936. pp. 290–1

In an era of crisis, a people naturally turns to its historians and critics and prophets for reassurance of its faith in its own destiny. Mr. Matthiessen combines some of the characteristics of all three types of leader. He knows and has meditated long and profoundly on the literary history of America and its antecedents in western European culture; he has developed his own technique of literary criticism under the best of contemporary masters . . . ; and because he is ultimately concerned with values rather than with mere facts, the robe of the prophet falls upon his shoulders whether he will or not. The result [*American Renaissance*] is perhaps the most profound work of literary criticism on historical principles by any modern American with the possible exception of [John Livingstone] Lowes's *Road to Xanadu*.

Robert E. Spiller. *Saturday Review*. June 14, 1941. p. 6

American Renaissance is the first full length critical treatment of perhaps the most distinguished decades in our literary history. It marks, moreover, a break in the long tradition of academic and popular surveys—surveys which have been delicate evocations of a golden age, scholarly digests, sermons on the American character, or belligerent expeditions in search of the ''usable past,'' but seldom critical estimates of American literature. Mr. Matthiessen, in turning to criticism rather than to intellectual history, and in stating that literature can illuminate as well as reflect an age, has demonstrated, if only by implication, the serious shortcomings of the Parrington approach. Parrington's neat but cut-and-dried pronouncements were enormously stimulating; he could portray with brilliance and force a Tom Paine or a Daniel Webster, but in deliberately minimizing aesthetic judgments, he coarsened many of his literary evaluations and blinded himself to less obvious but equally important aspects of our culture. Mr. Matthiessen, more deeply versed in the economic, political, and social backgrounds of the 19th Century than are the majority of the so-called belletristic critics, has brought to light a rich and complex period, and he has done so by using the very technique ignored by Parrington and his school—aesthetic analysis.

Daniel Aaron. *Kenyon Review*. Winter, 1942. pp. 102–3

Matthiessen has also utilized the resources of the Harvard Library, going over the hundred and fifty thousand words of Henry James's then unpublished working notebooks (presented to the library by James's nephew, and since published, finally, in an edition by Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock) as an important source for his study *Henry James: The Major Phase*. He has also used the resources of his own labors (and those of a group of his students who did ''most of the spade work'') in a detailed comparative study of James's rewriting of *The Portrait of a Lady*. James's revisions of the three early novels for the New York Edition of his works had previously been examined haphazardly by critics, . . . but Matthiessen's comparison is as systematic and industrious as the best scholarship and as imaginative as the best criticism. It is printed as a supplement, ''The Painter's Sponge and Varnish Bottle,'' to *Henry James: The Major Phase*, and deductions from it, as to precisely what James wanted of his novels in his final period, are an essential part of the book's thesis. It would be hard to find a better example than this of effective criticism utilizing the hard work of scholarship for its own ends.

Stanley Edgar Hyman. *The Armed Vision* (Knopf). 1948. p. 258

His experience of literature and the arts had led him to hold a rich and complex view of utility, and he could recognize it even in books and in people whose social philosophy was absolutely at odds with his own. This, I think, goes far to explain Matthiessen's extraordinary success as scholar and teacher, and it is what gives a permanent value to his books. He could—indeed he had to—point out the superficiality of Granville Hicks's literary use of the are-you-for-or-against-the-people criterion, even at a time when he professed a general allegiance to the popular-front political views that provided the author of *The Great Tradition* with his critical method. And similarly, Matthiessen found that he must defend the Bollingen award to Ezra Pound's poetry, in spite of the fact that he detested with all his soul Pound's fascism and anti-semitism. Matthiessen's own partisanship, on political issues, was intense. Wherever he thought he could see the interests of ''all the people'' lay, he aggressively spoke his mind. But the complexity of his view of human nature and its needs, which is reflected in the sensitivity of his scholarship, compelled him to avoid a partisan approach to literature. The true scholar of democracy must serve the people; but he must serve them in his own way and according to his own lights.

Bernard Bowron in *F.O. Matthiessen*, edited by Paul M. Sweezy and Leo Huberman (Henry Schuman). 1950. p. 45

He was a great teacher because he unstintingly taught out of himself. In the classroom, in tutorial conferences, and in politics he steeled himself to speak from as deep in his heart as he knew how to reach. Ideas and literature were never things apart, they were always felt experience. If he was able to avoid the obvious dangers of so personal a method it was through the rigorous use of a cool and incisive mind. And yet he never allowed his students to ignore for a minute the severe limitations of the human intellect. He had read too deeply in Hawthorne and Melville to forget the inevitable doom of the solitary thinker. Though himself wholeheartedly committed to the life of the mind, he had an unusually vivid and unrelenting awareness of the desolation that awaits an intellect unsustained by affection, a life not bound to other lives. This he need not have taught those who knew him well. It was his own tragedy.

Leo Marx in *F.O. Matthiessen*, edited by Paul M. Sweezy and Leo Huberman (Henry Schuman). 1950. p. 43

Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*, published in 1941, can now be recognized as a landmark in the interpretation of our literature, comparable in importance to Vernon L. Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought*, published 1927–1930. Each of these books set the tone for a decade of scholarship and criticism. Parrington's emphasis on Jeffersonian liberalism forecast the predominantly social criticism of literature during the thirties. Matthiessen's quite different emphasis on tragic insight and his insistence that the content of literature cannot be understood apart from its form define the main lines of approach to American literature during the decade just past. His ''placing'' of the five major authors with whom he deals (Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman) has imposed itself so completely that we tend to take it for granted. His influence is particularly evident in the growing realization that American literature has a depth which rewards intensive probing.

The reader of the book is impressed first of all by Matthiessen's superb equipment for his task. He moves with assurance into the backgrounds in English tradition of his American writers. He can establish and interpret Melville's debt to Shakespeare, or Emerson's to Coleridge, or Thoreau's to Burton and Browne. He shows that the materials of American literary history have unsuspected richness of texture when they are systematically collected and brought together for synoptic treatment. At the same time, Matthiessen commands the techniques of close analysis that have been developed during the past fifteen years by the ''new'' critics.

Henry Nash Smith in *F.O. Matthiessen*, edited by Paul M. Sweezy and Leo Huberman (Henry Schuman). 1950. p. 55

The late F.O. Matthiessen's study, *Theodore Dreiser*, was presumably a labor of political love, inspired more by sympathy with Dreiser's views about social injustice than by admiration of his art. Certainly it does not rank with Matthiessen's best works. . . . Still, his book is an admirable exercise of the liberal imagination. He does complete justice not only to Dreiser's historical importance, in the struggle for emancipation from the ''genteel tradition,'' but to his staying power and intrinsic merits. While clearly preferring the incomparably finer craft of Henry James (of whom he also wrote a study), Matthiessen could recognize the plain truth that Dreiser understood some important spheres of American life beyond the scope of James, and in his humorless, sombre, compassionate brooding achieved an elemental kind of power lacking in James.

Herbert J. Muller. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Summer, 1951. pp. 462–3

As it happens I have been personally acquainted with each of the biographers, so that I rush to think what clues and keys to their own critical lives they give in what they have written about others; but it is a rush like that of waves in mid-sea which only threaten to break with a subsiding crest. Matthiessen among them is dead, whom I knew longest and who had death a mounting under-swell always in his mind along with his passion for decency. The tenderness of his human dignity is present in his study of Dreiser, and by contagion modifies the shape in which we see Dreiser: as a kind of donkey stubbornly persisting, ever promising—or if you like as a kind of Samson waiting for the chance of the temple—but as a donkey, let us say, hauling only his own burden in a treadmill that no longer worked, hauling and haunted by a strange hope for another treadmill. Matthiessen was a man who when he saw injustice never ran upstairs, but entered its slavery; he lends something of that quality to Dreiser so that it lives among the broken promises of his work like a vital habit—lives among, that is, his inadequacies to life and the intermittences of his heart and talent.

R.P. Blackmur. *The Griffin*. March, 1961. p. 7

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MATTHIESSEN, Peter (1927–)

If there's one thing Peter Matthiessen knows, it's how to tell a *real* Indian. *Real* Indians are poor (''not on the government dole''). paranoid, ''wide-eyed,'' ''often very blunt but rarely rude,'' and at odds with the elected leadership on their reservations. They speak in metaphor, don't look you straight in the eye, and are never at home to be interviewed. However, with the determined persistence of the right guru they can be cornered and celebrated. Matthiessen's two recent books, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* and *Indian Country* are more than ample evidence that good intentions, a command of the language, and hard work are not enough. A sensitive, credible reporter also needs common sense and just a tad of objectivity.

If all this sounds inordinately harsh, it is a harshness borne out of this reviewer's frustration. These are two books I expected to like, wanted to like, tried to like, and ground my teeth over. They deal with important subjects and will be read by more of the public at large than will probably any other nonfictionalized account of contemporary Indian situations. Moreover, as Matthiessen had demonstrated in previous books such as *Far Tortuga*, *Wild-life in America*, and especially the National Book Award-winning *The Snow Leopard* that he is a writer capable of lyric grace, insight, and wisdom. I looked forward to his perspective on Wounded Knee and its ensuing political turmoils, and on the various legal and cultural conflicts that plague ''Indian country'' from sea to shining sea. An intelligent non-Indian, someone with no vested interests, family ties, or social obligations might, I thought, shed some new light on the terribly confusing, contradictory, and tragic facts of Native American life.

That may still be true, but such illuminations are not to be found in Matthiessen's two books [*In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*, 1983, and *Indian Country*, 1984]. Instead we get continual references to that remitting villain, ''the white man'' (whoever *he* is), a simplistic dismissal of all *real* Indians (i.e., those Indian people who might label themselves ''progressives,'' who do not feel automatically at odds with the American government on each and every issue, and

who participate in tribal elections), and a political analysis which is so patently one-sided that it prompts skepticism even in a reader (yours truly) who in any other circumstance would agree with its broad conclusions. Matthiessen paints a picture of good vs. evil that is almost mythic in its refusal to deal with loose ends and jagged edges. . . .

The sad thing about all this is that Matthiessen truly is a gifted writer. The occasional passage has the feel and power of poetry, especially when a natural scene is being described. . . .

I wish that Matthiessen had written about Indians as they are rather than as he wishes them to be.

Michael Dorris. ''Real Indians.'' *Puerto del Sol*. Fall, 1984, pp. 111–12, 115

Peter Matthiessen's new novel [*Killing Mr. Watson*] draws a bead on the flimsy apparatus of justice, and uncovers the circumstances of and aftermath of a killing that put a whole community on trial; but the real issue concerns not so much the operation of law as the trammels of conscience. . . . It is part of Matthiessen's considerable achievement that he gives this incident the anguished air of exoticism.

At the core of the book is the inscrutable figure of one Edgar J. Watson, who arrives in the harsh frontier community of the Everglades with a fistful of dollars and a fearsome reputation. Where he has come from, nobody appears to know: all that concerns the scattered inhabitants of Chokoloskee is when he'll be going back. What we learn of Watson—or ''Mister Watson'' as he is known, even to his wife—emerges piecemeal from the novel's intricate shuffling of narratives, overseen by an unnamed writer (possibly Matthiessen himself) intent on chipping away the crust of rumor and myth that surround the facts of his life. . . .

Killing Mr. Watson is clearly the work of a feverish curiosity—Matthiessen is also a naturalist and explorer—and his feel for the haunting spaces of frontier existence is conjured in a vividly pictorial prose.

Anthony Quinn. *The Listener*. Aug. 9, 1990, p. 33

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MAXWELL, William (1908–)

William Maxwell's latest book, *Billie Dyer and Other Stories*, . . . is memoir disguised as fiction, or vice versa. In what has come to be Maxwell's trademark style—thoughtful, quiet, painfully compassionate but also painfully shy—we are introduced to a series of figures who populated the Lincoln, Illinois, of the author's childhood. The two best stories in this generally excellent book are the title tale about Dr. William Dyer (the only black man among Lincoln's Ten Most Distinguished Men) and a story called ''The Front and the Back Parts of the House,'' about a black maid, Hattie Dyer (not unimportantly, a relative of Billie's), who served the author's family in various ways. In both stories, the author's discomfort with the difficulties of race relations is more than a personal feeling; it speaks to us culturally, calling upon and making use of our pervasive liberal guilt.

What Maxwell does in these tales—especially in the story about Hattie Dyer—is join a shame at the way white employers have used black servants or workers and a related but not identical shame at the way fiction writers cannibalize the lives of their kith and kin. He does this through two seemingly conflicting techniques: by bringing his characters and their early twentieth-century setting fully to life, and by reminding us incessantly that there is a transmitting authorial presence. In spite of years of psychoanalysis, sophisticated city living, and high-class professional editing (he was for many years the fiction editor at *The New Yorker*), Maxwell forces himself to be a blinkered, limited individual when he conveys experience to us; he forbids himself the luxury of omniscience. . . .

For people who are anxious to get on with the plot and find themselves impatient with enveloping atmosphere, William Maxwell's work will always be hard to swallow. But for those of us who treasure him precisely for this evocation of the contemplating authorial mind, he is incomparable. No one else seems able to combine, as he does, the witnessing chronicler and the characters being chronicled, to mesh the writing self and the experiencing selves (some but not all of whom are earlier incarnations of the writer). His research is intensive but not intrusive: it becomes part of the story, as when he comments about an aunt-by-marriage, ''I have pursued her and her family through three county histories and come up with nothing of any substance.'' One cannot disengage the tone of loss that pervades Maxwell's fiction from the experiences of the characters in it: it is simultaneously the particular loss felt by a young boy whose mother dies, the widespread losses of decency manifested in small-town race relations, and the yearning of an aging writer for the not-fully retrievable past.

Wendy Lesser. *The Yale Review*. July, 1992, pp. 202–3

At age eighty-five, William Maxwell's appearance is at once endearing and a bit disconcerting. He is thin and slightly frail, and on his head grow solitary white hairs. Yet he is also energetic—enthusiastic, at times even agile in a boyish way. . . .

Maxwell has lived in his Manhattan apartment for over twenty-five years—a period that accounts for less than half of his career as a publishing fiction writer. . . . His first novel, *Bright Center of Heaven*, appeared in 1934. (Maxwell dismisses the book—long out of print—as hopelessly imitative.) Since then he has published six more novels; three collections of stories, including his latest book, *Billie Dyer and Other Stories*; a fascinating, semi-imagined history of his family, *Ancestors* (1971); and a collection of essays and reviews. . . . His novel *So Long, See You Tomorrow* (1980) won an American Book Award. . . . and he is considered by many readers to be among America's greatest writers, though his readership remains limited.

Maxwell is better known, in fact, as a *New Yorker* fiction editor—one who, from 1936 to 1976, helped shape the work of John Cheever, Eudora Welty, John O'Hara, John Updike, and countless other celebrated writers. . . .

Maxwell's own writing has changed both much and little over the years. In early books such as *Time Will Darken* (1984), which the *Boston Globe* called ''as near to perfection as it is possible for a novel to be,'' Maxwell seemed more willing to describe at length and to speculate about his characters' motivations, and even their futures. *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, however, is a mere 135 pages and says much simply by what it leaves out. Yet one can fairly early spot a Maxwell sentence—deliberate in tone yet informed by sympathy, precisely paced, and essential to whatever paragraph it calls home. Maxwell admits that the evolution of his current, almost-skeletal style was largely influenced by his work as an editor; yet he also claims that, during his years at *The New Yorker*, he became increasingly inclined to leave stories alone, assuming that the writer had good reasons for whatever he had done.

If Maxwell's style has changed over the years, his subject matter for the most part has not. Nearly all of his work takes place in the Illinois of his youth and has its roots in the death of his mother in the influenza epidemic of 1918, when Maxwell was ten. From his second novel, *They Came Like Swallows* (1937), right through *So Long*, this loss has been his muse. It's amazing how much he has remembered and set down about this cherished period—a childhood that ended halfway through.

David Stanton. *Poets & Writers*. May–June, 1994, pp. 37–38

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MCCARTHY, Cormac (1933–)

The Appalachian South and the American Southwest have served as Cormac McCarthy's fictional territory for the past thirty years, but with the publication of *All the Pretty Horses* he and his characters have come to the border of Mexico and crossed over into previously unchartered land. Despite the proximity of our countries, surprisingly few American fiction writers of merit have taken their characters south of the Rio Grande. . . . But of writers in English outside of the U.S., two major figures have focused upon the Mexican landscape, D. H. Lawrence and Malcolm Lowry. Cormac McCarthy's Mexico in *All the Pretty Horses* is transformed in such a powerful visionary fashion that his work demands to be placed in the company of this masterly pair of novelists.

In this little essay, ''Landscape and the Novel in Mexico,'' Octavio Paz writes of Lawrence, Lowry, and the Mexican novelist Juan Rulfo as three artists whose poetic visions ''give the landscape its concrete form'' rather than vice versa. The landscape in their work, Paz suggests, ''does not function as the background or physical setting of the narrative. . . . It is something that is alive, something that takes a thousand different forms; it is a symbol and something more than a symbol: a voice entering into the dialogue, and in the end the principal character in the story'' [in Paz, *Alternating Currents*, 1983, p. 33].

Using Paz's assertions as a standard, a reader can travel through the northern Mexico of *All the Pretty Horses* and notice certain rhetorical patterns that perhaps ought to be regarded as more than mere rhetoric. The landscape, almost a ''character'' in itself, becomes a force to reckon with rather than a mere reflection of mood. . . .

John Grady Cole lights out for the territory ahead, or, to be specific, to the south, to Mexico and its blank and unchartered regions, unhappy with the known past of family turmoil and American blood past. He seeks freedom from the old well-marked Texas spaces in the possibilities of an undiscovered country. In this way his quest becomes associated with the land and its representation in rhetorical passages focusing on landscape. However, it seems apparent from the start that character, motive, and what we normally consider in fiction to be background are deeply intertwined. . . .

The land before him holds much promise for John Grady Cole, for his imminent education as a breaker of horses and prodigal son, as a boy turned man by means of love and tested by imprisonment and the blade. . . . The Mexico that rises up before us in the subsequent sections of the novel is, as Paz argues about the Mexico of Lawrence, Lowry, and Rulfo, not so much a visionary landscape as a landscape of vision. The land is the promise, the promise is the land; alive, a symbol, a voice, a character, the book itself.

Alan Cheuse. *Southern Quarterly*. Special Issue on Cormac McCarthy, ed. Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce, Summer, 1992, pp. 140–41, 142

The plantation scene is notable for being one of the most flagrantly ''Southern'' moments in McCarthy's work. Southern writing, from the antebellum period onward, has been full of ruined old houses, symbolizing the failure of southern order to preserve itself against time. One is a bit surprised to encounter such a symbol in McCarthy's work: he is a writer who studiously avoids clichés, for one thing, and a writer who—except perhaps for his allegedly Faulknerian prose style—seems to have very little to do with southern literary tradition. We will search his novels in vain for the great theme of ''the past in the present,'' for the burden of southern

history, for (excepting *The Orchard Keeper*) the conflict between tradition and modernity. And we will be hard pressed to wring from them the sort of humanistic content which, for all his gothicism, finally emerges from Faulkner's; it is hard to imagine McCarthy on some platform in Stockholm, assuring us that man will survive and prevail. ''If this is the South,'' John Ditsky has said of McCarthy's characteristic landscape, ''it is the South perceived by Vladimir and Estragon'' [see *Hollins Critic*; 1981, p. 3].

Indeed one may be startled to discover, in one of McCarthy's notoriously inscrutable novels, not just ''Southern'' symbols but any intelligible symbols at all. They suggest after all the presence of *theme* in a body of work which, as Vereen Bell has cogently argued, is essentially antithematic. What one takes from McCarthy's novels, Bell has taught us, is a ''hyperrealistic'' rendering of the physical world in all its dense, vivid specificity—and particularly the power of the world to upend whatever conceptual gods are imposed on it. To begin discovering themes and symbols in McCarthy's work is to risk the very delusive logocentrism that the novels themselves are meant to expose.

And yet there it is, a ruined mansion which might have been lifted from the pages of any southern pastoral lament, since, say, George Tucker's *The Valley of Shenandoah* (1824). I have the feeling that McCarthy employs this symbol, and the cluster of thematic associations it evokes, quite deliberately, and that in doing so he is (among other things) asserting a particular sort of relationship to the southern literary tradition.

> John W. Grammer. ''A Thing against Which Time Will Not Prevail: Pastoral and History in Cormac McCarthy's South.'' *Southern Quarterly*. Summer, 1992, pp. 19–20, 26–27

Readers who find Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* (1973) disturbingly powerful might well argue that this power results from the ''raw material'' of its antihero. Lester Ballard is a twenty-seven-year-old white native of Frog Mountain in Appalachian Sevier County, Tennessee: a cursing, spitting, vengeful, homicidal, necrophilic sociopath. This grotesque outsider could serve as stuff for a gratuitously shocking horror story. But Ballard represents a serious figure for McCarthy—not primarily a case study in psychology or criminology, but a fictional figure quite within the bounds of human possibility. Some degrees of human evil prove difficult to apprehend, must be seen to be believed. In its struggle with this difficulty, the aesthetic power of *Child of God* derives not so much from the force of Lester Ballard as subject or object but rather from the play of positions taken by the narrator through whom we see Ballard. Hunting, tracking, sighting, looking, watching, searching, exploring, examining—such processes dominate the story. Ballard demonstrates both a passionate attachment to the rifle he has carried since boyhood and an expert ability to sight and shoot, a faultless eye. The text is concerned not with a theological question, as the title might suggest, but with a problem of vision: how does a man such as Lester Ballard see the world? How might we, how ought we to *see* Lester Ballard? ''He could not swim, but how would you drown him? His wrath seemed to buoy him up. Some halt in the way of things seems to work here. See him.'' I would suggest that McCarthy approaches this problem not merely by privileging Lester Ballard as an ''objective'' referential phenomenon but rather by playing with the rhetorics of visibility, ways of *seeing*. The aesthetic power of *Child of God* results from McCarthy's superb regulation of narrative distance and perspective, his command of four degrees of proximity to Ballard, four kinds of narrative position with differing visions: the voyeuristic, the oblivious, the blind (blinded by darkness), and—most inventive—the archaeological. These ''visions'' determine both rhetorical strategies on the surface of the text and dramatic structures in the elements of the story.

> Andrew Bartlett. *Southern Literary Journal*. Spring, 1993, pp. 3–4

One does not often hear such lavish praise for a writer from the American West. Saul Bellow gushes over the author's ''absolutely overpowering use of language, his life-giving and death-dealing sentences.'' The real hero of his novels, writes Shelby Foote, ''is the English language.'' ''He must be acknowledged as a talent equal to William Faulkner,'' judges Madison Smartt Bell. Newsweek calls him a ''literary lion in the desert . . . the best-kept secret in American letters.'' The *New York Times* magazine says he ''may be the best unknown novelist in America.''

These and other encomiums were laid at the feet of Cormac McCarthy in spring 1992 upon the publication of *All the Pretty Horses*, the first volume of *The Border Trilogy*. But like most stories of literary discovery and triumph, this one features plenty of twists and turns. McCarthy, who was born in New England and grew up in Knoxville, Tennessee, has lived for nearly two decades in El Paso, Texas. So far as I know, New England does not claim him as a literary son, but the South most certainly does. To be sure, McCarthy's first four novels—*The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1974), and *Suttree* (1979)—are set in the Deep South. The lone book-length critical study of his work to date, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, by Vereen M. Bell, published by Louisiana State University Press in 1988, attempts to locate him in the southern literary tradition. Moreover, the summer 1992 issue of *Southern Quarterly* is devoted entirely to a consideration of McCarthy's fiction.

Still, for at least the last decade, McCarthy has been concerned with things western and Latin American rather than southern. The shift westward was probably inevitable. ''I've always been interested in the Southwest,'' McCarthy has said. ''There isn't a place in the world you can go where they don't know about cowboys and Indians and the myth of the West.'' McCarthy, therefore, must be considered a literary hybrid. In his formative years he was steeped in southern literature and culture, and the influence on him of southern writers like Faulkner—especially Faulkner—is clear. The reader may be excused for concluding that McCarthy's most recent fiction was composed by the illegitimate offspring of Zane Grey and Flannery O'Connor—and that the Marquis de Sade was the delivering physician. Like Grey, the author of these books has a fine talent for painting action pictures in words. His resemblance to O'Connor (and Faulkner) seems twofold: first, there is a concern with the most vexing of metaphysical questions; and second, a taste for the flashier techniques of southern gothic. His debt to the Marquis de Sade is obvious: his novels contain some of the most graphic and shocking violence in modern fiction.

> Tom Pilkington. ''Fate and Free Will on the Western Frontier: Cormac McCarthy's Western Fiction.'' *Western*

American Literature. Winter, 1993, pp. 311–12 [reprint from *The World and I, Washington Times*, 1992]

Though he has long had distinguished admirers—Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, Robert Penn Warren—it has been only about five years since McCarthy vacated the title of Best Unknown Major American Novelist. No longer Knoxville's other writer (after James Agee), his entrance into the literary-academic mainstream has been signalized by such honors as his receipt of a MacArthur Fellowship and of both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award for his best-selling sixth novel, *All the Pretty Horses*.

There are a number of likely explanations—for McCarthy has subsisted since 1965 as a writer's writer and cult figure. He has been accounted, by common standards, a difficult writer, one who moreover remained practically anonymous, on the Pynchon model, wholly disinclined to assist in the promotion of his own work, all of which in Random House hardcover was out of print. In their original editions his first five novels sold probably no more than 15,000 copies. It seems likely as well that the very originality of his work, its categorizable quality, has deterred some prospective readers. And if for a presumably authoritative account of his subject matter we look into *The History of Southern Literature* we read, in part, that ''Cormac McCarthy's fiction is filled with episodes of animalistic fornication, incest, murder, and necrophilia''—a not wholly inaccurate but not altogether engaging description. . . .

All the Pretty Horses is just as inimitably McCarthy's work as its predecessors, but differs substantially in accessibility and tone, which fact has led some recent essayists to dark imaginings about lost courage and abrogation of authorial values. These suspicions have been induced by McCarthy being on best-seller lists and granting interviews and turning up as the subject of a university press book and—the final indignity—being studied at an academic conference. In fact, however, *All the Pretty Horses*, likable though it may be, much resembles McCarthy's first novel, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), in that it memorializes, without a trace of sentimentality, a vanishing way of life. . . .

All the Pretty Horses is a classic western, a story of initiation and romance, mystery, and adventure, and of the relation among free will, fate, and justice. Though the Western frontier spirit of boundless optimism has receded, there exists in its place a respect for and an enactment of the heroic virtues: fortitude, resolution, magnanimity.

Allen Shepherd. *New England Review*. Winter, 1994, pp. 176–77, 178, 179

A boy is traveling through Mexico on horseback, leaving the Southwest, leaving home. That's a bald outline of Cormac McCarthy's new novel, *The Crossing*. In his last novel, *All the Pretty Horses*, two boys traveled from the Southwest into Mexico. As did a boy in his previous books, *Blood Meridian*; or, *The Evening Redness in the West*. Yet, the voyages are as different as if set on separate continents. . . .

What all McCarthy's books share is a sense that humans are at best narrow, often insensate or crude, and sometimes evil. So the dialogue between humans is spare, while the writing around nature, animals, the world runs from lyrical to florid. In *The Crossing*, Billy learns in very specific ways about the human condition. For one thing, humans want borders. That's why we name things, frame things with stories, hang onto the past. And still, we are always lost.

C. Carr. ''Books.'' *The Village Voice*. July 5, 1994, p. 1

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MCCARTHY, Mary (1912–1989)

Miss McCarthy has learned the difficult art of setting down everything as it might have happened, without telling a single self-protective lie and without even failing, in the midst of a seduction, to mention the safety pin that holds up the heroine's badly mended underwear. *The Company She Keeps* is not a likable book, nor is it very well put together, but it has the still unusual quality of having been lived.

Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*. May 25, 1942. p. 737

What is delightful about *The Oasis* is the infectious energy and enthusiasm of Miss McCarthy, who plunges gallantly into the thick of so many complicated ideas and problems with a rebarbative gusto.

There is a violence in this writer which is both exhilarating and amusing. . . . Miss McCarthy's mind has what people are accustomed to calling a masculine width or range. She sees people in terms of moralities—both civic and personal. But it is even more her feeling for words and her talent for epigram which emerges at the end of the book as her particular gift.

Julia Strachey. *New Statesman and Nation, later Statesman and Nation*. Feb. 26, 1949. pp. 211–2

Her highly sophisticated and intellectualized prose leads her into fascinating digressions which make her sound like an essayist *manqué*; it also leads her into frequent epigrams, but instead of the shallow verbal sparkle of drawing room comedy, hers have the psychological penetration of La Rochefoucauld. . . . Like Joyce she has been deeply affected by her early religious training even when fleeing from it. Although she has stepped out of the confessional booth to lie down on the analyst's couch she is still on the same quest for the essential, the quintessential self. Her brief incisive pieces are etched with corrosive acid, it is true; but they still have a savage honesty, a bristling sensibility, and at bottom a pitiless humility.

Robert Halsband. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 7, 1950. p. 23

It is the anguished urban sensibility that Miss McCarthy's prose writhingly plots. The people in her stories all seem uncontrollably involved in endless showdowns with the people around them, or as often as not just with themselves; and nobody, unfortunately, ever seems to win. But this is the deadly pattern of relationships among ''thinking'' people.

Miss McCarthy's attitude toward the people in her stories is one of contempt and outrage, but it is not just a shallow, critical attitude. It originates in a deep and almost continually disappointed moralism. She wants people with intelligence to be good and decent and productive, and that they are not arouses the furious broken-hearted chastiser in her.

Chandler Brossard. *American Mercury*. Feb., 1951. pp. 232–3

The most important thing in fiction is binding connection, that which makes the characters adhere to one another, as it were of their own affinity, through all the situations the novelist invents. This is love. It cannot be derived from the satirical connection. . . . Yet it is this which Miss McCarthy vainly tries to do in her last two novels (*The Oasis* and *The Groves of Academe*) . . . ; she would have satire do the work of love. Apparently she cannot prevent the substitution, because satire has become for her more than a genre; a virtual ontology which throws up a world of ridiculous objects, even when she herself belongs to that world and berates it only because she is unable to break her dependence on it.

Isaac Rosenfeld. *New Republic*. March 3, 1952. p. 21

The major distinction Miss McCarthy makes with regard to people, the only distinction that has force and reality to her, is between the intelligent and the stupid. . . . A Mary McCarthy heroine examines her soul with the scrupulous, unashamed persistence of a professional model looking herself over in the vanity-table mirror. . . . In general, it might be said they dramatize the disjunction—or rather, the hostility—between Reason and Impulse. This is Miss McCarthy's true subject, a theme which underlies her satirical castigations, which calls forth all her famous brilliance, which gives point to her acerbity and depths to her apparently gratuitous bitterness.

Norman Podhoretz. *Commentary*. March, 1956. p. 272

Unlike other notable hatchet-women (Dorothy Parker, for instance), Miss McCarthy is not a Sophisticate but an Intellectual. . . . And though time and circumstance cast her in with the young radicals for whom Marxian criticism of ''the system'' furnished that rationalization of their discontents which the previous generation had found in the war against ''provinciality,'' she never committed herself wholeheartedly to that either. In fact, if she ever discovered what she believed, admired, or wanted she never devoted much time to praising or expounding it. But she can justify her contempt for what she does not like—and that is almost everything including other intellectuals—with telling thrusts and shrewd analysis.

Joseph Wood Krutch. *Saturday Review*. May 26, 1956. p. 20

Memories of a Catholic Girlhood, Mary McCarthy's account of her childhood and adolescence, has made clearer to me the traits which make her the particular sort of artist she is. They are, I believe, perfectionism, a fanatical striving for honesty, and a fierce sense of hierarchy—a combination calculated to produce a thoroughly disturbing vision of life. For to the perfectionist, things-as-they-are appear for the most part lamentably worse than they ought to be; the cult of honesty makes it a duty to portray this state of affairs as unsparingly as possible; and in a hierarchical order, it is always easy to disgrace oneself but almost impossible to behave so well as to transcend one's station. . . . The portraiture of her recollections is more tolerant of human frailties than in her fiction and therefore more attractive and richer in vitality.

Charles J. Rolo. *Atlantic Monthly*. June, 1957. pp. 90–1

What she has written so far has been of the fashionably acid and shocking kind: it is concerned on the whole, even to the point of ruthlessness, with the discrepancy in an urban and aggressive society between moral jargon and the inanity of pretentious action, with the atrophy of feeling and the protective surrogate of sentimentality and middle-class convention. These defects in our life she has represented with an unmerciful eye for weakness and vulgarity. *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* is no less skeptical toward the world of the past half-century in which she grew up, but it is more perceptive, more critical of her own resources of understanding, and therefore, more mature, than any of her previous fiction.

Victor Lange. *New Republic*. June 24, 1957. p. 18

What Chaucer did for the fourteenth-century English pilgrim, Mary McCarthy has done for the Vassar girl of 1933. The section of society Miss McCarthy has chosen to cut through obviously limits her field, but one of the virtues of *The Group* is that it is an unassuming and economically constructed novel which displays a brilliance for the particular, rather than symbolic, bombast for the universal. And this without a trace of apology or pretense from the author. It is never a fatuous book. Even when it succeeds in reaching beyond its own narrative boundaries of time and place, it remains essentially what Miss McCarthy apparently wanted it to be: a period piece.

Robert Kiely. *The Nation*. Sept. 21, 1963. p. 163

. . . Miss McCarthy is very good at showing how the life and feelings of women are mixed up in things, particularly those things—clothes, furniture, food, etc.—which make up the domestic routine. Yet, the proliferation of such detail has the effect of robbing her characters of freedom, as though they were all prisoners in a Cartesian universe, enmeshed in those great chains of causation that lead from the First Cause to each tiny effect.

This is the style, then, of a writer on whom nothing is lost and for whom everything figures. Miss McCarthy does not handle words with unusual distinction—in that sense she is not a stylist at all—yet her prose is unmistakable. At its most characteristic her writing has a finely articulated grayness that comes from a series of wonderfully linked, perfectly comprehended minutiate. . . .

. . . in much of Miss McCarthy's later fiction there is an increasing sense of baffled helplessness, an undercurrent of terror

at the powerlessness of women to save themselves, or even to help themselves. The sardonic amusement with which she watched Margaret Sargent [*The Company She Keeps*] make a mess out of her life has gradually disappeared to be replaced by the queer, hard, semi-tragic feeling that one finds at the end of *A Charmed Life* and throughout *The Group*.

Thomas Rogers. *Commentary*. Dec., 1963. pp. 488–9

Her dependence on autobiographical or semi-autobiographical materials is not in itself a deficiency (although one wonders whether she could write a novel not based on events in her own life), but her technique is. Her enormous vocabulary and erudition show on every page; indeed, scarcely a page appears without some italicized French phrase or esoteric term. But this witty, highly intelligent fondness for words for their own sake sometimes makes of a relatively short narrative a book of several hundred pages. Her treatment of characters, with rare exceptions, serves as a pulpit or platform from which she can lecture on some evil in humanity or some *cause célèbre* with which she is no longer personally involved. Indeed, so cavalier is she with characters, even central ones, that she disposes of them in the best *deus ex machina* fashion; when all else fails, kill them off; it's neater that way, and it saves her the chore of figuring out some logical means of ending the novel. When Miss McCarthy is not attempting a novel, as in her excellent stories in *The Company She Keeps*, or her semi-autobiographical narratives in *Cast a Cold Eye* (1950, later incorporated in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* [1957], in many ways her best book), she has no noticeable trouble winding things up; there is none of the sometimes forced attempts at polemicizing; there is none of the artificial intrusion of the author in literary or political digressions. In short, whatever strengths are to be found in her novels—vigor, honesty, straightforwardness, intelligence, to name a few—are more than adequately represented in the shorter pieces as well, and not a few additional strengths are added.

Paul Schlueter in *Contemporary American Novelists*, ed. Harry T. Moore (Southern Illinois). 1964. pp. 62–3

Mary McCarthy's own voice is heard more in all of her work than she is perhaps aware of. . . . Certainly the more it is heard, the more feeling there is. One hates to say it, because one hates even by the remotest implication to seem to abandon fiction to the breast-beating writers, but it is difficult to get away from the point that in some of her novels and tales Miss McCarthy casts *too* cold an eye. One welcomes the feeling in *The Stones of Florence* for the Florentines themselves. The Venetians may have allowed their city to become a fairy tale, but the Florentines care for much more than their monuments, and Miss McCarthy has a fine scorn for the foreign residents in the past and present who have not been able to see this. And in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* she rises to a pitch of something like passion that makes it the noblest utterance that she has yet produced.

Louis Auchincloss. *Pioneers and Caretakers* (Minnesota). 1965. p. 186

Mary McCarthy does ''miss'' by having too much furniture in her novels and by not leaving enough space for the play of passions and the drama of growth. But if her concern is satiric and her interest lies in creating characters unaffected by time, then these charges are inconsequential. However, if her purpose is to write not satirical novels but novels that are satiric only peripherally, then the lack of resonance and development that is evident in her fiction becomes a flaw. The chief failure of her fiction to the present is that it commits itself neither to satire nor to the ''form'' of the novel. The result is a somewhat dichotomous grouping of snatches of brilliant satire and of characters whose complexity involves them in a different—and greater—reality.

Barbara McKenzie. *Mary McCarthy* (Twayne). 1966. p. 179

She shares Emily Dickinson's admission to Colonel Higginson that ''candor is the only wile,'' and she has built a career, as someone has said, on candor and dissent. She has always regarded sex as comic or grotesque, and professes a lack of interest in ''happy'' sex in fiction. She is unforgiving to her enemies and is no more charitable toward human stupidity than she is to bad writing. She is a David against the social, economic, intellectual and cultural Goliaths of the twentieth century, and she relishes the role.

She has never lost her faith in the Fact and her reliance upon it in her novels. Her fiction is really dramatized theses, orations with figures. Her special purview has been the facts of feminine existence that other writers, especially other women, have shied away from as indelicate. As Maxwell Geismar said of Saul Bellow, she is a novelist in spite of herself, for all her instincts are toward the informal essay raised to the level of fiction. Dwight Macdonald has called her fiction ''a series of reviews of people's performances'' rather than a direct vision of the performances themselves. In the process of the review we learn her standards and hear her rather stern, sometimes almost puritanical moral judgments. Her criticism, like her fiction, is uncorrupted by compassion, and she writes it with a sense of mission, of vocation. She is an advocate of common sense, the concrete, the real, and the authentic.

Doris Grumbach. *The Company She Kept* (Coward). 1967. pp. 216–17

The fact is that one returns to Mary McCarthy not for her gossip but for herself, or rather for herselves, those black shadows cast by the fingers of a very gifted writer on the hard wall of experience. These are the I, She, You, the Young Woman, the Wife of her fiction and essays, to whom she gives a name only reluctantly; it is the reader, not the author, who craves the security of the named name. Few writers have fought so hard to preserve the self against intrusion, whether from the otherness of fact or the otherness of other people, and she has done this with the classic devices of her beloved French novelists: the revelations that tell all and nothing, the ruthless self-analyses that defy us to belabor her weaknesses, snobberies and cruelties half so harshly as she has done herself.

Ellen Moers. *New York Times Book Section*. June 11, 1967. p. 7

[McCarthy's] work is about the painful mixed blessing of freedom for her kind of people—for intellectuals—and in particular, about

how hard it has been for intellectuals in our time to behave decently and humanly. For to be free and clever has often meant only to be able to escape from difficult, limiting reality into the realm of flattering abstractions. And yet—for I have said that to speak of what she dislikes is to speak of only half her subject—if she shows what makes her kind go wrong, she shows just as vividly what makes them go right. She shows that sometimes, even in intellectuals free to please themselves, there arises a love for reality that is greater than love of self. This development, because it means that the self must be willing to suffer for something it values more than its own ease, can be one of the moving and beautiful events of a human life—it can be heroic.

At any rate, the conflict between these two tendencies of the mind is at the center of all Miss McCarthy's novels. Because this conflict is her own, her reports on it have the variety, complexity, and intensity of personal experience. But because the freedom to live by ideas, ideas which may lead away from the real as well as toward it, is what distinguishes the whole class of twentieth-century intellectuals, her tales of the troubled Mary McCarthy heroine have developed naturally into social satire.

Irvin Stock. *Mary McCarthy* (Minnesota). 1968. p. 9

To read Mary McCarthy you have to be constantly awake. There is no filler that can be skipped, or relaxed winks to the reader assuring him he needn't work too hard for the next page or two; whatever you miss is to your disadvantage, and most of the essays [in *The Writing on the Wall, and Other Essays*] need to be reread, preferably after a second look at the particular book under consideration.

What keeps one awake is the sound of a voice always talking to you, varying itself in pitch and delivery as the subject demands. This is not to praise her for lively shock-value, as in the phrase ''I'll bet Mary McCarthy would do a job on *that* one.'' In fact readers with the image foremost of the Lady Mary as wicked wasp will find it quite irrelevant to this book; whatever cleverness there is, and there is plenty, operates in the service of literature.

William H. Pritchard. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1970. p. 372

As in her earlier books about the war, *Vietnam and Hanoi*, the most impressive quality that Mary McCarthy brings to bear on her subject is a keen moral sensibility. This is her real guide as she picks her way through the legal debris in the Georgia courtroom, sorting its facts, examining its participants, and salvaging the key issues. What emerges [in *Medina*] is not a document that vilifies the rather shallow figures of the trial but a polemic that tries to pull us closer to recognition of the nature of our involvement in this action.

Basil T. Paquet. *New York Review of Books*. Sept. 21, 1972. p. 37

The first seven chapters [of *The Mask of State*] are on-the-spot accounts of the Ervin Committee hearings. Their factual accuracy proves that Miss McCarthy listened carefully and absorbed the substance of the testimony. When she tells us what happened her perception is fully adequate to providing an understanding of the events.

Admittedly, one whose hunger for facts, accusations and quotations is insatiable would do better to plunge into the brain-addling flood of undigested information which is visited upon the reader of *The New York Times*. Mary McCarthy's aim is to interpret what is being said, and by what manner of men.

What better evidence of Mary McCarthy's journalistic skill can we ask for, than the fact that almost a year later nothing has happened which seriously contradicts her conclusions and perceptions. Despite the energetic ingenuities of all the king's lawyers and all the king's pressmen, we see them shattered now as she described them then.

It is no deprecation of Mary McCarthy's other talents to say that she is one of America's finest journalists. It is good for all of us that she has turned her powers to the inner tribulations of this country which, despite a long exile, she appears to care for very much.

Richard Goodwin. *New York Times Book Section*. June 30, 1974. p. 6

McCarthy's voice has always been perfectly reliable; the stirring and disturbing tone of the born truth teller is hers, whether she is writing essays or fiction. Her perspective is always feminine: Antigone grown up, her absoluteness not diminished as she takes on sex. She has never been easy on herself or her characters, or tried to make anyone look better. This is true whether she is describing her failure to best an anti-Semite (''Artists in Uniform''), her fears about traveling as a reporter in Vietnam (''How It Went''), or her heroine's response to divorce in ''Cruel and Barbarous Treatment.'' . . .

Where are we, then, to place *Cannibals and Missionaries*, which its publishers present as ''a thriller,'' in the context of Mary McCarthy's work? She is not the sort of writer who would toss off a book as a lark or a diverting experiment, so why has she done it?

It is clear to me that this, the most political, the least autobiographical of her novels, would have been impossible without her experience of traveling to Vietnam as a reporter. Many of the details of that experience, particularly those about physical fear and communal bonding, find their way into this novel in the accounts of the passengers' ordeal. *Cannibals and Missionaries* is the story, among other things, of a committee of liberals who are hijacked while traveling to Iran to examine the atrocities of the Shah's regime. It speaks, with McCarthy's habitually unsentimental voice, to the problem of witness and political responsibility among non-professional men of good will. For McCarthy, terrorism is disturbing in the same way that sexual promiscuity would have been for Emily Brontë: it is political activity without manners, without form; therefore it is incapable of yielding much meaning and is inevitably without hope. In some crucial way, it is not serious; it has no stake in the future. . . .

The most important achievement of *Cannibals and Missionaries* is McCarthy's understanding of the psychology of terrorism, the perception, expressed by Henk, that terrorism is the product of despair, ''the ultimate sin against the Holy Ghost.'' Once again, McCarthy is asking the difficult question, confronting the difficult problem. For surely, terrorism threatens us all, not only physically and politically, but morally and intellectually as well. It postulates a system of oblique correspondences, a violent disproportion between ends and means, against which we have no recourse. She comes to terms as well with our peculiar but irrefutable tendency to see human beings as replaceable, works of art unique. For the lover of formal beauty who is also a moralist, it is the most vexed of questions. I'm not sure McCarthy has anything new to say on the subject, but she does not imply that she does.

Often, artists have responded to the prospect of atrocity by creating a well-crafted work of art. One thinks of Milton's ''On the Late Massacre of the Piedmontese,'' a perfect Italian sonnet whose hundredth word is ''hundredfold.'' In response to the truly frightful prospect of anarchic terrorism, Mary McCarthy has written one of the most shapely novels to have come out in recent years: a well-made book. It is delightful to observe her balancing, winnowing, fitting in the pieces of her plot.

The tone of *Cannibals and Missionaries* is a lively pessimism. Its difficult conclusion is that to be a human being at this time is a sad fate: even the revolutionaries have no hope for the future, and virtue is in the hands of the unremarkable, who alone remain unscathed.

Mary Gordon. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 30, 1979, pp. 1, 33–35

Cannibals and Missionaries is susceptible to the recurring criticism that McCarthy is more essayist than novelist. One reader wonders why she wrote this book as a novel; another finds the long periods of inaction tedious. We may again pass over the question of genre. As the term is commonly used, *Cannibals and Missionaries* is a novel. But to say so does not clear it of the charge that it contains so many monologues, both internal and external, that the subjects of conversations and reflections, rather than action and character, sometimes dominate our attention.

There is, to be sure, a lot of talk in *Ulysses*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Portnoy's Complaint*. But McCarthy's fiction hardly resembles Joyce's or Faulkner's or Roth's. Although she exposes the minds and actions of her characters, she does not often explore their souls and invite us to feel with them. Indeed, we hardly even mourn their deaths—fortunately, since their mortality rate is appalling. We like many of them, but amusement and embarrassment are the emotions we are most likely to feel on their behalf; and we do not willingly identify with most of them. We do, however, judge them. We think about them in terms of what they do and ought to do, not of how they feel or why they feel that way. Our attention is directed to how their minds work, what they know, and how they explain themselves. McCarthy believes (as she says in the interview with Niebuhr) that truth is knowable; her characters are prone to err, but not with impunity and not without presenting their case. They argue and rationalize. They think in essays; sometimes they write letters and journals. And finally, we cannot believe that Sophie's journal entries and Pete Levi's letter are written to portray Sophie and Peter; rather, these characters seem at times to have been created to ponder ideas.

If a weakness of McCarthy's fiction is its essayistic tendencies, its great strength is the accuracy with which she portrays characters, particularly comic characters, giving new life and individuality to universal types. Aileen Simmons belongs to the tradition of the Wife of Bath, going on a pilgrimage and looking for a mate, gregarious, a little overdressed, outspoken, ever-mindful of precedence. Her eye is on the clerkly Senator, an unlikely prospect if ever there was one, but she also contemplates a rich old man, Charles Tenant; like Allison of Bath, she is alert to any opportunity. Frank Barber has literary kinsmen in Parson Adams and Pangloss and, doubtless, some Ur-Parson among the cavemen. Of more recent vintage is the wicked Charles, genuinely liberal, dauntless, and dreadful in his confessions of the human frailties that plague us all. He is a comic character and a homosexual, and the two facts have nothing to do with each other; the gay Charles is offered as character without any statement about his sexual identity, which is a problem only to Aileen. At eighty, he is in any case past his prime, but he is physically fearless and a good foil to the other men with their macho instincts.

Willene Hardy. *Mary McCarthy* (Ungar, 1981), pp. 194–95

How I Grew the first of three projected volumes of memoirs . . . the entire conception of a long memoir by a writer who has already written so much about her [Mary McCarthy] childhood and youth, should have been thought through more carefully. . . . The writer herself was aware that she had used this material extensively, so she compressed or distorted the old familiar incidents and portrayals. Perhaps thinking of Wordsworth, she decided to write about the past by recounting the growth of her own mind. Indeed, the memoir begins, ''I was born as a mind during 1925, my bodily birth having taken place in 1912.'' Unfortunately, the result is not poetry but lists: the books she read as a child, in the Sacred Heart School; in the public high school, at boarding school, in each of her classes at Vassar; catalogues of boys she went out with, facts and definitions, recitals of trains going from Seattle to the East. When the reader of the memoir looks for a thoughtful account of emotional change, or of experience, the writer responds with lists, with disquisitions, with geographical facts, with the smart performance always praised by the nuns and the ''darling'' teachers at Vassar. This flurry of reading lists obscures the reader's need to know how the subject of the memoir became the person who wrote the memoir, how, in the tradition of the form, the writer changed from one sort of person to another. It is a need to know imaginatively and emotionally, which remains unsatisfied.

Sonya Rudikoff. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1989, p. 51

There used to be a fine phrase, now banned, I supposed, in this supersensitive age—''man of letters.'' ''Woman of letters'' doesn't sound right; ''person of letters'' is wholly unacceptable. Whatever the contemporary equivalent of the old phrase, it applied vividly to Mary. She wrote with analytical power, startling clarity, keen human insight, silken wit, dispassionate ruthlessness, on an enviable diversity of subjects; the novel, painting, architecture, opera, theater. politics, manners, tastes, religion, language, museums, universities, Vassar, Venice, Florence, France, America, Vietnam. Her novels, stories, and essays constitute the brilliant commentary, interpretation, panorama of our disordered age. . . .

She may have cast a cold eye, but she had the warmest of hearts.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. *Partisan Review*. Winter, 1990, p. 15

Over the years, in fact, McCarthy, has written tirelessly about her own life, busily mythologizing herself in the process of inventing a gallery of alter egos. As she readily points out, she is Meg in *The Company She Keeps*—the clever Vassar girl, ''a princess among the trolls.'' She is also Martha, the truth-telling ''bohemian lady'' in *A Charmed Life*. She is Kay, iconoclast and scoffer in *The Group*. And she is Rosamund, the ardent and willfully noble aesthete in *Birds in America*.

A more factual portrait of the author was provided by *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* in 1957, and with the publication next

month of *How I Grew*—the first volume of her autobiography—the self-portrait of the young Mary McCarthy will be complete. . . .

The novels each began with an idea. *Birds of America*, a sentimental study of an idealistic boy's coming of age was meant to ''be a novel about the idea of equality and its relation to nature.'' *The Groves of Academe*, a brilliant portrait of a Machiavellian academic, was supposed to raise the question, ''Where is the justice for an impossible person?'' And even *The Group*, that gossipy chronicle of eight Vassar women, was conceived as ''a history of the loss of faith in progress.''

It is an outlook common to many of McCarthy's heroines, and one suspects that their creator, too, shares this unwillingness to trust in fate—this desire to make sense of life through rules and definitions, this instinct to control disorder through intelligence and logic.

Michiko Kakutani (1987). ''Our Woman of Letters.'' In Carol Gelderman, ed. *Conversations with Mary McCarthy* (Jackson: Univ. Pr. of Mississippi, 1991), pp. 257–58, 265, 268

[*Intellectual Memoirs: New York 1936–1938*] . . . The pages about love and sex here are among the most candid, touching, and humorous McCarthy has written. . . .

Evident throughout the memoirs is the way literature permeated these lives and love lives. . . . Mary, recalling [Philip] Rahv in the last year of her life, says she still loves him ''vividly, as I write these lines.'' Love, or even the illusion of love, is always connected to writing. When she wrote a story about an affair, she did it ''to explain it to myself.'' Writing about Philip is what conveys to her that she did, and still does, love him.

Loving is here caused, sustained, and explained by literature: the other person's writing, one's own, or literature in general. Does this diminish love, reduce it to an *amour de tête*, not deep or transcendent? I don't think so. The memoirs make clear that love, which isn't mere infatuation, is always entwined with some kind of learning, and to men and women of letters writing, like reading, is learning. ''One of Philip's great charms,'' we are told, ''was that he truly loved to learn.''

John Simon. *The New Leader*. June 1, 1992, pp. 23–24

McCarthy, Elizabeth Hardwick writes in the introduction [to *Intellectual Memoirs: New York 1936–1938*] was obsessed with facts as a way to truth: facts were not relative to McCarthy but were father and mother absolute bodies of being. McCarthy did not believe that truth could accommodate sloppy or inaccurate reporting (possibly this is the essence of her quarrel with Hellman); hence she assumed that facts could lead to the inevitability of truth. This basic optimism of McCarthy, this faith in the faith that facts are discoverable in the nature of things, provided McCarthy with a strength to achieve her creative, intellectual triumphs. In this second volume of her memoirs, such faith allows her to see herself in many roles and to wonder, without regret, about the choices she made. Such faith makes a relativist tremble in envy, but it also shows that McCarthy, no matter how far she traveled intellectually, remained a Catholic in her pristine soul. She never lost faith in faith.

Martin Tucker. *Confrontation*. Fall, 1992, p. 360

When Gore Vidal called Mary McCarthy ''our most brilliant literary critic,'' he attributed this achievement to the fact that she was ''uncorrupted by compassion.'' A former student of McCarthy's believed her ''quite repelled by certain kinds of emotion.'' After all allowances have been made for cleverness, sharpness of observation, ambition, and frank sexiness, McCarthy remains condemned by the failure of that most belittled of human emotions: kindness. She exacted a rigidity of standards in her own life as in everyone else's, but as with her archenemy Lillian Hellman, it is the nastiness that lingers, a residual bad taste. . . .

McCarthy, whatever pity [Carol] Brightman felt for her as she lay dying, remains in this biography [*Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World*, 1992] a nasty woman of vaulting ambition, capable neither of compassion nor of revealing the hidden wound that made compassion forever impossible. It is unclear whether McCarthy wrote dangerously; it is evident that she lived dangerously, but, in the end, without any sense of lasting fruition and without peace.

Carolyn G. Heilbrun. *Women's Review of Books*. Jan., 1993, pp. 17–18

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MCCULLERS, Carson (1917–1967)

With subtlety and power, with suggestions and forthright statements, by means of well realized characters and revealing episodes, Mrs. McCullers circles her theme, coming closer and closer to its core, until she has encompassed and exposed its meaning. The task she set herself called for more than mere narrative skill, more than effective dramatic technique, and she has met its requirements with remarkable success. But narrative skill and dramatic episodes speed the reader on his way, while sudden, surprising insights illumine it. The author is never commonplace: used props, stock characters, and worn literary counters have no place in her writing.

Ben Ray Redman. *Saturday Review*. June 8, 1940. p. 6

Miss McCullers's picture of loneliness, death, accident, insanity, fear, mob violence and terror is perhaps the most desolate that has

so far come from the South. Her quality of despair is unique and individual; and it seems to me more natural and authentic than that of Faulkner. Her groping characters live in a world more completely lost than any Sherwood Anderson ever dreamed of. And she recounts incidents of death and attitudes of stoicism in sentences whose neutrality makes Hemingway's terse prose warm and partisan by comparison.

Richard Wright. *New Republic*. Aug. 5, 1940. p. 195

She is a suggestive rather than an eloquent writer, and often seems to present us less with a meaning than with a hint. And yet the lines of her work are clear and firm. . . . Though she has an acute observation, she does not use it to make rounded people. . . . Carson McCullers's work has always seemed to me to be a form of self-dramatization. . . . She does not dramatize herself in the sense that she is merely autobiographical; but she does dramatize herself in the sense that she seems to invest the various sides of her personality with attributes skilfully collected from the outside world.

George Dangerfield. *Saturday Review*. March 30, 1946. p. 15

Her gifts are limited—as Virginia Woolf's were limited, or Glenway Wescott's.

I do not mention these writers casually, or because I am unfamiliar with them. Like them both, Mrs. McCullers, though operating in a narrow field, ploughs deep furrows. Like them both, if I may pursue the metaphor, she engages in what Southerners used to call intensive cultivation. The trick about intensive cultivation . . . is that the earth runs sterile. Such, surely, was the fate of Mrs. Woolf and Mr. Wescott. Up to the moment Mrs. McCullers has not thus been cursed. She does not, of course, write the kind of gleaming, perfect prose Mrs. Woolf was capable of. But hers is beautifully fitted to her purposes, and that, I suppose, is what good writing means.

Francis Downing. *Commonweal*. May 24, 1946. p. 148

The art of Carson McCullers has been called ''Gothic.'' Perhaps it is—superficially. Certainly her day-to-day world, her little Southern towns, are haunted by far more masterful horrors than were ever conjured up in the dreary castles of a Horace Walpole. It seems to me, however, that the ''Gothic'' label misses the essential point. Because Carson McCullers is ultimately the artist functioning at the very loftiest symbolic level, and if one must look for labels, I should prefer to call her work ''metaphysical.'' Behind the strange and horrible in her world there are played out the most sombre tragedies of the human spirit; her mutes, her hunchbacks, speak of complexities and frustrations which are so native to man that they can only be recognized, perhaps, in the shock which comes from seeing them dressed in the robes of grotesques. They pass upon the street everyday but we only notice them when they drag a foot as they go by.

William P. Clancey. *Commonweal*. June 15, 1951. p. 243

The same fundamental pattern exists in all Mrs. McCullers's major prose works. The pattern is more elaborate in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* than elsewhere, but the beginnings of it are recognizable in her first novel and its evolution has occupied the whole of her literary career. It is a closed pattern, and one which many readers will view with a reluctance which is a measure of their suspicion that it is, after all, authentic. . . . But it is a pattern with a strange vision of life which Carson McCullers has attained in *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*; an eternal flaw exists in the machinery of love which alone has the power to liberate man from his fate of spiritual isolation.

Oliver Evans. *New World Writing 1*. April, 1952. p. 310

To say that Mrs. McCullers has a Gothic penchant is but to note, and note superficially, her interest in the grotesque, the freakish, and the incongruous. Such qualities, to be sure, exert a large influence on the contemporary imagination. There is another sense, however, in which the Gothic element may be defined more pertinently. The Gothic insists on spiritualization, the spiritualization of matter itself, and it insists on subjectivism. . . .

Protestant as the fundamentalist tradition of the South may be, and Gothic as its experience of guilt and tragedy is likely to appear, it is the peculiar stamp of subjectivism, wistful and bizarre, that emerges like a watermark on every page Mrs. McCullers has written.

Ihab Hassan. *Modern Fiction Studies*. Winter, 1959. pp. 312–13

She was an American legend from the beginning, which is to say that her fame was as much a creation of publicity as of talent. The publicity was the work of those fashion magazines where a dish of black-eyed peas can be made to seem the roe of some rare fish, photographed by Avedon; yet McCullers' dreaming androgynous face, looking out at us from glossy pages, in its ikon elegance subtly confounded the chic of the lingerie ads all about her.

Unlike too many other ''legends,'' her talent was as real as her face. Though she was progenitress to much ''Southern writing'' (one can name a dozen writers who would not exist in the way they do if she had not written in the way she did), she had a manner all her own. Her prose was chaste and severe and realistic in its working out of narrative. I suspect that of all the Southern writers, she is the most likely to endure, though her vision is by no means as large or encompassing as that, say, of Faulkner, whom she has the grace to resemble not at all.

Gore Vidal. *The Reporter*. Sept. 28, 1961. p. 50

For those who have indicted Mrs. McCullers and the whole school of Southern writers for their absorption in what often, for lack of anything better, is termed the ''morbid,'' there can be, of course, no answer. Recognizing what Tennessee Williams has called ''an underlying dreadfulness in modern experience,'' Mrs. McCullers elects to depict it in its own terms—terms sometimes fraught with an almost overpowering feeling of human suffocation in a world beyond control, yet terms ultimately successful through their very irresistible intensity.

In the labyrinth established for the McCullers characters, a world of ''no exit,'' man is caught up in the dizziness of life, is inextricably drawn toward a crisis in which he either recognizes himself or, failing this, is lost forever in frustration and despair. It is a world of either/or, in which there are few half-way measures,

where everything is viewed in nightmarish bold relief. Simultaneously unrealistic and yet supra-realistic, it is the unique and unforgettable world of Carson McCullers.

Catharine Hughes. *Commonweal*. Oct. 13, 1961. p. 75

In every case, whether the lover is grotesque or whether the grotesquerie is in the nature of his love (we remember that Frankie Addams has, in the words of Berenice, fallen ''in love with a wedding''), the result is not only suffering but violence. Singer kills himself. The Captain shoots Private Williams. And in the later works the violence persists. In *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, the climax is a horrifying wrestling-boxing match between Miss Amelia and Marvin Macy, after which Macy and the hunchback, Cousin Lymon, systematically destroy and violate everything. The concluding action of *Clock Without Hands* starts with the bombing of Sherman Pew's house and his death, events which are followed by the complete collapse of old Judge Clane as he tries to make a speech on the radio; after these bizarre details, the death from leukemia of J.T. Malone provides a quiet and pathetic ending. Indeed the novel is set within a framework of sickness and death which thus become the symbolic symptoms of the society (a punishment for the failure to recognize the existence of time and the necessity of change?).

Grotesque characters and lurid events are not all of Mrs. McCullers' stock-in-trade. She has, as well, a sense of form. In a curiously dead-pan style, she begins each of her longer works with an exact statement of what is going on.

Marvin Felheim in *Contemporary American Novelists*, ed. Harry T. Moore (Southern Illinois). 1964. pp. 49–50

The Member of the Wedding (1946) and *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951) represent the art of Carson McCullers at its finest. One cannot find in the history of the American novella more beautifully plotted pieces. . . .

Although it is on the authorship of her novellas that Mrs. McCullers' fame will primarily rest, *Clock without Hands* is a memorable book. It makes the mistake of dealing too currently with the segregation problem, so that a sense of newspaper headlines becomes mixed up oddly with the never quite real atmosphere of a McCullers novel, but it is still a vivid picture of the South in the throes of racial crisis.

Louis Auchincloss. *Pioneers and Caretakers* (Minnesota). 1965. pp. 165, 168.

In her best work, Mrs. McCullers has always been concerned with exploring what Hawthorne called the 'labyrinth of the human heart,' and what she has found therein has not always proved cause for rejoicing. What she conceives to be the truth about human nature is a melancholy truth: each man is surrounded by a 'zone of loneliness,' serving a life sentence of solitary confinement. The only way in which he can communicate with his fellow prisoners is through love: this affords him a certain measure of relief, but the relief is incomplete and temporary since love is seldom a completely mutual experience and is also subject to time. This view of life and love received its most pessimistic statement, of course, in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, which added the startling notion that the beloved 'fears and hates' the lover. A flaw thus exists in the very nature of love, and frustration is the lot of man.

Oliver Evans. *The Ballad of Carson McCullers* (Coward). 1966. pp. 192–3

In Mrs. McCullers' novels, the mothers of all young girls are either dead or so busy at work they seem not to exist for the children. In either case, the rival has been removed from the Oedipal triangle. The flight from sexuality which is a recurrent theme in Mrs. McCullers' fiction is the flight of the female from the phallus, a fear engendered by the young child's insecurity when abandoned by the protective mother. Mick Kelly of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, Frankie Addams of *The Member of the Wedding*, and Miss Amelia all feel mixed desire for and subconscious fear of their fathers. . . .

The Ballad of the Sad Café, revolves about antipodal action, interplay between the active and the passive participants, with normal characteristics of the male and female inverted. The one time that Lymon performs a positive act is when he leaps on Amelia's back to make her lose the fight she is waging with Macy. This entire scene is an inversion: the female wrestling with the male over the love of a beloved, also a male, who stands cowering in the corner like a Victorian heroine, pale and wan.

Robert S. Phillips. *Southwest Review*. Winter, 1966. pp. 82–3

In a recent survey, *Fiction of the Forties*, Chester Eisinger has traced the main flaw in *The Member of the Wedding* to ''its focus on the child's self-centered world in which the macrocosm plays no part.'' But this, I think, is precisely the source of its strength. Throughout this essay, I have argued that Mrs. McCullers is fundamentally a master of bright and melancholy moods, a lyricist not a philosopher, an observer of maimed characters not of contaminated cultures. That she writes best of uncomplicated people in fairly straightforward narrative forms is proven positively by *The Member of the Wedding* and ''The Ballad of the Sad Café.'' and negatively by the failure of her last full-length work of fiction. Published in 1961, after ten years of painful composition, *Clock without Hands* tries to link the existential crisis of a man doomed by cancer to the sociological crisis of the South poisoned by racial strife. But because Mrs. McCullers was ill and working against her natural grain, the novel is deficient both in psychological intuition and cultural analysis.

Lawrence Graver. *Carson McCullers* (Minnesota). 1969. p. 42

In Mrs. McCullers' writings, even when bodies are not freakish, souls are. Souls, she remarks, have colours and shapes like bodies. Indeed, these shapes are so marked that they give the impression of abnormality even in a normal body. Contradictions in the mind show in the body of Jake Blount [in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*] as though he were a man who had served a term in prison, lived for a long time with foreigners in South America, or gone to Harvard. Something was different from the usual. The great question here is whether fulfilment obtained at the expense of normality should be considered wrong. Should such fulfilment be allowed to bring happiness? The soul of man is small and grotesque. It seeks to love

its grotesque counterpart in the flesh. The flesh, however, does not recognize its soul and hates it.

What Mrs. McCullers is offering in this regard is a strange variant of neo-Platonism. In classical neo-Platonism beautiful soul cries out in longing to beautiful soul, finding its happiness in a union beyond the flesh as it reaches out to the bliss of the Transcendent Good. Mrs. McCullers' affirmation is that a Creator has formed an incomplete humanity, one that can only trust that there is sense in creation. Some good, rather than total good, is the meaning available for man.

Radiance, nevertheless, exists in the world and cannot be denied.

Alice Hamilton. *The Dalhousie Review*. Summer, 1970. p. 216

If the muse of isolation was for Carson McCullers inward-turning and at home only in the South of her childhood memories, it inspired her best writing with a rare sympathy for and insight into hidden suffering which, I think, represent the highest accomplishments of her fiction. For McCullers wrote of man's isolation with an understanding that was as compassionate as it was despairing. She spoke for people, who, in their trapped inwardness, could not speak for themselves, who loved without hope of being loved. Running throughout her works is the unstated conviction that no human being can in his inmost, truest self ever be really known, that he is doomed either to eternal loneliness or to compromise with the crass world outside. . . .

McCullers believed that only through the compassion and empathy of art could such vulnerable inwardness be freed and appreciated for the valuable and rare quality that it was. Her vision of human loneliness is a vision born of love. . . . McCullers possessed what most of her characters tragically lack, a double vision that enabled her to see the inside and the outside of people: a hopeless love for a departed friend beneath John Singer's deferential politeness, a sincere moral outrage beneath Jake Blount's loud talk and belligerent manner, an uncertainty of identity and terror of the future beneath Frankie's foolishness and irritability, and a desperate, lonely passion beneath Miss Amelia's masculine dress and crafty business practices. In her most successful works McCullers could, as she once claimed, ''become'' her characters, enter their lonely lives, the places where they lived. And without letting us lose sight of their awkward, sometimes frightening and often amusing outwardness, she let us see into their secret inwardness.

Richard M. Cook. *Carson McCullers*, (Ungar, 1975), pp. 126–28

McCullers's is . . . the definitive use of a specific emotional effect—a pathos that at once lends a strange atmosphere to landscape and character, and helps establish an intimate, unusually searching relationship between tale and reader. This is an impressive achievement—showing the kind of subtlety and even deviousness of intent we are perhaps more inclined to associate with more ''difficult'' fiction—and its very impressiveness has, I believe, led one or two of McCullers's critics into overestimating her. . . .

The very perfection of McCullers's work depends, after all, upon her own level-headed acceptance of her limitations. She knows that she can describe, quite subtly, one particular dilemma or area of life and she concentrates almost her entire resources on that. There is no place in her fiction . . . for the rich ''over-plus'' of experience—by which I mean any aspects of behavior that cannot be included under the heading of theme, or any dimensions of feeling that cannot be reconciled with the major effect of pathos. And recognizing this she demonstrates little interest in such matters as the historical and social context, and no commitment either to the idea of a developing consciousness. Her people walk around and around within the circle of their own personalities, their inner world of thought and desire hardly engaging with the outer world at all. They seldom change, except physically, they never reflect more than one aspect of our experience (admittedly, it is a significant one); and to inflate them, their world, or indeed their creator to a major status—to suppose, in fact, that McCullers's novels and short stories are any more important to the tradition than they genuinely are—is, I believe, to be guilty of what used to be called ''overkill.'' It is, in other words, to smother a quiet but effective talent by heaping upon it unearned and patently unacceptable praise.

As for McCullers's actual achievement, though, setting aside all such exaggeration, that surely is certain and secure. She is not a major writer. . . . But she is a very good minor one—so good, indeed, that she seems to reap a definite advantage from her minor status and turn her limitations into virtues.

Richard Gray. *The Literature of Memory* (Johns Hopkins Univ. Pr., 1977), pp. 272–73

Mrs. McCullers's fiction, in particular *The Member of the Wedding*, can speak to the adolescent reader in very intense fashion, for what it conveys is the frustration and pain of being more than a child and yet not an adult, with the agony of self-awareness and sense of isolation thereby involved. There is the shock of recognition—something of the same kind of reassurance through identification that books such as *Look Homeward*, *Angel* or *The Catcher in the Rye* have been known to provide. . . .

The McCullers fiction, I believe, has at its center a fundamental premise: which is, that solitude—loneliness—is a human constant, and cannot possibly be alleviated for very long at a time. But there is no philosophical acceptance of that condition, and none of the joy in it that one finds in, say, Thomas Wolfe or even Hemingway. The solitude is inevitable, and it is always painful. Thus life is a matter of living in pain, and art is the portraying of anguish. Occasionally, a character of hers knows happiness, but never for very long. . . .

Like certain other of her contemporaries, Carson McCullers, it seems to me, constructed her art out of the South, but not out of its history, its common myths, its public values and the failure to cherish them. What is Southern in her books are the rhythms, the sense of brooding loneliness in a place saturated with time. Compare *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* or *The Member of the Wedding* with, say, *Winesburg*, *Ohio*, and the relationship with the region is obvious. Sherwood Anderson's grotesques are more simple; a few clear, masterful sentences and we get their essential quality. Carson McCullers must show her misfits, whether spiritual or physical, in an extended context; there is plenty of time for everything. The Southern quality is unmistakable, in the unhurried fascination with surfaces, the preoccupation with the setting in which the characterization reveals itself. Character is not for McCullers, any more than for Eudora Welty or William Faulkner or Thomas Wolfe, an idea, but a state of awareness. To repeat, there

is plenty of time . . . and when the violence comes, as it so often does, it erupts in a place and a context, and it jars, queerly or terribly or both, the established and accustomed patterns. Before and after, there is lots of waiting, lots of time to think about everything.

Louis D. Rubin, Jr. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Spring, 1977, pp. 269–70, 281–82

Carson McCullers is not a realistic writer, yet in her best works she matches the documentary detail of social surface to a complex understructure of grotesque allegory drawn from the modernist tradition. She explains her method in the essay ''The Russian Realists and Southern Literature'' (1941), where she rejects the ''Gothic School'' as a ''tag'' for Southern writing and posits instead ''a peculiar and intense realism . . . a bold and outwardly callous juxtaposition of . . . the whole soul of man with materialistic detail.'' In *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, the allegorical structure, the complex solar system of grotesque ''lonely-hearts'' in complementary orbits, is perfectly balanced by an intensely realistic documentation of the social surface found in a Southern mill city during the depression. It is a prodigious fiction, and remains her finest effort.

Her second novel, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, was more directly influenced by modernist fiction, in particular, Isak Dinesen's *Seven Gothic Tales*. When viewed as an example of the modern Gothic, McCullers's tale of bizarre sexuality on a peacetime army base demonstrates versatility and artistic daring. This critically neglected second book seizes many of the grotesque aspects of the modern South and develops them as symbols of a more universal alienation. . . .

McCullers worked for over a decade on *Clock without Hands*, her last novel, in which she attempted a major social fiction, a realistic assessment of the postwar South. She intended it and *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* to stand as a pair of major Southern novels. Unfortunately, her declining creative power made successful completion impossible. The novel's weak characterization and stereotyped action, undoubtedly influenced by the author's long and debilitating illness, cannot create a structure strong enough to order the complicated changes that transformed the region in the days of integration. Carson McCullers died on September 29, 1967.

Born and reared in the Deep South, Carson McCullers came of literary age at the end of the most important decade in the history of Southern letters, and she extended the tradition by employing the modern South as setting in all of her major fictions. More importantly, she used the harsh symbolism of Southern life to re-create the universal failures and anxieties of the modern world. However, like many Southern writers, she developed an ambivalent attitude toward her native land; she cut herself off from the roots of her vision in the South, yet she never developed a replacement. Her achievement, however, still proves unique in the fiction of the Southern Renascence.

Joseph R. Millichap. ''Carson McCullers.'' *The History of Southern Literature*, Louis D. Rubin, Jr., ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1985), pp. 487–88

Memory plays very little part in the lives of Carson McCullers's heroines, and they live in a world practically devoid of traditional Southern femininity. They are contemporaries of Virgie Ramey and Laurel Hand, yet they inhabit a flat present bereft of myth, history, or even family traditions. Surrounded by the tawdry everyday life of modern Southern towns, they seem to exist in a void, alienated from the few models of femininity available to them. The only warmth provided by women comes from Negro cooks. Mick Kelly's mother rarely appears in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, and then only to issue impatient or dispirited orders about Mick's baby-sitting chores or the management of the family's boardinghouse. She is a scarcely believable stick figure by comparison with the vivid presence of Portia. The cook's vigorous and compassionate views of the world provide the only adult guidance for Mick and her little brothers, yet Portia is more like a practical older sister or aunt for Mick than a mother. The real maternal figure in the novel is the androgynous café keeper Biff Brannon, but Mick shies away from his solicitations. In *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, Miss Amelia Evans has been reared motherless and has lost even her father long before the action of the novella begins. Frankie Addams of *The Member of the Wedding* knows her mother only as a timid and sad-looking picture shut up under the handkerchiefs in her father's bureau drawer. Bernice the cook is the wise black mammy figure who has reared the motherless child, but her race prohibits Frankie from following her example as a woman. Without mothers, these feminine protagonists define themselves most comfortably in masculine terms. The crisis for each of them comes as social pressures force them to abandon masculine independence and accept a feminine identity increasingly fraught with anxiety as McCullers progresses in her exploration of the problem from novel to novel. . . .

Ambitions are the psychological equivalents for the physical assertiveness of the tomboy, and again the requirements of submissiveness and restraint for the Southern lady have traditionally discouraged the pursuit of professional, artistic, or political goals. . . .

This conflict between serious ambition and the pressure of conventional femininity is exactly the problem that confronts Mick Kelly and Frankie Addams in Carson McCullers's fiction. McCullers's portrayal of their dilemma is especially valuable because she concentrates on puberty, the time when demands for ''femininity'' first press in upon a girl, and she allows her protagonists to be more sharply aware of their choices than Plath allows Esther Greenwood to be. Esther is paralyzed because she cannot even look at the contrary impulses within herself. She tries to escape them by blotting herself out, in a sense accepting the verdict implied by *Mademoiselle*'s refusal to acknowledge her identity as a serious writer. Mick and Frankie have the immense advantage of tomboy self-reliance and a habit of scrappy assertiveness. Their passage into womanhood may be acutely painful, but at least childhood experience helps them to confront their confusion head-on. Through Mick and Frankie, McCullers provides an unusually perceptive treatment of the problem which warps so many gifted women's lives, but between them she makes the grotesque experiment of picturing a tomboy who refuses to acknowledge it.

Louise Hutchings Westling. *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Pr., 1985), pp. 110–11, 113, 115

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of the Wedding, 1950 (d); *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, 1951 (s); *The Square Root of Wonderful*, 1958 (d); *Clock without Hands*, 1961 (n); *The Mortgaged Heart: The Previously Uncollected Writings of Carson McCullers*, 1971 (misc); *Collected Stories*, 1987

MCGINLEY, Phyllis (1905–1978)

If you read *The New Yorker*, you know the verse of Phyllis McGinley; and yet, at that, you can't quite appreciate how attractive it is all gathered together [in *On the Contrary*], supplemented by a few graver grace notes. We will not compare Miss McGinley to Mrs. Dorothy Parker, which is the obvious and misleading thing to do. Miss McGinley is clever and cool and ''hep'' to most of life, but she has a personality of her own that transpires to the reader. . . . Some of her best ballads have an infectious rhythm, and always her rhyming is good. For a Westerner, born in Oregon, brought up in Colorado, sent to school in Utah, she is singularly metropolitan.

William Rose Benét. *Saturday Review*. March 16, 1935. p. 558

Well, that for the prose. Miss McGinley the Terse, With some gin in her name, 's not awry in her verse.

Golly, *no*; she belongs with the best o' the daft Who are licensed to practise the darlingest craft.

Her songs are New York, and her pen the *New Yorker's*, And most of the crop she's collected are corkers.

She's urban-suburban, resilient as Rahway, And yet (says the jacket) she comes from Utah-way! No matter: she reads like a lady who's schooled By traditional masculine verse—but not ruled.

And who cares for the source? Still, I'll crack her a Filbert For some of the good that she got out of Gilbert, For some of the slyness—but don't let it trouble you—After that Talk-of-the-Town E.B.W.

Phyllis McGinley, you've made such a name for Yourself that I'll bet you will reach what you aim for.

My critique—I'm signing these couplets for such: The danger to all good light verse is too much.

David McCord. *Atlantic Monthly*. Feb., 1938. n.p.

With her second collection, *A Pocketful of Wry*, Phyllis McGinley tops the estimable number of our light versifiers from the point of view of both substance and craftsmanship—and that is no small accomplishment. . . . No light-versifier, not even Ogden Nash, so tempts a delighted reviewer to go on quoting indefinitely. But devotees of Phyllis McGinley don't need quotes—they've already done their own quoting. And if there is that rare reader who doesn't already know her sparkling work, it's his bounden cultural duty to read *A Pocketful of Wry* without delay.

Ruth Lechlitner. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Dec. 8, 1940. p. 28

In an essay opening her sixth book of poems *A Short Walk from the Station* Phyllis McGinley reveals that ''for the best eleven years of my life I have lived in Suburbia and I like it.'' How much longer she will be allowed to keep her membership in the Order of Sappho is questionable. She doesn't suffer from unrequited love, frustration or any other kind of pain of the ego. In fact, it's hard to understand what drives her to write verses at all—except that she sees the droll truths of ordinary life and has a wonderfully witty way of stating them.

Harry Gilroy. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 18, 1951. p. 6

The news today is that Phyllis McGinley has done it again—just as she has been doing it again and again in the columns of *The New Yorker*, ''in which the majority of these poems originally appeared,'' and in other periodicals less fortunate. It's arrived, the 1954 McGinley, that is: *The Love Letters of Phyllis McGinley*—and what a disarming title that is!—the most recent light verse, mostly *con amore*, of the lady whom one has long suspected of being the most dependable practitioner in the field, at least on the distaff side, now that Dorothy Parker has gone out of print. (We men still have our occasional Ogden Nash.) How long this has been so one hadn't realized until now: for, unless my arithmetic is slipping, by actual count this is the *seventh* McGinley collection.

Gerard Previn Meyer. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 18, 1954. p. 11

Among the younger poets who are rapidly reaching a major status is Phyllis McGinley. She never writes less well than her best, and this [*The Love Letters of Phyllis McGinley*] is her seventh book. In each she has combined a frivolous manner with serious intent. She is utterly feminine, in that she conceals both her profound talent and her deep concern under a felicity of phrase as light as puff-pastry. Caroline Tate has said that the only thing that matters about a woman's education is that it should be surreptitious, and one of the peculiar talents of Phyllis McGinley is to give a perfect (and perfectly correct) impression of complete fulfillment as a woman. Here is someone who enjoys her daughters, her petticoats, her prettiness—while yet conveying, to all who read between the lines, the ''divine discontent,'' the profound, inner dissatisfaction that is the trademark of the proper poet.

Anne Fremantle. *Commonweal*. Oct. 22, 1954. p. 69

Without knowing who wrote them, I could recognize the genre of English Poetry to which such lines belong, and name some of the masters in it—Hood, Praed, Calverly, Belloc, Chesterton. But when, instead of looking at their style and technique, I think of writers with a comparable kind of sensibility, a similar cast of imagination, the names that come to mind have either, like Jane Austen, Colette, and Virginia Woolf, written in prose, or, like Laura Riding and Marianne Moore, written poetry in a totally different style. What, in fact, distinguishes Phyllis McGinley's poems from those of most light-verse poets is that no man could have written them. . . . the feminine imagination accepts facts and is coolly realistic. There are certain resemblances between the lines from ''June in the Suburbs'' which I quoted on page ix and the

poetry of John Betjeman, but what makes it impossible that Mr. Betjeman could have written them is their total lack of nostalgia.

W.H. Auden. Introduction to *Times Three* by Phyllis McGinley (Viking). 1960. pp. ix, xii

Before McGinley, love and art were the proper (and almost only) subjects of à la mode light verse. Miss McGinley is famous for adding suburbia to the list, and I can't quite make up my mind how I feel about it. . . . Miss McGinley occasionally sounds more complacent than content, diametrically opposed states, if one stops to think about it. . . .

Her variety, her usual (but alas, not invariable) explicitness of observation, her humanity, are a tradition in themselves. Certainly it is true that she is, within her tradition, an important poet, and she writes as wisely and sadly of youth and old age as anyone since Cicero, perhaps. . . . The important, the most endearing function of this type of verse is to teach us to wear our rue with a difference. In her series on the saints, Phyllis McGinley does this most felicitously, making an object lesson of faults which would have been unforgivable, had they not been obliterated by love. . . .

Bette Richart. *Commonweal*. Dec. 9, 1960. pp. 278–9

In the Fifties the gaiety is somewhat less; form assumes a new importance, satire is sharper. There has been (I am sure) more revision. A consistory of saints and reformers explains dialectically a side of Miss McGinley we have scarcely seen before. But if the Fifties produced only ''The Doll House,'' ''Portrait of Girl with Comic Book,'' and ''In Praise of Diversity,'' this volume *Times Three* would be fulfilled. For it is not the feminine banter and wordplay in which she is unrivaled that concern me here. It is her eloquent moments, her compassion, her intuition, her ability to pare the world's wormy apply with a razor blade, the new dimension that a word takes on in Miss McGinley's turn of phrase. . . . This is the poetry of delight that she has kept and would keep alive.

David McCord. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 10, 1960. p. 32

Her latest prose work, a collection of autobiographic essays called *Sixpence in Her Shoe*, is a tour de force among just-like-me books. For, in fact, there is little resemblance between Miss McGinley and her readers. Unlike them, she is a gifted writer of light verse, a winner of Pulitzer Prizes and honorary degrees. However, she is at the same time a consecrated suburban housewife and the wife of Charles L. Hayden, a telephone-company executive.

In this memoir Mrs. Hayden belittles the triumphs of Phyllis McGinley. Since women are primarily ''nesters,'' woe to those who stray from the hearth to ''moonlight'' in jobs or professions. Reluctant absolution is given the minority impelled by economic need or afflicted by talent. But Mrs. Hayden leaves no doubt about where she stands as she rues the ''tea parties, matinees, manicures, and other small feminine pleasures'' Miss McGinley has sacrificed for the fleeting joy of ''seeing one's name on a book spine.''

Marion K. Sanders. *Harper's Magazine* Nov., 1964. p. 149

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MCGRATH, Thomas (1916–1990)

His father was sympathetic to the Wobblies, and the Roman Catholicism of [Thomas] McGrath's youth was easily translated into radical politics, reading some Marx in high school, then joining the Communist Party in college. But he had also been trying to write poetry for years before encountering his first modern poets as a high school senior. . . .

Through college on his own, he pursued the moderns further, reading their books instead of samples. . . . Hardly standard fare for a farm boy, a reflection of McGrath's superior intellect and self-taught sophistication—and subsequent cause for much friction between him and party hacks unable to abide any literature not reduced to simplistic ideological formulas. In later years and to his great credit, McGrath developed a distinction between ''tactical'' and ''strategic'' poetry, the former a necessary but biodegradable version of propaganda as compared to strategic verse's equally essential, more traditional use of contradictory material to ''expand human consciousness.''. . .

The profile of the poet that emerges [from Gibbon and Des Pres, eds., *Thomas McGrath: Life and the Poems*, 1992] aided by Roland Flint's and Philip Levine's brief memoirs, limns a heroic, if incomplete figure, an artist and teacher who stayed true to his political ideals through decades of harassment, blacklisting, and critical neglect without ever sacrificing intellectual independence.

The ''incomplete'' element relates to the biographical side of the subtitle's scale. Despite McGrath's extensive testimony and the commentary of colleagues and amiable critics, there surfaces no sense of a domestic life, no references, for instance, to mates or sexual entanglements, [which] other sources indicate that he wed. To be sure, this could be mere shyness, decorum, a professional's need for privacy, but it intimates that McGrath might have been another manchild somehow stunted by nature or nurture. The matter is important only because it helps explain a serious gap in the work as well.

Edward Butscher. ''West of the Mississippi.'' *Poet Lore*. Winter, 1992, pp. 59–60

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Double World, 1955 (p); *The Gates of Ivory*, *The Gates of Horn*, 1957 (n); *About Clouds*, 1959 (juv); *The Beautiful Things*, 1960 (juv); *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, 1962 (p); *New and Selected Poems*, 1962; *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, *Parts I and II*, 1970 (p); *The Movie at the End of the World: Collected Poems*, 1973; with others, ed. John Judson, *Voyages to the Inland Sea III*, 1973 (p); *A Sound of One Hand*, 1975 (p); *Letters to Tomasito*, 1977 (p); *Open Songs: Sixty Short Poems*, 1977; *Trinc: Parises II*, 1979 (p); *Waiting for the Angel*, 1979 (p); *Passages toward the Dark*, 1982 (p); *Echoes inside the Labryinth*, 1983 (p); *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, *Parts 3 and 4*, 1985 (p); *This Coffin Has No Handles*, 1988 (n); *Selected Poems 1938–1988*, ed. Sam Hamill, 1988; *Death Song*, ed. Sam Hamill, 1991 (p)

MCGUANE, Thomas (1939–)

A sense of dizziness, of speed, of a peculiarly cerebral combination of drollery and sadism will carry the reader some distance in *The Sporting Club*. An accelerating plot and apparently straight passages of troutfishing will carry some readers a further distance. . . .

Thomas McGuane has a sprightly, knowing ear for dialogue, and an eye for the ''absurd,'' and a light, fashionably cool touch that tires us only occasionally, and an obvious intelligence that has plotted all this out, crazy pranks and jokes and all, with vigor and enthusiasm. And it is always possible that we are to take the destruction of the Club (and even the scandalous revelation of its founding members' depravities) as a moral act. Quinn asks Stanton: ''Just tell me why you're going after everybody.'' Stanton replies: ''Because I hate it all.''

The hatred is hard to take seriously, but the comedy is engrossing and at times ingenious. Thomas McGuane is, at 28, that notorious and difficult creature—a writer of promise.

Joyce Carol Oates. *New York Times Book Section*. March 23, 1969. p. 5

Taking America apart is a game that the Americans themselves are accustomed to play with quite as much gusto as any critical observer from outside. . . . Mr. McGuane's [*The Sporting Club*] is set in the lush hunting-grounds of the Centennial Club, where trout and grouse and deer fatten themselves for the rods and guns of relaxing tycoons and back-to-nature enthusiasts. The Club has its mystique. As the hacking-jacketed ex-president Fortescue says: ''There are still some of us alive for whom life in the forest means a return to older virtues, not just a vacation.'' Pomposities ripe for puncturing cluster round, and the puncturing instrument is Mr. McGuane's hero, the half-mad, idle-rich, pistol-collecting, duel-provoking, buttocks-baring and totally anarchic Stanton. . . .

The alarming and violent fun of the book makes it very much a document for the Sixties, and although its target was not, perhaps, too hard to hit, it shows imaginative verve in its action, and the bouts of near-absurdist comedy are nicely interspersed with sketches of the natural background, the ''warm and creaky'' night, the ''raccoons rinsing mussels.''

Edwin Morgan. *The Listener*. Dec. 4, 1969. pp. 799–800

Put simply, McGuane has a talent of Faulknerian potential. His sheer writing skill is nothing short of amazing. The preternatural force, grace, and self-control of his prose recall Faulkner. He is as assured in elegantly elaborate description as in the outrageously bawdy comedy first revealed in *The Sporting Club*, an account of the rich at play in the Michigan wilds, and now come to full bloom in *The Bushwacked Piano*, the saga of a young man at large in an America wallowing in its own vulgarity. At 31, McGuane is a virtuoso.

His intelligence is as great as his style. His persistent thematic concern is the defilement of America, land and people alike, the advent of what he calls ''a declining snivelization.'' This is no easy bow to ecological or political fashion. In his exploration of man and nature he is solidly within American literary tradition; his depiction of man's encroachment upon the land is as eloquent in its way as Faulkner's, in ''Delta Autumn'' and ''The Bear.''

Jonathan Yardley. *New York Times Book Section*. March 14, 1971. p. 6

Nicolas Payne [in *The Bushwacked Piano*] is a young man who refuses to be, unlike D.H. Lawrence, ''at one'' with things. He fights against life's Waring Blender, and lives constantly under its ''awful shadow.'' Payne is a young man with awful problems and when Ann, his girl-friend, tells him, ''It's all in your head,'' it's the kind of information that he knows can't help anyone. Payne sometimes goes around ''for no reason'' on crutches. He sometimes hears nonexistent dogs, he never knows their number. He would like to become a legend. He carries a pistol for warmth and believes in ''horses that will not allow themselves to be ridden, '' terror, fraud and God who's smart as a whip. He reviews his options every day and when he longs for the life inside the Waring Blender, and he does sometimes, he does not carry a pistol, and tries not to limp. What he wants out of life is something as impressive as fun. . . . *The Bushwhacked Piano* is gorgeously written, sad and terribly funny, and says a lot about love and violence in America in this, the so-called Twentieth Century.

Jane Richmond. *Partisan Review*. Fall, 1972. pp. 627–8

Thomas McGuane is one of our best young novelists, and it's cheering to watch him approach his apogee. From the beginning, he has seemed the heir apparent of two interlocking schools: in his conscious concern with aspects of American virility, as in his tool-like, purpose built prose, he is a more modern, more ironic Hemingway; in his eye and ear for the perversions of American life and (hence) language, he is the successor, in narrative and dialogue, of Twain and Lardner and Richard Bissell. . . .

Ninety-two in the Shade is a short, tight, dense tale of the classic American confrontation between waste of time, waste of life, and death, on the one hand, and sublime mastery of a talent, gift, skill, or trade, on the other. In short, the subject is the heights and depths of human possibilities. . . .

The book is a black comedy that has the grinding inevitability of tragedy.

L.E. Sissman. *New Yorker*. June 23, 1973. pp. 88–9

In a completely deadened world there *is* an excitement, as [McGuane's hero] Skelton finds, in the thought that somebody wants to kill you. In a totally meaningless and unnatural world there is a moral beauty in following your instincts, even if your instincts issue instructions to kill or be killed. At the same time, all killing is clearly senseless, a stupid trap for both you and your victim, and that is why we have to see the humor of murder. It is cruelly funny, because the joke is on both of you, and no one is left to laugh. These are the thoughts, though, it seems to me, of a culture absolutely at the end of its tether, and the ironic, defeated moral of *Ninety-two in the Shade* belongs with them. . . .

The book is a flippant, lucid, somber American allegory, and between the bleak, neat deaths of two men and the slow anarchic slither into lifelessness of the rest of the country, there is only the alert, breezy talent of the allegory's author. . . . McGuane mobilizes all these meanings with such verve and intelligence that the end of America can't really be as nigh as his book suggests it is.

Michael Wood. *New York Review of Books*. Dec. 13, 1973. p. 20

McGuane's novel [*Ninety-two in the Shade*] is set in the river running heart of America, in that vague and pulpy geography of marshes, inlets and creeks. It is here that Nichol Dance, a Caliban in Ariel's clothing, and a cold sole known as Carter ply their skiffs, for the benefit of visiting fishermen. Into their icthyolatrous womb sinks Tom Skelton, a young man who has at last escaped from life and is looking for the real thing among what Americans call ''nature.'' He too, takes up with a skiff, but you cannot go very far or very fast in an Ameridiluvian swamp and *Ninety-two in the Shade* describes that overwhelming sense of place which invades someone who cannot move. . . . *Ninety-two in the Shade* is full of small, bright objects leaning slightly to one side, and they wink all the fiercer in a setting sun. It is a funny and talented novel.

Peter Ackroyd. *Spectator*. July 13, 1974. pp. 52, 54

Despite the fact that he makes his home in the wide expanse of Montana, McGuane's hero, Frank Copenhaver [in *Nothing but Blue Skies*] somehow manages to box himself into a corner. A former hippie turned real estate mogul who has fallen upon hard times, Copenhaver feels the urge for introspection as his life falls into ruin. His wife has left him, his financial empire teeters on the brink of collapse, and his college-age daughter has taken up with a right-wing water-rights advocate more than twice her age. . . .

Wracked with emotion over his financial excesses and family problems, Copenhaver launches into a raucous midlife crisis. . . . Copenhaver's angst and self-serving malaise would become tiresome quickly, but McGuane manages to temper the excesses of his hedonistic, hard-drinking hero with enough humor to make him both compelling and genuine from start to finish.

Miss R. Spring, 1993, p. 207

Nothing but Blue Skies, Thomas McGuane's new novel, offers a provocative and sweeping vision of the post-Reagan West, a landscape blighted by environmental, economic, and spiritual frailties. Through his depiction of Frank Copenhaver, the book's central character, McGuane seems intent on nothing less than a reexamination of the myth of the American West. McGuane skillfully manipulates the conventional iconography, employing a disturbingly complete set of traditional western images: this is a book about land and livestock speculation, about fly-fishing and Montana rivers, about barroom brawls, about male camaraderie, about selling the family ranch—in short, about all forms of western cultural inheritance. . . .

McGuane's cultural critique is superb, but in reaching this level he leaves behind a narrative that is not entirely satisfactory. When reading McGuane, perhaps the dean of contemporary Montana writing, one expects a great deal: the biting wit, the incisive commentary, the outrageous climax, the lyrical reflection. While McGuane's signature stylistic movements are felt in *Nothing but Blue Skies*, here they are only occasionally devastating, and too often the anticipated peaks don't pay off (including a disappointing father-daughter fishing scene, and a silly pig-riding episode). The periodic moments of rhetorical brilliance and wicked humor leave the rest of the book sounding somewhat flat.

Nathaniel Lewis. *Western American Literature*. November, 1993, pp. 283–84

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MCINERNEY, Jay (1955–)

If the fact of [Jay] McInerney's fame acts as a corrective/model to his fiction, his first novel. *Bright Lights, Big City*, investigates the relationship between these two elements. Its anonymous hero is a part-time cocaine freak, depressed about the recent separation from his wife, nominally hanging onto a job verifying facts for a prestigious fashion/arts magazine. True to the spirit of the semiautobiographical first novel, he also aches to be a writer. . . . From this brief precis, it may be easy to see how some critics were able to dismiss the book as a kind of yuppie Bildungsroman—full of tortured self-searching and struggling-writer romance. Yet what is missed by this reaction is the context in which McInerney locates the role of writing, and the way in which he dissolves the oppositions between fact and fiction. His early comment, that, ''In fact, you don't want to be in Fact. You'd much rather be in Fiction,'' [in *Bright Lights, Big City*], ironically presents its hero being suspended between the two. The usual distinction between concrete immutable fact and the less solid, more fanciful area of creative output is here presented as a question of preference, a choice of genres. . . .

What McInerney continually teases out of his novel is the sense that American fiction simply cannot keep up with the reality that surrounds it, and that writing must therefore serve the function of self-preservation rather than description or mere escapism. In effect McInerney builds *into* his novel the misgivings that other writers have expressed *about* the novel. . . .

This sense of depending upon narrative yet inevitably being betrayed by it is analogous to McInerney's presentation of his protagonists' relationship to their parents. They seek out meaning through their families as well as through fiction, yet end up being at one remove from both. The narrator of *Bright Lights, Big City* constantly creates himself in the image of adolescence, and is as uncertain about his writing as the schoolboy is about his homework. . . .

What McInerney offers then is not some religious rebirth (bread as transcendental symbol), but the necessity of psychoanalytic reworking (bread as emotional recall)—a process of working *through* problems rather than any simplistic absolution *from* them. The critic Duncan Webster has drawn parallels between vision of uncertainty and the malign arbitrariness of America's ''Dirty Realists.''. . .

In the fictional world of McInerney, the point at which our personal histories (via the family) interconnect with our public selves (within society) is the very point at which this instability is created. The past is not seen as a refuge or retreat, but is rather presented as dictating the ebb and flow of the present. . . .

By calling into question the connection between what we are escaping *from* and what we are escaping *into*, McInerney problematizes the very genre that he describes [as] ''the exploration of the individual psyche in a relatively domestic context.'' *Bright Lights, Big City*, with its insistence on how the individual self is constructed through the other (be that family or fiction), suggests the impossibility of separating the psyche from its domestic context. Whoever and wherever we *are* can only be negotiated through the people and the places we have come *from*. Hunter S. Thompson has to a ''Generation of Swine.'' McInerney replaces this with a generation of orphans—illegitimate, decentered, irrepressibly nomadic.

This sense of abandoned aimlessness and the subsequent desire for spiritual depth both find themselves confronted in McInerney's second novel, *Ransom*. . . .

Jay McInerney may well be heralded as the chronicler of how the blank generation achieves maturity, yet the cutting edge of his fiction resides in its suggestion that such a process is one which cannot help but fail to satisfy. *Brightness Falls* [his third novel] is undoubtedly his most accomplished work to date, but its accomplishment is to be found in its recognition that the novel will always, to some extent, have *to be continued*.

> Graham Caveney. ''Psychodrama: Qu'est-ce c'est?'' In Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney, eds. *Shopping in Space: Essays on America's Blank Generation Fiction* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1992), pp. 47–48, 54–55, 74

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel about the label you've sometimes been stuck with as a ''spokesman for a generation''?

MCINERNEY: I think it's sort of a dirty job. I don't believe that I'm a spokesman for a generation. I don't speak for black kids growing up in housing projects much. I worry about my generation. In terms of being a spokesman, I don't feel like I have any great leadership potential here. I don't have a program to espouse particularly. So far as I spoke for a generation in my first book, it was a little shocking to me the way that to some extent it was interpreted as a bible for behavior instead of just a novel. I certainly didn't want to encourage people to go out and snort drugs. On the other hand, maybe the character in that book was somewhat representative of the moment and a cultural phenomenon.

INTERVIEWER: Reviewers have noted an added social or political dimension to your latest novel. What do you see as the change in consciousness from *Bright Lights, Big City* to *Brightness Falls* in terms of larger social issues?

MCINERNEY: I guess I do think that there is a change in that direction. I'm much more interested in social issues than I used to be. When I say I don't necessarily speak for black people my age in housing projects it doesn't mean I wouldn't like to, it means I wouldn't presume to. In *Bright Lights* I was really writing on a more personal scale. I was writing a psychological novel in which the general culture was implied. It wasn't drawn in great detail, the foreground was always the single individual and that's true about my first three books.

In my new book I did want to do more. I did want to step back and say something about the society, the culture, the economy in a more direct way. . . . In recent years, American writers have kind of turned away from examining society at large. I wanted to take on more of the world that I lived in. I wanted to find a way to fictionally address some of the things I was observing in the eighties in New York, the incredible polarity of wealth and poverty on this one little island, sort of a microcosm of what was happening in the country as a whole, only more extreme and accelerated. If I could be a spokesman for my generation I'd like to think that in the nineties people my age are going to start gaining a little political consciousness. . . . The eighties was such a period of individual gratification and self-absorption and selfishness on the part of the average person my age. The bigger scale of the new book represents my dissatisfaction with all that. . . .

INTERVIEWER: [Thomas] Pynchon defined sophistication as one's attitude, one's seriousness in thinking about death. Your new novel tries to deal with death seriously.

MCINERNEY: At this age one sees one's possibilities narrow, parents start to die. And there's AIDS.

INTERVIEWER: The characters don't even want to name the disease in the book.

MCINERNEY: Everyone's creeping around it and when someone dies of AIDS it's not really even directly referred to.

INTERVIEWER: Does this approach come from your personal experience? What were you thinking?

MCINERNEY: I didn't want to hit it over the head. The character of Jeff Pierce might have died of a drug overdose. He was someone who had a romance with death, with self-destruction, and AIDS was the way that he happened to die. . . . There is a kind of denial in the middle class, the predominantly heterosexual middle class. . . . A lot of people in the book are in a state of denial about this epidemic. That's one of the ghosts that sort of haunts the book.

> Stephen Beachy. ''Interview with Jay McInerney.'' *San Francisco Review of Books*. Fall, 1992, pp. 28–29, 30

Meet Corinne and Russell (''Crash'') Calloway, a successful young New York couple. She's a stock broker; he works for a publishing company. That is, until he decides to buy the company with borrowed money—a scheme entirely plausible in the greed-is-good, junk-bond financed 1980s. From that point on he is surrounded by people whose lives come down to a single proposition: You win or you lose.

The novel's characters are strikingly similar to those in Tom Wolfe's portrait of the decade of decadence, *Bonfire of the Vanities*: black firebrand, arrogant financier, anoretic socialite, and

voluptuous mistress, but the tone is less slick and knowing than Wolfe's, more like Fitzgerald's in his novels of lost innocence.

Brightness Falls is billed as a satire, and its portraits of writers and financiers are devastating. As for the main characters, however, McInerney can't quite decide whether they are figures of fun or objects of envy.

Miss R. Fall, 1993, p. 214

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MCKAY, Claude (1889–1948)

The most significant accomplishment among . . . recent poems are two sonnets signed by ''Eli Edwards'' which appeared in *The Seven Arts* for last October. ''Eli Edwards,'' I understand, is the pseudonym of Claude McKay, who lives in New York City, choosing to conceal his identity as a poet from the associates among whom he works for his daily bread. His story as it is . . . is full of alluring interest, and may one day be vividly featured as a topic of historic literary importance. For he may well be the keystone of the new movement in racial poetic achievement. . . .

Here [in ''The Harlem Dancer''], indeed, is the genuine gift—a vision that evokes from the confusing details of experience and brings into the picture the image in all its completeness of outline and its gradation of color, and rendered with that precise surety of form possessed by the resourceful artist. The power in this poet is, I think, his ability to reproduce a hectic scene of reality with all the solid accessories, as in ''The Harlem Dancer,'' and yet make it float as it were upon a background of illusion through which comes piercing the glowing sense of a spiritual mystery. Note the exalted close of Mr. Edward's riotous picture of the dancer when

> . . . looking at her falsely-smiling face,
> I knew herself was not in that strange place—

he translates the significance of the intoxicated figure with its sensuous contagion into something ultimate behind the ''falsely-smiling face,'' where ''herself''—be it the innocent memory of childhood, perhaps of some pursuing dream of a brief happiness in love, or a far-away country home which her corybantic earnings secures in peace and comfort for the aged days of her parents—is inviolably wrapped in the innocence and beauty of her dreams. This sonnet differs in both visionary and artistic power from anything so far produced by the poets of the race. The visual quality here possessed is extraordinary; not only does Mr. Edwards evoke his images with a clear and decisive imagination, but he throws at the same time upon the object the rich and warm colors of his emotional sympathies. . . .

William Stanley Braithwaite. *The Crisis*. April, 1919, pp. 275–80.

Home to Harlem is a book to invoke pity and terror, which is the function of tragedy, and to that extent—that very great extent—it is beautiful. It is hard to convey to the reader the impression this novel leaves upon the mind, just as it is hard to convey the impression that a blues-song leaves upon the mind. One reads, one hears and the heart is touched.

Out of his individual pain, Claude McKay, the poet, has fashioned his lyrics; and out of his impersonal sorrow he has written a fine novel. *Home to Harlem* is a story involving the lives led by the lost generation of colored folk in the teeming Negro metropolis north of One Hundred and Tenth Street, New York. It is a story not of the successful Negroes who have done well in the trades and professions and have built themselves homes, sent their children to school, and engaged in civil and social pursuits of a sober and respectable nature: it is the story of the serving class—longshoremen and roustabouts, house-maids and Pullman porters, waiters and wash-room attendants, cooks and scullery maids, ''dime-snatchers'', and all those who compensate for defeat in life in a white man's world by a savage intensity among themselves at night.

Most of the scenes of *Home to Harlem* are in the cabarets and gin-mills where jazz bands stir the blood to lust in an atmosphere as orgiastic as a pagan Saturnalia. But there are scenes, too, on railroads dining-cars where cooks and waiters have scant respect for Pullman porters and feuds are carried on between chef and pantry-man. And there are scenes in buffet flats and in the barrack quarters for railroad employees in Pittsburgh and in the small rooms for which a steep rent is paid in over-congested Harlem.

Home to Harlem, is not a novel in the conventional sense. The only conflict in the mind of Jake, the hero, is as to whether he will keep on working at whatever insecure, underpaid drudgery he can find to do on the docks, in the stoke-hole of a steamer and in dining-cars or turn his handsome body and good looks into the shameful asset of a ''sweet-man'', kept in luxury on the earnings of a woman. The only conflict of wills engaged in by the hero is when he takes a girl away from his former buddy, and anger and hate flare into being, with drawn gun and open razor. When the book closes and he is going away to Chicago with the girl to start life anew, he is the same wondering, indecisive being he was in the beginning, who ''preferred the white folks' hatred to their friendly contempt'' and found a sinister satisfaction in the fact that the white man is too effete to know the sensual pleasures of the blacks.

The language of *Home to Harlem*, whether Mr. McKay is setting forth dialogue in a perfect transcription of Negro slang and dialect or is telling his story in the Negro idiom, is a constant joy. A big black buck ''lazied'' down the street; another chap is ''sissified''; Aunt Hattie remarks concerning some imported liquor offered her, ''Ef youse always so eye-filling drinking it, it might ginger up mah bones some'', and a sadistic yellow-brown girl inciting her new lover to attack her former lover cries ''Hit him, Obadiah! Hit him I tell you. Beat his mug up for him, beat his mug and bleed his mouf! Bleed his mouf! Two-faced yaller nigger, you does ebery low-down thing, but you nevah done a lick of work in you lifetime. Show him, Obadiah. Beat his face and bleed his mouf''

Mr. McKay is not at all solicitous toward his reader. He makes no case, he pleads no cause, he asks no extenuation, and he doesn't explain his idiomatic phrases. There is no glossary at the end of the book as there was to Carl Van Venchten's *Nigger Heaven*; and the

unsophisticated happily will read whole pages of this novel depicting the utmost moral degradation without ever knowing what it is about. And this is just as well. (p. 184)

Burton Rascoe. Bookman. April, 1928, pp. 183–85

The Harlem Renaissance was a time of great creativity for African Americans. W. E. B. DuBois and others hoped that the ''talented tenth'' of African Americans would be able to prove the intelligence and the creativity of African Americans and thus gain greater acceptance from the white population. During the Harlem Renaissance, writing, music, and art flourished. Harlem was a cultural and artistic center, a mecca for talented writers, artists, musicians, and performers. Claude McKay, although personally peripheral to the creativity of this period, was artistically one of the writers whose work has been considered at its center. McKay's writing has made an important contribution not only to African American writing, but also to gay literature. Despite his absence from Harlem during the 1920s, Claude McKay has been most strongly identified as a Harlem Renaissance writer, helped often by his friend and one of the initiators of the Harlem Renaissance, James Weldon Johnson. Indeed, some date the beginnings of the Harlem Renaissance with McKay's work.

McKay's success as a writer of fiction, poetry, and non-fiction seems to stem not only from his racial protest, but also, intertwined with and inseparable from race, his sexuality. While white critics lauded his *Home to Harlem,* African American critics including W. E. B. DuBois and Alain Locke attacked the novel for its sexual content and realism. Robert Bone writes that *Home to Harlem* ''bogs down in the secondary contrast between Jake and Ray.'' If a gay reading of this book is undertaken, however, the sexual difference between the two men, and Ray's sexuality in the subsequent novel *Banjo,* may be seen to be a primary contrast between men, allowing a space for difference and tolerance and for friendship and understanding between heterosexuals and homosexuals. Sexuality and gender are often left vague in McKay's work, with clues left for the reader. As Bad Object Choices points out, like Langston Hughes, McKay lived in a time in which ''an artist of the Harlem Renaissance might have felt compelled to be closeted about his homosexuality'' except in ''safe zones'' created within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered subculture. Certainly McKay's writing takes note of sexuality. It is often feminine in both feeling and description. A. L. McLeod notes that Jekyll, McKay's mentor, described Jamaican dialect as ''a feminine version of masculine English,'' and McLeod notes that lines in ''To Clarendon Hills and H. A. H.'' suggest ''a total male commitment,'' although the homoerotic content of ''The Harlem Dancer'' is ignored in McLeod's analysis. In her analysis of *Banana Bottom,* the book that Marian McLeod feels is his most successful, McLeod notes that McKay's earlier books had depicted the world of men. She notes that ''twenty years after having left Jamaica, he returned symbolically in the character of Bita Plant . . . his ideal Caribbean.''

As Judith Lorber points out, gender and sexuality are fluid, not fixed. Bita Plant may be Claude McKay's feminine side. Indeed, as Robert Bone points out in his discussion of McKay's *Banana Bottom,* that book is his link with Expressionism, granting him artistic fulfillment. Bone writes ''If McKay's spiritual journey carried him 'a long way from home,' in the end he returned to his native island.''

Claude McKay's writing during and after the period known as the Harlem Renaissance is valuable because of the complexities of race, class, sexuality, and gender that it contains. His work greatly enriches our legacy of gay and bisexual writing.

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MCMILLAN, Terry (1951–)

Within weeks of its publication, Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* appeared on the *New York Times* best-seller list, exceeding the success of her first two novels, *Mama* and *Disappearing Acts*. Although specifically it tells the story of four African-American women, *Waiting to Exhale* addresses the dilemma of career women who want it all.

Career advancement, relocation, divorce, aging parents, illness, single parenthood, and the never-ending search for love are the problems these women face and the issues McMillan explores. Yet her real purpose soon becomes clear—to sensitize readers to the real-life problems of Alzheimer's, AIDS, breast cancer, hypertension, and the need for individual, communal, and governmental action. McMillan's work does not match the caliber of Toni Morrison's, Alice Walker's, Gloria Naylor's, or Zora Neale Hurston's (to whom she has been compared), but *Waiting to Exhale* is an important book as it traces the problems of ''real'' women in a real world. McMillan has created a series of portraits that reveal the resiliency of the black career woman.

Paula C. Barnes. *Belles Lettres*. Fall, 1992, p. 57

Terry McMillan grew up in the small town of Port Huron, Michigan, the oldest of five children. Her father had tuberculosis and was in a sanatorium during much of her childhood; her mother, the prototype for McMillan's first novel. *Mama*, supported the family as a domestic. When McMillan was seventeen, she moved on her own to Los Angeles, where she worked as a typist for an insurance company and put herself through college at night. She eventually earned a journalism degree from University of California at Berkeley. *Mama* (1987) was a critical success; to help it become a commercial success as well, McMillan handled much of the marketing herself. . . . Her second novel, *Disappearing Acts* (1989), was widely praised for its depiction of a frustrated black man named Franklin. McMillan's real-life former lover did not find the

portrayal sympathetic, however, and filed a $5 million dollar lawsuit against her, which he lost. In 1990, McMillan edited *Breaking*, the first anthology of contemporary African American fiction to come out in seventeen years. Her third novel, *Waiting to Exhale*, . . . had 410,000 copies in print and the paperback rights sold to Pocket Books for $2.64 million. The book was on the *New York Times* best-seller list for eleven weeks and negotiations were under way for the film rights. McMillan has taught in Wyoming and at the University of Arizona in Tucson. She now lives near San Francisco with her eight-year-old son, Solomon.

Molly Giles. *Poets and Writers*. November-December, 1992, p. 32

McMillan's third novel, *Waiting to Exhale*, has jumped to the top of best-seller lists. Her honesty and sensitivity appeal to readers. What is especially noteworthy is that she dares to expose issues that need attention from black women, at times to the dismay of black men. McMillan adeptly portrays the everyday lives of four black women in *Waiting to Exhale*. . . .

These women are in their late thirties and intelligent, with looks and careers. Their bond is so tight it could whip up jealousy. The joys, fears, and search for love they experience are not confined to the lives of black women. McMillan points out universal truths: that there are women out there with much to offer, yet willing to be alone in order to ''settle down, not settle. . . . We as black women are suffering. It's through the black man's ignorance, negligence, and lack of respect. . . . All I'm saying is pay attention.''. . .

Her. . . . challenge comes from angry black men. McMillan exhausts herself explaining that she is not a speaker for the entire black race. She has her black women love black men, but she believes that black men make themselves difficult to be loved. . . .

The press once dubbed her Zora Neale Hurston's heir. Although she's flattered, her other inspirations include Katherine Ann Porter, Chekhov, and J.D. Salinger. ''But they never mention that. . . . [They think] I couldn't possibly be influenced by Eudora Welty, which I am.'' Terry McMillan is without comparison. Her break-neck speed, colorful characters, gritty and honest language and emotion put her readers on an incredible rollercoaster ride that doesn't leave them sick. ''Writing is a journey, an expedition of people's lives. It's exciting, not knowing where you're going, how it's going to end up, and what it's going to do to you.''

Myra Cole. *San Francisco Review of Books*. Fall, 1992, pp. 20–21

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MCMURTRY, Larry (1936–)

Texas teen-agers complain that a small town is so dead there is nothing to do on a Saturday night except sit on the curb and watch the sewer back up. Seemingly, Thalia, as ugly and lonely as the land around it, qualifies. Its optimistic founders, though, first named it Paradise—but Texas already had a Paradise. Undaunted, they chose Thalia (''blooming and luxuriant''). Perhaps it was to their eyes, but not to Larry McMurtry's. Thalia was the general background for his *Horseman Pass By* (filmed as Hud) and *Leaving Cheyenne*. Now, in *The Last Picture Show* Thalia takes center stage and so does McMurtry.

The book is about the initiation of a boy, Sonny Crawford, into the mystique of manhood. Other major characters are Sonny's buddy, Duane, and Duane's girl, Jacey, who is rich, pretty and Queen Bee of Thalia High.

During the course of a year, Sonny learns a great deal from the neglected wife of an overly virile coach who reveres his mother and has a passion for guns. Another mentor is the pool-hall owner, who is the guardian of youth, particularly simple-minded Billy. Sonny also learns from Jacey's mother never to say thank you to a lady. By the end of the novel, Sonny and Duane have fought over Jacey, reconciled, and attended the last movie to be shown in Thalia. Sonny becomes painfully aware that his youth, like the picture show, is gone, and that manhood is something more than sexual pleasure.

The high school scenes are achingly familiar and include one of the wildest, funniest basketball games ever recorded. But it is the boys' preoccupation with sex that dominates the book. McMurtry takes his characters on a trip from onanism to prostitution, with a stop at every station in between. One seduction scene (surely a literary first) has Jacey being aroused by a one-man demonstration of shooting pool. Her further adventures with the rich kids in Wichita Falls are eyebrow-raisers. Another notable episode involves a gang of slightly drunken boys in a comic orgy in a cow lot. Afterward, they take Billy the idiot, shove him into the back seat of a car with a grotesque whore, and watch the results.

Offensive? Miraculously, no. McMurtry is an alchemist who converts the basest materials to gold. The sexual encounters are sad, funny, touching, sometimes horrifying, but always honest, always human.

The whole, however, is not as satisfying as the parts. The characters lack depth. The boys have no ambitions above their plated belt buckles. Duane remains shadowy, and Sonny finally becomes almost mute, victimized by a too-contrived story line. The novel loses focus when Jacey takes over. Ultimately, even pictorial accuracy and authentic language cannot sustain a plot that slicks up.

There are also some unnecessary literary clichés. The coach's persecution of the English teacher who takes boys swimming wasn't new in *Tea and Sympathy*. And the death of Billy detracts from, rather than strengthens, the fresh symbol of the last picture show. The pages of literature are strewn with the bones of slaughtered innocents. Billy and his death will cause few readers to shed a tear.

One point, however, is well-established. Though McMurtry blandly dedicates this book to Thalia, he would never recommend it as a place to live. But it's a fascinating place to visit—in a book.

W. T. Jack. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 12, 1966, pp. 68–69

McMurtry is typical of a new breed of Southwest writers who are reacting against the tendency of an earlier generation to idealize and simplify the past in order to establish the purity of its heroism and nobility for a presumably inferior present. . . .

Because his works are more lifelike than the typical Western adventure and because he has sometimes viewed the foibles of his native state with a cold eye, McMurtry has often been regarded as having completely turned his back on the virtues of the past in order to adopt the role of iconoclast. Such is not the case. Indeed, McMurtry is one of the few Southwest novelists to understand the full potential of the Western myth as a framework for serious fiction. Certainly this myth has tremendous possibilities in an age when most urban writers are content to picture their characters as isolated figures floating weightless in a cultural and moral vacuum, and McMurtry explores those possibilities in his most significant works. . . .

McMurtry is worthy of serious study for two important reasons. First, as a craftsman he has demonstrated a remarkable ability to solve the technical problems posed by the existence of a Western mythology already known to a readership raised on *Gunsmoke*. It is the question of credibility which is, after all, most troublesome to the exploiters of myths. . . . Second, McMurtry is a social critic whose views of his region mirror the larger concerns of contemporary intellectuals. Whether one agrees with him or not, McMurtry must be acknowledged as one of the spokesmen for a climate of opinion which may soon be prevalent throughout the Southwest and which, however dissident, must be reckoned with as a cultural force. . . .

Whatever his shortcomings may be, he has demonstrated a remarkable technical skill, and his profound insights into the nature of the cowboy, both mythic and real, will provide him with all the subject matter he will need for a lifetime of productivity, should he see fit to return to his earlier preoccupation with the type. If he should choose to explore other thematic material, he will not enter a strange country without valuable resources at his disposal. For his is a considerable talent, and his contribution to the literature of the Southwest has already justified the attention he has received in the region. And if a significant Southwestern literature is to be the wave of the future, then McMurtry is one who will surely ride the crest of that wave to national preeminence.

Thomas Landess. *Larry McMurtry* (Steck-Vaughn, 1969), pp. 1–2, 5, 42–43

Larry McMurtry's sixth novel, *Terms of Endearment*, rounds out the trilogy-adventures of a smart set of Houstonian characters begun in *Moving On* (1970) and continued through *All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers* (1972). Though time sequences often fall out of order in the three novels, key events and characters are repeated often enough to maintain a continuous theme which, not surprisingly, has three parts: sex and its frustrations, academics and its frustrations, and something like culture and its frustrations which McMurtry has branded *Ecch-Texas* in a book of essays, *In a Narrow Grave*.

The author of three novels-made-movies, *Horseman*, *Pass By* (filmed as *Hud*), *Leaving Cheyenne* (filmed as *Lovin' Molly*), and *The Last Picture Show*, McMurtry has moved the setting from the wide-open ranges of the Texas cattle country to the wide-open residential sections of Houston for the second set of three novels. But what is unfortunately revealed by this newest effort is the wide-open spaces of McMurtry's imagination and stockpile of Texas stereotypes. This last book is hopelessly like the previous two, and whatever was fresh and innovative about the others is conspicuously absent from this third novel. . . .

In spite of some loose ends . . . , McMurtry seems finally to have capped off the story as a trilogy. The time of the second part of *Terms of Endearment* is 1971–1976, which suggests either that it is the last chapter to this somewhat uninteresting story, or that McMurtry desires a few more years of breathing room before attacking the next installment. In many ways the novel is lacking. In spite of its four-hundred-page length, the development of the characters is not always satisfying; the situations are often wanting for credulity or for significance, and the dialogue is sometimes ''bitchy'' and pointless. Occasionally the conflict is mundane and predictable, therefore dull; and time-movement is a problem throughout the book. One of the biggest problems is one which plagues all three of the novels: McMurtry knows too much about literature to allow his characters to be completely unread. The ''name-dropping'' of famous titles and authors is only a part of the problem; the rest centers in McMurtry's allowing characters to speak about deep philosophical or literary problems which one might expect a Guggenheim Fellow to know about, but with an authority one would find incredible in a Houstonian socialite, even a rich and well-educated one. Also one cannot help but feel that McMurtry wrote all three novels with an eye toward Hollywood's acceptance of them for film, but in spite of his inclusion of Peter Bogdanovich in the book (at a party), one must doubt the possibility of film adaptation for any of the three.

On the plus side, the book reads well. There is humor for those who have not become inundated with McMurtry's lampooning of Texas and Texans; and the story has enough twists and turns to keep the reader's attention in spite of the somewhat trite nature of the conflict. In short, McMurtry has worn out the stereotypes. Aurora, Vernon, Rosie, and Royce are all out of a well-used stockpile, and their shopworn appearance is damaging to the book. Lack of development is not a charge to be laid lightly at McMurtry's door, and one does not wish for another eight-hundred-page monolith such as *Moving On*. In spite of these lesser efforts, however, McMurtry has demonstrated in his first three novels that he is a talented and forceful writer. One can hope that number seven will be a luckier number than was *Terms of Endearment*.

R. C. Reynolds. *Southwest Review*. Winter, 1976, pp. 102, 104–5

McMurtry is unique among Southwestern regionalists in his use of satire and black humor in a context in which these elements have been traditionally absent—the Western novel. The mordant wit that characterizes many of his essays is intensified in his fiction, which often becomes Hogarthian in the savagery of its satire. His cynical view of marriage reaches its height in *All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers*; the caustic portraits of Uncle Laredo and his wife, Martha, who are so antagonistic toward each other that they live on separate ranches is a monstrously magnified depiction of marital incompatibility. He caricatures sex-crazed Mexicans in the same novel, Petey Ximenes and Antonio (though perhaps these characterizations illustrate a regional ethnic bias against the non-Anglo). His personal antipathy toward the hypocrisy and tawdry icons of the small town is personified in *The Last Picture Show*, particularly in the figures of Herman Popper and Jacy Farrow. McMurtry has said that the small town derives its concept of masculinity and femininity from the examples of the football coach and the high school beauty queen, but the characterizations of

Coach Popper and Jacy Farrow undermine these accepted norms for sexual identification. . . .

McMurtry's use of black humor in *The Last Picture Show* should not be overemphasized, for the novel is a highly symbolic and complex work, as well as a scathing denunciation of the spiritual stagnation of a small town. But it should be noted that the frank treatment of sex in this novel sets it apart from the stereotypes established in such typically Western books as Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, while the humorous treatment of the same subject exhibits the approach utilized by other young Texas writers, such as Donald Barthelme and Terry Southern, or by James Leo Herlihy in *Midnight Cowboy*. . . .

In Faulkner's epic saga of the South, a new breed of man, the Snopeses, arises after the Civil War to challenge not only the power but the life-styles and values of the old aristocracy. The emergence of this class signals the birth of the new South and the end of the old mythic South. Faulkner was able to chronicle the demise of the old traditions and to reconstruct the antebellum South in his art while avoiding the pitfalls of historical romance. He succeeds, ultimately, in utilizing the materials of mythology to restore the old South in a kind of living presence, one in which he was totally at home. For more than a decade, McMurtry's task has been not so much to restore the myth of the West as to lay it to rest, to escape from its hold. Indeed, McMurtry has never been fully convinced of the accuracy of the myth, but whether he conceives of it as something that was, of that might have or should have been, his conception of the old West as myth gave form to his earliest fiction and ennobles some of his most memorable characters: Homer Bannon, Sam the Lion, and Roger Waggoner. . . .

McMurtry laments that although Texas has ''a few decent writers,'' it has had no Homer and no Faulkner. ''Thus,'' he says, ''it has no single, greatly told tragic story, no central myth.'' McMurtry remains preeminently a regional novelist, the finest Texas has yet produced. Should he overcome the unresolved tension he feels about his native soil, he might succeed in writing the saga the region lacks.

Charles D. Peavy. *Larry McMurtry* (Twayne, 1977), pp. 102, 105, 116–18

Larry McMurtry's fiction is noteworthy for its sympathetic and sensitive examination of present and future citybillies. *Hud*, for example, records the passing of a frontier cattleman and the attempts of his stepson and grandson at coping with modern society. The title character, in fact, is a cowboy seduced by urban ways, a ranch hand no longer satisfied with the slow periods of ranch life. But *The Last Picture Show* provides the most complete portrait of the disintegration of small-town Texas life as the larger-than-life older generation dies out and is replaced by younger people spoiled by the modern world, and thus incapable of facing the rigors of a ''land so powerful that it is all but impossible to live on it pleasantly'' (*In a Narrow Grave*), people for whom citybilly life is the only alternative to the emptiness of dying high plains towns.

The Last Picture Show operates on a series of contrasts between characters, places, and the sources of values which determine the psychological realities of each generation. The characters are differentiated not so much by age as by their sense of belonging and self-knowledge. Sam the Lion, Lois, and eventually Mrs. Popper have come to terms with themselves and with the land, whereas Sonny, Duane, and Jacy are groping for identities the country can no longer supply. The roles they attempt to play are empty both to themselves and to their companions, since roles must have some relationship to the places in which they are lived. The social gathering places of the older generation are either disappearing or no longer serving the needs of the young. With the loss of place comes a loss of identity, a loss which cannot be compensated for by the stereotypes of movies or television.

Andrew Macdonald and Gina Macdonald. In *Larry McMurtry: Unredeemed Dreams*, ed. Dorey Schmidt (Pan American Univ., 1978), p. 22

By his own account, Cadillac Jack McGriff, 6 feet 5 inches of Texas manhood without his boots or Stetson, 35 years old and twice divorced, is a natural scout and a natural womanizer. Having done a stint as a bulldogger on the rodeo circuit, he retired to roam the country in his big pearl-colored Caddy with peach velour interior. He now spends his days scouting—exploring back roads for antiques and collectibles, buying and selling what strikes his fancy, ''too curious, too restless, too much in love with the treasure hunt'' to specialize.

The double conceit of scouting and that fancy vehicle allows Larry McMurtry, the author of seven other novels, the peculiar luxury of a rambling, often incoherent, frequently entertaining tale [*Cadillac Jack*]. . . .

But every time Mr. McMurtry threatens to get into something like substantive plot or character development, Jack jumps into that dadblamed car and drives off somewhere. The cruising is endless and serves only to connect the short, affectionate, sometimes hilarious vignettes of Americans trading and swapping that give the book its genuine eccentricity. . . .

Larry McMurtry is a problematic figure. His second and finest novel, *Leaving Cheyenne*, threatens to become an acknowledged classic. That tender love story of a strong-minded trio spans half a century but is set in only a few square miles of rural Texas. Indeed, it is crucial that Molly, the independent heroine, will not leave her land. With his third novel Mr. McMurtry found cars and the possibility of escape; then came Houston and after that the open road. Lately, as the author has drawn on his experiences in Hollywood and in Washington, where he is a rare-book dealer and critic, his fiction has been increasingly satirical and cartoonish. It's the folks in the background of *Cadillac Jack*, the ones who live out there in the middle of America, who seem real. They are worth meeting.

Eden Ross Lipson. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 21, 1982, pp. 13, 20

Obviously the trail drive [in *Lonesome Dove*] satisfies the aficionados of western fiction, appealing to the frontier spirit that Americans share and to the American dream that there is an Eden awaiting the stalwart. The search motif and the love relationships give the book universal appeal. But the power of the book rests in the awesomeness of the myth of the cowboy. The myth, heretofore foisted upon gullible audiences by Hollywood, can now be drawn from the fiction of one who knows the myth, Larry McMurtry, who admits to being haunted by it and recognizes that he will never be free of it (*In a Narrow Grave*).

In the myth the Cowboy is the God. And ''the god has abandoned Texas. Only the guards hear the music of his leaving.'' The God may have been Old Man Goodnight, or Teddy Blue, or McMurtry's own Uncle Johnny—any horseman whose ''mythos celebrates those masculine ideals appropriate to the frontier.'' McMurtry, heir to the legacy of ranchers, heard the music of the god's leaving, and he believes that, though the last cowboy has made the last drive, the Cowboy has become a mythic ''figure of romance as remote and appealing as King Arthur.''

In *Lonesome Dove*, the Cowboy–God is a Freudian composite of the three old Rangers: Call is Superego; Gus, Ego; and Jake, Id. Taken as one, the three embody the idea of Cowboy, the man on horseback, full of the joy of life, accepting the tragedy of life, brave, daring, hard-working, loyal, reliable, proud, stoic, often ascetic, straightforward, restless, independent, and not without a sense of humor. Each of the Rangers is consistent within the Freudian concept. When Jake the Id dies, nothing seems to go right anymore. When Gus's tempering Ego is gone, Call becomes a confused old man. He had adhered rigidly to the higher conscience and had achieved his goals. He had performed his duties, but he had failed to become ennobled by his acts, for he lacked the chastening of the Ego which would allow him to compromise his ideals and descend to Gus's level of humanity where all men make mistakes and redeem themselves someway. To view the three as one is to realize the Cowboy–. . . .

During the latter decades of the 1800s the West became less and less a man's world. The Feminine Principle, symbolized by Clara, inexorably swallowed up the cowboys, pulled them into her domain, be it her growing ranch community in Nebraska or, to move to the contemporary scene, one of the metropolitan centers spreading out over what was once rural. The Feminine Principle will diminish the cowboy, for his confidence will be destroyed when he leaves his man's world. July Johnson will become Clara's husband, bereft of his manly stature; Dish, top hand on the trail, will stay on at her ranch, ''the extreme romantic, sentimental to the core,'' idealizing Lorena and responding to Clara's will.

Lorena is the Cowboy–God's Love–Goddess. Despite all the abuse she has suffered and the horror she has faced, Lorena remains beautiful and worship-worthy. . . . Within the household of the ranchwoman, the Love–Goddess may or may not live on: she is forever unreachable. Her spirit has gone with the Cowboy–God.

One review of *Lonesome Dove* has said: McMurtry ''writes with a new power and harnesses his awesome skills to the fullest'' and ''has distilled the westering experience to the essence'' (Leonard Sanders, *Fort Worth News-Tribune*, August 16, 1985). Let it be added that McMurtry, who has himself heard the music of the departing God, has elevated the Cowboy in the Call-Gus-Jake figure to that mythically heroic stature where he remains forever superior to other men and to his environment, his legends, however exaggerated or absurd they may seem firmly rooted in the true western frontier experience.

> Ernestine P. Sewell. ''McMurtry's Cowboy–God in *Lonesome Dove*.'' *Western American Literature*. Fall, 1986, pp. 224–25

McMurtry perceives time as lineal progression. A region and its values grow, mature, and die, and other worlds move in and take over. The old Rangers die, and Newt will carry on in a new place with a new life, retaining much of their frontier ethos. His children and grandchildren can only be symbolic frontiersmen, people who vary as much as Hud, Danny Deck, Uncle Laredo, Vernon Dalhart, and Boog Miller. Some will be mutants, and others will live as eccentrics, people slightly off balance. History for McMurtry, however, does not progress forward in a straight line. It zigzags, going back and forth in ever-widening lines. Visions of the past always relate to a fixed time and place—the twenty-four years between 1866 and 1890 in which the plains were alive with cattle drives. In particular places he sees the ghosts of cowboys and cattlemen. ''I cannot but love the plains,'' he wrote in *In a Narrow Grave*, ''nor cross them without the sense that I am crossing my own past.''

Past and present tug in McMurtry's mind. He struggles to stay in the present while the past pulls him back. His best works have been generated out of this conflict. *Lonesome Dove* released the tension of that tug-of-war, and McMurtry walked, rope in hand, into the country of the past, a mythic land in which his forefathers rode. The epigraph of *Lonesome Dove*, a passage from T. K. Whipple's *Study Out the Land*, states that for earlier Americans, civilization was a dream inside themselves and the wilderness reality; for modern Americans, civilization is reality, the wilderness a dream. Past and present wear the same fabric, woven of myth and reality. McMurtry's cow-boys wore it on one side and he on the other. . . .

McMurtry has always been serious about his work and entertained the desire to write something lasting, something beyond regional prose. Blatantly declaring that he is not a Southern writer, he has sought a tradition in which to establish his works. The Western tradition is shallow in comparison with the Southern, though it is rich in its imagery. So, he drew upon his personal experience, personal ''homes,'' in order to give his work depth. The first three novels came closest to succeeding because the frame of reference was honest, the pathos real. Once those themes and concerns were exhausted, McMurtry took cues from the Beat Generation and traveled the roads of America searching for new inspiration. Neither Danny Deck's beat-up Chevrolet nor Jack McGriff's long Cadillac provided the vehicle from which McMurtry could create lasting works. His last two novels have been set where he started—on the open plains of the West.

In *Lonesome Dove* and in *Texasville* McMurtry writes as a mature man, one schooled in experience, one who recognizes waste in past and present. Together *Texasville* and *Lonesome Dove* raise a weighty question: what gives life meaning? The way people live or what they accomplish? As *Texasville* indicates, few people today expect to live a myth. Few have been called to great missions. Few have guides through the labyrinth of life. Few have retained belief in age-old symbols and sacraments. Most of humanity lacks the inner calls and outer doctrines of earlier times.

> Lera Patrick Tyler Lich. *Larry McMurtry's Texas: Evolution of the Myth* (Austin, Tex.: Eakin Pr., 1987), pp. 58, 61–62

The residents of Thalia [in the Thalia tetralogy] echo the themes of *The Great Gatsby*, transferred to the West Texas plains: Sonny and Gatsby embody their illusions in Jacy and Daisy. Foreshadowing more mature adults in *Texasville*, Sonny learns too young in *The Last Picture Show* that ''he was never going to get to sleep with Jacy. . . . Somehow his whole life had worked out to keep that one thing from happening, and it was the one thing he wanted most of

all.'' Although Gatsby dies, Sonny in *Texasville* is literally borne back ceaselessly into the past, as his mind blurs and he returns to the nonexistent past. Ruth attempts to reassure and console Sonny at the conclusion of *The Last Picture Show*, but cannot verbalize the elusive insight which she tries to convey. . . .

McMurtry has claimed that ''the tough-minded Texan is a rarity,'' but he is clearly exempting Jacy and her mother Lois and Karla Moore and most of the bed-hopping women of Thalia. They are domineering women, whose amorality makes jelly of the weak-minded males of the Thalia novels. Controlled by their libidos and their materialistic self-aggrandizement, they are all daughters of Daisy Buchanan. They survive because they have never been deluded by tenderheartedness or illusory idealism. Jacy plots her future at SMU based on merchandising her sexuality. Hedonism, mixed with a bitter sardonic worldview, immunizes them from both the idealism and the sense of loss that the male inhabitants of Thalia feel.

The morose nature of the men of Thalia mixes, as it did for Sut Lovingood, with raucous humor. McMurtry and the quintessential Texan as well leaven the despair and alleviate the gloom of the basic premise. The tumbleweed invasion and the great hens-of-hell egg fight are masterful Old South-western humor. The homespun poetry and comic similes come straight from the frontier vocabulary. Duane's first unsuccessful attempt to rid Jacy of her exasperating virginity belongs to barnyard humor. The Reverend G.G., who mixes piety with prurience, has a lineage that traces back to Parson John Bullin and other frontier circuit riders. Aphoristic one-liners utilizing the commonplace pepper the Thalia novels, as do prime examples of Texas vernacular. The energy and vitality of the comic relief suggests that another inheritor of the frontier tradition in humor, Mark Twain, was correct when he said that ''against the assault of laughter nothing can stand.'' The mythic Texan can feign seriousness and yearn for superiority, but he can never take himself completely seriously. He can laugh at himself, even in his most preposterous poses, and then laugh at censorious outsiders who do not understand his rituals, his personae, his whistling in the dark of an improbable universe, and his nervousness at being such a microscopic speck in the vastness called Texas. Larry McMurtry has succeeded in delineating him more skillfully than any other writer, and, even more impressively, in suggesting the ways that beneath his uniqueness, the essential Texas is blood kin to modern man.

> Hamlin Hill. ''Thalia and the Real Texans.'' In Clay Reynolds, ed. *Taking Stock: A Larry McMurtry Casebook* (Dallas: Southern Methodist Univ. Pr., 1989), pp. 405–6

While [Edward] Abbey and other [environmental] novelists imagined alternatives to our ruinous lifestyle, Larry McMurtry focused on the Western myth's destructive effects on personal relationships. Acclaimed for his early novels—*Horseman, Pass By* (1961), *Leaving Cheyenne* (1963), and *The Last Picture Show* (1966)—McMurtry expressed his ambivalence about rural and small-town Texas, hating its crudity, violence, and bigotry, wistfully eulogizing the free spirit and self-reliance of the cowboys who had been crude, violent, and bigoted. With *Moving On* (1970), *All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers* (1972), and *Terms of Endearment* (1978), McMurtry created the ''urban Western,'' a novel that reveals the hollowness at the core of the late twentieth-century urban West.

As if seeking the very heart of urban darkness, McMurtry picked Hollywood, Washington, D.C., and Las Vegas as the respective locations for his next three novels—*Somebody's Darling* (1978), *Cadillac Jack* (1982), and *The Desert Rose* (1983). Although his novels of the 1970s and early 1980s show McMurtry experimenting with different points of view and with varying levels of realism, his next work established him as one of the masters of American fiction.

Lonesome Dove (1985, Pulitzer Prize) not only dominated the best-seller lists for months but was also recognized as ''a masterpiece in the genre of trail-driving novels,'' as Jane Nelson put it. . . .

McMurtry's description of a nest of snakes attacking a hapless cowboy is one of the most bone-chilling scenes in contemporary fiction. Indeed, so much violence fills the novel that it seems as if McMurtry was trying to drive a stake through the heart of the Hollywood myth that the good guys always rode off unharmed into the sunset. Paradoxically, *Lonesome Dove* resuscitates interest in the Old West by making it more believable. McMurtry's trail drive includes passages of metaphysical questioning and angst as well as scenes of sex and violence—all of which make the novel palatable to late twentieth-century taste. More important, *Lonesome Dove* satisfies the desire for a sustained narrative that creates the illusion of ''the real thing.''. . .

In its scrupulous authenticity, *Lonesome Dove* reflects extensive authorial research. By itself, authenticity does not, of course, make a novel first-rate. But when serious novelists make authenticity one of the primary qualities of their art, the basis of fact can help to create the illusion of reality, and the best of such authentic fiction serves not only as satisfying literature but also as a form of history.

> James H. Maguire. ''Fiction of the West.'' In Emory Elliott, ed. *The Columbia History of the American Novel* (New York: Columbia Univ. Pr., 1991), pp. 460–61

Larry McMurtry has written eighteen novels, and the longer he writes the stronger the sense of déjà vu. Three of his most recent novels, including his new one, *The Late Child*, are sequels to earlier works. But in Mr. McMurtry's case enough is as good as a feast. The pleasures of *Lonesome Dove* were largely undone by *Streets of Laredo*, and to the minor novel *The Desert Rose* he has now added a lesser suffix. Despite the critical accolades, the prizes, the unrelenting sales, the movies and the miniseries, Mr. McMurtry's career as a serious novelist is becoming checkered fast. Still you keep reading, because he has written novels good enough—I think especially of *Leaving Cheyenne*—to make you wonder why the rest are no better than they are. . . .

Yet, no Larry McMurtry novel is unreadable. It's always fun to listen to his characters talking. In *The Late Child* they usually say more interesting things than the narrator does. In fact, you begin to sense that Mr. McMurtry is more interested in hearing the world around him than he is in seeing it.

> Verlyn Klinkenborg. *New York Times Book Review*. May 21, 1995, p. 12

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MENCKEN, H.L. (1880–1956)

Like Max Beerbohm, Mencken's work is inevitably distinguished. But now and then one wonders—granted that, solidly, book by book, he has built up a literary reputation most to be envied of any American, granted also that he has done more for the national letters than any man alive, one is yet inclined to regret a success so complete. What will he do now? The very writers to the press about the blue Sabbath hurl the bricks of the building he has demolished into the still smoking ruins. He is say, forty; how of the next twenty years? Will he find new gods to dethrone, some eternal ''yokelry'' still callous enough to pose as intelligentsia before the Menckenian pen fingers? Or will he strut among the ruins, a man beaten by his own success, as futile, in the end, as one of those Conrad characters that so tremendously enthrall him?

F. Scott Fitzgerald. *Bookman*. March, 1921. p. 81

Mencken, in spite of all his protestations of realistic resignation, is actually a militant idealist. Most Americans—even of fine standards—have long ago resigned themselves to the cheapness and ugliness of America, but Mencken has never resigned himself. He has never ceased to regard his native country with wounded and outraged eyes. The shabby politics, the childish books, the factories turning out wooden nutmegs have never lost their power to offend him. At this late date, he is, I suppose, almost the only man in the country who still expects American novelists to be artists and politicians gentlemen.

Edmund Wilson. *New Republic*. June 1, 1921. pp. 11–12

Mr. Mencken is so effective . . . because his appeal is not from mind to mind but from viscera to viscera. If you analyze his arguments you destroy their effect. You cannot take them in detail and examine their implications. You have to judge him totally, roughly, approximately, without definition, as you would a barrage of artillery, for the general destruction rather than for the accuracy of the individual shots. He presents an experience, and if he gets you, he gets you not by reasoned conviction, but by a conversion which you may or may not be able to dress up later as a philosophy. If he succeeds with you, he implants in you a sense of sin, and then he revives you with grace, and disposes you to a new pride in excellence and in a non-gregarious excellence.

Walter Lippmann. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 11, 1926. p. 414

Mencken is in a Berserk rage against stupidity, dullness, and sham; he is a whole army, horse, foot, artillery, aviation and general staff all in one, mobilized in a war upon his enemies. He has a spy bureau all over the country, which collects for him illustrations of the absurdities of democracy. . . . If you ask Mencken what is the remedy for these horrors, he will tell you they are the natural and inevitable manifestations of the boobus Americanus. If you ask him why then labor so monstrously, he will say that it is for his own enjoyment, he is so constituted that he finds his recreation in laughing at his fellow boobs. But watch him a while, and you will see the light of hilarity die out of his eyes . . . and you will realize that he is lying to himself and to you; he is a new-style crusader, a Christian Anti-Christ, a tireless propagandist of no-propaganda.

Upton Sinclair. *Bookman*. Nov., 1927. p. 255

Courageous and independent he began early to fight against cant and stupidity, shams and hypocrisy, intolerance and reaction, and he fought against great odds and many enemies—and won. In the fight circumstances and expediency have doubtless thrown him off repeatedly from the high resolves he once had, and so, like Valentino, he has felt sadly that he has never done quite all that it was in his power to do. . . . A poet of a peculiar order, who uses all the license of fact that a poet is entitled to, Mencken has been and is a personality, he has meant and means something in the life and thought of this country, he is a symbol; and as a symbol he must also be and mean something—again like Valentino—that is foreign to his wishes and more than a little distasteful to him. *Hinc lacrimae rerum*.

Burton Rascoe. *Bookman*. Feb., 1928. p. 676

There can be no denying that, at first, there was a delightful charm in his hilariously impish maneuvers and his agreeable jargon. It must have been a rare pleasure for many of his nature, who lacked his ability and fearlessness, to watch him as he went through life making faces at everything most people were afraid to make faces at. But today that old charm of Mr. Mencken is dead, or at least fast dying. . . . His *Prejudices* have been admirably named in order to protect anything written therein, but in the handling of his subjects he does not mean to remember that he is actually prejudiced; and he makes the mistake of taking himself very seriously, which is probably the only thing he does take seriously. . . . It is too bad that Mr. Mencken is intolerant for that is as much a sin as cruelty.

William Saroyan. *Overland Monthly*. March, 1929. pp. 77–8

In the thick of his blistering charges against American life in general, Mencken somehow contrived to make the individual reader feel exempt from the indictment, an *âme bien née* who belonged on the side of Mencken and the angels. Thus the situation, from the outset, was ironical. Mencken, exposing the ghastly inadequacies of all matters of public interest, encouraged his readers to be too snobbish to give a damn about them. He insisted

he could offer no remedy and was amused that he should be expected to. Those whom he influenced at once accepted his conclusions, turned their backs on the national plight and set up as a civilized minority. . . . Mencken, far from leading America out of the wilderness, merely bade the elect, from some secure elevation, watch their less enlightened brethren wriggle and squirm.

Louis Kronenberger. *New Republic*. Oct. 7, 1936. pp. 243–4

His value . . . lies as much in his profound and unwilling reflection of a period as in his brilliant reporting of it. If he helped to mold the spirit of the post-war epoch, he also betrayed its underlying pressures. . . . And if he undervalued the resources of our democratic social arrangement—exaggerating in this as in so much else, he could hardly exaggerate the blind consuming power as well as the blind fertility of our industrial machine. For, otherwise, knowing as well as we do now the distorted sources of the Menckenian imagery whose goatish prancing drew into such a macabre dance of death—still, why do these recurrent omens and portents of disaster, those acrid visions of dissolution and the whole unlovely prophetic end of what had been in its day the world's last best hope: why does all this linger so uncomfortably in our minds?

Maxwell Geismar. *The Last of the Provincials* (Houghton). 1947. pp. 65–6

He was a social critic and a literary showman who had taken lessons from Macauley, as well as from Nietzsche, Huneker and Bierce, and he fought with all his masculine force against the elements in American society that impeded the creative life and stifled its growth. A transatlantic Attila, with his own Teutonic fury, a coarse mind that had undertaken a literary spadesman's work, he accomplished a task that only a coarse mind could do. . . . After the jazz age passed, when he had become an institution, Mencken's limitations and faults were more generally apparent. It was evident that he had the vaguest of literary standards.

Van Wyck Brooks. *American Scholar*. Autumn, 1951. pp. 414–6

In private one might make bold to esteem him both as a literary and social critic more than often wrong—or childish even, or it might be just slightly pig-headed—in his estimate of this or of the other affair or person. But the magnificent verve and gusto with which always the man presented his chosen point of view, no matter what might be his theme, resulted almost always in a work of dramatic art that you savored with enjoyment.

Think what you might, whether before or after the performance, there was at the moment no denying this H.L. Mencken was putting on a rousing good show. So that temporarily his aesthetic or political or social rightness or wrongness did not seem, to me at least, to be of weight.

James Branch Cabell. *The Nation*. Sept. 12, 1953. p. 213

As a thinker Mencken probably had only a temporary vogue, for his fund of knowledge was limited and his ideas . . . were few and largely dubious. But as a journalist, his influence was immense. Indeed, he was one of the greatest editors in all our history. . . . He was a man of contradictions and obscurities, and puerilities and even cheapness, but he was a great editor, and his *Mercury* was, all in all, a great magazine.

Charles Angoff. *New Republic*. Sept. 13, 1954. pp. 19–22

It has become a commonplace of literary history that Mencken was an emancipator who helped free American writing from gentility and American manners from provinciality; and this is true or at least true enough to be worth saying. But it is also true that whenever we fall back upon a writer's ''historical importance'' and try to assert his value in terms of what was peculiarly local to his time, it is probably due to an uneasy awareness that his voice no longer reaches us. In the recent efforts to ''revive'' Mencken it has been customary to speak of the need for a similar figure in our time. To be sure, nothing could be more useful than a cultural leader who would outrage our genteel and conformist literary world. But the whole point is that Mencken, even at his best, would no longer be adequate . . . for . . . it is unlikely that we can again respond to the carnival Nietzscheanism that was the essence of his thought.

Irving Howe. *New Republic*. May 21, 1956. p. 17

Mencken's gifts were singularly varied. He was surely one of the great newspapermen of his generation, and of his books probably those dealing with the American language will be longest remembered. He took on the professional philologists and beat them at their own game. He knew more about medicine and the law than any other layman who has passed my way. And he was always reading books about religion. He was never interested, so far as I know, in painting or sculpture—music was a real hobby, but his tastes ran almost exclusively to Beethoven and nineteenth-century German romantic composers—and he never really liked the theater, though he acquired a great collection of Ibseniana, which he presented to the University of Leipzig.

Alfred A. Knopf. *Atlantic Monthly*. May, 1959. p. 51

My own theory is that he used his magnificent gifts as a writer and as a newspaperman to play the role of a public clown at a time when a public clown in the United States was very much needed. His role was like that of the court fools who were often chosen by monarchs to relieve the tedium of court life, not because they were fools in today's ordinary sense of that word, but because they were articulate and sometimes acid observers of the social scene.

If court fools sometimes suffered because of their barbed wit, perhaps Mencken did, too, though he never admitted it and seldom bothered to reply publicly to charges of wickedness. He always said he had set up his pitch in life ''on a busy and interesting street.'' To this he added: ''I did a good business, and I have no regrets.'' But, being a man of sensibility, he must have had some uneasy moments, even when he knew that in one case or another he had been guilty of nothing more than overstatement by intent. Certainly he tried often to please people, especially in personal contact, even when he had offended them with planned malice. His habits with his interminable correspondence bear witness to that.

Stephen E. Fitzgerald. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 17, 1960. p. 14

Mencken's forte is the sentence, not the paragraph or the essay as a whole; few of his pieces have a strong cumulative effect. And although one can isolate remarkably inventive phrases, in reviewing his work as a whole one notes his fondness for certain stereotyped expressions. He relies so heavily upon a limited vocabulary of invective (bilge, boob, buncombe, mountebank, and poltroon appear with high frequency) and on words he assumes are intrinsically funny (like bishop, Presbyterian, and peruna) that one must conclude that he aimed for stock responses.

One must also note that, unlike Swift, he did not create a variety of personae but depended on the public image he created of himself: the irreverent, boozy iconoclast. . . . One of the reasons for Swift's greatness is his ability to implicate the reader. Mencken, in contrast, tends to create a circus atmosphere that induces the reader to remain a spectator.

Raymond G. McCall. *College English*. May, 1962. p. 635

The root prejudice in Mencken's ideology was his individualism. Perhaps he knew that the cause of individualism is, was, and always has been a losing one. Nevertheless, he took his position and held to it as best he could, even when his stance became awkward. His race theories were paradoxical and illogical, but they were an outgrowth of the Nietzschean idea that the superior individual is the goal of evolution; his strictures against reform and aid for the destitute strike most of us as unfeeling, but he sensed the violation of individuality that undermined both philanthropist and philanthropee. He was a radical only in the sense that he thought the individual self was being smothered by the doctrine of service; he was a reactionary in that he wanted to revitalize and conserve the values he thought had been evolved when the self was directly concerned with survival both in nature and society—the values of courage, honor, pride.

E. A. Martin. *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Summer, 1962. p. 337

The mask of the solid citizen, as Mencken used it, was flexible enough to be altered in several ways, always according to how it would increase the impact of the piece he was writing. It was a rhetorical device first, and an ideological exhibit only secondly. Sometimes he stressed the ordinariness of himself, or rather of his comic self-image. In ''On Being an American,'' he contrasted himself with the ''Young Intellectuals'' partly through presenting himself as ''a loyal and devoted Americano, even a chauvinist, paying taxes without complaint, obeying all laws that are physiologically obeyable, accepting all the searching duties and responsibilities of citizenship unprotestingly.'' [!] He was, he suggested, a better citizen than the worshippers of Harding, or than Rotarians, Klansmen, and Anti-Saloon Leaguers. Sometimes he presented himself as the working journalist or writer. In ''Gamalielese,'' an attack on the prose style of Warren G. Harding, Mencken announced that he was qualified to judge the great man's style because ''I have earned most of my livelihood for twenty years past by translating the bad English of a multitude of authors into measurably better English.'' But he solemnly abandons all claim to qualification for judging the great man's ideas (thus ostensibly rejecting the mask of the intellectual superman)—and then proceeds to mix considerable criticism of Harding's ideas with ridicule of the presidential prose style. The mask of the ordinary citizen has functioned as a device of irony and satire.

Norris W. Yates. *The American Humorist* (Iowa State). 1964. p. 160

The worth of a critic is determined by two things: the soundness of his judgments and his influence on readers and writers. Mencken's influence both as critic and editor was tremendous. His successful battle for realism constitutes one of the major chapters in American literature. His popularity among writers was larger than that enjoyed by any other American critic before or since. In reading the vast amount of criticism he wrote between 1905 and 1925, I was astonished at how sound it appears from my vantage point in time. With rare exceptions (D. H. Lawrence is the major one), the writers he praised have lived and the writers he condemned have died; those who fell somewhere in between are the ones whom we ''have heard of, but never read.''. . . He dwelt between the two poles of understanding and enjoyment, touching now one and then the other, but never becoming shackled to either. He was, moreover, a man of the world, with a wide range of knowledge in other fields: another prerequisite for the major critic. Finally, he possessed the one enduring quality that all critics who live must have: he was a writer of the first rank. Indeed, he was an extraordinary artist, as is once more becoming clear to that happy minority of men who read books.

William H. Nolte. *H.L. Mencken: Literary Critic* (Wesleyan). 1966. p. 259

It is an error . . . to think of Mencken's contribution as being purely a negative one. His tactics, true, were those of demolition, but what he was accomplishing—quite apart from the very genuine worth of his own writings as literature—was something quite constructive and positive: he was pointing out, educating the reading public (and the writers as well) to demand, what American fiction and poetry ought to be providing, which was a much broader and more authentic report on human experience than was being offered at the time. You have a right, he said to his fellow-readers, to insist that the literature of your time deal with experience in terms which are meaningful to you, and not in those appropriate for your grandparents. Any work of literature which represents your experience as consisting of something less complex and less important than you have found it should not be tolerated.

Louis D. Rubin. *Sewanee Review*. Summer, 1966. p. 735

Mencken's seeming callousness reflected the harshness of the dogmas of social Darwinism, but it was also in part an impression created by his literary technique. Stereotyping is a form of exaggeration with considerable value for writers who, like Mencken, specialize in invective and ridicule. Such an author wants his readers to share his animus against a particular group or a type representative of the group. Stereotyping enables him to ignore all the differences among the members of the group which make them unique personalities and which might enlist his readers' sympathies with his victims. If he has the stylistic resourcefulness, he can portray the evil traits he attributes to the group so vividly that he succeeds in making many readers accept his judgments. The

danger is that stereotyping may become not a conscious technique but a habitual manner of thought.

Douglas C. Stenerson. *American Quarterly*. Winter, 1966. p. 690

As one of the most influential critics of his period [Mencken] led the battle against the Puritan tradition, against the disproportionate influence of rural America, the ''Bible Belt'' that produced what Herbert Hoover would call the ''noble experiment'' of Prohibition. He attacked the censorship that then made it hard to treat sex at all honestly. . . . Similarly Mencken beat the drum for the leading writers of the '20s. Like him, Dreiser, O'Neill, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, and the rest are now generally patronized when not ignored, because they were overrated in their day; yet they helped to mark America's ''coming of age,'' a maturity that our young people can take for granted. Although they were all writers to outgrow, they enabled us to outgrow them—and then too easily to grow ungrateful. . . .

Mencken is more than a museum piece. He left some solid work, notably his thorough, loving study of the American language, but also in his contributions to literary criticism. He is still enjoyable reading because of the verve with which he attacked shams that are by no means extinct. His gusto can be more refreshing because his declared prejudices are easier to discount than the more fashionable prejudices of the '70s.

Herbert J. Muller. *New Republic*. Feb. 12, 1972. p. 32

Alas, there is no Mencken. He is gone for good. Furthermore, if his counterpart were to appear before us today and take up the vigil of the master where he left off, he wouldn't be able to get away with it for very long. For the conditions that made a Mencken possible and plausible back in the 1920's, when he was in his public heyday, simply do not exist any more. Nor do the conditions obtain that in the decade of the 1910's permitted him to achieve preeminence as a critic of literature and champion of the bold moderns who opened up American fiction to the insights of the twentieth century. Mencken was of a specific time and place, and when the time ended and the place took on a different look, he was out of it. What most of those who lament his absence today forget is that Mencken ceased to perform his now-legendary function as Lord High Executioner of American Poltroonery several decades before he suffered the stroke that ended his literary career in 1949. The vintage Menckeniana that everyone quotes and longs to have duplicated today was almost all composed in the days of Presidents Wilson, Harding, and Coolidge. By Herbert Hoover's time he wasn't able to bring it off nearly so well, and the Roosevelt years were definitely not for him. Wisely, he realized it soon enough, and turned to other and more fruitful pursuits.

Louis D. Rubin, Jr., in *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (Rutgers). 1973. pp. 217–8

In one sense . . . Mencken was not a thinker. He was certainly not a philosopher, especially if the role of philosopher is identified with sustained linear argument or with a complicated architectonic of thought. Mencken, of course, never applied the word philosopher to himself, and preferred to think of himself as a critic of ideas. It might be still better to think of him as a dramatist of ideas, since it is not the systematic quality of his ideas that is important but their ingenious and highly stylized development. Nevertheless, his huge gifts of historical imagination could not have been possible without a strong intellectual framework to contain this imagination, to give it shape. While Mencken never used ideas in the manner of the philosopher, never wanted to be tied down to the hardness of intellectual formality and exactitude, his ideas are of no small importance as artistic vision. . . .

Obviously the enduring power of Mencken's vision is due to his wizardry with words and his large gift for simplifying and vivifying ideas, for chopping off little blocks from the vast and inert morass of human knowledge and holding these blocks up to the glare of light, featuring them in their full dramatic intensity. Mencken's greatest genius was not only that he could do this, and do it better than any of his contemporaries, but that he happened to hit upon, with fine and exact precision, most of the great verities of life in America, upon our most persistent and troublesome social conditions and disorders. The continuing interest of Americans in Mencken is due not merely to the fact that he was a vivid though now somewhat remote and alien figure of the twenties, that he captivated a generation of intellectuals who were struggling against small-town smugness and complacency, or against an impoverished cultural and social life, but that he continues to address himself to our problems today.

George H. Douglas. *H.L. Mencken: Critic of American Life* (Archon, 1978), pp. 14–16

American criticism was a dry, juiceless pursuit which threw a very dim light on the literature (principally the English literature) of the past: it considered that it was making a significant contribution to human knowledge if it counted the number of irregular verbs in *Beowulf* or located some Latin source for an obscure passage in *The Faerie Queene*. It could not be bothered, it felt that it would be beneath its dignity to bother, with the literature that was taking shape around it.

Mencken's criticism differed from this not just in degree but in kind. There had simply never been anything like it before. Though he was extraordinarily well read, he gave little time to mining the classics of earlier generations; his work is notably free of both quotation and learned allusion. He preferred to deal with the contemporary—and in his role as a book reviewer this meant dealing as much or more with the bad, the third-and fourth-rate, as with the good. Indeed, it was the attention that he gave to the bad, and the ridicule he poured upon it month after month after month in *The Smart Set*, that exposed it for what it was and so cleared the path for better and more honest work.

When he wrote about the good—Conrad's novels, for example, or Dreiser's—he illumined it superbly for the benefit of those who had read or would read it, but at the same time he was at an infinite remove from that tribe that Hemingway would later call ''explainers.'' That is to say, however much insight he might bring to bear upon an author's craftsmanship and thought, he never looked for symbolism or two or three layers of hidden meaning. His analyses, in fact, could be read with pleasure and profit by people who had no particular interest in Conrad or Dreiser. Often—there are those who complain that it was too often—his consideration of the work of other men was only a point of departure for setting forth his own ideas; such great essays as ''The National Letters,'' ''Puritanism as

a Literary Force,'' and ''The Sahara of the Bozart'' not only trace the history of American literature but are a part of it. . . .

His thought, it should be unnecessary to say, was seldom original and never profound. There is no point in making him out to have been a great thinker, and any suggestion that he was one would have evoked a violent reaction from him—either he would have burst into guffaws or disappeared quietly into a nearby ocean. ''Great Thinkers'' were precisely the kind of people whom he distrusted most. His ideas are chiefly notable for their solid common sense—but common sense was a rather rare commodity in the America of his time, and perhaps that is the reason why he seemed so unusual and irritatingly different. If there is a larger supply of it today, if life is saner and more intelligent and a bit pleasanter to live, he deserves much of the credit for that fact. We also have to be grateful to him for giving us a body of literature that, a generation after his passing, is still capable of reminding us that laughter is the best antidote for our troubles, and that it remains the only really effective way for disposing of the ''charlatans,'' ''mountebanks,'' and ''frauds'' which, despite his best efforts, continue in our midst.

Charles A. Fecher. *Mencken: A Study of His Thought* (Knopf, 1978), pp. 17, 352

Mencken was only a second-rate philosopher when he came to do a set piece, but he was a wiser and a better writer as a journalist, and as such an original. Like all originals, he was a bad master. By which I mean that he is a dangerous model for authors of lesser talent. During the 1920s, American newspapers and magazines, even the *Smart Set* and the *American Mercury* themselves, were full of Mencken imitators, who imitated only the windy rhetoric, the facetious polysyllables, the verbosity. There must have been some awful undergraduate essays spawned by Mencken's fame. This, however, is the price the public has to pay for the appearance of any genuine original. It was the same, in his day, with Dickens. And with Mark Twain. And any year after *The Rite of Spring* the concert halls were glutted with fourth-rate Stravinskys. . . .

Intellectual clowns are wits, and Mencken could certainly be witty. But he was also, and I maintain more remarkably, a humorist, and all humorists are professional mountebanks. They instinctively (when they are good) and deliberately (when they are bad) adopt an attitude toward the facts of life that is more naive than that of their audience. This puts the audience in a superior frame of mind, which is the proper frame for the agreeable form of compassion known as laughter. However, the laughter would remain in its pure state of pity if the humorist were really naive. He is, in fact, sharper than his audience. But the successful technique of humor demands that he should throw furtive hints of intelligence to his readers, as if they were his only allies in a world of oafs. The circuit of flattery is now complete. The audience begins by chuckling at the simpleness of the writer and goes on to laugh in triumph at the sudden discovery that they and he alone form a secret society of mockers at the great mass of men.

Alistair Cooke. In *On Mencken*, ed. John Dorsey (Knopf, 1980), pp. 99–100, 107–8

In *God's Trombones* . . . [James Weldon] Johnson tried to fulfill [H.L.] Mencken's prophecy of the American poet who would express the inner life of his people by using to the full the vast flexibility and resources of the living American language. It is not surprising that Mencken published one of Johnson's poetical sermons, ''Go Down, Death!'' in the *American Mercury* (April 1927), and called it in print ''one of the most remarkable and moving poems of its type ever written in America.'' Indeed, Johnson became a model for him of what could be done with the Negro idiom in poetry. When Carl Van Vechten sent Mencken some early poems by Langston Hughes, written in dialect, for possible publication in the *Mercury*, Mencken rejected them, telling Van Vechten that the young man in question ought to read Johnson's strictures on Negro language. And as we know, Hughes must have gotten the hint that dialect poetry was not his medium, for he never wrote it again. After 1925, he began to develop his own unique vernacular style from his observations of real black life in the Harlem streets.

Thus, despite his neglect by critics of the Harlem Renaissance, Mencken is an inescapable presence in the history of this literary movement. Even its negative side, what Sterling Brown has called its penchant for ''exotic primitives,'' might to some extent be laid at Mencken's door. Certainly the unjustly maligned Van Vechten should not bear the brunt of Brown's criticism, for the Dionysian worldview of *Nigger Heaven* was already stale Pilsner by the time Van Vechten developed it. Still, I believe that Mencken gave Johnson and other black artists a perspective by which they could attempt, like Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, to ''forge in the smithy of [their] souls the uncreated conscience of [their] race.'' If the results did not quite match the glorious expectations, there were many other reasons for the Renaissance's failures besides Mencken's presence. Certainly what can be said of the pre-Renaissance collaborations of Johnson and Mencken is that they anticipated many of the major themes of the literary movement. Satire of the master race, the search for an authentic poetical language, a connection between the Harlem Renaissance and the Irish Renaissance, the conflict between pagan and puritan, youth and age, past and present—all these things Mencken and Johnson had touched on, and their legacy had a profound effect on the exciting, creative period to come.

Charles Scruggs. ''H.L. Mencken and James Weldon Johnson: Two Men Who Helped Shape a Renaissance.'' In Douglas C. Stonerson, ed. *Critical Essays on H.L. Mencken* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1987), pp. 199–200

As a humorist, Mencken embraced all of America. The resident of Hollins Street, who named his pet turtle Mrs. Mary Baker Eddy, ranged easily, as a writer, from slapstick to black humor. Mencken was always more than willing to laugh at folly, especially when his fellow Americans became too serious, and hence far too confused, to laugh at themselves. If Mencken found little sacred, then it was for the simple reason, as he saw things, that little deserved to be. ''One horse-laugh is worth ten thousand syllogisms,'' he exclaimed. ''It is not only more effective; it is also vastly more intelligent.'' Fashions vary, Mencken well knew. Presidents come and go; one euphonious abstraction replaces another, and good times follow bad. The human animal, however, changes little. Mencken's laughter, like Mark Twain's, remains salubrious.

To Mencken's credit, his iconoclasm extended to his own work. He despised special pleading and, unlike most people, genuinely felt more comfortable with censure than with praise. Mencken

recognized that his mature writing, to say nothing of his early work, was widely uneven in quality. He knew that he wrote too much, but he saw from the beginning that his worst sin would have been silence about a matter that interested him. He never claimed that his thinking was profound. Some have criticized Mencken's ideas as commonplace; *commonsensical*, I suggest, would be a more accurate adjective. From our later vantage point, a number of Mencken's polemical pieces fail to persuade. Mencken always viewed attack as the best defense; the fury of his assaults and his considerable gifts as a stylist often hid, at least for the moment, the shoddiness of his rhetorical technique. His political predictions were often laughable and some of his judgments about literature downright embarrassing. This man who railed at American provincialism was, on occasion, quite parochial himself. Finally, Mencken was neither devil nor demigod. Rather, he was a writer of immense talent who, much to his benefit, lived during an age that could appreciate his gifts. . . .

As a young poet, Mencken concluded that the fate of the man ''who fought for the right'' was oblivion, nothing more than a gravestone ravaged by time. His own career belied this lugubrious pronouncement. For half a century, no matter what role he was playing, Mencken's public life was characterized by bellicose individualism, unwavering pessimism, and considerable integrity. These qualities made him a national force in his own day and memorable to posterity. . . .

He defended the right of authors to compose as they saw fit and the right of editors and publishers to seek writing of quality without regard to its moral tenor. In every available forum, he argued forcefully that political radicals, whose ideas he found preposterous, had the right to air their views. He battled for the right of the individual citizen not to be harassed by those persuaded that they know what is best for him and for the right of all Americans, regardless of race, to mingle freely in a public place. Mencken's defense of liberty was as nonpartisan as it was continuous. Many have claimed that their opponents deserve to be heard; Mencken actually meant it. It is this struggle against imposed silence and conformity, this vibrant celebration of the freedom to dissent, that marks Mencken's most enduring contribution to the land that gave him such a wealth of material and so much delight.

Vincent Fitzpatrick. *H.L. Mencken* (New York: Continuum, 1989), pp. 113–15

The dark qualities [in Mencken], including the deep skepticism that went beyond a distrust of American institutions to a skepticism about human nature itself, were indeed firmly in place from the beginning. But that is not the reason we read Mencken, is not the essential Mencken any more than Samuel Clemens after 1895 was the essential Mark Twain. What was essential, rather, and what made Mencken sui generis was an exuberance, a boldness, a courage to challenge old and established ways of thinking—in short, the confidence to be a free man. The early work in the *Book of Prefaces*, the *Prejudices*, and the other essays of the 1920s, all the while denying the transcendent importance and the intrinsic worth of human life, issued that denial with all the energy and joy of an affirmation by any other man. ''Here I stand, unshaken and undespairing, a loyal and devoted Americano,'' Mencken wrote in the early 1920s. ''Here am I, a bachelor of easy means, forty-two years old, unhampered by debts or issue, able to go wherever I please and to stay as long as I please—here am I, contentedly and even smugly basking beneath the Stars and Stripes.''

The rhythms and cadences were unmistakably Whitman's, the boldness and sassiness of this earlier Mencken. His writing of the early twenties was his own ''Song of Myself,'' chanted not long after he had burst fully onto the national scene, just at the moment he was celebrating the nation's imbecilities and miseries—the sins of the South and the pruderies of New England, the fakeries of California and the provincialism of the hinterlands in between—with all the vigor and gusto with which that earlier rude and vulgar fellow had sung the nation's triumphs and glories. For all his European antecedents and, in an American context, his parallels to Samuel Clemens, Mencken bore at his indomitable peak a remarkable resemblance—if, sometimes, as in a distorted mirror—to that other exuberant nineteenth-century American voice. He was our nay-saying Whitman, and whatever his manifold inadequacies of heart and conscience, he sounded his own barbaric yawp over the roofs of the timid and the fearful, the contented and the smug.

Fred C. Hobson. *Mencken: A Life* (New York: Random House, 1994), pp. 547–48

Sad to have to report, the chief attention that H.L. Mencken has received over the past decade—a period that has seen, in addition to a continuing biographical interest, the posthumous publication of three of his time-embargoed books (of which *Thirty-five Years of Newspaper Work* is the latest)—has been over the question of whether or not he was anti-Semitic and racist. Not, this, quite the attention that Mencken himself had planned. . . .

What Mencken had that couldn't be taught was an iron streak of powerful common sense. He had a feeling for the reality of things, which made it easy for him to skewer both the platitudes of the clergy of his day as well as the social panaceas of the academics and intellectuals. He much admired competence, and himself knew how things worked. If the gullible American, boobus Americanus, was one of Mencken's principal players, the perennial quack—professors, ministers, politicians, and other problem solvers—was another. A quack, in Mencken's view, was anyone who pretended to know who created the universe, why there was sin and suffering in the world, what intentions lay behind natural law, and why man has his present form; also, anyone who thought he could change human nature. . . .

Nor in these [new] books [*A Second Mencken Chrestomathy*, ed. Terry Teachout; *Thirty-five Years of Newspaper Work*, ed. Fred Hobson, Vincent Fitzpatrick, and Bradford Jacobs], does he show any charity to those who happened to hold opinions different from his own; and he is least charitable to those who took a different line from his on the two world wars. Such people are written off as muddled, stupid, cowardly. A spirit of sourness, a want of Mencken's characteristic large-heartedness, pervades these books, largely, I believe, because of the continued dominance over American political life of [Franklin D.] Roosevelt and the prosecution of the Second World War.

Which brings one to the vexing question of Mencken and the Jews. . . . For all his high spirits, his immense talent, his considerable intelligence, Mencken, when he felt himself cornered by events, decided to blame the Jews.

Joseph Epstein. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. June 9, 1995, p. 14

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MEREDITH, William (1919–)

It is kindest to pass over briefly the earlier pieces [in *Love Letter from an Impossible Land*], which inevitably and quite frankly derive from the Latin and Metaphysical poets, or are sheer imitations of Auden, Spender, Rukeyser and other contemporaries. The more formal or traditional the pattern, the more cramped, mannered, and rhetorical they are. Too often they bear the awkward burden of abstract intellectual concept, seldom the exact, salty flavor of genuine experience. But when William Meredith leaves the bookshelves and becomes the flyer, he becomes also a poet in his own right.

Ruth Lechlitner. *Poetry*. July, 1944. p. 227

Mr. Meredith's art is tough-minded, delicate, and impatient with slovenly writing in himself and in others. . . . [*The Open Sea*] is as solid an accomplishment in the actual composition of a book (as distinguished from the composition of a single poem) as I have seen in a long time. The very consistency of excellence makes it difficult to single out single poems for praise, but I have a personal favorite, in any case. It is a sonnet called ''The Illiterate.'' Its virtues, as I feel them, are precision, grace, and a profound depth of human feeling which is curiously conveyed through the daring experimental spirit. . . . We have been told by Vested Interests that you can't write sonnets any longer, that you can't do this and you can't do that. The only answer to the theoretical absolutist is the living and embarrassing evidence of a beautiful poem.

James Wright. *The Yale Review*. June, 1958. p. 609

The elegance which is compounded of compassion, intelligence, and linguistic precision once again characterizes the work of William Meredith. In *The Wreck of the Thresher* he is fascinated by the ironies in our assumptions and by the paradox of our identities. There is a recurrence of upside-down, inside-out mirror imagery, as of the branches and the roots of a tree. Meredith is sane and exploratory, yet subjective and nostalgic. And he maintains a simplicity of form which works nicely in behalf of his richly complex grasp of the nature of things. One only wishes for the elimination of such gaucheries as ''At the Opera.''

Fred Bornhauser. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Winter, 1965. p. 150

In connection with William Meredith's verse, the two words that come most often to mind—that is, to *my* mind—are ''balance'' and ''relaxation.'' He is introspective and a little diffident, grave and perplexedly troubled, particularly when he can't do anything about what is happening, what has happened. He is the kind of poet who stands looking at the ocean where the atomic submarine *Thresher* went down, meditating, speculating, grieving intelligently. Things of this nature hurt him into poetry, but not poetry of great intensity. Instead, it seems muffled and distant, a kind of thin, organized, slightly academic murmur. One keeps listening for Meredith's *voice*, and is baffled at its being, although one is surer and surer it is there, so consistently elusive. . . . At his best he is a charming poet, cultivated, calm, quietly original, expansive and reflective, moving over wide areas slowly, lightly, mildly and often very memorably. [1965]

James Dickey. *Babel to Byzantium* (Grosset). 1971. pp. 197–8

''Art by its very nature asserts at least two kinds of good—order and delight.'' So William Meredith, in his introduction to a selection from Shelley, a poet who interests this decorous American for his patience with established verse forms, being ''otherwise

impatient of everything established.'' Meredith's declension of order and delight as versions of the good, a pairing susceptible of a whole range of inflections, from identity to opposition, is the generating trope of his own poetry, its idiopathy or *primary affection*.

In his four books of poems, even in his translations of Apollinaire, a curious restraint, a self-congratulatory withholding that is partly evasive and sly, partly loving and solicitous, testify, like so many essays in emphasis, to the war between delight and order, and yet to the necessity of divising them in each other: if order is not found in delight, the world falls apart: if delight is not taken in order, the self withers. Success, for Meredith, is provisional—he does not ask more. . . .

The persistent modesty of this disarming poet makes an assessment of his achievement—its value, and in the old sense its virtue—something of a violation of his very temper. The arms of which he would strip us are self-importance and heedlessness, those devices we employ to get through life more cheaply. Meredith's voice now, submissive to his experience and the representation of a discipline at a higher frequency than itself, recalls us to a more expensive texture.

Richard Howard. *Alone with America* (Atheneum). 1971. pp. 318, 326

[Meredith] is often compared with Richard Wilbur for imposing, with considerable grace, the most rigorous formal demands upon his verse. Such writing had a notable boom in the 'fifties, and following the usual sea-change in literary taste is viewed with suspicion now. But it seems unfair for Meredith or Wilbur to be held accountable for the refined disasters produced by their imitators. Meredith's best poems are elegant but not precious, ordered but not finicky, deeply thoughtful but not recondite. . . . The new poems [in *Earth Walk*] . . . show that Meredith is still making advances at an age when most writers are traveling in tried-and-true ruts. . . . Time and again Meredith has discovered dignity where other men have ceased to look for it, and given it new life in his poems. I am happy for him that he has seen such things, and for us that he has written them down.

Robert B. Shaw. *Poetry*. July, 1971. p. 233

Like Frost, Meredith portrays a natural landscape of fields and woods, the clearing where ''a whippoorwill calls in the dark,'' the hill where the poet has ''planted spruce and red pine.'' But Meredith's poetry also incorporates the contemporary city where a man's wallet is snatched from him on a stairway by a boy who, running away, ''turns a brown face briefly/phrased like a question.'' And whereas, in Frost, the landscape of farm and countryside has significance as part of an ethical drama, in which man pits his strength and courage against inimical nature, in Meredith the props of the natural scene stand for a deeply intuited consciousness of an identity between our physical selves and the earth we inhabit and are made of. If Meredith's poetry has a signature, it is the tree, which appears over and over again as a literal object in a scene, an emblem, a self, rooted in earth and growing outward to air and sun.

The poet of *Earth Walk* chooses to place himself squarely in reality, conveying to us a sense of the mind's rootedness in a body against whose weight we struggle to raise up decent lives.

Marie Borroff. *The Yale Review*. Winter, 1971. p. 285

Mr. Meredith places [in *Earth Walk*] his most recent poems first in line instead of last—a wise decision, I think. . . . I do not mean to suggest that Mr. Meredith in his early period was ever a bad poet; too often, however, he was not a very exciting one. Yet, curiously, from the beginning he was writing just outside the camp of ''modernism,'' for the most part speaking in a subdued, almost timid voice directly to the reader and making of personal experience a fitting subject for his low-key meditations. He may have looked more to recent poets than to Whitman for inspiration, but he was, in one sense, writing in the 'forties the way most people are now writing in the 'seventies.

By making this point I do not argue that he is one of the true pioneers of the new era. There is little of the pioneer spirit in his work. And today, as the boisterous crowd surges forward, chanting, shouting, and waving banners, Mr. Meredith marches along a hundred yards behind, quietly playing his flute.

Thomas H. Landess. *Sewanee Review*. Winter, 1973. p. 148

Since ''Resemblances between the life and character of Hazard are not disclaimed but are much fewer than the author would like,'' we can take Hazard [of *Hazard, the Painter*] as Meredith's model of an admirable man as well as his opportunity to speak of himself in the third person—perhaps not such a surprising tactic in a poet so decorous and diffident, but a very surprising one in a poet who has spoken so beautifully for himself in his own person so often in the past.

In devising a persona through whom he will talk, Meredith places his voice at too far a remove from his experience (Hazard's experience is of course Meredith's, whether historically true or not); the voice becomes so elusive that Meredith is often in danger of vanishing from his own poetry. . . . [We] realize with acute discomfort that we're hearing Meredith talking about how Meredith talks about Hazard. Such convolution shows the seams of the art; the fiction evaporates and we're left with psychological history instead of poetry. What we finally hear is neither a whole characterization nor a whole poet, but a dispossessed consciousness shunting back and forth between the two.

Except for Hazard's equanimity in accepting age, it's hard to know why Meredith finds him admirable. . . .

The best expression of the book's prevailing mood, and one of its best poems, is ''Rhode Island''. . . . Quite a good poem, and reminiscent of Meredith at his quiet, cultivated best: the gentle wit; the graceful handling of a line which wonderfully replicates Hazard's lazy, random thought; that dexterously placed concluding joke whereby the enervated Hazard continues occupying a necessary space while the small frets of his life chatter on about him. But the charm of the poem derives from its inconsequentiality as much as from anything else.

That's a part of the hazard Meredith takes with his new book—the risk of making poetry out of slim occasions. But perhaps his largest risk lies in continuing to make poetry out of a sensibility which in its easy optimism, its insulating comforts, and its abiding concerns for custom and ceremony must seem to many quite at odds with the prevailing spirit of our times, not least to Meredith himself.

Alan Helms. *Parnassus*. Spring/Summer, 1976, pp. 220–21, 224

The Wreck of the Thresher, published in 1964, was the book which most firmly established the nature and strength of William Meredith's poetry. It seems now, two books later, to have been the culmination of a development in certain directions from which the poet has since swerved, though not unrewardingly. *The Wreck of the Thresher* reveals unobtrusive mastery of craft traditionally conceived; it is not full of sonnets, villanelles, sestinas, or other insistent evidences that the poet is comfortable in formal cages; but beneath the steady, honest lines with their sometimes unpredictable rhyme schemes, there is a sense of assurance that for Meredith, form is a method, not a barrier. In its range of subject, tone and mode, the book consistently offers the voice of a civilized man, a man with good but not flashy manners, engaged in encounters with matters of inexhaustible interest. . . .

Meredith's most recent book, *Hazard, the Painter* (1975) [, a] collection of sixteen poems[,] seems to have been designed to provoke a number of reactions, not all of them charitable, and not all of them familiar to readers of Meredith's previous books. . . .

The style of *Hazard* appears to be more casual, less concentrated, than anything Meredith has written before. One notices, for instance, that there is not a semicolon anywhere in these poems; instead, the independent clauses tumble along over their commas, contributing to the feeling of interior life, as in the second half of this stanza from ''Politics,'' a poem about old liberals gathering to hear jazz for McGovern. . . .

Gradually, as one rereads these poems, the accumulation of anecdote and detail provides the density that is missing from the style, and there arises the illusion of a life, a way of life, made difficult by a difficult time, but still enjoyable and cherished. ''The culture is in late imperial decline,'' Hazard thinks in the line taken from Berryman; and in ''Hazard's Optimism,'' considering his vision of the parachutist as he himself tries a parachute jump, Hazard concludes thus. . . .

The mask of Hazard gives Meredith, at least for the duration of this deceptively brief book, the freedom to work out of ways in which he might think he was becoming set. In the chattiness that contains more than it at first seems to, beneath the detailed surfaces, there is room here for satire as well as for a serious, loving exploration of a peculiar world.

But Hazard is not destined to take over Meredith's voice and life. He is an interesting character met along the way, and, having met him, Meredith is usefully diverted from his way. There are too few uncollected poems on which to base conclusions about apparent directions to come, except to note that in some recent ''dialogue poems'' responding to wittily chosen epigraphs, Meredith continues to find fresh ways of reminding us that there is joy in plucking at the hems of even the darkest mysteries.

Henry Taylor. *Hollins Critic*. Feb., 1979, pp. 1–2, 14–15

The distinctive quality of William Meredith's *The Cheer* is its precision of statement, achieved for the most part without falling into aridity and abstraction. Mr. Meredith is refreshingly unafraid to *think* in poetry or to use the wide vocabulary and pliant syntax that many poets now deliberately avoid in favor of vatic pronouncement or egalitarian plainness. . . . I am struck by the narrowness of the gap between the versified quotation from Freud and the continuation in Mr. Meredith's own voice. True, it is the poet who moves from the abstractness of ''attitude'' and ''admiration'' to the more particular hospitals, tombstones and trees; but surely the most arresting word in this passage is the abstract (and Freudian) ''incestuous,'' which is endlessly suggestive in this context.

While few of these poems are remarkable for their depth of feeling, some have memorable imagery and music. . . . If, as Mr. Meredith says in his title poem, ''The cheer is hidden in the right words,'' this is one of the more cheerful books I've read lately.

Paul Breslin. *New York Times Book Section*. March 22, 1981, p. 14

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MERRILL, James (1926–1995)

That this collection of formalist poetry by James Merrill could be published in the present time of maximum disorder augurs well for letters in the republic. In *First Poems* is evidence of positive devotion to the first principles of traditional poetics: regular meter, rhyme, involved stanzaic patterns and organic form. . . . In fact his subtle and luxurious and elegant moods are not particularly involved with the mainstream of modernist ideas. His supreme criterion of experience is art. . . .

The reason and purpose of Merrill's method is to make time stand still by causing objects and thought to become indistinguishable. It accounts in large part for the astonishing grace and eloquence of style, the Jamesian syntax, the elaborate diction and languid tone of the verse. The thought in Merrill's work is not especially brilliant, but, clothed in exquisite language and superlative meter, it results in extraordinary poetry.

Anthony Harrigan. *Poetry*. July, 1951. pp. 233–4

James Merrill is the most graceful, attractive, and accomplished of the ''elegants'': the highly-skilled, charming, agreeable craftsmen of the forties and fifties who promised most and delivered least. These are the leisurely European travellers: the rootless, well-mannered, multi-lingual young men: the sophisticated, talented, slightly world-weary occasional poets of the last twenty years, who have done everything perfectly according to quite acceptable standards, and have just as surely stopped short of real significance, real engagement, of the daring and self-forgetfulness that might have made the Word come alive, preferring as they did to settle for decor, decorum, and the approval of a body of like-minded critics who affirmed the assumptions of this approach, and pointed out little tricks of rhyme and phrasing as if these were permanently valuable additions to the spirit. . . . Like Wallace Stevens . . . Merrill operates exclusively in that area where objects are engaged

in becoming assemblages of approximate comparisons of other things to themselves. Unlike Stevens' poems, whose meanings are usually implicit and frequently open to a number of interpretations, Merrill's nearly always make neat summations, prefigure, insist on, furnish explicit judgments, instruct, edify, so that experience itself comes to resemble a kind of dandyish, Gidean private-school teacher.

James Dickey. *Sewanee Review*. Summer, 1959. pp. 504–5

The originality of Merrill's novel-about-a-novel [*The (Diblos) Notebook*] is that unlike the novelist's notebooks put into novels by Gide, Huxley, Durrell, or other users of the device, his notebook presents something like a facsimile in typography of actual working pages. The prose is scrappy, disorganized, and full of these parentheses and cancellations. This may be only a trick, but it is a good one, because the trick works. The two different versions of the story, occurring as they do in nearly simultaneous fragments, may provoke little more than the usual reflections on the real and the imagination. But the small puzzlements of the words themselves, the cancelled or broken phrases, the second choices—these are interesting. Merrill is a good poet, he has the skills of our period, particularly the Marianne Moore skill of the microscopically exact description, so accurate that it seems a bit odd. He knows how one line of dialogue can create a person's presence if it is the one right line. His trick allows him to be laconic, to skip transitions and exposition, to drag in as many allusions and reflections as he pleases. Many pages of the book are very attractive in this way, almost like poems. . . . Its true subject is its own manner and style, its elusive, almost furtive brilliance, so that the book really is about the poetic impression, the quick insight, the misunderstanding, the discarded sketch as opposed to the constructed and finished museum piece.

John Thompson. *New York Review of Books*. May 6, 1965. p. 23

James Merrill is an excellent poet, who has not, it seems to me, gotten anywhere near the praise and recognition he deserves. His very early poems . . . were beautifully executed but somewhat frail, especially in comparison with the work in *Water Street* and *Nights and Days*. Without sacrificing any of their technical skill, his poems have become more openly dramatic, and he manages some weird effects by sometimes deliberately clouding our sense of who precisely the *dramatis personae* are. There are poems in which the ''you'' being addressed is not quite distinct from the poet; but this calculated uncertainty about pronouns gives an interesting excitement to the poems when it occurs. Inasmuch as Mr. Merrill has also written several plays (as well as two novels), it is not surprising that his poems should have this particular dramatic flavor, which is there even in the most meditative of them.

Anthony Hecht. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1966. p. 331

Readers of *Water Street* will remember it as marking a change, new powers expressed in poems that release the force of the coiled past, a personal past. . . . The sly bows to his own richness of style are part of Merrill's strength. There is no pretense that the poet is shedding his skin; he keeps all the playful and rewarding complication that marked his earlier poems, but gains a psychological intensity and authority that is new. . . . *Nights and Days* contains poems as supple as those of *Water Street* and continues its surprising liberties. But it includes something further, two important long poems, ''From the Cupola'' and ''The Thousand and Second Night,'' the latter of which seems to me Merrill's best work. . . . Merrill's poems are some of the most convincing expressions we have of the pressure of fantasy, and of the abiding, unavoidable connections between fantasy and the commonplace.

David Kalstone. *Partisan Review*. Winter, 1967. pp. 146–8

In this volume [*Braving the Elements*], Merrill has found a use, finally, for all his many talents. His surreptitious fondness for narrative, which issued rather badly in his early novel *The Seraglio* (1957) and his later sketch for a novel *The (Diblos) Notebook* (1965), has now found a clear medium in his wonderful short narrative lyrics; his almost unnaturally exquisite gift for euphony has become unobtrusive but no less exquisite, in fact more so; his ironic and wayward humor has been allowed to surface in poetry as well as in prose; his single best subject—love—has found a way of expressing itself masked and unmasked at once, instead of hiding almost mummified in swathings of secrecy.

Helen Vendler. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 24, 1972. p. 5

Merrill may well be our subtlest examiner of waking nightmares, some of them apparently his own. The usual protagonist of a Merrill poem is an individual who bears (I suspect) certain likenesses to Merrill himself: a less innocent Lambert Strether moving uneasily through an era of hard acid rock and public assassinations. Sensitive, middle-aging, he skims along the border of his society, skeptical of self-dramatizing public statesmen, distrustful of the daily newspaper and its ''bulletin-pocked columns,'' unwilling to be Aquarianized by his counterculture neighbors. . . .

A superiority of Merrill's is that, along with a crushing burden of sophistication, he carries a childlike freshness of observation, a certain ability to look back into his boyhood with detachment.

X.J. Kennedy. *Atlantic Monthly*. March, 1973. pp. 101–2

No poet of our moment has finer formal gifts with which to make his affirmation. Merrill is at ease and very good in free verse, but his most stunningly beautiful work comes when the greatest number of restrictions have imposed themselves. The different forms and styles he uses now are the ones he has used for years; he simply gets better and better at doing what he always did well. Because there is nothing of a formal nature that he cannot do, nothing is accidental, everything was meant to be exactly as it is. His use of meter and rhyme is anything but ''oldfangled'' he takes liberties with the classic forms—a Merrill sonnet sequence, ballad, or villanelle may be too flexible for the purist—and bends with pleasure and finesse to the double-dactyl invented by Anthony Hecht and John Hollander. . . . Virtually all his reviewers have justly lavished praise upon the range of Merrill's cultivated mind among the music, art, language, and customs of many countries, his

delicacy, elegance, wit, polish, euphony, and descriptive powers. In *Braving the Elements* all this is as true as ever.

Judith Moffett. *Hollins Critic*. June, 1973. pp. 8–9

[Merrill] is a poet in a situation of leisure, travel, civilized friendships, airplanes, motor cars, Mexico, Greece. He can be unashamedly ''camp'' and he has fun and wit, but his brittleness is redeemed by his sympathy. His themes are often those of pathos, a rather unfashionable emotion today. But the subjects of his poems (which can be extremely obscure) are really only excuses for the very rich harvest of a purely poetic—imagistic, allusive, word-jocular—world.

Stephen Spender. *New York Review of Books*. Sept. 20, 1973. p. 11

Merrill has absorbed into verse many of the resources of daily conversation and prose. Still, there is a special strangeness and sometimes strain to Merrill's colloquial style, a taut alertness to the meanings which lurk in apparently casual words and phrases. We may find this in all good poets, but Merrill raises it to a habit of vigilance, a quickened control and poise, sometimes bravado, which he clearly trusts as a source of power. When Merrill uses an idiom, he turns it over curiously, as if prospecting for ore. . . .

The figures who appear and re-appear in Merrill's poems have more substance than the legendary heroines who were muses to the sonneteers, but they also have the same mesmerizing force, as he considers and reconsiders their shaping impact on his life. To reread Merrill's books since *Water Street* is to discover him preparing a stage whose objects and cast of characters become increasingly luminous. They become charged with symbolic meaning and release symbolic reverberations from otherwise ordinary narrative event. . . .

Much of Merrill's interest in narrative and everyday experience has been aimed at discovering the charges with which certain objects have become invested for him. He seems in his developed poetry to be asking the Freudian or the Proustian question: what animates certain scenes—and not others—for us? Over the years Merrill's poems have used the objects and stages of daily life, the arrangements of civilized behavior, almost as if he expected to waken sleeping presences and take by surprise the myths he lives by.

David Kalstone. *Five Temperaments: Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery* (Oxford Univ. Pr., 1977), pp. 79–80, 82–83

Is there a visual and an auditory comprehension of words alone that reveals their highest importance as symbols of feeling? Long after Merrill's resolve against ''counterfeit language'' in his search for essentials, he continues to show a fondness for words in their shapes. What are these but words humming in darkness, revealing their shapes only in sound: ''A fly embroiders darkness with insane / Frazzle and quirk.'' The image appears at the close of *Mirabell*, immediately preceding a final meditation on light. The poet is falling asleep. An ''embroidering'' fly buzzes in the room. The annoyance is represented in an ''insanity'' of word-sound and word-shape. So is it for a poet to regard in its wholeness the autonomy of the word.

James Baird. *Southwest Review*. Summer, 1989, pp. 361, 368

Merrill's position is that progress and knowledge in the beginning, as now, come not only from the reasoned world of science but also from the realm of visionary quests within the self. Even in this theory, however, he uses scientific concepts. For example, an equivalence used throughout *Sandover* is between the image of the God within matter (the atom's ''point'') and the God within the human soul. Hence the scientist's quest for the secrets of matter matches the visionary's quest for interior knowledge. To some extent, then, Merrill posits a Platonic scheme, seeing the world's progress in terms of human nature becoming increasingly in tune with the Divine Mind. . . . In effect, he asserts that there need be no major mind/nature conflict. . . . Nature has paradisal potentiality actualized by Mind; the ''accumulated intelligence'' in the world is the Cosmic Mind's growing ''consciousness'' on earth, from that Mind's genesis in matter and especially the first cell. That the human being is part of this evolving consciousness is seen in humanity's gradual control of the forces of nature; Teilhard de Chardin's thesis of evolution as emergence of the ''nous'' from matter is process now conscious in man.

C.A. Buckley. *Mosaic*. Spring, 1993, pp. 57–58

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MERTON, Thomas (1915–1968)

The more secular early work is made up, at its best, of études which readers of poetry will recognize as in the manner of Wallace Stevens. . . . Quite different are the latter poems on the peace and joy of his vocation, written with a smoothness, a conviction, and a serenity astonishing in our disordered world. Rarely, perhaps never, have the innocence and wide-eyed excitement of the religious life been so well realized in verse. Everything to Merton has become Bethlehem and Jerusalem; all nature is a reminder of the breast-tightening presence of God. But the direct statement of these poems has been achieved at the expense of poetic quality: technically, everything is too bland and easy.

John Frederick Nims. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 26, 1946. p. 36

The Seven Storey Mountain is more than the autobiography of a modern cosmopolite who, ''armored and locked in within my own defectible and blinded self by seven layers of imperviousness,'' toiled up the seven circles of Dante's Purgatory that symbolize the world of today. It is a look into the soul of the climber as he makes his tormented way from the prison of limitless unbelief to ''the four walls of my new freedom.''. . . the author's personal history is peripheral to the story of his religious experience. *The Seven Storey Mountain* is essentially the odyssey of a soul. As such it stands as a more human document than the comparable *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* of John Henry Newman. It has warmth and gusto and Augustinian wit.

Ann F. Wolfe. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 9, 1948. p. 30

. . .*The Seven Storey Mountain* is not merely the record of a twentieth-century Shelley torn by the conflicts of modern life. It is also a clear, objective picture of that life, a true report on persons, places and things as well as states of mind. The descriptions of France, England, New York, and Gethsemani, Kentucky, capture their respective *genius loci*; the flavor and atmosphere of half a dozen schoolrooms are almost miraculously reproduced, and the people Merton discusses, his parents and grandparents, his school friends and associates, are as alive as reality itself. This autobiography gives us the world within men and the world without. It succeeds moreover in demonstrating, not merely stating, man's sharing of the divine life

Francis X. Connolly. *Catholic World*. Nov., 1948. p. 166

Those better versed in the spiritual writers of the past than I am may say that there is nothing really new in [*The Seven Storey Mountain*] and that it sounds like the notes of a good novice who, coming from bar stools, juke boxes and sessions in Greenwich Village, discovers, so to speak, America all over again. But that is exactly the value of this book: to be an account of the personal experience and discovery of an intellectual of our own day, who speaks our language, has our problems and our temper. What good, in a way, is the language of Saint Teresa of Avila, or the Gallic and bourgeois style of the Little Flower, both of which reflect the style of their age, and are obstacles to men who need the stripped-down, caustic and smart language of our day? Even the little angry jabs which interrupt the peaceful flow of this beautiful English and the controversial undertone of so many of its chapters reveal a man of flesh and blood, not somebody petrified by the wax and plaster poured over a human being by the spiritual drill of a novitiate.

H. A. Reinhold. *Commonweal*. April 15, 1949. p. 20

Thomas Merton belongs to the class of writers—intense, one-sided, humorless, propagandist, morally indignant—whose work falls outside the normal canons of criticism. Those who cannot accept it totally must be allowed to smile a little. What Merton has to say touches too nearly the heart of Christianity for it to provoke either hostility or ridicule; but it has proved impossible to display in isolation the more significant items in his personal history and at the same time keep out a note of irony. Merton emerged from his youthful troubles, nourished by an apocalyptic imagination, to become a God-intoxicated man. Having conceived for himself a sublime ideal, he has heroically given it effect. Whatever may be thought of the content of his message or of its relevance to our times, there can be no withholding tribute to the earnestness of his convictions. . . . A practiced writer, he achieves in prose the merits of force and clarity; but it is too highly charged, too diffuse and uneven, to attain distinction. Many of his verses have the authentic ring of poetry. Ring is the word for it; his chosen vocation of silence has instilled no contemplative quietness into his poems.

Aelred Graham. *Atlantic Monthly*. Jan., 1953. pp. 71–2

More important than the grammar is the word the monks' silence speaks. This word, Merton insists [in *The Silent Life*], is not primarily the rhythm and melody of the liturgy; the *opus Dei*, the ancient church prayer offered unceasingly day and night. Nor is the monastery primarily the home of spiritual estheticism, culture, or educational enterprise, or of missionary activity. Its language is above all the language of spiritual liberty. The whole monastic life tends toward this summit of liberty, and it is in the light of this freedom of spirit that we must see and understand all the discipline of the monk, his austerities, his sacrifices, his rules, his obedience, and his vows.

John LaFarge. *Saturday Review*. May 18, 1957. p. 39

Sight and sound and feeling. I have spoken so far only of sound, and indeed that may be enough, for in the poetry of Thomas Merton all the senses work together to one end, the letting of things declare themselves. . . . Yet sound is somehow for Merton the carrying sense, the medium through which experience of any magnitude makes itself seen and felt. Of any magnitude—a reminder that Merton is a noticer of little things as well as huge ones.

Mark Van Doren. Introduction to *Selected Poems* by Thomas Merton (New Directions). 1959. pp. xiv—xv

Convinced that even in America ''the world has moved a very long way towards conformism and passivity'' in the last 20 years, Thomas Merton has written a defense of solitude [*Disputed Questions*] as a way to find our souls and God. He is concerned with the *person*, not with the individual. For mass society is constructed out of individuals, ''empty and alienated human beings who have lost their center and extinguished their own inner light in order to depend in abject passivity upon the mass.'' The establishment of the Kingdom of God can only be the work of mature persons who have reached ''the full supernatural stature of Christ.'' . . . Thomas Merton sees in hermits the highest form of life, for they have renounced the world to which we increasingly conform. They seek God alone with singleness of heart; they aspire more than others to perfect union with Christ; they are ''perfectly united to that infinite Love with which God loves all things in Himself.''

C. Eugene Conover. *Christian Century*. Jan. 18, 1961. pp. 84–5

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MERWIN, W.S. (1927–)

Merwin is a poet of twenty-four who seems to be learning more and more about his craft. He has seen clearly the general cultural drift and quietly set his own sights accordingly, without the usual whimperings *or* heroics. . . . To master a given form, as in his imitation of a medieval dance-of-death poem, Mr. Merwin does sometimes risk falling into mere flatness, and one would prefer to see him taking more chance the other way—toward some explosions of formal structure. But there is no questioning his genuine talent.

M.L. Rosenthal. *New Republic*. Jan. 5, 1953. p. 28

To my mind Merwin's beautiful ''Burning the Cat'' and his ''White Goat, White Ram,'' the latter a fantasy of infant memory, show his religious sensibility to better advantage than the more specifically religious poems—but ''Prodigal Son'' is a good one.

My biggest objection to Merwin is that he pays insufficient attention to the life of individual lines. These suffer from an excess of harmony, which finally jars, and overconsideration of pause with underconsideration of measure, which results in dragged gait. He misses many enjambment opportunities and, while writing lines of comparable length, frustrates the search for regular patterns of stress. The over-all result is a slackness of line which often destroys the shape of a poem, for a poem is best thought of as first a shape (incarnation) of breath (word) in the ear guyed by the tension of verse lines, themselves breaths. A poem is a kind of breathed ballet for the ear. If these shapes in the ear are slack, then the presentation which the poem should finally be, the vision generated by the dance of sense, just doesn't happen.

John Logan. *Commonweal*. Dec. 28, 1956. p. 341

Merwin speaks in a recognizable voice—assured, aloof, impeccable, and just a little bit snotty. You feel always that he must have chosen his subject, that for a subject to choose him would be presumptuous. With Stevens and Henry James, Merwin in his attitude toward language is the most nearly French of American writers. Words to him aren't sacks to lug things in, they're featherweight position-indicators. . . .

But Merwin has another voice—less lovely, perhaps, but gutsier. It's the voice that in his early poem, ''Leviathan,'' spoke what is probably, next to Pound's ''Seafarer,'' the best Anglo-Saxon poetry in modern English. Merwin speaks in this voice more often in *The Drunk in the Furnace* than he has ever done before. . . . Merwin—whose themes in the past have been drawn largely from myth, bestiary, and *objet d'art*—seems for the first time concerned for America. He sees the barrenness of highway, corner bar, pool room at the Lions' Club. Like his own ''Odysseus,'' Merwin is setting forth wearily in new directions. . . . Merwin appears struggling toward more personal and humane matter.

X.J. Kennedy. *Poetry*. May, 1961. pp. 122–3

I can't praise these translations [*The Satires of Persius*] enough. They are the best I have seen from Latin poetry. The purpose of translation, as I understand it, is to convey the meaning. If the reader wishes to have the meter and sound he has to read the original. Merwin conveys the meaning and the emotion magnificently. He draws on a tremendous range of reading and of diction—American slang, literary jargon—to convey Persius' ideas. The poems are accurate and yet come alive naturally.

Robert Bly. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1962. p. 474

Merwin, a skilled poet, has in this book [*The Moving Target*] adopted the prevailing confessional tone, and thus he wishes us to consider him as being in the fashion, with his *personality* as the primary datum. The personality here is the *given*; the poet is therefore necessarily somewhat concealed by the personality. Consequently we must ask ourselves: what type of personality is here revealed? Or, since poets have so many types of personalities, what type of *mask?* Merwin is unquestionably one of our most competent younger poets; his extraordinary *A Mask for Janus* (1952) remains an important book. To one who has followed him, sometimes not without difficulty, through the books published since, it is a relief to be able to report that there is no danger here of the personality damaging the poet. Indeed, the personality is merely a device, which Merwin as poet sets up in order to knock down again.

The personality that Merwin chooses to wear in this book is a familiar one to a reader of the younger contemporary Anglo-American school: Villon intermixed with snippets of *angst*; a guilty rooting up of parents and grandparents; a remorseful childhood. Merwin does not include marital situations or major hospital surgery; nevertheless, the mode is sufficiently a current ''sincere'' chiché to be easily recognizable. But Merwin treats it so coldly and with such an inner distaste that his aristocracy of spirit becomes at once apparent. And so we get not just some, but quite a bit of real poetry out of this volume, with its cold elegance, its arrogant harshness; its marmoreal and haughty gloom. Merwin has the grandeur of the mausoleum. One cannot find five ordinary lines without coming on something extraordinary and good; but it is all

dispersed, nothing connects; all the good stuff is scattered there impartially, inexplicably.

Joseph Bennett. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1963–64. pp. 624–5

I have read through *The Moving Target* twice now and I find I don't have any great enthusiasm for it. I will try to assess why.

Generally the poems in this volume use a personal referent of persistent vagueness: them, their prayers, their faces, their names. Even a specific location is difficult not so much to identify (that might be beside the point) but to grasp some ready and sure sense of it: spirit (whose, what), Possessor (a god? which, who). . . . Merwin addresses the omniscient a lot of the time and, since he is a precisionist the rest of the time, the question comes up and leads to another.

Why does the verse need to be so metaphorical? For all the use of the concrete, to my eye what remains is suggestion, in context surprisingly abstract.

Edward Dorn. *Poetry*. June, 1964. p. 184

Merwin remains the most versatile poet writing in English. Whether or not this has been his choice no one can know; a man does as he can. The critical response to him has been intense, considering his rather short career. He has been praised and abused; his different modes have aroused the same critics to full respect as well as to full anger. It may be as simple as this: the critics don't know what they want poetry to be, and Merwin can give them almost anything—and some of it top-rate, within the limitations of his style of the moment. . . . Merwin has never been one to write directly: witness his earlier Cansos, his ballads, his moral landscapes; but his present mode [in *The Moving Target*] strips his work of authoritative statement to a degree that was not the case with the earlier modes (however circumventive they may have been).

David Galler. *Kenyon Review*. Summer, 1964. p. 583

The new book [*The Moving Target*] is more colloquial, less mandarin in diction that the preceding ones. In some ways the idiom is antipoetic: there is a deliberate roughening of the line in order to avoid the smoothness, neatness, and sonority of the past. Merwin imitates the awkward phrasing, distorted syntax, and irregular rhythms of the inarticulate: it is a little like the painter Dubuffet imitating the scrawls of children. Merwin abandons traditional metrics grounded in iambic measure for the ''open field'' versification advocated by Charles Olson. His imagery is fresh, bright, and colorful, like that of such ''subjective image'' poets as James Wright and Robert Bly. It often depends on the surprise of ''happy accidents.'' The whole effect is somehow tentative, casual: few of the poems are ''said'' once and for all.

But the themes of *The Moving Target* are not new; they are merely disguised. Merwin's old preoccupation with the anabasis motif, with the classic voyage and the lonely journey on a dangerous road, persists, as does the theme of the return, of the prodigal son come home. One also finds a prophecy of doom for contemporary civilization, as in *A Mask for Janus:* hints of death and resurrection. The difference is that Merwin now seems unwilling to show that he is working with myths; he pretends to be interested in the commonplace realities of the 1960's.

Stephen Stepanchev. *American Poetry since 1945* (Harper). 1965. pp. 118–19

[Merwin's] words are literal, yet far-out; like musical chords extended into their far sequences. Yet it is no accident that Merwin's forerunners, as they occurred to me, are all French; Merwin is a long way from the dominant objectivism of American poetry today, in spite of superficial resemblances. Looking back to Merwin's earlier books, one can see many phases in his progress, including some prolonged spells of wasted, pedestrian writing, during which he might have gone in several directions. He chose, or was chosen by, this one: a sacrifice of the conventional harmony of words, which dominated *The Dancing Bears* (1954), for a gain in the subtle atonality of ultra-meanings; though his longer poems, in spite of subtlety, are complex and strong. Poems like ''The Moths'' and ''The Widow'' are among the most advanced work being done in America.

Hayden Carruth. *Poetry*. Sept., 1968. p. 422

The Selected Translations of W. S. Merwin is a collection of superbly accurate renderings into contemporary American English of the poems of 87 men ranging from an anonymous Egyptian of the 20th century B.C. to a brilliant Russian poet still in his twenties. As such the book is something far richer, more various, more awesome than a book of ''imitations'' that might have given us 87 of the voices of W. S. Merwin rather than an incarnation of the single voice of Man.

It was from Pound, Merwin tells us in his introduction, that he learned to respect ''the greatest possible fidelity to the original, including its sounds.'' But of course, we say, that's obviously *how* one translates, but anyone who has ever attempted translation knows how nearly impossible it is to practice the obvious, how difficult it is simply to *prefer* the voice of Neruda or Alberti or Pasternak, to name a few of the recently mutilated, to one's own. So entirely absent from the present collection is Merwin's own style as a poet that one begins to suspect that this is a book written out of the love of poetry rather than the love of self.

Philip Levine. *Poetry*. Dec., 1969. p. 187

In his more recent poetry, Merwin uses classical myth only occasionally, but in the volumes *The Lice* and *The Carrier of Ladders* myth itself is as important a poetic device as it is in his earlier work. In *The Lice*, Merwin develops his method of probing within the structure of myth for the unconscious forces that motivate its creation through an exploration of the nature of generalized ''gods'' or ''divinities'' rather than through allusions to particular ancient mythical figures or narratives. . . .

Gods also hover over the lives of the speakers in Merwin's latest book of poems, *The Carrier of Ladders*: naked and abstract in ''Plane,'' tainted by a history of loss and violence in ''Psalm: Our Fathers,'' and reduced to the most essential form or equation of myth and ritual in ''Words from a Totem Animal,'' in which the sacrificial beast and the participant in rite become one in their

relation to the silent, cold, unreachable self which these gods so clearly represent.

Lillian Feder. *Ancient Myth in Modern Poetry* (Princeton). 1971. pp. 414–5

W.S. Merwin is a distinguished and difficult poet who writes distinguished and beautiful prose. Although *The Miner's Pale Children* consists of almost ninety prose pieces on everything from stones and spiders to bandages, eggs, and love, the work as a whole has a curious and pervasive unity. It is the kind of unity that can be achieved only by a strongly creative personality viewing the world in its own way. Merwin views the world as living—shoes contain memories and a stone put in its proper place eases man's tensions; tight-rope walkers meditate on their craft until the excitement and danger of their performance is lost in the vitality of their equipment; gardens suffer, literally suffer, the ravages of war. In Merwin's view of the world, everything lives; and his talent is such that in his prose, everything comes alive.

Prairie Schooner. Winter, 1971–2. p. 370

A lot of Merwin's poems are like variations on the theme of what Ruskin termed ''the pathetic fallacy,'' the projection upon nature of our human passions. The repetitiousness of this attitude makes them a bit monotonous: more, I think, than the form, which has little variation.

However when all this is said, these poems communicate a sense of someone watching and waiting, surrounding himself with silence, so that he can see minute particles, listen to infinitesimal sounds, with a passivity of attention, a refusal to disturb with his own observing consciousness the object observed. It is as though things write their own poems through Merwin. At their best they are poems of total attention and as such they protest against our world of total distraction. He gives the reader the feeling that the things we see in nature can be withdrawn from our eyes and restored to their integral separateness; and that, in doing this, rituals and sacraments which have been lost, and a sense of the sacredness of living, are restored. He gives things the invisibility of covering darkness and then watches light re-create them for us.

Stephen Spender. *New York Review of Books*. Sept. 20, 1973. p. 11

W.S. Merwin has become a stunning modernist. Yet his first four books have come back to remind us how ''Horatian'' his beginnings were and how dull. These mostly precious, waxen poems are the ''classical'' work of a young man for whom the classical tradition is in fact dead. They exist after the fact. The poet but embroiders on a funeral cloth while, rocking in the cradle of his talent, an unknown quality waits to be born.

Merwin commenced in the fifties not merely as a poetic academic but as a sort of ghost. This world, dragging its physical, hence contemporary everydayness, was not his ''bourn.'' His spirit was smitten with loftiness; it wanted to sing or rather to ''carol.'' So it sprang back to the more spiritual, the more vertical middle ages, where time was but a candle in the cathedral of eternity. The Lady and the fool, tasseled fable, hearty rejoicings, middle earth, laurel woods, espaliered gardens, bones, prayers, tongues of fire, shadows, shadows—this poet took the whole kit and caboodle out of the trunk and propped it up to dote on it, stroking it like doll's hair. . . . His pathos is somehow all prettiness—cold. These poems might have been penned for the lords and ladies of Byzantium; they are the spirit's cultured pearls.

True, Merwin's four more recent volumes are even spookier, hardly for human readers at all. Yet in manner they are somewhere in tomorrow. Instead of brocade, the barest, briefest threads that relate to—you scarcely know what. But you want to know; they get into you.

Calvin Bedient. *Sewanee Review*. Spring, 1977, p. 367

To the extent that Merwin's work has affinities with those poets we identify with specific schools of contemporary American poetry, he comes closest to Robert Bly, James Wright, Galway Kinnell, and the Deep Imagists, in his creation of a series of complex poetic images emanating from the depths of the psyche, often never emerging into consciousness in the poems. Merwin's unquestioning acceptance of perception serves paradoxically to call into question the very structure of perception as it is traditionally understood. In this he is like the poets named above. In his work the images often remain deeply submerged, awaiting the reader's intuitive, if not intellectual resolution. The reader climbs around amid the words, pauses, and images as one climbs rocks underwater; one is never certain where the next step will carry him. But Merwin is more spiritual and less down-to-earth than the Deep Imagists. . . .

Merwin is a visionary poet whose work reflects an engagement in the silence of the self, a receptivity to supranatural experiences, and, in the later work, an openness to participation in the lives of other creatures, and a questioning of the basic structures of perception. In pursuing the negative aesthetic, he opens the way for a poetry that is mystical without being effusive, intimate without being personal, formal without taking itself (or anything or anyone else) too seriously, a poetry that is inspired yet controlled in that it follows a regular, if elliptical, pattern of thought. . . .

In the final analysis, Merwin's recent poetry may not be monotonous or weak at all; it may not be attaining to the condition of silence; it may be misjudged. In actuality, some of the poems of *The Compass Flower* and the recent prose pieces may manifest a radical departure in the evolution of Merwin's writing. They may manifest a new literary perspective, even a new genre.

Cheri Davis. *W.S. Merwin* (Twayne, 1981), pp. 19, 21, 160

W.S. Merwin was a student of [John] Berryman's at Princeton. One night he called the drunken Berryman ''pusillanimous,'' and the poet wanted to flatten him. Merwin, of course, was right, as he is about everything in his own book of childhood recollections, *Unframed Originals*. With stunning sense for detail, setting, character and situation, Merwin employs flashback and story-within-story to recreate his parents, aunts, uncles and cousins in rural Pennsylvania. His father was a Presbyterian minister in Union City and in Scranton, a loving extrovert with everyone but his only son. Withholding love in order not to spoil the boy, he surrounded him with a myriad of don'ts so that one marvels how little Billy did not

break into smithereens. He looks back without anger at this man on the go, so typically American and yet so strangely alone.

Merwin's mother emerges in the last of the six family studies as a woman prepared to die with the developed concentration with which she lived. She is a warm, unselfish person who also finds it difficult to express her love. The poet is walking to Athos, in the midst of the monks' praise of the Virgin Mary, unaware that his mother is about to die far away. He prays for her, remembers lines from Dante's *Purgatorio*, and brings his book to a peaceful closing, reconciled to his own limitations and to the unfulfilled lives from which he has come.

Merwin is a staring eye that misses no gesture or sign; each word and motion points to the whole. What appears on the surface to be a list of trivial observations or a mere digression, helps illuminate the final portrait with a Flemish painter's light. He is master of color and line, and *Unframed Originals* belongs in the gallery of great word-portraits.

James Finn Cotter. *America*. Jan. 29, 1983, p. 76

Time has all but vanished from [W. S.] Merwin's syntax, and while this is his greatest strength, it also of course throws up a correlative weakness. There are no words, like Milton's *when*, *ere*, *though*, *lest*, and *fondly*, to guide the reader from present to past, from actual to conditional, from declaration to evaluation. But to omit those words is *difficult*. The technical resources required to drop all that equipment are daunting indeed. Merwin has passed through a process of transformation and self-instruction that, with a deeply serious end in view, has left him with perhaps the most unerring ear and the most formidable technique of his generation. He is a master of sound as Picasso is a master of drawing, and he uses sound to maneuver the rhythms of his poems so that their literal meaning is unmistakable.

That does not make the ninety-two poems in his new collection ''easy''—far from it [*The Carrier of Ladders*, 1970]. As Merwin's title reveals, the man who carries a ladder holds not only the rungs and sidepieces but the spaces between them, and the ladder enables him to use those very spaces to rise through space. Understanding the silences is sometimes extremely difficult. These poems inhabit an undifferentiated landscape and are written, even more than most contemporary work, for the ear. They move in the spasmodic rhythms of a speech that is groping for pebbles in the dark and naming what its fingers feel. They almost require reading aloud to be understood. . . .

Merwin's poems concern themselves with the divisions of reality (speech and silence, rungs and spaces, light and dark, solidity and emptiness) and aim to bring these divisions, these spaces within reality, under control in a unity of consciousness. When he faces this unity he can produce tiny poems that have the flavor of the finest haiku.

Peter Davison. *One of the Dangerous Trades: Essays on the Work and Workings of Poetry* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Pr., 1991), pp. 150–51

W.S. Merwin's *Travels* . . . includes narrative poems (some based on accounts and diaries of real travelers, such as Georg Eberhard Rumpf, Francisco de Paula Marin, David Douglas, Gregorio Bondar, Manuel Córdova) interspersed with miscellaneous personal lyrics. And yet the fundamental stylistic fact about the book is that it is written entirely without punctuation. (This is nothing new for Merwin, who's been doing this kind of thing for the past twenty years.) The poems, however, are neither stream-of-consciousness, nor L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, nor otherwise peculiar. Their novelty is ostensible. The stanzas are usually composed of real sentences; it's just that we must pause, divide, and punctuate for ourselves, inserting all the guide posts that the author has deliberately omitted. John Hollander has eloquently discussed the ''fiction'' of any poem's ''form,'' and Merwin's here prove Hollander's point. The effort he demands of his readers is equivalent to that made of any traveler in a new land, attempting to make sense of terrain, customs, weather, and, above all, of language: the interaction among ear, eye, mind, and text gives Merwin's poems a dramatic, phenomenological base that more ''conventionally'' printed poems lack. Here are poems with the normal scaffolding removed: we must stop, consider, and rebuild the landscape with the linguistic units that appear to be thrown helter-skelter in our path. These units, however, constitute the path: they are no mere obstruction. We are traveling in realms of gold. . . .

Merwin used to be a poet of brevity and bareness. These poems represent a step forward in form and subject matter. Some of them are largely phrasal, lacking main verbs and discursive movement; most, such as the exciting ''Rimbaud's Piano,'' have a normative narrative core. Some (''Paul'') syncopate the visible against the aural; many poems are written in syllabics, some with rhyme. Syllabics, of course, can never be heard, only seen; Merwin wants us to experience his formal effects through the eye as well as the ear. . . . As in travel, the eye and the ear contend and cooperate with each other. All is movement, all is transition.

Willard Spiegelman. *The Yale Review*. July, 1993, pp. 140–41

Since *The Moving Tiger* (1963), W.S. Merwin's work has abandoned most of the techniques by which poetry measures its distance from prose, has gone further and discharged punctuation; his poetry now exists in its own inner exile, a stream of consciousness without barrier or limit, except the arbitrary limits of beginning and ending. . . . Such a poetry suffers an extreme attenuation of its vocal gestures and a corresponding expansion of vatic, dreamlike utterance (Merwin often sounds like a voice from the beyond). The world in such poems has shrunk to its weary abstractions: not Platonic images, but the mummified remains of ideals. . . .

In most of Merwin's work, nature is not the medium in which we find ourselves, or a relentless and unforgiving condition, but the warm and nurturing substitute for vanished religion, repeating its claims while absolved of its guilts. The incantatory spell of the phrasing cannot disguise the dampness of the philosophy. The poems using the substance of the poet's life are of weaker interest and weaker intent than any meager narrative, not because Merwin's experience is hobbled by a lyric measure but because the experience is never pursued as thoroughly, as subtly, or as defiantly as the smallest entry in a naturalist's journal. Merwin has been productive, and genuine within the restraints of his means and his ambition; but for two decades the means have determined the ambition, rather than served it. The poems of *Travels* have lost the

terms most crucial to their shape as expressive properties of a subject.

William Logan. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. Jan. 14, 1994, p. 23

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MICHENER, James (1907–1997)

It was an unorthodox war that Mr. Michener fought in [*Tales of the South Pacific*], compounded of fiction and fact and cloaked in a romantic haze reminiscent of the novels of H. Rider Haggard. Certainly, the dirty, humdrum business of fighting (or waiting to fight) was never as much fun as Mr. Michener makes it seem throughout much of his book. Yet he has captured the phase of war that most GI's in the Pacific will want to remember—the flaming sunsets, the quiet, pellucid lagoons of some forgotten atoll, jungles that breathed mystery as well as malaria. . . . This juxtaposition of cultures forms the inspiration for most of Mr. Michener's tales. A visitor to dozens of islands himself, he came away from each with a story that will not be found in the official annals of the war.

David Dempsey. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 2, 1947. p. 5

Mr. Michener can be sarcastic about discipline, rank, and navy traditions. He can be romantic in his enjoyment of the riotous local color of the Solomons and New Caledonia. He can be hilarious, poignant, exciting, and pitiful. In fact, his versatility is astonishing. And, best of all, he is able to retain the conventional virtues of narrative pace and suspense without sacrificing a maturity of mind which should appeal to thoughtful readers.

These *Tales of the South Pacific* are magnificently entertaining. But they are more than that. Mr. Michener is an acute observer of human character, an adroit literary artist, a man with a philosophy of life which makes him tolerant of many human weaknesses but not of all. He is certainly one of the ablest and one of the most original writers to appear on the American literary scene in a long time.

Orville Prescott. *The Yale Review*. Spring, 1947. p. 576

Mr. Michener makes of this a warm-hearted, readable story, crammed with lively incident and a remarkably diversified array of characters. But sterner intelligence was required to infuse his vision with genuine meaning. *The Fires of Spring* is flawed by sentimentality and naïveté. David's portentous discoveries on the journey toward manhood—the ''meaning'' of love, art, maturity, and so on—are made explicit in banalities. David's conviction, ''There's no reason why I couldn't write as well as Balzac,'' remained, as far as I was concerned, one of many indications of his intellectual innocence, not an earnest statement of his mission. Consequently, the final conflict—novel-writing versus the wicked job—has a histrionic ring and is a rickety symbol of Michener's theme: the struggle to keep alive the adventurous spirit and fierce ideals of youth, the ''fires of Spring.'' As for the denouement, Pollyanna takes command.

Charles J. Rolo. *Atlantic Monthly*. March, 1949. p. 85

The Michener stories [in *Return to Paradise*] alternate with descriptive essays on The Atoll, Fiji, Guadalcanal, New Guinea, and so on, each of which constitutes a chapter on the author's own spiritual enlargements. . . . He writes in the tradition of the American journalist-traveler, and because he is at once curious, gregarious, liberal, patriotic, and receptive to different ways of life, he can become enthusiastic virtually in the same breath over awesome island scenery and the fact that Australian steak costs 29 cents a pound, without arousing in us any emotions more ignoble than envy and a wan desire to follow in his expensive footsteps.

This is in short a very pleasant travel book, full of charming vignettes, stray facts, and not especially penetrating insights into the power structure of the area, the racial relationships, and this country's role in the Pacific, about which Mr. Michener is apprehensive.

Harvey Swados. *The Nation*. May 12, 1951. p. 447

There are moments in the book [*Sayonara*] when the reader can just glimpse the clash of two cultures, tragically wanting to get together. There is, for instance, a provocative discussion in an art shop about Eastern and Western tastes. The Japanese woman is given full points for her quiet understanding and the resilient toughness behind her gentle manners. (The American woman in the book I wouldn't want to be caught dead with). But everything happens too quickly, too stiffly, and too neatly to make this the full, complicated and truly tragic picture of Madame Butterfly, 1954, and the G.I. who buys her lingerie at the Post Exchange.

Frank Gibney. *Saturday Review*. Feb. 6, 1954. p. 11

The documentary novel of the Nineteen Thirties has re-emerged as the ''epic'' of an area, a people or a nation. . . . Now James Michener has brought us a brilliant panoramic novel [*Hawaii*] about Hawaii from its volcanic origins to its recent statehood. It is a complex and fascinating subject, and it is rendered here with a wealth of scholarship, of literary imagination and of narrative skill, so that the large and diverse story is continually interesting. . . .

Maybe Mr. Michener is a little too evasive, or indulgent about this first American conquest of Hawaii. He has a somewhat nostalgic admiration for the swashbuckling sea captains who took the central places of power—and of profit—in the economic development of the island, and whose descendants intermarried with the shrewder children of the original missionaries. But there is a sharp description here of both the personal behavior and the political manipulation of the ''sugar barons'' who by the Eighteen Nineties had come to own the land, the trade and the whole destiny of Hawaiian culture. . . .

What price progress? If *Hawaii* as a whole is a superior popular novel rather than the great novel it should be, it is mainly, I think, because Mr. Michener hasn't resolved the central conflict in his narrative. It is because the writer gives a kind of unthinking acceptance to modernity, and in particular to American modernity, while his deepest feelings and his best talent belong, in fact, to Hawaii's legendary past.

Maxwell Geismar. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 22, 1959. pp. 4–5

It is a sensuous pleasure to have this glorious book [*Japanese Prints*] in one's hands, from the exquisite raw silk binding with its brocade lady, to the fine paper and many delicate color plates. Mr. Michener has the infectious enthusiasm of the devoted amateur, who loves every scrap of the old papers as sacred relics; yet this never dulls his qualitative judgment.

Lincoln Kirstein. *The Nation*. Dec. 12, 1959. p. 446

Michener's idea of his function, in summary, is to report the world, factually or imaginatively, but also emotionally and even poetically. And the act of writing implies the taking of some moral stand as well, even though ''morality'' is today an unmodish word. He fought to keep the song ''You Have to be Taught'' in the musical show *South Pacific*. He labeled himself a coward because he was persuaded to omit a chapter called ''Lobeck, the Asiatic,'' from *Tales of the South Pacific*. His powers of characterization and description save him from selling his author's birthright for a pot of message, but there is no doubt that usually his themes are strong.

Primarily, Michener is not a born writer but a teacher or even a preacher. He did not publish a book until he was forty, and it is possible that his volumes, impressive and popular as they are, serve merely as an extension of his teaching activities. He is the professor *malgré lui*. In print, his classroom is the world.

A. Grove Day. *James A. Michener* (Twayne). 1964. p. 146

. . .the author discusses [in *The Source*] some of the perplexing issues that exercise the new Israel: the treatment of the Arab minority within the state and the refugees outside; family life in the kibbutzim (collective villages); the constant—and sometimes sharp—dialogue between the Israeli and the American Jew, each committed to his own way of life, but bound to each other; and, above all, the conflict between religious orthodoxy and the needs of life in a modern state. Examples are given where, by the liberal standards of today, a rigid application of the old laws seems harsh and obsolete. Yet Mr. Michener strives to view such questions in their historical perspective, and sympathizes with the necessity for adjustment rather than a rejection of the religious heritage in a secular Jewish state.

Told with remarkable erudition and moving human detail, *The Source* is a monumental and imaginative study in depth of the old-new nation Israel.

Joan Comay. *Saturday Review*. May 29, 1965. p. 27

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MILES, Josephine (1911–1985)

Miss Miles' poetry seems to me to evolve upward (though doubtless not in the order in which the poems are written) from something that is little more than the enjoyment of vernacular speech—which obviously delights her ear—through a kind of sharp, humorous, and often resonant character-picture, by way of enigma, to the lyric proper. At each level she shows some if not all of the traits which are most personal and peculiar to her as a writer and which give the over-all tone of her work. The traits I think of

are: the delight in the vernacular, which she makes serve a sophisticated craft; the quality of her humor, which Louise Bogan compared to the ''dissenting 'dryness' of the country store or town meeting''; and her belief in the importance of particular event, circumstance, place—the net in which she snares her subjects, and the idea informing her love of vernacular speech, of the particular flavor of the language she hears.

Barbara Gibbs. *Poetry*. Oct., 1946. p. 49

Thoroughness, courage, and at least a perceptible originality have for some time made Josephine Miles one of our most interesting commentators on the poetic mind. . . .

The present study [*The Primary Language of Poetry in the 1940's*] shows the linguistic method for which she is best known as neither feeble nor triumphant; one is inclined to view her particular approach cordially but nevertheless coolly. Her book falls into three chapters: the first and longest contains by far her most valuable work, which, it is noteworthy, arises not from her statistical method of commentary on the art of poetry by aid of linguistics but from her own poetic spirit, that not infrequently inspires imaginative language of no mean order. In other words, although Miss Miles appears to give first place to a scientific method, and second place to a philosophic one, the aesthetic method of criticism actually serves her best; when her own hand is happiest, criticism turns out to be neither science nor philosophy but art.

Henry W. Wells. *American Literature*. May, 1952. p. 265

Her work is terse, quirky, and often quite abstract; rarely does it have the sonority and rhythmic charm which, in some poets, can make us patient of difficulty. Yet if one sticks with these poems, it soon transpires that they are the real thing. Beyond the dry obliquities of the language, the shying-away of the half-rhymes, the condensed secretarial grammar, lies an intense, intelligent and original sensibility with certain persistent concerns. Once this is perceived, the mannerisms are largely redeemed.

I find two main subjects here [*Prefabrications*]. The first is human communication, and it is studied in short, penetrating poems about loneliness, animosity, understanding, and love. The second is human dignity, as conceived by a skeptical, democratic intelligence. These subjects are pursued in a milieu of supermarkets, shoe-stores, highways, and beach-cabins; Miss Miles accepts the fearful jerry-built landscape of California as the real world of her poems, and finds her symbols in it.

Richard Wilbur. *Saturday Review*. Feb. 18, 1956. p. 50

A conceivable interpretation of her title [*Prefabrications*] is that she is countering the jerry-built constructions of the modern world, those that shut out sun and sea, with the pre-logical fabrications of the poetic imagination. Man, at war with nature, including human nature, has become a prisoner in time. Only by an act of the imagination or, equivalently, by an act of love can he re-establish contact with his primal source and regain the power to set himself free. Miss Miles' approach is oblique, metaphorical—she is not one for direct assault—but over and over again we hear the light-voiced cue. . . . The people of her fancy are sensitive, disturbed, but not doom-ridden; their hearts are nimble; the sea and the rain and the wind have news for them.

Stanley Kunitz. *Poetry*. June, 1956. p. 190

Josephine Miles presents the anomaly of a poet and a good one who as a literary scholar and historian has been chronically given to a statistical method of analysis. Because she is a poet and this character seems to carry over into her scholarly labors, even in their most forbidding phases, her articles and monographs, now a long series, have always had their peculiar interest and have offered their peculiar kind of profit—though, for me at least, there were moments, especially in the beginning, when it seemed as if verbal statistics were being recited with a strange feverish insistency, an out-of-place lyric throb. . . .

What then are the conspicuous merits of the descriptive tour of English poetry [*Eras and Modes in English Poetry*] which Miss Miles conducts according to these lights? I believe they are considerable, and peculiar. They are related first of all to the fact that she does eschew the recent American enterprise of organistic analysis and evaluation of individual poems. We must not go to Miss Miles for that. Rather, the peculiar aim of her technique is the description of large areas of poetry—''eras and modes.'' She is out precisely to make generalizations, to formulate viable historical concepts. . . . [H]er method of verbal statistics, richly informed or supplemented by her own special insights, is a union of the formal and contentual which at its best comes close to being a masterly union for generalizations about poetic history.

W.K. Wimsatt. *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*. April, 1958. pp. 321–2, 325–6

Miss Miles early found her own style and attitudes, and she has worked with integrity and pleasure to make the world her verse defines as large as possible. Her poems, though, are characteristically as small as possible; few have made a couple of quatrains say so much, or with such grace. Miss Miles's tone—gravely insouciant, sweetly tough—is all her own. Her rectitude of feeling and exactness of language evoke continual felicities. The reader's pleasure grows with her maturing mastery, for good as are the early works, her more recent poems are her best.

Miss Miles confronts experience both openly and inwardly, and finds poems everywhere. With her ear for the colloquial and eye for the surprising delight in the ordinary, she makes poems both witty and compassionate about motels, advertisements, election campaigns, California's exploding population, drivers in traffic, buying a pair of shoes. She can sketch persons memorably in brief, characteristic actions, and she understands her people with a sympathy that is unsentimental. A complementary voice—passionate, contemplative, self-knowing—alternates with and reinforces the language that renders her exterior world.

Daniel G. Hoffman. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 29, 1960. p. 31

The first quality of her work that struck me was a uniform sort of unrelieved and often drab intellectuality. There are plenty of intelligent comments, plenty of shrewd narrow-eyed observations, but I kept wishing for a little more feeling and a little less knowledge. The poems are so self-contained that they come to

seem automatic, including as they do all the things that poems need in our time in order to exist respectably: they have beginnings, middles, and ends, and one is never in any doubt about which is which. There is none of the opening out into a Beyond greater than anything the poems have to tell: nothing to assure the reader that what he brings to the poems of his own life is at all important—Miss Miles has neatly packed everything for him. And yet I did not continue to feel this way for long. I came to believe what Miss Miles says, and believe it in a way that also includes a large measure of admiration for the gentle assurance with which she deals with her material. If there is such a thing as making a cardinal virtue out of deliberately letting alone larger subjects in favor of smaller ones, Miss Miles has made a modest and authentic triumph of it, and any reader who is at all alive will be enriched by her quick, penetrating looks from the odd angles of hidden corners.

James Dickey. *Sewanee Review*. Spring, 1961. pp. 330–1

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MILLAY, Edna St. Vincent (1892–1950)

One would have to go back a long way in literary history to find a young lyric poet singing so freely and so musically in such a big world. Almost we hear a thrush at dawn, discovering the ever-renewing splendor of the morning. . . . The surprise of youth over the universe, the emotion of youth at encountering inexplicable infinities—that is expressed . . . and it is a big thing to express.

Harriet Monroe. *Poetry*. Dec., 1918. p. 167

Her appearance in no way disappointed me. She was dainty with a daintiness of Queen Anne's lace or with the daintiness of a spiderweb gossamer such as I have seen decorating the leaves of dahlia flowers on a September morning. It is true that I did detect in her look an April shadow of vanity, but below this self-conscious protection was a living representation of the divine spirit of poetry, uncontaminated as the spirit of Catullus, gay as the spirit of John Suckling. I never became disillusioned; the more I saw of this young and most beautiful girl, the more I came to appreciate the rash quality of her nature, heedless and lovely as a fieldfare rising from the wintry ground. She might disguise herself in all the pretty frippery that she could buy . . . and yet below her laces and ribbons there will always remain a barefoot poet, doomed yet redeemed, under the shadow of Eternity.

Llewelyn Powys. *The Verdict of Bridlegoose* (Harcourt). 1926. pp. 37–8

A sensitive spirit on a romantic pilgrimage through an over-sophisticated civilization from which most of its romance has been robbed—this is the keynote of her work, as it is the keynote of many other modern poets not so finely tempered or so feverishly alert. . . . Sensitively, and with swift strokes, she has set down, if not the Odyssey of a heart, at least a record of all its poignant moments, its strange terrors, its little absurdities, and much, too, of its mocking emptiness.

John Hyde Preston. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. July, 1927. p. 343

Taking the vocabulary of nineteenth-century poetry as pure as you will find it in Christina Rossetti, and drawing upon the stock of conventional symbolism accumulated from Drayton to Patmore, she has created, out of shopworn materials, a distinguished personal idiom: she has been able to use the language of the preceding generation to convey an emotion peculiar to her own. . . . There are those who will have no minor poets; these Miss Millay does not move. The others, her not too enthusiastic but perhaps misguided partisans, have seen too much of their own personalities in her verse to care whether it is great poetry or not; so they call it great. . . . Miss Millay is one of our most distinguished poets, and one that we should do well to misunderstand as little as possible.

Allen Tate. *New Republic*. May 6, 1931. pp. 335–6

Her reciting voice had a loveliness that was sometimes heartbreakingly poignant. I fell in love with her voice at once; and with her spirit, when I came to know it, so full of indomitable courage. But there was in her something of which one stood in awe—she seemed, as a poet, no mere mortal, but a goddess; and, though one could not but love her, one loved her hopelessly, as a goddess must be loved.

Floyd Dell. *Homecoming* (Farrar and Rinehart). 1933. pp. 301–2

Her work is not rich enough in overtones and in contrapuntal cross-references to be great musical verse; not sufficiently marmoreal for great plastic verse; nor of such comprehensive ordering power as to be great poetry of ideas. At its best, it falls just short of that intensity which is found in the highest moments even of some contemporary poetry. There is a word slightly in the way or else the image lacks the needle point. It never quite to use E. E. Cumming's phrase, ''lifts the top of your head off.''

Philip Blair Rice. *The Nation*. Nov. 14, 1934. p. 570

Millay may be happy or unhappy or angry or loving or perplexed; she may be in any one of a hundred different moods; but when she is writing a poem she is never debilitated or unconscious. Whatever her mood, she is intensely alive in every one of her five senses, and

all her senses are fused in a single controlling mood and purpose. Her poems represent only those moments in her life when she has succeeded in becoming utterly at one with herself and intensely aware of the world.

Elizabeth Atkins. *Edna St. Vincent Millay and Her Times* (Chicago). 1936. p. 148

In Edna Millay's high lyrical talent, the Yankee note, which one felt from the first, increased in depth and clarity as time went on, as the flippancy of her earlier verse,—its conscious naïveté mingled with wonder,—yielded to profundity of feeling. She had begun with fairy-tale fancies and travesties of nursery-rhymes, in which she turned the moral inside out; but this mood of an infantile mischief-maker had always been half-rapturous and the rapture grew, together with her force of passion. An accomplished and disciplined craftsman, Miss Millay was a learned poet, with the Yankee love of Virgil, Catullus, Chaucer, and especially the Elizabethans whose vein she recaptured in her tragic sense of youth and the brevity of life.

Van Wyck Brooks. *New England: Indian Summer* (Dutton). 1940. p. 540

A writer must be judged by his best. Edna Millay's best came at a time when many needed her excitement. Whether her capture of that audience was a good or a bad thing for the course of poetry one cannot say with any conviction. Certainly her intimate treatment of the frankly sensuous was some part of an age's contribution toward broadening the range of subjects permissible to poetry. That much is surely good. . . . But neither merit nor lack of merit defined her position in the poetry of the Twenties. It was not as a craftsman nor as an influence, but as the creator of her own legend that she was most alive to us. Her success was as a figure of passionate living.

John Ciardi. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 11, 1950. p. 77

She wrote some bad verse when she was young and some worse verse when she was older, as who has not. . . . She could be silly, cute, arch, hysterical; she could commit ghastly errors of taste. She also could and did, write so memorably that her language was on every tongue. . . . She was a fine lyric poet, also in the classical sense, a fine elegiac poet. . . . She expressed a great deal more than the spirit of a tinsel age: there was the silver of an individual voice, the legal tender of no base emotion.

Rolfe Humphries. *The Nation*. Dec. 30, 1950. p. 704

Edna Millay . . . had not sufficient education to allow her to use effectively her poetic endowment. . . . This inadequacy of artistic education also injured her self-criticism: in spite of her interest in ideas, she could not cope with them in writing.

Mary Colum. *New Republic*. March 12, 1951. p. 17

Let me register this unfashionable opinion here, and explain that Edna Millay seems to me one of the few poets writing in English in our time who have attained to anything like the stature of great literary figures in an age in which prose has predominated. It is hard to know how to compare her to Eliot or Auden or Yeats—it would be even harder to compare her to Ezra Pound. There is always a certain incommensurability between men and women writers. But she does have it in common with the first three of these that, in giving supreme expression to profoundly felt personal experience, she was able to identify herself with more general human experience and stand forth as a spokesman for the human spirit, announcing its predicaments, its vicissitudes, but, as a master of human expression, by the splendor of expression itself, putting herself beyond common embarrassments, common oppressions, and panics.

Edmund Wilson. *The Nation*. April 19, 1952. p. 372

It was her anxiety (I feel) that an intellectual passion keep pace with an emotional passion which so increasingly troubled and labored her mature work. She was essentially a lyric and emotional poet, and her art, which belonged to that side of her nature, suffered in the attempt to express her maturer convictions, and under the weight of an active social consciousness.

And it is her own poetic vitality, her immense capacity for delight in the world of nature which she observed so lovingly and accurately and so unforgettably made plain, the intensity of her relationships, her responsiveness, her vulnerability, and above all else her unshaken dedication to her art, which made her, in the face of what she feared but never capitulated to, and under the bludgeoning of ill-health and an encroaching neuroticism, the truly great lyric poet which she was.

Sara Henderson Hay, *Saturday Review*. June 5, 1954. p. 20

. . .along with her New England stoicism we have certain concomitants of reverence for life, indignation at its gross abuse. The murder of Lidice, the murder of Sacco and Vanzetti, the murder of Hiroshima, ''logic alone, all love laid by,'' connect themselves with a score of poems that capture her heart. ''And on the gravel crawls the chilly bee.''. . .

This is the great, not the genteel, tradition. Varied, felicitous, sustained, Edna St. Vincent Millay explores the tragic sense of our time and ''the joys of an unhappiness that confesses itself.'' Hers is the serious poetry, the profound affirmation, that the genteel tradition forbade. New England is in it, ''clean cliff going down as deep as clear water can reach.'' ''There, thought unbraids itself, and the mind becomes single.'' This book [*Collected Poems*] is a monument to straightness and singleness of soul.

Francis Hackett. *New Republic*. Dec. 14, 1956. p. 22

Dylan Thomas said that ''Out of an inevitable conflict of images . . . I try to make the momentary piece which is a poem.'' Unwittingly he defined the conspicuous technical deficiency of Edna St. Vincent Millay: there is no conflict of images, since such a conflict is ''inevitable'' only in major poets, and consequently there is no richness, no secret tension to relate the mystery of the poem to the mystery of human experience. There is no mystery in Millay's experience, nor was there in ours at the time we applauded her as our spokesman. It was not peace, momentary or eternal, that she recorded, but merely the outcry. At eighteen, when most of us

looked upon peace as complacency and hysteria as honesty, she was our very selves.

Not so today. The recent edition of her *Collected Poems* . . . has left me feeling wistful about the girl I was. With the splendid exception of a handful of sonnets (artistically inexplicable) she was to our youthful solitude what Jerome Kern was to our youthful romance. It saddens me to write it, ''for today I'm dreaming of yesterday.'' Millay will be, if she is not already, a period piece, a cultural curio like roses made of hair and protected under glass. Nothing quite like her will ever happen again.

Bette Richart. *Commonweal*. May 10, 1957. p. 159

Her sense of impermanence and impending loss was by no means confined to love. The theme of death runs all through her poetry. But it was not in any sense a fear of or what some of her critics considered an obsession with death. She herself called death a ''Supreme Nuisance, an obstacle in the road of life, insurmountable and unskirtable. . . .'' If she is obsessed with anything, it is with life.

Her chief emotion about death is resentment of a blind and irrational force that will so rudely cut off life. ''Down, you mongrel, Death!'' she says in one of her poems. She resents death so much that it is not enough for her to know that there is a constant cycle of rebirth in the world.

Miriam Gurko. *Restless Spirit: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (Crowell). 1962. p. 130

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MILLER, Arthur (1915–)

All My Sons is a serious drama, on its technical side in the Ibsen tradition, I suppose we may say, though that is intended to indicate only the general school rather than any imitation. It has a genuine story, a good moral basis in the theme, a good variety of characters, well drawn, and offers an unusually rewarding vehicle for the acting and the directing. . . . The writing in many of the situations in *All My Sons* has real feeling and an admirable, and often moving, realization of the dramatist's motivations, or themes.

Stark Young. *New Republic*. Feb. 10, 1947. p. 42

Arthur Miller is a moralist. His talent is for a kind of humanistic jurisprudence: he sticks to the facts of the case. For this reason his play (*Death of a Salesman*) is clearer than those of other American playwrights with similar insight whose lyric gifts tend to reflect the more elusive and imponderable aspects of the same situation. There is poetry in *Death of a Salesman*—not the poetry of the senses or of the soul, but of ethical conscience. It might have been graven on stone—like tablets of law. *Death of a Salesman* stirs us by its truth, the ineluctability of its evidence and judgment which permits no soft evasion. Though the play's environment is one we associate with a grubby realism, its style is like clean accounting on the books of an understanding but severe sage. We cry before it like children being chastised by an occasionally humorous, not unkindly but unswervingly just father.

Harold Clurman. *New Republic*. Feb. 28, 1949. p. 27

In *Death of a Salesman*. . . Miller has managed to rise above the ordinary flat lands of moralization and thesis drama. His play is a consummation of virtually everything attempted by that part of the theatre which has specialized in awareness and criticism of social realities. It is a culmination of all efforts since the 1930's to observe the American scene and trace, as well as evaluate, its effect on character and personal life. . . . Miller's achievement lies in successfully bridging the gap between a social situation and human drama. The two elements in *Death of a Salesman* are, indeed, so well fused that the one is the other. . . . Undoubtedly *Death of a Salesman* is one of the triumphs of the mundane American stage. It moves its audience tremendously, it comes close to their experience or observation, it awakens their consciousness, and it may even rouse them to self-criticism.

John Gassner. *Forum*. April, 1949. pp. 219–21

It is the biting truth of Arthur Miller's insight into the rotten moral base of our selling society that gives the play *Death of a Salesman* its power. . . . Arthur Miller casts a score of darts—at advertising, credit selling, the family automobile; at the petty larcency and the subversive attitude toward sex characteristic of our time. But his main attack is against the view that a man is a fool if he does not get something—as much as possible—for nothing more than a smile, being a good fellow and having good connections.

In the very act of striking a blow at the immorality of our commercial civilization, and the salesman mentality it has engendered, Arthur Miller has raised a shout for the individual and his right to his own soul.

Albert A. Shea. *Canadian Forum*. July, 1949. pp. 86–7

The form of his play (*Death of a Salesman*) is not that of ''flashback'' technique, though it has been classified as such. It is rather the same technique as that of *Hamlet*: the technique of psychic projection, of hallucination, of the guilty expression of forbidden wishes dramatized. . . . It is visualized psychoanalytic interpretation woven into reality. . . . The entire play has the aura of a dream, a wish of prehistoric proportion, its strength lying in its adroit social rationalization, in its superlative disguise of the role of the younger son Hap. . . . *Death of a Salesman* is an enduring play. It will be performed over and over for many years, because of its

author's masterful exposition of the unconscious motivations in our lives. . . . It is one of the most concentrated expressions of aggression and pity ever to be put on the stage.

Daniel E. Schneider. *Theatre Arts*. Oct., 1949. pp. 18–21

The Crucible does not, I confess, seem to me a work of such potential tragic force as the playwright's earlier *Death of a Salesman*; it is the product of theatrical dexterity and a young man's moral passion rather than of a fruitful and reverberating imagination. But it has, in a theatre of the small success and the tidy achievement, power, the passionate line—an urgent boldness which does not shrink from the implications of a large and formidable design. . . . His characteristic theme is integrity, and its obverse, compromise. . . . In *The Crucible*. . . he has stated his theme again with a wholly admirable concision and force.

Richard Hayes. *Commonweal*. Feb. 20, 1953. p. 498

If *The Crucible* is a drama of 1953, as well as of 1692, it does not follow that it is a simple parable. On the contrary it is self-contained rather than contained by time of place. It is the terrible and tragic situation that provides the real setting. . . . The situation is convincing to the last irrational detail. The conflict emerges in subtly differentiated forms and shadings. . . . Beginning slowly, with a prologue somewhat diffuse and confusing, the play gathers momentum and power with each act. The final scene, just before the hanging, is immensely moving, summarizing the theme of the play with an eloquence that carries the audience. . . out of the theatre in a mood of resolve rather than despair.

Freda Kirchwey. *The Nation*. Feb. 7, 1953. pp. 131–2

He is, basically, a political or ''socially conscious'' writer. He is a distinguished survivor of the thirties, and his values derive mostly from that decade. He is not much of a hand at exploring or exploiting his own consciousness. He is not inward. He writes at times with what may be a matchless power in the American theatre today, but not with a style of his own, and those who see his plays can leave them with little or no sense of the author as a character. He is not, in fact, much concerned with individuality of any sort. This is not an adverse judgment; it is a distinction, or an attempt at one. What interests Miller and what he can often convey with force is the crushing impact of society upon its members.

Richard H. Rovere. *New Republic*. June 17, 1957. p. 13

Responding to the political climate, Miller's plays have moved steadily inward. Although each play has probed the impact of large, bewildering issues upon a simple man, the large issues have become increasingly dim. Some of the haziness is intrinsic, but some of it is induced by the simple man's mounting personal problems. In *All My Sons*, the issue is no less than the war itself. The play shares the weakness of its chief character, who finds it hard to make the war's values immediate and meaningful. *Death of a Salesman* strikes a balance between the social problem of the shattered myth of success and Willy Loman's sex and family problems. *The Crucible* shows us witch hunts, but the obvious contemporary reference is masked by the historical setting and by the very distinctive seventeenth-century speech; what remains is the tension between the incalculable malice of private individuals and the conscience of a guilt-ridden husband. With *A View from the Bridge*, Miller's focus moves still further within. Eddie Carbone is not only troubled and guilty; he is sick, and his symptoms resemble those that Tennessee Williams, the most typically ''internal'' of contemporary American dramatists, had made the common substance of Broadway drama—incestuous inclinations, psychotic sexual jealousy, frenzied hostility to homosexuality, and possibly incipient homosexuality. If these symptoms are present, it is less important that the immigration service also has its shortcomings; the play's main topic has become Eddie's troubles.

Henry Popkin. *Sewanee Review*. Winter, 1960. pp. 59–60

Mr. Miller seems verily to go out of his way to find sub-humans, precisely to make us accept them as tragic figures. We can cry with Willy's widow; we can feel vaguely pious with Mr. Alfieri, the chorus figure of *A View from the Bridge*. But in neither instance should we allow ourselves to forget that pathos, as distinct from tragedy, is Mr. Miller's achievement and that we have been had if we concede more than this.

What is unusual here is not Mr. Miller's limited achievement, which seems the inevitable limitation of anyone writing in a world wherein an ism such as naturalism could have been conceived of in the first place. Rather, what is peculiar to Mr. Miller is his insistence—for example, in his essay ''Tragedy and the Common Man''—that what he writes is tragedy. For Mr. Miller not to see a difference in *kind* between a character of sound mind and some faith in at least minimal freedom of choice, on the one hand, and a character of weak mind or no mind and no freedom at all, on the other hand; for Mr. Miller not to recognize a difference in *kind* between a rational animal and another animal, argues, to speak mildly, a deficient aesthetic awareness and a stunted moral imagination. What Mr. Miller wants is to have us pin on Willy and Eddie the same label we pin on Hamlet. We are asked to disregard the intellect and will which rather customarily mark the human being. We are asked to ignore the difference between our glum and perhaps tearful reaction to the demise of Mr. Miller's people and the clear sense of victory-in-defeat, for himself and for mankind, that Hamlet gives us in his death.

Joseph A. Hynes. *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Summer, 1963. p. 331

. . .Miller's view of man has been too simplified to finally convince us that his work is an adequate representation of reality. Each of Miller's central characters, the living embodiments of his point of view, has been engaged in an action which his creator clearly considers the most significant one which a man can undertake, the search for a sense of personal dignity and identity in a hostile world. It is in this search that Willy Loman resembles the cowboys of *The Misfits* and, in fact, all of Miller's central characters, for each of them, though he lives most explicitly amidst the problems of the modern world (Miller's one historical play is a thinly disguised presentation of the McCarthy era), is engaged in this essentially personal quest for his own self. When he has found that self—and a Miller hero almost inevitably does so—he has, in the mind of his author, reached the point of rest at the end of his

journey. This faith in the efficacy of self-knowledge, the one element that appears in all Miller's plays, is far more central to his view of life than any of his ideas, however serious, concerning the immediate problems of society. But as with many faiths the problems of achieving and retaining it are great.

Arthur Ganz. *Drama Survey*. Oct., 1963. p. 231

Whatever drawbacks one may find in Arthur Miller's *After the Fall*, the size of its concerns are impressive, and one can think of no other new American play this season that would have been as appropriate for the opening venture of the Lincoln Center Repertory Theatre. . . . For just as this is a theatre that carries the future hopes of a too-often disappointed theatregoing public, so is *After the Fall* a play that intensely examines one disappointed man's right to hope in a world where incredible horror and violence keep cropping up to make one suspect the progress of the human race.

While this man, a lawyer named Quentin, is a rather special individual molded in his creator's own image, he has within him a number of nagging conflicts that are universally felt in our times. Quentin began life with the presumption that one is moving toward some elevation; that there were injustices for him to correct, good and bad people for him to judge, and fixed principles to be placed ahead of natural or selfish impulses. Looking back on this period, Quentin bitterly remarks, ''Not to see one's own evil—there's power and rightness, too.''

Henry Hewes. *Saturday Review*. Feb. 15, 1964. p. 35

Throughout his career, Arthur Miller has shown a marked tendency to argue general propositions in colloquial terms. . . . but all his writing reveals his penchant for voicing ethical abstractions, usually of wide social relevance. This habit evidences high seriousness; unfortunately, it has also caused stylistic problems. . . .

All My Sons shows clearly what is evident in almost every play Miller has written—the habit of following a well-prepared movement to crisis with a digressive denouement. His desire to articulate substantive truth, here as elsewhere, often restricts a potent talent for expressing inward urgency through colloquial language. . . . Miller's dialogue is most telling when it works by implication rather than by explication.

Leonard Moss. *Modern Drama*. Summer, 1964. pp. 52, 55–6

Miller's mind has always loomed bulky on the stage—not like a genuine largeness, but like the elephantiasis of a flea. Imagine, to be precise, an enormous photographic enlargement of a microbe: instead of being majestic, it is merely distorted, grotesque, and blurred in its detail. This is emblematically manifest in the very opening stage direction of *After the Fall*: ''The action takes place in the mind, thought, and memory of Quentin.'' Though *mind* would seem to cover the whole thing very nicely, one might, pedantically, wish to throw in *memory*. But what on earth is that pleonastic *thought* for? To satisfy Miller's need for magnifying grandiloquence: Damn the tautologies, full speed to the stars!

The most painful flaw of *After the Fall* is its megalomania combined with hypocrisy. A forthright, smiling self-love can be harmless and even likable. But here we have Miller telling us that he is relentlessly baring his, or his blatantly autobiographical hero's, chest—only to emerge as someone whose faults are as nothing compared to those of almost everybody else.

John Simon. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1964. p. 234

Incident at Vichy carries further the question of guilt and innocence that takes root in Miller's plays, from David Beeves in *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, and grows through them. Joe Keller was aware of his guilt, but not of the need to do anything about it. Willy's guilt, in part, blinded him to his real situation, and Miller found then that we are conscious only up to the point at which guilt begins. This tends to make victims of us all. Prompted by the time, he realized in *The Crucible* that the crippling force of guilt prevents people from taking action. It became ''the most real of our illusions, but nevertheless a quality of mind capable of being overthrown.'' The conflict reaches agony in the confusion of guilt and innocence, justice with injustice, in *After the Fall*.

Sheila Huftel. *Arthur Miller: The Burning Glass* (Citadel). 1965. p. 235

Playwright Arthur Miller entered the literary world as a novelist. From time to time over the past fifteen years he has returned to the solitude of prose as a relief from the public and artistic pressures of the drama. Stories free him from what he calls ''an aggressiveness in playwriting'' and from the larger burdens of his role as national moralizer. This first collection of his stories [*I Don't Need You Any More*] shows him breathing more easily with less at stake, content to revisit and reshape the memories of childhood, to skewer a single character and watch him wriggle on a spit of ethical conundrums, or simply to recast the pregnant moments of his past. . . . His stories are carefully ordered to underscore the continuity of his interests over the past fifteen years—his humanism, his running dispute with American values, his inquiry into personal responsibility. Sometimes he butchers events for the sake of argument and his stories fail to live. But the handful that blend insight and outlook show him an effective handler of the short-story form.

Paul D. Zimmerman. *Newsweek*. Feb. 27, 1967. p. 92

I had mixed feelings about Miller's new play [*The Price*], but on the whole thought better of it than most reviewers did. It is, as many have said, moralistic, talky and frequently contrived. . . . Despite these inadequacies, and they do seriously compromise the evening, I was impressed by Miller's intermittent insights (''we invent ourselves to wipe out what we know'') and moved by the play's central dilemma: ''who's to take care of the helpless old father?'' Such a theme, concerned as it is with retesting the boundaries of personal obligation, has seemed to many merely old-fashioned. In terms of current taste it is, but when that shifts, as it must, Miller's subtle inquiries will be more fully appreciated.

Martin Duberman. *Partisan Review*. Summer, 1968. p. 419

Although what Miller has to say in the new plays is philosophically suspect, it is not his theme but his commitment to it that has crippled his work. His new truth is not an impetus to creativity, but a doctrine that must be illustrated. . . . Miller's most recent play

[*The Price*] is set in the same thematic country as *After the Fall* and *Incident at Vichy*. . . . If this were all there were to *The Price*, it would not be that welcome a change from *After the Fall* and *Incident at Vichy*. Its strength lies in the character of Gregory Solomon, who dominates the play when he is on stage and, through well-timed intrusions during the brothers' discussion, continues to be a formidable presence even when he has moved to the periphery of the central action. A man almost ninety years old, a retired appraiser, who finds in the furniture an opportunity to begin again, he is an embodiment of the idea that life is the product of belief beyond disbelief. More important he is Arthur Miller's first real comic character, a creation that realizes some of the possibilities implicit in Willy Loman's happier scenes.

Gerald Weales. *The Jumping-Off Place* (Macmillan—N. Y.). 1969. pp. 19, 21–3

In all [Miller's] works, despite crushing obstacles, something is achieved, the possibility of responsibility and action is restored. Dignity is reaffirmed.

And because this possibility permeates his work, Arthur Miller is one of the most rebellious writers in the modern drama. His continuing exploration of the ramifications of determinism and free will, guilt and responsibility, drift and action, represents his revolt against a theater singing dirges of woe. Miller rebels against the fashionable complacency and chic lamentation that dominate so much of the contemporary stage, on, off, or below Broadway. His consideration of responsibility and free will is a challenge to the paralyzing morbidity of a drama which views man as trapped in a cosmic straitjacket, thrashing about in his pettiness and helplessness. His characters are not defined in terms of hysteria, but of history; they are not only affected by their world, they are able to affect it as well.

Miller does not invite his audience to luxuriate in a velvety cloak of universal despair and self-pity, nor does he subject us to sadomasochistic barrages under the shrill slogans of joy, freedom, and liberation. In a theater of angry young men, frustrated old men, and precocious adolescents of indeterminate age, Miller goes his own way, committed to a drama of communication, based on the reasonable assumption that the stage may still be the place for an aesthetic and civilizing act.

Benjamin Nelson. *Arthur Miller: Portrait of a Playwright* (McKay). 1970. pp. 318–9

In spite of personal dedication and public optimism, Miller's plays are remarkably full of suicide. Larry Keller crashed his airplane, and Joe Keller shot himself. Willy Loman crashed his car and did not die his dream death of a salesman. John Proctor (and several lesser characters) of *The Crucible* went to death to assert their integrity, as Eddie Carbone met death in a vain effort to assert his integrity. Lou and Maggie killed themselves in despair in *After the Fall*. Prince Von Berg sacrificed his life to prove his faith in individual life, and Gregory Solomon lost his daughter by a suicide that is not particularized. For all these misfortunes, Miller seeks our pity, and pity is what he evokes when most adept. Though Miller is said to specialize in the inarticulate, all his victims are articulate; they talk. Incisive dialogue etches Miller's low men in our minds; Joe Keller, Willy Loman, Eddie Carbone, Gregory Solomon are vigorous with concrete colloquialisms, Jewish inflections, or rhythmic repetitions of everyday words. Often, however, Miller tries to convert his low man into Everyman, or—worse—into the Tragic Hero. Then Miller is betrayed by his weakness for sonorous abstraction or incongruous image. He finds it hard to accept that he is most true when most trivial.

Ruby Cohn. *Dialogue in American Drama* (Indiana). 1971. p. 95

[Miller's] avoidance of intellectual heroes has made it even more difficult for him to articulate his own ideas. While writing *The Crucible* he felt that ''the historical moment seemed to give me the poetic right to create people of higher self-awareness than the contemporary scene affords.'' But the contemporary scene affords people who are very much more self-aware than the ones he chooses. Returning to modern times in *A View from the Bridge* he burdened himself with a hero who was so unaware of himself and so inarticulate that a choric lawyer had to be introduced to explain the significance of what was going on. *After the Fall* went to the opposite extreme with a hero who unnecessarily swamped the play with self-explanation. *Incident at Vichy* also suffered from a surfeit of exposition: both Von Berg and Leduc are attitudes dressed up as men. In *The Price* Miller tries to get the best of both worlds by taking as his hero a policeman who had opted against developing his initial potential as an intellectual. But because his decision to join the police was taken twenty-eight years before the action of the play, it is hard to bring it into focus.

Ronald Hayman. *Arthur Miller* (Ungar). 1972. p. 118

For Miller, . . . writing in a secular society in which our society's structure related to materialism, the development of values came out of his heterogeneous experience, religious and secular. Given that his family and his roots were always with him, given that the fact and the image of his work experiences—as in ''In Memoriam'' and the half-finished play of 1936—were in his subconscious, it seems that an emotional-religious-psychological conflict raged just beneath the surface. In his early works he was able to dramatize those value conflicts that were close to him and almost on the surface. In his richer works, in *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*, the past came rushing in. . . .

In his career up to and including *Salesman*, Miller's Jewish heritage was in conflict with his American present. Believing in the values he assimilated from his earliest years right through his University of Michigan years, when he was a Jewish boy from New York in Ann Arbor, it was the moral dilemma of his times that was his subject. As a man and playwright, he saw group identity smashed by external forces and by the demands of individualism and success. On the other hand, at the same time he perceived the ideal world as one in which ''the individual was at one with his society; his conflicts with it were, in our terms, like family conflicts, the opposing sides of which nevertheless shared a mutuality of feeling and responsibility.'' In this sense, Miller proceeded from his roots. Not certain of who he was but certain of his values he tried to set forth what happens ''when a man does not have a grip on the forces of life and has no sense of values which will lead him to that kind of grip . . . the implication was that there must be such a grasp of those forces, or else we're doomed.'' These are the reasons

behind Miller's portraits of Willy and Joe Keller, for example, for at base Joe's trouble was not that he could not tell right from wrong, ''but that his cast of mind cannot admit that he, personally, has any viable connection with his world, his universe, or his society.'' It seems undeniable that in attempting to deal with his moral dilemma, Miller's roots were the barb or spur reflecting his Jewish heritage and sensitivity, and responsible for his continuity of thought and treatment from Brooklyn to Broadway, from adolescence to *Death of a Salesman*.

Daniel Walden. In *Critical Essays on Arthur Miller*, ed. James J. Martine (G.K. Hall, 1979), p. 195

One might argue, with justice, that *Death of a Salesman*'s only peer as the American play of the twentieth century is Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*. . . . There are many thematic similarities in the two. They are, of course, ''about'' the same thing—life-long quest of a certain image of self and other, set in the twin frameworks of family role relationships and occupational success striving. Both demonstrate how these spheres interpenetrate, particularly the way in which a culturally enjoined success ethic informs and corrodes family life. The Lomans and the Tyrones, though unlike in many ways, are both nuclear families and almost totally self-absorbed. The family members, with few ties to any rich life outside, feed upon one another; demanding too much of one another and of themselves, they are embittered by the inevitable gulf between ideal image and functioning reality. Both families subsist on fictions, shared delusions that seem necessary to the preservation of any family life at all. Perhaps all families require the maintenance of certain myths about themselves; but the Tyrones and the Lomans are extraordinary in the pervasiveness and grandeur of their domestic myths. In each play, crises arise and create a breaking through of the delusive fabric. Thus Biff, at last determined to expose Willy's comforting lies for what they are, says, ''We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house!'' The dramas are also akin in that the action pivots on a troubled target member—Willy Loman, Mary Tyrone—whose torments throw the tangle of domestic affection and accusation into sharp relief.

In the end, Willy's tragedy lies as much in the bringing down of his dreams as in the bringing down of the man. In some curious way, perhaps the dreams were the best part of the man. Willy chased the same green light Jay Gatsby chased. Willy and Gatsby share the same epitaph—''nobody came to the funeral.'' Willy's whole being has been based on the moving power of a friendship and a presence that do not exist. . . .

The play is now more than a quarter of a century old, and Willy Loman's American has been in many ways transformed. Yet the values portrayed and betrayed are with us still, and the pain and terror are not diminished by a fraction. Linda and Charley, who see Willy unblinkered, affirm that he is a tragic hero. Their words are now familiar, engraved on the consciousness of those who care about the American theatre and care about the texture of our national life. . . .

Robert N. Wilson. *The Writer as Social Seer* (Univ. of North Carolina Pr., 1979), pp. 69–70

One could say a playwright is not a great playwright unless he can use things—in themselves—thematically, not simply as properties to be touched then discarded on the way to discovery, but somehow as the discovery itself. At this point, drama extends itself into poetry, and metaphor swells with movement to a broader, historical reality. Arthur Miller operates in this vision with reserve and intelligence and surprise.

He operates such power initially. The touch of any world begins, of course, with what we first see; and in Miller's opening stage demands, we not only find the physical setting depicting time and place, we often are presented with objects that instruct us intuitively through their metaphoric quality. . . . With well chosen objects Miller tips us off to the inner substance of his characters, or at least what they appear to be to the main figures whose viewpoints often shadow the plays. . . .

In Miller's world, even dreams become absurd, their baggage at last, heavy and silly and seemingly impossible to get rid of. Willy's dream land of big games and diamond mines and assistant buyer positions might be more beautiful than his actual everyday life, but as Biff slowly realizes, its self-inflation is eventually fatal. Such a revelation holds us abruptly in *The Price* as the playwright forces us face to face with the accumulation of the past, both of its dream and reality life.

Marianne Boruch. *Literary Review*. Summer, 1981, pp. 548–49, 555, 560

[*The Crucible*] This playing out of the drama's theological issues as a conflict between a guilty adulterer and his suspicious wife serves supremely well between [Arthur] Miller's ultimate object of ''examining . . . the conflict between a man's raw deeds and his conception of himself; the question of whether conscience is in fact an organic part of the human being, and what happens when it is handed over not merely to the state or the mores of the time but to one's friend or wife.'' The Puritan Proctor could not have provided a fitter subject for the study of the organicism of conscience, because for the Puritans inner grace and outer obedience to the ''state'' and to the ''mores of the time'' had become hopelessly confused. Goodness had lost its theological meaning and degenerated into merely human concept. Hence, to the end of the play neither Elizabeth nor John fully understands the meaning of the word ''goodness,'' although Hale, again in an abbreviated and somewhat debased form . . . tells us in the fourth act that ''before the laws of God we are as swine'' (p. 320).

E. Miller Budick. *Modern Drama*. Dec., 1985, p. 543

MATTHEW ROUDANE: Do you try to get members of the audience to confront themselves and others about key issues?

ARTHUR MILLER: I am not a teacher in the theater, despite what you may have read. . . . The play is really an attempt to order life. Now I'm more than happy when people do arrange themselves on one side or the other of the argument of the play. And I think it may do their brain some good to move away from the anguish of daily chaos. But the theater is not an educational institution, certainly not primarily. If a play makes them feel more alive, it is more than enough.

Matthew C. Roudane. In Matthew C. Roudane, ed. *Conversations with Arthur Miller* (Jackson: Univ. Pr. of Mississippi, 1987), p. 370

Miller's drama has continued to receive exposure in the legitimate theater, but even collectively these productions could not garner an audience so enormous as the one that assembled in the fall of 1985, in family rooms across the country, to watch *Death of a Salesman* on CBS television. Still hot from its successful Broadway run, the play, starring Dustin Hoffman, found an audience of twenty-five million, who acknowledged in Willy Loman—salesman, father, participant in the savage game of success—a range of coincidences in circumstance and character. . . .

Clearly, *Death of a Salesman* is Miller's masterpiece, but the artistic voice that refuses to be bound by time or space resonates throughout the canon, including the most recent plays. Contemporary critics following the fashion may dismiss Miller's drama as outdated both in vision and form, but, individually and collectively, the plays resist summary judgment. Moreover, the frequency with which they are being produced in New York and throughout the United States, in major European cities and on university stages—not to mention Beijing—testifies to the playwright's remarkably constant reputation and catholic appeal.

Miller is in his seventies now, and he remains an energetic, socially conscious thinker and an accomplished dramatic craftsman. Not content to silence the voice that has defined American drama for four decades, Miller has recently completed his autobiography, *Timebends: A Life*, and he is at work on several dramatic works, one of them presently a one-thousand-page draft of *The Ride down Mr. Morgan*, America's best-known playwright may or may not have another Willy Loman in him, but productions of both contemporary and vintage Miller suggest that, at the very least, ''attention must be paid.'' America's elder statesman of the stage is all too modest in summing up his achievement as having created ''Some good parts for actors.''

June Schlueter and James K. Flanagan. *Arthur Miller* (New York: Ungar Publishing, 1987), pp. 142–43

Arthur Miller understands that serious writing is a social act as well as an aesthetic one, that political involvement comes with the territory. He and I have been at the barricades together often and I am never surprised to see him. A writer's work and his actions should be of the same cloth, after all. His plays and his conscience are a cold burning force. I wish there were more like him.

Edward Albee. In Christopher Bigsby, ed. *Arthur Miller and Company: Arthur Miller Talks about His Work in the Company of Actors, Designers, Directors, Reviewers and Writers* (London: Methuen, 1990), p. 1

From his earliest work Miller has sought to express a tragic sense of life, to see in the losing battle with time a certain dignity and courage. No wonder he was so out of sympathy with the low farce of a Senator McCarthy, who assumed, ultimately, that people crave the redemption of submission, or that he resisted what he saw as the reductivism of the theater of the absurd, flirting, as it did, with a world resistant to a moral reading of experience. His work bites deep because it insists on the reality of the moral world, on some sense of justice which ties cause to effect, action to consequence, but also because he confesses to the complexity of that world. He has never seen art as detached from the confused social and psychological world which we all inhabit. He acknowledges our capacity for self-deceit and the contingent nature of the values to which he subscribes. But somewhere, beneath the dulling routines of daily life, beyond the seductive simplicities of ideology or a self-justifying materialism, he insists that there are human necessities which cut across class, race, or gender. It is out of those necessities, just as it is out of the near impossibility of perceiving or understanding them, that his theater is born.

Miller's is essentially a democratic art. He writes about salesmen, dockyard workers, second-hand furniture dealers, policemen, farmers, lawyers, surgeons, businessmen. Like Walt Whitman he gives equal weight to their anxieties and illusions, their articulate pleas and their stammering self-doubts. He writes as though there were one society and the lives of every man and woman [are] of equal worth. He writes, moreover, as though there were one audience. They may indeed be fracturing along lines of class, nationality, or experience, strangers in a strange world, but he plainly believes that there is a level at which we jointly acknowledge certain truths. For Miller, that is what theater is about. At university, he discovered the drama of ancient Greece and that of Ibsen simultaneously. To him they were both in the same game. What he saw in them was a society arguing with itself and perceiving in the life of the individual the lives of us all. That is why the most American of writers has proved the most international. There is no day without a production of one of his plays somewhere in the world and those plays are not seen simply as pieces of exotic Americana. They have been claimed for their relevance to the life of the individual and the meaning of social action. In whatever languages his characters may speak, from whatever stages the voices of a multitude of actors may sound forth, they never fail to amuse, to challenge, to move.

Christopher Bigsby, ed. Introduction. In *Arthur Miller and Company: Arthur Miller Talks about His Work in the Company of Actors, Designers, Directors, Reviewers, and Writers* (London: Methuen, 1990), pp. xiv–xv

I told Arthur [Miller] how my feelings about him as a writer had changed. I had at one time thought him the enemy, consigned to the poetry-free pits of naturalism Hell. Not until I saw *The American Clock* did I realize how shot through to its very bones the play was with surrealistic imagery and that this surrealism was indeed responsible for that which was most powerful about the play. I subsequently saw a conventional revival of *All My Sons*. I closed my eyes and simply listened to the play's madness and realized one day some visionary director will find a way to liberate Arthur's plays from their cage of traditional psychological realism (much as Bergman had done in his Munch-inspired *Hedda Gabler*).

John Guare. In Christopher Bigsby, ed. *Arthur Miller and Company: Arthur Miller Talks about His Work in the Company of Actors, Designers, Directors, Reviewers, and Writers* (London: Methuen, 1990), p. 223

[*Broken Glass*]. . . The time is 1938, the year of Kristallnacht. The heroine, a Brooklyn housewife named Sylvia Gellburg, is paralyzed from the waist down because, as we later learn, she's been obsessing on the looming Holocaust. She needs others to sympathize with her fears, but her husband is a man who denies his Jewishness. . . . A dour conservative who forecloses on properties

for a gentile firm, Gellburg pretends his family name is Finnish and takes pride in his West Point son because he gives lectures on artillery and twice spoke to General MacArthur. Harry Hyman, the doctor they consult, explains (and *explains*), with all the gravity of Paul Muni discovering a serum for smallpox, that Gellburg's wife is possessed not with a virus (as she suspects) or a dybbuk (as Gellburg suspects) but with hysterical symptoms. Eureka! The cure he suggests is sexual, that Gellburg sleep with his own wife. The doctor was apparently thinking of applying that treatment himself because at one point he advises Sylvia to ''imagine we've made love and you're telling me secret things.''

I know it's hard to believe, but I think we're being told that all Sylvia needs to walk again is a little poke from someone who really hates the Nazis. . . .

Clearly, Miller has been furrowing a lot lately about what it means to be a Jew, and is once again saying (to quote from *Incident at Vichy*), ''I don't want your guilt: I don't want your responsibility.''

Robert Brustein. *New Republic*. May 30, 1994, p. 30

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MILLER, Henry (1891–1980)

Miller has something in common with Lawrence and Joyce; in his detestation of the abstract, depersonalized life of his time he is on the side of Lawrence, and he is like Joyce in that all his work is a confession. But it is undertaken in a very different temper from Joyce's; it completely dispenses with dignity and is all the better for it. . . . He pours out everything, getting over his shame by a sort of braggadocio, as Rabelais did; not so completely as Rabelais, but more completely than Joyce.

Edwin Muir. *The Present Age from 1914* (Cresset). 1939. p. 149

Miller invokes food and sex as heroic sentiments and even generalizes them into principles. For the man who is down and out has eyes only for that which he misses most frequently; his condition makes him a natural anarchist, rendering irrelevant all conventions, moral codes or any attempt to order the process of experience according to some value-pattern. The problem is to keep alive, and to that end all means are permissible. . . . Miller's claims as a guide to life and letters or a prophet of doom can be easily discounted. . . . He is remarkable, however, as the biographer of the hobo-intellectual and as the poet of those people at the bottom of society in whom some unforeseen or surreptitious contact with art and literature has aroused a latent antagonism to ordinary living, a resolve to escape the treadmill even at the cost of hunger and degradation.

Philip Rahv. *New Republic*. April 21, 1941. pp. 557–9

I don't know any other writer who has succeeded in completely humanizing the writer as a character, stripping him of any special prestige, making of him a true Everyman who wins his laurels, if any, only in actual competition with other individuals for the possession of human qualities and for the enjoyment of whatever there is to be enjoyed in life. The exhilarating quality of Miller's best things comes precisely from the fact that he has succeeded in making of writing a natural way of existing, and also in making of the reader a companion in the material and moral odyssey, the dejection, the hunger, the shame, and the very real pitfalls which have to be experienced by an individual in order to have that kind of existence.

Nicola Chiaromonte. *New Republic*. Dec. 4, 1944. pp. 751–4

Miller is part of the anti-intellectual spirit of our times, which stems back to the emotionalists and humanitarians (all tender-minded) of the French Revolution. He is a primitivist with the kick of a mule. He is an anarchist more dangerous than Emerson and Nietzsche rolled into one. . . Miller, with an intense fusion of the conscious and subconscious, tells all and spares no one, least of all himself. He is the mighty I AM in literature as in life. . . . He is as elemental as a thunderstorm or a Himalayan avalanche. Along with other mystics he appears to be half sinner, half saint, and sometimes both simultaneously.

Herbert Faulkner West. *The Mind on the Wing* (Coward). 1947. pp. 116–7

He spruces up words conventionally regarded as vulgar and taboo and brings them out on parade, thus achieving an effect of daring originality, what Kenneth Burke calls perspective through incongruity. The solemn he treats with ribald mockery and iconoclastic disdain, the sublime with profane levity; the erotic, the sensual, the luridly carnal—forbidden themes—he honors with lyrical fanfares, almost mystical exaltation. Since the time of the Greeks, sex has been proscribed by Western civilization; Henry Miller considers it his mission to redress the balance, to restore sex to its position of primacy.

Charles I. Glicksberg. *Southwest Review*. Summer, 1948. p. 289

Here in my opinion is the only imaginative prose-writer of the slightest value who has appeared among the English-speaking

races for some years past. Even if that is objected to as an overstatement, it will probably be admitted that Miller is a writer out of the ordinary, worth more than a single glance; and after all, he is a completely negative, unconstructive, amoral writer, a mere Jonah, a passive acceptor of evil, a sort of Whitman among the corpses. . . . It is a demonstration of the impossibility of any major literature until the world has shaken itself into its new shape.

George Orwell. *Such, Such Were the Joys* (Harcourt). 1953. p. 199

Henry Miller is a really popular writer, a writer of, for, and by real people. In other countries he is read, not just by highbrows, or by the wider public that reads novels, but by the people who, in the United States, read comic books. In the United States he has been kept away from a popular public and his great novels have been banned. Only highbrows who could import him from France have read him. . . . I should say he has become part of the standard repertory of reading matter everywhere but in England and in the United States. If you have read Balzac, or Baudelaire, or Goethe, you are also expected to have read Miller.

Kenneth Rexroth. *The Nation*. Nov. 5, 1955. p. 385

As a creative spirit, Miller has to be accepted like a live volcano—with all the ever-latent dangers of eruptions. The volcano does not erupt because it wants to, but because it must. Miller pours himself out like hot lava; his vision is often blurred, not by misjudgements—for he judges rarely—but by contradictory feelings, fantastic appetites, erratic ideas, generous prejudices, bizarre nostalgias, sacrificial self-offerings. . . . His raw material is formlessness and chaos, but under his hand the formlessness turns into life, the chaos into the world we live in.

Alfred Perlès. *My Friend Henry Miller* (Day). 1956. p. 186

It would not be amiss, I think, to say that he emerges . . . the Billy Graham of the bohemian Left. In his present state of modified beatitude, he may indeed be *the* spokesman of the Diverted Revolution in America—a movement without banners, individualistic and ''personalist,'' mystically inclined toward a creed something like Schweitzer's ''reverence for life'' but rather more self-indulgent, nihilistic and averse to the concept of Duty. . . . Of course, Miller's claims as a spiritual influence remain open to hilarious question. . . . Yet the things that annoy us in Miller are frequently things true of ourselves also—and of a sort which shame and ''self-respect'' hardly permit us to admit to ourselves, let alone to the world. His freedom in communicating such matters is one of his true distinctions.

M. L. Rosenthal. *The Nation*. June 8, 1957. p. 502

Even in books like the two *Tropics* where Miller was piling sordidness upon sordidness to get the effect of reality, the thing (on rereading) does not come off as real, especially if you compare him with writers in the same genre like Céline and Beckett. The excitement of the books as good sexual pornography has also considerably worn off; partly perhaps because we have got used to those things from other sources, but chiefly because Miller's own interest in sex (as a writer, of course, not in life) is not fully authentic, but here again seems a little forced. It is not the genuine interest in sex as a thesis, as in Lawrence, or in sex as sensuality, as in Colette; it is not the experience of sex itself that is important to Miller but the symbol of it—symbol of the violent quest for experience that flung Miller out of an ordinary office job and a bourgeois career into the stews of Paris. As a writer Miller has never dealt with experience as such but with himself having the miraculous adventure of having experience. He is an innocent abroad—he is even now the innocent abroad in California.

William Barrett. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 3, 1957. p. 10

It is difficult to say how far such an instinctive writer as Miller has realized his own importance. Probably he arrived at it through a process of trial and error: looking for a fixed point in a world of shadows he found only himself, and in the depths of himself nothing but a longing, nihilistic and pre-natal, a violent attraction toward the darkness of the womb. There is, however, no doubt that his transition from the objectivity of the third person to the subjectivity of the first, from a narrative to an autobiographic style, from reticence on certain subjects to the most brutal frankness, was deliberate and conscious. With him the American novel, which with many of the imitators of Hemingway, Faulkner and Saroyan had become merely a literary machine, reached a turning point. Like the spring-time rush of a turbid and riotous mountain stream breaking up the winter's ice (or if you prefer it like the filthy gush from a drain bursting up through the cracks in the surface of a road), we see in Miller the moment when that precarious balance between American society and its opponents, which had never been completely achieved, broke down altogether.

Alberto Moravia. *Sewanee Review*. Summer, 1960. pp. 474–5

Henry Miller can use the language. He writes strong, biting, memorable, vivid prose. . . . Style, style, style: brushwork, the drive of the hand into the clay, the thrust of the lines of structure against each other, the movement of the musical phrase between keys and modes, the balance and rivalry of colors, the rise and fall and timing of an actor's voice—style is a chief aim of all artists in all media. This Henry Miller has achieved: he is a wonderful stylist.

Spontaneous, his style appears. He writes prose which often seems to run absolutely naturally, like the flow of eager conversation or a rapidly written letter or the current of nonlogical ideas in one's own mind. If in the future he is remembered for anything more than his interest in obscenity, he will be recalled as an agile, often graceful, sometimes powerful manipulator of word and phrase and sentence and paragraph, and sometimes (although less often) of those larger units which are called chapters.

Gilbert Highet. *Horizon*. Nov., 1961. pp. 104–5

The form he uses is sometimes called ''the autobiographical novel,'' but this is a misnomer; the word ''autobiographical'' obtains merely because the narrator (that is the created *I*) sounds so very real. It is now generally recognized that all that is dramatically engaging—whether tragic or comic—must appear to stem from a bedrock of reality. In narrative, this means a straight-faced delivery. This straight face can extend as it does with Miller, beyond the

work itself, so that, when questioned about it he can say: ''Oh yes, that's all real, that really happened, that's *me* I'm writing about, etc.'' which is, of course, nonsense, but, in any case, does not alter the new form which he has brought into being. This form—the narrative using a wholly created, but entirely convincing *I*—is one of the great forms of the future, even as it is today, in the work, for example, of William Burroughs and John Rechy.

Terry Southern. *The Nation*. Nov. 18, 1961. pp. 400–1

Miller is always good when he can praise anything. In however addlepated a way, he loves life. Though his recipe for happiness is one that for any thoughtful person just wouldn't work, nevertheless happiness is what he wants.

What is more, Miller has developed a style that is very well fitted for this continual act of celebration. He writes a hurrying, turbulent prose that gives the impression of complete spontaneity, but only the most naïve reader will imagine that such prose can be produced without a great deal of hard work. The rhythms never get out of hand, the pauses are varied with considerable skill, and the words are chosen with great effectiveness. If this is anti-art, it is at least not anti-craft.

John Wain. *New Republic*. Dec. 1, 1962. p. 22

He is childlike, sensitive, very proud, high-spirited, totally uncritical, alternately gay to the point of euphoria and despairing to the point of suicide. He curses a civilization that he does not understand, reviles a country he is unable to leave, and dismisses as worthless all the major authors he has never taken the trouble to read. He refuses to make any effort to commercialize himself, to ''earn a living,'' but harasses his acquaintances to support him (''You call yourselves my friends'') in petulant open letters—and they do. I do not pretend wholly to understand such a man—even Durrell, who should of all people be able, all too obviously fails. But his letters. . . , cleared of the cant and rhetoric of his books, offer as clear a picture as we are ever likely to get. They prove, at least, if proof were needed, that the Dirty Old Man who still represents the greater part of his public image is really only a fractional, though integral, fragment of the whole—a whole that is huge, unchanging, probably unique, and the closest thing our century is likely to produce to a genuine Noble Savage.

David Littlejohn. *The Reporter*. April 11, 1963. p. 45

Sexus, *Plexus*, and *Nexus*, taken together, are simply an enormously expanded *Tropic of Capricorn*. All these books deal with Miller's life during the twenties when he was trying to discover himself. This is the central story that he has been trying to tell ever since 1932, when he started writing *Tropic of Capricorn*, the story of his ''rosy crucifixion,'' when he died as an ordinary mortal and was resurrected as a writer. Originally he thought he could explain the miracle in one volume. It took him five or six years to finish *Tropic of Capricorn*, only to discover that the mystery had eluded him. The events he narrated were in some mysterious way deeply significant to him, yet he had not succeeded in explaining the significance even to himself. . . . Miller's method [in the trilogy] is rather like psychoanalysis. He seems to be putting down everything he can remember about the period, in hopes that some meaning will ultimately emerge from the mass.

George Wickes. *Henry Miller* (Minnesota). 1966. pp. 38–9

Miller has spent a long industrious life grinding slow and exceeding fine, also coarse. He is a world literary figure, and it is proper to ask where—apart from the long-banned candor—his achievement lies. With whom shall we compare him—Lawrence? Joyce? Beckett? He is not as important as any of these because he has not created a world that is recognizably his own. He has not really created at all. He lacks architectonic skill, a making or shaping drive. He has had only one real subject—himself—and he has not been prepared, or endowed with the ability, to convert himself into a great fictional myth. Called a novelist by some, he has the novelist's ear and eye but not the novelist's power to create great separable artifacts. He has done what any man with his endowments and deficiencies is forced to do—produce autobiography that begs at the door of fiction.

Anthony Burgess. *New York Times Book Section*. Jan. 2, 1972. p. 10

We have in Miller an ideal instance of the interested eye, one filled with more ego than light, an ''I'' which lives in a world of utility and blunt satisfactions. Since objects are reduced to their signs (I am edible, I am drinkable, I am bedable), such signs are surreally enlarged and related, so that a woman is simply a collection of hungry concavities which must be approached warily but always with phallus aforethought. . . .

In *The Tropic of Cancer* and *The Colossus of Maroussi*, where Miller is at his best, in spectacular bursts, in similar fits and starts throughout his *oeuvre*, there is an eager vitality and exuberance to the writing which is exhilarating; a rush of spirit into the world as though all the sparkling wines had been uncorked at once; and the language we watchfully hear skip, whoop and wheel across Miller's pages makes an important esthetic point, especially to those of us who are more at home with Joyce or Woolf or James or Proust, and that is that beneath all the quiet ruminations of the mind, the slendered sensibilities, the measured lyricism of finer feelings, even nearby the remotest precincts of being, is a psyche like quicksand, an omnivorous animal, the continually chewing self. . . .

Some styles are celebrational, as Miller's often is; some are penitential, like Joyce's, full of self-imposed barriers, hardships, ordeals and penalties; and some are excremental—where the idea is simply to get it out, to write like hell and never look back, as Mailer says, until the words amass and mount in books which resemble the rubble of a prolonged catharsis.

Henry Miller's works are not *written*, and do not belong to the page like Pynchon's; nor are they *spoken* as Gaddis's are; nor do they employ the more formal oral eloquence of Sir Thomas Browne; they are *talked*, yarned like a sailor, endlessly gabbed. . . .

William H. Gass. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 24, 1976, pp. 1–2

Like so many American writers of his generation, Miller formed his artistic premises in the matrix of the subversive, on a fanatical commitment to a doctrine of total personal freedom and the most unsettling honesty about himself and his emotions—whatever, in

fact, represented an engagement of life antithetical to the hypocrisies of official society. Also he was, as it seems now, fortunately placed in history to become the sort of man and writer his radical metaphysics required him to be. At a time when, for the provincial American, raw experience in and for itself seemed equivalent to ascension to Godhead, Miller became a supreme cultist and chronicler of the rawest experience conceivable. At a time when the prevailing bigotries deemed it obscene for writers to describe the bodily functions in the language commonly used for them, Miller dedicated himself to becoming the world's first artistically serious writer of pornographic novels. At a time when reason and repression were still the dominant features of established culture, Miller became a champion of the unfettered libidinous self and treated the sex act as if it were a triumphant dance on the grave of the righteous.

But what is perhaps most striking about Miller is that, in the service of his nihilism, he has been able to revert to a state of total infantile irresponsibility, existing in that state not only without the slightest twinge of conscience but with the most astonishing happiness. This more than anything may well be what has helped estrange him from American readers, for he has tended to play far too cheerfully and guiltlessly the complete bastard for us to love him very much. It would seem that we can accept such a man only so long as we have reason to suspect that in some as yet unpolluted part of himself he is conscious of violating principles he knows to be right. The quite honorable French tradition of the flaneur is alien to us, and particularly odious is one who is a professional idler in everything except copulation and the writing of filthy books. We may salivate over his descriptions of sex, yet despise him for refusing to treat sex with the requisite moral seriousness and respect. For Miller saw the sex act as one of the funniest routines in the human vaudeville, and he also saw it, in the form of its usual practice in the bohemian world he knew, as one of the most obvious symptoms of the emotional illness of modern culture, which had evolved from a state of miserable repressiveness to a state of moral anesthesia without ever attaining a genuine revolution of feeling. . . .

Yet Miller in his best work has always been able to transcend the sordidness implicit in this view. What saves him is his joyfulness in the face of the sordid, his power to find high pleasure in the sexual comedy and positively to revel in the detritus thrown off by the process of the world's dissolution. Unlike his French contemporary Céline, to whom the ugliness of the bodily functions was a prime indication that life was disgusting, Miller delighted in such ugliness because it was for him an affirmation of the vitality of life at a time when the forces of technology were hard at work regimenting, purifying, and intellectualizing life out of existence.

John W. Aldridge. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 13, 1976, pp. 26–27

It would be a pity to remember Henry Miller only as the man who made it possible for Americans to write about sex. If there had been no sex in *Tropic of Cancer*, Mr. Miller's first and best novel, it would have been an even better book.

Leon Trotsky said about Louis-Ferdinand Céline, who influenced Mr. Miller, that he walked into literature the way most men walked into their living rooms. The same is true of Mr. Miller, who was one of the earliest American authors to perfect a vernacular, conversational style and to use it to write an impressionistic, anecdotal novel about a comic, antiheroic character. In *Tropic of Cancer*, we can hear Céline's *Journey to the End of Night*, Dostoyevsky's *Notes From the Underground*, Walt Whitman and a smattering of Joyce and Rabelais.

Mr. Miller's reputation as a sexual pioneer tended to obscure the fact that he was a marvelous observer, a man with an infallible ear and a flair for finding symbolism in unobtrusive places. In one of the most successful scenes in *Tropic of Cancer*, he turned an encounter with a Parisian prostitute into a declaration of war: the war between the sexes, between nations, between man and his conscience.

It was not the joy of sex that animated Mr. Miller's books so much as the comedy of sex, a mood he may have borrowed from Rabelais. It might have been better if he had clung to that mood, for in his later books he showed an increasing fondness for philosophizing. In this, he was just the opposite of the man who said, ''I wanted to be a philosopher but cheerfulness kept breaking in.''

An easy and jubilant movement from the particular to the general, from the event to the symbol, had always been Mr. Miller's forte. After his first novel, however, the general began to crowd out the particular. As someone said about a ballet written by Salvador Dali, the dancers were so burdened with symbolism that they could hardly move.

There was not a great deal of fun in American fiction in the 30's. At his best, Henry Miller was wonderful fun to read. He was the poet laureate of expatriation, and his portraits of Americans in Paris may be the best that have ever been written.

Anatole Broyard. *New York Times (daily)*. June 9, 1980, p. D14

Henry Miller never lacked a stalwart legion of detractors. His strengths as a writer were counterbalanced by obvious weaknesses. When his command of the colloquial style faltered, he produced some of the most awkward prose of the age. His surrealistic effusions could become utterly confusing; his dadaistic pastiches puerile and self-indulgent. Many reviewers lambasted the Miller philosophy as dime-store mysticism. His vitriolic denouncements of America were judged to be facile or offensive; his celebrations of particular artists, uncritical and self-serving; his metaphysical pronouncements, glib or idiotic. In their closing arguments, those prosecuting Miller for literary charlatanism called attention to his literary decline. If *Tropic of Cancer*, his first book, showed promise—indeed, was a minor classic—was it also not a fluke? Each succeeding work was a step down the ladder of literary excellence. At the bottom rung was *The Rosy Crucifixion*, which took formlessness and self-indulgence beyond the most generously drawn limits.

Such arguments notwithstanding, Henry Miller remains a great American writer. Because his fall from the literary heights was so extended, it is easy to lose sight of the contributions he made to twentieth-century literature. If he outlived the artist he had been, perhaps coming generations will more easily forgive him the sin of longevity. *Tropic of Cancer* is a modern masterpiece. *Black Spring*, *Tropic of Capricorn*, and *The Colossus of Maroussi* are solid, innovative works. Miller was a writer on the side of excess, extravagance, and extremes; he did not appeal to readers and critics who demanded subtlety, irony, and wit, or a spare style and an unflagging control of the medium. He was a comedian, not a tragedian; a Romantic, not an ironist; an autobiographer, not a

novelist. His work is uneven, but Miller's entire canon, even to its weakest link, is an unparalleled achievement in personal narration.

A writer's importance is not ultimately a product of his shortcomings. The strengths are what endure, and Miller had exceptional strengths. His greatest achievements were as a surrealist, as a vernacular humorist, as a transcendentalist, and as an autobiographer. In these four respects Miller ranks with the best writers of this century.

J.D. Brown. *Henry Miller* (New York: Ungar Publishing, 1986), pp. 107–8

A vision of transcendence drove Miller throughout his life as an artist, but its focus was blurred by the ambivalence of psychic forces straining in divergent directions. Here was a man afflicted with the restlessness of a permanent wanderer who could celebrate the *spirit of place* of lands he visited more acutely than most of the inhabitants; who maintained through his long life a courtly, virtually medieval concept of romantic love while writing scenes of erotic abandon extraordinary in intensity and magnitude; who looked to the past for inspiration and the future for salvation, while proclaiming his conviction that the artist must live in Whitman's ''eternal here and now''; who saw himself as a kind of gangster and desperado of art when he wasn't lecturing his readers on the necessity for social reform; who sounded like a street-smart superrealist when he wasn't writing surreal, cinematic fantasies about the landscape of his mental voyages; who disparaged American culture with great energy and invention while demonstrating his tremendous affection for the variety and style of life in America; and who, perhaps most of all, proclaimed the power of an almost mythic male ego-impulse while struggling without real success to convey the nature of the feminine reality he knew to be its necessary complement. It is a measure of both the ultimate disappointment of Miller's work, as well as a part of its perplexing fascination, that there is no real rendering of an equivalent feminine spirit to match the masculine one which Miller expresses, for this is the one case where the conflict of contrary impulses has not been balanced by contending forces of similar gravity. Miller's inability to envision or write about a harmonious blending, or even and equal contest, must be reckoned a ''failure''—particularly in terms of his great ambitions—but the manner in which he struggled with the question is at the heart of his achievement as well. . . .

There is much in Miller that forecasts the direction of American literature after World War II and yet, for all his visionary power, he is essentially leaning backward—his artist/hero has a strong intimation of what the postmodern world will be like, but he is constructed primarily out of familiar materials. He is built out of F. R. Leavis's ''Great Tradition'' more than one would suspect, and he cannot go far enough back into primitive America or far enough forward into unknown country to stake out his own ground. The concept of a frontier to the West is beyond his imagination, his world is still that of Eliot's ''unreal city,'' and he cannot break on through to the Far East, enchanted as he is by his own concept of an Eastern mythos. The decade he spent in Europe did not prepare him to make the quantum jump into the absurd universe of Camus and Kierkegaard, and thus he only brushed the vast energy that charged the *spiritus mundi* of the 1930s instead of seizing and controlling it. There are aspects of the eschatological everywhere in Miller, but his instinct for a new age was built on values derived originally from Renaissance humanism, and he was as likely to fall backward into time as to hurtle ahead through a time warp to the future.

Leon Lewis. *Henry Miller: The Major Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), pp. 2, 55–56

Miller's main contribution, I suggest, is the rhetoric of grotesquerie. He did open it up. In several senses, there is little behind his rhetoric—not much of a dramatic world of autonomous characters and patterns, not much major moral or social engagement, and not a unique way of knowing or living. Part of his distinctive quality may be the Americanization of the literature of extreme rebellion in which he modified defiance by bumptiousness, eloquence by crass confession, nihilism by geniality, iconoclasm by easy optimistic faiths. Miller's American ordinariness does separate him from the radical explorers of sensibility and the world. He was a buffoonish version of that great tradition, upon which he so patently drew. The mind-loose and fancy-wild American talker, he transcended the fatally ordinary American lower-middle-class ambience—out of which he came but always remained part of—by his eloquent and grandiloquent gestures. Miller's buffoonish rhetoric became his identity (however pathetically failing him in the end) and his legacy.

Kingsley Widmer. *Henry Miller* (Boston: Twayne, 1990), pp. 116–17

What has Henry Miller to say to us now, in his centennial year? Does he have any message, really, beyond some vague and now quite well-accepted principles of sexual and artistic freedom? Isn't his work sexist and out of date? Because his books were banned for their sexual content, he is thought to have been a freewheeling advocate of sexual expression. But ''freedom'' is hardly the word to use in conjunction with a worldview as sexist as Miller's. In fact, as feminist critics have pointed out, he gave voice to certain male attitudes that reflect the deep sexual neuroses of twentieth-century American culture. Hardly a run-of-the-mill male chauvinist, he shared the conflicts of his generation and class about sex while bringing to them complex responses of his own, and his books can in fact reveal a great deal about sexuality and male-female relationships in our recent history. . . .

Miller's autobiographical heroes walk a narrow line—as did their creator—between acceptance and rebellion, rejoicing and disgust. It was inevitable that Miller would attempt to derive a truly positive philosophy in his later years, and it was just as inevitable that he should fail; he was much more convincing as the literary *clochard*, the ''evil product of an evil soil'' he describes in *Tropic of Capricorn*. Thus he chose as the subject for his mighty autobiographical trilogy his early years with Beatrice and then with June; his subject was how his soul was forged in suffering. Whenever he attempted another tack, he drifted. But he knew there were other, loftier subjects, and couldn't help admiring and attempting to emulate the sages and seers of earlier times.

Another aspect of Miller's life, his almost uncanny knack for staying out of step with his own times, needs to be acknowledged. Almost every move he made went against the grain of the age. He often said that Americans mature later than people of other nationalities, but his seems rather an extraordinary case. In Paris,

he lamented being forty, wearing glasses, and being bald; he was there a decade too late, after most of the famous expatriates, the Hemingways and Fitzgeralds, had gone home. Similarly, his blistering attack on America was written during World War II—hardly good marketing judgment. He lived out the forties and fifties in isolation in Big Sur, and then, in the sixties, when the counterculture took up some of the ideas he espoused, he perversely moved to the affluent, bourgeois setting of Pacific Palisades. But the single most harmful piece of mistiming in Miller's life was one over which he had no control: the twenty-five-year ban on the Paris books in the United States. For most of his adult life his greatest works remained unavailable in his own country, and largely unread. He enjoyed notoriety but not fame; he subsisted on handouts. Critical acclaim came only when he was an old man, when his lifework was finished, when he hardly cared about writing anymore. These years of his life stand as a scathing indictment of the way American society treats its iconoclastic artists. Unheralded, unreviewed, unappreciated, virtually unknown, he insisted on being heard. What he had to say may have been unpalatable. But as Miller wrote in defense of *The Rosy Crucifixion*—and the statement might apply to all of his best work—''If it was not good, it was true; if it was not artistic, it was sincere; if it was in bad taste, it was on the side of life.''

Mary V. Dearborn. *The Happiest Man Alive: A Biography of Henry Miller* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), pp. 13–14, 311

Henry Miller foresaw our world of restricted opportunity and widespread mediocrity and railed against it before it arrived. He understood that we would rather relegate sex to a commodity—alternately condemned and slavered over—than try to understand its deep and pervasive power in our lives. He became, like so many prophets—from Jesus to Savonarola—the victim of his own predictions. He railed against America's sexual schizophrenia and he was rewarded by being banned, burned, pirated, deprived both of his livelihood and his power to reach his potential audience. He railed against the conformity and ugliness of America's treatment of the nonconformist, the poet, the artist, and he became the victim of that treatment. Ironically, he was silenced first by close-minded puritans and then by open-minded feminists pursuing sexual honesty and gender fairness. It fell to him to both express and to exemplify the role of the creative artist in a world that has increasingly little use for dissent, for art (except as a salable item), for honesty, for any kind of entertainment or information but that which lulls the senses or sells a product—from a president to a war to a pair of jeans.

Henry Miller predicted all this. Henry Miller never stopped fighting against our somnolence. Henry Miller still matters because he still has the power to wake us up. . . .

His freedom still terrifies. That is why he is critically dismissed, not taught in most universities, relegated to the remainder table. He is a seer. And what he sees is not pleasant. Yet we need his vision more than ever. Our freedoms are being taken away while we look at a flickering light show. More than ever we need to be enlightened. Our very survival depends upon it.

Erica Jong. *The Devil at Large: Erica Jong on Henry Miller* (New York: Turtle Bay Books, 1993), pp. 4–5, 7

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MILLHAUSER, Steven (1943–)

[*Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer (1943–1954). By Jeffrey Cartwright*], Steven Millhauser's deft first novel, . . . offers a substantial amount of truth disguised as elegant artifice. . . .

Stop for a moment and consider the child as artist. In a sense every child is an artist. Just as the intricately-contrived private lunacies of madmen are at heart one with the creative act, so too, the uninhibited crayon scrawls of an infant are the joyously self-indulgent motions of an artist. Art is a magic act. The Cro-Magnon of Lascaux knew that; Picasso knows it too. Children dwell in a world of magic. At will, any child can conjure up surroundings more desirable than the material world of his elders; he, too, is a magician, an artist.

Although Steven Millhauser knows this, his narrator, young Jeffrey Cartwright, does not. Disappointed by Edwin Mullhouse's answers to his queries into the meaning of ''Cartoons,'' he writes: ''Either he did not understand the nature and meaning of his book, and its relation to life, or else his mind grappled with these matters in so curious and personal a manner as to be unable to communicate its findings to intellects organized in a more commonplace way.'' Poor Jeffrey misses the point. Sadly, he is not alone.

But what of Steven Millhauser's novel, considered as a work of art? Certainly, it displays an enviable amount of craft, the harsh discipline that carves through the scar-tissue of personality painfully developed during a process known as ''growing up.'' Only by the slow acquisition of craft is it possible to return to the mad-child-artist who got lost somewhere in the shuffle. In spite of Jeffrey Cartwright's occasionally pedantic tone (the tedium of the device might be likened to the sting of the master's cane), *Edwin Mullhouse* evokes the world of children with delicacy and precision.

Millhauser's eye is trained to observe with a child's perceptions. He appreciates the mystic importance of trivial objects (baseball cards, homemade Valentines, comic books) and he sees the intensity of colors and textures in a world still new. His ear is attuned to the nuances of children's speech from the attempts of a preschooler to imitate his father quoting Chaucer . . . to the roundabout formalities of two second-graders discussing a class room romance. . . . Disbelief is successfully suspended. The author's world has become the reader's.

Along with its other virtues Steven Millhauser's playground of runny-nosed geniuses also serves as an excellent vehicle for satire. The 11-year-old biographer and his meticulous attention to trivia—Jeffrey is forever providing exact lists: of every title in Edwin's library at age 4, of the bubble-gum cards he collects at 9, of all the novelty-shop gifts he gives his second-grade love, Rose Dorn—recall Carlos Baker giving us the inside information on Hemingway by telling the number of trout caught in three days' fishing the Clark's Fork of the Yellowstone. . . . Yet no author is singled out; it is the genre of literary biography itself that is the target. If this seems a balloon easily punctured, it is to the book's credit that it succeeds as a story in spite of the satirical intention.

Steven Millhauser has written a rare and carefully evoked novel. He tells us quite a bit about the nature of children and supplies us with a few useful clues about art in the process. . . . If the story is sometimes slow, it is never uninteresting, and the high points soar with the breath-held clarity of true fiction.

> William Hjortsberg. *The New York Times Book Review*. September 17, 1972, p. 2.

Little could James Joyce have foreseen the avalanche of cliché he was setting in motion when he began *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* with [a] now legendary sentence. . . . In thousands of first novels since Joyce's revolutionary use of the baby artist's earliest lisping literacies half a century ago, a precocious horde of sensitive, rebellious, grimly ambitious children—every last one of them wise and gifted beyond his tender years—have marched to the same leitmotif: The child is father of the novelist, and the proper study of a young writer is Himself when young.

It has been left to the ingenious imagination of still another first novelist, a Brown University graduate student named Steven Millhauser, to stand the Künstlerroman genre on its swollen head in *Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer, 1943–1954, by Jeffrey Cartwright*. . . . Not in the least by chance, he has also produced a brilliant parody of Literary Biography (Semi-Worshipful). . . . Compared to Jeffrey's zealous sense of purpose, his industrious concentration on his subject's infinite variety and plenitude of sameness, James Boswell seems inattentive, Richard Ellmann's *Joyce* slipshod, Leon Edel's *James* cursory. . . .

If the Graduate Student's Revenge were all that Steven Millhauser had in mind for his cunningly literate mockery, *Edwin Mullhouse* would still be an extraordinary achievement. But he is aiming at much more than parody. At the heart of the book, all kidding aside, is a metaphor of childhood as a state of genius.

Except for the tormented year that Edwin sweated over the writing of *Cartoons*, there was nothing in the least Mozartian about the boy novelist. . . . When Jeffrey's literary horizons were expanding into Dickens and Mark Twain, Edwin was still engrossed in *Walt Disney's Comics & Stories* and his kid sister's first-grade texts. . . .

What sets Edwin apart, the essence of his singularity, is his stubborn refusal to surrender the transient genius bestowed upon children, ''the capacity to be obsessed,'' whether the obsession is with Bugs Bunny or Pick Up Sticks. . . . Edwin successfully defied life's cruel assault on a child's playful freedom, ''the obscenity of maturity''—and if Jeffrey cannot resist patting himself on the back for this ''memorable phrase,'' the little monster should be forgiven. A biographer's lot is not a happy one.

Even more than a remarkable tour de force of parody, equal in its way to the best of [Max] Beerbohm, *Edwin Mullhouse* is a portrait not so much of the artist as a young child as of the *ordinary* child as artist. At the age of 29, Millhauser seems to have forgotten nothing of the way children go about the business of being children, at once succored by the adult world and stymied by its elephantine misreading of what children need and want. With all its satiric exaggeration and absurdity, *Edwin Mullhouse* is the most comprehensive account I've read of the language and lore of American middle-class children.

Of course the idea of childhood as a state of grace—in the psychological, not religious, sense—is a sacred liberal shibboleth of our time. From Paul Goodman's *Growing up Absurd*, through the radical educational theorists like John Holt, Ivan Illich, Edgar Friedenberg, *et al*., we have been told that children possess a

spontaneous creativity, a capacity for freedom of feeling and thought, that adult society inexorably stifles or deflects through such repressive institutions as school. It is the old Rousseauian idea of the natural child doomed by the harness of unnatural necessity. And Jeffrey Cartwright, that child of his time, knows all about the ''obscenity of maturity.'' But Steven Millhauser knows something more—that the end of childhood is not necessarily a form of death, just as the violence of Mickey Mouse or Tom and Jerry cartoons doesn't really hurt. And parody is a higher form of comedy than slapstick.

Pearl K. Bell. *The New Leader*. October 16, 1972, pp. 15–16.

Millhauser's first novel received wide critical attention and excellent reviews but few readers. (Although those readers tend to grapple him to their soul with hoops of steel.) If these facts mean anything, they probably mean not that Millhauser is a coterie writer but that he is less confusable with other writers. . . . We tend not to like new things; for this reason our first question about a novelty is likely to be ''what's it like?'' If it is like nothing we know, we shy away. In art this happens all the time. When we say that a first-rate writer must create his own audience, we mean little more than that he must bring out latent tastes in his audience since he has chosen not to appeal to those already developed. In *Edwin Mullhouse* and now in *Portrait of a Romantic* Millhauser deals with topics that Anglo-American life and art have worn down into clichés over the last two centuries: the child, growing up, school days, nature and nurture, the fall from innocence, sex, all that jazz.

But Millhauser has managed to put things differently; no wonder people backed off nervously. Although one reads *Edwin Mullhouse* with recurrent pops of amused recognition—that's it exactly! that's the way it was! I'd forgotten!—one also reads with a steadily depending realization that Millhauser has much more on his mind than childhood games and games with childhood, and that his 13-year-old narrator Jeffrey has considerably more on his mind, and his conscience, than an affectionate biography of his late neighbor, good buddy, and budding writer Edwin. There are deep waters and dark passages, and curious discoveries about art, readers and human relationships. Like a movie about children from which children are banned by the movies' censorship code, *Edwin Mullhouse* is hardly a children's book, though definitely a book for former children.

Portrait of a Romantic carries many of the same topics into later and darker stages, though its relationship to the first novel is too complex to be stated briefly. Early on, [Leo] Tolstoy wrote a trilogy of novels, *Childhood, Boyhood* and *Youth*. Millhauser seems to have embarked upon a similar sequence, developing, with different characters, similar or related themes and settings and giving them a chronological basis. But there the comparison ends; Millhauser's preoccupations are with the dark, disturbing and destructive forces of our growing up, and with the curious foreshadowings of maturity they reveal. If the Millhauser child is father of the man, [William] Wordsworth would be appalled.

There is no artist like Edwin in *Portrait*, and no work like Edwin's novel Cartoons. The artists of this novel, boys on their way into and through high school, are characteristic Romantics; they take themselves as their material and life as their *magnum opus* . . . and if that sounds pompous and overblown, think back to yourself as a teen-aged romantic; the tone is appropriate.

As Millhauser brought unexpected significant issues into the bright Connecticut childhoods of *Edwin Mullhouse*, so into this one (''I was born in the shady corner of a sunny Connecticut town,'' Arthur says) he introduces love and death, with proper childhood comedy (the sex scenes are among the funniest ever written, surely) but also with traditional overblown romanticism. . . . All the adolescent withdrawals from life and affirmation, from hostile delinquents up against scrawled walls through the boredom and weariness and languor and indifference of exasperating adolescence, are reported, photographed and evoked here; but once again Millhauser refuses simply to *remind us*. Interlarded with the dull summers, classrooms and Ping-Pong games are grimmer matters, from the sick comedy of a preference for sickness over health . . . as far as the psychological sickness and even horror of blood-brother pacts, Russian roulette, suicide clubs, and violent death . . . to name only them.

The whole comic and frightening story is reported in Arthur Grumm's self-indulgent hothouse prose, but it is shaped also by Millhauser's cool artistic intelligence, recurrently reminding the reader to keep a safe distance. . . .

[Millhauser does not intrude] upon us with the tempting sincerity of a tastelessly direct statement . . . , [nor does he] insert résumés of [his] own philosophical and moral positions. . . . Millhauser lets Arthur tell his own artful tale, but [stays] the hell out of it, as [he] should, letting [his] selection and arrangement of characters and incidents speak for [him. Millhauser speaks] eloquently and memorably.

J. D. O'Hara. *The Nation*. September 17, 1977, pp. 250–52.

Steven Millhauser's first novel, *Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer, 1943–1954, by Jeffrey Cartwright*, is probably the best Nabokovian novel not written by the master himself. . . . As it turns out, the back-and-forths through which the biographer invents his author and the author his biographer stir the mind and agitate the emotions as unexpectedly as do the ins and outs through which nature and art invent each other in Nabokov—through which, for example, the critic Kinbote and the poet John Shade invent each other in ''Pale Fire.'' Millhauser's demonstration that the preadolescent imagination is a lost genius within us all provides the Nabokovian note of pathos. That the author's name is so close to his character's (Millhauser/Mullhouse) adds reflections for us to reflect upon.

''A work of fiction is a radical act of the imagination whose sole purpose is to supplant the world,'' says Arthur Grumm, the hero of [*Portrait of a Romantic*]; but he is a romantic. Millhauser's second novel, which reflects on his first, is in the form of an account by the 29-year-old Grumm of events that take place mostly during his 12th to 15th years, when genius lapses into adolescence, when myth succumbs to romantic agony. The mere thought of his childhood years bores Grumm. . . . What he seeks is ''not the crude pleasure of sense but the subtle pleasure of transgression.'' His unsuccessful attempt to commit suicide and his successful attempt to put a finger into the fan are more like premonitions of what is to come.

What is to come, during four winters, is a deeper and deeper submersion into the alluring dangers of the romantic subreal. The first and last of these winters and the summertime recoveries of actuality in between are spent by Arthur Grumm with his ''double,'' a wonderfully real boy named William Mainwaring. . . . He is

one of the best realized boys in American literature since Huck Finn, whom in some respects he resembles. Realist Mainwaring, Grumm's quotidian parents, his commonplace aunt and uncle, his conventional cousin, the banal summer excursions they take together are all made uncommonly vivid and sympathetic by Millhauser, who finds poetry where his adolescent hero gets bored. This family life is the ordinary against which the extraordinary measures itself. The extraordinary is exemplified in part by Grumm's companion during the second winter, his ''triple,'' Philip Schoolcraft, whose main expression is a mocking smile; who dismisses Mainwaring as a ''scientist'' and ''philistine''; who lives in a crumbling and gloomy old house with his dotty mother; who lies on the bed in his garret, smoking, staring at the ceiling, listening to a record of ''Afternoon of a Faun,'' memorizing Poe, playing Russian roulette. It is he who reveals to Grumm the secret kinship between fiction and suicide. . . . The two boys solemnly seal a suicide pact with drops of blood.

During the next winter Arthur Grumm seals another suicide pact with the pale, doleful enchantress, the ''Lady'' Eleanor Schumann, age 13, who may be taken as the objectification of his Gothic longings. . . . What goes on between her and Arthur Grumm in the murky closets and haunted alcoves of her chamber is a set piece of deadpan comedy, of obsession turning round and round on itself until what lurks inside comes out.

During the fourth winter, Arthur Grumm and William Mainwaring solemnly seal a third suicide pact with drops of blood, and the battle for Grumm's soul—between his double and his triple, between his good and bad angels, between the romantic and the realist within him—is fought out. I won't say what happens, but if what happens were reducible to a proposition, it might be one like this: Reality is the source of all value, but it is ticklish, you can only grip it with fictions—which, however, destroy it, along with life. Romanticism turns out to be not so much suicidal as murderous.

But to say that is to say practically nothing about this remarkable book, which says much more in a rapt march of particulars that pull you irresistibly after them into dangerous moods. If your experience is anything like mine, you will want to risk those moods twice. For one thing, the book is very good, and in ways that clearly require a second go-around. For another, its aftershock is terrific. And it goes on rumbling through the mind, knocking things over. You will want to know how you were set up for it.

Once you reread the book the particulars begin to look different. The foreshadowings become luminous with afterglow. What first seemed merely realistic—an abandoned sneaker in a brook, a Raggedy Ann doll hung out to dry—becomes symbolic. What seemed mere fantasy—Grumm's transformation into a mechanical doll, the endless corridors of Eleanor's playroom—become the workings of an iron psychological necessity. You come to see how you were set up by an elegant design and an exacting intelligence. You come to recognize romanticism as an age, an era, a condition, a propensity within all of us to murder reality. Millhauser makes you feel both the cost and the pleasure of yielding to it.

George Stade. *The New York Times Book Review*. October 2, 1977, pp. 13, 30.

''If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite,'' William Blake wrote. In *Edwin Mullhouse,* it was clear that Mr. Millhauser would settle for nothing less. So it is cheerful to report that in his first short-story collection, *In the Penny Arcade*, Mr. Millhauser continues to pursue fiction as a mysterious, magical, enlightening experience. He still chases the Blake an infinite. Always, as he writes in one story, his fiction leads us ''away from the torpor of the familiar into a dark realm of strangeness and wonder.''

The book is divided into three sections. In ''August Eschenburg,'' the long story that forms the first part, a German boy in the late 19th century is obsessed with mechanical devices that simulate life. The world is readying itself for the motion picture, but movies have not been invented yet, and August becomes the last great maker of Automatons. He raises his craft to art, his humanoid models to the threshold of breath. August first creates models for a department store's windows, then an automation theater—a *Zaubertheater*, though not one as soul-changing as Hesse's—which quickly loses customers to a frankly pornographic automation theater (an overly obvious depiction of artistic debasement). August's backer, the cynical Hausenstein, who surreptitiously owns the other theater, knows that ''your good blue-eyed German likes plenty of been on his plate and plenty of been on his women.'' August knows only that ''his ambition was to insert his dreams into the world, and if they were the wrong dreams, then he would dream them in solitude.'' Frustrated, August returns to his hometown, his art ''outmoded.''

For Mr. Millhauser, art always has an erotic component. August creates his ''dark-eyed suffering automation girl,'' who has ''in her walk . . . a new suggestion of ripeness, of sexual wakening,'' with ''something akin to love-anguish.'' Art, like eros, stirs senses to full life, demands devotion, teases, yet delivers perfection and beauty. Can they last? ''Was beauty subject to fashion?'' Sadly, it appears so. This is the way of the world, Mr. Millhauser tells us: art, dreams and beauty sooner or later are vitiated. Yet he never lets his musings on the suffering and ravishment of art grow stale; the breath of human passion blows through them.

Gently yet more intentionally sensual are the next two stories [''A Protest against the Sun'' and ''The Sledding Party''], which deal with a young girl's awakening to the vibrancy and threat of womanhood and love. As with Edwin Mullhouse and August Eschenburg, Mr. Millhauser always works best with young people. They are lighter-than-air simulacrums of adults; unformed, they let us imagine possibility, process and fulfillment. The secret is to keep the grown-up offstage as much as possible. . . .

Adulthood is everywhere in ''A Day in the Country,'' which takes Judith, a 36-year-old technical-book editor, to a resort for a weekend. Judith is feigning insouciance after a bad love affair, and it takes a young woman with ''melancholy and mutely appealing eyes,'' who Judith believes is following her, to get her to face the truth that she's lonely and depressed. The story is Upper West Side Hawthorne, and Mr. Millhauser, whose mysteries are so illuminating, founders with conventional psychologizing. Judith's epiphany can only lead, the reader believes, not to awareness but to an analyst's couch.

In the book's final section, character is moved to the background, and poetic, allegorical effect takes over. Since Mr. Millhauser's touch with people is usually so gentle and understanding, this comes as a slight disappointment. The first story, ''Snowmen,'' gives us a suburban town seized by a frenzy of snowy replication: snowmen, snow animals, snow houses and finally snow ''griffins, unicorns, and sea serpents'' are magically built. As a miniature of Mr. Millhauser's art—rampant imagination supplanting dull reality—the fantasy is brilliant, but as a tour de

force, there is nowhere for it to go. What happens to the snowy wonderland? It melts.

[''In the Penny Arcade''] is reminiscent of an early scene in *Edwin Mullhouse* and of James Joyce's ''Araby.'' A boy returning to a penny arcade visited years before finds the ''majesty and mystery . . . crushed down by the shrewd, oppressive eyes of countless visitors who looked at [the figures] without seeing their fertile inner nature.'' The final story, ''Cathay,'' which describes a fabulous city, is like one of Italo Calvino's evocations of invisible cities—a charming, openended artifice. Though not as intellectually rich as Calvino's fantasies, ''Cathay'' is richer in fairytale magic.

Mr. Millhauser's stories stand in rare counterpoint to his contemporaries' work in a flat, ironic, affect less realism. Though his art can be hampered by too rigid conceits and occasional bad choices of subject, he is a true original when he draws us into his precise, luminous awareness, when he makes our world turn amazing. As the narrator of ''Penny Arcade'' realizes, ''I recognized that I myself had become a part of the conspiracy of dullness, and that only in a moment of lavish awareness . . . had I seen truly. [The magical figures] had not betrayed me: I had betrayed them. I saw that I was in danger of becoming ordinary, and I understood that from now on I would have to be vigilant.''

Mr. Millhauser is more than vigilant; he creates for us this splendid arcade. And he asks us also to be vigilant as we venture with him into the common corners of our ragged world, where the marvelous glows and true meanings breathe life.

Robert Dunn. *The New York Times Book Review*. January 19, 1986, p. 9.

On the surface, Steven Millhauser's first novel, *Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer 1943-1954,* and his most recent, *Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer,* appear radically different in subject and scope. *Edwin Mullhouse*—the outrageously exhaustive literary biography (written by an 11-year-old!) of a writer whose ''Early,'' ''Middle'' and ''Late'' periods span kindergarten through fifth grade—counts the angels on the head of a pin. *Martin Dressler,* in contrast, constructs a grand cosmology (a vast, turn-of-the-century New York City hotel named—what else?—The Grand Cosmo) to rival Dante's road map of heaven and hell. But both Edwin Mullhouse's biography and Martin Dressler's hotel are really cities of the mind, archeologies of the imagination.

Steven Millhauser's previous novels include *Little Kingdoms* and *The Barnum Museum.* The re-publication of his 1972 novel, *Edwin Mullhouse,* in conjunction with the appearance of *Martin Dressler,* provides an opportunity to discover patterns that have shaped the writer's ongoing aspirations and inspirations from beginning to end.

Edwin Mullhouse is a hoot of a book. Not since Vladimir Nabokov set Dr. Charles Kinbote loose to wreak havoc on poet John Shade's heroic couplets in *Pale Fire* has there been a more deliciously loony literary critic than Jeffrey Cartwright, the ''real'' author of *Edwin Mullhouse.*

You have to suspend your disbelief a bit, of course, to enjoy this *Bugsy Malone* of literary biographies. The truly annoying Jeffrey Cartwright, detecting signs of genius in his friend Edwin since birth, decides at age 5 that he will play a pint-sized Boswell. (Edwin's first, infant memory of Jeffrey is, appropriately, ''a vague sensation of someone bending too close to me''). Jeffrey, a young fellow with apparently total recall, faithfully catalogues the titles of Edwin's 200 favorite cartoons, provides an exhaustive summary of ''juvenilia''—thirty-one stories from a family newspaper, ''an event of major significance in the spiritual history of my artistic friend''—and records Edwin's every word. Edwin Mullhouse's literary career climaxes with his one and only book, *Cartoons* (published posthumously in 1958). Ironically, the writer's death makes possible the biographer's *Life.*

Is it any coincidence that *Edwin Mullhouse,* with its lambent prose, flights of speculative free association and novelistic probings, was originally published in the same year as the final tome of Leon Edel's five-volume, bazillion-page life of Henry James? But then, why pick on Edel? Scores of literary biographers could be models for Millhauser's dead-on satire of the form.

Shrunk to the scale of Edwin Mullhouse's brief life span, childhood events loom large as defining moments: At 6 months, we learn, ''Edwin was always sleeping''; ''colds always took him by surprise''; ''third grade surprised me: I had not anticipated desks.'' When a cohort hits the skids, ''she drifted into the middle reading group and at last into the lowest reading group, from which she never emerged.''

A big joke, of course (one Jeffrey shares with Kinbote) is that this unreliable narrator/biographer has no idea how deluded he is. Jeffrey's unctuous self-effacement is hollow to the core: ''It has been my policy in this work to huddle modestly in the background.'' Who's the biographer really writing about? Why, himself, of course: ''I, for one, can testify that even a modest biographer can be driven to strange devices for the sake of his throbbing book.''

The even bigger joke, though—one it may take the reader longer to figure out—is the fact that Jeffrey Cartwright is correct: Edwin Mullhouse is a genius. And so is Jeffrey Cartwright (Steven Millhauser, too).

''Biography is so simple . . . . All you do is put in everything,'' says Edwin. And that's just what Jeffrey does, with mad abandon. There are wonderful pages on the poetry of Edwin's pre-verbal burbles (James Joyce meets Mister Rogers), and the miracle that happens in first grade: ''Words were springing up all around him . . . . They grew on pencils, on lamps, on clocks, on paper bags, on cardboard boxes, on carpet sweepers, on the brass prongs of all plugs, on the bottom of plates, on the backs of spoons. They grew on his sneakers, in his underpants, on the inside of his shirt behind his neck.''

''For what is genius,'' Millhauser writes, ''but the capacity to be obsessed? Every normal child has that capacity . . . but sooner or later it is beaten out of us, the glory faded.'' What if, contrary to the Wordsworthian dictum that we must inexorably trade the heaven which ''lies about us in our infancy'' for the ''light of common day,'' we could fully recall the wondrous way we saw the world as a child?

That's the imaginative premise of *Edwin Mullhouse*—and the grim joke behind Edwin's early death, which saves him from ''the obscenity of maturity.'' It's also a clue to the main character's name, that seductive echo between ''Edwin Mullhouse'' and ''Steven Millhauser.'' Not to wax biographical (*pace,* Jeffrey Cartwright!), but surely Mullhouse is Millhauser's childhood self—just as Cartwright is a darkly comic parody of the adult writer, shaping childhood memories to the procrustean bed of literary form.

Like *Edwin Mullhouse,* Millhauser's new novel, *Martin Dressler,* is a story of genius and obsession, in which an amazing world is

built to the dictates of an unfettered imagination. It's a tale as American as a Horatio Alger. A German immigrant lad in New York City at the turn of the century rises from rolling cigars in his father's store to out-trumping The Donald as the builder of the most astounding hotels the world has ever seen.

At age 13, Martin takes the Prospect Park & Coney Island Railroad to West Brighton, where he has a transforming vision of the modern age: ''Iron piers stretched out over the ocean, iron towers pierced the sky, somewhere under the water a great telegraph cable longer than the longest train stretched . . . and Martin had the odd sensation . . . that the world, immense and extravagant, was rushing away in every direction.'' The rest of the novel (which takes place between 1881 and 1905) chronicles Dressler's attempts to harness and contain that pulsing energy in a series of ever-grander business and building enterprises.

As a youth, Dressler wanders the ''vast stretch of land'' between the Hudson River and Central Park, a patchwork of row houses, vacant lots, chateaux, squatters' shacks and farms. As the city grows, so does Dressler's imagination: ''It was as if the West End had been raked over by a gigantic harrow and planted with seeds of steel and stone; now as the century turned, the avenues had begun to erupt in strange, immense growths: modern flowers with veins of steel, bursting out of bedrock.''

Historic New York has been the focus of popular novels from the nostalgic (Jack Finney's *Time and Again*) to the nasty (Caleb Carr's *The Alienist*). Martin Dressler's Manhattan joins the fantastic ranks of meta-cities as a worthy companion to Mark Helprin's *Winter's Tale* and E.L. Doctorow's *The Waterworks.* If you're a fan of the time-travel genre, you'll relish the vivid detail with which Millhauser re-creates a bygone era: a flash of high-seated cyclists, distant sounds of an organ grinder, the smell of horse manure in the air. In contrast to the Joycean excess of *Edwin Mullhouse, Martin Dressler*'s prose is spare, but still sensuous, as rich as a Tiffany lampshade ''hand-painted with Nile-green sailboats, its gleam of slender glasses holding amber and emerald and ruby liquids.''

Martin Dressler's astounding success comes from his uncanny ability to intuit the temper of an era still in its infancy. His restaurants flourish on prescient principles: relentless print advertising, linked stores with similar decor, name recognition, ''five-minute'' breakfasts (guaranteed), free prizes for the kids. Not content to invent the McDonald's of the horse and buggy set, however, he restlessly seeks out ever-more difficult and daring endeavors. Dressler rises inexorably from desk clerk at the Vanderlyn Hotel to developer of a chain of ''Metropolitan Lunchrooms'' to innovator of the grandest of grand hotels.

In the hotel business, Martin Dressler finds his true métier. An epiphany sets the tone for the fantastical ventures that follow: ''At once he saw: deep under the earth, in darkness impenetrable, an immense dynamo was humming . . . it was as if the structure were his own body, his head piercing the clouds, his feet buried deep in the earth, and in his blood the plunge and rise of elevators . . . a wild, sweet exhilaration.'' The self-contained universe of the hotel will literally body forth its creator's imagination.

I can't help but think of Martin Dressler's contemporary, Henry Adams, speculating in his *Education* that ''the new American—the child of incalculable coal-power, chemical power, electric power, and radiating energy, as well as of new forces yet undetermined—must be a sort of God.''

Just as Jeffrey Cartwright ''creates'' Edwin Mullhouse, so Martin Dressler realizes American dreams in concrete and steel. The apex of his creation, the Grand Cosmo itself, is an amalgam of hotel, museum, department store, amusement park and theater—twenty-three levels underground, thirty above—containing (and I offer only the most partial of lists): rustic cottages, caves, a New England Village, a Moorish Bazaar, a Seance Parlor, a Temple of Poesy, an Asylum for the Insane, a Theatrum Mundi, stage sets of the solar system and ''black gardens of imagination'' in a subterranean labyrinth. Millhauser's powers of description in this section of the book astound and delight.

The Grand Cosmo cleverly embodies the most profound contradictions of the modern American sensibility: our yearning for the nostalgic and the new, the exotic and the utterly familiar; a place at the very heart of the city—and a place where we can get away from it all. (I write this review a stone's throw from the Mall of America, that Grand Cosmo of the Upper Midwest!)

Yet Martin Dressler, man of his age with the Midas touch, builds the Grand Cosmo to his heart's desire—and it fails miserably. Why? Is Dressler being punished by a jealous God for satanic overreaching? Is there a fatal flaw in this creator that leads to the downfall of his creation? One clue may be found in his disastrous marriage. Dreams make terrible lovers, as he discovers after wedding the languorous beauty Caroline Vernon, a woman whose lotus-eating sensibility (''a sweet, melting melancholy, a dissolving shadowy sweetness of vague regret and dim longing'') would seem at utter odds with Martin's go-getting ambition. His ill-fated attraction to Caroline suggests the darker proclivities of an obsessive imagination: Vigorous cities of the mind can also become entropic, escapist prisons.

Another clue to the fate of the Grand Cosmo can be found near the novel's end. Martin strolls the streets of his old neighborhood to discover that his first residence, the Bellingham Hotel, has vanished without a trace: ''That was the way of things in New York . . . Even as his new building rose story by story it was already vanishing, the trajectory of the wrecker's ball had been set in motion as the blade of the first bulldozer bit into the earth.'' Millhauser here takes a page from Prospero's book: ''The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces . . . the great globe itself'' must inevitably dissolve as we awake from artifice to reality.

But I doubt Steven Millhauser is about to abjure his rough magic just yet. *Edwin Mullhouse* ends with Jeffrey bumping into yet another ''interesting little fellow . . . I expect to be seeing more of . . . in the near future.'' At the conclusion of *Martin Dressler,* its hero ambles away from his failed hotel into the light of common day: ''For the time being he would just walk along, keeping a little out of the way of things, admiring the view . . . . He was in no hurry.'' The year is 1905; Martin Dressler, the suggestive age of 33. I eagerly await another biography, another hotel, another novel.

Diana Postlethwaite. *The Nation.*May 6, 1996, pp. 68-72.

A short story writer and novelist who specializes in the curious relationship of childhood and creativity, Steven Millhauser is best known for his first book, *Edwin Mulhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer, 1943-1954.* In the decades since it was published, the penchant for ever-thicker biographies has only increased, as has the satiric power of Millhauser's novel. The

burden of Millhauser's subsequent career was to somehow match the brilliance of his first book. That he has not done so is at once predictable and further testament to the enduring greatness of *Edwin Mulhouse.* Few contemporary American novels have a legitimate claim to being regarded as classics, but Millhauser's elaborate account of the Boswell to Johnson relationship of a ten-year-old writer and his adoring but deeply jealous classmate is one of them.

Although reviewer-critics often mention the heavy debts that *Edwin Mulhouse* owes to Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire,* a whole range of other books are more likely influences, including Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* and Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight.* Moreover, biography itself is only part of the novel's landscape; unsentimental portraits of childhood—either as beings closer to the truth than adults are likely to realize, or as complicated characters in their own right—also matter greatly. Indeed, no contemporary American writer is more adroit or more penetrating when it comes to rendering children from the inside out.

Millhauser is also concerned with the curious relationship between art and life, or in the case of Edwin Mulhouse, between the artist and his biographer. At one point Jeffrey, the child who has escaped death's clutches to chronicle the story of a writer-friend who did not, puts it this way:

> God pity the poor novelist. Standing on his omniscient cliff, with painful ingenuity he must contrive to drop bits of important information into the swift current of his all-powerful plot, where they are swept along like so many popsicle sticks, turning and turning. He dare not delay for one second, not even for one-tenth of a second, for then the busy and impatient reader will yawn and lay aside the book and pick up the nearest newspaper, with all those slender columns that remind you of nothing so much as the sides of cereal boxes. The modest biographer, fortunately, is under no such obligation. Calmly and methodically, in one fell swoop, in a way impossible for the harried novelist who is always trying to do a hundred things at once, he can simply say what he has to say, ticking off each item with his right hand on the successively raised fingers of his left.

There is a good deal of truth in the selection, also with a perhaps even greater amount of tongue in Millhauser's cheek, for *Edwin Mulhouse* is a novel that lives or dies on the accumulative effect of its elaborate style.

Excess comes with the territory, but the argument is harder to sustain in Millhauser's subsequent work. In *Portrait of a Romantic,* Arthur Grumm, the novel's 29-year old protagonist, replaces his present situation with elaborately recalled dreams from his adolescence. As he insists, ''A work of fiction is a radical act of the imagination whose sole purpose is to supplant the world.'' One could say similar things about the stories Millhauser has been publishing in recent years (*In the Penny Arcade, The Barnum Museum,* and *Little Kingdoms: Three Novellas*): they are often populated by characters who, in the words of Edwin Mulhouse's suicide note, ''aspire to the condition of fiction.'' Moreover, Millhauser is a writer whose allusion-packed paragraphs never quite know when to say when.

The result is at once large swatches of dazzling verbal magic and a disturbing sense that the pyrotechnics never move beyond the status of learned exercise. Millhauser receives respectful attention whenever a new volume appears, but his work has not yet managed to step outside the long shadow that *Edwin Mulhouse* cast.

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MILNER, Ron (1938–)

At the American Place Theater last evening I strained to hear [*Who's Got His Own*] in two different ways.

The first problem is merely vocal. For Ronald Milner's *Who's Got His Own*, the director Lloyd Richards has brought together three restless, volatile, fever-pitch players who can scarcely contain the furies they feel. . . .

The play *should* be done in the round because it is composed almost entirely of passionate fists and faces, but the round becomes a menace when the pitch is low and the pace close to breathless. One [character] turns his head away and more than words are lost. The shape of the sequence disintegrates and we are forced to patch meanings together as best we can, by long-distance and with a faulty connection.

The strain goes beyond that, though. Mr. Milner has certain admirable intentions, at least, as a playwright. He would like to use the stage as though it were really a bear pit, with a point at the center where all angers must cross. He would like to make his play out of words, a hundred thousand harsh words and no window dressing. And he would like us to see his victims gored to death in full view, harried and helpless and beyond hope. The Negro family of the play no longer have anything to conceal; they have reached the point where only truth-telling and blood-letting will do.

Mr. Milner does make us listen, or try hard to. The formalization that brings a bitter brother, a trembling sister, and a bereaved mother into separate spotlights to rasp out their private agonies creates a confinement with some tension to it. We are curious to know precisely why the boy, immediately after his father's funeral, wants all pious mourning dispensed with as so much fraud, why he cannot bear the memory of seeing the old man, in work clothes, hunched over a cigarette on the street looking as though he had just stolen something in broad daylight.

We are curious to understand why the shaken sister's white lover has looked at her, one morning, with a disgust he cannot explain. We certainly want to know, at the beginning of the play's final act, why the son of the family—desperate with everyone's grief—has gone to a white friend for consolation and, on impulse, beaten him senseless against a wall.

In part, we come to grasp these things. The love-hate relationship between the whites and blacks has left each of the frustrated blacks with a residual impulse, ''like he had to kill one of *them* before he could have any peace.'' Yet there is no peace in the killing. The killing is meant to atone for yesterday. But, a resigned

mother sighs at evening's end, no one can wait in ambush for yesterday. It's not coming this way again.

With effort, we make our own connection with Mr. Milner's circling, unsettling thought. . . . But the connection remains remote even when we have heard what is being said, the heat on the stage is a dry heat. The [characters] cry real tears now and again; but we are merely alert, strictly attentive, still detached from the felt heart of the matter.

Why? Possibly Mr. Milner works at too high a pitch too much of the time; soon the room becomes airless. Possibly he has made the mistake of taking us only backward, never forward, in time. . . . [*Who's Got His Own*] takes place in ''the continuing past,'' the program tells us; and it does seem always to be retreating.

More than that, Mr. Milner is not yet a poet. He has a poet's habits of style and a dramatic poet's eagerness to crack heads together to see what new sound may be forced from them. But the language itself is still prose, prose in an incredible hurry, prose in such a hurry that it escapes us before we are quite touched. Language need never be tame; but it must take the time to steal closer to us.

Walter Kerr. *The New York Times.* October 13, 1966, p. 52.

If you have ever gone to any of the summertime festivals of street plays—exceedingly simple moralities in which Virtue and Vice contend for the souls of ghetto youngsters . . . you will recognize Ron Milner's *What the Wine-Sellers Buy* right off. Its bones are the bones of all such exhortations to ''stay clean,'' its neighborhood pieties the same neighborhood pieties, its warnings the very same warnings. At the end of the evening a lad who has *almost* been seduced by a Mephistolike figure into pimping his thoroughly nice girl reaches out to the girl, clutches her tight, and firmly announces ''We ain't goin' his way, it costs too much.'' The homily has simply been moved indoors . . . , opulently mounted, opened up by its author to cram just as much lifelike detail—and perhaps as much dramatic truth—into its elementary design as possible.

How much? At what point does a slogan stop being a slogan and begin to dissolve into the ambiguity and abrupt candor and restless complexity we're willing to call art? There are three or four suddenly hushed moments in Mr. Milner's play when we can very nearly hear the metamorphosis taking place, the evening gliding upward into felt personal truths that are not necessarily suitable for placards.

[Mae], the girl trapped between her love for a boy and the boy's mistaken notion of what will best secure their futures, is taking a severe dressing-down from her mother. The piece, like all such pieces, is full of scoldings: there must be spokesmen for the Right. But, halfway through the older woman's entirely conventional tirade, the girl cuts her off with a cry. The cry is not what we expect. The girl is begging her mother to hit her, hit her hard. Not to wake her up, to drum some sense into her. She scarcely needs that. She simply wants her mother to touch her, to put a hand to her, never mind how fiercely or what for. ''When you stopped whipping, you just took your hands away,'' [Mae] says. . . . Something over and above the rhetoric has crept in, and its presence has an authority that no amount of righteous finger-wagging will ever equal.

[Mae] is given another such opportunity to escape the strict programing of Our Lesson for Today (Mr. Milner seems to write best for this reluctant, defiant changeling). Under too much pressure from the boy, who is now daydreaming that prostitution will earn them enough money to buy a service truck and turn legitimate, she tries flight. Phoning her father in another city, she asks if she can come to him.

The scene itself is resolutely sentimental, unabashedly stock. The girl fondles a teddy bear as she listens to the refusal we know is certain, a faltering ''Oh?'' trickling out of her as she absorbs a father's lame excuses. But the conversation goes on a bit longer, grows lighter, and she has pretty well swallowed her disappointment by the time talk turns to Christmas. What would she like for a present this year? The answer pops out of her, eyes glinting maliciously. ''A truck,'' she says.

Of course she knows that the request is absurd. She has suddenly seen herself as absurd, her situation as absurd; she is laughing at her own pain, and the flash of bold humor cuts through everything that is saccharine about the sequence like an honest-to-God breadknife.

As Mr. Milner goes on with his work, he will do well to let impulse interrupt him oftener, let people speak for themselves instead of steadily saluting the evening's cause. He has a certain gift for decoration, even when it is being applied to the all-too-obvious. His Mephisto, for instance, emerges as a spider-legged, flair-skirted, sombrero-crowned cock of the roost who cannot discuss the prospects of chicken farming without turning his throat into a barnyard pianoforte. . . .

[The panderer Rico] is often mesmerizing to watch as he sidles through what seem to be no more than cracks in the hall doorway, dressed in everything from zebra-stripes to tapes tried red-and-golds that would look well on the backs of playing cards. If he resembles anything at all it is a Fifth Musketeer, recently cashiered from the King's service for good cause.

Mephisto, however, is still Mephisto, and what he has in mind for his prey is Hell. As soon as one of the Virtues—in this case a bourgeois contractor—begins an impassioned speech that may persuade our young hero to think twice, we know that the devil in the back room will slink instantly from his lair, ready to tug the other way. While the boy propositions his girl, [Rico] stands above them in a pale blue spotlight, dictating the boy's ploys, sometimes reciting them with him. . . .

A debating-society regularity haunts the play: a high school coach speaks sharply on the subject of sex; the boy traps the girl immediately afterward. The first act lights fade away on the boy's first taste of marijuana. The second act lights fade away on the *girl's* first taste. Motivations stand in the corner, waiting, until they are needed: if the boy requires new prompting along a wrong path, his mother becomes ill and there is no money for medicine. This done, we lose the mother for up to an hour afterward.

And the slogans keep on raining. ''If you don't respect us, we got to respect ourselves,'' the girl declaims, as likely as not to automatic applause. ''If I sell you, then what am I gonna buy, huh?'' the boy finally asks, repenting his plans. It's very much an ''I'm gonna tell you somethin''' play, with the speaker promptly making good his word.

Graham Greene once remarked that it was no more than a single step from the medieval morality play—with, perhaps, a central figure named Ambition—to *Macbeth*. But it is the step that makes all the difference, so great a difference that by the time we get to *Macbeth* it is no longer possible to say precisely where the most urgent ambition lies. *What the Wine-Sellers Buy* hasn't yet made the step. Though it comes teasingly close a few times . . . , the formula locks it in as tightly as though Mephisto's claws *were*

inescapable. In the service of virtue, a theatrical vice wins. The characters haven't freedom enough to act for themselves.

Walter Kerr. *The New York Times*. February 24, 1974, p. 1.

Playwright Ron Milner is considered one of the more exciting writers who came to national prominence during the explosive Black Theatre movement of the 1960s. Much like his contemporaries, Ed Bullins and Amiri Baraka, he was influenced by both the social and political conditions of those times. A native Detroiter, Milner, who has often been called ''the people's playwright,'' has had his works described as being rich in the authentic texture of life in the urban black setting. He has repeatedly been praised for his powerful use of language and observation of character. His characters often examine their self-perceptions and identity while questioning their place in a complex and oppressive world. This introspection enables them to come to a new understanding of themselves, thereby changing how they relate to that world.

Reminiscent of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Milner's first full-length play, *Who's Got His Own*, portrays the damaged relationships of a recently widowed mother with her alienated son and embittered daughter. The drama explores the impact that living in a racist society has on black manhood. Opening with the funeral of the domineering patriarch, the son—Tim, Jr.—is forced to address the conflicting feelings of disgust and love he has for his father. After Mrs. Bronson reveals several unspoken truths about her husband, Tim, Jr. and his sister, Clara are better able to understand their father in a new way, thereby coming to terms with those feelings.

Milner's next play, a one-act drama called *The Warning: A Theme for Linda*, again examines the theme of black manhood. However, unlike *Who's Got His Own*, the issue is dealt with entirely through the unpleasant and whimsical experiences of women. Linda, a 17-year-old girl living in an impoverished section of Detroit, daydreams about men and what it means to be a woman. In contrast to her fantasies, Linda's alcoholic mother and resentful grandmother tell her of their disastrous encounters with men, warning her to stay clear of them. Finally, after deciding to discard both the imaginary men of her dreams and those of the stories told by her mother and grandmother, Linda instead decides to begin a serious, sexual relationship with her boyfriend, Donald. She confronts him with the challenge of sharing their futures together as equals in mind, body, and soul.

In 1973, Milner combined his concern for the temptations besetting urban black youth with an examination of the destructive black role models of pimps and drug-dealers created by Hollywood. Set in Detroit, *What the Wine-Sellers Buy* deals with a young high-school boy choosing between good and evil. The boy, Steve Carlton, is forced to decide whether to follow the advice of a pimp named Rico who suggests that he turns his girlfriend into a prostitute to raise money for Steve's sick mother. By following Rico's advice, Steve would simultaneously satisfy his mother's medical needs while condemning his girlfriend Mae to a life of depravity. Steve's struggle with his conscience allowed Milner again to address the theme of black male responsibility. Finally, Steve comes to the correct moral decision by understanding that the cost would be too high for himself and his girlfriend.

Set in Detroit in the late 1980s, *Checkmates* depicts the vast differences in the value systems of two generations of African-American couples: a young upwardly mobile professional pair, and their older, middle-class, traditionally-minded landlords. Milner shows the world in which we live as one devoid of the strong moral and social values it once had. Initially the younger couple—Sylvester and Laura—appear to have it all: successful careers, good looks, love, and financial security. As the play progresses, their commitment to one another is tested as they confront growing individual needs. For Laura, it is her desire for a career that justifies having an abortion without Sylvester's knowledge. Sylvester displays self-centeredness when he becomes physically abusive after increased feelings of paranoia regarding his job and the discovery of Laura's abortion. Eventually the distrust created between Laura and Sylvester pushes them both into the arms of other lovers. Their ''anything goes'' code of behavior actually helps to create a division in their relationship during times of strife. Rather than bringing them closer, Sylvester and Laura's troubles enlarge the division between them which eventually makes their love for one another seem futile, and finally leads to divorce.

In contrast, through reminiscent flashbacks we see that the older couple of Frank and Mattie have also dealt with infidelity, physical abuse, and the frustrations of racism on the job. However, in each of these experiences Frank and Mattie chose personal sacrifice over self-centered behavior; children were not seen as being in conflict with individual desires, and adultery and physical abuse was simply not tolerated. It is through their lives that we see how these sacrifices for the marriage have strengthened their relationship. Because of their more traditional value system, Frank and Mattie's world is more stable. Theirs is a code of behavior which helps them live through troubled times.

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MITCHELL, Margaret (1900–1949)

[*Gone with the Wind*] is a long book and a copious one, crowded with character and incident, and bound together with one consistent thread, the strong greediness of Scarlett O'Hara who was bound to get her way, in spite of the hampering ideal of the Perfect Southern Gentlewoman and the ruin that follows men's wars. . . . the tale of her adventures and her struggles makes as readable, full-bodied, and consistent a historical novel as we have had in some time—a novel which, in certain passages, as in the flight from burning Atlanta, rises to genuine heights. Miss Mitchell knows her period, her people, and the red hill country of North Georgia—she knows the clothes and the codes and the little distinctions that make for authenticity. Tara is a working plantation, not a white-porched movieset—and Atlanta is itself and an individual city, not a fabulous combination of all the first-family features of Richmond,

Charleston, and New Orleans. The Civilization of the antebellum South was something a little more than a picturesque gesture in gentility—and to a public a little surfeited with wistful reminiscence of the cape-jessamine side of it, Miss Mitchell's rather more realistic treatment should come as a decided relief.

Stephen Vincent Benét. *Saturday Review*. July 4, 1936. p. 5

Margaret Mitchell gives us our Civil War through Southern eyes exclusively, and no tolerant philosophy illumines the crimes of the invaders; she writes with the bias of passionate regionalism, but the verifiable happenings described eloquently justify prejudice. Unfortunately her temperamental limitations as a critic both of mass movements and personal behavior are such that she often gives a shallow effect. She is vigorous enough to imbue her work with dramatic buoyancy, but unequal to the subtler demand she makes on herself with the tragedy fitly conceived as the climax of her story. . . . If Miss Mitchell is able, later, to master the wide significances implicit in her own material, and to convey her idealism as something more than a soporific, she may yet demonstrate the mature humanity absent in the works of so many among us who are ''disillusioned'' in that adolescent fashion which follows a first boast of understanding and belief.

Evelyn Scott. *The Nation*. July 4, 1936. pp. 19–20

Scarlett is matched with another rogue, her male counterpart, a renegade aristocrat originally from Charleston, as reprehensible as she in morals, but much her superior by reason of his romantically cynical intelligence. Miss Mitchell uses the two of them to assert indirectly the virtues of the society whose destruction they witness. By this device, she has clearly hoped to avoid sentimentality in treating a subject she fears as sentimental. A greater novelist would have had no such dread: Tolstoy is not afraid of Prince André's enthusiasm for the Tsar. And Miss Mitchell is somewhat hampered in the long run by the emotional inadequacy of her heroine, as well as the limitations of her mind. Scarlett undergoes the war, but reacts neither to its pity nor its terror. And she is too stupid to know that there are larger issues involved than her own survival.

Gone with the Wind is one of those thousand-page novels, competent but neither very good nor very sound. The historical background is handled well and with an extraordinary sense of detail. The moral problem is less sure in its treatment. It is this: In a society falling apart, upon what terms can the individual afford to survive? Scarlett wants only to last and takes any terms life offers. Miss Mitchell seems to approve of her persistence. But she also implies that civilization consists precisely in an unwillingness to survive on any terms save those of one's own determining.

John Peale Bishop. *New Republic*. July 15, 1936. p. 301

Gone with the Wind is an encyclopedia of the plantation legend. Other novelists by the hundreds have helped to shape this legend, but each of them has presented only part of it. Miss Mitchell repeats it as a whole, with all its episodes and all its characters and all its stage settings. . . .

But even though the legend is false in part and silly in part and vicious in its general effect on Southern life today, Miss Mitchell lends new strength to the legend by telling it as if it had never been told before, and also by mixing a good share of realism with the romance. She writes with a splendid recklessness, blundering into big scenes that a more experienced novelist would hesitate to handle for fear of being compared unfavorably with Dickens or Dostoevsky. Miss Mitchell is afraid of no comparisons and no emotions—she makes us weep at a deathbed (and really weep), exult at a sudden rescue and grit our teeth at the crimes of our relatives the damyankees. I would never, never say that she has written a great novel, but in the midst of triteness and sentimentality her book has a simple-minded courage that suggests the great novelists of the past.

Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*. Sept. 16, 1936. p. 162

What did it matter that Kenneth Roberts described the Revolutionary patriots as a ''rabble,'' or that Margaret Mitchell won the peace as if the North had never won the Civil War? All the lost causes now came back through the historical novel, that favorite home of lost causes, and no one—least of all the millions of readers in the North and the West gulping up one Confederate romance after another—cared whether the South had lost at all. South or North, West or East, it all added up to everything the contemporary world was not, a kind of seamless web of heroic and exhilarating legend.

Alfred Kazin. *On Native Grounds* (Reynal). 1942. p. 511

Gone with the Wind abounds in action and is filled with the nostalgic atmosphere suggested by its superb title, yet the principal interest lies in character—in the character, first of all, of its selfish heroine, Scarlett O'Hara, and the man, Rhett Butler, in whom at last she meets her match, and upon her misapprehension of whom she misses her best chance of happiness. Margaret Mitchell refused either to sentimentalize her characters or to slander them; at the close of the penultimate chapter she shows us very clearly just what a sentimental ending for her book would have involved—and then shies away from it. For a Southern Civil War novel, *Gone with the Wind* is rather remarkably on the realistic side, and it is far more antiwar than prowar.

The Southern belle as an opportunistic adventuress was a rather astonishing theme to begin with (though Scarlett does not belong to the old aristocracy), but the author knew her people. The young woman's determination to stop at nothing to win economic security may have cost her her soul, but it was her Southern sentimentalism that destroyed her chances for happiness in this world.

Edward Wagenknecht. *Cavalcade of the American Novel* (Holt). 1952. p. 429

. . . *Gone with the Wind* had a quality that went further than merely providing entertainment. It had a life outside its covers, and its heroine was a creation with the kind of undeniable vitality that animated Captain Ahab and Huckleberry Finn. The *London Observer*, taking inventory of characters created in the past fifty years, put Scarlett on a level with Sherlock Holmes, Jeeves, George F. Babbitt, and Peter Pan. And it was not only Scarlett who walked from the pages into an existence as someone known and thought of

as a person in millions of minds; the three other leading characters, and a number of minor ones, also were accepted as real people. This came not only from deft characterization, but from the total effect of solid structure. Here was one novel that did not disintegrate, that hung together, greater in sum than in any part; and, taken as a whole, it achieved greatness.

Finis Farr. *Margaret Mitchell of Atlanta* (Morrow). 1965. pp. 137–8

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MOMADAY, N. Scott (1934–)

This first novel [*House Made of Dawn*], as subtly wrought as a piece of Navajo silverware, is the work of a young Kiowa Indian who teaches English and writes poetry at the University of California in Santa Barbara. That creates a difficulty for a reviewer right away. American Indians do not write novels and poetry as a rule, or teach English in top-ranking universities either. But we cannot be patronizing. N. Scott Momaday's book is superb in its own right.

It is the old story of the problem of mixing Indians and Anglos. But there is a quality of revelation here as the author presents the heartbreaking effort of his hero to live in two worlds. . . .

Young Abel comes back to San Ysidro to resume the ancient ways of his beloved long-haired grandfather, Francisco. Abel is full of fears that he has relaxed his hold on these ways, after living like an Anglo in the Army. He is our tortured guide as we see his Indian world of pollen and rain, of houses made of dawn, of feasts and rituals to placate the gods, of orchards and patches of melons and grapes and squash, of beautiful colors and marvelous foods such as piki, posole, loaves of sotobalau, roasted mutton and fried bread. It is a wantless ''world of wonder and exhilarating vastness.'' . . .

Abel's troubles begin at once. He has a brief and lyrical love affair with a white woman from California seeking some sort of truth at San Ysidro. Then he runs afoul of Anglo jurisprudence, which has no laws covering Pueblo ethics. He is paroled to a Los Angeles relocation center and copes for a time with that society, neither Anglo nor Indian. He attends peyote sessions; he tries to emulate his Navajo roommate, who almost accepts the glaring lights and treadmill jobs, the ugliness of the city and the Anglo yearning to own a Cadillac. Abel cannot ''almost'' cope. Because of his contempt, a sadistic cop beats him nearly to death. But he gets home in time to carry on tradition for his dying grandfather.

There is plenty of haze in the telling of this tale—but that is one reason why it rings so true. The mysteries of cultures different from our own cannot be explained in a short novel, even by an artist as talented as Mr. Momaday.

Marshall Sprague. *New York Times Book Section*. June 9, 1968, p. 5

As a modern, historical consciousness and a member of a largely desacralized society, [Momaday] knows that he cannot return to the mythopoesis and archaic ontology of his Indian ancestors, that the Kiowa verbal tradition ''has suffered a deterioration in time,'' . . . and that the Kiowa culture can no longer establish identity and compel belief solely through the authority of its myths and rites. As a Kiowa who ''feels Indian'' in spite of all this, he is intent on reconciling his ''primitive,'' tribal, ''blood'' consciousness with his modern, individual consciousness; but he is also bothered by a fear of presumption and sacrilege, a suspicion that he is evoking his dead relatives along with their myths, visions and rites without really being able to believe in them, or, to put it more precisely, to believe in what he has made them—in his imagination and through his art.

Put in yet another way, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is one man's intensely personal discovery of what Joseph Campbell has called the collapse of traditional mythology and its displacement by creative mythology. But Momaday has gone one step farther, for he has sought to posit the essential continuity between these two kinds of mythology, insisting that both are acts of the imagination and both are capable of generating the same kind of belief. And he has done so in two ways: through the development of a complex structure in which to cast these many journeys he hopes to make . . . and through a series of memories or visions of his Kiowa ancestors through which he claims to have achieved a full sense of identification with them. . . .

[Momaday] is not only functioning as a creative mythologist, an indication of his modern, individualistic perspective; but he is also dramatizing the process whereby traditional mythology becomes creative—an indication that the two are continuous and reconcilable.

The last structural indication that Momaday has been moving toward the convergence of personal and cultural experience, poetry and myth, can be found in the poems which frame the entire work. Their positioning is itself an indication that creative art, that is the authority of the imagination, is most responsible for the integrity of the work, the journey it recalls, and the idea of the self which it reveals.

Charles A. Nicholas. *South Dakota Review*. Winter, 1975–76, pp. 149, 155–56

House Made of Dawn (1968) is the most complex and the most obscure novel written by an American Indian. Virtually every page of the text illustrates Momaday's fascination with structure: the novel makes use of multiple points of view, stream of consciousness techniques, abrupt changes of time and chronology achieved primarily through the use of flashbacks and flashforwards; it also incorporates ethnic materials (traditional oral tales, fragments of poetry), and historical documents, both oral and written. If there is one major problem with the novel it is its obscurity, which has resulted in a number of ambiguities about factual matters within the narrative. . . .

It is impossible to analyze *House Made of Dawn* without considering two relative points at the outset. First, the meaning or meanings of Momaday's novel are irrevocably bound up in the novel's structure: form and content interlock. Second, the novel should not be interpreted without reference to two other works published by the author: *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969) and *The Names* (1976). The first of these has a tripartite interwoven structure involving Kiowa legend, established facts about that

legend (''historical'' facts), and Momaday's personal experiences with these events or facts. *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, like Tosamah's sermon in *House Made of Dawn*, records the historic movement of the Kiowa people from the Northern to the Southern Plains. *The Names*, a kind of precocious autobiography, covers much the same material. . . .

What he is not . . . certain of, it seems to me, is what the American Indian *was*. That past—the end in the beginning—forms the central quest of all of his prose works (*House Made of Dawn*, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, *The Names*). Reading any one of these volumes is a frightening experience since in each one of them Momaday has created a painful image of his self: a man in search of his roots. I would further suggest that Momaday has yet to solve the dilemma of his own identity. The ending of *House Made of Dawn* . . . typifies this dilemma.

Charles R. Larson. *American Indian Fiction* (Univ. of New Mexico Pr., 1978), pp. 78–79, 81–82, 94

House Made of Dawn is a memorable failure. Some of its passages attain a prose surface brilliance and also a depth, not at all like the historic depth of Macaulay or the ancient, almost etymological depth of Hardy, but a kind of depth of physical perception simultaneous with a post-Romantic understanding of man's relationship to nature—an understanding and a sensory perception which are both great and unique. . . .

The novel falls apart rather than coming together: it remains a batch of often dazzling fragments, a kind of modern prose Sutton Hoo—perhaps because the young Momaday yielded to the deadly, fashionable temptation of imitative form in dealing with contemporary identity crisis, here specifically the fragmented personality of the misfit Abel. The book's own fragmentation is not quotable, since the problem is an incoherence of large parts, but any reader will readily grant that the sequence of items—say, the bear hunt and the murder that parallels it; the night scenes with Father Olguin; Abel's flashbacks; his encounter with the enemy tank; and his encounter with Angela—is without fixed order. The parts can be rearranged, no doubt with change of effect, but not always with recognizable difference. The fragments thus presented are the subject. The result is a successful depiction but not an understanding of what is depicted: a reflection, not a novel in the comprehensive sense of the word. . . .

The book is therefore an intelligent miscellany of more and less well-written facets that together represent a historical and contemporary situation of great importance, but it is not a successful understanding of or coping with that situation, and so it fails as a novel—right through its evasive ending.

What remains is nonetheless sometimes rare photography with scraps of great prose. The prose is often rhythmically distinguished: long in its rhythms, with neither the complex clauses of James and Macaulay nor the streams of Joyce and Faulkner, yet very far indeed from the syntactical and artistic simplifications of Hemingway. And there are other successes. The long unified description of the bear hunt is remarkable for its psychological perception of the sexual relationship between hunter and hunted (the prose, the psychology, and the bear owe something to Faulkner). And the great description of the Eagle Watchers Society . . . approaches the barren courage of Melville's *The Encantadas*.

But probably the most successful general feature of the novel is its landscape, which is both intensely sensory and symbolic in its implication of a human and historically specific relationship to that landscape. . . .

Roger Dickinson-Brown. *Southern Review*. Winter, 1978, pp. 30–32

Near the end of N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* the old man, Francisco, in the fever of dying, recalls a solitary bear hunt from his youth. A preliminary and, it seems, self-imposed ritual to the hunt was a visit to a cave of the Old Ones. . . . The bear hunt which follows is a central tale in the novel, in the same way that Francisco, the protagonist's grandfather, is a central cohering character. The hunt was an occasion of great, self-conscious manliness, carried off through conscientious application of racial skills and virtues, and accorded, in the pueblo, well-earned esteem. But most interesting, I think, is the quiet trespass in the Anasazi cave—a terrifying sin of commission, according to the lawyer. A sacrilege, and therefore the height of bravery.

Francisco works as a structuring principle in *House Made of Dawn*. His lime-twig trap, his hope to snare the sacred, frames the eighty pages and thirteen days of Part One. His inexpressible grief sets the tone that broods behind every page. Until the last part, Francisco is inarticulate and peripheral, a still point against whom the story's violence brushes and whom it then leaves alone. But in this book peripheries are profound, delineating limbuses. Francisco—heroic, crippled, resonant with the old ways, impotent in the new—acts as a lodestone to the novel's conflicting energies. His incantatory dying delirium in Spanish fixes Momaday's symbolic compass: Porcingula, the white devil, the black runners. The commotions of the narrative gather and cool around the old man, and around his dying the book shapes its proportions. Francisco becomes at the end the lens for the single sharp image the novel has been struggling to focus on: Abel's convalescent, redemptive participation in the running. The direction, the structure of *House Made of Dawn* is toward proportion, toward a falling into place. The novel resolves into Francisco's recollections and is driven by tensions revealed to be his: sacrilege and sacredness, fear and courage.

It is a brave book. Momaday's ambition is enormous and untried; he is attempting to transliterate Indian culture, myth, and sensibility into an alien art form, without loss. He may in fact be seeking to make the modern Anglo novel a vehicle for a sacred text. . . .

The novel concerns survival, not salvation, enduring rather than Faulkner's sense of prevailing. The dawn runners physically manifest *the* Indian strength—they abide, ''and in this there is a resistance and an overcoming, a long outwaiting.'' And Momaday is proposing not only a qualified hope for cultural continuity, but a holy endurance. The running is a sacred rite and an act of courage, thus a warding off of fear and evil, the specters (consolidated in such demons as Martinez and wine) that gnaw at Indian probity throughout the book. The race at dawn is additionally a sacrament of creation. As such it outlines the novel's purpose and achievement.

House Made of Dawn. Its subject is creation myth, the antithesis of Benally's ''plan.'' The book's metaphysics build from a sequence of creation schemata: the diaspora of the Bahkyush, the feast of Santiago, St. John's Word, Tai-me, Benally's songs, his grandfather's story of the Bear Maiden. The book is a creation

myth—rife with fabulous imagery, ending with Abel's rebirth in the old ways at the old man's death—but an ironic one, suffused with violence and telling a story of culture loss. Sacrilege repeatedly undercuts sacredness. Father Olguin constantly faces the corruption of his faith, from Angela's mockery, from the perverse vision of a Pueblo Christ child. The vitality of ceremony is juxtaposed to the helplessness of drunks. The peyote service is sullied, almost bathetic. But sacrilege impels sacredness here, as fear does courage, and loss survival. The series of myths, each variously imperfect, each with common corruptions and shared strengths, overlap, blend, and fuse as this novel. . . .

Momaday is a preserver of holiness in *House Made of Dawn*. He has transported his heritage across the border; in a narrative and style true to their own laws, he has mythified Indian consciousness into a modern novel.

Baine Kerr. *Southwest Review*. Spring, 1978, pp. 172–73, 178–79

It is the magic of the storyteller which moves the listener across time and place, bringing him in touch with his ancestors and the places the people once inhabited. In this verbal dimension [N. Scott] Momaday has found a clearer understanding of his racial identity, and he emulates the storyteller's attitude toward the word in his writings. He is well aware of the problems involved in this process: ''When you translate the spoken to the written word, you freeze it, paralyze it. It loses something of its vitality and flexibility.'' Momaday's recital of his poems and parts of *House Made of Dawn* is informed by a vitality which the reading experience cannot generate to the same degree. Nevertheless, if the reader conceives of words as events, he can share in the actuality of experience inherent in language. . . .

N. Scott Momaday described his poetic work as developing from a reflection of oral poetry to the strict formal tradition of English verse and then to syllabics and a kind of free verse. Yvor Winters's instruction in traditional English verse forms is clear in Momaday's early unpublished poems and also in some of the later works, particularly ''Before an Old Painting of the Crucifixion'' and ''Plainview: 1.'' Winters was also responsible for Momaday's experimentation with syllabics and postsymbolist imagery.

After his studies at Stanford, Momaday directed his attention to free verse and to what may best be described as prose poetry, while continuing to write syllabic verse. The stages by which Momaday described the evolution of his poetry are not strictly chronological or mutually exclusive. For example, of the published poems which antedate Momaday's studies at Stanford, one is in free verse, while another is an adaptation of Navajo verse patterns similar to the later syllabic poetry. . . .

Momaday's work as a painter has recently expanded into the medium of watercolor. His interest in Plains Indian shields, which were the subject of a series of paintings in recent years, is being pursued in the compilation of a major exhibit of Plains, Apache, and Pueblo shields, due to go on show in one or two years. Momaday's concern with the painter George Catlin may well produce a play in the near future. Catlin (1796–1872) was one of the first persons to realize the impending disintegration of traditional Indian life. His extensive travels to nearly fifty tribes in the 1830s resulted in his ''Indian Gallery,'' one of the greatest artistic records of North American aboriginal life.

Momaday's racial experience will remain the catalyst of his future works. They will continue to contribute an important aspect of American culture to literature and art.

Matthias Schubnell. *N. Scott Momaday: The Cultural and Literary Background* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Pr., 1985), pp. 57, 189, 256

Yet what I find everywhere in Momaday's work is a determination toward what [Mikhail] Bakhtin calls ''poetry'' in its most extreme ''epic'' sense, to the establishment, that is, of a single authoritative voice, with its own ''unique'' or ''personal'' style, sufficiently distinctive to subordinate all other voices, everywhere translating them into the terms congenial to it. Critics may debate whether Momaday's tone in the two autobiographies is more accurately described as elegiac or simply lyrical: what one cannot miss is that whatever the name appropriate to that tone it rarely varies. There is very little in the way of wit or humor, no gossip or scatology, decidedly no self-criticism or criticism by others permitted to sound. But how could there be for a writer who opens *The Way to Rainy Mountain* by calling his reflections on the end of his people's traditional culture ''idle recollections, the mean and ordinary agonies of human history.'' History, for Momaday is only interesting as the stuff of myth, ''agonies,'' I dare say, uninteresting so long as they remain ''mean and ordinary.'' . . .

What is true of *Rainy Mountain*, is true as well of *The Names*: there is everywhere the predominance of Momaday's distinctive lyric/epic artspeech. In this regard it is interesting to note that whereas the photographs in [Leslie] Silko's autobiographical text appear without captions (they are identified at the end of *Storyteller* but there are no markings along the way to tell the reader that they will be identified, let alone to tell the reader just what names Silko herself would give to these pictures), Momaday has seen fit to provide captions for his photos. Here, too, there is the determination to full control; the photos may speak as they will to their viewers, but they may do so only in the presence of Momaday's own cues as to their content or meaning. . . .

Obviously Momaday is free to choose whatever stylistic manner he pleases. My intent here is simply to establish that his texts seek to fix that manner univocally; his writing offers a single, invariant poetic voice that everywhere commits itself to subsuming and translating all other voices.

Arnold Krupat. *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Pr., 1989), pp. 178, 180, 181

When, in 1969, *House Made of Dawn* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, the Pulitzer jury, quoting one of its members, declared that ''an award to its author might be considered as a recognition of 'the arrival on the American literary scene of a matured, sophisticated literary artist from the original Americans.''' At last, it seemed, N. Scott Momaday had produced the American Indian novel that reviewers had been anticipating since 1937. . . .

It can indeed be argued that with the appearance of *House Made of Dawn*, for the first time a novel by an American Indian author—a member of the ''aboriginal race''—both portrayed with full power ''the drama of the American Indian'' (note the implication of

theatrical performance, something to be observed from a safe distance) and displayed a talent and sophistication that placed it in the ranks of successful mainstream American novels. . . .

But most significantly, it seemed that at last, with *House Made of Dawn*, an American Indian writer had produced a novel of a type well-schooled readers could both recognize and sink their teeth into, and the critical feast touched off by a Pulitzer Prize was a result in part of the fact that Momaday's novel is even at first glance recognizably modernist and thus deceptively easy fare for a New Critical approach. *House Made of Dawn*, the work of an author educated in a doctoral program at Stanford University under the tutelage of Yvor Winters, would seem, in fact, to contain the requisite elements of a work assimilable into the modernist canon: an alienated, deracinated protagonist who appears to fit the conventions of naturalism (which had long embraced the Indian as victim); a fragmented cultural context, suffering from a loss of order or structure; a formally experimental, discontinuous narrative replete with multiple perspectivism, stream of consciousness, and so on; and a dependence upon mythic structure to provide a way of ordering what T.S. Eliot had called the anarchy and futility of modern existence.

Once into the novel, however, a perceptive reader may begin to realize that sophistication in *House Made of Dawn* is of a different order from that in canonized texts. It is a sophistication of ''otherness,'' a discourse requiring that readers pass through an ''alien conceptual horizon'' and engage a ''reality'' unfamiliar to most readers. What has matured with Momaday is not merely an undeniable facility with the techniques and tropes of modernism, but more significantly the profound awareness of conflicting epistemologies that had been suggested by [Zena P.] Mathews and made explicit by [D'Arcy] McNickle. With Momaday the American Indian novel shows its ability to appropriate the discourse of the privileged center and make it ''bear the burden'' of an ''other'' world view. Momaday's novel represents more fully than any Native American novel before it the ''assertion of a different perspective.''

Louis Owens. *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Pr., 1992), pp. 90–91

N. Scott Momaday has amassed a considerable body of work in his thirty-year career, and ample honorific attention to go with it, including the Pulitzer Prize. This book [*In the Presence of the Sun*] selectively spans that thirty-year period, with more than seventy poems and sixty drawings, including a selection of new poems, and the collection of poems (previously released only in a limited edition) that gives the book its name. Momaday himself seems quite satisfied that the book represents his career appropriately. In his preface, he writes: ''The poems and stories, the drawings here, express my spirit fairly, I believe. If you look closely into these pages, it is possible to catch a glimpse of me in my original being.''

This ''original being,'' then, is complex and introspective, as much the product of Kiowa ancestry and lore as of growing up in a western American landscape while belonging to the global culture of the late twentieth century. Indeed, the firmly grounded sense of identity Momaday conveys in his ''Gathering of Shields,'' a set of prose poems ''directly related to the stories, songs, spells, charms and prayers of the Native American tradition,'' coexists with a paradoxical mixture of cultured myths in the collection, ''The Strange and True Story of My Life with Billy the Kid.'' In the latter collection, Momaday recounts his memory of coming to live at the Jemez reservation as a child and becoming acquainted with it by riding his horse through the landscape. . . .

In the Presence of the Sun ranges over a profusion of experience that crosses cultural lines and defies definition, yet always bears the confident presence of an author who knows where he is from.

Eric Todd Smith. *Western American Literature*. November, 1993, pp. 274–75

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MOODY, William Vaughn (1869–1910)

No other new poet of the past score of years, either in America or in England, has displayed a finer promise upon the occasion of his first appearance, or has been deserving of more respectful consideration. . . . We wish to say, furthermore, that we have not for many years been so strongly tempted to cast aside critical restraints and indulge in ''the noble pleasure of praising.'' . . .Nor do we hesitate to add that, with the possible exception of what has been done by Professor Woodberry, no such note of high and serious song has been sounded in our recent American poetry as is now sounded in *The Masque of Judgment* and the *Poems* of Mr. Moody.

William Morton Payne. *Dial*. June 1, 1901. p. 365

The Masque of Judgment is not . . . a defiance of the Almighty. It is a reverent, but tremendous, protest against the doctrine of eternal punishment; and, as a work of constructive imagination, it ranks with the great masterpieces.

And the workmanship is worthy of the grandeur of the prodigious scheme. Professor Moody's verse has the ''large utterance'' of great poetry and those rhythms that haunt the chambers of the memory like music. . . . Such poetry will never be popular. . . . But it is great poetry none the less. . . . We must thank him for demonstrating that American poetry can grapple with the greatest problems, and handle them with masterly vigor.

G.B. Rose. *Sewanee Review*. July, 1901. pp. 333–6

His quality is opulence, a certain gorgeousness that is never barbaric, owing to his power of classic restraint. His sweetness is

crystal, never luscious or impure. . . . In one sense Mr. Moody's genius is not dramatic, not impersonal; he sees all things, all persons, suffused with his own imagination. . . . He has found, like Mr. Swinburne, his masters in the Greek tragedians. The compassion is obvious, but no poet since Shelley has united such masterly metrical plasticity, such exuberance of sensuous imagery with so vast a sweep of metaphysical imagination. . . . He has the Euripidean color and mobility, the Euripidean sweetness, the Euripidean pathos.

May Sinclair. *Atlantic Monthly*. Sept. 1906. pp. 328–9

Much of Moody's work, like that of the Symbolists, was intricate analysis of emotion. What men do was of less interest to him than what men feel. But the feeling that fills his poetry is commonly the great feeling that is stirred by great issues, not the sentimentality of mere temperament. True, he is alive to the beauty of delicate sensations. . . . But he was a man of too much intellectual power, and also of too critical humor, ever to be mawkish or trivial in his imaginings. . . . It is indeed one of the remarkable things about Moody that, with all his subtle emotions and subtle imaginings, he is almost free from over-elaboration and from frigid excess of heat.

Charlton M. Lewis. *The Yale Review*. July, 1913. pp. 701–2

The ability to think profoundly and yet to express his thoughts in vivid concreteness of poetic images, distinguishes Moody from the mere versifier who turns out ethical and aesthetic commonplaces. Moody never succumbed to the desire to please the *Musa Meretrix*, and his greatness as a poet is due to his dogged tenacity and persistence in attempting to express a coherent, centered interpretation of man's spiritual destiny in a world of glowing beauty and appeal. His singleness of aim, his steadily increasing insight, his fastidious self-criticism kept him from rapid and vapid composition. Consequently we have not a large body of poetry from his pen, but what we do possess is most carefully wrought.

Martha Hale Shackford. *Sewanee Review*. Oct., 1918. p. 408

That his present popularity is in no way commensurate with his achievement is due partly to the lack of public interest in poetry during his lifetime, partly to the poetic revolution instigated by the Imagists immediately after his death. . . . Some of the objectives declared by the Imagists Moody had already achieved; towards others he was clearly progressing. . . . Moody passed from the realm ruled by Tennyson and Browning, Rossetti and Swinburne, to that in which he was akin to Maeterlinck, Francis Thompson and Ernest Dowson. Like the latter, he confronted the eternal problem of the dualism of flesh and spirit and the inevitable union, although his solution was different.

Robert Morse Lovett. *Atlantic Monthly*. March, 1931. pp. 392–3

Moody was constantly growing in poetic power. Primarily a scholar, with the tendency to derive his themes from literature rather than from life, his life ended just at the time when he might reasonably have been expected to put forth his most significant and individual work; which is not to say that he did not leave us poems of distinctive craftsmanship and spirited nobility. . . . Moody attempted greatly. Certain phrases in his rhetoric ring like old counters now, but the exercise of his imagination was a daring one, and again and again he snared the precise epithet, the distinguished expression of exalted feeling. . . . In a day when poetry was, or seemed to be, of but the very slightest interest to American readers, he persevered as one of the elect to perfect his own gift, driven by his genuine daemon.

William Rose Benét. *Saturday Review*. May 2, 1931. p. 802

One finds . . . traces of the Greek dramatists, of Shakespeare, of Shelley and of Milton, but one finds even more evident the sweet gravity of Tennyson and Matthew Arnold and the lyric vigor of Kipling. One finds too seldom the precision and intensity which were the battle cry and the goal of Moody's immediate successors. . . . If he was concerned with major themes, his philosophy was not sufficiently considered or perhaps not expressed clearly enough to be convincing; his music, if sounding, was too often reminiscent, and his imagery, though often fine, was also too often literary. He was rooted in the great tradition but did not rise above it.

Babette Deutsch. *New Republic*. July 29, 1931. pp. 293–4

Here was a poet who, according to the enthusiasm of his own generation, wrote out of great promise a considerable achievement, and exerted upon his contemporaries and upon those a little younger, a wide and liberal influence. We must be indebted, gladly or not, for the influence, without knowing precisely what it was. Perhaps it was the influence of a man writing verse of a large order without intellectual or spiritual constriction; the influence of example; the influence of a man taking poetry seriously and naturally at a time when poetry was commonly taken either uncouthly or artificially. . . . But on the whole, Moody's verse is only the poetry of a man with a good deal of feeling. The poetry depends on the man who wrote it and not on itself.

R.P. Blackmur. *Poetry*. Sept., 1931. pp. 331–3

The subtlety of his music, the richness of background, the carefully wrought imagery, the depth of thought, the extensive allusions, the use of the academic and the remote, the strong suggestion of ethical authority—these are features which do not endear a poet to the mass of readers and which are perceived in full appreciation only by the poet, or the student and lover of poetry. . . . As an artist, he endorsed a fundamental tenet of contemporary workmanship—freedom of manner and thought. In his repudiation of conventional thinking, in his candor and frankness, in his analysis of emotion and his emphasis upon psychological interpretation, Moody linked his poetry to modern taste.

David D. Henry. *William Vaughn Moody* (Humphries). 1934. pp. 221–2

When William Vaughn Moody's ''An Ode in Time of Hesitation'' appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* for May, 1900, it was immediately recognized as the poetic utterance of genius on a problem which

interested everyone and bewildered many. The problem was how to reconcile our imperialistic aims in the Philippines with the ideals for which this country was founded. Moody's ode gave expression to the misgivings which thousands felt. Many still remember the excitement with which the poem was received. Moody became at a bound the best-known poet of his time. He was recognized as a poet of surpassing technical skill and poetic genius; it was apparent to all that he was exercising one of the oldest duties of the poet: the direction of his country in a time of crisis.

Francis J. and Adaline Glasheen. *College English*. Dec., 1943. p. 121

The early death of William Vaughn Moody cut short the career of a poet already distinguished, and probably robbed our dramatic literature of a playwright who might have contributed more than any other, save Eugene O'Neill, to the modern symbolic drama of spiritual struggle in which romantic and realistic tendencies are blended. Fine humanist and university teacher that he was, Moody retained as artist a profound understanding of everyday life, and the ability to interpret its complexities in simple and passionate symbols of action. Moody's trilogy of poetic dramas was never produced; yet his two plays in prose, which were successfully presented, can be fully understood only in the light of his poetic *Masque of Judgment*. All of his dramatic work, in prose and poetry, through a variety of human situations, relates to a central problem which has persisted as a major theme in every period of American expression.

This theme is the sense of sin and, more particularly, its destructive power upon the freedom and expression of the human soul.

Sculley Bradley in *Literary History of the United States*, edited by Robert E. Spiller et al (Macmillan). 1948. p. 1013

Thus it is not surprising to find the unity of Creator and created the major premise of Moody's *magnum opus*, his unfinished trilogy of verse dramas. Indeed, in a sense it is their theme, for though the theme proper is the unity of God and man only, as an evolutionist Moody perforce regarded man as, in Emerson's words, ''a piece of the universe made alive.'' The part played by this broader conception is less important in *The Fire-Bringer* and in what can be conjectured concerning the unfinished Death of Eve than in *The Masque of Judgment*, but of its centrality in this play, the first to be written, Moody has left us in no doubt.

Frederick William Conner. *Cosmic Optimism* (Florida). 1949. p. 315

It is easy to see why Moody should have been such a popular poet in a time so desperately anxious to be reassured of the validity of its crumbling premises. . . . Here [in *The Fire-Bringer*], disaster is the illusion, rebirth the reality. Something of Moody as the Midwesterner is here: the buoyance; the expansiveness; the optimism; the basic ease with which—despite qualifications—he moves within the idea of progress; the acceptance of the absolutes of Newton's world—Time and Space and Change, those ''bright caryatids.'' The old exuberance of an earlier America is in the poem, though pasteurized and made acceptable to genteel aspiration by the full-blown academic rhetoric.

Thomas Riggs. *American Literature*. Jan., 1951. pp. 415–16

We must allow Moody to write in his own time and within the conventions of that time. Yet a recent history of American poetry begins its discussion of his work by saying that the present reader of his verse ''is almost certain to be faced with embarrassment.'' I do not feel in the least embarrassed in reading him, and it seems to me the phrase points up a certain temporal parochialism in contemporary criticism. . . . Possibly Moody's modernization of myth did not succeed; clearly, however, he was content to appeal to universal myth rather than to the private myths of the subconscious or the unconscious, and in his large discourse, even if it be set down as failure (and I do not think it is a failure), he suggests that if there be such a thing as an autonomy of art, art is autonomous only as a province within the larger empire of human history and of human experience.

Howard Mumford Jones. *The Bright Medusa* (Illinois). 1952. pp. 63–4

. . .the most promising American poet, William Vaughn Moody, was an exception to the evasiveness of his fellows. His ''The Quarry'' was a protest against the imperialistic spoilage of Asia, and ''On a Soldier Fallen in the Philippines'' (*The Atlantic Monthly*, February, 1901) also anti-imperialistic, accused the dead man's ''darling land'' of stumbling and sinning in the dark. Most ambitious in this criticism was Moody's ''An Ode in Time of Hesitation'' (*The Atlantic Monthly*, January, 1900), the final word in the title alluding to the debate over the absorption of the Philippines. The poet accepted the liberation of Cubans and Filipinos as just, but shrinking from the ''sounds of ignoble battle'' that came ''sullenly over the Pacific seas'' and reminding our leaders that the people might forgive blindness but would smite baseness, he exhorted them not to convert a righteous victory into a selfish gain. One of the best American poems on a topic of national urgency, the ''Ode'' is surcharged with idealism, is kindled by a controlled imagination, and is linked to a vocabulary and to verbal figures somewhat on the bookish side.

Grant C. Knight. *The Strenuous Age in American Literature* (North Carolina). 1954. pp. 12–13

At the ideological heart of Moody's design for *The Death of Eve* was the same moral thesis which he tried to work into the Rhoda-Michaelis relation, and which had been central to the ideology of the *Masque*, *The Fire-Bringer*, *The Great Divide*, and poems like ''The Brute,'' ''I Am the Woman,'' and the narrative poem on which the play was based—that evil, as a manifestation of an imperfect but evolving universe, springs from the same essential creative source as good; and it provides the condition of strife necessary for the good to transcend its present limited state in the general cosmic progress toward perfection.

This thesis receives perhaps its most concentrated expression in Moody's work through the character of Eve, the original bringer of evil into the world, who now becomes, in her old age, the

embodiment of that higher good which evolves out of man's struggle with evil.

Martin Halpern. *William Vaughn Moody* (Twayne). 1964. p. 166

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MOORE, Marianne (1887–1972)

The grim and haughty humor of this lady strikes deep, so deep as to absorb her dreams and possess her soul. She feels immense incongruities, and the incongruity of her little ego among them moves her art not to grandeur but to scorn. As a satirist she is at times almost sublime—what contrary devil balks even at those moments, tempting her art to its most inscrutable perversities?

Harriet Monroe. *Poetry*. Jan., 1922. p. 215

This exacting moralist, who enforces with such intricate resonance the profound convictions of her ethical and emotional fastidiousness, has dumfounded most of those readers whom she has not completely sub-jugated. . . . (She is) a poet whose style, at once intensely cultivated and painstakingly honest, never fails to charm me and whose mastery of phrase and cadence overwhelms me.

Yvor Winters. *Poetry*. April, 1925. pp. 39, 44

Her style combines the frigid objectivity of the laboratory with the zeal of naive discovery; it mixes the statistics of newspapers with the casual hints and cross-references of a mind constructed like a card catalogue. This is not a perversity of erudition, not of ironic parody. It is a picture of the problem of the modern intelligence. . . . Hers is a poetry of super-imposed meanings, and her object is to lift the layers of convention, habit, prejudice, and jargon that mask the essential and irreducible truth.

Morton D. Zabel. *Literary Opinion in America* (Harper). 1937. pp. 427–8

She is difficult because she will not buy triumph at ''horrifying sacrifice of stringency''; she refuses to descend to the level of those to whom ''the illustration is nothing without the application''; and she demands of her readers that their minds shall follow hers in leaping by fifths and sevenths from point to point like the jerboa in her poem. She has affinities of spirit with Henry James—the same thoroughness and elegant restraint, the same astute detection of minute differences, the same gradual foliate disclosure and sharp clarity of definition. But all these qualities are condensed into the ''contractibility'' of verse. Her subtlety of ear and delicacy of rhythmic perception, the variations in her use of full, light, vowel, end, and internal rhymes, and her ingenious designs of syllabic divisions, are all functional parts of the setting in which she arranges her brilliant ''jewelry of sense.''

Elizabeth Drew. *Directions in Modern Poetry* (Norton). 1940. p. 68

Only Marianne Moore could write a poem about the mind and fill it with thoughts that glow like buried treasure just brought to light. . . . Literally and figuratively, light is the source of her enchantment. What she sees provides symbols for the unseen, the inner vision. . . . Her poetry dreams with its eyes wide open and weaves its spell out of the visible, the tangible, the intelligible; a wide-awake magic; proof that a passionate intelligence can be haunting. . . . In her poetry the appearance of things—the way they greet the eyes and ears; what they feel like to the touch; their characteristic impact—come to us in a blaze of reincarnation. . . . Through art such as this, with its demand upon the attention of the whole person, we are restored not to a state of nature, but to that totality of experience which is a sign of organic development.

Lloyd Frankenberg. *Pleasure Dome* (Houghton). 1949. pp. 121–3, 133

Miss Moore has great limitations—her work is one long triumph of them; but it was sad, for so many years, to see them and nothing else insisted upon, and Miss Moore neglected for poets who ought not be allowed to throw elegies in her grave. I have read that several people think So-and-So the greatest living woman poet; anybody would dislike applying so clumsy a phrase to Miss Moore—but surely she is. Her poems, at their unlikely best, seem already immortal, objects that have endured their probative millennia in barrows; she has herself taken from them what time could take away, and left a skeleton the years can only harden.

Randall Jarrell. *Poetry and the Age* (Knopf). 1953. pp. 183–4

The dexterity and intelligence of . . . poems in *Like a Bulwark* are nimble variants of that keyboard, that system of transitions between fact and moral fantasy which characterizes Miss Moore, with its counterpoint which can encompass and utilize every combination between those chosen limits.

The system of transitions was established in the themes of Miss Moore's earliest poetry. Her symbolical use of animals is the perfect expression of a spontaneous but orderly mind. The orderliness manifests itself in the precise style of writing, the spontaneity in this fantasy where questions of conduct and manners are referred to the animal world. Miss Moore's fantasy is a controlled fantasy, a high seriousness that refuses to be merely solemn.

Charles Tomlinson. *Sewanee Review*. Autumn, 1957. p. 677

There is an effect in her prose of propriety and exactitude which we might be tempted to compare with the powerful economy of intelligence in Jane Austen. We notice that Miss Moore's approval or admiration may appear in her saying that an author's work

''detains attention'' or ''commends itself.'' A sentence may begin, ''Appreciation which is truly votive and not gapingly inquisitive''; or we learn that imagination ''precludes'' banality. Were one to read no further (no further in the same sentence), the temptation would be to believe oneself reading an author of the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. But no, it is not Jane Austen's or Fanny Burney's example that provides a prefiguration of these delicate, exact apostrophes or salutations. Personal conviction moves through more rapidly; there are no safe, however valid or intelligible, assumptions. It is rather, perhaps, the more romantically independent if equally responsible affirmations of Charlotte Brontë that we may be momentarily—and only momentarily, and very pleasantly—reminded of. But decidedly Miss Moore's thinking, tempo, expertness is of our own time, though not limited by it, as more ambitiously ''modern'' writers end in being.

Laurence Stapleton. *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Summer, 1958. p. 370

Hers is a poetry in which as much as possible is left unsaid. So often are her transitions left to the reader to fill in, one may puzzle over certain poems for days and get nowhere with them, or at best, not far. There ought to be enough matter remaining in the *Collected Poems* to nourish a dozen imponderably dull doctoral theses. But those who read for wisdom may be content to notice the sculptural outlines, though ignoring some mysterious grains. In a few Marianne Moore poems whose logic remains obscure to me, I have felt borne along by the power of her metric. Lines may be jagged in appearance, difficult in allusion, and hard to connect one with another; and yet the poem will still stride forward with authority. It is as if Miss Moore has found out that a poet can raise almost any difficulty for the reader and still keep the reader under control, as long as there are many more stressed syllables than unstressed ones. (Where at times the new free-verse falls apart and becomes simply boring, as sometimes, for instance, even Robert Duncan will do, there are usually few heavy syllables, many lines with many weak ones. And there isn't any powerful metric drive—as Miss Moore has, almost always. She can maintain a steady wham, wham, wham of short stubby monosyllables; she throws stresses on an *a* or a *the* or an *of* by putting them in tight patterns and making rimes of them.)

X.J. Kennedy. *Minnesota Review*. Spring, 1962. p. 376

Since Miss Moore frequently recommends that the individual maintain a certain distance from his fellows, a poised and dignified independence, we may assume that she thinks the price not too heavy. When shut off to some degree from others, we cannot fully comprehend nor be comprehended by them; yet only such separateness can enable us to adopt that cliff-like stance of independence she advises. We may deduce that the dichotomy of soul and body, of spiritual and material, gives rise to those paradoxes which Miss Moore sees neither as quaint or clever absurdities, nor as tragic flaws, but as inevitabilities of human experience. Miss Moore herself chooses to view a paradox not as a problem to be solved but as a situation to be explored for significances. In this exploration arises her poem, whether as a record of discovery or as a report of a search in progress.

Bernard F. Engel. *Marianne Moore* (Twayne). 1964. p. 23

We've all been given courage by her beautiful daring, her abundance, her naturalness that is as cunning, various and splendid as Nature's own. And her moral responsibility. She is a rascal and a revolutionary of form, of aesthetics. She is an uncompromising idealist as to content, to truth. Especially we *women poets*, as we are called, are grateful and lucky in possessing the grand and indelible example of her work and of her life. She is inimitable because she devises her own contests, makes her own rules and, at the point least expected, disconcertingly reverses them, so as to demonstrate that ''it is not the acquisition of any one thing that is able to adorn.''

May Swenson in *Festschrift for Marianne Moore's Seventy-Seventh Birthday*, ed. Tambimuttu (Tambimuttu and Mass). 1964. p. 48

In reading certain poems of Marianne Moore, it is necessary to distinguish between two kinds of vision operating in them. There is the bird's-eye-view which presents a general panorama and fails to recognize discrete particulars; and there is the close-up, accurate study which recognizes the latter and does not subordinate them to a general picture. Often the two kinds of perception may be observed to be at work in the same poem, each contributing its own images. And, briefly, the images purveyed by the general view most often give rise to false conclusions and express sentimental feelings, while those that are the product of the accurate detailed study give rise to careful moral judgments and express, with some reticence, discriminated feelings. . . . When there are two views or attitudes present in a poem the cruder one is generally dismissed, usually implicitly, in favor of the accurate one; or the former is corrected by the latter. A study of the poet's use of this twofold approach not only throws light on the poems where both approaches are clearly present but helps to reveal an important feature, the essential code, one may say, of the poet and her work: that truth and feeling must rest upon minutely perceived, finite detail.

A.K. Weatherhead. *English Literary History*. Dec., 1964. p. 482

Juxtaposition of incongruities is of the essence. But not in the ways of other modernists. She is not working with a sensuous language for violently mysterious effects, or juxtaposing words for the sake of shocks of collision. Rather, her language is strictly tempered and clear, almost classical in its moderation and lack of rhetorical splurge. Verb is firmly connected to noun, there is no straining of language within the sentence unit for a tremor of associations setting up strange trains of disrelations. But she did put these clear lines together in such a way that the firm orderly thought or epigram-like description is set next to another in a manner not to have been foreseen. The surprise, the shock, exists in between the spaces that have been leaped over by a swift imagination. Transitions thus seem more like transpositions, a strange flowering of truth upon fact.

Jean Garrigue. *Marianne Moore* (Minnesota). 1965. p. 13

This policy of accurate comparison, bringing, if need be, the prune, the alligator, the shad, the porcupine, the frog to the service of a discussion of a cat, does not worry about congruousness just as

Braque does not worry about perspective, being intent on a different way of filling its elected spaces. Congruity, like perspective, deals in proportions within an overall view. Miss Moore's poems deal in many separate acts of attention: optical puns, seen by snapshot, in a poetic normally governed by the eye, sometimes by the ears and fingers, ultimately by the moral sense. It is the poetic of the solitary observer, for whose situation the usual meanings of a word like ''moral'' have to be redefined: a poetic whose effort to define itself has for two centuries constituted a tradition of some centrality. To understand that tradition is to perceive Miss Moore's place in the story of the mind of Europe, neither as eccentric nor as peripheral as she is sometimes made to seem.

Not more than two centuries' weight, though two centuries of continuous revolution, lies behind the ideal of describing accurately the thing seen.

Hugh Kenner. *Southern Review*. Autumn, 1965. p. 755

Well, what kind of Heaven would Miss Moore's be? Much, most probably, like the earth as it is, but refined by responsiveness and intellect into a state very far from the present one; a state of utter consequentiality. For what is Heaven, anyway, but the power of dwelling eternally among objects and actions of consequence? Miss Moore's Heaven would have a means of recording such objects and actions; it would have a history, and a way of preserving its discoveries and happenings: it would have books. But it would be, first of all, a realm of Facts: it would include an enormous amount of matter for there to be opinions about, and so it would make possible vivid and creative and personal parallels between things, and conclusions unforeseeable until they were made. It would take forever from Fact the deadness of being *only* fact, for it would endow what Is with the joyous conjunctions that only a personality itself profoundly creative, profoundly accessible to experience—a personality called a soul—can find among them. Truly, would we have it otherwise in the Eternal City?

James Dickey. *New York Times Book Section*. Dec. 25, 1966. p. 1

Unless you are already a devotee of Marianne Moore's poetry, this [*Tell Me, Tell Me*] is not the book to start with: manner has turned into mannerism, and her optimism has become extensive. There are a few beautiful lines to remind you of one reason why her poetry is held in high regard. . . . Her accomplishment is to describe well and without malice things that catch her fancy and to do this in a way that suits her fancy whether it suits anyone else or not. The best of excerpters, she takes ideas and phrases from her wide and happy reading and sets them in a firm, moral mastic, thereby composing very fanciful, and here and there delightful, mosaic poems. ''Jewel'' and ''gem'' are words she likes, and the last poem in this book is ''Sun.'' The first line of the first poem, which is addressed to the Brooklyn Bridge, goes: ''Enfranchising cable, silvered by the sea.'' But in fact the bridge, cables and all, is repainted every ten years or so, and of course the paint is constantly being sullied by New York's aerial sewage. Is this substantial truth less interesting, really, both in itself and as a subject for a poem, than a whimsical sea-silvering of the unpleasantness?

George P. Elliott. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1967. pp. 139–41

''It was my seventy-ninth year to heaven.'' Try to imagine such a line in Dylan Thomas, or in almost any recent poet, and at once the special achievement of Marianne Moore is clear, not the good genes and teetotaling that permit the longevity of the person, but the sensibility that permits the longevity of the poet and the poems. From her nearly eightieth year comes *Tell Me, Tell Me*. Miss Moore's curiosity is still urgent, as in the title; her grasp on the elemental still strong as in the sub-title, *Granite*, *Steel*—and, as in the rest of the sub-title, *and Other Topics*—she shows again her old-fashioned willingness to hazard that poetry treats ''Topics'': what the mind makes of things. This is a career growing as long and as exemplary as Titian's, with the same strength, that comes from not cutting off any good human capacity. One wants to make the comparison with Titian despite the absence of the gorgeous heroic in her verse, because so much has been said of the quietness and individuality of her art that we are in danger of forgetting its classic completeness, its refusal to make those exclusions of perception, thought, or feeling that give much contemporary verse its eccentric and sometimes specious drama.

S.P. Zitner. *Poetry*. Sept., 1967. p. 423

The function of a poem. when Miss Moore writes it, is to provide for distinctive energy of mind a sufficient occasion; a direction. The mind moves from its presumed rest; ranges abroad through materials congenial to its nature; comes to rest again. This is the figure the poems make; a sequence, a curve, the trajectory of a mind well aimed. If we ask why one curve is chosen in preference to another, there is no ready answer: it is so. The assumption is that energy of mind is good, and its release in action is good. The note is experimental, exploratory.

Denis Donoghue. *The Ordinary Universe* (Macmillan—N.Y.). 1968. p. 47

Epigrammatic brilliance, intellectual fastidiousness, and an unwillingness to falsify one's sense of one's own limitations may have an exemplary value of their own, in art as well as in life. Marianne Moore does not tell us the meaning of history, the nature of sin, or the right way to conduct our lives. She keeps things in order; she observes and annotates; she exercises the courage of her peculiarities. She gives us imaginary gardens with real toads in them; she also gives us the sick horror of decency trying to confront honestly the fact of modern war, and the undramatic, faintly humiliating, matter-of-fact discovery that decency recovers from that confrontation.

George W. Nitchie. *Marianne Moore* (Columbia). 1969. p. 178

Critical writings about the work of Miss Moore fall into two sharp divisions: clear-minded essays—[T. S.] Eliot and [Hugh] Kenner are cases in point—where an exact perception of what she is about eschews all floridness; and, on the other hand, a host of ''tributes'' in which the poet is reduced to the status of a kind of national pet and where the intellectual stamina finds no answering attitude in the appreciator but calls forth instead sentimental rhapsodizing. One of the more depressing thoughts to cross the mind of anybody who has read such criticism in bulk is to wonder whether Marianne Moore has not suffered more from lax adulation than almost any

other significant poet of our century. Perhaps the reason for this lies as much in the nature of the work as in the nature of Miss Moore's more indulgent public. This work is morally ''armoured,'' like some of her favourite animals, but suppose that armor should come to seem quaint, a carapace of knowing quiddities? This is the way many people have apparently read it, and this is the basis for Miss Moore's popular success. Thus the one potential defect in a brilliant oeuvre passes for its virtue in a body of critical writing that seldom engages with the reality.

Charles Tomlinson in *Marianne Moore*, ed. Charles Tomlinson (Prentice-Hall). 1969. p. 12

Marianne Moore and Emily Dickinson do not stand to each other in a relationship as undeniable as that between Miss Moore and Henry James. I doubt if one who had mastered the urbane obliquity of James would care altogether for the abrupt and unceremonious withdrawals into enigma of Emily Dickinson. It has often been remarked that Marianne Moore's style develops out of highly civilised prose. Her sentences are beautifully articulated, more condensed than prose normally is, and with an odd sidelong movement that in prose would probably disconcert; but no one could mistake the element from which they have arisen. Their affinities are with conversation. . . . Emily Dickinson was afraid to converse: she utters a few astonishing words from behind the door and then closes it in palpitation. She too wants her ''heightened consciousness'' to find its response—but from whom?. . .

And yet, given this all-important distinction between the two poets, their choice of language seems to unite them unexpectedly. Both are incontrovertibly American—or perhaps one should say American of a certain tone and temper which, like much else in the modern world, may be dissolving. They are individual, ironic, and above all fastidious. They place a high value on privacy and know the power of reticence. Their poetry is exact and curious like the domestic skills of the American woman in ante-bellum days. It has the elevation of old-fashioned erudite American talk—more careful in its vocabulary, more strenuously aiming at correctness and dignity than English talk of the same vintage.

Henry Gifford in *Marianne Moore*, ed. Charles Tomlinson (Prentice-Hall). 1969. pp. 172–3

I think it has been insufficiently emphasized that a good deal of Miss Moore's verse, particularly the earlier, is not stanzaic at all, or rhymed—or, indeed, regularly, or approximately regularly, syllabic. Nevertheless, perhaps it is here that her contribution to modern experimental poetry may be seen at its purest and most remarkable, for what she is writing is not prose or the prose-poem but poetry with prose's rhetoric, complexity and ease, poetry without adventitious musical aid, whose units are arguments and paragraphs. . . . The baroque cleverness and ornament is to delay and enrich a closely-argued journey towards the clinching spire or altar of meaning and emotion.

Roy Fuller. *Owls and Artificers* (Deutsch). 1971. pp. 49–51

The word ''precious'' is usually a term of condemnation. For Marianne Moore it is the highest possible praise. Life itself is seen as ''An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish'' and she does not permit it to be seen in any other way. She, like Stevens, has often been compared to Edith Sitwell, but Edith Sitwell's bric-a-brac universe is a form of rather savage metaphysical sarcasm. Marianne Moore approves of hers. She not only likes it that way but she is incapable of seeing it otherwise. This in itself is an ironic and witty commentary on the world as it really is. It even has a scarcely audible note of tragedy, but it's doubtful if that is intentional. I've often wondered if Tennessee Williams got the idea and the title for his play, *The Glass Menagerie*, from the contemplation of Marianne Moore and her poetry. Certainly the play could stand as a perfect criticism of both person and poems. . . .

Other women of her generation, notably Elinor Wylie, tried to claim the heritage of Emily Dickinson, but today their verses seem thin stuff indeed, while Marianne Moore's survives. More apparently inhuman poetry has probably never been written. . . . There is a progression in the development of a carapace for the sensibility. Emily Brontë, Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore. They all write about the same thing, the vertigo of the sensibility in a world of terror.

Kenneth Rexroth. *American Poetry in the Twentieth Century* (Herder and Herder). 1971. pp. 68–9

Marianne Moore is not an original thinker. Her ''message'' of freedom through sacrifice could not be more commonplace, as she herself would agree. Yet she may make it strike us with an original force because it is arrived at in the poems themselves only through difficulty. It is hard for her to sacrifice silence. Then again, it is hard for her to sacrifice speech. Sacrifice alternates with sacrifice, and the freedom with which we are able to put them together, reclaiming both speech and silence ''in/the name of freedom'' and as a taboo against psychical oppression, is the freedom of Moore's verse. We may take freedoms with her verses because she has given them to us. She covets nothing that she has let go.

What is commonplace as idea is not necessarily commonplace as a personally held and acted-upon conviction; in fact, commonplace, as Marianne Moore embraces it, is rare. It is for the intensely personal valuation that Moore has performed upon the common places as well as the exotic places of the world that we feel gratitude and enlightenment, if we are able to feel them. ''In Distrust of Merits'' shows us commonplace abhorrence of war and the Self who participates by not participating, yet it has a felt intensity, a ''mountainous wave'' of unconscious fastidiousness ''that makes us who look, know depth.'' ''He/sees deep and is glad, who/accedes to mortality'' (''What Are Years?''). It is an easy thing to *say*, but difficult to *see*. . . .

Marianne Moore's work is a lifelong exposition of paradox, and no matter how much careful observation she lavishes on the objects that illustrate her various paradoxes, no matter how much precise illusion is given shape through her disarming rhetoric, the paradoxes still remain and are always interesting. Perhaps paradox itself is the rock crystal thing that the hero is seen to see. It is accuracy and mystery well married; it is naked in its objective transparence, but armored in the untouchable axial law that made it. . . .

There is only one poem called by Marianne Moore ''The Hero,'' but in effect all the poems she wrote might claim this as some sort of subtitle. It is telling that the hero of the poem ''The Hero'' is an anönymous character, for the hero can be anybody at

any time who shares the hero's devotion to vision and to the ''rock crystal thing.'' Heroes have pasts and futures. This is clear from the poem; all her past sensations gather in her, preparing her with responses to her fathering fate, her apprehensions, her convictions. We must acknowledge the value of childhood and of limitations in general, turn the wishes born of both into actions. These actions are heroic when they express both the personal desire of the hero, fulfilling some need in her, and connect also with the desires of a community of potential heroes. Thus the wish and the limitation become a dance, a poem, a Brooklyn bridge or icosasphere, Bach's Solfegietto, or a knight in quest of modest armor. . . .

We shall always come back to ''science'' in the work of Marianne Moore, because science was to her a method of knowledge indispensable to her comprehensively evaluative mode of poetry. Moral sense may be uppermost, but it must be informed with the greatest possible exactitude about the state of things in the physical world. In order to make spiritual acknowledgment of creation, it must make technical acknowledgments—how it was done, how it is to be done. This technique links the past and the future as well as the matter and the spirit of all worldly phenomena. If ''science'' is accurate observation of the world's developing, temporary balance, and eventual dissolution, and ''prophecy'' the accurate observation of those processes on a spiritual level, then poetry, if it is to contain the truest of all observations, must put them together. The confusion is accurate and necessary. Confusion, submitted to poetry by unconfusion, confusion affectionately admitted, leads to the development and expression of the whole soul.

Pamela White Hadas. *Marianne Moore: Poet of Affection* (Syracuse Univ. Pr., 1977), pp. 213, 216, 219, 223–24

It holds true. . .of Marianne Moore's poetry at all times that the form, the instrument designed, varies with the intended point of view and the scope of experience looked into or out upon. Naturally she did not always succeed in these experiments; in some of her early poems (like ''Snakes, Mongooses'') discursiveness may defeat the shape of the whole. But she always obeyed a counsel that she offered younger writers: ''Be just to initial incentive.'' If the subject had attraction, she would not desert it; and sometimes the effort of execution sets up a tension with the intended theme. The tension keeps even the lesser poems alive because the subject of the poem is never sought for but comes as an involuntary summons. The reader too becomes aware of the interaction between the beckoning subject—inhering not in any one theme or image, but in all the words together—and the objectifying figure of spoken sound.

Marianne Moore's poetry shares some technical qualities with the three modern poets most closely associated with her—T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams. All these poets developed new rhythmic patterns, freeing verse from the over-use of iambic pentameter and the cul de sac of elaborate post-Swinburne stanzaic forms. All of them introduced a conversational tone, a greater proximity of poetry to spoken language. They could all convert seemingly ''non-poetic'' material into the substance of art.

At the same time, the differences among them are as marked; otherwise none would have been a true writer. . . . She does not juxtapose motifs from the past (of art, literature, history) with fragmentary present scenes in the way that Pound and Eliot had. Instead, if she uses past events or quotations from earlier writers, it is to bring them directly within the range of her observation. . . . Likewise, although she sometimes invokes myth for its suggestive power, she does not rely upon it for unifying heterogeneous subjects. Dialogue in her poems, when it occurs, sounds like people talking in the present, not being overheard or remembered. As she remarked, she never considered herself an ''imagist,'' but every page of her work presents images for which alone the poem deserves to be remembered.

Lawrence Stapleton. *Marianne Moore: The Poet's Advance* (Princeton Univ. Pr., 1978), pp. 221–22

In Moore, sincerity is a blend of eagerness and restraint, of ambition and humility. She leaps, precipitously, into speech, and then checks herself, paradoxically producing more speech by recording her revisions. . . .

For Moore, integrity is the opposite of tedium, and sincerity and gusto are two sides of the same coin. As sincerity is connected with the urge for truth and accuracy, gusto is, as Hazlitt says, ''power or passion defining any object.'' Moore's ''gusto'' is also like the classical *enargeia*, which modernists appropriated. It is the emotional byproduct of the flux and tension of form. This flux and tension are set in motion by sincerity which accepts no single-minded description of reality. But Moore's gusto is not, as is the energy in Pound's vortex, the eye of the storm, a perfect center created from the collision of perspectives. It is the feeling of pleasure accompanying bafflement, the energy released in the poem by the resistance of an object to each onslaught of form. Her acts of description and definition repeatedly give way to exclamation of delighted defeat. The desire for possession is displaced by passion and admiration. Gusto is an emotion connected with failure, not with mastery, with relinquishing, not attaining, ''what one would keep.'' Few writers deal with failure so enthusiastically. Moore celebrates the world's elusiveness, its superiority to our acts of appropriation, seeing the world's freedom as intrinsic to our own. And ''gusto thrives on freedom,'' on the repeated discovery of difference. Thus her poems do not seek a still center in the turning world; they are distinctly temporal, and turn with it in constant astonishment. . . .

Moore's greatest poetry does not deal directly with the major myths of our culture, with tragic or comic themes. Her truths, excerpted from her poems, may seem proverbial. But if we consider her subjects and themes as occasions for significant imaginative acts we can have no doubt about the value of her art. Like ''impassioned Handel'' in ''The Frigate Pelican'' who was ''meant for a lawyer and a masculine German domestic/career—'' but who ''clandestinely studied the harpsichord/and never was known to have fallen in love,'' Moore is ''unconfinding'' and ''hides/in the height and in the majestic/display of her art.'' Like the frigate pelican and his fellows, without cosmic purpose ignoring the more obvious lures of the romantic sensibility, she ''wastes the moon.''. . .

Moore's poetry is opposed, above all, to complacency, inertia, dejection. Her objective in the aesthetic of sincerity and gusto is to keep the mind alert and free, the world large and abundant.

Bonnie Costello. *Marianne Moore: Imaginary Possessions* (Harvard Univ. Pr., 1981), pp. 3, 13–14

Short of inventing an entirely new language . . . the concepts of modernism and postmodernism are essential to any discussion of

Marianne Moore. She was a full-fledged but subversive modernist whose treatment of twentieth century experience undermines the outward calm so essential to modernism as it is usually defined. She thus anticipates the jagged confusion that postmodernists proposed as a more appropriate response to contemporary experience. . . .

The criticism [of Moore] that prevails relegates [her] to the domain of static and iconic European modernism. Her craft and her precision become defensive barriers against the chaos around her. But, in fact, just the opposite is true. Moore maintained her allegiance to both the machine-fascinated and idiom-searching school of American modernism. Out of those interests and because of her undeniable talent for and love of precision. Moore created an entire body of work that anticipates not only postmodern literature but related manifestations of postmodernism as well.

Moore's subversion of the stifling parts of European modernism and the strain of American modernism that modeled itself on European modernism—the insistence that art was art by virtue of and in direct relation to its escape from life—is not nearly so manic as Yossarian's mad ravings in Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*, but her patterning bears the marks of other artists whose works have become reference points for postmodernism. Rather than the pioneering but still recognizably musical compositions of Aaron Copland, Moore's quotation-littered poems make one think of John Cage's music, in which artificial time constraints and found sounds replace traditional phrasing. Moore's attention to curious objects, her refusal to set most poems into a recognizable narrative, and her nearly too startling metaphors become not precious mannerisms but postmodern credentials when they appear in Frank O'Hara's poems. And Moore's carefully constructed and just as carefully fractured and interrupted compositions resemble the music of Steve Reich and Philip Glass and the talking dances of Trisha Brown. Moore's poems have often been compared to collage, but they resemble more specifically Joseph Cornell's boxes. Accuracy, patterning, and repetition are essential tools of the postmodern musicians, dancers, and visual artists whose work Moore anticipates. Their responses to and their interpretations of life in the twentieth century are inclusive rather than defensive or escapist, just as Marianne Moore's were. They acknowledge and exploit the machine, which was so important to Moore and her fellow American modernists, and they do so within their own versions of the American idiom. Whether these similarities prove, as some critics have always argued, that postmodernism does not really exist, that it is merely a continuation of modernism (which was, after all, a continuation of Romanticism), is not the question here. Nevertheless, this attempt to establish a context for the terms modernism and postmodernism should provide a starting point for reading Moore's work and understanding the way in which she plays within, manages to escape from, subverts, and thus redefines American modernism.

Whether in personal comments, critical essays, or individual poems, Moore employed scientifically accurate observation to record sensuous details and to convey her idiosyncratic interpretation of American modernism. Thus, at the very height of modernist concern with fragmentation and disorder, Moore assumes a dialectical stance and subverts even the possibility of its synthesis. Instead, she acknowledges and enacts irresolvable multiplicity by denying chronological order, by incorporating fragmentary quotations into her own work, and finally by questioning the stability of her medium, language. In the process of writing such essays and poems, Moore undermines established literary tradition. Moore's break with nineteenth-century romanticism was decisive. Her response was not a grand design but a curious combination of wit, tenacity, impressionability, and power. Her work is a continuous fictive discourse that replace the lyre of traditional poetry with everyday words and with heretical ideas about language itself.

Taffy Martin. *Marianne Moore, Subversive Modernist* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Pr., 1986), pp. x, xii–xiii

One of the negative themes [in Moore criticism] that has persisted since the early days of the *Dial* is that her poetry is limited and small, that it lacks emotion. Another deceptive view is that the poetry is restricted to objects and animals, common and exotic, and that it concentrates on the acquisition of details about things, largely at the loss of more universal considerations. This theme, which is affiliated with the belief that the poet, a collector of curios, does not evoke deep feeling, was foreshadowed by Ezra Pound's statement, in 1919, that the poems would not sell widely because they demand ''mental attention.'' Although his prediction, in context, indicts the reader rather than the poetry, many critical evaluations have proved its accuracy.

In the past few years, critics have begun to see its largeness and its passion. My own conviction is that the permanence of Marianne Moore's poetry is in its depiction of a dramatic struggle between the poet's mind and the world. . . .

Her poetry of the mind's inward growth is enlivened by metamorphic imagery that dramatizes the progress of consciousness in its shifts from one vivid scene to another. That view of a fluctuating world is a commonplace among scientists and philosophers of the age, who have doubted the validity of an unchanging reality. ''What is more precise than precision? Illusion,'' asserts the speaker of ''Armor's Undermining Modesty,'' affirming that principle. Common in the poetry, and coinciding with moments of perceptual change, are figures of fire, water, and rock, elements of metamorphosis. Other images are dialectical in that they move and are moved, act and are acted upon, see and are seen. These images, and the ways in which they are manipulated, enact the struggle of consciousness toward illumination.

To be sure, the poetry's form for engagement evolves throughout her career. While retaining the naturalness that is essential to her craft, she develops an inner dialectic, a rhetorical scheme that imitates the mind's growth through change. It proceeds from the early conversation and, later, from the metaphysical dialectic, which involves a combination of direct address and formal discourse, and the use of an extended image to display the argument. . . .

A proper understanding of her achievement requires patience, attention, and humility. Although inquiries are made and solutions are not easily found, the quest creates the tension between the world and the object on which the mind dwells. For every position there is a refutation; still, the mind gains, for it moves forward by containing its antithetical elements. Just as dignity is attained through hardship and freedom rises above the limitations that life imposes, wisdom results from the dangerous endeavor to perceive.

Grace Schulman. *Marianne Moore: The Poetry of Engagement* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Pr., 1986), pp. 6–8

Moore knew and truly loved the old pieties, and she brought them into a century in which often the only absolutes seemed to be uncertainty and tyranny. I find that as a moralist she started out in the mode of subjective expressions of opinion in her brief judgmental lyrics of the prewar and World War I years. During the twenties and thirties she turned gradually toward an increasingly objective embodiment of value through a nearly total eclipse of the personal voice in her poems, producing virtuoso pieces in which the rhetorical forces of fact and of value are virtually indistinguishable. The out break of World War II then effectively broke the silence of her poetic ''I'' and ushered a third orientation, and advocacy of values that was not a return to her early subjective verdicts but a newly shared sense of social and historical urgency.

This movement from subjective judgment to objective embodiment to shared advocacy is part of a broad development in Moore's work from isolation, confrontation, and satire toward community, representation, and sympathy. The marked evolution in her poems from compression to expansion and, significantly, back to compression is accompanied by clear shifts from substantive to attributive metaphors and from observation as sight to observation as insight.

Margaret Holley. *The Poetry of Marianne Moore: A Study in Voice and Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1987), pp. ix–x

Besides recognizing more fully Marianne Moore's adversarial inclinations, I believe we need to apprehend her as something of a feminine visionary. Secular as her writing may be when we compare it with, for example, that of H.D., Moore is nonetheless a poet who imagines alternatives to the way we live, think, feel, and does so in modes which we may identify as gynocentric and discover as well in the work of other women poets. Let me list, very briefly, a few of the more significant qualities which Moore shares with other women writers, not in order to imply that gender is a rigidly determining category for the artist but to suggest the shade of difference it may make and to offer a context which will clarify what Moore attempts to do with the figure of the maternal hero. First, Moore's assertion that ''The Past Is the Present'' and her inclination to skip and jump among the centuries within a given poem indicate that she deviates from the high-Modernist assumption that the modern world has been sundered from the past; nowhere in her work is the sense of temporal loss we find in Yeats, Pound, or Eliot. Her way of transforming the temporal to the spatial, in museumlike poems which exhibit bits of history as if they were interesting artifacts or fossils, coincides, however, with Gertrude Stein's continuing present, with H.D.'s palimpsests whereby the Trojan War, the conquest of Greece by Rome, and World Wars I and II are recurrences of the same event, and with Adrienne Rich's aperçu, ''Time is male,'' each of which exemplifies in different ways what Julia Kristeva has called ''women's time,'' in tacit resistance to ''the time of history.'' Again, her affirmative use of animals as lightly disguised versions of herself harks back to Emily Dickinson and forward to poets as various as May Swenson and Elizabeth Bishop on the one hand, Margaret Atwood, Maxine Kumin, and Anne Sexton on the other, and to the quite widespread tendency among contemporary women poets to represent nature, or the body of the world, as continuous with, rather than disjunct from, our own bodies. Her imagery of disguises, veils, and armor is shared by innumerable women artists. Her style, with its charm, brio, and dash, its elusiveness and its profoundly comic valence, might be threaded back to Anne Bradstreet and Dickinson, in neither of whom does Puritanism preclude humor. ''God be with the clown,'' said Dickinson and there is a whole story to be written of the ways women writers use humor as a means of resistance and pleasure in a literary culture which privileges tragedy. Then there is the curious way Moore plays with gender distinctions as if, at times, she did not take them quite seriously—and the fact that Dickinson does the same, as does Virginia Woolf in *Orlando*, Anne Sexton when she is ''tired of the gender of things,'' Diane Wakoski when she disguises herself as the ''lady Bank Dick,'' Adrienne Rich when in ''Diving into the Wreck'' she sees a mermaid and merman and recognizes ''I am she: I am he,'' Marilyn Hacker when she writes a sequence of gay love sonnets, Jorie Graham in a ''Self-Portrait as Apollo and Daphne.''

If each of these devices is a way of imagining the world as other than it is (less rigid, less oppressive, less sad, and above all less governed by authorities exterior to personal judgment), it remains the case that Moore is in no sense a poet of explicit protest. On the contrary, her consistent stance toward the world is one of a rather determined affection.

Alicia Ostriker. ''Marianne Moore, the Maternal Hero, and American Women's Poetry.'' In *Marianne Moore: The Art of a Modernist* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Pr., 1990), pp. 55–56

Moore is unusual in that her poetry rarely chooses sides or privileges one thing over another; instead, she is interested in including many different and opposite possibilities. Moore's poetry explores control and defense in all of its forms. She is interested in literary and cultural tradition, power, art, and artifice, strict poetic forms, both her own and those of the culture, as well as dominance, danger, and defense. Her poems set these various controls alongside what is generally thought of as their opposing freedoms. The vitality in a large number of Moore's poems comes from the tension between these opposite things. Moore's however, does not see freedom and control as opponents, one necessarily triumphing over the other. Rather than privilege one over the other—to allow one to ''win''—Moore carefully and subtly places things in the same poem and attempts to reconcile them—to ''cross the fen.'' In this way, her poetry both overtly and covertly reveals her distaste for a hierarchical order where one thing must be ''good,'' or privileged, and its opposite necessarily ''bad,'' or disparaged. . . .

Moore, then, while clearly propounding subversive ideas and opening the boundaries of poetry until there is room for all forms, language, and subject matter. has no desire to abandon that which has been traditionally included. She does not wish to create an alternate possibility but a wider one. The reason that she emphatically denies her poems cultural weight is that she does not wish them to become predetermined—to become the way to write animal poems as the sonnet became the way to write love poems. Her poetry has room for both the new and the old and strives for a unity of the two rather than exclusion.

Maureen Wagner. ''The Inclusive Impulse in the Poetry of Marianne Moore.'' In Patricia C. Willis, ed. *Marianne Moore, Woman and Poet* (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, Univ. of Maine, 1990), pp. 243, 253

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MOORE, Merrill (1903–1957)

Many of the poems show a fine perception of the apparently trivial and incidental things which can illuminate a character or a situation. This perception is a gift usually associated with a dramatist, or more especially with a certain sort of novelist, rather than with a sonneteer, but Mr. Moore has this gift, and his dramas and novels are precisely fourteen lines long. The fact proves how well he has learned to use his formal curb, for in the best examples there is exactitude and an unusual impression of the circumstantial: in some matters at least his facility is subject to an extraordinary compression.

Robert Penn Warren. *New Republic*. Jan. 29, 1930. p. 280

Mr. Ransom, in his introduction to Mr. Moore's poems, has said that Mr. Moore has always found it easier to write a new poem than to revise an old one; this is, I imagine, true of all of us. Mr. Moore's poems are obviously unrevised; the meters are a kind of rhymed and butchered prose, and the diction is for the most part very, very approximate, to speak as charitably as possible. The fact that Mr. Moore has written badly with a deliberate intention and consistent effect does not alter the fact that he has written badly. The reviewers who find ''originality'' in this sort of thing are deluding themselves.

Yvor Winters. *Poetry*. May, 1930. pp. 104–5

He may well be pioneering in a variety of the form (sonnet) as native as Petrarch's arrangement was Italian and Shakespeare's was English. There is something distinct and, I believe, autocthonous in the loosened, speech-inflected rhythms; in the heightened tempo of the lines; in the substitution of a set of unpredictable, sometimes jagged, and even syncopated rhymes, instead of well-regulated rhyme-schemes; in the refusal of the poem to split neatly into traditional octave and sestet, and dividing itself anywhere with what seems sheer perversity—all held somehow within the prescribed, though no longer formal fourteen lines.

But these sonnets are American in the broader sense. They are not, I must add, braggart; they do not celebrate any particular section of the country; there is none of the loud spread-eagle affirmation which is a not unnatural reaction to the contempt and weariness of a negative ''lost'' generation. This poetry is American in attitude as well as in subject-matter—in its insatiable appetite and unsated curiosity, in its combination of native egotism and astounding detachment, in its excesses of awe and flippancy, of puzzled insecurity, a nonchalance and eagerness ''to match with Destiny for beers.''

Louis Untermeyer. *Sewanee Review*. Jan., 1935. pp. 60–1

He has a fine ear, but too often it is intrigued by seeming contrapuntal effects; by internal rhymes and near-rhymes, and by puns. . . . Too often he strives. His difficulty is that one word suggests another and leads him off the track. He dilates; he flows; but he does not get any place.

However, in a journalistic style, Merrill Moore has produced a few fine poems. . . . He has a sharp gift of characterization in a civilized manner like that of La Bruyère. He has an undoubted eye for color, an ear for words; a smooth and running formlessness which is in itself a new form when it is successful. He has a vivid imagination and an occasional adroit turn for whimsey.

Cyrus L. Sulzberger, II. *New York Times Book Section*. June 16, 1935. p. 8

These fourteen-line poems are not, in the first place, sonnets. Their rhymes, the inner rhythms, their pauses are not those of the true sonnet at all. . . . Nor is there in these lines any of the fusion or intensity of true poetry. They are rather a kind of rapid-fire comment on life—original, sometimes startling, sometimes quite sensitive representations of people, actions, disease, emotions. If one disregards their claim to being poetry, one finds them very interesting.

Eda Lou Walton. *The Nation*. Aug. 7, 1935. pp. 166–7

I do not know of any contemporary poetry of consequence that yields so many points of adverse criticism. It invites attacks of every kind. . . . We cannot refute that criticism which meets the poems on their own ground and convicts them of loose diction, imprecise imagery, and, all too often, inconsequence of subject and treatment. There is scarcely a poem . . . that is not in some detail exceptionable. . . . And we may add, for what it is worth, that the author reveals no political, social, or philosophical tendencies: he belongs to no school, he fights for no significant ''cause.''

Yet these objections do not dispose of Merrill Moore. They do not touch the real meaning of his work, the passionate humanity of these records of daily life. He is something of an earth-force, like Gertrude Stein. He compels our attention.

Dudley Fitts. *Sewanee Review*. April, 1939. pp. 292–3

Some (of the poems) are simply pretty, some are very flat, and some ramble like an epigram in a fourteen-line uniform. A few bring the full promise of an opening line straight home, and ring a bell like a cash register. In others, even when they get lost on the way, and the bell doesn't ring, there is a sense left that you can cash in on them because the register drawer is still open from preceding ones that did ring. What is surprising in so many poems is their

cleanness, their immediacy, their lightness and speed. The idiom is contemporary, supple, and like good talk, doesn't nag. There are rarely any inversions to force a rhyme, and the emphatic word seems mostly to be the substantive rather than the modifier or verb. Even when the lines are padded, as so many perhaps must be, the padding is made up of the common debris of living speech, not of dead archaisms.

Edwin Honig. *Poetry*. April, 1952. p. 59

Several circumstances make some of his verse appear to superficial view lighter in tone than is actually the case. His colloquial idiom, swift, multi-syllabic foot, habitual reliance on implication, on understatement, and on mystery, if not mystification, readily cast into some minds doubts as to the seriousness of the man and artist. . . . His amused smile is no indication of a want of robust humor, his emotional control, no mark of lack of emotion. In each case he appears not only a superior artist but a faithful physician to mankind and in a peculiar degree the modern urbane man and thinker.

Henry W. Wells. *Poet and Psychiatrist* (Twayne). 1955. pp. 289, 296

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MORE, Paul Elmer (1864–1937)

He has proved possession of almost every other quality desirable in a critic, but the light touch, the graceful *sprezzatura*, which he himself praises, the humorous disdain which includes one's own pet theories among things which may be waved aside upon occasion—has he this quality, which in several well-known cases makes all the difference between a talented reviewer and a delightful author? He has at least something else which is not so very unlike it—an unaffected and sweet simplicity.

Somewhat too systematic for a great official critic, he has thus far, perhaps, been; let us, however, do justice to the integrity and coherency of his work. A writer is conditioned by his background. It is comparatively easy for a critic with a background of merely contemporary culture to form a consistent philosophy, or for one whose reading has been chiefly English. Considering the extent of Mr. More's studies, it will seem remarkable that he should entertain a harmonious view of life or art at all. When to this wide sweep of scholarly experience are applied the habit of seeking consistency and an instinct of frankness, we have a critic who is fit for even harder problems than those involved in the aesthetic exposition of literature.

George M. Harper. *Atlantic Monthly*. Oct., 1906. p. 568

The author of *Aristocracy and Justice* is more than an essayist, more than a critic. He is an American institution, the ablest spokesman for the idealism of our intellectual plutocracy. If his books are not read, at least his ideas are thought, and if our plutocracy has become too timid in the face of a growling Demos to express itself so uncompromisingly, at least it continues to act just as if it had this social and moral philosophy which Mr. More expounds. . . .

It is not in his premises but in his conclusions that Mr. More is flatly out of touch with the driving and creative thought of the day. He assumes the very question he ought to prove—that a ''natural aristocracy'' of inherited wealth does produce in society that harmony of reason and emotion which is justice. He has canonized the particular denouement of a non-moral struggle of group wills-to-power which our time most passionately rebels against, and which has been most productive of disorder and intellectual chaos—the rule of an industrial plutocracy.

Randolph Bourne. *New Republic*. April 1, 1916. p. 245

Mr More writes better than Mr [Edmund] Gosse. Does he write well enough? Mr More thinks more clearly than Mr Gosse. Does he think clearly enough? I have read in all five volumes of the *Shelburne Essays*. Each separate volume has interested me; but I have left them with only a confused impression of the standards by which Mr More judges. That is singular, for Mr More is a critic who insists upon standards. Sometimes, it seems that Mr More is chiefly a moralist; sometimes, a transcendentalist; sometimes even, a politician, of a highly superior kind, of course. Somewhere, I have felt, there is a great confusion in his thought.

J. Middleton Murry. *Dial*. Aug., 1921. p. 237

If W.D. Howells was the dean of our fiction, Mr. More is the bishop of our criticism. His classical and Oriental scholarship, his reverence for tradition, his reasoned conservatism, his manner, a little austere at first contact, and his style, pure and severely decorous, all become the office. By the serenity of his pleasure in letters and the life of the mind he recalls those substantially happy old churchmen-scholars of the eighteenth century, Warton and Percy and Warburton; by the range of his deep and difficult reading he suggests Coleridge, to whose intellectual dissoluteness, however, his intellectual organization and concentration are antithetical; by his aloofness from the spirit of the hour and its controversies he reminds one of Landor, striving with none, because none is worth his strife; by his touch of mystic ardor and his sustained moral intensity and philosophic seriousness, he belongs with Savonarola and the great French ecclesiastics of the seventeenth century.

Stuart P. Sherman. *Americans* (Scribner). 1922. p. 321

Nothing new is to be found in the latest volume of Paul Elmer More's *Shelburne Essays*. The learned author, undismayed by the

winds of anarchic doctrine that blow down his Princeton stovepipe, continues to hold fast to the notions of his earliest devotion. He is still the gallant champion sent against the Romantic Movement by the forces of discipline and decorum. He is still the eloquent fugleman of the Puritan ethic and aesthetic. In so massive a certainty, so resolute an immovability there is something almost magnificent. These are somewhat sad days for the exponents of that ancient correctness. The Goths and the Huns are at the gate, and as they batter wildly they throw dead cats, perfumed lingerie, tracts against predestination, and the bound files of the *The Nation*, the *Freeman* and the *New Republic* over the fence. But the din does not flabbergast Dr. More. High above the blood-bathed battlements there is a tower, of ivory within and solid ferro-concrete without, and in its austere upper chamber he sits undaunted, solemnly composing an elegy upon Jonathan Edwards, ''the greatest theologian and philosopher yet produced in this country.''

H.L. Mencken. *Prejudices: Third Series* (Knopf). 1924. p. 176

Some are born orthodox; others achieve orthodoxy. Mr. More, who in the period of his *Shelburne Essays* was in three distinguishable senses of the word a humanist, is on the way to achieving orthodoxy. *Christ the Word* is a defence of the Incarnation from a point of view which would not have been offensive to 'pious ears' of the third and fourth centuries.

Almost the only 'heresy' of which Mr. More is at present guilty is the denial of personality to the Holy Ghost. . . .

Whatever Mr. More's minor heresies, orthodoxy will probably, and with good reason, rejoice quite as much over this as over the earlier volume in *The Greek Tradition* on *The Christ of the New Testament*. It will be generally felt that a humanistic Saul who once found salvation in culture, albeit a somewhat austere and stoical culture, has taken his seat among the prophets. Certainly the testimony of one whose orthodoxy is the result of his empiricism rather than of his subscription to *all* the teachings of Holy Church is an impressive testimony.

Austin Warren. *Sewanee Review*. April, 1928. pp. 246–7

We will not . . . join any thoughtless anti-critic in censuring Mr. More for being a moralist. Every significant critic of literature must be also a critic of life, and therefore a moralist. . . . Everything has been done that can be done to cloud the issue between art and morality, but through these treacherous currents Mr. More has steered a straight course. He has certainly been correct in refusing to be swept off his feet by our modern philosophers of change, and by the evidence of change which has multiplied on every side in our time. He has been fully alive to the significance of this evidence. He has fully recognized that our circumstances are always changing, more or less rapidly, that we ourselves inwardly are always changing, that our creaturely knowledge is relative and imperfect, and consequently that we can never establish any absolutely fixed rules of conduct, or of manners. But he has steadily seen, too, that this is not the whole truth; and, by way of reaction from the dogmatism of our apostles of the flux, he has been impelled to examine anew all that other body of evidence which shows that constancy as well as change characterizes our world and ourselves, because it is the abiding which we can understand, and in terms of which alone we can bring at least partial order out of the chaos of our unformed selves.

Robert Shafer. *Paul Elmer More and American Criticism* (Yale). 1935. pp. 274–5

. . .the works we are considering fall into two groups, one being the collection of essays belonging in some degree to literary criticism, the other a continuous study of religious thought as it developed from Plato to ''the Catholic faith.'' In this more comprehensive grouping, the unity to which we have drawn attention is preserved by the fact that the basis of criticism in the essays is a standard which defines the religious attitude. The major theme, which the criticism of the Romantics brings to light, may be described thus: the nature of man is compounded of reason and the senses; it is possible to exaggerate the claims of either part, and the result will be extreme intellectualism or unbridled emotionalism. At the present time the latter is the more immediate danger, supported as it is by a rampant naturalism and materialism which demand the indiscriminate satisfaction of all desires and claim for the individual the right of self-expression in defiance of all rules. . . . [Irving] Babbitt fulminated unceasingly against Rousseau's naturalism and the modern romanticism which he believed to have been created by the apostle of individual rights and natural passions. More, in his essay on Rousseau, takes a wider view and regards Rousseau as essentially unoriginal, an incident in a development which began centuries before his time.

G. S. Brett. *University of Toronto Quarterly*. April, 1935. pp. 287–8

His critics have accused him of a defective ''aesthetic sense''; he has seemed to be preoccupied with the content of literature; he has little to say of style, almost nothing, except what he says impatiently, of the craft of writing from the point of view of the writer. With Professor Babbitt, he never permits us to forget his conviction that the problems of craft are secondary and ''aesthetic'' and that, if the writer is virtuous, the writing will take care of itself. The reply to this is not that such confusion of thought is unworthy of Mr. More—which it is. It is not enough to oppose to it an equal confusion—that his is due to a lack of aesthetic perception. His failure to understand the significance of style is a failure to understand most of the literature that he has read. It is his intention to examine the ''doctrine'' of a given work in the light of his own. We have just seen that it is difficult to find out what Mr. More's doctrine is. With what is literature, then, to coincide? Mr. More entertains false hopes of literature; he expects it to be a philosophy and a religion because, in his state of ''independent faith,'' he has neither a definite religion nor a definite philosophy prior to the book he happens to be reading.

Allen Tate. *Reactionary Essays* (Scribner). 1936. pp. 132–3

The *Shelburne Essays*, then—we are not here concerned with the volumes on the Greek and Christian traditions—were not written merely as literary criticism. The numerous authors treated in these volumes were considered chiefly for their bearing upon More's study of the artistically designed life. In order, however, fully to

understand them and clearly to express that understanding, More considered the authors according to the principles set down by Aristotle and Horace, those founders of the classical tradition to which he had devoted himself. To him literature was far more important than life; he hardly obeyed his favorite Horace's recommendation to study men as well as books.

John Paul Pritchard. *Return to the Fountains* (Duke). 1942. p. 180

Someone has spoken—it does not matter who, for no doubt many others have made the same observation—of the delightful urbanity of the prose which graces the early *Shelburne Essays*. Urbanity in prose was one of the standards by which the nineteenth century measured its approval of an essay in literary criticism, and an early twentieth-century reaction against the arts of being urbane was natural; urbanity seemed to cover a lack of seriousness, to remind one, if ever so slightly, of the hypocritical heart that knew of neither Freud nor Jung, and yet was satisfied to beat its tattoo securely beneath a tightly buttoned-up frock-coat. In rereading the *Shelburne Essays* we are aware of their proximity to the Victorian scene in literature, and More could not deny his affection for its lesser figures, its Lionel Johnson, its George Gissing, or a forgotten poetess, Louisa Shore, but however urbane he may have seemed, there is no lack of seriousness in what he had to say. And today, now that the nineteenth century is at a proper distance behind us, we are less frightened by the presence of its urbanity than we were, let us say, twenty-five years ago. To speak of Tennyson or of Longfellow no longer awakens the discomfort that was once felt. We are in a position to see how steadily More viewed the merits and flaws of Longfellow's poetry, how careful he was not to patronize it, or to dismiss its hold upon popular imagination.

Horace Gregory. *Accent*. Spring, 1944. p. 143

More would not limit the artist as Plato did in his most austere moments, nor of course would he require that literature be moralistic, still less religious, in intention. But he would insist that great literature is only possible if the artist has a sense of a higher and a lower in man, and of his potentialities for good and evil, recognized and distinguished as such.

Obviously, More would not claim any originality for this fundamental doctrine. On the contrary, what he urges as a humanist is the necessity for renewed insight into the core of truth that has been handed down in a long tradition—which, however, the modern world has tended increasingly to reject, with disastrous consequences. We may hope, then, to arrive at some understanding of More's thought if we consider his interpretation of the tradition. In three stages of it, the Buddhist, the Platonic, and the Christian, he finds emerging with progressively greater clarity the principles of a complete humanism, complete because taking into account the religious instincts and needs of man.

M.D.C. Tait. *University of Toronto Quarterly*. Jan., 1947. pp. 111–12

By this I do not mean that More was not concerned with aesthetics. He has been condemned more vigorously for this than for almost anything else, but I believe that any honest reading of his works will reveal that he is fully alive to the subtle joys of the written word. Those joys, however, do not become his principal concern as a critic. Nor is he primarily interested in the biographical aspects of criticism, although here, too, he is interested in the lives of men as they reveal or conceal the search for, and the realization of, aspects of truth. Rather, More is a judicial critic, interested in detecting the sham from the true, and endeavoring to determine the success of the artist in probing the underlying truths of human nature and existence.

Robert M. Davies. *The Humanism of Paul Elmer More* (Bookman Associates). 1958. p. 191

For decades he had fought against naturalism for distinctively human values and had prompted others to do so, but a few years before he was hailed as a leader of humanism he had, while endorsing it as far as it went, moved on to theism. When his early Calvinistic piety succumbed to rationalism and romanticism, he came under the influence of medieval and Vedantic mysticism and passed through a phase of vague religiosity before ending in a blend of Anglicanism, Buddhism, and Platonism. He has been called the finest English-speaking critic of ideas, literature, and religion since Coleridge, Matthew Arnold, and Newman. In religion he could, on account of his reverence for spiritual realities as he apprehended them, subscribe without reservation to no prevailing creed; despite the catholicity of learning and taste in his *Shelburne Essays*, he was more a moralist than a literary critic in the narrower meaning of the words; and that traditional moralism made him less a detached and widely piercing than a sincere and frequently sound thinker. Tradition, however, did not shackle his individualism; his Platonism, for example, was as uniquely his own as were his approaches to literature and religion. In short, when anything deeply concerned him, disregarding the usual labels and categories he courageously followed his feelings and convictions. His distinction came from within rather than from any occupation or position that he adorned.

Arthur H. Dakin. *Paul Elmer More* (Princeton). 1960. pp. v–vi

More entertained certain views about ethics and social relations to which both the aesthetes and the radicals of the 1920's were antipathetic. He was a mordant foe of romanticism and naturalism; he distrusted humanitarianism as a literary impulse (unless it was transmuted by deep emotion into art); and he was a great believer . . . in character, discipline and responsibility. But even his strong moral predilections rarely distracted him entirely from his task of literary evaluation—a task to which he brought an extensive learning, an eye for the happy analogy, and a talent for succinct and pungent phrasing. . . .

It is not hard to understand why the Puritan view of life appealed to him. More was a kind of Puritan himself, albeit a somewhat Anglicized and Platonized variant, and the Puritan's inhibitions—a sense of the immutable One lying behind and beyond material phenomena, together with a refusal to blend heavenly and earthly categories, a distrust of the unchecked imagination, and the moral criteria by which one judged both life and art—were not dissimilar to his own.

Daniel Aaron. Introduction to *Shelburne Essays on American Literature* by Paul Elmer More (Harcourt). 1963. pp. 3–6

In addition to the example of a splendid intelligence at work, More offers the reader a style: dry, fluent, highly modulated. He knew what most critics cannot know, that the critic, wherever he finds himself, in the academy as elsewhere, is a writer. He took pains to write well. Not that he was by any means a crabbed or cold stylist; his work flashes with genuine anger when he lights into an adversary—Mrs. Eddy, for example, whom clearly he would have been deeply obliged to see in the stocks on Boston common.

Hayden Carruth. *Poetry*. Sept., 1964. p. 371

The selection of a tradition requires a principle of selection, and More's principle, in literature as in religion and philosophy, is dualism. We are not surprised to find, therefore, that the literary criticism of the *Shelburne Essays* shows the influence of his Oriental studies. Especially in the earlier volumes do his judgments and analyses make use of such conceptions as maya and karma, the higher and the lower self, self-knowledge, insight, and inattachment. . . . As the *Shelburne Essays* progress, the Vedantic terminology tends to disappear, but there is no essential change in More's standards. . . .

The literary criticism of the *New Shelburne Essays*, a series More began in 1928 after having published no collected criticism for over seven years, sweepingly condemns the literature of the twentieth century. In the *Shelburne Essays* and in the other uncollected criticism which he was writing at the same time, his attitude toward contemporary literature was ironic, condescending, and disgusted, perhaps even arrogant; in the *New Shelburne Essays* it is all of these, but impatient and petulant as well.

Francis X. Duggan. *Paul Elmer More* (Twayne). 1966. pp. 45–6, 119

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MORLEY, Christopher (1890–1957)

Those who like books as well as those who like people will get a vast amount of pleasure out of Christopher Morley's *Parnassus on Wheels*. . . . This is the story of a ''literary'' farmer's sister, who revolts and takes to the open road on her own account. Her misadventures and the philosophy of the ''Perfessor,'' whose book-van supplies her with the opportunity to escape the career of domestic drudge, make unusually good reading. Mr. Morley combines genuine understanding of the ''bookish'' temperament with humor that is irresistible.

Dial. Oct. 25, 1917. p. 403

His spirits, indeed, seem uniformly high, and one credits him with a good hearty young mental digestion. He is sprightly, alert, and various. He is skittish and informal too—in the fashion, ofttimes, of the young Englishman who is away from home and home regulations. He can strike a high note, as in his observations on President Wilson or on the German Emperor; and he can fall, with facility, to the lower strata of ordinary American ''humor.'' . . .

H.B. Fuller. *Dial*. June 6, 1918. p. 539

In this one book [*The Haunted Bookshop*] the author has made what first appeals to the average reader: a novel. There is a good story in it, an amusing, even exciting, plot of the moving-picture variety. . . . It is plain and obvious melodrama for a few pages, written with whimsical chuckles by the author, who is quite aware of the incongruity of hold-ups, daring rescues, and thunderous climaxes in a quiet bookshop.

Next, the book is full of alluring comments upon books,—the author, even more than his book dealer, Roger Mifflin, has the art of making you think, ''There is a book I must read.'' And you jot down the title. There were five such titles on a slip of paper near me, before I was three-quarters of the way into *The Haunted Bookshop*.

Finally, the book abounds with odd and unrelated comments upon all manner of things, and is delightful for that reason, just as *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (which Roger Mifflin loved) and *The History of European Morals* (which he undoubtedly loved) are delightful. It deserves an index. I can fancy some of the entries: ''Boarding-house bathtubs, best time to use,'' ''Cook, Lafcadio Hearn's, anecdote about.''

Edmund Lester Pearson. *Bookman*. Sept., 1919. p. 78

Mr. Morley, having chosen a compelling theme, has illustrated it by a fable of uncompromisingly austere design [*Thunder on the Left*]. The dominant mood of his novel is that of tragic irony. The novel is, however, a comedy as the ancients defined that term: it is a profoundly honest interpretation of actuality. Comedy implies the maintenance of a consistent intellectual attitude to life. And perhaps because this attitude is strictly objective, thoroughly disillusioned and invariably acceptant of the actual, the attitude of comedy is conspicuously rare in American fiction. Mr. Morley, rising to this attitude, has written a novel which illustrates an idea and yields a powerful emotion. And he has written it with an art that

is never uncertain, never relaxed, never inadequate to his purpose. . . . Much of the irony of the novel derives from a perception of the disproportion between events and experience, between the insignificant activities of the characters and the momentous significance of what passes in their minds. . . . the rapid and inevitable tragedy, lying not in the immediate situation but in the perception of experience by the characters, constitutes one of the most moving pictures of American life recently achieved in our fiction.

Lloyd Morris. *New York Times Book Section*. Dec. 6, 1925. p. 2

He has been dismissed with the easy name of humorist, whereas his humor is only the bubbling over of a rich nature which, without his joy in living, might have taken tragedy for its issue. He has been labeled stylist, and set on a shelf by those who adore literary language without due discrimination between that passionate love of English which has given him power when, like George in *Thunder on the Left*, he has Great Moments, and those junketings with fine words which this drunkard in vocabularies will sometimes indulge in. For Christopher Morley is not one stylist, he is three. A master of lovely, supple English, lifting in the presence of beautiful emotion to a superb prose—that is Morley the First and Best. Then there is Morley II, a bad boy of letters, a punster without restraint, whimsical, witty, using the oldest tricks as well as the newest inventions. This is the journalist Morley, good, but too puckish to last. And finally, Morley III, Morley writing style, Jacobean, Johnsonian, Lambish, Stevensonian, exerting his great talent for rhythm and word as a euphuist or antiquary, writing brave language a little too fine—there I like him least. It is the best genius that controls in *Thunder on the Left*, in *Where the Blue Begins*, in *Inward Ho!* in the best of his *Translations from the Chinese*, and some of his other poetry.

Henry Seidel Canby. *American Estimates* (Harcourt). 1929. p. 62

He has usually preferred the personal essay for his expression, but it is doubtful whether any one form could fully contain the outpourings of a talent so rich, so varied, and so alive. It has filled up many volumes of essays with contagious enthusiasms uncommon in our day, it has spilled over into poetry, and there has been left more than enough for several novels cast in the attenuated form of fantasy. In fact, the thin walls of that slight form are often hard put upon to contain the timed explosives with which they are charged. . . . Christopher Morley has said that he chooses the forms of fantasy and fable as a recourse ''to avoid the bitterness of being understood.'' This may mean that he has been less unaware than some suppose that an ideology and a way of life have collapsed about his ears.

Harlan Hatcher. *Creating the Modern American Novel* (Farrar and Rinehart). 1935. pp. 212–13

The reader is reminded all through the thoughts and grief of Kitty Foyle of the author of *Where the Blue Begins* and of *Thunder on the Left*. Every page has bits of the Morley philosophy, and this gives the narrative a glittering quality of the unexpected. It is done, however, in the words of Kitty Foyle. . . .

It is unfortunate that *Kitty Foyle* had to be a novel, because wit and wisdom are only the by-products of convincing fiction. . . . As it is, [Kitty] is required to tell a worldly, sophisticated story, to analyze the effect of environment on character, to speak the thoughts of her author, and to be Kitty Foyle, the heroine, a white-collar girl and the graduate of a business college. It is not an impossible assignment, but one which has great dangers. What actually happens is that she does not take the form of an integrated character. In spite of Mr. Morley's best efforts she is an intellectual abstraction in an intellectual equation and not a girl who has loved and who has achieved a victory by renunciation.

J.P. Marquand. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 28, 1939. p. 7

If none of his books achieved real greatness, it can unquestionably be said of him, as this paper editorially observed on March 30, that he will be remembered as ''one of the best minor writers of his time.''

Having said that much, I have still not indicated the full range of his contribution to the literary world of which he was so long a part. . . .

It was Morley's misfortune to see the tides of current taste set against him and to be, in his last decade or two, a less popular and lower estimated figure than he had earlier been. He took that philosophically, but sometimes winced when the charge of being ''whimsical'' was hurled at him. Heaven knows there are fouler faults a writer can be accused of, and maybe a little whimsey wouldn't come amiss in the paragraphs of some of our more industrious and self-anointed God-helpers. At least Chris Morley could laugh from his belly, and he had, besides a brisk and fertile imagination, a fine respect and love for, and a mastery of, the English tongue. . . .

J. Donald Adams. *New York Times Book Section*. April 14, 1957. p. 2

Although well known as the author of *Parnassus on Wheels*, *Where the Blue Begins*, *Thunder on the Left*, and *Kitty Foyle*, Christopher Morley thought of himself as essentially a poet and wanted to be remembered as such. . . . The details of the lifelong affair with New York City are recorded in Morley's poetry: the panorama of faces in the subway, the wounds at night of traffic in the streets, the tiny fluffs of milkweed blown into the city on an October day; these are the pictures Morley drew, partly recreated from notes taken on the spot, partly the products of happy memories. . . . Morley's poetry, it need only be noted, exhibits symbolism without recourse to private mythology, knowledge without offensive pedantry, and complexity with neither wilful obscurity nor any of the seven types of ambiguity discovered by William Empson and embraced so ardently by the gradgrind mind. No, Christopher Morley's poetry is too honest and too human and communicates too directly with the reader for an explicator to feel very much at home.

Jon Bracker. Introduction to *Bright Cages* by Christopher Morley (Pennsylvania). 1965. pp. 13, 19, 34

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MORRIS, Wright (1910–1998)

Mr. Morris . . . makes you see and feel as well as think. He always has; and one wonders why he is not more generally recognized as one of America's leading novelists. Each of his seven novels, excepting perhaps *The Works of Love*, marks a distinct advance in his ability to convey his original and remarkable insights. I hope that *The Huge Season* will have such success that it will send readers and critics back to such excellent novels as *Man and Boy* and *The Deep Sleep*, for Mr. Morris is a major writer and a major writer can be understood fully only when he is read entire.

Harvey Curtis Webster. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 2, 1954. p. 29

In his last three novels (*The Huge Season, The Deep Sleep*, and *The Works of Love*) he has strongly suggested Sherwood Anderson at his best—an Anderson without wooliness, without loose language and looser feelings, without all the mumbling and rumbling and bumbling that one associates with much of Anderson's prose; rather the ''dry'' Anderson who could present, with perfect directness, the American ''grotesque.'' Morris is the only American who now seems to write in the full spirit of Constance Rourke's *American Humor*. . . . A master of the comic and deeply sensitive to the most inarticulate of American sorrows, Morris' work is moving as only truly original work can be.

Mark Schorer. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 3, 1954. p. 4

For the reader willing to accord the inner world of action a significance equal to that of the outerworld, there are universes upon universes to explore under Mr. Morris' skilled guidance. The characters (in *The Field of Vision*), thus viewed from within, build up to uncanny vividness, and most of them, no matter how pitiful they may appear from without, have the persistent dignity of men and women somehow made restless and homeless by a vision which lures and more often than not eludes them. Mr. Morris has published close to a dozen books since his debut with *My Uncle Dudley* in 1942. The present work should do much to consolidate his position as an original and powerful talent.

Chad Walsh. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Oct. 7, 1956. p. 6

It is said of [Morris] that he is the darling of the Lit'ry and *Ceremony in Lone Tree* does show signs, like Morris's earlier books, that he has read other writers beside himself, including Faulkner and perhaps even Nabokov. . . . The defense of Morris need not rest, however (as it has done in the past), entirely on his wit, or on his power to create out of emptiness a living scene, or even on his eye for such boondocks of the age as the castrating Female. His strongest claim is that alone among American writers he has an intuitive sense of the present quality of [the] life of the middle . . . a sense of waves of *kitsch*, buried Calvinism, bogus hatred (of the city), bogus love (for the tough old mountain men, The Pioneers), fear of the bomb and disbelief in the bomb that now torment and titillate the millions who still sit in kitchen chairs instead of kitchen bar stools.

Benjamin DeMott. *Partisan Review*. Fall, 1960. p. 758

Like Morris himself, his characters have to rediscover the past, seeking both ''the durable dreams of American life'' and the significance of their own youthful experiences, if they are to grow and achieve self-knowledge. The degree of self-awareness they attain depends not only upon their own capacities but also upon Morris's ''escape from nostalgia.'' As he examines, re-examines, and probes the past, Morris also seeks the means to reveal it. He

discovers a number of symbols that recur throughout his novels; he experiments with several techniques, discarding some, developing others, until he finally finds a form that both contains and expands his theme. Thus the growth of the artist parallels the growth of the man. It is in this insistent and progressive examination of the role of the past in American experience, plus the development of a creative method for rendering this theme, that the importance of Wright Morris can be found.

Arthur E. Waterman. *Critique*. Winter, 1961–2. p. 24

Morris has been called a ''nay-sayer'' by Leslie Fiedler, the highest honor Fiedler can bestow on one of his contemporaries. Though the epithet is applicable, it may be indicative not of the strength of Morris's vision, but of its final limitation. He lacks the over-riding compassion which enables Bellow, for example, to redeem his lost sufferers in the midst of impossible circumstances, in spite of everything. Morris's world, in which the past and the future merge in malevolent conspiracy, denies the human being his presumption of dignity.

Although Morris's universe is nihilistic, his theme impotence, his characters fools and madmen, he renders experience with great richness of detail and evocation, bringing it to life to expose its essential deadness. If his view of reality is limited, it is no more limited than Hemingway's; it is only less simple, less readily appealing. Though in recent years Morris has received a fair amount of critical approbation, he is still undervalued. He may see life through a narrower window than the greatest writers, but he sees its incompleteness distinctly, and he sees it whole.

Jonathan Baumbach. *Critique*. Winter, 1961–2. p. 71

He says big things, big enough to win the respect of the most serious reader, but they are not particularly hard sayings. . . . There is in his novels a constant, explicit dialectic between two worlds—between what is really real and what, in our ordinary experience, merely seems so. Almost obsessed, from the beginning, with the poignance of a human life caught in a changing, shifting world, he has in most of his novels gone back to the past, caught the lives of his characters in flux, and tried to fix them by a transforming vision of whatever is timeless beneath or above the changing surface. . . . The particular values shift from work to work, and we can be sure that they will continue to shift. . . . But the varied quest can, for Morris, be summarized without too much distortion under three heads: 1. Men escape the phony and find reality whenever they do anything heroic, courageous, full of audacity. . . . 2. But it is not enough to be merely brave; the unimaginative hero is soon caught in his own clichés. . . . What can save him is inventiveness, imagination. . . . 3. Finally—to come to a value that in some modern novelists has been unique and supreme—one can touch reality by achieving love.

Wayne C. Booth. *American Scholar*. Autumn, 1962. pp. 610–2

Twenty years separates Wright Morris' first novel, *Man and Boy*, from his eleventh, *What a Way to Go*. Why in those two decades Morris' distinctive talents have been enjoyed by only a small coterie remains a mystery to me. Perhaps the secret lies in his great versatility which allows him the freedom continually to change his focus but denies us the liberty of ever pinning him down. More likely it has something to do with that slightly cock-eyed world of his, a world definitely mad but with a special madness that may be as difficult to appreciate as it is to depict. . . . As a satire of tourist manners in the old world and a travel guide to courtly love in the new, *What a Way to Go* is shrewd, funny, and beautifully written. May it bring to Wright Morris a measure of the popular success that he has deserved all along.

Paul Levine. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1962–63. pp. 601–2

And that is the vision, finally, of the American Territory that Morris has come to, full and wealthy with felt life—and yet circular in a way that is perhaps beyond Morris' intentions. It is a comic vision, after all, of failure. If, because the mode of apprehension is comic, these characters are allowed life, and if what is perceived is a principle by which they can live, still the lives they lead are pathetic because they are bound to be fruitless. They are all agonists whose total adventure is that they are batted back and forth between impossibilities. These novels are rich and ripe and full and wise, kept well within this life by their gathering of the real voices and things of this life. But even so there is in them a manipulating of all these things into symbols which say again and again that this life is only between the loci of the real realities, and it will surely have to be Morris' effort to prevent the collapse of his immediate present into a confusion of merely symbolic evocations. Morris' naive and marvelous sensibility for things, in all their inertness, is luckily persistent, but meanwhile this felt life has become for him theoretically implausible.

Marcus Klein. *After Alienation* (World). 1964. pp. 241–2

It's all so pat, so perfectly engineered: reading it [*In Orbit*] is like taking the back off your watch and seeing the little wheels click round and round. A perfect small machine: but somehow too neat, too trimmed, to capture life. I suppose this is what old-fashioned critics meant when they said that a book ''smelt of the lamp.'' It's a perfect demonstration of literary technique, and since Mr. Morris is a college teacher of Creative Writing, such demonstrations are a necessary part of his job. But for some reason—either the slight staleness of the dominating image of the motor-cycling *blouson noir*, or the relentless over-writing which seems to drain all spontaneity from the story—this novel, for all its enviable skill, didn't take me into the presence of life. . . .

John Wain. *New York Review of Books*. May 4, 1967. p. 36

Wright Morris has been the most consistently original of American novelists for a quarter of a century which has borne witness to his originality by refusing to keep his novels in print. Faulkner once occupied the same position, though not for so long a time; and Morris' longer stay may have been his own fault, as Leslie Fiedler once remarked, because he would never join a gang. Perhaps he could not because he had anticipated and discounted too many of them.

He discovered early that life, from any rational point of view, was absurd but took the discovery as a matter of fact rather than as a revelation of philosophical truth. He developed a sympathy for common humanity and an eye and ear for its peculiarities without

becoming an alienated or angry young man. He realized that the American archetype of the self-sufficient hero was inappropriate to the modern world and simply avoided the traditional character instead of preserving the cliche with an ''anti-hero'' or some other man of straw. He lit out for the Territory, in the words of Huck Finn, ahead of the rest and made it, in his own play on the words, a territory in time rather than in space. Because of this he may prove to be not only the most original but the most important American novelist of the mid-century.

Leon Howard. *Wright Morris* (Minnesota). 1968. p. 5

Despite its brevity, *Fire Sermon* is simon-pure, dyed-in-the-wool, honest-to-God Wright Morris of the very highest grade. I am not saying that it is his best book—but it is a radiant expression of the art he has developed through 30 years and 14 earlier novels. Although it is anything but preachy, it will stick in the minds of some members of the congregation for a long time. . . .

As he has frequently done, Morris takes his time in showing his characters before he sends them into action. He isn't much interested in the kind of audience whose attention must be (as the blurb writers put it) gripped by the first paragraph. The more patient reader, if he will let himself, comes to admire the skill with which, stroke by stroke, the characters are given form and substance. He will also discover, among other things, that the book is funny, one of Morris's funniest.

Granville Hicks. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 26, 1971. p. 52

In a jacket plug for *One Day*, Eudora Welty said, ''Laying sure hands on the *daily* is Wright Morris's *forte*.'' His ''sure hand'' is at work again in *Fire Sermon*, particularly in the first third of this very short novel, in which slowly, deliberately he defines his two main characters, the twelve-year-old Kermit and his 82-year-old ''next of kin,'' his great-uncle Floyd, and sets up the relationship that develops when the old man takes the boy in after the death of his parents. . . .

To someone who grew up on movies in which Jackie Cooper reduced Wallace Beery to sudsy softness and Shirley Temple penetrated the iron exterior of Lionel Barrymore, there is something dangerously familiar about some of the early scenes in the book. . . . Both funny and sentimental, then, these early scenes, but the novel is not going to end—as the movies I invoked usually did—in a smilingly tearful two-shot. This novel is not a hands-across-the-generations schmaltzer, but another enactment of inevitable replacement of the old by the young. . . .

Although the book ends with the young watching the dawn (yes, Morris really does that), with Kermit sorting himself out as best he can, the pervasive quality of the novel lies in Uncle Floyd and the nostalgic sense of loss in him.

Gerald Weales. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1971–72. pp. 725–6

Solitary, prolific, enjoying fitfully public acclaim, laboring more often in obscurity, [Morris] seeks to repossess American reality by penetrating its past, stripping its myths. Morris is native to the plains of Nebraska; his characters, frail, inward people, return to their Midwestern past in order to find some viable identity of their own.

His novels vary in quality. Some seem opaque, tedious, or frivolous; a few attain permanent distinction. Certainly Morris is an artist; conscious of his material, he struggles continually against its flatness. . . . Isolation, silence, memory, and above all the muteness or failure of love, the inability to respond, are the concerns of his best work.

Ihab Hassan. *Contemporary American Literature* (Ungar). 1973. pp. 37–8

Wright Morris may well be the last of our novelists to write with a sense of the whole of America in his blood and bones, to possess a vision of the country as both a physical place and a metaphysical condition. The literary tradition from which he seems most directly to descend—and it is a tradition shared with some incongruity by James, Twain, Edith Wharton, and Sherwood Anderson—may have passed on to him the materials of this vision, and it may be said to have been reconstituted in his work with very little likelihood that it will survive beyond his work. . . .

But one thing is certain. The America of Morris's novels no longer exists as a territory of our collective imagination, and that is because the myth that brought it to life in our imagination is dead. We may think that the myth survives in the popular culture of our day, but we will be wrong. It is not even there in lessened mutated form. What we see in popular culture are imitations and prevarications of the myth, media entombments of artifact, cartoon facsimiles which may have the vague contours of the original with one essential element missing: they bring nothing to life; they no longer fire and transform our aspirations. . . .

There is much humor and a rare and genuine kindness in the novels of Wright Morris, but the dark strain has deepened in them. It is also to be found—in different guises and because of somewhat different provocations—in the works we consider most original and permanently valuable in the modern American literary tradition. It arises perhaps, as Philip Rahv once said, from a recognition of ''the discrepancy between the high promise of the American dream and what history has made of it. [From Dreiser and Anderson to Fitzgerald and Faulkner] the inner feeling of [the modern American] novel is one of nostalgic love of nativity combined with baffled (and sometimes angry) disenchantment.'' That has been the troubled preoccupation of some of our finest novelists, and inevitably it is also Wright Morris's—although it should be said that he cannot tolerate without some amusement the faintest note of apocalypse.

Nevertheless, his somber awareness of what has happened to us in the past and is continuing to happen to us today cannot be entirely concealed behind the subtle locutions of his irony and wit. It is perhaps that he is holding in escrow the ultimate pessimism he clearly sometimes feels. For he has, after all, lived much, has found much cause for love and wonder, and has too much practical sanity to make final pronouncements of either hope or disaster.

John W. Aldridge. In *Conversations with Wright Morris*, ed. Robert E. Knoll (Univ. of Nebraska Pr., 1977), pp. 3, 6, 12–13

There are . . . two worlds in the fiction of Wright Morris, and any adequate conception of his work must make room for both. The

first has an absolute reality; it is a playground of natural forces which do the work of time, destroying each moment in order to create the next. The second is the habitat of a supernatural force, imagination, which nevertheless grows out of the natural process of evolution.

The real-ideal dualism points to an emerging pattern of contrasts, or opposites, which can be found in Morris's work. They include physical conception and imaginative conception, life and art, flow and arrest, process and culmination, text (outside of space but experienced in time) and photo (outside of time but experienced in space), man and nature, hero and witness. . . . The relative weight Morris assigns to one side of the dualism or another varies from book to book depending upon the specific situation depicted, the side which other themes happen to give the greater stress, and the point to which his developing consciousness of the world has brought him. His reservation of absolute judgment grows first from an ambivalence toward his subject, an ambivalence which is the only legitimate and truthful reaction to a profoundly ambiguous world, and from his basic premise that life is process. His tendency to think in patterns of opposites on whose relative worth conclusive judgment is withheld is further evidence of his deliberate tentativeness; respect for the unfinished character of the world prevents him from emphasizing once and for all one side of a dualism when tomorrow he may find the other more cogent.

Morris has always been a strong spokesman for the importance of tradition in shaping the individual talent, and his own talent has been partially formed by two very different writers—D.H. Lawrence and Henry James—who are both singled out for praise in *The Territory Ahead*. Morris himself has said that his admiration for other writers is ''remote from imitation''; it is rather an awareness of literary tradition as part of the total culture out of which any writer must write. Because, as he says, echoing James's judgment, ''It is the fiction that shapes the fact,'' Morris was ''influenced'' by Lawrence and James before he ever knew their work. Like any good artist, he was attuned to his time and place, which owed a part of their sense of themselves to these men. . . .

In Morris's work, the treatment of choice more nearly resembles that of such doctrinaire existentialists as Sartre than that of Lawrence: characters are often confronted with very difficult dilemmas resulting from the nature of the contingent world in which they find themselves. Nevertheless, like Lawrence, Morris senses a creative presence in the universe that comes close to being God and that debars him from the radical states of anxiety, fear and trembling, and sickness unto death usually associated with existentialism. Impersonal forces are working their obscure ends in man, but there are ends, however obscure. Moreover, existentialism is an extremely self-oriented philosophy, while Morris's most sensitive characters, like those of Lawrence, have an instinctive sense of belonging among the larger forces of life in the cosmos and recognize that the universe is not a mere backdrop for their own self-absorbed little dramas.

G.B. Crump. *The Novels of Wright Morris: A Critical Interpretation* (Univ. of Nebraska Pr., 1978), pp. 15–18

A summary description of Wright Morris's new novel, his 19th, suggests that this sophisticated ''regionalist'' has forsaken the impressionistic visual emphases that distinguish his best fiction (*The Works of Love, the Field of Vision, Ceremony in Lone Tree*) for a more conventionally narrative picturing of life in Nebraska's ''middle Western plains''; the method, let's say, of Conrad Richter or Willa Cather.

Plains Song follows through four generations a family ''cursed'' because its women ''bear only daughters, if anything at all.'' . . . I think this novel is saying that the way women have changed is only part of a fabric of overall change; and that, in saying so, it makes the mistake of satirizing one of its major elements (women's liberation), while simply celebrating its counterpart (rugged individualism and uncomplaining toil)—thus creating a feeling of unequal empathies, an imbalance in the generosity that the book otherwise seems to breathe.

Nevertheless, it succeeds as both an insistently changed lament (''plainsong'') and a sequence of vivid and revelatory images. . . .

This eloquent novel portrays the passage of time with remarkable concision, and its understated (plain) style carries surprising emotional force. We feel how these people age: how their habits subtly alter; how they grow apart from others, become set in their ways. Wright Morris knows the embattled regions within his people as well as the harshly beautiful landscapes that surround them; and it is this rich double focus that gives his novels their unique solidity and truthfulness.

Bruce Allen. *New Republic*. Feb. 9, 1980, p. 40

No American writer's style, I think, is as perfectly controlled as Morris's. Everything style has been trained over the centuries to do, Morris makes it do in his novels. . . . Morris's style—the American language in action—conveys the informal tone and feel of a man talking to men. He makes imaginative use of American slang, clichés, idioms, and especially of midwestern speech patterns and rhythms as a way of getting at the American character. He tunes us in on the resignation, the melancholy overtones, the subtle poetry, the humor, the shrewdness of insight of midwestern speech.

In any work of fiction, the point-of-view technique the writer chooses dictates style. The third person central intelligence point of view that Morris most often uses dictates a conversational, informal tone and style; Morris modulates between a simulation of first-person informality and the more formal syntax, diction, and tone of an omniscient voice. Filtering his character's experiences and reveries through the third person, Morris employs his unique ability to transform the clichés of American language and culture into expressions of wit, satire, and peculiar lyricism. Morris creates a congruence of outer and inner reality—a triumph of style. Examining the immediate emotional and intellectual intuitions and perceptions of his characters from within, as they move from one small, but highly charged moment to another, Morris has evolved a flexible style, based on a manipulation of clichés, that has proved effective in rendering the sensibilities of both articulate and inarticulate characters. . . .

Each of Morris's novels is an answer, given in the language of the cliché, to Crevecoeur's cliché question, ''What is an American?'' The cliché is symbolic of the American dream defunct, and it is in this ''dead'' language of clichés that Morris tells us of the sterility of modern life. But the special contexts he prepares for clichés simultaneously annihilate their phoniness and resurrect their original vitality; he suggests that the dead past can be made to live again.

Morris's characters share his efforts to salvage something from the cliché.

David Madden. *Midwest Quarterly*. Summer, 1981, pp. 319–20

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MORRISON, Toni (1931–)

The tone of much black writing is forensic, a public tone that speaks across ethnic and political gaps, that at one time or another has been used to persuade or frighten whites into action and to cajole or exhort other blacks into solidarity and revolution. Toni Morrison's tone, in this lyrical story [*The Bluest Eye*] about growing up black and poor in a northern Ohio town, is a more private tone, the tone, as it were, of black conversation. All of which is not meant to imply that Mrs. Morrison has no political consciousness, far from it, but only that she has found a way to express that consciousness in a novel instead of a harangue. She has the skill to convince you that she is telling it like it is without constantly telling you that's what she's doing—and that you'd better pay attention to her.

This story commands attention, for it contains one black girl's universe: alienation from the white world in a candy store, a sad neighbor girl made pregnant by her father and eventually driven mad, class conflict among black playmates, deracinated adults fighting each other and splitting up, a father who denies his son, and most of all that sad little girl, who wishes her eyes were blue, the bluest eyes in the world.

The girl never got those eyes; she was spiritually destroyed instead, and no marigolds bloomed either that year. To the narrator, those twin losses seem connected: ''I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. The soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late.''

Raymond A. Sokolov. *Newsweek*. Nov. 30, 1970, pp. 95–96

With the publication of *The Bluest Eye* in 1970 and *Sula* in 1974, Toni Morrison has laid claim to modern portrayal of the preternaturally sensitive but rudely thwarted black girl in today's society. *Sula* is more fully dominated by the title character, and Sula's characterization is the more complex; in both novels, however, the protagonist is forced into premature adulthood by the *donnée* of her life. Pecola's comprehension of her world is never articulated for either the other characters or the reader; Sula, too, remains a partial enigma both in and out of her narrative. But the pain that each experiences is made vivid and plain. Taken together, the two novels can—and I think must—be read as offering different answers to a single question: What is to become of a finely attuned child who is offered no healthy outlet for her aspirations and yearnings? Pecola escapes in madness; Sula rejects society for amoral self-reliance. For both, sensitivity is a curse rather than a blessing. Morrison's second novel, though richer in many ways, is essentially a reworking of the material of the first with an alternative ending. Though her characters' problems are conditioned by the black milieu of which she writes, her concerns are broader, universal ones. Her fiction is a study of thwarted sensitivity. . . .

Both Morrison's novels find beauty in sensitive response and show its inevitable doom in a world in which only the hard, the cagey, and the self-interested can triumph. Although both Pecola and Sula fill essential roles in their communities, it is not the admirable in their characters that has an influence. Pecola serves as the bottom-most societal rung whose lowliness raises the self-esteem of everyone else, while Sula's acknowledged ''evil'' encourages others' righteous sense of comparative superiority. Sensitivity is lovely, but impractical, says Morrison. It is a pragmatic outlook, if not a particularly happy one.

Joan Bischoff. *Studies in Black Literature*. Fall, 1975, pp. 21, 23

Song of Solomon by Toni Morrison is a fine novel exuberantly constructed and stylistically full of the author's own delight in words. Morrison has a strong narrative voice and much of her novel's charm comes from an oral tradition, her love of simply telling, for example, how places and people got their names and how these names—Not Doctor Street, Ryna's Gulch, a boy called Milkman, Mr. Solomon, women known as Pilate, Sing and Sweet—contain history. There is an enchantment in Morrison's naming, a heightening of reality and language. Though each name is almost mythical it can be explained factually, thus the grandmother named Sing was really part Indian, Singing Bird, but not quite, the illegitimate daughter of a white gentleman, she was Byrd. In *Song of Solomon* lives are as strange as folk tales and no less magical when they are at last construed.

Toni Morrison has written a chronicle of a black family living in a small industrial city on the shores of Lake Michigan, but the

method of the book is to enlarge upon the very idea of family history, to scrape away at lore until truth is revealed. And so we see that all the fears and misunderstandings that have shaped, say, the hostile marriage of Macon Dead and his wife Ruth, are as open to interpretation as the influence of dialect and The Good Book upon an old ballad. Milkman Dead, their son, finds that he is burdened by the truth about his parents and elated by a trip to Virginia to discover the remote romantic tales of his family's past. Morrison's novel demythologizes the Dead family, but even as Milkman learns the truth—there was no gold hidden in a southern cave, no lurid scene in which his mother threw herself naked upon her father's corpse—the new myths are created. There was, in fact, Milkman's great-grandfather, Solomon, a prodigious Biblical lover who enters into legend. ''O Solomon don't leave me,'' the black children sing in their play, a corrupt version of Solomon's story, but of course their game, their song has the vitality of life over legend and so does Morrison's novel.

Song of Solomon is so rich in its use of common speech, so sophisticated in its use of literary traditions and language from the Bible to Faulkner, that I must add it is also extremely funny. Toni Morrison has a wonderful eye for the pretensions of genteel blacks and the sort of crude over-statements made by small time revolutionaries. Like many fine artists she dares to be corny—there is a funeral scene worthy of Dickens in which a crazed old woman sings ''Who's been botherin' my baby girl'' over her daughter, a poor deluded creature who has died of a broken heart. And like many great novels at the core it is a rather simple story of a boy growing to maturity. On the day Milkman Dead is born a mad insurance agent, Icarus-like, is trying to fly off Mercy Hospital. Milkman is finally weaned from the romance of the past and his own self-concern, a grown man ready for life, ready to fly. As for myth, Toni Morrison knows it's dead material unless you give it life—that's art.

Maureen Howard. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1978, pp. 185–86

Toni Morrison's works are fantastic earthy realism. Deeply rooted in history and mythology, her work resonates with mixtures of pleasure and pain, wonder and horror. Primal in their essence, her characters come at you with the force and beauty of gushing water, seemingly fantastic but as basic as the earth they stand on. They erupt, out of the world, sometimes gently, often with force and terror. Her work is sensuality combined with an intrigue that only a piercing intellect could create.

Two of her three novels, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1974), reveal a consistency of vision, for they illustrate the growth of a theme as it goes through many transformations in much the same way as a good jazz musician finds the hidden melodies within a musical phrase. Both novels chronicle the search for beauty amidst the restrictions of life, both from within and without. In both novels, the black woman, as girl and grown woman, is the turning character, and the friendship between two women or girls serves as the yardstick by which the overwhelming contradictions of life are measured. Double-faced, her focal characters look outward and search inward, trying to find some continuity between the seasons, the earth, other people, the cycles of life, and their own particular lives. Often they find that there is conflict between their own nature and the society that man has made, to the extent that one seems to be an inversion of the other. Her novels are rich, then, not only in human characterizations but also in the signs, symbols, omens, sent by nature.

Wind and fire, robins as a plague in the spring, marigolds that won't sprout, are as much characterization in her novels as the human beings who people them.

Barbara Christian. *Black Women Novelists* (Greenwood, 1980), p. 137

Toni Morrison . . . has achieved major stature through the publication of only three novels. *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973) are brief, poetic works which explore the initiation experiences of their black, female, adolescent protagonists. *Song of Solomon* (1977) is a much longer but still lyrical story relating Macon (Milkman) Dead's search for familial roots and personal identity. Milkman's development is framed and illuminated by the maturation stories of three women important in his life, and the presence of these subplots in the tale of a male protagonist is a good indication of the importance of female initiation in Morrison's thought.

For Toni Morrison, the central theme of all her work is [beauty and love]. . . . Certainly, this theme is evident in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon*, their female characters searching for love, for valid sexual encounters, and, above all, for a sense that they are worthy. . . .

Morrison's early works explore the results for black women when the values are real and powerful but are designed primarily for middle-class whites. This concept certainly appears importantly in *Song of Solomon*, but that book also explores what happens to women whose values (and value) are determined by the men who control their lives. From the outset, these values are known by some of Morrison's female characters to be useless, even damaging, to them. . . .

In Toni Morrison's novels, she joins her basic theme with the initiation motif, and the initiation experiences, trying and painful as they are, fail. . . .

In her fiction, then, Morrison has united her theme, the explorations of love, and a traditional device, the initiation motif, along with a series of brilliantly dramatized foreshadowing events, skillfully made frames, and splendid characterizations. The resulting novels are compelling statements of the failure of human values. The inversion of a traditional motif—that is, the treatment of failed initiations—is successful, its effect devastating. The achievement is remarkable, making it clear that Toni Morrison is, indeed, a major American novelist.

Jane S. Bakerman. *American Literature*. Jan., 1981, pp. 541–42, 563

Because Toni Morrison is black, female, and the author of *Song of Solomon* . . . one expects from her a fiction of ideas as well as characters.

Tar Baby has both. And it's so sophisticated a novel that *Tar Baby* might well be tarred and feathered as bigoted, racist, and a product of male chauvinism were it the work of a white male—say, John Updike, whom Morrison brings to mind.

One of fiction's pleasures is to have your mind scratched and your intellectual habits challenged. While *Tar Baby* has shortcomings, lack of provocation isn't one of them. Morrison owns a

powerful intelligence. It's run by courage. She calls to account conventional wisdom and accepted attitude at nearly every turn of her story. She wonders about the sacrifice of love, the effects of racial integration, the intention of charity. Continually she questions both the logic and morality of seeking happiness or what Freud said passes for it, freedom from pain, by living in social accommodation. Although Morrison tells a love story—indeed, she tells two or three stories about love—her narrative lines run to complexities far beyond those of physical or emotional bonding. . . .

To believe Toni Morrison's characters isn't to believe their dramatic behavior. They are real people—in a story. The reason we can't credit their behavior is that, except for the most minor of figures, their actions are determined by Morrison's convictions, not their histories. Such is the curse of novels of ideas.

Webster Schott. *Book World*. March 22, 1981. pp. 1–2

All of Morrison's characters exist in a world defined by its blackness and by the surrounding white society that both violates and denies it. The destructive effect of the white society can take the form of outright physical violence, but oppression in Morrison's world is more often psychic violence. She rarely depicts white characters, for the brutality here is less a single act than the systematic denial of the reality of black lives. The theme of ''invisibility'' is, of course, a common one in black American literature, but Morrison avoids the picture of the black person ''invisible'' in white life (Ellison's Invisible Man trying to confront passersby). Instead, she immerses the reader in the black community; the white society's ignorance of that concrete, vivid, and diverse world is thus even more striking.

The constant censorship of and intrusion on black life from the surrounding society is emphasized not by specific events so much as by a consistent pattern of misnaming. Power for Morrison is largely the power to name, to define reality and perception. The world of all three novels is distinguished by the discrepancy between name and reality. . . .

Morrison's use of mythic structure, more and more overtly as her work develops, is central to her existentialist analysis. The heroic quest for identity achieved by conquest in and of the outer world embodies the human need for transcendence and self-definition; at the same time, the mythic sense of fate and necessity corresponds to the experience of facticity, both as irrevocable consequence and as concrete conditions for choice. Between those two poles—free heroism and determined role—move Morrison's characters. Further, mythic patterns are especially appropriate to her social concerns, since the mythic hero by his nature both embodies and transcends the values of his culture. These connections would be significant in most presentations of existential themes, but the special situations with which Morrison is concerned further complicate her use of myth. On the one hand, traditional myths claim to represent ''universal'' values and experiences; on the other, they clearly exclude or distort minority experiences by offering inappropriate or impossible models (e.g., Shirley Temple). . . .

Morrison, then, must capture ''universal'' aspirations without denying concrete reality, construct a myth that affirms community identity without accepting oppressive definitions. In the process, she must take the outline of the mythic structure, already so well suited to the existentialist quest for freedom and identity, and adapt it to the historical circumstances that surround this version of the quest. She values the myth as a way to design, not confine, reality; it remains to be seen how much further she can carry that notion.

Cynthia A. Davis. *Contemporary Literature*. Summer, 1982, pp. 323–24, 341–42

In theme and style Toni Morrison's novels are a fine example of vintage wine in new bottles. Her exploration of the impact of sexism and racism on the lives of black women in her Gothic fables provides a more complex and, perhaps, controversial vision of the personalities and bonding of fiercely alive modern black women than the idealized images of most writers of the 1960s. Particularly in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* she distills history and fact with the poetic freedom and Gothic vision of modernist and postmodernist writers.

Her sharp eye for the concrete details and telltale gestures that evoke a sense of place and character in the fables and *Song of Solomon* are complemented by a wonderful gift for metaphor and metonymy that are as penetrating in their insightfulness as they are arresting in their freshness and suggestiveness. Her characters are eccentric and maimed as a result of their experience as black men and women in an environment that rigidly defines their humanity by economic, sexual, and racial myths, but still they persevere in their efforts to cope with or triumph over the obstacles in their path to self-esteem, freedom, and wholeness. Thus Pecola is destroyed psychologically, Sula dies an outcast among her own, and Milkman follows the path of his African ancestor, but both Claudia and Nel survive the terror and tragedy of their friends' lives, achieving in the process a precarious adjustment to the worlds of Shirley Temple and the Bottom. Pilate's moral victory is even more Pyrrhic. Because Morrison probes the awesome will to live of her characters in order to suggest the truth of their psychic experience and the complexity of their humanity, her Gothic fables, reminiscent of Toomer's *Cane*, are a quintessential blend of realism and poetry, bizarreness and beauty, revelation and lyricism.

Bernard W. Bell. *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Pr., 1987), pp. 276–77

Most reviewers of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* have assumed that the mysterious title character is the ghostly incarnation of Sethe's murderous baby, a flesh-and-blood version of the spirit Paul D. drives from the house. . . for evidence throughout the book suggests that the girl is not a supernatural being of any kind but simply a young woman who has herself suffered the horrors of slavery.

In large part, Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning fifth novel is about the atrocities wrought both upon a mother's need to love and care for her children as well as a child's deep need for a family; Sethe murders her baby girl rather than have her taken back into slavery; Baby Suggs grieves inconsolably when her children are sold; Sethe sees her own mother, a woman who was brought from Africa on a slave ship, only a few times before the woman was killed; Denver loves her mother, Sethe, but also fears the woman because she is a murderer. These and other incidents illustrate the

destruction of family ties brought by slavery, and Beloved, seen as a human being, emphasizes and illuminates these themes. . . .

In *Beloved*, Morrison also shows that past griefs, hurts ranging from the atrocities of slavery to less hideous pains, must be remembered, but they should not control life. At the end of the novel, Paul D. tells Sethe ''me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow'' (p. 273). And throughout *Beloved*, Morrison's theme is that remembering yesterdays, while not being consumed by them, gives people the tomorrows with which to make real lives.

Elizabeth House. *Studies in American Fiction*. Spring, 1990, pp. 17, 24

Beloved provides some of the insights into mothers and women that *Sula* begins to adumbrate, and it does so all the more intensely for telling the story of a mother who is a slave. The economy of slavery circumscribes not only the process of individuation and subject formation, but also heightens and intensifies the experience of motherhood—of connection and separation. It raises questions about what it means to have a self, and to give that self away. It raises questions about what *family* means. If mothers cannot ''own'' their children or themselves, they experience separation and loss all the more intensely.

At the end of the novel, the doubly bereaved Sethe, who has lost her daughter twice, is nursed back to life by her other daughter Denver and by her lover, Paul D. To her self-effacing ''she was my best thing,'' he insists, ''You your best thing, Sethe. You are.'' Holding her fingers, he enables Sethe for the first time to see herself as subject, as mother and subject both: ''Me? Me?'' she says tentatively, and thus enables the mother's voice and subjectivity to emerge, allowing herself to question, at least for a moment, the hierarchy of motherhood and selfhood on which her life, until that moment, had rested. However, she can do so only in the context of another human bond; she can do so only because Paul D. is holding her hand. Is this a reversion to oedipal mediations and triangulations, or is it an affirmation of a subjectivity that, even when it is maternal, can only emerge in and through human interconnection? Sethe's story is ''not a story to pass on,'' yet this novel, more than Morrison's earlier works, does let the mother speak for herself. It allows her to recognize both her love for Beloved and her love for herself. With this novel. Toni Morrison has done more to shift the direction of her own work and of feminist theorizing. Along with writers like Grace Paley and Tillie Olsen, she has opened the space for maternal narrative in feminist fiction. That narrative is surely ''cruel enough to stop the blood.''

Marianne Hirsch. ''Maternal Narratives.'' In Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* (New York: Meridian, 1990), pp. 428–29

Throughout *Song of Solomon* There is the sense of the narrator talking to the reader, without, however, intruding into the territory of the novel. Like other storytellers, the speaker, with grace, makes an easy acknowledgment of the reader as hearer or listener; in this there is a kinship with both [Ernest] Gaines's and [Amos] Tutuola's works. Likewise, the narrative about character backgrounds does not simply sum them up, but has the import of the spoken recollection of the past, a quality of discourse. . . . Throughout the novel, various characters become audience-witnesses to the other characters' sayings and doings, and often, as here, the narrative rendering possesses the understated blues-humor of the last line.

The technique of ''multiple narrator and spectator'' figures in the plays and fiction of the African (Ghanaian) writer Efua Sutherland and probably has longer traces in our tradition. . . . Harold Courlander has noted instances of the theme of the Flying Africans, especially stories of slaves flying back to Africa. . . . This is another illustration of how the African American writer may turn to his own folkloric and oral traditions for surrealistic perceptions that one finds in the best of modern world literature. . . .

Morrison draws many more elements of oral tradition in *Son of Solomon*. Like Ellison's *Invisible Man*, it is a multistructure of oral traditional forms—in language, characterization, treatment of episodes, dramatic dialogue, repetition, and variation, the interplay of music and oratory in vocabulary, syntax, narrative vision, themes and motives, imagery and figurative forms—''texture, text, and context'' as Alan Dundes would say. And like the best folktale or dilemma story, *Song of Solomon* is indirectly didactic. Pilate provides the model for Milkman and for the audience of the possibility of wholeness in the world. The integration of oral and written literary traditions adds the same sense of wholeness to the text.

Gayl Jones. *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Pr., 1991), pp. 171–72, 177

Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination was first presented as a series of lectures at Harvard University. Here, Ms. Morrison invites literary scholars to carry on her generous task of making the black experience resonant for all Americans. Black characters in classic American novels, she maintains, have been as marginalized as their real-life counterparts. . . .

White American fiction, she states, has fabricated a black persona that is ''reflexive,'' a means for whites to contemplate their own terror and desire without having to acknowledge these feelings as their own. Such characters thus operate like vaudeville blackface, indicating ''the sycophancy of white identity.'' In texts by the most canonic of American writers, Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, for example, the death or oppression of a black character is followed by the apparition of a ''closed and unknowable white form.'' ''These images of blinding whiteness . . . seem to function as both antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness—a dark and abiding presence that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with fear and longing.''. . .

If no systematic study exists of the role black characters play in forming white identity, one could still see a good part of research in black studies and postcolonialism as working toward just this goal.

Wendy Steiner. *New York Times Book Review*. April 5, 1992, pp. 1, 29

Just as Morrison's *Beloved* was sparked by an actual historical event, so too is *Jazz*. Morrison first came across the story of the

star-crossed lovers when she read Camille Billops's manuscript, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, which contains photographs and commentary by Owen Dodson. Van Der Zee described to Camille Billops the curious origins of his photograph of a young woman's corpse. . . . As she lay dying, the young woman refused to identify the person who shot her. What manner of love was this? Morrison protected the seedling of this story line, nurturing it for over a decade, until it assumed the shape it has here, in *Jazz*. . . .

About Morrison's narrator: despite its revelation of a full and lyrical consciousness, despite its extensive ruminations about its character's consciousness, it remains indeterminate: it is *neither* male nor female; *neither* young nor old; *neither* rich nor poor. It is *both* and *neither*. But it is alive, alive with feelings and emotions, regard and scorn, blindnesses and insights about the human actors that conspire to produce this curious tale of love, betrayal, departure, reconciliation, and union: the murdered victim, after all, emerges as a conspirator in her own death. We will not weep for Dorcas; rather, we are left spellbound by the narrator's final aria, a *tour de force* of longing, of longing for a love that endures even its cruelest betrayal.

Henry L. Gates, Jr. *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (New York: Amistad, 1993), pp. 53–54

The latter chapters of part 2 [of *Beloved*] exemplify in Morrison's medium what jazz artists achieve in music. The opening lines of each section are convincing enough evidence that each speaker is pursuing her particular variation on the same theme: ''Beloved, she is my daughter. She mine'' (200); ''Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk'' (205); ''I am Beloved and she is mine'' (211, 214). Each voice continues in a vein which exploits the needs of the individual (instrument) and with a style that is highly individualized. Sethe's variation on the Beloved theme is one of explanation and expiation, a gathering together of the concerns that have compelled her throughout the novel. Denver's variation is the preservation of her self and her rediscovered sister, a process that reveals (again) her fear of Sethe and her idealized notion of her father. *Beloved*'s variations deal with loss and identification, and the rediscovery of a mother figure—the gaps in her language closing (as visually the words on the page draw closer together) as her resolve strengthens and her awareness increases. . . .

When we come to the text entrenched in our ''literary habit,'' *Beloved* may overwhelm us, appall us, even frighten us. When we come with an understanding of oral/musical traditions, the novel's capacity for frenetic movement, for harmony *and* discord, purity *and* excess, engages us in a (re)memorable performance.

Cheryl Hall. *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.*. Spring, 1994, pp. 94–95

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MORTON, Frederic (1924–)

Mr. Morton has not tried [in *The Hound*] to make his hero sympathetic. He gives us instead a pitilessly frank picture, searchingly delineated and perfectly set into the ornately glitter frame of the Viennese background. . . . The novel's narrative style may seem over elaborate at times, even self-consciously labored. But there is no denying the vigor and quick-silver beauty of the prose. More than that, the rather precious quality, the artificially brittle atmosphere that rises like a vapor from these pages, is the last breath of a dying way of life.

Andrea Parke. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 23, 1947. p. 33

Frederic Morton, whose new novel, *Asphalt and Desire*, should win deserved popularity, is quite a phenomenon. Born in Vienna twenty-seven years ago he went to England after the Anschluss and arrived in America in 1940 when he was fifteen. Today he not only writes English of quality and vividness (few other European-born writers have managed this switch), but seems to have caught something of the authentic New York tempo in his literary heartbeat.

To cap the virtuosity in his . . . novel, Mr. Morton tells his story through the thoughts and emotions of a girl—a Jewish girl, just graduated from Hunter College, who has a brother at Cornell and parents who run a drugstore in the Bronx. . . . But the triumph of the story is the portrayal of the parents—still in style European despite their many years in America. . . . Not often in fiction has this atmosphere of love-hate been more warmly conveyed—or more vivaciously.

Asphalt and Desire is, indeed, quite hilarious in places; and there perhaps the Viennese in Mr. Morton serves him well, adding a whiff of boulevard comedy to the sharper humors of his adopted city, and infusing enough compassion to take the sting out of the prevalent acid. He has certainly written a novel that is an achievement in itself as well as full of promise for future performance.

James Hilton. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. March 2, 1952. p. 3

Readers of his earlier novel *Asphalt and Desire* will know that Frederic Morton writes a smooth, clever prose, out of which there bursts only occasionally a tender or bitter note of tragedy. For the most part his sophistication, his disengagement from anything more than a nod of pity toward his assembled passengers [in *The Witching Ship*] detaches his readers, too, and leaves them with the hollow suspicion that if humanity is largely the sum of its appetites, there is no need to fret when it meets adversity. . . .

Doom itself plays what is probably the major role in the story. It is omnipresent in the storm; in the news of Holland's fall which puts the ship in a state of emergency; in the discovery of a Nazi

agent among the passengers; in the boarding of the Syngdam by officers of a German submarine; above all, in the fears for the future that grip nearly every heart. Indeed Mr. Morton so successfully conjures up the figure of doom that the reader feels a considerable let-down, although admittedly also relief, when the Syngdam reaches New York.

Virgilia Peterson. *New York Times Book Section*. Jan. 24, 1960. p. 40

Mr. Morton's aim in the volume dedicated to this unique family [*The Rothschilds*] is not to relate the economic history of their rise and their exercise of financial might. . . . Instead, while he gives enough broad detail for the general reader to understand how the fortune was won and employed, his main purpose is to dramatize the personal flesh-and-blood reality of the myth known to the world as ''Rothschild.'' Anecdotes abound—gaudy, gripping and sometimes pathetic. The whole makes a tale which, once begun, is hard to lay aside.

Marvin Lowenthal. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Feb. 18, 1962. p. 7

To his full-length portrait of the incredible Rothschild family, the first in more than twenty years, Frederic Morton has brought the insights of a novelist and the special skills of a magazine writer. The result is a group biography which may lack the substance to please serious readers, but which is so vivid, witty, and perceptive that it is certain to satisfy everyone else.

In his Preface, Mr. Morton remarks accurately that it would take a team of scholars years to dredge from the archives the information required to chronicle the affairs of the House of Rothschild in all their technical detail. Only a writer who happened to be a historian and a financial expert as well could hope to produce anything approaching a definitive biography. As the author of four excellent novels, Mr. Morton quite naturally chooses to write about the ''human'' side of the Rothschild story, seeking to make the myth become reality in flesh-and-blood terms.

John Tebbel. *Saturday Review*. Feb. 24, 1962. p. 40

[*The Schatten Affair*] is one of the most entertaining novels I have read in years. Dry and ironic, it somehow manages to be handsomely romantic in the grand style. Morton's career as a novelist seems to have been waiting in the wings, as it were. . . . With *The Schatten Affair*, he makes an authentic bid for the attention of the serious fiction reader, as well as for the one who likes nothing more than to lose himself utterly, in a hypnotic tale. . . .

When the book ends, we see that Morton has constructed an ingenious triptych. The central panel shows us our own time—brilliant snapshots of present-day Berlin, commercial to the point of obsession, cynical and spiritually dead. . . . One of the two flanking panels is the Nazi past, the other one, the Schatten past. The three meet in Spey's final discovery that ''everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned.'' . . .The barbarians are, as always, in the ascendancy.

Daniel Stern. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 29, 1965. pp. 4, 32–3

Frederic Morton's *The Schatten Affair* . . . gets into trouble when the plot begins to blot out the landscape, but that can be safely ignored; the book is high entertainment, all about a sophisticated American public relations man who becomes entangled with the neo-Gothic denizens of an estate when he tries to use them to organize a brilliant opening for his employer's grand hotel in Berlin. If Morton cannot handle comic Gothic as well as his superbly assured manner would indicate, he can be a splendid guide when his hero is frankly a traveler. . . . This cool elegance is just right for catching the seediness of the Schatten estate, the iron efficiency of the lady who runs the tourist bureau, the exciting and enervating quality of ''the Western sideshow set in the Eastern Apocalypse.'' For those who like their fiction new, neat, elegant, and within civilized limits, Morton is a writer to read and watch.

Roger Sale. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1966. p. 126

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MUKHERJEE, Bharati (1942–)

Mukherjee's two novels, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1973) and *Wife* (1976) reflect a world which refuses to hold together both at the individual and the cultural level. They are novels of and about isolation. Though peopled with innumerable characters, the protagonists do not relate to the others and are preoccupied in exploring the nature of their own identities. The two novels may appear to be similar at first reading, or as M. Sivaramakrishna views them, the second a continuation of the first, but it is unfair to treat them as such for the texture of both the novels is very different. Again when one begins to think in terms of disintegration and decay, it is possible to find parallels in the work of Conrad and other literary figures of the contemporary world, but that too would be bypassing the main concerns of the novels.

The question then arises: how does one approach these novels? How do the characters develop and what is the significance of the structure of the narrative? What kind of a sensibility do they express? Are they as Sivaramakrishna views them ''explorations of the kind of sensibility which is inarticulate not because language fails but because the emotions are basically intractable to communication''? Perhaps, but they are more than that for these voiceless emotions arise out of a questioning of cultural issues, and the journeys which Tara (*The Tiger's Daughter*) and Dimple (*Wife*) undertake are journeys at a cultural level. Mukherjee's novels (like those of Ruth Jhabvala), are representative of the expatriate sensibility. This alone offers an understanding of the ambivalence present not only in the psychology of the protagonists but also that of the author; this helps us understand the satiric interludes, the

ironic juxtapositions, the shifting point of view and also the final disintegration.

It is not easy to define the expatriate sensibility for it can be variously defined. Does it imply a total rejection or a ruthless questioning of tradition or a love/hate relationship with the native heritage? It would be differently expressed and fused in the texture of thought in each individual work. . . . The sense of time, as it exists in Mukherjee's novels, is important for the understanding of Dimple's life. The present and the past do not interact in *Wife*. In *The Tiger's Daughter* they do interact but the interaction is nonproductive. Again there is the significance of the authorial point of view: the heroines are the focus and both the episodes and the characters are seen through their responses and relationships. There is a questioning of the Indian situation, of how do the post-independence generations relate to their own country, how do they get past the colonial experience, and free themselves from the Western attraction. For both Tara and Dimple, however, there seems to be no way out: the distance they have covered cannot be retraced. They are immigrants both in place and mind, theirs is the foreignness of the spirit.

Jasbir Jain. *Journal of Indian Writing in English*. 13:2, 1985, pp. 12–13, 17–18

Bharati Mukherjee's third volume of fiction is finally out, a decade after the second novel: *The Tiger's Daughter* was published . . . in 1972 and *Wife*. . . in 1975, both about to be reissued by Penguin. And yes, it is different from the first two. It is not just that it is a volume of short stories: with *Darkness*, Bharati Mukherjee comes to terms with North America. . . .

The title of the volume echoes Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, drawing our attention to violence at the heart of human affairs. ''The Father'' is a successful Indian businessman in Detroit who discovers that his very Americanized daughter, in her late twenties, is pregnant. He is pleased to think he is modern enough to come to terms with it and tries to persuade his wife to accept it. But when he discovers there is no father, that his daughter wanted to be an unmarried mother because no man was fit enough, his mind snaps: he beats her up and has to be restrained by his wife. This act of violence may be too sudden for the reader to take—I feel there has not been enough of a building-up and a letting-down. But then the violence is the key to a tapestry-like painting needing to be deciphered. Mukherjee herself provides us with clues. In ''Saints,'' ''Wayne holds Mom's head against dusty glass, *behind which an emperor in Moghul battledress is leading his army out of the capital*'' (my emphasis). The last story in the volume is a description of the painting. The five-page work describes the Begum's wife: ''In her capacious chamber the Begum waits, perhaps for death from the serving-girl, for ravishing, or merely the curtain of fire from the setting sun.'' We see the European adventurer, the Portuguese priests who have religious paintings for him: ''They want to trick the emperor into kissing Christ who on each huge somber canvas is a white, healthy baby. The giant figures Hindu icons hidden in the hills.'' The painting is about the violence of history, feudal oppression, patriarchal oppression, colonialist adventurers, European efforts to get a foothold on the wealthy East. We should not, then, be surprised at the violence at Bangladesh nearly 400 years later. . . .

At the end of ''Courtly Vision,'' we realize that the painting is hanging on a wall in an art gallery somewhere in the U.S., perhaps in New York City, waiting to be bought for a mere 750 dollars. Within ''Courtly Vision,'' there is a further clue to Bharati Mukherjee's writing:

> Give me total vision, commands the emperor. His voice hisses above the hoarse calls of the camels. You, Basawan, who can paint my Begum on a grain of rice, see what you can do with the infinite vistas the size of my opened hand. Hide nothing from me, my co-wanderer. Tell me how my new capital will fail, will turn to dust and these marbled terraces be home to jackals and infidels. Tell me who to fear and who to kill but tell it to me in a way that makes me smile. Transport me through dense fort walls and stone grilles and into the hearts of men.

This is what the literary artist has done: she has penetrated below the surface, found the reality, and told the truth on several grains of rice. The leader wanted to be told the truth, even the bad news. But Bharati Mukherjee does not only focus on the bad news. She also celebrates life, the creative possibilities contained within people, the ability to give up fixed worlds, to break out of cages and relate to a complex, multicultural world. The painting is a two-dimensional cage. The writer-artist frees the people from two-dimensionalism, the writer-artist sees the meaning and the potential.

Peter Nazareth. *Canadian Literature*. 110, 1986, pp. 184, 189–90

Bharati Mukherjee can take her place among the best South Asian and American writers of today. Her work ranges from very good to dazzling. Her handling of her subject, of what she calls ''the pain and absurdity of art and exile . . .exile among the former colonizers: the tolerant incomprehensions of hosts, the absolute impossibility of ever having a home, *desh*. . . .'' (epilogue to *Days and Nights in Calcutta*) is uncomprisingly honest and often deeply painful. . . .

Days and Nights in Calcutta (1977), coauthored by Bharati Mukherjee and her husband Clark Blaise, consists of two distinct parts. There are two narrative, in some ways two philosophical essays, based on selected experiences and episodes that took place during an extended visit to India (most of it in Calcutta) in the early 1970s. It is in this book that Mukherjee describes the difficulties of being a South Asian writer in Canada and describes the constant search by many immigrants and expatriates for a secure and familiar place. She continues and develops this discussion in the introduction to her brilliantly written, chilling collection of short stories, *Darkness* (1985).

Her first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), portrays Tara Banerjee Cartwright, a Western-educated, well-to-do Bengali woman married to an American. Tara's petulance and constant nervousness regarding her role as the Bengali wife of an American visiting her family in Calcutta, overshadows her well-intentioned efforts to understand her world of diverse cultures. . . .

Tara . . . is caught in the physical violence of Calcutta as she tries to untangle the confusion of different cultures. Dimples [in *Wife*] loses her sanity when faced with a culture she doesn't comprehend and that refuses to make room for her. Both are lonely, isolated women and their sense of loss is translated and re-created in the lives of the more gutsy, but almost bizarre characters who appear in *Darkness*. Some of us may feel quite uncomfortable around Mukherjee's characters. We look around us and we see

fellow South Asian immigrants at social gatherings, special grocery and sari stores, and even professional conferences. And we say, ''No, come on. . . who here would kill her husband as he eats his cereal? And who would be so silly as to be caught in the midst of a political confrontation? Who would brutally attack his unmarried daughter, not because she is pregnant, but because she is pregnant through artificial insemination? This is only well-written South Asian American gothic. After all, aren't all South Asian Americans successful citizens of America with periodic attacks of anxiety regarding their children's cultural identity?'' Yet we know that in her own imitable fashion, Mukherjee has taken her own fears and struggles, as well as the fears and struggles of many among us who have remained without a voice to speak of the immigrant experience, and presented some of the more violent and grotesque aspects of cultural collisions.

Roshni Rustomji-Kerns. *Massachusetts Review*. 29, 1988, pp. 656–59

Mukherjee's writing career began in 1971, with *The Tiger's Daughter*, and her seventh book *Jasmine* was published in 1990. Her popularity shot up when her second book *The Middleman and Other Stories* bagged the 1988 National Book Critics Award in America. This collection seeks to dramatize the ''immigration experience'' in America. In a recent interview, Mukherjee has clearly stated her aim in her writings:

> We immigrants have fascinating tales to relate. Many of us have lived in newly independent or emerging countries. . . when we uproot overselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must absorb 200 years of American history and learn to adapt to American society. . . . I attempt to illustrate this in my novels and short stories. My aim is to expose Americans to the energetic voices of new settlers in this country.

In fact, Mukherjee had to come to terms with her own identity in an alien land, caught as she was between two conflicting cultures. Also, she had to contend with racial discrimination during the years she spent in Canada, precisely between 1972 and 1980. She managed to overcome both the crises and this brought in her a sense of elation and confidence.

R.K. Dhawar. *Indian Women Novelists* (New Delhi: Prestige, 1991), p.23

In an era where air travel has made the distant close, the remote accessible, and rich and poor mobile, the migration of an underclass to more privileged countries is a commonplace. Individual movements across national and ethnic boundaries, and the consequences borne by their participants, comprise the core of Bharati Mukherjee's stories. With few exceptions, the motley, restive group of refugees, emigrants, fugitives, mercenaries, professionals, and others populate the territories explored by three novels and two collections of short stories. Without exception, the international and contemporaneous perspectives of her work are readily perceived.

Her characters are moving, about to move, recently moved or already moved. Mostly immigrants who seek a better life in the United States and Canada or would be emigrants dreaming of futures in the West from homes in less developed Asian countries, their odysseys, together with their physical and emotional passion for survival in alien quarters, are the stuff of Mukherjee's narratives. She scours the complex multicultural worlds of her foreigners, the new North Americans, to portray their displacement and adaptation, those of whom she speaks in her article on immigrant writing: ''They have all shed past lives and languages, and have traveled half the world in every direction to come here and begin again.'' Mukherjee's immigrants may be divided into those whose experience of the discontinuities of displacement are such that they either cannot re-place their reality or develop a tragically misplaced one and those, who in their determination to see America as their home, exuberantly will themselves to become Americans over and above their original nationalities. . . .

''Voice'' . . . has a special place in Mukherjee's aesthetics. ''To me there are no Indian themes, American themes or English themes. What I'm trying to produce is a voice perhaps.'' Passionate and intense, riveting, urgent, and incisive at its best—at its worst, Mukherjee's voice is too taut and brittle to sustain credibility. Notwithstanding the importance she places on voice and the consequent belittlement of thematic identity, Mukherjee does see herself today as an American writer influenced and inspired by the melting pot of her adoptive country. . . .

In Mukherjee's fiction, a woman's sexual involvement often functions as a measure of detachment from native mores and, correspondingly, of her assimilation and Americanization. Sexual openness is seen as part of the freedom from tradition America offers. Although Leelah, narrator of ''Hindus,'' points to the inescapable obstacle posed by the past in the process of assimilation in her remark, ''No matter how passionately we link our bodies with our new countries, we never escape the early days,'' the seduction exercised by a more open and anarchic environment and the liberation of sensibility, if only partial at times, are particularly evident in Mukherjee's women. But with their more conservative backgrounds, South Asian men and women react in different ways: women, by expressing their sexual needs more candidly; men, by believing their countrywomen are freer in America than in their native land or are more uninhibited and self-sufficient than they have been brought up to be. . . .

For Mukherjee, ''there are people born to be Americans. By American I mean an intensity of spirit and a quality of desire. I feel American in a very fundamental way, whether Americans see me that way or not.'' In the challenges posed by America to her expatriates and immigrants, Mukherjee shows that, inevitably, it is America that is affecting them in varied ways; so far only in a few stories is immigration handled from the mainstream culture's point of view. Her abundant imagination brings the tensions and forces within the multicultural and multiethnic spheres of her new Americans to vivid life. Mukherjee recreates their world—more often than not relegated to marginal status by mainstream North America—throbbing, exuberant, and dynamic with the energy and passions of ''aliens'' determined to survive, succeed, and ultimately, belong.

Liew Geok-Leong. In Robert L. Ross, ed. *International Literature in English: Essays on the Major Writers* (New York: Garland, 1991), pp. 488, 494–95, 498

Her later works, comprising the novel *Jasmine* (1989) and the stories in *Darkness* (1985) and *The Middleman* (winner of the 1988 National Book Award), are her most rewarding. Almost all of them

directly or indirectly deal with the disconcerting experience of migrating to North America. Although her first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972), is set in India, its protagonist, is a passive young Bengali wife of an American, and it portrays her Chekhovian disillusion with India during a family visit. Mukherjee's second novel, *Wife* (1975), describes a weak-minded Bengali woman who migrates to New York with her engineer husband in search of a better life; but her sensibilities become so confounded by her changing cultural roles, the insidious television factitiousness, and the tensions of feminism that, ironically, she goes mad and kills her husband.

Many of Mukherjee's later works expatiate upon this South Asian immigrant experience in North America, much of which is painful. Especially painful is the topic of racism; indeed, one possible reading of the title of her anthology *Darkness* is as a reference to racial prejudice, which is, after all, a darkness of the mind toward the darkness of another person's skin. Those works set in Canada, however, are more bitter than those set in the United States, especially on the topic of racism. . . .

Mukherjee's U.S. stories may be intended to be kinder and gentler than her Canadian ones, but she is aware that America is ''violent, mindlessly macho, conformist, lawless. . . . No dark-skinned person has the right to feel comfortable inside American history. Yet I do.'' And she prefers America's ''melting pot,'' girded by its ''human rights laws,'' to Canada's discrete ''mosaic.''. . .

In Mukherjee's fictions of the South Asian experience in North America, especially in the United States, a few may actually be optimistic, though not painless. The *Middleman* tale ''A Wife's Story,'' for instance, tells the positive variant of the novel *Wife:* the short story's protagonist is an Indian woman who absents herself from her husband to do graduate study in New York, and although she encounters racial prejudice and sees her women friends being sexually exploited, she is able through her liberating camaraderie with both men and women to discover in herself a power, confidence, and sexuality which she did not realize she was capable of. But it is Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* (1989) that contains her most optimistic depiction of the South Asian experience in North America. . . .

As Mukherjee has explored her immigrant world, her scope and language have evolved appreciably. Her early works are limited to the minds of young women, sensitive, educated, middle class. In her recent works, she empowers herself to appropriate the mentalities of men as well, of whites, of soldiers of fortune. Her narrative voices also have increased many fold. . . .

Both Naipaul and Mukherjee, one providing an example that the other has made into many, have written ironical and cautionary fictions about the uneasy passage of Asian Indians to participate in the American dream. Mukherjee evinces a somewhat more positive view than Naipaul of immigrant life in the United States, glimpsing occasionally the redeeming possibilities of love and the self-affirming opportunities for the pursuit of happiness—though neither love nor happiness is ever obtained without pain or without a price. More often, however, the American Dream is found to be meretricious, easily becoming a nightmare of violence, prejudice, and exploitation; sometimes the dreamer discovers that in dreams begin responsibilities of self-defining of which he or she is incapable. Frequently, therefore, the immigrant only ends up being exploited and victimized, deracinated and *dépaysé*, neither here nor there.

C.L. Chua. *Reworlding: The Literature of the Indian Diaspora* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992), pp. 54–57, 60

Focusing on immigrant characters from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, Mukherjee does not shy away from the enormous cultural and religious diversity represented by those groups; yet she underscores challenges common to all these immigrants. Her story ''Hindus,'' for example, uses language as a metaphor for an imposed sense of ''otherness.'' In the bright urbane worlds of Toronto and New York some people carelessly confuse Hindi with Hindu. Leela, a Bengali Brahmin, is alert to such insults, intended or unintended. She begins to see language as a new caste system when, in an art dealer's office, she is complimented for knowing, ''Hindu,'' which is ''such a hard language.'' Indeed. This dismissive attitude allows some people in the dominant culture to adopt a casual manner disrespectful of both a language and a religion. Leela knows what these slights mean; she says, ''No matter what language I speak it will come out slightly foreign, no matter how perfectly I mouth it. There's whole world of us now, speaking Hindu.''

This forbidding sense that words can imprison as well as release is a keystone for writers. Mukherjee examines these ''new pioneers,'' . . . as she calls them, in their urban settings. As always in immigrant literature, these settings are more than decorative features; rather, these cityscapes underscore the isolation which surrounds the characters. Within the canyons of Toronto and New York, their yearning to acculturate pushes up against the desire to embrace cultural ghosts of the lost homeland. In the story ''Nostalgia,'' for example, Dr. Manny Patel is bothered by this longing for the old land and the old ways. He visits an ethnic neighborhood inside the city; he parks his Porsche, a gleaming symbol of his successful transition to the New World, and wanders into the ''little India'' of the Sari Palace and the New Taj Mahal, where thoroughly acclimated citizens can purchase bhindi and cardamom, dal and marsala tea. He finds there as well an experienced team of hustlers who sexually entice him, then blackmail him. . . .

Canada—indeed all of North America—is being redefined and enriched by this [multicultural] movement. As always in history, immigration alters national identity, and this is nowhere truer than here. [Joy] Kogawa and Mukherjee insist that we hold in mind one small geographic fact: this is still the fabled ''New World,'' and many new explorers are still coming to discover it. Finally, these new voices issue lyric, powerful warnings that plurality without unity may well be as bad as unity without diversity.

Thus *Darkness* and *Obasan* are more than testaments to the ongoing literary renaissance in Canada; they are beautiful textbooks that remind us to appreciate differences as well as similarities. How old citizens and culture groups welcome the ''new pioneers'' will say essential—and we hope eloquent—things about the New World's ethical development.

B.A. St. Andrews. *World Literature Today*. 66, 1992, 56–58

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MUMFORD, Lewis (1895–1990)

Mr Lewis Mumford has systematically exposed the degradation of the American scene as revealed by the architectural march from the simple beauty of Puritan communism to the monstrous ugliness of the contemporary city. *Sticks and Stones* is a book of first importance, not only by reason of its historical truth, but also because of its intelligent blending of aesthetics and humanism. In reading these essays, I was continually impressed by the author's perceptive balance: the fact that a young Utopian like Mr Mumford should have written with such charm and hopefulness while presenting the most sordid and bombastic phases of our civilization, is, I take it, indicative of his faith in the future.

Thomas Craven. *Dial*. Feb., 1925. p. 153

The Story of Utopia, published in 1922, expresses the post-war disillusion with the present, looks with hope into the future, and yet, significantly, is in the main a history of the utopias of the past, from Plato's *Republic* onward. The author distinguishes two types: utopias of escape or compensation, and utopias of reconstruction. . . . In his next two books Mr. Mumford, instead of working out a fundamental programme, studied the conditions of Utopia in a definite region and time of history—America and her brief past. In the first, *Sticks and Stones* (1924), he found an index of American life in our architecture; in the second, *The Golden Day* (1926), in our imaginative literature and philosophy. . . . Like Van Wyck Brooks, Mr. Mumford has written a fresh and thoughtful study in literary history viewed against a background of general history. Like Mr. Brooks, and unlike the usual academic historian, he is always thinking of the future, even though he says little about it till he reaches his ''Envoi.'' And here his vision, like Mr. Brooks's, wavers uneasily between a deterministic respect for *forces* and a pioneering zest for free *adventure*.

Norman Foerster. *Toward Standards* (Farrar and Rinehart). 1930. pp. 119–25

We no longer trust mechanical governors and we are turning to the electric clock with its fewer cogs and its internal unchanging frequencies. Mr. Mumford suggests that the next phase will be biotechnic and that we shall allow the biological processes to set the pace and ring the bells again.

I have overdone the clock-time theme from Mr. Mumford's point of view. He has written a factual book [*Technics and Civilization*] letting the phosphorescent events and things tell their own story. The trouble with this method is that the same facts would tell many stories if Mr. Mumford would let them do so. It is for this reason that he gets caught in the arms of his windmill and in the end the windiness of his sociological doctrines snatches him up and leaves him and us in a dizzy whirl.

Scott Buchanan. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. July, 1934. p. 449

This book, it seems to me, is chiefly a personal essay—a confession by a significant man. You will find, here, excellent pages on the ''romanticism'' of the pioneer, on the genius of Emerson, on the limitations of Dewey and Santayana. You will find other pages less adequate: as the discussions of Whitman, Melville, Poe and Dreiser. What interests me most in *The Golden Day* is not its assemblage of interpretations, but its focus.

For Mr. Mumford the great crime of civilization has been the progressive mechanization of life, which has degraded man instead of contributing to his emancipation, his leisure, and means of enjoyment. The machine was not used to satisfy human desires; it became an object of idolatrous worship, with the standards of mechanical efficiency and worldly success set up as the ideal and ultimate religion. Now this searching and bitter indictment of industrialism springs from no ungirdled sentimentality. Perhaps no modern writer dealing with the subject has been as well-grounded and thorough and discerning in his study of industrial history and its relations to the culture of a people. Mr. Mumford speaks largely of what he knows. The machine, he argues with convincing logic, is a tool, not a good. Men do not live to work; work, in its true and liberating sense, should give joy and enrich the whole personality.

Charles Glicksberg. *Sewanee Review*. Jan.–March, 1937. pp. 55–6

The literary career of this extraordinary man has been marked by a series of intuitions which in turn have led him to study the actual fact in order to justify the intuition. A book like *Sticks and Stones* (1924) was, in an unfavorable sense, a collection of brilliant guesses. Mr. Mumford felt the need for a study of the interaction of civilization and architecture in the United States, and set himself to study it with a blithe and fine ignorance of the difficulties of the subject. The result was a book which is, in all probability, wrong in paragraph after paragraph, but which, in its totality, was and is one of the most illuminating analyses of culture in the republic since Bryce or De Tocqueville. The illumination comes from a certain fearlessness of imaginative insight—a capacity, reminiscent of Blake, to see the transient and accepted fact in the new and strange light of eternity. . . . Latterly Mr. Mumford has become a touch more sociological and a touch less esthetic. He is, in truth, by way of becoming a specialist on the culture of cities. It is a transformation at once to be hailed and to be deplored.

Howard Mumford Jones. *North American Review*. Autumn, 1938. pp. 170–1

In one of the many encirclements of ideas contrived within the comparatively short space of his new book [*Men Must Act*], Lewis Mumford speaks of the intellectual culture of our time as too remote from the masses to serve them satisfactorily. It is the special triumph of the program which he sets forth that it meets and uses deeply rooted popular forces, and that its terms can be promptly understood. *Men Must Act* is as direct as a good broadside. With immediacy and restrained eloquence, indeed with the effect of the spoken word, it belongs in the great pamphleteering tradition. It will sharpen wits and vocabularies, or provide trenchant vocabularies when these are missing. Yet it is not merely a tract for the times. It deals with permanent values. It defines a course of action and the enduring groundwork for that course; and it touches, with unerring clairvoyance, essential popular impulses and beliefs in the present crisis.

Constance Rourke. *The Nation*. Feb. 18, 1939. p. 206

It should be noted at once that by ''cultural values'' Mr. Lewis Mumford does not at all mean esthetic values; he means goals for the good life. . . . This quest for values began in New York City in 1895; it was fostered by walks around the city with his grandfather; it was directed towards sociology through contact with the writings of the late Sir Patrick Geddes, encountered while taking evening courses at C.C.N.Y.; after service in the Navy during the last war (with Plato and Emerson as bunk-mates), it led to a career of intense study, travel, editing and, always, more study; it directed the affirmation in his first book, *The Story of Utopias*, that ''there is no escaping the problem of ends and the problem of ends, if I may be permitted a pun, belongs at the beginning''; it underlies his belief that ''the basic standards of the past century were false'' and is the catalyst of the eloquent prose that has indicted in luminous language the vacuity and triviality of much of modern living as ''an opulence of carefully packaged emptiness''; it is the driving force of his strenuous efforts to shape the world to the heart's desire.

Edward Duff. *Commonweal*. Oct. 30, 1942. p. 38

Mumford's conception of society as an organism provides the rationale for his ideas of social reform. Social problems are viewed as analogous to physical and/or mental illness. A social disease is the result of the malfunctioning of a member. If a part is out of gear, the whole is affected. The classes and social groups are all functions of one another. Any function that is working anarchistically is destroying social integration. It focuses the problem of integration. The concept of the reform flowing from these assumptions is that of adaptation. Adaptation is the typical reformist's concept of social change. Society, the social and economic structure of society, is given. There must be adaptation to that which is given. . . . Now, Mumford goes a step further in confusion. Now, we must begin making ourselves ''organic'' in order to make society ''organic.'' And this means we must ''think'' like Mumford.

James T. Farrell. *The League of Frightened Philistines* (Vanguard). 1945. pp. 122–3

As his vision developed, the modern crisis has darkened; and the sense of urgency increasingly warms the words of the man who is, I believe, the most lucid and devoted intelligence of our country. . . .

When Mumford defines religion as ''a sphere beyond knowledge and certainty,'' he reveals his essential misunderstanding. In the true religious mind (which has always been rare), knowledge of God (formed of course by the specific culture) is more certain than knowledge of one's body or of the chair one sits in.

This basic misapprehension vitiates Mumford's view of ''the whole and balanced man.'' Mumford describes the qualities of this man on the basis of society's needs as he sees them; not as the result of a structure within the person which must fulfill those needs.

Thus, finally, his version is not methodological but romantic. The true person must be structured precisely by the immediate knowledge which Mumford denies. . . . Lewis Mumford, I feel, is another Moses who leads to and sees the promised land, and cannot reach it. But as a diagnosis and intelligent pointing of the way, his book [*The Conduct of Life*] has great value. And passion makes it eloquent good reading.

Waldo Frank. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 22, 1951. pp. 11–12

Mumford's developing ideas have followed a consistent line from the outward to the inward aspects of civilization: first the city and the machine, to which he has devoted two large books, the physical body of society; then the soul. Meanwhile, *Technics and Civilization* and *The Culture of Cities* were accompanied by *City Development, Sticks and Stones*, and other studies of architecture and urban planning, in all of which he pursued the prophetic tradition of Morris and Ruskin and the great town-planner, Sir Patrick Geddes. A professed disciple of the versatile Geddes and his ''Outlook Tower'' in Edinburgh, Mumford shared Ruskin's view that architecture has a social and ethical as well as a technical side, regarding it as more than a matter of construction, or even of beautiful construction, and as touching on all the major human interests. . . . He taught his readers for the first time to look at their churches and public buildings, their banks, dams, factories, and jails as works of art, or to ask why they could not be so described.

Van Wyck Brooks. *Harper's Magazine*. June, 1952. pp. 47–9

More serious issues are raised [in *The City in History*] by Mr. Mumford's characteristic missionary spirit. Though he makes an obvious effort to be scrupulously fair as well as accurate and exhaustive, he writes from beginning to end as a frank, unabashed evangelist, now fired by a desperate sense of urgency. Hence his frequent vigor and eloquence, and also his frequent repetitiousness and habitual overstatement; he is not given to subtlety or ironic reserve, any risk of the reader's missing his point. And though his cause is humane, his fervor generous, his sense of urgency certainly justified, they make for a lopsided history, especially of our own civilization. . . . The very point of his insistence on all the abuses of our growing power is that we can and must do something about them. In my judgment, his animadversions are considerably more than half-truths, and however over-insistent, are still that part of the truth that most needs to be said.

Herbert J. Muller. *The Nation*. July 29, 1961. p. 64

The impression he gave in *The Golden Day* as in many of his historical studies was of too little perseverance, of an intellectual curiosity too promptly satisfied; but true as this may have been in various degrees, Mumford seems also to have been driven to seek the unity in history by all the disunities of his own spirit, his culture, his civilization. He wanted very badly, it appeared, to get history under control. . . . To trace lines of continuity in certain of the humane and scientific areas of culture and to decide what further social uses could now be made of them—that was the double task Mumford had in effect set for himself.

David Weimer. *New England Quarterly*. June, 1963. pp. 190–1

. . . Mumford is sometimes repetitious and not infrequently pontifical. . . . But this [*The Myth of the Machine*] is the work of an orchestral stylist, of a rich and easy mind, powerful in knowledge, sensitive in inquiry, and purposeful. We hear a great deal these days about physics and higher mathematics as the avenue to—if not the residence of—20th-century philosophy. But social and cultural anthropology, in the hands of such writers as [Loren] Eiseley, Miss

[Jacquetta] Hawkes and Mumford, by demythologizing the past, by anatomizing its truths, makes at least an equivalent contribution. If it is a truism that the future depends on the past, then at least it has never been more true. A book such as Mumford's gives any reader a sense of heritage that dwarfs any merely ethnic or national tradition and provides—both in terms of the possible and the impossible—some clues to a rationale.

Mumford does not wallow in facile humanism. He waves no technicolor banners about man's unconquerable spirit and eventual triumph. But he knows that human history is, among other things, wonderful; and that, if it ends in self-annihilation, this fact in itself will not disprove the wonders. And since he knows exactly how much *Homo sapiens* has accomplished and has failed to accomplish, he is awestruck, loving and ironical.

Stanley Kauffmann. *New Republic*. April 29, 1967. p. 30

Lewis Mumford sees *The Pentagon of Power* as his last book, the culmination of a life's work of criticism and prophecy: it is a critique of our civilization through an extended historical analysis deep in conception and popular in exposition. As such it demands respect; and the critical question is whether its inevitable shortcomings vitiate its message. . . . Professor Mumford rightly takes credit for a very considerable achievement. This is to have demonstrated, by a multitude of arguments and examples, that our science and technology are made by man, the product of human presuppositions and choices. We can have a different sort of technology, serving a better sort of society, if we but will it and master its achievement.

In his attempt to find a positive unifying theme for the provision of a simple moral, Professor Mumford may well have neglected the deeper significance of his materials. The confluence of various unpleasant things described as Megamachine is likely to be temporary; and its replacement will doubtless include other things pleasant and unpleasant. History is not a curve that measures goodness as a function of time: nor is it a cosmic drama in which the last act is now beginning. As materials for an appreciation of the deeper dialectic of history, where wonder and tragedy are intermixed, where the liberation of one generation is the oppression of the next, Professor Mumford's anecdotes and insights, extending to science and its ideologies, are undeniably rich and suggestive.

TLS: The Times Literary Supplement. July 9, 1971. p. 795

[*Interpretations and Forecasts*: 1922–1972] is hardly the occasion for a full assessment of Mumford's achievement; we need, as I have said, the companion volume on cities. But I know few in the next generations who combined the grace, the breadth of inquiry, the urgent yet urbane disinterestedness that one finds in Mumford, in [Edmund] Wilson, in [Walter] Lippmann, in [V.L.] Parrington, although none of these figures, I think, conveys either the rich sense of individual personality or the enduring wisdom that one finds in the greatest English prose writers of the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. It may be too soon to judge what Mumford and the others have left us. They have no heirs of anything like their stature, and few even want to celebrate their virtues. . . .

One way of praising the early work of Lewis Mumford is to say that as he leaps across the apparent boundaries offered by countries and centuries and subjects, he also confronts each person, book, and event as something fresh, by itself, not fodder for generalization, though perhaps an occasion to celebrate the possibilities of generalizing. . . . [R. Buckminster] Fuller, like the later Mumford, seeks not just generalization but masterful generalization. Both are decent, on the side of life, but both are imperial, commanding. One can admire them, and live at the heart of empire too, and yet not necessarily want to join in the chorus.

Roger Sale. *New York Review of Books*. Feb. 7, 1974. pp. 30, 32

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N

NABOKOV, Vladimir (1899–1977)

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight is the life story of a fictitious English novelist of note; a story told by his half-brother, and told with a brilliancy, a delicacy and a grave and exquisitely venomous humor which make it a delight to read. . . . The book follows Sebastian with poetic passion through his childhood in Russia, his education at Oxford, his love-affairs, his literary career. To state that the facts of Sebastian Knight's life seem oddly similar to those of Vladimir Nabokov's, and that it might be possible to conceive of this book as a private individual's expose of his public self, would be simplifying a matter which implies, but scarcely lends itself to, simplification. It is a far profounder and more symbolic issue which brings us to the startling and dramatic end.

In a note which accompanies the book, James Laughlin tells us that Nabokov has twenty volumes to his credit; and with that admirable determination to give us the artist complete, Laughlin adds that New Directions will publish the other volumes as soon as they can be done into English. It would therefore scarcely suggest limitation in the nature of the present work itself if we should judge this single book as a fragment of a still undistinguishable whole.

Kay Boyle. *New Republic*. Jan. 26, 1942. p. 124

I suppose it is Mr. Nabokov's elaborate prose method that persuades his publishers that *Bend Sinister* is so distinguished a work of fiction; and I daresay there will be a considerable public to agree with them. This will be the public that has become so tired of the arid prose and method of contemporary naturalism that it welcomes any change as a change for the better. But in point of fact, what looks like a highly charged sensibility in Mr. Nabokov's style is really only fanciness, forced imagery, and deafness to the music of the English language, just as what looks like an innovation in method is already its own kind of sterile convention. . . .

On the other hand, to dismiss it simply as bad taste is to pass over a possible larger significance. Mr. Nabokov's novel is written in a claustrophobic style in which the reader's mind is allowed to do no work of its own, in which we are led by meaningless associations into blind alleys and trapped in boredom. But after all, Mr. Nabokov's story of the dehumanization of man under tyranny is a claustrophobic story. Whether or not it was the author's intention to model his prose system on the social system he is attacking, this is exactly what he has accomplished.

Diana Trilling. *The Nation*. June 14, 1947. p. 722

My admiration for the writings of Vladimir Nabokov began in college, when I read for the first time *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and thereon determined to spend my own more or less real life in writing Sebastian Knight's novels: *The Prismatic Bezel*, *Success* (''the probing of the aetiological secret of aleatory occurrences''), and most of all *The Doubtful Asphodel* (''A man is dying. . . . The man is the book; the book itself is heaving and dying, and drawing up a ghostly knee''). Of many reasons why I did not carry out this notable project, the best is that Nabokov, who had occupied the field first—immediately after inventing it, in fact—went on to write, if not those books, books very much like them, books about lonely, scholarly heroes a little insane, in situations more than a little absurd, heroes who at the same time ''are what can be loosely called 'methods of composition''': *Bend Sinister*, the *Nine Stories*, the wonderful essay on Gogol; and now *My Poor Pnin and Lolita*, the latter of which is, I suppose, bound to deepen the odd silence around its author's name. . . . As a novel, this book [*Pnin*] looks somewhat accidental, though held together (if it is) by one pretty device emerging at the finish, where the first-person narrator appears on the scene to take Pnin's job and incidentally reveal that most of what he knows about Pnin is gathered at second hand from people who impersonate him.

The earlier work, *Lolita*, may well be the funniest tragedy since *Hekuba*.

Howard Nemerov. *Kenyon Review*. Spring, 1957. pp. 313–14

Much of the humor of *Lolita* results from shock. It is perfectly outrageous for Humbert to be so blithe about his sexual relationship with a child. We are shocked by, but at the same time must laugh at, his clinical exposition of the affair. Humbert is mad, but if one accepts his premises it is the world around him that is mad. . . . Rarely does a novel demand so liberal a mind of its readers—and certainly there are literate people who find *Lolita* offensive. There will be some who will find it subversive of American morality. Already someone has seen it as an allegorical seducing of the New World by the Old. But there will be a few who will see that Nabokov has written nothing more or less than an American *Dead Souls*.

Richard Schickel. *The Reporter*. Nov. 28, 1957. pp. 46–7

Perverse. Of all the words one should employ to tag Nabokov's art, this now seems to me by far the most accurate. *Lolita* has been called perverse because of the sacred ground it so blackly disrupts, and hence embargoed. But no one ought to be surprised. Nabokov has put in a working lifetime toward the cultivation of fruitful perversity, and it is probably this which gives him his great distinction as a conjuror and sets him apart from anyone. . . .

Vladimir Nabokov is an artist of the first rank, a writer in the great tradition. He will never win the Pulitzer Prize or the Nobel Prize, yet *Lolita* is probably the best fiction to come out of this country (so to speak) since Faulkner's burst in the thirties. He may be the most important writer now going in this country. He is already, God help him, a classic. He has written in Russian, French, German, and now wields an English that a native young writer would kill for. I am afraid that, in this respect, he puts Conrad in the shade. Where Conrad creaks, Nabokov dances.

Conrad Brenner. *New Republic*. June 23, 1958. pp. 20–1

Then the novelist, if he is to maintain the right conditions for a story of passion-love, must see to it that his lovers do not approach the

condition of marriage. That is, their behaviour to each other must not be touched by practicality, their virtues must not be of a kind that acknowledges the claims of the world. As soon as mutuality comes in, and common interests, and co-operation, and tolerance, and a concern for each other's welfare or prestige in the world, the ethos of the family, of marriage, has asserted itself and they lose their status of lovers. Their behaviour to each other must be precisely not what we call ''mature''—they must see each other and the world with the imperious absolutism of children. So that a man in the grip of an obsessional lust and a girl of twelve make the ideal couple for a story about love written in our time. At least at the beginning of his love for Lolita there are no practical moral considerations, no practical personal considerations, that qualify H.H.'s behaviour. As for Lolita, there is no possibility of her bringing the relation close to the condition of marriage because she cannot even imagine the female role in marriage. She remains perpetually the cruel mistress; even after her lover has won physical possession of her, she withholds the favour of her feeling, for she has none to give, by reason of her age, possibly by reason of her temperament.

Lionel Trilling. *Encounter*. Oct., 1958. p. 17

Who, save this rococo gambler, would try to tell the story of an international political assassination in a set of lunatic footnotes to an atrocious poem in monstrous heroic couplets? Who else could be convulsively funny in an index? Trickery on this outrageous scale is, fortunately, rare in the novel; otherwise our responses would be debauched in half a season. But the master at the top of his form is an experience not to be missed; and *Pale Fire* will enjoy a *succés d'estime* to contrast with *Lolita's succés de scandale*.

Like *Lolita*, *Pale Fire* is a flawed poem about a flawed and perverse love for an impossible princess, the English language; the essential experience is that of mental alienation. . . . The fragile perversity of these crazed and broken mirrors may bother the stolid; but it is the essence of Nabokov's astonishing talent to wander in the half-world of semi-people, against whom he uses the glittering tangularities of many languages. He is a fish perpetually and magnificently out of water; long may he wave.

Robert Martin Adams. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1962. pp. 421, 424

The real, real story, the plane of ordinary sanity and common sense, the reader's presumed plane, cannot be accepted as final. The explanation that Botkin is mad will totally satisfy only Professors H. and C. and their consorts, who can put aside *Pale Fire* as a detective story, with the reader racing the author to the solution. *Pale Fire* is not a detective story, though it includes one. Each plane or level in its shadow box proves to be a false bottom; there is an infinite perspective regression, for the book is a book of mirrors. . . . Love is the burden of *Pale Fire*, love and loss. Love is felt as a kind of home-sickness, that yearning for union described by Plato, the pining for the other half of a once-whole body, the straining of the soul's black horse to unite with the white. The sense of loss in love, of separation (the room *beyond*, projected on to the snow, the phantom moves of the chess knight, that deviate piece, *off* the board's edge on to ghostly squares), binds mortal men in a common pattern—the elderly couple watching TV in a lighted room, and the ''queer'' neighbour watching *them* from his window. But it is most poignant in the outsider: the homely daughter stood up by her date, the refugee, the ''queen,'' the bird smashed on the window pane. . . .

In any case, this centaur-work of Nabokov's, half-poem, half-prose, this merman of the deep, is a creation of perfect beauty, symmetry, strangeness, originality, and moral truth. Pretending to be a curio, it cannot disguise the fact that it is one of the very great works of art of this century, the modern novel that everyone thought was dead and that was only playing possum.

Mary McCarthy. *Encounter*. Oct., 1962. pp. 72–84

He is a nostalgic writer, above all; and he has preserved, even in the unlikeliest contexts, the nostalgia of childhood. Lolita—when she appears on the scene many years later—is much more than a nymphet; she is a ruthless evocation of childhood, all the crueler for the fact that she is in the past, and thus irrecoverable. The gap of thirty years between herself and Humbert is an essential part of their disaster. To bridge the gap is not merely a fictional device. . . . The effort of memory is what counts. . . . Not that [Nabokov] objects to being dispossessed; not that he wastes any time mourning lost millions. What has been stolen from him is an emotional heritage, an interpenetration of landscape and family and personal dignity. In each of his books this theft provides part of the theme, even when, as in *Pnin*, he tempers his nostalgia with humor. The past never ceases to beckon, however possessive the present may become.

Alan Pryce-Jones. *Harper's Magazine*. April, 1963. p. 98

This four-volume presentation of one of the world's most attractive poems [*Eugene Onegin*] contains much material which will primarily interest the Pushkinist. The sound and penetrating Appendix on prosody deserves a wider readership—if only because nowadays there is a mass of writing about all aspects of poetry except the one thing which actually defines it as poetry rather than prose, its technique and metric. (It might be supplemented by lines 30–38 of Nabokov's own poem *An Evening of Russian Poetry*.) The long Commentary which fills out half this bulky production is full of insights too: for example on ''the aphoristic style which was Pushkin's intrinsic concession to the eighteenth century''. It is also a regular rodeo of hobbyhorses. Nabokov scoffs at Virgil, Hudibras, Swift, Shchedrin, Béranger. He thinks Coleridge's *The Pains of Sleep* a great poem. He urges the abolition of the Cyrillic alphabet. He sneers at other translations. Odd stuff, but at least individual. As with Yvor Winters preferring Bridges to Hopkins, agreeing or not we must respect this more than a thousand acceptances by rote of current, and probably ephemeral, orthodoxy. Meanwhile, we can note in passing, from Nabokov's extreme rudeness to previous translators, that he would hardly expect any hostile criticisms of himself to be too muted. . . .

It is sad to knock any attempt to bring Pushkin before us. There are long passages without these faults. Nevertheless, on the whole this is too much a transposition into Nabokovese, rather than a translation into English.

Robert Conquest. *Poetry*. June, 1965. pp. 236–8

While writing his English verses Nabokov was elaborating the English prose which, somewhat subdued in *Sebastian Knight*, sometimes out of hand in *Bend Sinister*, would culminate in the controlled sinuosities of *Lolita*, the almost paranoid eloquence of *Pale Fire*. Kinbote's eloquence, I mean, for the point of the novel, rhetorically speaking, seems to lie in the contrast between the inflamed yet often beautiful writing of Kinbote's editorial notes and the paler fires, the intermittent beauties, of John Shade's poem. . . . In *Pale Fire*, as so often in our author's work, it takes two men to make a proper Nabokovian man—two men who, however, rarely succeed in uniting. With a writer, if he is a genius, the duality may be made to work for him, just as the Siamese twins in the story, ''Scenes from the Life of a Double Monster,'' are finally put to work by Uncle Novus. Nabokov has done the same with the poet and novelist in him, made of them a team. Thus he has been able to perfect an English prose medium whose flexibility is adapted to the astonishing range, the endless contradictions, of his nature, of Nature itself.

F.W. Dupee. *The King of the Cats*. (Farrar). 1965. pp. 140–1

Above Shade and Kinbote, the poem and the Commentary is Nabokov himself, who is the most important of the three artists, and who imposes his own pattern upon *Pale Fire* without in any way impinging upon the separate designs of the poet Shade and the madman-artist he has created. This aspect of the novel is clearest and most serenely open and obvious when seen in the perspective of Nabokov's entire artistic career. . . . I think it safe to say that there might have been a good deal less bafflement over *Pale Fire* if such earlier Russian Nabokov novels as *The Defense* and *The Gift* had been translated into English prior to 1962; and there would beyond any doubt have been a great deal less if some of the articles by Nabokov's best Russian critic, Vladisav Khodasevich, had appeared in English translation. It was Khodasevich who very early in Nabokov's writing career declared that his sole thematic concern is art, and that he writes only about artists—failed artists, aspiring artists, mad artists, every conceivable kind of artist—but that he does this in allegorical form, choosing as his protagonists chess players, homosexuals and murderers. I would have the reader of Nabokov always bear in mind this wise and simple observation—though it doesn't *always* apply.

Andrew Field. *Tri-Quarterly*. Winter, 1967. p. 31

The forte of Nabokov's style is the utter concentration of attention, masquerading as the utter dispersion of attention.

Nabokov's gift is for the creation of these small-scale effects, rather than for larger structures. His best books, among them *Pnin*, *Lolita* and *Speak*, *Memory*, have relatively little of the anagrammatic hide-and-seek and fussy pedantry that usurp the center of later and apparently more ambitious works such as *Pale Fire* and *Ada*. They are certainly not powerful, all-encompassing visions like those of Proust and Joyce; in fact, their structure seems slight and rather negligible. They are held together primarily by a sensibility—a texture of delicately perceived sensuous particulars, of radiant moments of poetic feeling tempered by a dandified wit: their affective core is nostalgia, the poignant sense of a lost past. Such a core of feeling exists in *Ada*, but it is lost beneath a grotesquely elaborated ''structure'' which remains largely superficial. The book is a bit like a seashell, extravagantly involuted, knobbed, covered with all kinds of random incrustations. What is most striking about it is the fantastic disproportion between that hard external carapace and the small living creature inside it.

Elizabeth Dalton. *Partisan Review*. No. 1, 1970. p. 158

Both Proust and Nabokov establish clear boundaries between past and present, provide elaborate and meticulously drafted maps for their realms of recollection, and carefully choose the grounds, or privileged moments, at which past and present will be allowed, briefly and dangerously, to meet and commingle. The goal of these artists is something more important than self-discovery or the discovery of cultural and regional identity. It is the discovery and definition of human consciousness, conceived as the master key to the riddle of reality, conceived also as providing limited, transitory glimpses of the realm of essence.

Neither Proust nor Nabokov permits this essentially metaphysical quest to sterilize his fictional art. Both remain great tragicomic novelists in close touch with the actualities of man in contemporary society and with central issues of modern history. Thirst for the eternal never alienates their loyalty to the human condition although it may constitute the deepest source of their great originality and power as stylists and fabulists.

Julian Moynahan. *Vladimir Nabokov* (Minnesota). 1971. p. 6

Writing mostly in Russian during nearly two decades of exile in the West and then transforming himself in middle life into an Anglo-American novelist, Nabokov improvised a stylistic manner of extraordinary verbal ingenuity, having, one feels, all the properties of masterliness except natural fluency and natural resonance. Precisely because his effort was not only to establish a new working medium (and thus a new readership) but to preserve himself as a human being solidly rooted in life, an element of strain and artificiality cemented itself into his work, deadening the active flow of it. V. S. Pritchett . . . (a specialist in these matters) has defined the case well: ''Vocabulary, grammar, syntax and the fashions of epithet'' had themselves to take the place of the country and culture Nabokov had lost, and as a result he became ''a superb exploiter'' of the historical languages he adopted to this end but not, like Joyce, their master. He now writes English, including various odd sorts of jargon and slang, with remarkable virtuosity and inventiveness, but he writes it as if it were about to become a dead language; the texts of his novels are scenarios, awaiting realization.

Warner Berthoff. *Fictions and Events* (Dutton). 1971. pp. 90–1

The suffering of Nabokov's characters comes both from within and from without. Agnostics like their creator, sure of nothing but the steady flow of sensations, his characters are, in fact, desperately dependent on the external world. Through their passion for intensity they victimize themselves; and hence their suffering is in part self-created. Yet, at the same time, their suffering has a corresponding source in the external world. Not only is the world devilishly seductive and tantalizing, but also the impressions one receives from it seem at times to form themselves into significative patterns

and designs, leading one to the momentary hope that the world holds a meaning of its own, an innate meaning not imparted to it by the perceiver. As these patterns form and dissolve, so the hope quickens and dwindles, leaving the perceiver with nothing but memories. The humanity of Nabokov's characters is based on no philosophical, political, or religious system, on no creed or ideology, but simply on the dignity with which they confront this mirage of hope.

This is surely a view of life born of Nabokov's personal experience. Having seen how fate plays games with man, leaving traces here and there, clues that hint at a whole design or pattern, at a coherent and rational meaning innate in the external world, Nabokov plays the part of fate in the world of his fiction. In the style and form of his fictional worlds, countless moments of aesthetic bliss are available to the reader willing to alter his habitual mode of perception, willing to take—if only temporarily—the aesthetic stance.

Donald E. Morton. *Vladimir Nabokov* (Ungar). 1974. p. 12

Behind the often delightful invitation to play of mind there lurks a persistent didacticism. In correcting any mistaken ideas we may have about fiction and reality, Nabokov means to demonstrate that if fiction is not Reality, then neither is so-called ''reality'' outside of fiction. Reality, as he is fond of saying, always belongs in quotation marks. The ground thereby claimed by Nabokov's own fictional enterprise is, to say the very least, exorbitant—and he chooses to govern it all by himself.

As we've seen in the past ten years, any number of little Nabokovs will be ready to make such an investment in a book of this kind [*Look at the Harlequins!*] that they end up admiring it as their own handiwork, their own ''invention.'' To some extent this is always and quite properly the case. But the kind of exegetical efforts we are invited to make here need to be distinguished from those we are willing to make while reading Melville or Joyce or Pynchon. At their many puzzling moments those writers direct the attention of the reader not principally to their own literary texts and lives but to the life and texts of the existent world, with all its inheritances, in which they live and write. Theirs seems to me an altogether more exciting and important venture than Nabokov's, even if he has sometimes been called—and sometimes deserves to be called—our greatest living writer.

He stands on the periphery of the great tradition of American literature since Hawthorne and Melville, and of 20th-century literature since Joyce, in that he is, despite his terror of solipsism, its most awesome practitioner. He is not sufficiently vulnerable to—and his style is only infrequently enriched by—the power of the social and literary institutions by which man continues to invent himself.

Richard Poirier. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 13, 1974. p. 4

He makes his novels function on two frequently interpenetrating levels: the level of the ''reality'' they depict and that created by the way in which that depiction is organized. This second level will take on an increasing importance for Nabokov, and is most evident in the way in which he imposes artificial authorial patterns, overloading his works with obvious contrivance and coincidence. . . .

Increasingly one has to be aware of the role Nabokov's often delicate and scarcely perceptible patterns play in his books if one is to hope to make a full reading of them. Thus, early in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* we come across a list of books in Knight's library. The narrator detects a strange melody in the list; and so he should. The books, more or less in the order in which they are arranged, will have a series of echoes in the course of the work to come: some featuring in descriptions of Knight's novels, others in the main narrative, helping to bring about that interpenetration of the two which is the whole point of that work. Thus, we find an echo of *Hamlet* the first title on the shelf, in Knight's first novel, about a fat student who comes home to find his mother married to his uncle, an ear specialist, who has poisoned his father. Much of the echoing is a great deal subtler than this; and there are moments when the melody almost dies away, until it is finally rounded off with *King Lear*, the final title, since the death of a king, or checkmate, is a proper conclusion to a book that abounds in references to chess.

Echoing of this kind is much more than a gratuitous virtuosity. It is vital to Nabokov's conception of the form of fiction, of the novel as a self-reflecting form, circular rather than linear, constituting its own autonomous and self-justifying world.

Alex de Jonge. In *Vladimir Nabokov—A Tribute: His Life, His Work, His World*, ed. Peter Quennell (William Morrow, 1980), pp. 60. 63

The difficulty of assessing Nabokov's achievement as a novelist writing about people obviously derives from the flagrantly artificial quality of his fiction. Current sophisticated theories of criticism notwithstanding, readers of novels have traditionally tended to identify the *artificial* with the *superficial*. The Nabokovian universe, we all know, is a construct of words, taking life from the page and pen of its author. Self-conscious artifice intrudes on the reader's awareness, signaling the discontinuities between Nabokov's fabricated worlds and the one we call our own. According to Nabokov himself, upon completing one of his novels the reader should experience ''a sensation of its world receding in the distance and stopping somewhere there suspended afar like a picture in a picture.'' It is not only at the end of his novels, however, that Nabokov arranges his effects in this way. The continuous wordplay, allusions, self-conscious references, and authorial intrusions all serve to interrupt the reader's sympathetic participation in the author's illusory world. In this way, Nabokov alerts us to the fictional status of his literary landscape; he impels us to recognize that all the apparent depth and dimension we perceive in this ''picture in a picture'' are achieved aesthetic effects. . . .

Instead of provoking indignation, our reading of Nabokov's fiction should encourage us to clarify some familiar distinctions. The freedom of a literary character is always illusory. A realist may attempt to make what ''happens'' to his character appear to rise inevitably out of his nature or the nature of the world posited by the fiction, but the form of a character's fate is always the author's choice. Plausibility is both natural and artificial; and while Nabokov's worlds declare themselves fiction, their author recognized the need for plausibility and consistency within their structure. . . .

What I am suggesting, then, is that we may be denying Nabokov's characters their reality because of a misreading of, or disenchantment with, his method. The lives of literary characters (and, indeed, our own lives) are a great deal less autonomous than

we would often like to believe. What we may resent, when reading a Nabokov novel, is the loss of our illusions rather than any inherent lack of humanity on the author's part. Shattering such illusions was a feat Nabokov particularly enjoyed. Obviously anticipating the stir his pronouncement would create, he once told an interviewer, ''My characters are galley slaves.'' The description is characteristically inciting; yet it contains more honesty than arrogance. Nabokov's love of puns is surely evident here in his use of the word ''galley,'' which refers to the printer's proofs of a manuscript as well as to an ancient rowing vessel. Nabokov's characters serve their literary master; but slaves, after all, are puppets only in the social sense.

Ellen Pifer. *Nabokov and the Novel* (Harvard Univ. Pr., 1980), pp. 4–5, 8, 11

In Vladimir Nabokov's works many of the characters who die do not simply disappear. Not only can the presence of their spirits be detected; the faint influence of these spirits upon the living can also be discerned. Nabokov has appropriately suggested such ghostly presences and influences as invisibly as possible. Yet the clues are provided: he characteristically gives us sufficient evidence to detect the ghostly activity concealed in his written world. . . .

Nabokov's ghosts are concealed by some of his favorite diversionary techniques. Many of his characters ridicule or scoff at what are actually genuine spectral presences and influences. Skepticism, facetious remarks, and even serious speculations presumed to be inaccurate all help to disguise Nabokovian ghosts. Another camouflaging factor is Nabokov's fondness for the pathetic fallacy, many uses of which tend to conceal the presence of spirits in faintly personified backgrounds. Yet such patterns, when finally detected, can actually help to locate some of Nabokov's most elusive ghosts.

Indeed, there is a remarkable patterning about both the presence and influence of Nobokovian ghosts. They consistently appear in, or act through, certain background elements such as wind, fog, lightning, sunlight, and water. These elements are typically featured in faintly unusual ways. It is even occasionally suggested within a given work that spirits lurk in the pertinent element. Moreover, these background elements often seem appropriate (for example, a warm wind or a raging one) in view of the deceased's personalities, their emotions just prior to death, and their logical objectives in trying to influence the living. Perhaps most important, the ghosts continually appear at times when their own logical objectives are furthered and promoted.

Nabokovian ghosts induce dreams in which their former selves appear. Such dreams, as suggested in *Transparent Things*, tend to be prophetic. Somewhat similarly, Nabokovian ghosts cause a person to remember (or to have visions of) their former selves when they are present. Such recollections are often surprisingly vivid and usually quite abrupt. The general patterning also includes details and phrases not necessarily associated with any individual ghost but recurring throughout Nabokov's works at times when ghosts are present. They may thus be considered characteristic background details attending Nabokovian spectral activity. In brief, these are: descriptions of sunsets and the low sun, illuminated or stained-glass windowpanes, and rising, whirling dust. Also quite frequently when a ghost is present, Nabokov describes what would be seen by a hypothetical observer or spectator with a lofty, unusual perspective.

Another aid in detecting Nabokovian spirits is that both their presence and influence are subtly confirmed in various encoded ways. Numerous casual, sarcastic, or joking references to ghosts, specters, spirits, shades, etc. fit a pattern of truth if taken seriously. Their unwitting accuracy thus resembles that of Gogolian remarks about the devil. There is even what could be termed a pattern of misunderstanding about Nabokovian ghosts. For example, when a character intensely (but apparently unsuccessfully) wills a deceased person to give some sign of continuing existence, that person's spirit typically is present.

Finally, the presence and influence of Nabokovian ghosts are confirmed by a complex system of encoded names and agencies. Not only are the names of the ghosts sometimes hidden in the text when they appear; these bodyless beings often concentrate their influence on, or act through, a particular living person (or even an animal or insect). In such cases, there is often a suggestive relationship between the names of the spirits and of the people they influence. When butterflies or moths are involved, the spirits' former selves were typically associated with similar creatures in some special way.

W.W. Rowe. *Nabokov's Spectral Dimension* (Ardis, 1981), pp. 9–11

Lolita may be usefully scrutinized as a hermeneutic narrative, involving the proposal and solution of an enigma. The operations of the hermeneutic narrative are particularly legible in detective texts; the reader of detective fiction is propelled through the narrative by the guarantee of truth at the end of the line. Detective fiction is teleological in character. Expectation and desire are sustained in the hermeneutic narrative by various delays that postpone the solution of the enigma. To satisfy this expectation and desire, to reach the solution of the enigma, involves following the narrative line in its unfolding until the truth is deciphered. In *Lolita* the truth at the end of the line is the identity of the fiend who has purloined the nymphet, a truth that is absent for most of the plot. It might be said, then, that the line of Humbert's own journey in quest of the fiend doubles the line of the hermeneutic narrative, which ends with the truth, the name, the man, Clare Quilty.

David Packman. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Structure of Literary Desire* (Univ. of Missouri Pr., 1982), pp. 31–32

A wide range of literary subtexts underlies much of his writing, and his own varied and often controversial views on writers and their works are well documented. It follows that any specific information about the books which he actually read and notated would be of some interest. . . .

The conditions of exile, which led Nabokov through a succession of countries and abodes, determined his subsequent relations to books. It would be no exaggeration to argue that along with ''tables and chairs and lamps and rugs and things'' which he never sought to obtain, one could also add ''books.'' Nabokov left Russia with little baggage, and the constraints of subsequent travels resulted in books being left abandoned in Germany, including a large number of autographed emigré works. The Nabokovs carried only what they could of his own works, as well as books absolutely needed for his writing. The Berlin Public Library and the private libraries of fellow Russian emigrés in Berlin and Paris were used as

required. Many books were again left in Paris prior to departure for America because of baggage restrictions and limited financial resources, although some were later forwarded. When the Nabokovs arrived in New York in May 1940 they carried few personal belongings, and the several books which did accompany them were for the most part copies of some of Nabokov's own published writings.

> Stephen Jay Parker. *Journal of Modern Literature*. Summer, 1987, pp. 5–6, 7–8

Nabokov generally sacrificed most other pursuits to the pursuit of his art. When he did take the time to write letters, the stimuli were family ties, close friendship, and aesthetic, professional, or scientific matters that required the authority of his signature. He replied to critics only when his artistic or personal integrity was questioned. He wrote to newspapers and magazines on those rare occasions when an important matter of fact or of morality needed to be set right. He was moved by the letters of certain fans, but felt he could not sacrifice writing time to embark upon exchanges with them, and only seldom did he find some exceptional quality in a fan letter that caused him to break this rule. Among the most touching letters were those in which the return address had been deliberately omitted to make it clear that neither the author's time nor his signature was being solicited; I recall one in particular, signed ''a little Nabokov.'' There again, the whims of fate and filing caused the loss of a few special letters that had been set aside for reply, and no other trace of name or address remained. An exceptional letter from Israel, received and hopelessly misplaced many years ago, was one of those that caused Nabokov special chagrin.

In Montreux, in his later years, Nabokov often lacked the time to answer even the most deserving letters. At the suggestion of Edmund Wilson—who even sent a sample—cards were printed containing a brief note of thanks and explanation for would-be correspondents.

> Dmitri Nabokov. Introduction. In Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli, eds. *Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Letters 1940–1977* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), p. xvi

Because Nabokov valued the liberating force of consciousness he felt he had to understand how people could be imprisoned in madness, in obsession, or in the everyday ''solitary confinement of their souls.'' Here his interest in psychology shades into his philosophical interest in consciousness, the over-riding concern of all his art. Although Nabokov insisted on the critical use of reason, he had no faith in expository argument and scorned discursive fiction, leading many readers to assume he is all style and no content. In fact he was deeply serious as a thinker—an epistemologist, metaphysician, moral philosopher, and aesthetician. I will trace the development of his philosophical views, sketch their final shape, and suggest how they influenced his art.

To do that I must explain his deceptive strategies as a writer. For reading Nabokov is like sitting in a room with a view onto a somehow misleading landscape that seems to wink in the sun and invite us out. Some readers fear they are only being lured to trip on the threshold. Actually Nabokov wants the good reader to step through and enjoy the detailed reality of the outside world. But the good rereader who ventures far enough finds another door concealed in what had seemed that solid landscape outside, a door into a new world beyond. . . .

Although Nabokov was often hailed as the finest stylist of his time, many readers have found themselves perturbed by the deliberateness of his language. To them, his phrasing calls attention to itself too much to express genuine emotion, or even to *say* anything. This puts Nabokov in good company, since it was exactly the reaction Shakespeare provoked in Tolstoy. . . .

Some conclude that since his stylistic originality announces itself with such force, Nabokov therefore can have only style to offer. I find another explanation more convincing: his style stands out so boldly because he has re-thought the art of writing deeply enough to express all his originality of mind. . . .

Nabokov prizes pattern and design, things united in new combinations rather than highlighted by isolation. He is entranced and puzzled by the chance harmonies of the moment, the complex artistry of mimicry in the natural world, the designs of time or fate, the patterns lurking within memory. When he lets a new scene materialize under the flimsy awning of a smile he seems to have yielded to mere momentary whim. But before the sentence ends we discover that it was always under his control. . . .

Independence and pattern function like the complementary twin hemispheres of Nabokov's mind. He searches out pattern in the music of a phrase or the spell of an anagram, in the shapes of time or the weave of the universe. He pursues independence in everything from his own sense of self to his philosophy of history, from his politics or aesthetics to his way of looking at a face or a tree.

> Brian Boyd. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Pr., 1990), pp. 5, 6, 8, 9

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NASH, Ogden (1902–)

Hard Lines presents some keen satire in verse that is intricately successful in nonsensical rhymes. Words deliquesce in the most abandoned ways as if the poet had given up the struggle. But the hits are local and contemporaneous; the book is delightful sophisticated fooling, but New Yorkish, not American.

Leon Whipple. *Survey*. June 1, 1931. p. 267

Hurrah, Mr. Nash, for your writings laughable! We liked you surly, we love you affable, And think your poems designed for the nursery Almost the best in your bulging versery.

(There's one, especially, you might brag on, Concerning Belinda who owned a dragon; We also discovered ourselves in stitches Over the lady who ate up witches.)

And, fine, Mr. Nash! you're not so silly as Many another Pater Familias, For you see flaws as well as perfection In little gazelles of your own selection.

And we like your remarks on tending and feeding them; And, thank God, most of the poems in this book [*The Bad Parent's Garden of Verse*] *scan*, and aren't made up of the kind of lines that used to be funny but now we get eyestrain from reading them.

And since that's a thing that we're filled with delight about, We're glad that you had some daughters to write about.

Phyllis McGinley. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 10, 1936. p. 15

Nash has been applauded for his industry and his verbal ingenuities. Both are virtues, but they become vices with Nash. For one thing, he writes too much. At first his work seems amazing; then it becomes amusing; after too many repetitions of the same effects, it descends to the mechanical. The present volume contains almost three hundred pages; were it half as long it would be twice as good. Productiveness not only compels Nash to pad but to pretend. He has to pretend to be funnier than he really is, or to be funny when he wants to be serious, or to give a ''snap'' to a title which might better have been casual or non-committal. . . .

But the rest of Nash belongs on the sunny side of the ledger. His verse always makes good reading; often it is the best light verse written in America today. . . . It is in this realm, the realm of incalculable imagination, that Nash is happiest and at his highest.

Louis Untermeyer. *Saturday Review*. June 4, 1938. p. 6

It is Ogden Nash more than any other American who has lifted the lightest of the arts from the virtual oblivion in which it languished. The feat of levitation was not lightly accomplished. *Hard Lines* was a hard-hitting book. Dorothy Parker and the poetically short-lived Samuel Hoffenstein had separately paved the way for it; but the Nash laughter was not their laughter, and his first utterance established a new school of which he is both master and pupil. In succeeding volumes he set the classical English teeth on edge; but at home the versatility of a daft Leonardo got him quoted in universities and barrooms, factories and corrals. He was a hit in 1931, and he is a hit again this year. For a land of unstable worship, that is a lifetime of popularity. How has he done it?

He has done it by virtue of remarkable wit, a somewhat novel technique, and the fact that he has eschewed (he would say ''eschawed'') the old literary formulas derived from the English, and descended to life and brass tacks. He has an unerring aim for the universal and the education to make it sound faintly but pleasingly esoteric. He has the gift, in his own way, of the satire of Pope and Swift.

David McCord. *The Yale Review*. Winter, 1939. pp. 392–3

Clearly Ogden Nash is God's gift to the United States. While writers of dismally serious intent are a dime a dozen, a genuine comic talent is nearly priceless. Mr. Nash is our best literary comedian since Will Rogers. He has become, in a strictly Shakespearean sense, America's number one fool, though in any other sense he is nobody's fool.

Mr. Nash's extraordinary faculty for verbal pyrotechnics is happily employed in devising unheard-of-rhymes, as when he couples ''boomerang'' with ''zestful tangy Kangaroo meringue.'' But it is not primarily as a grotesque word-smith that he deserves his laurels. He has a keen eye and a keener nose for what is broadly ridiculous or slightly affected in current ideas and manners, particularly those of metropolitan society, and his reports of his findings are more than traps for the injudicious. They are a species of flypaper that envelops the subject with a glutinous insistence which becomes uproariously funny.

George F. Whicher. *Atlantic Monthly*. Dec., 1942. pp. 161–2

Nash is the laureate of a generation which had to develop its own wry, none-too-joyful humor as the alternative to simply lying down on the floor and screaming. His ragged verse is remarkably like Ring Lardner's unpruned prose in effect—a catalogue of the annoying trifles that constitute our contemporary civilization, set down with a friendly leer. . . . Any but the most well-read and retentive-minded Nash fan would find it difficult to separate the early verse from the recent. Both rejoice the innocent reader's heart with their leisurely tempo and indifference to formal scansion and their miraculous quasi-rhymes. Further, Nash is one of the rare people who can make a pun and make you like it. He can write sentimental rhymes about his children and make you like those, too. In short, he can do almost anything in the poet line, and he has been doing it for fifteen years.

Russell Maloney. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 14, 1945. p. 4

It is only eighteen years since his first little book of verse was published, and it is good to see how in that short time he has become a social necessity. He is, of course, a great temographic historian; he can remind us, better than any other writer, what has gripped us in our hideous and hellbound civilization. But he plunges the needle with such generous and hypergelastic opiate that even as we perish we bless his name.

Christopher Morley. *Saturday Review*. March 19, 1949. p. 17

Perhaps you can't get there from here, but in Odgen Nash's company you will reach any number of pleasant destinations. You will also reach an inevitable conclusion; if you have not come to it years and lines ago: Nash is a genuine original voice, and such voices in any literature are rare. Consider the living American writers who combine in high degree wit with poetry or poetry with wit. . . . A few lines, fewer sentences, sometimes but a few words of any of these men are sufficient to establish the authorship. However much a poet or prose writer may perfect and enhance his skill, he will never achieve a truly original voice. He must be born with it.

Now one of the blessings of original voice, particularly in the poet, is that the assembled work in convenient book length reveals the total writer; that is, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. If Nash reads well in the magazines, he reads even better in his books—as Frost does, as Auden does. The quality or density (of the poet) may vary, but not the voice, not the man. And if you happen to like him, you have companionship all the way. Odgen Nash is the most cheerful of all companions, and even when he falters now and then, or overreaches, one does not mind.

David McCord. *New York Times Book Section*. June 9, 1957. p. 7

Less familiar to readers of current Nash is the reminder, delightfully clear in *Marriage Lines*, that he is also the author of charming love poems, some of them careless, others not, but all making their point with his characteristic originality and zip. . . . Mr. Nash has a real way about him when he sets out to speak well of his womenfolk.

Charles Morton. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 15, 1964. p. 26

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NATHAN, George Jean (1882–1958)

The American audience has neither viewpoint nor intelligence, he says, and since one cannot stay at home and read acting, and the only reason for acting is to be effective upon a theatrical audience, our most successful work is generally our most inartistic, and the popular playwright composes not a play but a mixture with which an audience ready with the customary responses is familiar. For Mr. Nathan, whose book [*Mr. George Jean Nathan Presents*] bristles and rattles with vigorous independent comment, the theatre has not even the charm it had ten years ago—it is smeared with the cabaret.

Algernon Tassin. *Bookman*. Nov., 1917. p. 349

Practically everyone who reads Nathan is annoyed by him, but I must confess that I find him unusually refreshing and, what is more, sound. After all the lollypop bunk about the theater that is written by the long list of scribes from press agents to college professors, one welcomes the man who is not seduced by any of the popular myths or fetishes of the present day drama. . . . Most of what he says is true, and all of it is diverting reading for those who do not object to having their preconceived notions upset.

Samuel J. Hume. *Survey*. Feb. 9, 1919. p. 675

If, as it sometimes seems, the vocation of writing pieces about the plays and players of the New York stage is scarcely an adequate occupation for an adult mind, what shall be said of one whose mission in life is evidently to write pieces about those who write pieces about the plays and players of the New York Stage? This is the stern mission of the faithful and tireless George Jean Nathan, whose new and pretty continuously entertaining book called *Comedians All* shows that he has lost nothing of that well-selected tone of contemptuous disparagement which has been his stock in trade these many years. . . .

Nor should it be thought that the array of and sometimes facetiously imaginary information on the theatre in other lands with which Nathan is wont to obliterate his neighbors, is just that ''Smart Set'' jackanapes showing off again, as his irritated victims are likely to believe. It is true that he labors to make his fellow-babblers believe that no one who has not seen all the productions up some side street in Odessa or Osaka is a poor creature, unfit to analyze the art of Eva Tanguay. It is true that no local farce is too paltry to inspire him to some windy dissertations on certain Swedish and Bulgarian prototypes. But this is not prompted by an itch for self-display, as is popularly believed. It is simply the output of a naturally punditical mind, whose true professorial quality is never quite concealed by his sedulous jocosity.

Alexander Woollcott. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 26, 1919. p. 598

Necessarily, he has to lay on with frequency. For one honest play, honestly produced and honestly played, Broadway sees two dozen that are simply so much green-goods. To devote serious exposition to the badness of such stuff would be to descend to the donkeyish futility of William Winter. Sometimes, indeed, even ridicule is not enough; there must be a briefer and more dramatic display of the essential banality. Well, then, why not recreate it in the manner of Croce—but touching up a line here, a color there? The result is burlesque, but burlesque that is the most searching and illuminating

sort of criticism. Who will forget Nathan's demonstration that a platitudinous play by Thomas would be better if played backward? A superb bravura piece, enormously beyond the talents of any other American writer on the theater, it smashed the Thomas legend with one stroke.

H.L. Mencken. *Prejudices: First Series* (Knopf). 1919. pp. 214–15

Mr. Nathan's special technique is well known. It consists in either frightening or flattering us into acceptance of opinions which, whether they be sound or specious, are always made to appear delightfully astute. He astonishes his reader with his ''erudition,'' his forthrightness, his elaborate *insouciance*. Nothing he says must be taken as a matter of course; it must always be seen as something remarkably personal, paradoxically different. He is an incorrigible show-off.

But his mind is probably better than his style; his flippancy, we are constantly reminded, must obscure neither the solidity of his judgment nor the extent of his knowledge. . . . Mr. Nathan is superior in intelligence to most newspaper reviewers—although his opinions as opinions do not nowadays greatly differ from theirs—he knows more plays, apparently, than any other critic alive, and, above all, he has performed a notable service as a propagandist for a culturally significant American theater. Nevertheless, we shall look in vain, if we seek in *Art of the Night* a single piece of important theater criticism.

Harold Clurman. *New Republic*. April 18, 1928. p. 277

His merits are many, and not to be briefly catalogued. The writing of few critics is so continuously entertaining for its own sake. He has the sharpest realistic discernment of any theatrical reviewer in regular practice. No other has so keen a scent for every shade of sham, pose, affectation. His intelligence is certainly as high as, and his range of knowledge of the drama—European and American, ancient and contemporary—equal and perhaps superior to, that of any other dramatic critic in these parts; yet though in this sense a highbrow he is never taken in by highbrowism. . . . Mr. Nathan's exuberant flow of words, once more, giving the impression of a man writing as rapidly and spontaneously as he talks, disguises the solid work and tedious research that must go into so much of his writing.

Henry Hazlitt. *The Nation*. Feb. 18, 1931. p. 187

George Jean Nathan . . . has an encyclopedic knowledge of the theater and probably remembers in detail more plays and players of the last thirty-five or forty years than anyone else now writing. For that reason there is a subtle justification for the title of his latest volume [*Encyclopedia of the Theatre*], even though that volume is not what one would at first expect, the book being as a matter of fact a collection of short pieces on a great variety of subjects arranged alphabetically by title. At this late date there is no point in describing either Mr. Nathan's attitude or his style, both of which are as well known as those of any writer on our theater are ever likely to be. He lays about him with all his accustomed vigor, but the secret of his individuality is simply that, for all his cynicism, he has an abiding respect for the theater and that, for all his ''sophistication,'' his deepest liking is for the most substantial things which the theater has to offer. . . . No one is less often taken in, but no one is less likely to respond to the genuine with conventional flippancy.

Joseph Wood Krutch. *The Nation*. Jan. 13, 1940. p. 53

One must know the current theater intimately to appreciate Mr. Nathan at his best. It seems difficult for him not to be captious. He comes down, as it were, from Sinai, and the tables of his law are not always decipherable to the laity, although his probably suits him ''fine.'' . . . One must also discount some Smart Set verbiage, as well as some flaunting of erudition that verges on pedantry and impishness. Nathan might have become a great critic had he been less the self-indulgent hedonist and had he not hopped so blithely from viewpoint to viewpoint—with frequent interregna of no viewpoint at all. He had the surest stance when he dug passages for realism in the American theatre at the start of the century. But the social implications seem to have eluded him, as they did not elude a great critic, G.B. Shaw. . . .

For all that, Nathan is still the nimblest spirit in the narrow world of dramatic criticism, and to all but victims of his heedless diatribes, he almost never fails to make pleasurable and stimulating reading.

John Gassner. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 22, 1944. p. 28

There is a great deal of critical good sense and wisdom, if superficial and worldly, and some of it not unlike what passes for wisdom among those Philistines whom Mr. Nathan has so long been attacking. It is a pity that Mr. Nathan through a long exuberant life as a writer . . . has felt it necessary to wear cap and bells and constantly to jingle the bells. For the jingling has often obscured the common sense, the nice perception, the high standards of esthetic integrity that Mr. Nathan has maintained with respect to theatre and other arts. . . . For below the tomfooleries there is a serious critic here and a well stocked and uncorrupted mind.

Irwin Edman. *New York Times Book Section*. May 4, 1952. p.3

For over five decades Nathan was a prominent and picturesque figure of the New York scene and one who held the imagination of the public. He had an aristocratic manner and an aristocratic viewpoint that were in striking contrast to the background against which he moved, the background of democratic, happy-go-lucky Broadway. He was feared for his humorous sarcasm, his staggering erudition, and his delight in deriding pretense, and he was admired for his lordly comportment, his elegant dress, and his lasting good looks. . . .

About his achievements and influence as a critic there are no longer doubts. At first his merry fashion of telling the truth, his brilliant but informal style, and his ever-ready audacity disconcerted the ponderous just as the Shavian fireworks had startled them in the nineties. Nathan, like Shaw, could be profound without being heavy. He could be serious without being dull.

Thomas Quinn Curtiss. Introduction to *The Magic Mirror* by George Jean Nathan (Knopf). 1960. pp. xiv–xv

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NAYLOR, Gloria (1950–)

Also of importance among black women who have managed to meld the concerns of feminism and the Black Arts Movement in their writing is Gloria Naylor. Her book, *The Women of Brewster Street* (1982), which received the American Book Award, consists of seven beautifully written, powerful interlocking stories about tragedy-burdened women. . . .

In her first story, ''Mattie Michael,'' her protagonist is abused by three men: Butch, a southern boy who impregnates her; her father, a seemingly religious man, who beats her horribly when he learns of her pregnancy; and her baby himself, Basil, whom she coddles and overprotects so thoroughly that he never grows up. Naylor flirts dangerously here with Daniel Moynihan's thesis of black woman as a castrator of males; Basil kills a man accidentally and, after Mattie puts up her house for bail for his release, he skips out on her and the authorities. This embittered woman becomes the matriarch for all the others in Brewster Place. . . . A more pleasing character is Kiswana Browne, who, in the wonderfully wise story devoted to her, comes to terms with her middle-class mother. . . . As Naylor traces the argument between the two women, Kiswana comes to see the heroism in her mother's quieter, steadier approach to social reform.

> Charles Johnson. *Being and Race* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ., 1988), p. 109

What is also interesting about Naylor's account of *Linden Hills*, as opposed to recent African-American women's literature, is her presentation of central male characters. In her development of Nedeed's character, she gives us not only their attempt to develop their patriarchy but their failure as well. That failure is due to their inability to create a community, which Naylor suggests must be the source of any route African-Americans take to empowerment. A community does not exist if it is rigidly controlled; nor can it exist without a shared history or shared values. But Naylor also presents male characters who experience the restrictions of Nedeed's vision. . . . While her first novel focuses on friendships among women, *Linden Hills* emphasizes the friendship between men, Willie and Lester. . . .

Willie may be the transitional figure between Linden Hills and Naylor's next novel. . . . He comes from a living working-class African-American community with a deep cultural past that is as old as Linden Hills. Through his friendship with Lester, he learns about Linden Hills from the inside and thus knows that the solution of the creation of an elite class fragments and destroys community. As a person intensely involved in the direction of his folk's future, then, he is not as likely to repeat, as some upwardly mobile working-class men have done, Nedeed's error.

> Barbara Christian. ''Gloria Naylor's Geography: Community, Class, and Patriarchy in *The Women of Brewster Place and Linden Hills*.'' In Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Penguin, 1990), pp. 371–72

In *Mama Day*, Naylor narrates the love story of two black people from strikingly different backgrounds—George, orphaned in the urban North, has grown up in an institution run by whites; and Cocoa, doted on by two black mother figures, has been drenched in the traditions of the rural South. Through the relationship that develops between these two characters, one the product of a white world, the other of an emphatically black one, Naylor deals with the issue of maintaining black cultural identity in the face of attempts by the white world to order, control, and define black people. . . .

No static ''document'' or traditional, completed historical artifact, the novel ''ain't about chalking up 1985, just jotting it down in a ledger to be tallied with times before and the times after'' (305); rather, like Candle Walk itself and the family quilt Mama Day (and Cocoa) keep adding pieces to, *Mama Day* is—as Cocoa finally realizes—an unfinished, dynamic story requiring constant revision. . . . By thus quilting ''the whole picture'' in *Mama Day*—his side, her side, the inside and the outside—Naylor has written no traditional tragedy, history, or romance, but rather ''quite a story'' (10) of black experience.

> Susan Meisenhelder. '''The Whole Picture,' in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*.'' *African American Review*. Fall, 1993, pp. 405, 418

In Naylor's work, readers—and thus interpreters—are positioned deeply inside the Southern community of Willow Springs in order to confirm an oral production where ancestors serve as models for telling and listening. . . . In this novel [*Mama Day*], all roads lead to the cemetery in Willow Springs for us to hear, believe, and confirm George's and the other ancestors' stories. Our ultimate understanding of this special folk community enables us to resist a position of ''unreliability'' in favor of one which authenticates the storytelling event with competence. We should realize, though, that listeners who travel these roads come from both sides of the color line, and that responsibilities of listenership can be dictated differently in terms of race.

George's role in the spiritual performance is the key to establishing this discourse as both intraracial and interracial. George, with his engineering degree and his gold-leafed copy of *King Lear*,

prizes his Western individualism, yet he fails to prove ''beyond a shadow of a doubt that you got nothing from believing in crossed fingers, broken mirrors, spilled salt.'' He thereby serves as a means to guiding skeptical White Western audiences to confirm his stories from the grave. George's color and middle-class status, however, clearly serve to invite unbelieving African-American readers to embrace the tradition of difference in Willow Springs and to resist the trap he fell into: George's death in the hen house comes because he failed to see that Mama Day—who had told him to bring back whatever he found—wanted him to bring to her his own ''gouged and bleeding hands'' in order to save Cocoa. She wanted George to confirm her belief system and to extend his isolated self, by way of his hands, to his dying wife. But his understanding comes too late. In the end, he ''went and did it his way, so he ain't coming back.''

Because there are no White characters in this novel, we could argue that Naylor's concerns are more intraracial than otherwise and that she intends her discussions of gender and class conflicts primarily for an African American readership whose non-Western heritage she wants to confirm. White readers are welcome to come along as a secondary audience if they so desire. However, Naylor, conscious of an African American literary tradition which has been governed by the demands of White reading audiences, is herself revising the works of such writers as [Charles] Chesnutt who were forced to account for a predominantly White readership. By explicitly including the personal narratives of a physically dead man to openly celebrate African traditions, she makes it clear that she is in no way courting a White readership as the primary audience for her novel. Thus when White readers assume their responsibilities of listenership, they do so with a difference: in the performance they are not positioned as master collaborators but, rather, they are reminded that historical presuppositions of their own authority as readers of African-American fiction are being revised.

Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon. ''Hearing Is Believing: Southern Racial Communities and Strategies of Story-Listening.'' *Twentieth Century Literature*. Spring, 1995, pp. 25–26

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NEMEROV, Howard (1920–1991)

Being largely under the sway of Wallace Stevens, Mr. Nemerov has appropriated not only the basic dichotomy of that poet but also his special tactics of treating ideas and perceptions severally and oppositionally. About half of his pieces deal with ''images,'' while the other half are concerned with the ''law,'' i.e., the normative function of the mind. I can discern no methodological connection between the two sets, not even the dialectical one of active contrasts moving toward some kind of synthesis. Not a few of the ''images''—that is, the strictly descriptive or anecdotal pieces—are quite good in their whimsical way; though rarely witty they have to their credit a certain mordancy, acumen, and lightness of touch. Stylistically they hover between Stevens and K. Rexroth, with occasional sallies—no spoils resulting—into Empson's domain. When Mr. Nemerov deals with ideas he is as a rule less satisfactory. . . . Yet, oddly enough, it is in this category that we must look for Nemerov's best poems: ''Warning: Children at Play,'' ''An Old Photograph'' and, particularly, ''Lot's Wife''—poems which suggest that ideation may after all be this poet's forte and that, by turning division of mind and eye into collaboration, he may yet achieve a fine body of poetry.

F.C. Golffing. *Poetry*. Nov., 1947. pp. 96–7

Instead of serving up the usual thinly disguised segment of autobiography, Mr. Nemerov has undertaken for his first novel the much more difficult task of presenting a satiric view of certain phases of contemporary civilization. *The Melodramatists* differs from the run-of-the-mill first novel also in being quite perfectly written and in being managed (after a slow start) with technical assurance. . . . Mr. Nemerov's verbal wit is always satisfactory, and it is pleasant to find a satirist in an early state, with his facility for irreverence not yet impaired by his immersion in the Bhagavad-Gita. Yet his satire would have been more effective if it had been less heavy-handed; it is wasteful to subject all characters, all positions to a uniform attack.

Herbert Barrows. *New York Times Book Section*. April 3, 1949. p. 4

Guide to the Ruins contains only a handful of first-rate poems; too many others lack the discipline of the writer's art. Good pieces are marred by a slovenly intrusion of slang and awkward phrase, and fail, since Mr. Nemerov's superb ear dares not be true to an authentic impulse. He slights accent and rhythm for the sake of being fashionable.

That Mr. Nemerov has an instinct for perfection is quite apparent in his war lyrics. These are organically sustained. What man has made corruptible in this little life is told with mordant wit and savage satire. In ''The Bacterial War,'' ''A Fable of the War,'' ''The Hero Comes Home in His Hamper, and Is Exhibited at the World's Fair'' his anger is controlled; his eye, objective; his spirit, fierce. Intense excitement went into the making of these poems, as in ''Still Life'' and in the psychological double-feature ''Trial and Death''.

I.L. Salomon. *Saturday Review*. July 1, 1950. p. 33

The use of a farcical plot to frame a serious subject may turn out to be characteristic of the present age (Eliot's *Confidential Clerk* provides another example); it is a natural concomitant of contemporary interest in artifice and in such ''artificial'' forms as the heroic couplet. But, while Mr. Nemerov's plot [in *Federigo*] is certainly artificial, he does not seem to be able to get around to doing anything very much with his serious subject. The man who would be wickeder than he is, who actually craves evil as a way of testing the reality of his own existence, is a very fine subject, but Mr. Nemerov tends to fritter it away, though often most amusingly.

Mr. Nemerov is a gifted writer—witty, intelligent, alive, with a sense of style—but probably he is not (or not yet) at his best in fiction. He does not love his characters; they are always threatening to bore him. Only when he gets them under the scalpel is he completely at ease; he runs a very entertaining dissecting room.

The reader who takes *Federigo, or The Power of Love* as a series of essays and observations stapled together by a silly but often amusing plot will find himself by no means unrewarded.

Paul Pickrel. *The Yale Review*. Autumn, 1954. p. xxii

The very anti-climax of the ''plot'' [of *The Homecoming Game*] exposes the underlying meaning of the action proper, which has to do with the corruption in a power state, euphemistically called liberal democracy. Mr. Nemerov set his conflict in a college community rather than in Washington, for example, because the action concerns not the game itself but the failure of the institution of learning in its essential function of instruction, of making leaders (that is our boast) who will reduce the brutal forces of power, in themselves always irresponsible, towards order in the state and felicity in private life. Football is the perfect grounds for this. It is a power game; hence the occasion for the corruption of power or its restraint.

Andrew Lytle. *Sewanee Review*. Winter, 1958. p. 121

When Howard Nemerov was younger it was not evident to his readers or perhaps to Nemerov himself that he would turn into a nature poet. The visible models, from Wordsworth to Frost, seemed as foreign to his intellectual and verbal manners as they could well seem. Indeed it was as a smart (and his elders thought too smart) rebel against the clear outdoor simplicities or the charting of emanations from bushes that he got into verse at all; and his early spirit of unbushiness did not distinguish him much from his contemporaries at Harvard, which he attended, or Yale, which he frequented.

Then came what looked like a change of heart, a change evident in his last volume, *The Salt Garden*. The change was indicated by a new interest in the difficult but relatively straightforward art of description. Against his apparent earlier inclinations he deliberately cultivated the naturalist's as distinguished from the metaphysicist's eye; and if he visited in Vermont he could be found out on long walks naming things. Before the switch he could, to be sure, have been found out on the same walks, but not for the same reason: instead of naming and characterizing the birds about him he would endow them with the trappings of paradox and analogy. After the switch he continued to be interested in paradox and analogy, but he was more grateful for the birds he started with than he had been.

Reed Whittemore. *New Republic*. June 23, 1958. p. 27

. . . reading Mr. Howard Nemerov's *New and Selected Poems* brings Thoreau's prose vividly to mind. These poems may be taken as another example of how intimately the statement of poetry and the statement of prose share the same virtues. Poem after poem in the present volume has sent me back to *Walden*, and everywhere I have been impressed by a similarity that is not, certainly, parallelism, but which exists in a serenity of temperament, a water-clear and air-cool vision of reality, that both writers share. The essence of this temperament is a deep faith in the organic processes of life, a belief not in mere recurrence, but in significant renewal.

Marius Bewley. *Partisan Review*. Jan.-Feb., 1961. p. 141

The adjective for this collection of some sixty poems [*New and Selected Poems*] is *fine*, applicable to craft, intelligence, sympathy, and wit. It would be difficult to imagine so consummate an artificer writing a wholly bad poem—is that a weakness? The urbanity of the tone is often a mask for the depth of the feeling. Syntax, like mind, is supple.

Stanley Kunitz. *Harper's Magazine*. Aug., 1961. p. 90

. . . Mr. Nemerov, as literary critic, is categorically and emphatically a Good Thing. (I don't necessarily mean ''as book reviewer.'') He works close to his texts, whether new or old, whether poetry or prose, and rarely fails to give the impression that he has seen them steadily, generously, fully. Let us suppose that he came upon the task of introducing Longfellow for the Laurel Poetry Series by the Dell paperback outfit, as one generally does come upon these chores, circumstantially. But the appreciation which results (via a good deal of unostentatious hard work) is discriminating and thoughtful, and it has the wholly unexpected result of interesting one in re-reading Longfellow.

Robert Martin Adams. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1964. p. 147

How could anyone, in this day and age, write a novel about writer's block, Doris Lessing once mused. Mr. Nemerov (six books of poetry, five novels) can, and does so by embracing the very method and the very terminology, clinical and unresonant, that one supposed would have made it impossible—those of Freudian psychology. . . .

The novel [*Journal of the Fictive Life*] begins as the journal of a novelist, Felix Ledger, but the mask soon drops and Mr. Nemerov begins, in his own person, to analyze not only the early pages of his own book, but the associations, puns, dreams, and poems that his mind produces as he writes about why he can't write. The book is a sort of ''live'' drama of his wrestling with his own Unconscious, which, after about two hundred pages, he perceives to have blessed him with a kind of ''novel.'' It is also a sort of whodunnit of aesthetics, involving its reader in a suspenseful attempt to answer the question (asked in full awareness of the linkings between life and art), '' 'Mommy, where do images come from?' ''

Mona Van Duyn. *Poetry*. Feb., 1967. pp. 333–4

The versatile American poet Howard Nemerov. . . has an extraordinarily varied body of excellent work to his credit. It ranges from light but telling satirical comment to the very serious, morbidly brilliant sequence ''The Scales of the Eyes,'' and includes touching buffoonery such as ''Lot Later'' (in which the biblical Lot tells his story in the language of a modern American-Jewish businessman) and the archaically elegant, eerie formality of ''The Goose Fish.'' Sheer humane intelligence with a sharply ironic edge carries Nemerov a good distance, and ''The Scales of the Eyes'' reveals a sensibility such as marks the best of the confessional poets—here turned away from the particular events that have scarred the poet's life to the symbolic dream-data of the inward life.

M.L. Rosenthal. *The New Poets* (Oxford). 1967. p. 310

There is nothing on the dust jacket [of *The Blue Swallows*, Nemerov's seventh book of poems] to indicate he has ever been awarded a major prize. If this is true, it is shocking, for he continues to be one of the very best poets writing in English. His poems are not normally marked by the extreme severity of [''Small Moment'']; but I chose it anyway because it seemed to me absolutely awesome. More commonly, his poems are compassionate, witty, and immensely civilized. . . . Nemerov in his poetry shows himself to be clear-headed, unillusioned and affectionate; wry, critical, often funny, and just as often deeply moving. Which is to say that he presents us with a highly intelligent and flexible viewpoint which is busily inspecting what is constantly passing for ''civilization'' right before our eyes. And there is not much that escapes notice. There is scarcely another poet who can show us so well how futile and ridiculous we are.

Anthony Hecht. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1968. p. 214

A man so able to delight in extended comic metaphor is a wise man and desires and easily makes the transition to a more encompassing expression. Over the years, Nemerov has managed to merge his self-satire and satire of the world through the maturation of a special tone—disarmingly colloquial and casual—and sustained irony. The tone, entirely his, allows him to write simply or complicatedly, sarcastically or caustically. The ironic method, also entirely his, eschews the usual tricky and ''incongruous'' lines whereby we normally decide that a poem is ironic; Nemerov's better poems are ironic *line-for-line*. They build; they do not destroy themselves for their effect.

David Galler. *The Carleton Miscellany*. Summer, 1968. p. 112

The difference between the early *Salt Garden* and [Nemerov's] most recent work is not the frustration of vision but its movement directed along a scale reaching from psychology to ontology. Indeed, direction turning into presence felt through all the senses becomes a major overt theme; and although *The Salt Garden* possibly contains more extraordinary poems than any single later volume, a sense of substantial presence increasingly informs his style. In this sense, *Gnomes & Occasions* is clearly an advance. . . .

Nemerov's stylistic parallels his thematic development. His first two books displayed a certain elegance, even a dandyism, derived from Ransom and early Stevens. Although this tone has never been completely dropped, it is in sharp abeyance by *The Salt Garden* and is mostly relegated to satirical uses. What has taken its place and been evolved into a powerful discriminatory instrument, a language to gauge ''the pressure of intelligence'' (in Leavis' phrase), is the plain style, a matter of diction and tone. The foremost practitioners of the plain style in our day are [J. V.] Cunningham, [David] Galler, and Nemerov. The line of descent is from Gascoigne, Fulke Greville, Ben Jonson and tribe, Churchill, some Byron, Landor, some Hardy, Robinson, much Frost, and later Yvor Winters. Plain style must not be confused with so-called ''American Speech'' (comparison of Nemerov's ''Storm Windows'' with just about any William Carlos Williams will write the difference large) nor slang (i.e., the bulk of our poetry since circa 1956). Plain style seldom if ever has recourse to colloquialism or the poetical. It tends away from local resonance, though it may be resounding enough as it builds up its effects over the whole of a poem.

Robert Stock. *Parnassus*. Fall–Winter, 1973. pp. 158, 160

If one could choose a word to describe Nemerov's art, one would have to settle for a coinage somewhere between *civilized* and *right*. But it is invariably civility with flair. You sense it whether he is writing about a recording of Casals playing Bach . . . or commencing on that void that is more than mere absence. . . .

Perhaps one of the strongest facets of Nemerov's talent emerges in his satirical poems, many of them quite short but all with the pith that characterized a poem of his called ''Boom!'' some years back. It is here that the poems flourish with the kind of inevitability and ineluctability that poems must have to leave us thinking that they are absolutely beyond improvement or paraphrase.

Samuel Hazo. *Commonweal*. Oct. 19, 1973. p. 67

Howard Nemerov is one contemporary poet who has interested himself in the elaboration of a distinct tradition in English poetry, that of the secular contemplative lyric. For Nemerov . . . the sources of poetry lie ''far out in the sea of tradition and the mind, even in the physiological deeps,'' as he puts it in *The Measure of Poetry*, a prose poem in his latest collection which explains a great deal about his attitude and method of composition. For Nemerov, measure is an elemental order, which he compares to the rhythm of the tide, and which is acted upon in the process of writing by ''the objects which are to appear in the poem.'' This dynamic working relationship between basal constancy and individual variousness yields ''moments of freedom, moments of chaos,'' ''relations which it may be that number alone could enrage into being''; that is, without the underlying, reassuring sense of order provided by rhythm, we perhaps could not afford to tolerate wildness, nonsense, fine excess.

This is not a reading of the world with which everyone will agree; but even a superficial appraisal of this witty and deft collection, Nemerov's ninth, will reveal that *The Measure of Poetry* is a distillation of long experience, and not empty theorizing. In more than seventy expertly lucid, pungent, and economically managed lyrics, Nemerov makes use of ''the objects'' of contemporary upper-middle-class life—its games, its gadgets, its intellectual enterprises—as well as of nature, as occasions for an unending flow of gently ironic observations on the flux of personality in the continuum of history. Nemerov is both urbane and humane—not always necessarily a congenial combination; he is Horatian in his perspective, academic in his precision. His poems do something we're not accustomed to these days; they aim at the articulation of what it is not unfair to call a kind of rarefied commonplace. . . .

Nemerov's modesty of diction reminds me at times of his contemporary, [Randall] Jarrell; but Jarrell's poetry, passionately involved with the theme of change, was prolix and effusive where Nemerov, who seems really to be writing about the *status quo* from a far more conventionally remote and professional vantage point, is felicitous and neat. This kind of calm straightforwardness goes against the noisy self-advertising mainstream of current writing, and it deserves praise and attention for that. There's genuine intelligence and feeling here, and the fact that the verse doesn't call

attention to itself—except, perhaps, by dint of its polish—is part of the point. *The Western Approaches* affords pleasures close to those which belong to music that is playful, various, and elegantly resolved.

Jonathan Galassi. *Poetry*. Dec., 1976, pp. 164–65

Howard Nemerov's poetry in *The Western Approaches* is a poetry mostly of saying rather than singing, even when it speaks of the power of traditional, transcendent song. The saying includes some skilled modes of speech, in some of the best poems, notably ''Learning the Trees'' and ''A Cabinet of Seeds Displayed'' (the kinship of subject is nearer essence than accident), reaching a firm and fair contemplation, mastered in technique, with an important, reverberant something to say. The reverberation comes from understanding quietly won. The book also offers fine poetry of physical description, and some high song.

The book, then, is important in itself, and in its place in the development of one of America's best and most highly reputed men of letters. Since the book is important, I shall take it seriously and, thus, disapprove some. Mostly I shall attempt to define what constitutes Nemerov's typical style, attitude, metrical convention.

His style, in deep intertwining with attitude, is witty, analogical, speculative, and uncertain. Yet it is also nostalgic and reverential, especially toward great past poetry and music; also slangy, chatty, obscene; with some unusual combining. The uncertainty underlies, interlaces, and unlaces much of the rest. . . .

The book may well be Nemerov's best book of poems, which ranks it high. Too much is still too ready of wit, merely and pointlessly if cleverly speculative, self-mockingly relaxed, curiously analogical. Who else but Nemerov would devote a whole, rather carefully written poem to asking whether the fishing hook or the question mark is upside down? But, then, who but Nemerov would be apt to notice the reversed likeness? It's the lively and observant intelligence that occasions the problem. Nemerov is conscious of the difficulty and has answered the charge ''that my poems are jokes, even bad jokes'' by saying ''I incline to agree, insisting, however, that they are bad jokes, and even terrible jokes, emerging from the nature of things.'' The pun on *bad joke* is a pretty good joke, but not a sufficient defense. At least to me his jokes seldom sound expressive (as those of Randall Jarrell's sometimes do) of a desperate-absurdity-locked-into-the-tears-of-things. . . . The best work—excellent physical description; the controlled variety and feeling of ''The Backward Look''; the intricate, precisely registered intelligence that in ''A Cabinet of Seeds Displayed'' reaches contemplative poetry of the first rank; the greatly haunting conclusion of ''Boy With Book of Knowledge,'' the fine completeness of ''The Consent''—requires high praise and much gratitude. For Nemerov more than most poets, his best is the enemy of his many-skilled normal; he is too near to poetic greatness to step modestly away.

Paul Ramsey. *Parnassus*. Spring/Summer, 1976, pp. 130–31, 137–38

Introspection is not a mood in Nemerov's work. It is the very atmosphere of his world, which becomes finally a corridor of mirrors—like the great hall at Versailles—in which the mind is seen gliding through the void. Searching for friendship, the mind finds only itself. Trying on the shapes of the external world in an unending masquerade, the mind finds fascination and satisfaction, if not companionship, in creatures that are, metaphysically, at least, smaller than itself. The most abiding of these creatures are found in the natural world. Few of the poems concern Nemerov's relationship with people and even the novels and short stories portray people from a distance. Nemerov has discussed his reticence about drawing on personal relationships in the *Journal of the Fictive Life*. When he does write about personal relationships, as in the poem about his sister's suicide in *Gnomes & Occasions*, his approach is restrained and indirect—even if ultimately moving.

Nemerov's supposed narrowness is simply a reflection of his cultivated pursuit of what interests and preoccupies him as a poet and novelist. He is a contemplative writer whose primary interest is in the process of contemplation itself. No modern writer has more eloquently traced the subtle emanations of consciousness and its shadowy journeying through the fine membrane of language out into the strangeness of the external world. In this connection he told an interviewer in 1966 that possibly the ''only significance that anyone was ever able to rely on, in thought at any rate, was the love of the world, terrifying as it is, that connected him to it by means of the word.'' In retrospect the novels, stories, and poems coalesce in the light of this observation. His interest has continually been in the excitement caused when the pliable but domineering mind comes up against the hard surface of the external world. With breadth of vision he has shown the results of this collision to be simultaneously pathetic and absurd. The pathos and absurdity are symbolic of a whole range of ambivalences that allow one to see Nemerov as a religious poet with no religion, a philosophical poet with no philosophy, and a satirist filled with compassion.

Nemerov's strength lies in the persuasiveness with which he articulates these ambivalences and in the clarity with which he brings the complex refractions of consciousness within vivid reach of the senses. Paradoxically, it is often his most cerebral poems that engage the senses most provocatively, as in ''The Town Dump'' and ''Brainstorm.'' It is as if in his lifelong effort to unite inner and outer worlds he stretches himself on such occasions to sustain the fine balance between the sensible and the immaterial. In both poetry and prose he has shown an absorbing interest in the experimenting mind. Challenged by the monotony of their society and by the obdurate silence of the physical world, his fictional characters and poetic narrators react to their plight with originality and panache. Nemerov gives them depth, moreover, in revealing the disaffection and hunger that linger after their most brilliant intellectual excursions. In this respect as in others. Nemerov has, without especially trying to do so, trenchantly captured the spirit of his time.

Ross Labrie. *Howard Nemerov* (Twayne, 1980). pp. 144–46

[Howard] Nemerov bases his model of the short novel on his study of more than a dozen classic texts: e.g., *Notes from the Underground*, *Billy Budd*, *Death in Venice*, and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. He extracts from these texts a predominant theme and a characteristic action essential to the genre. The theme of identity represents the conceptual basis, and the action can be reduced to the following pattern: two people become attached to and dependent upon each other to the extreme of some life-or-death predicament, so that only a difficult decision (choice, crisis) can dissolve their bond and at

least one can be saved. Life itself depends upon this decision. The author of the short novel composes a story that develops the theme of identity and character interdependence. . . .

Surprisingly, Nemerov goes on to assert that the protagonist of the short novel . . . though seemingly the victim of ''fate'' should be regarded as also a victim of a literary style or of the principles of composition itself.

Eugene Hollahan. *Studies in the Novel*. Summer, 1988, pp. 173–74

Ultimately, Nemerov is concerned not only with the figurative *possibilities* of science—its usefulness as a source of metaphors—but also with its figurative *nature* and its mythic properties. . . .

Throughout the *Collected Poems* there is considerable tension between the belief that language is powerful to comprehend and order and the conviction that there are limits to its power. . . . Here the metaphor—the world as writing—both does and does not succeed. Language *does* describe and circumscribe the world, but imperfectly. This realization leads to more sustained speculation, in poems and essays alike, on the power and the limits of language. In the course of that speculation, Nemerov turns again to science.

Miriam Marty Clark. *Mosaic*. Fall, 1990, pp. 38–39

As a poet, Nemerov tended to perplex critics. He never fit into any of the prominent (or, for that matter, obscure) categories they are inclined to impose. His books, from *The Image and the Law* (1947) to the penultimate *War Stories* (1987), contain a bewildering mélange of poetic types: lengthy philosophical musings on nature, language, and human life; tone paintings (''Somber November in amber and umber embering out''); humorous little squibs he called ''gnomes''; and lethal jabs at cultural sacred cows like Santa Claus and ''classic'' cars. . . .

Trying Conclusions allows us to appraise Nemerov more clearly than ever before, not only because it marks the closure of his long career, but because it contains the finest examples of the late work. Past misreadings of him as a primarily cerebral figure or the folksy ''Son of Frost'' cannot endure the book's witness. The poems bring into sharp focus a man of deep feeling who believed that our thoughts are intertwined with our emotions, and that compassion is demonstrated, not emoted, in poetry as in life. Reading these works, moreover, one realizes how many of today's younger poets have internalized aspects of his voice.

Phoebe Pettingell. *New Leader*. Dec. 30, 1991, pp. 27–28

Howard's poems, like crafted objects, are also statements of loss. The corset is the ruin of the whale. The model, as a representation, is a token of the absence of what it copies. The poem, on the other hand, would seem to lead us to larger subjects: the whales and wars. . . . Yet the poem does so—and this is how it is a kind of ruin—while keeping a sense of the elusiveness of the larger thing seen. For these things, even as they're evoked, remain ineffably distant and strange. They are under the sea, like the whales or like Middlemas and Prince, the two submerged airmen of Howard's early poem ''For the Squadron.'' . . . Or, like the mud turtle, disappearing at the end of the beautiful poem called ''The Mud Turtle.''

Alexander Nemerov. *American Scholar*. Autumn, 1993, p. 552

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NIEBUHR, Reinhold (1892–1971)

The big mystery about Niebuhr, of course, is how on earth he gets away with it. He is popular, handsome, and polished, but unmarried. He is a member of a traditionally conservative denomination, but is forever saying things that are radical and iconoclastic. He lives in Detroit and doesn't hesitate to criticize Henry Ford and Big Business in general; yet he somehow avoids the wrath of the conservative press. He is pessimistic and gloomy—Edgar DeWitt Jones calls him ''our American Dean Inge''—but his pessimism is somehow productive of hope and prophetic of progress. He is a caustic and merciless critic of the church's faults, and the church loves him for it. . . .

If you are satisfied with the church as she is at present, you won't like this book [*Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*] at all. If you are too tired or too lazy to think, you won't like it, either. But if you do like it, you won't think Niebuhr especially cynical or especially tame. His cynicism is not sneering, and his tameness is not docility.

Charles Stafford Brown. *Survey*. Oct. 15, 1929. p. 106

Reinhold Niebuhr's method in these related essays [*Reflections on the End of an Era*] is to compare prevailing attitudes and tendencies and, by analogy and differentiation, to discriminate their relations and functions. Thus there emerges a series of nicely balanced ratios between reason and impulse, religion and politics, mythology and history, individualism and collectivism, liberalism and radicalism, democracy and revolution, Christianity and Communism. Mr. Niebuhr may be described as a Christian realist who sees clearly and appraises justly, giving its due weight to each of the two elements by which human fate is determined, nature and spirit.

Robert Morss Lovett. *New Republic*. April 18, 1934. p. 288

Like his friend Paul Tillich—who has now become his colleague at Union Seminary—Niebuhr has always lived ''on the boundary'' between rival currents of thought. A German-American, well-grounded in the conservative traditions of the Lutheran and Reformed churches but equally versed in the political philosophy of John Dewey and the intricacies of the American labor movement, he has for years been reading Continental theology and applying it to the American scene. This practice has long since led him to view his native America with a detached and somewhat ironical gaze. It has also led him to criticize the Continental point of view from the American angle. The result—to employ his favorite term—has been the development of a powerful ''tension'' in his mind, where Europe and America are perpetually tugging in opposite directions. So long as America continues to tug he will never go completely orthodox in the Barthian sense. So long as Europe continues to tug he will never cease to pull American theology toward a deeper appreciation of the truth in orthodoxy. In all his recent books, orthodoxy and liberalism are made to carry on a continuous process of mutual criticism which should be for the ultimate benefit of both.

Walter M. Horton. *American Scholar*. Jan., 1938. pp. 9–10

The book [*The Nature and Destiny of Man*] is not easy reading; Dr. Niebuhr's sentences are apt to run statelily into extremes of length. And the reader must be content to accept his implied definitions. . . . Accepting these limitations for the sake of the book, we may admire Dr. Niebuhr's survey of the varieties of the image of himself which man has found. He recounts the classic and the rationalistic, the romantic and the modern. He devotes the second half of the book to a consideration of the Christian view, and quotes Augustine's epigrammatic definition of the whole problem: ''Therefore is the mind too strait to contain itself.''

Charles Williams. *Image of the City, and Other Essays* (Oxford). 1958. p. 144. [1942]

Reinhold Niebuhr's new orthodoxy is the oldtime religion put through the intellectual wringer. It is a re-examination of orthodoxy for an age dominated by such trends as rationalism, liberalism, Marxism, fascism, idealism and the idea of progress.

It is customary to say that Niebuhr's books are hard reading. But any person of average patience can find out what he is saying in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*.

Like Karl Barth's, his method is dialectic; that is, he sees in paradox not the defeat of logic but the grist of an intellectual calculus—a necessary climbing tool for attempting the higher peaks of thought. The twists & turns of his reasoning and his wary qualifications are not hedging, but the effort to clamber after truth. . . .

Clearly it is not a faith for the tender-minded. It is a faith for a Lenten age. Even those who fail to follow all the sinuosities of his reasoning must sense that, whatever else he has done or left undone. Niebuhr has restored to Protestantism a Christian virility.

[Whittaker Chambers]. *Time*. March 8, 1948. pp. 71, 76

Niebuhrism may be defined as uniting material social improvements with a return to traditional religion. He unites them by stressing human depravity, whose secular analogue is the deep sadness of history. This same man on the same way can address a socially optimistic rally of Americans for Democratic Action and deliver a theologically pessimistic sermon on evil. No wonder Niebuhrism has its left-wing and its right-wing deviationists. At the point where both invite sarcasm by racing beyond their master's gospel, the former may be labeled the Extroverted Progressors, the latter the Introspective Brooders. *The Irony of American History* should be read in the light of this split. . . . it is a brilliant philosophical synthesis of his social conscience with his other-worldly conscience. Spiritual love is his solution. By embracing both God and neighbor, Christian love ends the schizophrenia between the social and the mystical parts of human nature.

Peter Viereck. *New York Times Book Section*. April 6, 1952. p. 1

For events like those at Buchenwald have not merely aroused moral feelings; they have stupefied them. Terms like ''murder'' do not cover their impersonality, terms like ''mass hysteria'' or ''lunacy'' fail to convey their planned, organized, and premeditated efficiency. Mr. Niebuhr comes to us in these circumstances, when we feel that we do not even have the words to express our feelings, and speaks to us of ''the self which stands outside itself and the world [and] cannot find the meaning of life in itself or the world.'' He provides us with a metaphysical image of our sense of impotence and estrangement. With his emphasis on ''the essential homelessness of the human spirit,'' Mr. Niebuhr speaks for the displaced and unemployed conscience of our times. . . . Mr. Niebuhr's philosophy of history does what any good sermon should do. It makes the individual take the problems of the world into his own heart; it makes him feel responsible for what happens; and it redeems him from his sense of helplessness and unimportance by making him feel that his struggle with his own soul is the essential element in social change.

But for all the poignancy and pertinence of Mr. Niebuhr's ideas, for all that they share in mood and theme with our present sense of the push and pressure of things, one cannot avoid the conclusion that, in the end, they obfuscate and mislead and confuse. To disabuse us of the belief that reason and good will have a cosmic guarantee behind them, it is not necessary to show that there is a cosmic conspiracy against these ideals. This is the same undisciplined romanticism, merely turned inside out.

Charles Frankel. *The Case for Modern Man* (Harper). 1955. pp. 113–14

Niebuhr's reasoning is not deductive and systematic but empirical and pragmatic—once again in the American style. He is always testing theoretical constructions against experience. He is primarily a critical thinker, rushing on to indicate a truth, not stopping to formalize it. Therefore his style may leave something to be desired. He is never a definitional writer, carefully polishing his terms and relating them to one another in a system; rather he points to truth that can be observed, sometimes using sweeping generalizations to point to it. . . . Niebuhr's insight depends upon the faith and the community of faith of which he is a part. He is a product of American Protestant Christianity.

William Lee Miller. *The Reporter*. Jan. 13, 1955. p. 14

Niebuhr's whole theological burden grew from his surprise at the depth of the social problems he encountered as a young pastor in Detroit during and after the First World War. The changes which the assembly line introduced went far beyond the field of economics and radically effected the self-understanding of the worker and his relation to his environment. Niebuhr, equipped with the neat moralism of traditional liberalism, found himself absolutely unable to cope with the real problems of his congregation.

This led him, over the course of the years, to see that the problem of man is not to be solved merely by knowledge, progress, improvement or evolution. Man's problem is sin, in the full Biblical understanding of the word. With this foundation, Niebuhr was able to diagnose the troubles of the modern world as springing from, and in turn aggravating, man's unique predicament which expresses itself as sin.

The radical understanding of the problem then led him to look for a radical solution, and taking Christianity more seriously than did the majority of its advocates, he was brought to an appreciation of atonement and justification by faith, in their true Biblical relevance.

Hans Hofman. *The Theology of Reinhold Neibuhr* (Scribner). 1956. p. 3

Reinhold Niebuhr's social ethics are close to the center of his thought. The center is doubtless to be found in his theology; but, more than with other theologians, his theology has developed in response to his reading of contemporary history and to his reflections upon his own social and political responsibility in that history. His thought as a whole is a unity. His theology is in immediate control over his social ethics; but there is here no one-way deductive process, for in large measure his theology has developed as he has sought answers to problems which first became acute for him as a teacher of ethics and as a participant in public affairs. Both his theology and social ethics have deep roots in personal faith, in what he calls ''Biblical faith.'' This personal faith, about which he is generally reticent, is best expressed in his prayers and in his sermons. The unity of his thought can be seen in the way the same central convictions appear in many different types of writing, in his formal books, in his sermons, and in his countless articles and editorials. One unusual characteristic of his writings is the way in which he expresses the same insight sometimes in the context of explicitly Christian theology and sometimes in articles in secular journals without any such Christian reference.

John C. Bennett in *Reinhold Niebuhr*, edited by Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (Macmillan). 1956. p. 46

So far as Niebuhr's relation to the general history of philosophy is concerned, we may place him squarely in the great American tradition of pragmatism. He is the grateful heir of William James, and the understandably uncomfortable colleague of John Dewey. It was William James who ripped open the bandbox universe to give us a pluralistic universe, and to affirm the potency therein of man's free will. It was John Dewey who put pragmatism under the discipline of experimental science, and celebrated the glories of freed intelligence. It is Reinhold Niebuhr who has given pragmatism breadth and depth and height of vision, richness and subtlety and scope of texture, by placing it within the heroic perspective of the Christian faith. Niebuhr cannot accept James's idolatry of the human will, or Dewey's idolatry of human intelligence. Niebuhr knows only one absolute: the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, for all the differences in sensitivity and in insight, these three men belong together, in methodology and in metaphysics, like variations upon a common theme.

Robert E. Fitch in *Reinhold Niebuhr*, edited by Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (Macmillan). 1956. pp. 308–9

Readers of any of Niebuhr's books need not be reminded that he too believes that there is no explaining things by reference to a fixed and given human nature. Man is largely what he becomes; he isn't ready-made at the first. There are no fixed structures of nature or reason or history which man does not transcend by virtue of his spiritual freedom. What Niebuhr actually objects to when he rejects the idea of natural law is the view ordinarily associated with it, that human nature conforms wholly to stable structures and nicely reposes within discoverable limits. The thread running through Niebuhr's criticism of naturalism, rationalism and romanticism in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* is his contention that man's self-transcending freedom rises above the limits or even the vitalities of physical nature and above the patterns of reason or the uniquely individual organic structures discovered by romantic idealism. Man stands before possibilities for action which are not to be calculated in terms of the potentialities of a fixed essential nature of any sort. His freedom means that his self-understanding affects what he is or is to become; and he grasps after possibilities envisaged only when, from the heights of self-transcending consciousness of himself and the present historical actuality, he seeks to reshape both himself and his social environment.

Paul Ramsey in *Reinhold Niebuhr*, edited by Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (Macmillan). 1956. pp. 82–3

This is a time dominated by fear, and Dr. Niebuhr seems to be expressing the scared reaction to the overconfidence of the last century. The economic unity of the world, which has created a community of interest between the nations, has been a reality for less than fifty years. Not many of its peoples are psychologically prepared to surrender parochial interests to world interests. They are not ready for the responsibilities and duties that they will have to undertake as members of the international community. They are afraid of the changes that living in an international commonwealth may inflict on national patterns of life. Dr. Niebuhr's defeatism seems to suggest that the effort to make such a world state is not worth making because the limitations of human nature foredoom the attempt to failure. His line of thought provides an excuse for not trying, and for evading the great new problems of government and equity that the idea of a world state presents. He offers moral justifications for taking the easy and timid way out.

Anthony West. *Principles and Persuasions* (Harcourt). 1957. p. 184

The centrality of Christology in Niebuhr's thought is clear and unmistakable. This is somewhat remarkable in one whose major task has been focused on the Christian view of man to the extent that he is not infrequently (though not very wisely) referred to as an

''anthropologian,'' and perhaps especially in one who has contributed so notably to political and social analysis. This may be one of the surprising things about Niebuhr, but there is no gainsaying the fact that it is precisely because his social, political, and ethical inquiries are Christologically controlled, and indeed a working out of the meaning of Christology in ever wider realms of experience, that Niebuhr's thought has gained for Christianity a new relevance in surprising quarters in our time.

Gordon Harland. *The Thought of Reinhold Neibuhr* (Oxford). 1960. p. 13

Sometimes a by-product in the world of history turns out well for mankind, in which case Niebuhr may refer to it as providence; sometimes it turns out badly for mankind, in which case he may refer to it as judgment. . . . Certainly what is true of the world of the atom, where human freedom is irrelevant, is doubly true of the world of history where human freedom is thoroughly relevant: there, inevitably, in addition to the results we can plan, there are results we cannot. Sometimes the latter are logically explicable by hindsight; sometimes they remain paradoxical. Most irksome of all, perhaps, is the discovery that the chief prizes in life do not come primarily by planning. Whether it is happiness or self-realization, love or virtue, that we seek, we find that it is less likely to come as a result of direct effort than as a by-product of devotion to something else. . . . Indeed one person's calculation may set up a reaction in the other person that destroys the potential of love. Niebuhr deliberately uncovers various forms of what he calls ''imperialism'' in personal life, whether parental, marital, or ministerial. And the conscious or unconscious effort to manipulate other people under the guise of love must often, he says, be resisted in the name of justice.

June Bingham. *Courage to Change* (Scribner). 1961. pp. 38–9

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NIN, Anais (1903–1977)

The virtue of Miss Nin's writing, in a time of ''human winter,'' is that by its exclusive preoccupation with the intimate problems of feminine psychology, it is concerned with an aspect of human values as such. Her style, moreover, in its use of fairly broad emotive language and in the expression it gives to feeling and sentiment, possesses a certain *Innerlichkeit*, an air of immediate reality, for lack of which so much of modern American writing is dying such a hideous, choking death. But Miss Nin approaches the human by way of psychoanalysis. . . . The task she assigns to literature seems to be no more than to present and amplify the insights of psychoanalysis.

Isaac Rosenfeld. *New Republic*. Dec. 17, 1945. pp. 844–5

She is fascinated in a simplified psychoanalytic way with waking fantasies, with ego-ideals, and our pictures of ourselves as they affect our relations with others. Except for occasional flashes into the past, she does not work out articulated case histories. She omits what can be directly observed and objectively reported. She does not look at scenes and faces like a photographer or even a painter. . . . What Miss Nin records are subjective states, configurations of character, the fields of electric tension, movement and resistance in human relationships. She defines these with elegance and insight in apothegmatic general statements of a sometimes pretentious sort. . . The result is an abstract, psychic music, a dance of generalities and types, charming and suggestive in a narrowly romantic way.

Robert Gorham Davis. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 23, 1947. p. 36

Miss Nin's flavorful words are as piquant and stimulating to one's mental taste as exotic, highly seasoned foods to one's palate. Her constant psychoanalyzing of characters never lags. In these two characteristics lie the fascination of her writing. The present book (*The Four-Chambered Heart*) considered man's dual nature, i.e., of construction and destruction as brought out by the two women in his life. The characterizations are fuller, less impressionistic and less sketchy than in her previous writings. The story is closer knit, attaining a wholeness, an entity absent from Miss Nin's other books. There is the same swiftness of rhythm and fluidity of movement—Miss Nin's artistic label.

Elizabeth P. Nichols. *Library Journal*. Dec. 1, 1949. p. 1818

Anais Nin is, as Edmund Wilson has said, ''a world of feminine perception and feminine fancy''; a world, too, in which the iron curtain between the ego and the unconscious is continually pierced. . . . The effects achieved by Miss Nin's writing—poetic prose of singular vitality and beauty-reminded me, rather strongly, of the dance. *The Four-Chambered Heart* evokes the grace-in-motion and the elegant patterns, the emotional directness and dreamlike aura of a classical ballet.

Charles J. Rolo. *Atlantic Monthly*. Feb., 1950. p. 87

A Spy in the House of Love is . . . a sensitive and discerning fable of a woman's love life, which manages to compress within a very brief compass some of the rewards and almost too many of the anguishes of passion for its own sake. . . . We begin to realize that Miss Nin is one of the few women writers in our literary tradition to affirm the centrality of the biological impulses for her own sex, and on the same terms as for men.

The point is also that she is prepared to describe these emotions from the feminine point of view with the same ruthless honesty that marked a D. H. Lawrence or a Dreiser.

Maxwell Geismar. *The Nation*. July 24, 1954. pp. 75–6

It would be hazardous to speculate on the relation of this fiction to Anais Nin's diary without the privilege of reading the diary; but it would be equally hazardous to attempt to assess the failure of the fiction without taking into account the effect of the diary-writing habit on her art. A diary is not a work of art, and the very qualities that make a diary most successful are largely antithetical to the aims of art. In ''Un Etre Etoilique'' (*The Cosmological Eye*) and ''More About Anais Nin'' (*Sunday After the War*) Henry Miller speaks of the devastating honesty and the complete lack of malice in her journal; of the gargantuan inclusiveness and the complete self-absorption of the reverie; and of the fluid, undersea sinking of the narrative personality, so that each time one thinks the personality has reached rock-bottom, it reveals deeper and darker vistas. Without the disciplined control that is synonymous with art, such honesty becomes vulgarity, the lack of malice seems a lack of standards, the inclusiveness looks flabby, and the self-absorption leaves the reader puzzled and uncertain, since he—by what must be one of the most elementary laws of epistemology—does not share the same self.

Frank Baldanza. *Minnesota Review*. Winter, 1962. pp. 270–1

Henry Miller, with understandable partiality and consistent exuberance, has described Miss Nin's diaries as destined to take their place beside the confessions of St. Augustine, Petronius, Abelard, Rousseau, and Proust. Whether this is true of the millions of unpublished words we cannot say; but the present ''sampling'' offers a modulated and low-pitched portrait of the early Depression years in Paris after most American expatriates had fled. The myth of D. H. Lawrence prevailed; and life in the Villa Seurat had not yet become the Miller-Durrell legend. Miss Nin is a child of the Lawrentian revolt and of the Surrealists, that phase of the movement which looked inwardly into the distortions of the dream. Literary history will probably place her with that last backwater of Romanticism before World War II.

Leon Edel. *Saturday Review*. May 7, 1966. p. 91

This sorrow, the loss of her father who represented a cosmopolitan world of art and society, is behind not only the diary but behind those strange, beautiful novels now collectively called *Cities of the Interior*. Because a girl of eleven lost a father whom she feared even as she loved, the journal and her fiction are born. The men of her novels and short stories are adumbrated by this father-figure—floating, ambiguous, loved, hated, obfuscating the day, bringing on the dream that is so characteristic of those novels hovering on the borderline of the surreal.

Everywhere throughout the diary the compulsions of the artist are in evidence, and I say this even though Miss Nin's friends, and analysts, frequently saw the compulsion to keep the diary as an evasion and obstacle to artistic fulfillment. It seems to me that the diary in its obsession with the real, the momentary, the active and the psychic compelled the writer to experience the same submission to the disciplined will that the artist experiences in the making of any artifact—the same inevitable failures of comprehension, the same realization of the need to face the terrors of beauty, even those emerging from the kind of sordidness and dirt that Henry Miller, a leading character in the diary, encouraged Miss Nin to experience.

Harriet Zinnes. *American Scholar*. Winter, 1966–67. p. 152

She writes in her diary to establish that self lost by being a mirror to others; she writes also not only to save her own point of view but to project it. But when she keeps on arguing for the diary form, claiming it is more truthful than the novel, when she courts a kind of mirror intimacy, she falls into self-idealizings and self-justifications. . . .

In the first volume a larger design energized the parts: the explorations of psychoanalysis with Otto Rank (who reappears in the early section of this volume, as a close friend); the meeting with her father, Joaquin Nin, whom she had not seen since her early childhood; the new friendship with Henry Miller and the world he introduced her to. This section of the diary [volume two] is, as it were, midstream, and like many a middle section, it has its difficulties. A question of slackening pace or drive? The observations accumulate without that kind of economy that a good letter has, addressed as it is to another, who may become impatient if it goes on too long. The sense of the dialogue of the self with the self is often lost; she is carried away even from the realities of her most subjective experiences on a flight of language.

Jean Garrigue. *New York Times Book Section*. July 16, 1967. pp. 4–5

A few preliminary words need to be said about some of the typical characteristics of Miss Nin's novels and style. It may be observed that the unity which Miss Nin achieves is accomplished largely through three devices: (1) recurring characters, symbols, and motifs; (2) direct and indirect psychological analysis; and (3) the result of the first two: the definition of a single primary character. Curiously, each of these devices is used in Miss Nin's *Diary* also, but . . . with much more success than in her fiction.

Style, an amorphous subject at best, is conspicuously and consistently one of the attractive qualities of Miss Nin's art. The originality of her diction, imagery, and symbolism has led some to charge her with being too esoteric, but I think that one will find, upon close examination of her works, that she seldom introduces extraneous words and images into her writing, and that unity is a chief characteristic of nearly all her works. Miss Nin's rich vocabulary enables her, especially in the *Diary*, to make her pronouncements and descriptions clearly and precisely. In all of her writing she is sensitive to rhythm (and the idea of rhythm, movement, is a key symbol in her art), sensitive to rich and sensual images.

Duane Schneider. *Southern Review*. Spring, 1970. pp. 506–7

Miss Nin's diaries emphasize her resort to frequent bouts of psychoanalysis to rescue her from the desperate restrictions of an untrammeled life. Absorbed in narcissism, she flounders among

the multitude of selves she perceives. Committed to fantasies of feminine power, she involves herself therefore in endless responsibilities to others. Her self-display requires an audience, her audience makes demands, her freedom eludes her. Her relationships lead her back only to herself. It seems a strangely symbolic fact that her husband has disappeared, apparently by his request, from her published diaries. The stillborn fetus might, for all we are told, be a virgin birth: the figure of Anaïs Nin, surrounded by others, exists nonetheless in a terrifying isolation of self-concern.

Patricia Meyer Spacks. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1971–2. p. 564

Anais Nin is one of the most extraordinary and unconventional writers of this century. Her vast diary, which encompasses some 50 years of human relationships, resembles no other in the history of letters, and as a novelist she has been distinctly catalytic. With her direct knowledge of the mechanics of psychoanalysis, she conveyed the even flow of uncensored speech in a series of prose writings which constitute one continuous novel. Collected under the title, *Cities of the Interior*, these writings in fiction are so detached from historical epoch, and the topography of her inner spaces so remote from the naturalistic landscapes of her fellow novelists of the 1940's and 1950's that they might well have been left untouched as a legacy for future generations, had not the publication of her diaries, beginning in 1966, brought her into full public view, earned her a sizable American audience, and a particularly remarkable popularity with younger readers. . . .

If conversation and letter writing project the psyche outward, a continuously flowing interior monologue provides the channel for self-analysis. The splicing of dialogue and monologue, and the determining of their relationship to each other, are important features of Anais Nin's artistry. As she reports people's confessions, as she reveals their letters to her, she manages to bypass the kind of gossip and anecdote that we have learned to expect from diarists. Imagine a conversation in which nothing unimportant is ever uttered, where each bit of dialogue is crucial, digs deep into vital issues, where each meeting occurs at times of heightened awareness!

Anna Balakian. *New York Times Book Section*. Jan. 16, 1972. p. 28

Like Anaïs Nin's fiction, her Diary is also a collage composition. The assembled elements are the bits and pieces of her life: fragile evocations of her feelings; her victories over herself; her occasional moods of despair; richly detailed portraits of the people who moved her, inviting friendship and compassionate analysis, or provoking her disapproval and critical analysis; passages from books and letters; passionate declarations of her aspirations as a writer; passages brilliantly describing the psychological problems of the artist; sharp observations of the cultural patterns of America; and fascinating accounts of Nin's own repeated journeys into psychoanalysis. Selected from the mass of materials of the unpublished diary, the passages that comprise each published volume are themselves a collage composition presenting a phase in the life of their creator.

Nin's Diary, a work of art in itself, possesses special importance for those who are intrigued by the creative process. Because this Diary exists, we can see exactly how Nin's fiction was made. Even greater insights may someday be available to those who are able to study the unedited manuscripts. But a comparison of the present version of the Diary with the fiction reveals first, and perhaps most strikingly, Anaïs Nin's insistent need to preserve her experience, the stuff of her life, by recording it with astonishing dedication, even passion. The intensity and power of this need explains why Henry Miller and Otto Rank were unsuccessful in their attempts to free Nin of the diary. The diary *was* her life, her inner life, which the circumstances of her outer life prevented from receiving full expression. This need to preserve her experience, to protect it from alteration, change, or loss, proves the depth and strength of Anaïs Nin's creative will and inadvertently demonstrates one of the theories of her most famous analyst, Otto Rank. . . .

As she has repeatedly told her readers, Anaïs Nin's most valuable resource as an artist is her own complex self. Picking and choosing from the many and varied experiences of this self, she has created her ingenious books by combining elements that would not be found together in traditional fiction. She welds odds and ends of experience into collage compositions with the intensity of her personal vision of self and reality. As she has grown and changed, so have her books, reflecting the life that gave rise to them, just as the life has fed upon and been nourished by the books.

The quest that is traced again and again in Nin's writings actually involves a very radical concept: the abandonment of the idea of the self as a given fixed entity or essence. We create ourselves as we live, Nin explains poetically in her books and in the example of her own life that is revealed in the Diary. The idea of the self as a collage of experiences is central to Nin's psychological vision. Max Ernst, in writing of collage, quotes André Breton: '''Who knows if we are not somehow preparing ourselves to escape from the principle of identity?'''

Sharon Spencer. *Collage of Dreams: The Writings of Anaïs Nin* (Swallow/Ohio Univ. Pr., 1977). pp. 6–7, 17

Approaching Nin's *Diary* is difficult; the fact that it consists of edited versions of her original entries places it somewhat in a category of its own. A curious blend of direct access to a younger psyche or self, but with elements deemed unimportant edited out by the same psyche grown older, Nin's *Diary* has as little affinity with the retrospective reminiscences of an older Benjamin Franklin as it does with the daily entries of a Samuel Pepys. Indeed, one sometimes wonders whether Nin's *Diary* is not closer to fiction than autobiography, since in view of her deliberate omission of certain figures and aspects of her life, what we are really given here is the life of a ''persona'' rather than that of the author herself.

At the same time, however, one could argue that the editing only enhances the value of the *Diary* as a document of the growth of a psyche: as the teleology of inflation or regression is more apparent to the finished personality, so in the *Diary* we have only those aspects of her younger self that the older Nin found to be most strongly incorporated within herself. . . .

The most striking aspect of the first *Diary*, for example, is the larger-than-life quality and the numinous force of the individuals Nin presents. The clue to this exaggeration is to be found in the psychological theory of projection, but not, however, projection of the reaction formation variety—projections that are merely opposite to unconscious feelings. Rather it is a matter of the projection

of archetypes, configurations which are intrinsic in one's psyche and which when projected onto individuals in one's life empower these individuals with sacred or divine forces for one's self. The ''inflation'' is ''pathological'' in the sense that it ''naturally depends on some innate weakness of the personality against the autonomy of collective unconscious contents,'' but it is also part of the process whereby one is enabled ''to annex the deeper layers of the unconscious.'' In the *Diary*, the constellation of projections is like a star, with the Self (Nin) at the center, radiating energy into the figures around her while at the same time she gradually incorporates their power; as she takes back into herself the energy she has previously projected outward, the Self begins to gain in confidence and ego strength.

Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos. *Mosaic*. Winter, 1978. pp. 121–22

For Nin, perhaps more so than with most writers, the significance of her achievement in twentieth-century literature is linked closely to her literary career. As a fiction writer she tried consistently to keep before her the same principles that she later sustained so effectively in the *Diary*, but the nature of her attempt to describe and simulate psychological reality was often not apparent to her readers during the late 1930s through the early 1960s and in fact was not made clear until she became one of her chief literary critics and analyzed her works in the *Diary* and in *The Novel of the Future*. . . . Only after she perceived that the *Diary* would be her most acclaimed contribution to letters did Nin seem to recognize that her mode of autobiography was as effective a vehicle for her ideas as the novels. It is not the first time that a writer has tenaciously subscribed to a particular approach or genre, only to find later that acceptance and literary success lay in quite a different direction. . . .

Her fiction, although kept in print, is, regrettably, generally not given great attention. Nin was too long neglected, and she has been praised to excess recently for the wrong reasons. Her greatest value is as a legitimate cicerone through the feminine psyche, as an author who shows both women and men that the pursuit of one's completeness is a difficult task that must be undertaken, even though it is unpleasant to do so and even though it might not be successful in the end. She was nonetheless an optimist in a landscape of psychological despair, and her vision was augmented by her dedication to moderation and understanding.

Benjamin Franklin V and Duane Schneider. *Anaïs Nin: An Introduction* (Ohio Univ. Pr., 1979), pp. 291, 294

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NORMAN, Marsha (1947–)

Getting Out, the prizewinning play by Marsha Norman, has been acclaimed for its tightly crafted script, in which the two lives of the same white female convict are interwoven on the stage. The audience experiences the first day of Arlene's release from prison, during which time we respond with concern and maybe even trepidation to the simultaneous presence on stage of Arlie, her younger, violent, and self-destructive self who has just spent eight years in prison for the cold-blooded murder of a cabbie. This time in prison is but a minor and relatively static period of Arlie's life replete with prostitution, forgery, and hateful aggression toward her peers. Her crimes are the partial result of a rapist father [and] a seemingly uncaring mother. . . .

In the short space of the fiction's twenty-four hours, the audience sees Arlene fight off yet another rape, this time by Bennie, her sentimentally confused jailer, yet another confrontation with the uncaring, but present mother, and still another temptation to get out of poverty (but not, of course, out of bondage) by repeating the theatrical rituals of prostitution—Arlene again has the option to work with Carl, her previous pimp/lover. On the bright side, the audience hears her naive, but vehement desire to be reunited with her eight-year-old son, Joey (Carl's child whom she has not seen since his birth in prison). The spectators want her to join the ex-con cook upstairs, the tough but respectable Ruby, in a life without further crime. And the Christian viewers share Arlene's hopes in her new found lover, Jesus Christ. . . .

Getting Out (in theory) ends with the smiling sign that its spectators might not have to perform a tragedy after all. Arlie's laughter, especially if mimicked by the audience, suggests that while there are limits to patriarchal panopticism, that while authorities and audiences can always shit on their visual victims, they can in turn be pissed on in a diffusing manner, in the disguise of a bad joke. The libidinal economics of institutionality. The play's final gesture is not to join Arlene in *Getting Out* with the likes of Johnny Carson but to incite her playhouse spectators to represent the performance of power different from the exploitive, sexual-commercial world of paternal entertainment. The play closes with a seductive smile, asking its audience to join Arlene in her desires to be free of the macho world of control as it intertwines law, sex, and economics, as it prescribes production and subjection.

Timothy Murray. *Theatre Journal*. 35, 1983, pp. 376–77, 388

Clearly the success of *'night, Mother* rests on the peculiar power of the play in performance; it works for audiences, when it does work, on a number of levels—the naturalistic illusion so carefully maintained that the play, like unmediated experience itself, appears open to multiple interpretation. However, I would like to suggest the possibility that male and female audience members ''read,'' comprehend, and respond to the play in ways fundamentally different. While universal themes of death and desire, of human dignity and human pain, of hope and existential despair are accessible to all, these seem but ''secondary elaborations'' of the primary drama that women may cathartically experience in Norman's play. If we accept the psychoanalytic premise that given the specific pressures, complications, and resolutions offered the female child within the Oedipal situation, the process whereby men and women gain their sexual identity is not identical, then it stands to reason that a literary work in which such issues are represented should provide for the audience of each sex a different *kind* of experience. *'night, Mother* provides an interesting case since it both self-consciously addresses a female audience and subconsciously works upon the female psyche in powerful ways, positioning male and female viewers differently in the process. Indeed, because of the way in which the text foregrounds issues of female identity and feminine autonomy, focuses on the mother-daughter relationship, and controls the narrative movement, the relatively detached position available (however tentatively) to male viewers simply cannot (without great risk) be taken up by women. . . .

Whether or not Norman's *'night, Mother* is a ''feminist'' play is another question . . . but one not easily avoided. Clearly about and for women, the play offers women for identification unmediated by the gaze of men. The play also focuses on complicated issues of gender and female subjectivity, but does so without sacrificing traditional or conventional sources of pleasure through (Oedipal) narrative, closure, the illusion of reality, emotional catharsis. Much of the play's political effect (the area most closely associated with a feminist practice) lies in the theater event itself—how it is performed, what kind of discussion follows, what kind of reviews and critical commentary the play generates. If women were to see the actions and positions taken in the play as both recognizable and yet somehow untenable, then the play might offer the kind of dynamic contradiction that once brought to consciousness could generate radical change. In other words, this play allows women to perceive themselves as living in contradiction and to feel overwhelmingly uncomfortable about it. Norman herself, however, offers the audience no way of finally understanding that contradiction in social terms.

The danger . . . is that the play presents a mirror to reality in which women mis-recognize themselves in quite traditionally negative ways, the emotional catharsis serving a different therapeutic effect by reintegrating the spectator into her place within the dominant order, without challenging in any fundamental way the prevalent image of women in society—as those who reproduce, consume, and are consumed, who are powerless, inadequate, unworthy, and mutually destructive. After all, Jessie and Mama seem barely capable of handling the social dynamics of even their own limited lives. Norman's *'night, Mother* can perhaps best be understood as a profoundly naturalistic play in both intention and effect. It offers its audience images of women closely connected to a lived reality—characters neither idealized nor heroic, but shaped and determined here by the limited set, the limited options, and the tragic misapprehension of both themselves and the broader social dynamics of their specific situation.

Jenny S. Spencer. *Modern Drama*. 30, 1987, pp. 364–65, 374–75

Despite its widespread critical acclaim, *Getting Out* is so infrequently described as a political play that a definition of the term becomes essential: political theater shows public policy, laws, or unquestioned social codes impinging unfairly and destructively upon private lives. Individual though the protagonist may be, what happens to this character is not an example of isolated fate but rather is the result of historically alterable conditions which are inherently unfair to a segment of society. What happens to Arlene Holsclaw could not happen to every woman, but it does happen to many, and because of our laws, policies, and social codes, it is much more likely to happen to women than to men.

Getting Out takes place in a prison within a prison, in a present that is surrounded by—and a reflection of—the past. The setting is a one-room apartment in the slum area of a large Kentucky city. It is bare and dingy, and there are bars on its single window. Its former occupant was a prostitute whose trade paid for her pimp's ''green pants.'' Its present occupant, the prostitute's sister, Arlene Holsclaw, has just arrived from Alabama where she has been paroled after serving eight years for a second-degree murder committed during an escape from a prison where she was serving three years for forgery and prostitution.

On a catwalk above the apartment are the locales of a prison—sometimes literal and sometimes figurative—whose chief occupant is Arlie, Arlene as a teenager. . . .

What does it mean to ''get out''? At the bitter moment when she discovers just how limited her options for the future are, Arlene tells Ruby, ''outside's where you get to do what you want.'' By this, she primarily means being free of the constrictions placed upon her by her social and economic standing in the community. Arlene has come to believe that by eliminating that part of herself that society has always objected to, the rebellious, anti-authoritarian Arlie, by becoming ''meek,'' she could ''inherit the earth.'' The emphasis is on the tangible fulfillment of her desires. . . .

It is her final rejection of self that causes the prison to decide Arlie is rehabilitated. The shell she has developed to hostility and neglect is vulnerable to kindness and attention. In prison she comes to rely on the chaplain who renames her Arlene, teaching her that Arlie was her evil side that God would help her destroy. The destruction of Arlie was God's will, so that Arlene might join the meek that inherit the earth. Then, without telling Arlene before he left, the chaplain was transferred away. . . .

Arlene comes to trust Ruby's political analysis and accept her friendship because Ruby is able to validate Arlene's experience by showing its similarity to her own. The acceptance by another of her views is to Arlene in miniature the beginning of the end of her alienation, her awakening to a history of which she is a part, and the subsequent strengthening of her self-concept. When Arlene describes her suicide attempt, the ''murder'' of Arlie, it is Ruby who convinces her that ''you can still love people that's gone.'' The play ends with Arlene and Arlie sharing a pleasant memory—an acceptance by Arlene of her past and of the qualities in Arlie without which the battle for the future will be lost.

Meanwhile, the bars on Arlene's window remain. Men have placed them there—Bennie insists—''to keep folks from breakin

in.'' Perhaps—in some men's eyes—this is true. When will the bars be removed? Perhaps when men realize that keeping a caste in its place is as socially limiting to the confiner as to the confined. Perhaps when women recognize that they're there.

James Redmond. *Women in Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 186, 191, 193–94

In Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother*, thirty-seven-year-old Jessie informs her mother Thelma that she will kill herself that evening, after having organized the details of her mother's life and her own death. After much argument, during which time the mother attempts to change the daughter's mind, the suicide happens anyway; the mother is left alone on stage, and the audience leaves the theater, some obviously in tears. Although touted by some critics as a feminist investigation of the hopelessness and degradation of women's lives in patriarchal society, the play ultimately reinscribes the dominant ideology in its realist form. It is indubitably a narrative built on enigmas and mysteries which are revealed gradually until the final scene of (dis)closure. It steadfastly maintains that illusion of reader-as-subject who shares with the absent narrator the position of knowingness and ultimate understanding; a coherent, unified text that renders up its pleasure in the satisfaction of catharsis, in the illusion of change without really changing anything. As Brecht noted, ''The theater as we know it [he calls it illusionism] shows the structure of society (represented on stage) as incapable of being influenced by society (in the auditorium). Narrative closure reinstates the pre-existing order after instigating its temporary crisis. In what Roland Barthes would call a highly ''readable'' text, Jessie and her Mother are thus ''known'' fully; they are consumed characters, and the explanation for Jessie's suicide is perceived not within social relations (ideology) but in individual failure (or worse, as an heroic act, courageously ending a life that was indeed worthless).

Jeanie Forte. *Modern Drama*. 32, 1989, p. 117

The power of the play *'night, Mother* lies in its relentless movement toward the final gunshot. No matter how much we do not want to believe it will come, we are forced to share with the mother a growing realization that the evening will end with Jessie's death. Death lends to all of human existence an urgency and poignancy, a sense of meaning that arises from the awareness that life will not last. In Jessie's case the knowledge and control over the timing of that end and its immediacy are themselves the source of meaning never before existent in her life. Her suicide arms her with a power, a sense of control over her life. It is the lens through which she offers a view of her existence, an existence so fraught with detachment and boredom that she chooses to continue meticulously in the tedious business of its day-to-day routine until that moment when she shuts it off. But when her life is compressed within the boundaries of that evening, what emerges are a few hours of honesty and intensity that burst like a meteoric glimpse of what this mother-daughter relationship is and what it might have been. . . .

As we are left to wonder how this daughter came to see all of the elements of her life as indicative of failure and alienation, and how this mother's experience contributes to this conclusion, we have only the evidence of this brief, private conversation. As Jessie says, ''You're it, Mama. No more.'' The horrible bleakness of life, the emptiness Jessie experiences is not a peculiarity of female existence. But the significance of the mother-daughter relationship in the daughter's sense of powerlessness is unique to women. This play is not merely about the perils of parenthood or, more specifically, even the precariousness of motherhood in regard to daughters. It is about the problem and the elusiveness of autonomy, one of the stages on which the drama of human development unfolds.

Sally Browder. In Mickey Pearlman, ed. *Mother Puzzles: Daughters and Mothers in Contemporary American Literature* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1989), pp. 109–10

One way of approaching this drama [of mother-daughter doubling] is by looking at its banal surface in the context of the underlying mythic relationships of Demeter and Kore (Persephone), a relationship that offers clues to the mother-daughter relationship in the play. C. G. Jung and C. Kerényi, in their exploration of the Mysteries of Eleusis in *Essays On a Science of Mythology*, suggest an essential oneness of the Demeter and Kore figures in mythology, a oneness that is actually threefold, also embracing the third mythological figure, Hecate. Commenting on the identification of mother and daughter, Jung writes, ''Demeter and Kore, mother and daughter, extend the feminine consciousness both upwards and downwards. They add an ''older and younger,'' ''stronger and weaker'' dimension to it and widen out the narrowly limited conscious mind bound in space and time, giving it intimations of a greater and more comprehensive personality which has a share in the eternal course of things. Much of the power of Norman's play emerges from a mythical identification of mother and daughter that leaves Thelma bereft of the daughter she thought she had possessed but ironically at one with that daughter from whom she has derived new strength and life. More cathartic than depressing, the play reveals a bond between mother and daughter and a mythical sense of their oneness that allows for what Kerényi, commenting on Jung's ideas, calls ''*being in death*.''. . .

Marsha Norman surely did not attempt to make *'night, Mother* a modern version of the Demeter myth. The rhythms and resonance of that myth, however, give the play, despite its great sadness and sense of loss, its quickened sense of life. ''Hades,'' it has been noted, ''is the god presiding over our descents, investing the darkness in our lives, our depressions, our anxieties, our emotional upheavals and our grief with the power to bring illumination and renewal. Jessie embraces this god, and it is he that she introduces to her mother, who perhaps is able to see him more clearly through the image of Agnes's fires, a torch that burns to help one find what is lost. Mama learns from Jessie what it is that she used to whisper about after dinner with her withdrawn father—''His life, I guess,'' Jessie reveals. ''His corn. His boots. Us. Things. You know.'' And now Mama does.

Katherine H. Burkman. In June Schlueter, ed. *Modern American Drama: The Female Canon* (Madison, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990), pp. 254–55, 262

In *The Holdup* (1980–83), Marsha Norman confronts the frontier West—long the focus of a male-centered mythology. While admitting that this play was not a typical ''Norman play,'' that it has more fantasy than substance, and that it was not intended ''to

substantiate Western mythology'' (all facts that might explain why some critics responded negatively to it), Norman also claimed that in *The Holdup* ''there are serious things to be said about stories and how they operate on our minds.'' Indeed, the structure of this play's ''story'' suggests a transformation of the frontier myth. . . .

Inverting the traditional initiation rite, Norman presents a feminist version of the frontier myth that has general significance. Here, the frontier experience is the source of neither American uniqueness nor present day contradictions in American cultural life, but functions as a paradigm of a kind of maturation which was and remains relevant to American development. Other American women playwrights of the 1980s have written frontier plays taking a similar approach. In plays like *Going to See the Elephant* (1982), created by Karen Hensel, Patti Johns, Elana Kent, Sylvia Meredith, Elizabeth Lloyd Shaw, and Laura Toffenetti, and *Abundance* (1989), by Beth Henley, the categories of civilization and savagery, as they appear in the traditional frontier myth, are shown to be too simplistic to provide insight into the frontier experience. In these plays as well as in a musical like *Quilters* (1984), by Molly Newman and Barbara Damashek, the frontier experience is viewed less as an end in itself than as a gateway to ''an experience of the majesty of cosmic law.'' Marsha Norman may or may not have paved the way for these other frontier plays, but she took steps toward reformulating the frontier myth, and her work along with that of these other playwrights may help to change the way in which the frontier Western past is viewed and (ab)used in the future.

Richard Wattenberg. *Modern Drama*. 33, 1990, pp. 507, 575

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NORRIS, Frank (1870–1902)

Personally, the young novelist gave one the impression of strength and courage that would hold out to all lengths. Health was in him always. . . . I never met him but he made me feel that he could do it, the thing he meant to do, and do it robustly and quietly. . . . Norris heard nothing, or seemed to hear nothing, but the full music of his own aspiration, the rich diapason of purposes securely shaping themselves in performance.

William Dean Howells. *North American Review*. Dec., 1902. p. 777

There is no need of apology in dealing with *McTeague*. In it is some of the best work Norris ever did. . . . It is inexorable in its unrelenting life-likeness. . . . It is gray, gray and cold, in tone. . . Norris's interest was not that of the ethical teacher, the reformer who turns on the light. He rejoiced in McTeague and Trina as terms in a literary theorem. Their suffering leads to no conclusions. They are in the book because they appealed to his dramatic sense, his love for character. This book is without direct prototype. You may say it reminds you of Flaubert in treatment, or of Zola in theme, but in reality it is without fellow. Its originality is unquestionable.

Hamlin Garland. *Critic*. March, 1903. p. 216

To him fiction-writing was a branch of reporting. In this may be found the genesis of his peculiarly perverse attitude and the origin of many of his weaknesses. Norris did not have the analytical intelligence of an iconoclast. His rebelliousness was emotional and disorderly. He did not possess the faculty of concentrating his intelligence with piercing, destructive consistency upon his enmities. Instead, he shouted his blasphemies and trusted to the emotional force of his assertions to win him adherents.

C. Hartley Grattan. *Bookman*. July, 1929. p. 506

Here is what makes Frank Norris such a fascinating problem: the weakest side of his work is, in a way, the strongest side of the man. His moral passion, his idealism, his desire to make fiction contribute somehow to the good of his country and the needs of men—all this was intimately bound up with what we may call his journalism. . . . He had the exuberant temper of romanticism; he had been profoundly moved by the ideals of Zola; he admired the chastened, decorous realism of William Dean Howells; and on the weak, immature, journalistic side of him, he suffered a bad attack of Richard Harding Davis! Is it any wonder that he was not able to resolve all these elements and to bring them to a harmonious adjustment by the time he was thirty-two?

Edward Wagenknecht. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. April, 1930. pp. 314, 317

Life for him was an adventure in which fiction-writing was his greatest pleasure. He wrote as he lived: with zest, with enthusiasm, with gusto. His successes as well as his failures were due to his intense affirmation of the creed of youth. It was his fortune to see, as few people see, at the beginning of an epoch; to impress his name ineffaceably on American fiction at a time of flux when old patterns were melting away and a new literature was taking form. This he did because he affirmed rather than denied, because he lived rather than meditated, because he saw with clarity and wrote with enthusiasm.

Franklin Walker. *Frank Norris* (Doubleday). 1932. pp. 3–4

Without in the least impairing his capacity for minute observation, he was enamored of vastness, of all things large, powerful, and excessive; enormous, tremendous, colossal, gigantic, titanic, immense, mammoth, inordinate—these words form the backbone of his vocabulary. Crowds, great cities, even inanimate nature in its larger features—mountains, forests, deserts, seas—these have for him an independent life of their own; they breathe, and the sound of that breathing, composed of innumerable smaller sounds, manifests itself to the ear attuned to catch it in the form of a ceaseless, profound, all-pervading monotone. This almost mystical sense of an exhaustless life reaching down into the very roots of being stirs and excites him; it is almost an obsession.

Ernest Marchand. *Frank Norris* (Stanford). 1942. pp. 177–8

It is easy now to see the faults of his work. He was a borrower of literary effects; he took those he needed wherever he found them, in Kipling, Stevenson or Tolstoy, as well as Zola. He depended on instinct rather than intelligence for his choice of borrowings, since he thought viscerally, with his heart and bowels instead of his brain. . . . His great virtues were . . . freshness, narrative, vigor, a marvelous eye for the life around him and courage to portray it in its drama and violence, besides the ability to construct his novels, like Zola's, in massive blocks.

Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*. May 5, 1947. p. 33

Beneath the delicate and skilful texture of Norris's prose at its best, and the very often attractive tone of what was essentially a leisure class temperament and view of experience, there were, to be sure, other elements of feeling not far from the morbid. As in the case of Scott Fitzgerald, it was this strain which gave to Norris's work—work based on his own sense of life rather than on literary programs or social polemics—an underlying tension and interior dynamics different from the facade of virility and action which he stressed. . . . And wasn't it after all the presence of the ''Brute'' in Frank Norris himself—that is to say, his awareness of the sensual drives even in terms of morbid sin or ''evil,'' and his own sense of a certain isolation and exile because of this—which enabled him to break through the restrictions of his craft to the degree that he did?. . . The wound was also the source of his power; the animal instincts were the origins of his most human insights; and even the tormented rites of reversionary emotions became a path of liberation in the works of art.

Maxwell Geismar. *Rebels and Ancestors* (Houghton). 1953. pp. 51–2, 66

He did not completely master the art of the novel. When he was successful it was the success of vividness and vitalism, of realistic scenes and intense, violent emotions, of poetic though not always fully realized characters. When he failed it was a failure to achieve a balanced tension between conflicting but reconcilable methods of approach. His novels as a whole do not indicate a steady development as an artist, but they do reflect consistently the tenets of his responsibility as a novelist as he saw it: a realistic fidelity to life in all its variety and color and mystery, a sincerity of purpose, and a seriousness and complexity of theme, character, and content.

Charles G. Hoffman. *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Oct., 1955. p. 515

Awkward and melodramatic, *Vandover and the Brute* nevertheless has moments of great force, a force which derives from its author's horrified belief in what the failure to make a connection with life could mean. In his first novel Norris symbolized his fear of what might become of him if he persisted in his dilettante ways. . . . The writer in the United States, Norris decided, had somehow to recover his moral authority in the community. To do this, the writer had to acquaint himself more fully with the true nature of reality in America and come to understand the dreams of a democratic people. . . .

. . .The weakness which all of Norris's fiction is heir to is that its inflated, imitation-epic tone can suddenly go ludicrously flat, and in *The Pit* this happens again and again, a fact which Norris might have realized, for the novel finally pays more attention to Curtis Jadwin's home life than to his Napoleonic career on the floor of the grain market. But *The Octopus*, the novel of production, is a fine achievement; nothing else Norris ever wrote comes close to matching its quality. One of the most significant novels in our literature, *The Octopus* penetrates to the heart of the American consciousness at a crucial moment in our history.

Kenneth S. Lynn. Introduction to *The Octopus* by Frank Norris (Houghton). 1959. pp. xvii–xviii

Although a pioneer in forming a viable tradition of American naturalism, he displays at his best a precarious balance between the centrifugal pull of large abstractions and a centripetal interest in careful observation. It is the tension between these two approaches to reality—those of romance and realism—that contributes much to the vitality of his best work. When driven to ultimate formulations of that tension, he spins off into irrationality. When, as in *McTeague*, he finds a way to control its expression, he creates his monument.

George W. Johnson. *American Literature*. March, 1961. p. 63

Those who have tried to present Frank Norris as a complete rebel against the Victorian code and the traditional value structure of his own day have insisted upon separating Norris' non-fiction writings, which they admit are traditionalist, from Norris the novelist. But it is evident that such a separation should not be made. The same Victorian sexual code is as prominent in the novels as in the essays. The same belief in the efficacy of human freedom in the face of naturalistic forces can be seen in both. The same insistence that personal salvation or destruction is dependent upon the moral actions of the individual forms an integral part of nearly all his writings. . . .

Yet Norris has been pictured as a prime example of the development of literary naturalism in America. Here was one author who admitted a debt to Zola, who portrayed violence for the sake of violence, who pictured man as a low, vile creature imprisoned by the hereditary and environmental forces of an amoral world. All have agreed that Norris did not completely adhere to this position, but most commentators have insisted that he tried to do so. Yet an examination of his writings would seem to indicate quite strongly that these ideas were a rather thin intellectual veneer covering a solid base of traditional assumptions. Norris himself was probably unaware of the many unassimilated crosscurrents of his mind that are revealed in his writings, but they are nonetheless present.

Robert W. Schneider. *Five Novelists of the Progressive Era* (Columbia). 1965. pp. 149–50

Frank Norris was not a great novelist. His work lacks the breadth and depth of human understanding that we require of the greatest writers of fiction. Even his best novels are marred by melodramatic symbolism and oversimplified moral contrasts. But *Vandover*, *McTeague*, and *The Octopus* will continue to be read for reasons

other than their importance in late-nineteenth-century literary and intellectual history. Their permanence stems from Norris' vigorous involvement in man's universal attempt to make the unpalatable palatable, from his endeavor to translate two of the cruelly pinching facts of his own day—man as an evolutionary creature in an industrial society—into equally ''factual'' but emotionally acceptable fictional realities. He made this attempt not by writing novels of ideas, but rather—and this is what makes his fiction live—by imaginatively infusing into the vividly concrete world of Polk Street or the San Joaquin Valley a controlling vision of man and society. His best work, whatever its flaws, has the force of a particularized world shaped by an ordered conception of that world and by a firm craftsmanship.

Donald Pizer. *The Novels of Frank Norris* (Indiana). 1966. p. 179

Yet Frank Norris was not so uncomplicated as he pretended to be. He had to force himself to the simplifications which, he hoped, would free him from the trammeling complexities of other writers who shared his concern with modern social themes, and he was not always successful in his attempts. As a result his best work is far more disorganized than his worst, because it is best in its fidelity to life's amplitude and complexity, in contradiction to the theories of unity and simplicity that he rhetorically offered as the organizing principles. . . . Although Norris made a great deal of environmental influences in his works, they did not function so as to make him a model naturalist. Zola's appeal to him was not chiefly his sense of environment, it was that in examining a human career he did not stop at the doormat of behavior, but penetrated within the habitation to the soul's secrets.

Penetration is what marks the best of Norris's fiction and what gives *McTeague* a power that endures in spite, rather than because of, the piled-up verbiage which marks its more intense moments.

Larzer Ziff. *The American 1890s* (Viking). 1966. pp. 251, 260

Chronicling and applauding the triumph of impersonal forces, Norris nevertheless found the drama for his novels in characters whose greatness is measured precisely in terms of their ability to compete with immutable laws. Magnus Derrick and his subordinates struggling against the iron coils of the Octopus (the encroaching railroad); or Curtis Jadwin attempting to corner the wheat—these must inevitably be defeated; yet the strength of mind and will which makes their personal victory seem almost possible reflects their almost superhuman heroism. Thus Norris reaffirms the traditional American emphasis on the individual (his full name was Benjamin Franklin Norris) by writing novels of success in which *great* failure comes to suggest the highest human attainment. . . . On the one hand, then, force is all-powerful, overwhelming characters who are not even individuated by first names—Vandover, Annixter, McTeague, Osterman, Vanamee. On the other hand, Norris as a novelist suggests, it is only through the epic greatness of the characters who are placed in conflict with natural law that the power of its immutability can be recognized. Far from conflicting, these two tendencies point equally to Norris's romantic glorification of power.

Jay Martin. *Harvests of Change* (Prentice). 1967. p. 73

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OATES, Joyce Carol (1938–)

Unlike many collections whose short stories have been gathered arbitrarily to manufacture a book, Miss Oates' book [*By the North Gate*] has emotional consistency and thematic unity that produce a single effective fictional experience. It is one that, at times, seems too painful to bear. Yet it is also too interesting to ignore, too perceptive to turn away from and too honest to reject.

R. D. Spector. *Book World*. Nov. 17, 1963. p. 32

One of the excellent qualities of this novel [*With Shuddering Fall*] . . . is an unswerving fidelity to its theme. The theme is violence, beginning with a minor automobile accident, then accelerating swiftly to a nearly mortal flight, an immolation, onward and downward into an ever faster and stronger whirlpool of violence, until the entire world of the novel is caught in a paroxysm of hate and destruction. . . . This material is not as garish as it sounds because of the clarity, grace and intelligence of the writing.

John Knowles. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 25, 1964. p. 5

The question is no longer whether Miss Oates is a very good writer—she is, indeed—but just how far and high she can thrust the trajectory of brilliant accomplishment she has begun. It appears to me that her gifts are at least equal to Flannery O'Connor. If she is not absolutely more serious than Nabokov—whose *Lolita* this present novel [*Expensive People*] resembles in its virtuosity—she is more obviously ''ours'' and therefore to be taken more seriously by us. Everything she touches turns to such blistering gold that sometimes I suspect she must have had Rumpelstiltskin in to help her spirit in the night.

Expensive People contains and exploits a little of everything. It is satire, confession, dream, report on suburbia, gothic tale in contemporary dress, with even some touches of the pop novel thrown in to show that the author can find a valid use for the screech of that untuned fiddle, too. But though her technique is eclectic, parodistic, sheer magpie, her bits of everything are fused into a prophetic novel as singular in effect as the night cry of a hurt animal.

R. V. Cassill. *Book World*. Nov. 3, 1968. p. 5

Even though all her technical faults remain untouched, *A Garden of Earthly Delights* not only fulfills her early promise, it makes her, for me, the second finest writer in America. Wright Morris is a better writer because I think aesthetic values are of more lasting importance. I am unable to explain in aesthetic terms the mystery of Miss Oates's genius for sustaining the intensity of her vision and for creating such totally alive characters and situations. I know of no other young novelist who succeeds in creating life with an apparent absence of art. She seems to make criticism irrelevant; it elucidates her work very little beyond offering an introduction. (The opposite is true of Wright Morris.) Joyce Carol Oates is a phenomenon, an original, a natural—not a mentor, as Joyce, Morris, Hemingway, and sometimes Fitzgerald and Faulkner are. She must be experienced, not analyzed—this is simply a brute observation, not praise. The young writer who cites Miss Oates's writing as justification for his own faults disguised as virtues can only suffer, and may not survive.

David Madden. *The Poetic Image in Six Genres* (Southern Illinois). 1969. p. 46

[Oates's] virtues aren't difficult to sum up: a native gift for ''story telling''; a more or less clean narrative line, taking her from recognizable starting-points to conclusions very solidly on the same track; a passion for, amounting to an obsession with, what we like to call inner life; a good, almost photographic eye and ear for the minutiae of ordinary existence; a concern with some central human issues and conditions: the myths of love, the nature of female morale, the oppressions of family life, the aridity of urban and suburban existence; the quest for communion; the struggle against others.

In any conventional accounting for literary potentiality and achievement this cluster of attributes would rank high. And that in fact is the point about Miss Oates: in a time of uproar and uncertainty in literature, a period of violently shifting standards and aggressive new imaginative proposals together with a counteracting erosion of confidence about writing itself, she satisfies a longing for familiar ground, for what literature is supposed ''to be about,'' for the appearance of stability, continuity and graspable seriousness. And she does this handsomely, with few blatantly false steps, no inept images or gross failures of rhetoric, and with just the right degree of ''experimentation'' to keep her from resting too complacently in the bosom of the familiar.

Richard Gilman. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 25, 1970. p. 4

The details in Oates' fiction follow each other with a humble truthfulness that makes you wonder where she is taking you, that is sometimes truly disorienting, for she is all attention to the unconscious reactions of her characters. She needs a lot of space, which is why her short stories tend to read like scenarios for novels. The amount of concentration this involves is certainly very singular, and one can well understand the vulnerability, the ''reedlike thinness,'' the face and body tense with listening that her appearance gives off. My deepest feeling about her is that her mind is unbelievably crowded with psychic existences, with such a mass of stories that she lives by being wholly submissive to ''them,'' the others. She is too burdened by some mysterious clamor to *want* to be an artist, to make the right and well-fitting structure. . . .

Yet admiring her sense of reality, so unpresuming, honest, and truly exceptional, I have to add that the problem of dealing with Oates is that many of the things she has written are not artistically

ambitious enough. They seem written to relieve her mind of the people who haunt it, not to create something that will live.

Alfred Kazin. *Harper's Magazine*. Aug., 1971. pp. 81–2

Wonderland reaches its peak early and sustains it for almost 400 pages; but it's as precarious as the fat girl's tower of numbers holding itself up by the force of its own motion and the novel finally collapses and ends in shambles. The book begins to fail when Oates tells us that her characters are emotionally shaken and their lives changed by JFK's assassination; as in her use of the Detroit riots in *them*, the reality the narrative has created is so strong that actual events we ourselves have witnessed seem bland in comparison, and we can't believe that they could affect the characters' lives. The savage personal vision is lost and not regained; and *Wonderland*, the most involving, the most poetic, the greatest of Oates's novels so far becomes the most deeply flawed of her long works, because it has reached a higher plane than her other books and therefore must fall through a longer distance. Its ultimate failure seems inevitable and even admirable, since anything that exists at this degree of heat must burn itself up if it keeps going, and Oates isn't one to quit when she's ahead.

John Alfred Avant. *Library Journal*. Aug., 1971. p. 2545

Joyce Carol Oates doesn't pick at her characters' brains. Having escaped the fascination that motive and mental state have for other contemporary writers, she keeps the unfortunates who populate her novels so busy they have hardly a moment for introspection. Miss Oates tells what happens to her characters and what their experiences—usually terrible—do to them but she rarely explains what they are thinking about their plights. . . .

A number of the major themes of literature are recognizable in Miss Oates's work. She has Tolstoy's sense of history as it overwhelms the individual, and she reveals a classical affinity for fatalism and lost innocence. Her characters are afflicted with the anomie explored by the French existentialists. On a lesser scale, she shares James Agee's reverence for the terror and frailty of childhood and, like D. H. Lawrence, she scorns the life of the mind as ineffectual and irrelevant.

But, most of all, Miss Oates's ties are to the twentieth-century school of American naturalism, particularly Theodore Dreiser. Although she is less concerned with sociology than he was, Miss Oates's stories unfold in the same harsh settings, and her characters fight to survive with the same befuddled amorality as those of *An American Tragedy*.

Brian P. Hayes. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 9, 1971. p. 38

Wonderland is about a cluster of deeply related things—a cluster that seems to writhe frighteningly from a single source. It is about the spirit's hunger for strength and identity, its consequent need to possess others, its terror of the anonymity of flesh, of the blank nothingness of death. Oates seems uncannily up with all of us, the very young, the middleaged, the old; and though her three ''gook'' titles sound tritely pretentious—''variations on an American hymn,'' ''the finite passing of an infinite passion,'' ''dreaming american''—she is to my mind one of the most comprehensive and knowing American novelists now writing. . . .

The supreme attraction, the essential originality of *Wonderland*, as of *them*, is its dramatic unpeeled quality. Everything in it seems loaded, exposed, veined and vulnerable yet opaque, like a skinless plum. The scenes and characters (even the minor figures) are fully there without being contained. They are uncovered rather than delineated, broken into, never packaged. Oates's style, correspondingly, is inventive and continually fresh without being sharp or self-alerting—it is not a stylist's style. Seriously, steadily, it reveals; it is the perfect medium for her empathic imagination.

What a shame were *Wonderland* to be neglected or resisted because *them* made so recent an impact. In achievement it is more or less the equal of the earlier book, and the two together, like the gifted and enormous Pederson children, are distinct yet related wonders.

Calvin Bedient. *Partisan Review*. No. 1, 1972. pp. 124, 127

Wonderland is an ambitious novel, and a fascinating exploration of an area which has always been at the core of Miss Oates' work, but which she has never approached so boldly: the matter of identity in a world whose reality is questionable. To my mind the most telling portions are those in which the setting is vivid; they render most clearly the disparity between the interior life and the objective world. . . . However, the whole novel is successful; to have rendered such complex material with such simplicity is the mark of a fine artist. It is perhaps a measure of my own living condition as a living particle of Miss Oates' America that I feel such a marked preference for the located individual, and a certain distaste for the slipperiness of the purely interior flow of feeling.

Ellen Hope Meyer. *The Mediterranean Review*. Spring, 1972. p. 54

Joyce Carol Oates has come out with another book of poetry, her first [*Anonymous Sins, & Other Poems*] having met in many quarters with gentle critical disapproval. It is often difficult for an artist to move from one *genre* to another. Miss Oates is a novelist and short story writer of enormous power and widespread recognition; her prose skillfully recreates for us the chaos of our lives, the empty sentimentality of our hopes. Though her second group of poems, *Love and Its Derangements*, is an improvement over the previous book, it is not as consistently satisfying as the prose works. The least skillful characteristics of her novels and stories appear in the poems; there is little remaining space for the dramatic virtues she does possess. There are stunning poems in the volume, but they appear all too infrequently.

The essence of Miss Oates' poetry is emotion—intense, but unattached, free-floating. Poetry, to be truly effective, must ''organize'' emotion in two senses: it must give coherent organic form and direction to feeling and it must make that emotion felt in a direct, internal, and particular way. One of the worst criticisms one can make of a poem is to say that it abounds in vague emotion or empty verbiage. Unfortunately, a few of Miss Oates' poems do just that. Others employ stale or illogical metaphors. Some, however, probe deeply the moving themes of her novels—the psycho-sexual framework of love, the disappearance of concrete personal identity in our world, the need to achieve an existential relation between man and woman which forever lays the ghost of the old absolutist

romantic notions which inevitably betray the hopeful beings who hold them. At these moments Miss Oates is at her poetic best.

Sally Andersen. *Spirit*. Fall, 1972. p. 24

Critics slight Joyce Carol Oates when they tag her as merely, or primarily, a ''gothic novelist'' (i.e., lurid, grotesque, grisly). Some have clucked suspiciously about how much she manages to write and publish . . . hinting quality must suffer. Some find her work repetitious in theme and content, even (somehow) more like refined but still sensational journalism rather than carefully crafted fiction. These demurrers shy from the most astute challenges posed by Oates in her lushly tense, often wounding novels and stories. She is no more ''gothic'' than today's headlines, no more violent than the nightly bloody canapes served up on the six o'clock news. But her focus and creative impulse tend to deinstitutionalize the blood-letting, causing the impact to bite deep, even in media-narcotized minds. If there is any ''journalism'' in her writing, it is in the crushing immediacy of contemporary atmospheres and details which coupled with her unabashed fictional virtuosity, makes the terrifying aspects of American life vivid for her readers. Certainly there has been no absence of acute high quality in anything she has recently undertaken in fiction. And rather than repetitions in her work (are Matisse's nudes or Picasso's satyrs repetitious?), I think one discovers Oates has a brazenly disciplined and audacious methodology for attacking metaphysical problems while integrating the real, or apparent, textures of modern life into the equation.

S. K. Oberbeck. *Book World*. Sept. 17, 1972. p. 4

In the landscape of the contemporary American short story Miss Oates stands out as a master, occupying a preeminent category of her own.

It was as a writer of stories that she began her career in the early 1960's, and she has continued to write stories ever since, not as a diversion or spinoff from the writing of novels, but as a central concern in her work—a fortunate recognition that the shorter form is peculiarly suited to her. There is a sense of tension, of nerves stretched to the breaking point, of ''the pitch that is close to madness'' in much of what she writes. Sustained too long, it would lose its emotional effectiveness and intellectual credibility. As it is, a story such as ''The Dead,'' which tells with the utmost conviction of a young woman writer going gradually to pieces, is not only harrowing to read but unfaltering in its control, written as close to the edge as possible without crossing over it.

William Abrahams. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 23, 1972. p. 76

Much of the power of Joyce Carol Oates' fiction lies in her disturbing ability to identify and expose the fears we have deep within us. Through her art she touches these dark, personal fears: those we admit, those we deny, and those we dimly perceive—but perhaps refuse to confront.

Many of Oates' stories explore two major fears. One is the individual's fear of physical or emotional damage inflicted by another person. . . . The second is man's secret fear of the consequences of a sudden eruption of hidden psychic forces—forces which he suspects lie within him but which he can neither fully anticipate, understand, nor control. . . .

Most interesting of all, perhaps, is Oates' treatment of the fear of being the Outsider. No matter what else the story is about, nearly every one touches on this particular terror. The Outsider is a person who perceives himself as somehow cut off from, shut out of, the human race. He suffers from being uncontrollably different, an aberration. . . .

Given the horror of his situation, where does the Outsider in Oates' fiction look for comfort and solace? With genuine love unavailable, many of the characters look to art and the act of writing, desperately hoping to stave off disaster by fashioning pattern out of flux and sense out of absurdity.

Carolyn Walker. *Critique*. 15, 1, 1973. pp. 59–60

With her torrent of words, her absorption in feeling and her pitch of drama, why shouldn't [Oates] succeed as a poet too. Melville did; Hardy did; Lawrence did; Emily Brontë did; it is possible; it even, on the face of it, seems natural. . . .

These poems [*Angel Fire*] have an awkward gait and an ungainly structure, an incoherence of parts and a lack of conclusiveness in the whole. They are the poems of someone with ideas enough to make poems and with words enough to make poems but without the mysterious power to create the voluptuous surfaces, the original cadences, or the visual juxtapositions of words which alone convince us of the existence of a genuine new poet.

Helen Vendler. *New York Times Book Section*. April 1, 1973. pp. 7–8

Is Joyce Carol Oates, the only American woman writer of talent who has matched the industry of her British counterparts such as Doris Lessing, Muriel Spark and Margaret Drabble, to be cubbyholed as they have been? Is this remarkable novelist, a woman who is never afraid to take risks, a woman whose fictional works confront our contemporary scene, doomed to suffer the fate of Lessing, for example, and be seen only as an authority on the role of women? To do so would be to miss what she is all about.

In novel after novel, story after story, Oates gives us her own tragic America, a personal vision as perceptive as it is instructive and terrifying. She does not so much preach as show us ourselves on an exaggerated screen. Her damaged women, her haunted men are grotesques but always under her firm artistic control. They are as old fashioned as the wild, secretive loners who roamed the streets of Winesburg, Ohio at twilight. But, as with Sherwood Anderson's folk, Oates' swollen characters are relevant to and complement the horror and dangers of our American landscape. The truths of our lives are exhibited in the excesses. In no work of hers is this as evident as in her latest, lengthy novel. *Do With Me What You Will*.

Charles Shapiro. *New Republic*. Oct. 27, 1973. p. 26

At first the novel [*The Assassins*] seems a murder mystery: who killed Andrew? But to develop that topic would require at least one well-meaning, rational investigator. Stephen means well but is helplessly irrational; no one else is rational, well-meaning, or even well. The novel therefore reaches only coarse conclusions. By its

end one of the leading characters has been set wandering aimlessly; another is deaf, blind, dumb, and paralyzed as the result of a suicide attempt; the third has been shot; and the fourth has been shot and hacked to pieces with an ax. Why? What does it mean? Such questions are pointless. Motivation is unknowable and finally irrelevant in this world of paranoid neurosis: ''they'' make things happen, and these suspicious, isolated, hysterical victims merely flounder as their sickness bids.

J.D. O'Hara. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 23, 1975. p. 18

In Joyce Carol Oates's works three themes—woman, city, and community—merge into an all-too-real nightmare. Her cities are the settings for death, riots, and the violent wreckage of human lives. Her women are victims, raped physically and psychically by both men and the world. Not only is community an unrealizable dream, but few characters even aspire to it. . . .

Continuously, her fiction searches out and exposes the very root of violence: a sense of personal impotence. At the heart of violence in her world is the absolute and utter inability to affirm oneself—without which the person is unable to live fully as a human being, to define, affirm, and assert himself, and to enter satisfying, relationships with other persons. . . .

One of Joyce Carol Oates's persistent concerns is to make the tragic vision real to the twentieth century. She seeks through her works to awaken contemporary society to its own destruction, to deepen the consciousness of her readers to the tragic dimensions of life. This task demands that her own perceptions of the times be sharply defined, that she confront—because resolution is impossible—the ambiguities of the day without trying to answer them, and that in so doing she offer to her readers something more than the sensationalism of the daily news. . . .

Oates's works are limited, and she pays a price for her lack of humor. The tragic burden of the lives of her characters at times becomes barely tolerable and excessively oppressive: unrelieved, catastrophic events strain, if not defy, the imagination. Oates's characters may be ordinary people in one sense, but they suffer an extraordinary number of misfortunes and endure unbelievable afflictions—factors which tend to limit the works.

Unless she can move away from the two-dimensional, often superficial characters to which she has thus far almost solely confined herself and more directly towards her announced stronger moral posture and affirmative, transcendent vision, Oates will be doomed to repeating herself—a criticism frequently leveled at her at present. She has richly exploited the resources of her thematic concerns and of her choice of characters, and unless she moves on, she will become derivative of herself. Her tragically diminished people have told their tales, and their power to raise our consciousness is fast becoming exhausted. Her response to the complex phenomenon of urban life amounts to a deeply sensitive witness, but unless she is able to go beyond this, she fates herself to monotony and redundancy.

Mary Kathryn Grant. *The Tragic Vision of Joyce Carol Oates* (Duke Univ. Pr., 1978), pp. 15, 32, 117, 140–41

As Oates's skills as a novelist have developed, her work has increasingly evoked the confusing experience of our time and, more importantly, related our chaotic and imperfectly apprehended experiences to wider patterns of significance. Her importance for us is seen partly in the seriousness with which she sees the writer's dual, and perhaps contradictory role of submerging herself in our age, and partly as well, in her struggle to achieve a transcendence of our time in her articulation of it. In Oates's most recent work one now discerns a movement, observable in her essays as well as her fiction, towards a fascination with Eastern renunciatory philosophical modes. It is as if the violence and egocentric destructiveness which have been such tragic outcomes of Western history and philosophy must somehow be transcended by embracing the opposite vision. Of course such a development in Oates's thinking is prefigured in Lawrence's own. Lawrence, too, came to despair at the cultivation of the uniqueness of the self which has been so fundamental to Western consciousness. His later vision is not unlike that of Oates in *The Assassins*, where we first see, in her novels, her espousal of something akin to Eastern renunciation, a growing interest which seems to be entering all her work in the mid-seventies. On the surface, such a development is strange in writers like Oates and Lawrence, so imbued with the possibilities of transcendence achieved through the flesh, and it may be that the next stage in her career will show her developing in surprising, even more experimental, directions.

Possibly more than any American novelist now writing, Oates has shown herself sensitive to the eddying feelings of living in the 1960s and 1970s. But of course we look to writers to respond to more than the intellectual or social fashions of their age. Oates sees the cultural roles of the artist as that of struggling with and articulating the underlying, ongoing movements of feeling, not merely its glittering surface.

G. F. Waller. In *Critical Essays on Joyce Carol Oates*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (G. K. Hall, 1979), p. 17

Bellefleur is the most ambitious book to come so far from that alarming phenomenon Joyce Carol Oates. However one may carp, the novel is proof, if any seems needed, that she is one of the great writers of our time. *Bellefleur* is a symbolic summation of all this novelist has been doing for 20-some years, a magnificent piece of daring, a tour he force of imagination and intellect.

In *Bellefleur* Miss Oates makes a heroic attempt to transmute the almost inherently goofy tradition of the gothic (ghosts, shape-shifters, vampires and all that) into serious art. If any writer can bring it off (some will claim it's already been done), Joyce Carol Oates seems the writer to do it. . . .

Whatever its faults, *Bellefleur* is simply brilliant. What do we ask of a book except that it be wonderful to read? An interesting story with profound implications? The whole religious-philosophical view of Joyce Carol Oates is here cleanly and dramatically stated. She has been saying for years, in book after book (stories, poems, a play and literary criticism), that the world is Platonic. We are the expression of one life force, but once individuated we no longer know it, so that we recoil in horror from the expression of the same force in other living beings. ''Don't *touch* me,'' Gideon Bellefleur keeps saying, as Yvonne Petrie said in *The Assassins*, Laney said in *Childwold* and a host of other characters said elsewhere. Blinded to our oneness, we all become assassins. vampires, ghosts. We are all unreflectable nonimages in mirrors, creatures of time, and time is an illusion;we are all sexual maniacs, lovers engaged in a violent struggle to become totally one with

those we love (copulation and murder are all but indistinguishable); we are all crazily in love with the past—first our own Edenic childhood, second the whole past of the world. . . .

Joyce Carol Oates has always been, for those who look closely, a religious novelist, but this is the most openly religious of her books—not that she argues any one sectarian point of view. Here as in several of her earlier works the Angel of Death is an important figure, but here for the first time the Angel of Life (not simply resignation) is the winner. In the novel's final chapters Gideon Bellefleur turns his back on all he has been since birth, a sensualist; starves himself until we see him as a death figure; finally becomes his family's Angel of Death.

Joyce Carol Oates is a ''popular'' novelist because her stories are suspenseful (and the suspense is never fake: The horror will really come, as well as, sometimes, the triumph), because her sex scenes are steamy and because when she describes a place you think you're there. Pseudo-intellectuals seem to hate that popularity and complain, besides, that she ''writes too much.'' (For pseudo-intellectuals there are always too many books.) To real intellectuals Miss Oates's work tends to be appealing, partly because her vision is huge, well-informed and sound, and partly because they too like suspense, brilliant descriptions and sex. Though *Bellefleur* is not her best book, in my opinion, it's a wonderful book all the same. By one two-page thunderstorm she makes the rest of us novelists wonder why we left the farm. How strange the play of light and shadow in her graveyards! How splendid the Bellefleurs' decaying mansion! How convincing and individual the characters are—and so many of them! In one psychic moment, when the not-yet-2-year-old Germaine cries ''Bird—bird—bird!'' and points at the window a moment before a bird crashes into it, breaking its neck, we're forced to ask again how anyone can possibly write such books, such absolutely convincing scenes, rousing in us, again and again, the familiar Oates effect, the point of all her art: joyful terror gradually ebbing toward wonder.

John Gardner. *New York Times Book Section*. July 20, 1980, pp. 1, 21

Angel of Light demonstrates, perhaps better than any other Oates novel, what I think is the *real* reason for the critical unease surrounding her work: that she goes against the prevailing impulse in contemporary fiction toward the private and personal, a small-scale vision illustrated in the work of such a much-admired writer as Ann Beattie. As *Contraries*, Oates' thoughtful and illuminating collection of essays, makes clear, Oates' models are the 19th-century masters like Dostoevski and Conrad; like them, she is what I would call a ''social'' novelist, interested in creating microcosms of the world that reflect the moral and philosophical questions encountered by man as he is in conflict with society, nature, God, history. What she admires in those novelists is passion, energy, the courage to take artistic and emotional risks. . . .

Angel of Light is neither small nor tidy. It is a complex, dense, multilayered work that unfolds with all the profound implications of Greek tragedy—in fact, the story is a modern version of the fall of the House of Atreus. Yet Oates seems at last to have in control two of the weaknesses that have sometimes been the result of her considerable ambition and energy—a feverish, overwritten prose style and a heavy-handed use of symbolism.

Susan Wood. *Book World*. Aug. 16, 1981, p. 5

Even when Joyce Carol Oates is in a playful mood, her writing fails to provide patches of sunlit ease; she's too self-mesmerized to tune out the racket in her head and clear away a pool of summery calm, preferring instead to heap on the rubble, the noise, the piles of broken glass. She doesn't write books now, the books write her. She's like an obsessive pianist who even in her sleep practices arpeggio runs, her fingers rippling up and down a phantom keyboard. Snap to, Ms. Oates. It isn't too late. Wake up, wake up, wake up! . . .

Although *A Bloodsmoor Romance* has the fixings of a provocative antinovel, Oates's inability to turn off the babble once again plunges her into the gumbo. In a typical Oates novel, the reader is treated—if that's the word—to a series of Big Scenes connected by a lot of flimsy, careless doodles. Her fans probably drum their fingers patiently during the drowsier passages, knowing that Oates will soon barbecue a new fright for their snacking pleasure. . . .

Perhaps the key to Joyce Carol Oates's fiction is her phantasmagorical fear of sex, her revulsion from the flesh's treacheries. Sex in her fiction is seldom a tender idyll, a bit of lingering play, or even a collision of will and temperament. . . . Sex is instead a ghoulish prank, a corporeal meltdown. . . . Oates's books . . . are wonders of reckless energy and dishevelment. Although Oates's poetry is hardly ringing or memorable, it's easier to take than her prose because in writing poetry she's compelled to choose this word, that. But in writing fiction she doesn't seem to spiff up her sentences before dispatching them into the world; ragtag and motley, her phrases are thrown into the breach like waves of ill-prepared soldiers, a doomed multitude. She ought to spend more time revising and paring down, but she seems incapable of trimming away her wordy flab, or unwilling. Perhaps she *prefers* to drift high and free in the transcendental ether.

What *A Bloodsmoor Romance* makes clear is that writing, for Oates, is not a vocation or a calling but a semidivine compulsion. To her, the writer is a shortwave set receiving and beaming messages into the far reaches of dreamland.

James Wolcott. *Harper's*. Sept., 1982. pp. 68–69

Unholy Loves is academic in more than one sense. At the level of satire, it chronicles the daily life at an elitist university; it is also allusive, with echoes of Eliot, Auden, Yeats, Frost, Dickinson, and even Joyce Carol Oates, audible in the conversation and critical in the novel's development. And finally, like the work of the heroine, writer, and professor Brigit Stott, Oates's academic novel is obliquely autobiographical.

Oates's satire and self-parody are thus meant to serve a more serious turn. Behind the wry grimace, she is genuinely fearful of the human future, apprehensive of the pervasive American tendency to undervalue the life of the mind, and almost absurdly grateful for the academic propensity to take ideas seriously. Amid her gallery of familiar university types, Oates presents sympathetically rendered studies of artists and visionaries. She also offers a chilling view of the secret life of the victims of departmental plots and the incessant intellectual sniper fire—the stillborn thinker, the handicapped hangers-on, terminal cases betrayed by tenure machinations, and especially the beleaguered faculty wife.

Eileen Teper Bender. *Joyce Carol Oates, Artist in Residence* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ., 1987), pp. 104–12

[*A Bloodsmoor Romance*] Oates's novel, combining as it does material from Alcott's life and her fictionalization of it in *Little Women*, joins a long line of commentaries on the relationship between the two. . . .

Oates, then, seems to be implying two things about the relationship between Alcott's art and her life: the art disguised and falsified the life but also enlarged its opportunities. . . . According to Oates, it is a short step from Emerson's ''transparent eyeball'' to Zinn's ''Great Eye,'' from transcendentalism's reverence for nature and the individual to technology's disregard for their sanctity. Thus the Victorian cultural ideal forced Alcott or Aunt Jo and Aunt Edwina to conceal their sensational pasts and deny what they had learned of the complexity of human nature. But, as the case of Aunt Edwina reminds us, Alcott, in writing the equivalent of conduct books, in turning herself and her sisters into models for other young girls to follow, earned the right to conduct *her* life in comparative freedom. . . .

Biographers and critics have praised and blamed Alcott's *Little Women* series for its filial piety; Joyce Carol Oates's little women should both help them recognize its blasphemy and render suspect other innocent-looking women's fiction.

Elizabeth Lennox Keyser. *Women's Studies*. 1988, pp. 211–23

[*You Must Remember This*]. . . Oates's family chronicle completes a pattern of radical transformations from isolation and suicide in the Prologue to sexual and familial renewal in the Epilogue; from death wish to life force; from Thanatos to Eros; from loneliness to love; from violence to shelter; from chaos to control. One could argue that the closure is not earned and does not suffice to outweigh the humiliation and loss pervading the bulk of Oates's novel. And the roll call of family afflictions does in fact look daunting: unwed pregnancy, incest, abortion, poverty, alcoholism for Felix, sexual deprivation for Lyle, the maiming of Warren, the death of Domenic, the general loss of religious faith, the perversity of contemporary politics, the debasement of contemporary culture (especially evident in the new medium of television). But in the end those melancholy motifs are only the materials of Oates's realistic art. What matters most is the creation of values, sifted from the passing stream of life by the agency of memory—for ''to exist without memory isn't human,'' Enid tells herself (p. 273).

Victor Strandberg. *Studies in American Fiction*. Spring, 1989, pp. 15–16

Like the characters in [Theodore] Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, Iris Courtney and Jinx Fairchild [in *Because It Is Bitter and Because It Is My Heart*] are doomed to move in opposite directions—not because character is fate, but because, in America, color is destiny. After all, who would believe Jinx's story, his tale of chivalry and self-defense? In Oates's version of *Crime and Punishment*, Iris and Jinx must follow the paths of their respective lives from the deviance of racial separation.

Indeed I would be hard pressed to think of another white American writer who offers black characters and black life so convincingly, and who understands what Ralph Ellison dramatized so brilliantly in *Invisible Man*. As we watch Iris Courtney half-will and half-sleepwalk her way up the social ladder (attending Syracuse University, eventually marrying into a distinguished academic family), we are reminded of Carrie Meeber and the raw urges she embodied. At the same time, however, one has the uncanny sense that there is something else as well—namely, the history of our recent, traumatic decades as reflected through the eyes, and sensibility, of an extraordinary novelist.

Sanford Pinsker. *Georgia Review*. Fall, 1990, p. 540

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O'BRIEN, Tim (William Timothy O'Brien) (1946–)

One of Tim O'Brien's most important statements about the inherent problems of understanding and writing about the Vietnam experience appears in a chapter of his novel, *Going after Cacciato*, appropriately titled ''The Things They Didn't Know.'' The novel's protagonist, Paul Berlin, briefly interrupts his fantasy about chasing the deserter Cacciato, who is en route from Vietnam to Paris, to

come to terms with the fact that although he is physically in Vietnam and fighting a war, his understanding of where he is and what he is doing there is light-years away. At the center of the chapter is a long catalogue of the things that Berlin and his comrades did not know about Vietnam, and the chapter closes with the statement that what ''they'' *knew* above all else were the ''uncertainties never articulated in war stories.'' In that chapter Tim O'Brien shows that recognizing and exploring the uncertainties about the war is perhaps the closest one can come to finding anything certain at all. . . .

In his most recent work of fiction, *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien takes the act of trying to reveal and understand the uncertainties about the war one step further, by looking at it through the imagination. He completely destroys the fine line dividing fact from fiction and tries to show, even more so than in *Cacciato*, that fiction (or the imagined world) can often be truer, especially in the case of Vietnam, than fact. . . .

He explains in *The Things They Carried* that it is impossible to know ''exactly what had happened.'' He wants us to know all of the things he/they/we did not know about Vietnam and will probably never know. He wants us to feel the sense of uncertainty that his character/narrator Tim O'Brien experiences twenty years after the war when he returns to the place where his friend Kiowa sank into a ''field of shit'' and tries to find ''something meaningful and right'' to say but ultimately can only say, ''well . . . there it is.'' Each time we, the readers of *The Things They Carried*, return to Vietnam through O'Brien's labyrinth of stories, we become more and more aware that this statement is the closest we probably ever will come to knowing the ''real truth,'' the undying uncertainty of the Vietnam War.

> Steven Kaplan. ''The Undying Certainty of the Narrator in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*.'' *Critique*. Fall, 1993, pp. 44–45

In his new novel, [O'Brien] turns . . . matters of truth, time, and responsibility inward, letting them weigh on an individual character in a manner he has never done before. This is a story about a man named John Wade and his wife, Kathleen, who disappears one day from the cottage they are renting at the Lake of the Woods in northern Minnesota. . . . Wade is a Minnesota politician, and he has just lost a primary election. . . . He lost big because his opponent uncovered the fact that Wade was present at a massacre in the Vietnamese village of Thuan Yen, which is the local name for the place better known to history as My Lai where on March 16, 1968, between 200 and 500 civilians were butchered by a company of American soldiers. Wade's presence there was a secret Wade had kept from his wife, from his campaign manager and, in a sense, from himself. . . .

Joan Didion has said that narrative is sentimental, and in his own way Mr. O'Brien concurs. One of the most powerful chapters in *The Things They Carried* is the one called ''How to Tell a True War Story,'' which is, in effect, an essay, with examples, on the limits of narrative. The one question that the chapter doesn't ask is: Once you've learned to tell a true war story, how do you tell any other kind? *In the Lake of the Woods* asks that question in a different way. It is a novel about the moral effects of suppressing a true war story, of not even trying to make things present, a novel about the unforgivable uses of history, about what happens when you try to pretend that history no longer exists.

> Verlyn Klinkenborg. *New York Times Book Review*. Oct. 9, 1994, pp. 1, 33

Going after Cacciato is explicitly about living a story that is both ''true and unreal.'' Involving as epigram Siegfried Sassoon's observation that ''soldiers are dreamers,'' O'Brien tells the story of Spec 4 Paul Berlin standing watch one night in an observation post overlooking the South China Sea. As an escape from the equally powerful forces of boredom and fear, Paul Berlin imagines the possibilities of escape from the war itself. As pretext for his tale, Paul Berlin has Cacciato, the young, dumb, brave, and innocent member of his squad who deserted with the intention of walking from Vietnam to Paris. What if the squad pursued Cacciato? Paul Berlin wonders. What if Cacciato led them all the way to Paris?

Paris is a logical destination, representing all that Vietnam is not: peace, civilization, and the triumphant arrival of American soldiers in previous wars. ''By God! Lunch at Maxim's! . . . My old man ate there once,'' Paul Berlin exclaims when first imagining the possibilities of Cacciato's escape (33). Paris is identified with World War II time and again in the novel. The squad is led by an old lieutenant who served with Eisenhower and who is literally sickened by Vietnam. Upon arrival, Paul Berlin takes an attic apartment that had not been rented since 1946 and that is more than a little reminiscent of Gene Kelly's in *An American in Paris* (1951). Paris in 1945 symbolizes a point in history where everything went right for Americans, the essential opposite of Vietnam in 1968. Paris denotes the desire for both absolute power and innocence.

Paul Berlin's desire to reach Paris, to leave the war, is the desire for innocence, but surprisingly, perhaps uniquely in Vietnam War fiction, not the desire for power. *Going after Cacciato* is the rare Vietnam novel in which John Wayne's name does not appear as an ironic marker of the movie-made World War II-vintage American identity that the baby boomers carried into Vietnam. But rather than being a sign of the novel's resistance to the typical mythologizing of World War II, this bifurcation of power and innocence is very much like Ron Kovic's re-creation of a demilitarized backyard at the end of *Born on the Fourth of July*. . . .

> Katherine Kinnery. ''American Exceptionalism and Empire in Tim O'Brien's *Going after Cacciato*.'' *American Literary History*. Winter, 1995, p. 635

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O'CONNOR, Edwin (1918–1968)

Mr. O'Connor, who appears [in *The Oracle*] to know radio as an announcer, writer, and producer can know it, leaves no doubt about

his opinion. Nor will the reader, who, as radio listener, may already have certain prejudices of his own, have any difficulty in sharing it. For Christopher is not admirable. He has—and his delicious father-in-law puts it this way—two attributes: ''a remarkable talent for the commonplace, and that ridiculous lachrymal voice which appears to be standard equipment for describing to great numbers of idiots the catastrophes they are currently enduring.'' . . . The result is very pleasant and very biting comedy, though in the background is the tragic fact that the oracle *believes* what he says and, five million times worse, his listeners do too.

Mr. O'Connor, whose first novel this is, has made good use of his apprenticeship in radio writing and in the short story. He has a good sense of form and of the humorous and character-revealing detail. And, agreeable to note, he writes rather well.

Robert Wichert. *Commonweal*. July 27, 1951. pp. 386–7

The Last Hurrah has some qualities of the historical novel. It is nostalgic for a richer time and its structure is that of a pageant. Skeffington, the giant, trails an entourage of small bright figures, each designed to set off still another facet of the old man. The sly, truculent Garvey elicits Skeffington's mordant wit, the banker Cass evokes his talent for revenge and chicanery, the widow Minihin helps display his generosity, and so on. These subsidiary portraits are richer in surface than depth, but worked with reportorial skill and an affectionate ear for spirited Irish talk. The historical tone of the novel is further enforced by the fact that the politician of Skeffington's pattern was a sort of folk hero, not only to his constituents but to Mr. O'Connor as well. He was Robin Hood, with the small difference that the largesse for the poor came from his own pocket—or seemed to. He was the kind, wise father who lectured the truant and rewarded effort. He was the shaman who solved problems and offered vaudeville shows in addition. And he was the tribal leader who shared the same roots with his people, showed the same characteristics and, being successful, was an idealized self-portrait of themselves.

Mr. O'Connor very likely knows better, but he has been seduced by his own character into treating him as admirable which he is not, for all his humor and poise and even occasional grandeur.

Kate Simon. *The Nation*. Feb. 25, 1956. pp. 162–3

He entertains and moves his reader [in *The Last Hurrah*] with a story of a fabulous political antiquarian who, because of his genius, paid only very late devoir to the death-knell that has been tolling for old-line big-city bosses during the past twenty years. . . .

Here are all the ingredients of a Boston Irish novel, as before, but concocted with a masterful touch that compliments rather than demeans any of the author's derivations. If there is something unfavorable to be said about the book, let this opinion be advanced: the book lacks a certain depth in character because of its swift, zoned, summarist technique. The author himself, by his talent for the satirical vignette, must pay a certain toll for his brilliance in that area. But this reviewer will take the vignettes of Yankee newspaper folk and petty rabble-rousers, anytime, in preference to the more leisurely, incisive art, of, say, a Henry James.

Joe Dever. *Commonweal*. March 9, 1956. pp. 601–2

To hail this book [*The Edge of Sadness*] as the definitive Irish-American, middle-class, Catholic novel would do it an injustice. It is all of that, much more than *The Last Hurrah* was, but to approach it so would be to veer aside before one ever got to the real subject. The subject is Grace. It is a man's continually startled realization that God works in curious ways His wonders to perform—ways so embarrassing, or more often so ordinary-seeming, that the victim does not know he has been hit till he feels the truth working newly in his bones. . . .

That being stated, it is well to admit that the reader will find here, or recognize, closer and more informed observation of middle-class, Irish-American Catholics than he could get from a platoon of sociologists.

John V. Kelleher. *New York Times Book Section*. June 4, 1961. p. 1

The Edge of Sadness is not a French novel by a Bernanos or Mauriac: no demons attack Father Hugh; there is no debate about God's existence and no despair; this priest says his Mass, he prays—with difficulty, but he prays. There is nothing more dramatic than the fact that the only man he loved was his father, and in consequence there was the separateness. The Carmody family, which finally breaks down the walls that close him in, is not tormented in the fashion of the French Catholic novels by varied and dramatic lusts: the old man who heads it has done nothing worse than get very rich by being hard on the poor. He tyrannizes his family. These are respectable people. They also are found to be quite unhappy people as, little by little, one Carmody or another reveals his troubles to Father Hugh—they all spring from the absence of love. In this, again, the matter of religion does not enter; it is not because he is a priest that the Carmodys turn to him. The absorbing interest in this relationship, in this breaking down of their separateness and of his, consists precisely in the fact that this is a secular and not a religious novel.

Of course what gives it depth is the author's awareness that these people live beneath the eye of God.

Gouverneur Paulding. *The Reporter*. June 22, 1961. p. 48

The better novelists always seem to know how to make literary capital out of their limitations and incapacities. In writing *I Was Dancing*, probably his best book and one of the subtlest and most suggestive novels to come out of the Hub since *The Bostonians*, Edwin O'Connor, prose laureate of the Boston Irish, has done just that. What, by the way, are these limitations? Well, O'Connor cannot do women at all—the youngish wife of *I Was Dancing* is his usual stick figure paid off in a fine phrase. . . . and banished from the book within a chapter or so while the men settle to business; his grasp of Boston's peculiarly ethnocentric social and political patterns is, on the evidence of *The Last Hurrah*, superficial and melodramatic, especially in relation to the Yankee-Irish cleavage; and the characteristically somber atmosphere of his writing is anything but appropriate to the mode of straight comedy in which many of his admirers insist on pigeonholing practically all his writing. On the other hand, Skeffington's story [*The Last Hurrah*] does perfectly well as sad comedy. . . .

In his new book O'Connor transcends his limitations by a process of purification and concentration. The somber atmosphere

is refined to a pearly gray (the color of old age); dense social documentation, local color, and anecdotal set pieces are kept to a minimum—you know for sure it's Boston only because on page 69 Loew's State Theater is mentioned; the plot, focusing on a fundamental conflict of interest and willing between a father and his grown-up son, is simple and archetypal; and the action completes itself within the space of a single day.

Julian Moynahan. *New York Review of Books*. April 30, 1964. p. 13

There is a happy aura of simplicity about the work of Edwin O'Connor. It is the sort of simplicity that masks high, stylistic excellence and a profound, rather complex insight into the subtleties and contradictions to be found in mankind. . . .

The character of ''Waltzing Daniel Considine'' is a fine, fully-developed new one which may add further renown to O'Connor's marvelous gallery of portraits that includes Skeffington and the richly-drawn priest-protagonist of *The Edge of Sadness*.

There is a balance—a sanity and a Chekhovian depth—and a compassionate, yet somehow mysteriously detached humor to be found in the characters of *I Was Dancing*. The same quality was a hallmark of excellence for O'Connor's other works.

Richard A. Duprey. *Catholic World*. May, 1964. pp. 127–8

Although *The Last Hurrah* deserves praise on many counts, its humor and felicitous style, its well-made quality and bona fide political atmosphere, the book is chiefly distinguished by its presentation of a protagonist of stature. As we follow the career of the ''governor,'' learning to admire his ''good-humored audacity'' and compassion, if also to scoff at his occasionally merciless tactics, we recognize the intricacies of the figure, and we leave him, feeling a large measure of admiration. The portrait of Frank Skeffington decisively increases the value of *The Last Hurrah* as a literary effort. Not to be forgotten is its effect on the book's political issue either. Instructing us as to the difficulties involved in ascertaining the truth with regard to men in public life, the sketch persuades us to think twice about the subject of ''bosses'' and possibly to subject our previous commitments to revision.

Gordon Milne. *The American Political Novel* (Oklahoma). 1966. p. 171

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O'CONNOR, Flannery (1925–1964)

There is in Flannery O'Connor a fierceness of literary gesture, an angriness of observation, a faculty for catching, as an animal eye in the wilderness, cunningly and at one sharp glance, the shape and detail and animal intention of enemy and foe. The world of *Wise Blood* is one of clashing in a wilderness. . . . Miss O'Connor's style is tight to choking and as direct and uncompounded as the order to a firing squad to shoot a man against a wall. One cannot take this book lightly or lightly turn away from it, because it is inflicted upon one in the same way its people take their lives: like an indefensible blow delivered in the dark.

William Goyen. *New York Times Book Section*. May 18, 1952. p. 4

The theme of *Wise Blood* is Christ the Pursuer, the Ineluctable, with a satire on Protestantism thrown in. . . . It is quite clear what Miss O'Connor means to say . . . is . . . there is no escaping Christ. But the author's style, in my opinion, is inconsistent with this statement. Everything she says through image and metaphor has the meaning only of degeneration, and she writes of an insane world, peopled by monsters and submen. . . . Let me say of *Wise Blood* that it does deal with one of the themes, and shows a variety of sensibility, out of which the kind of fiction that matters can be made.

Isaac Rosenfeld. *(New Republic)*. July 7, 1952. pp. 19–20

Miss O'Connor is a regionalist in the best sense of the word; that is, she understands her country and its people so well that in her hands they become all humanity. The stories in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* take place in Georgia, but they are moving for their inescapable reality and not because of picturesque and local color. Such things, we recognize, could happen anywhere; some are grotesque and some terrible but we dare not say of any, ''This only took place in the writer's imagination.''

For she lays hold of the significant detail; her poetic awareness is constantly receiving, selecting the illustration which gives us a man or a woman or a certain kind of hot summer evening living and whole.

Sylvia Stallings. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. June 5, 1955. p. 1

Something about Miss O'Connor's work is reminiscent of the best work of another Georgia writer, Erskine Caldwell. Perhaps it is subject matter most of all. Though in no sense concerned with the pornography and lasciviousness to which Caldwell often resorts, she too goes in for the miseries of the poor whites. . . . Perhaps the similarities are enhanced, too, by the style of Miss O'Connor's stories—realistic, plain, literal. . . . Where Miss O'Connor's art differs—profoundly—from Caldwell's is not in language and subject matter as much as in the attitude of the author. Caldwell is the naturalist, out to make a social point. . . . More kin to the Bundrens of *As I Lay Dying*, her people confront spiritual and moral problems, not economics. There is in her characters a dignity, a human worthiness, that shows the real respect Miss O'Connor has for them.

Louis D. Rubin, Jr. *Sewanee Review*. Autumn, 1955. pp. 678–9

There are few modern writers whose wit is more unexpected and brilliant, or whose satire is more scathing than Flannery O'Connor's—a sample of her when she *really* wants to be mean is her satire on the

South and its nostalgia for the days of glory long-past-but-not-forgotten, in ''A Late Encounter With the Enemy''—yet her greatest strength lies in another quality which is at a premium among satirists: compassion for those whom she satirizes. The current of irony runs deep throughout her stories, but rarely does it run as deep as her compassion. . . . Because of her genuine horror of sentimentality, at just the point where many writers would soften, Flannery O'Connor's wit appears to become more wry and her satire more scathing, the result being a quality of humor remarkably akin to that of Chaucer in which the author tells with apparent ease and gusto sidesplitting stories, which, nonetheless, contain implicitly matter for some very sobering thought.

Robert McCown. *Catholic World*. Jan., 1959. p. 290

A Flannery O'Connor story or novel is always the slowly paced, leisurely uncovering of a series of unusual people and circumstances. She seems always intent on at first disenchanting us—mainly through a systematic puncturing of the myth of southern gallantry and gentility—and then restoring our confidence when she has forced us to view her world on her own terms. She forces us to go through a complete Cartesian purgation; our minds are cleansed of all previous notions. When we have forgotten the other books we have read, we can then allow for the existence of her Hazel Motes (*Wise Blood*), her Rayber (*The Violent Bear It Away*), and her ''The Misfit'' (*A Good Man Is Hard to Find*). We almost willingly ''suspend disbelief'' in the face of impossible happenings to unlikely people. This is part of what we must go through when we read most fiction writers. But never have I felt the compulsion to reject everything and start over again that I feel with Flannery O'Connor.

Melvin J. Friedman. *English Journal*. April, 1962. p. 236

Her satire and irony, exuberance of ear and invention, are inseparable from the central knowledge that in varying degrees they serve. ''Religious'' is a poor word for this knowledge if it does not mean ''knowledge of the world.'' She sees the South, it seems to me (who am no Southerner but no Northerner, either), as populated by displaced persons. Almost all her people are displaced and some are either aware of it or become so. But it is not a sectional or regional condition; it is a religious condition, common to North and South alike, common indeed to the world we live in.

The stories not only imply, they as good as state again and again, that estrangement from Christian plenitude is estrangement from the true country of man.

Robert Fitzgerald. *Sewanee Review*. Summer, 1962. pp. 393–4

But if [Nathanael] West wrote less effectively whenever he attempted to take into account the presence or absence of God, while Flannery O'Connor would not write at all without what she calls the ''attraction for the Holy''; or if it appears that Flannery O'Connor is writing about the spirit (the absurdity of disbelief), while Nathanael West was writing about the dream (the painful absurdity of sexual desire), at least I would say that the ''pitch'' of their comic fictions is very nearly the same. Both writers are demolishing ''man's image of himself as a rational creature'' (Flannery O'Connor, for instance, in her wonderfully unsympathetic portrait of the ridiculous school teacher, Rayber, in *The Violent Bear It Away*, and West in his creation of total and hapless dementia in *The Day of the Locust*). And both writers are reversing their artistic sympathies, West committing himself to the creative pleasures of a destructive sexuality, Flannery O'Connor committing herself creatively to the antics of soulless characters who leer, or bicker, or stare at obscenities on walls, or maim each other on a brilliant but barren earth. And finally both writers—one a Roman Catholic, the other a man of no particular religious drive—are remarkably similar in their exploitation of the ''demolishing'' syntax of the devil.

John Hawkes. *Sewanee Review*. Summer, 1962. pp. 397–8

The genius of Miss O'Connor's humor is that she nowhere appears the partisan of human fallibility. This is the initial requirement of the orthodox outlook: the Christian must realize that he is as liable to human weaknesses as any sinner or the unbeliever. She gives us an apt simile for this viewpoint in her story, ''The River'': where Mrs. Cronin stood, staring into the room, ''with a skeleton's appearance of seeing everything.'' We have the feeling that the skeleton itself, with nowhere to hide anything, must be able to see through us with its own inner visibility. That sense of conscience, that nakedness before God, is the source of religious realism and the premise for Miss O'Connor's humor.

Brainard Cheney. *Sewanee Review*. Autumn, 1963. p. 646

Exploding upwards into God is the action in all Miss O'Connor's stories. It is always an explosion of violence, generally physical violence, and always resulting from the violent agitation is a revelation, a striking disclosure, sometimes to the characters, always to the reader. This revelation is actually more devastating than the physical violence which preceded it. In the wake of the revelation a sense of mystery lives on—*the mystery*—the mystery of human nature, its context and complexities. It is the ability to evoke this mystery that gives Miss O'Connor's stories their peculiar depth and power.

Always the mystery is in terms of the real. The violence is born of the clash of illusion with reality. This reality is not only that of perceptible fact; it has a fourth dimension, a kind of space-time continuum, that reaches up to heaven and down to hell. The mystery gives Miss O'Connor's people a significance beyond what appears in the narrow Georgian groove and on the grimy exterior of their lives. The worst specimens of humanity communicate something of man's grandeur and misery. Her people are real, often the substratum sort, genuine in their perversity and in their comic antics, and they shock the reader by exposing the depths and the heights in man which the explosion opens up.

Jean Marie Kann. *Catholic World*. Dec., 1966. pp. 158–9

Flannery's early stories met with . . . unreflective criticism. Why, people wanted to know, did she have to write about such unattractive characters? And why write only about the South? Were there no other parts of the country worth portraying? From the point of view of sales, however, her stories had one thing in their favor: violence. Ours is an age which may be said to specialize in violence. Flannery's characters live in a matrix of violence and some of them meet violent ends. People continued to wish that they

could meet at least one ''attractive'' person in her stories, but they kept on reading. She began by writing stories which few people could understand. She ended by writing stories which everybody—or almost everybody—professed to ''love.''

This pattern seems to recur over and over in literary history. It usually signifies the emergence of a strong and original talent. In Flannery's case there is no question of the strength and originality of the talent.

Caroline Gordon. *Sewanee Review*. Spring, 1968. p. 267

In Miss O'Connor's fiction, the religious vision is markedly apocalyptic. According to this vision, everything in life leads to death, and death is revelation. It is exactly in the instant of passing out of time and life and into eternity that her characters seem to live most fully: they *begin* their humanity exactly when it is ended in time. She quietly insists on viewing death, however horrible and violent, from the perspective of eternity. If the reader resists this view, there will seem to be no moral or emotional resolutions to her stories: only the arbitrary, violent, and meaningless ''resolution'' of an equally arbitrary, violent, and meaningless death. If he accepts her view, he will be asked to see that the death of any character is supremely valuable as a means to his awakening to reality. . . .

The particular view of death that we find in Miss O'Connor's fiction is related to her presentation of the operation of grace. In this fiction, the effects of grace are rarely visible in the active and fruitful union of the human with the divine will, and redemption does not seem to happen *in the world*. Grace is usually seen to operate as a powerful but hidden force which is entirely separate from human will and intention. It seems as though God is out to accomplish His salvation in spite of the sinner's willful drive against Him.

Ruth M. Vande Kieft. *Sewanee Review*. Spring, 1968. pp. 345–6, 350–1

The work of Flannery O'Connor is remarkably free of morbidity because, like Greek tragedy or Christian myth, her attention is less on catharsis and loss than on transfiguration; less on the fact of death than on its attendant circumstance and aftermath—the apocalyptic vision of possibility. . . . The thrust of Flannery O'Connor's work . . . is into the heart of paradox, epitomized by serious consideration that man's mortality might be an act of grace and the occasion of death a prophetic sign. . . .

Flannery O'Connor undercuts the more sensational or melodramatic aspects of dying, because she is concerned less with documentary realism than with the aura of understanding effected in the agonist himself or in a bystander.

Leonard Casper in *The Shaken Realist*, ed. Melvin J. Friedman and John B. Vickery (Louisiana State). 1970. pp. 290–1, 293

Flannery O'Connor's Catholic celebration is unique in contemporary literature. Her literal, banal style disguises a sense of participation in the sacred action of the universe: the salvation of man. She remains firmly grounded in the physical scene, the rural, biblical South, but she shows us the mystery on which that scene is built. At times communal, more often personal, the hidden celebration in her work is perhaps the finest testament of her ability to connect fact and mystery.

A major premise of O'Connor's thinking is that the realm of the Holy interpenetrates this world and affects it. It is the workings of this mystery that she was most concerned with demonstrating in her fiction. By her own explanation, the grotesquerie of her stories is directly related to her Christian perspective. This is a point that has bothered some critics, who feel that a Christian view of life ought to tend toward the reconciliation of opposites, toward wholeness and affirmation, whereas the grotesque is by definition distorted, incomplete, or incongruous. To these critics O'Connor might have responded that they were trying to claim what has not been fully achieved: while opposites might be reconciled in Christ, the world was not yet reconciled to Him; we may know of the existence of wholeness because of Christ, but we are not yet whole ourselves. O'Connor's Christian conception of wholeness gave her the background against which she saw man in his present condition as, at best, incomplete; even the good, she felt, has a grotesque face, because ''in us the good is something under construction.''

O'Connor found elements of her Christian vision of man in both the religion and history of her native region. The legacy of a revivalistic past has lingered longer in the South than in any other region of the country, and while O'Connor hesitated to describe the South as Christ-centered, she did feel it to be Christ-haunted. The South's history included a major experience—the loss of the Civil War—in which O'Connor found important theological implications. She saw the loss of the Civil War as the South's collective and personal experience of the biblical story of the Fall. . . .

While she was an artist of the highest caliber, she thought of herself as a prophet, and her art was the medium for her prophetic message. It was her intention that her stories should shock, that they should bring the reader to encounter a vision he could face only with difficulty or with outright repugnance. And she wanted her vision not only to be seen for what it was but to be taken seriously. She was confident enough of her artistic powers to believe this would happen, even if it took fifty or a hundred years.

Dorothy Tuck McFarland. *Flannery O'Connor* (Ungar, 1976), pp. 1–2, 114

Flannery O'Connor never wrote a first-person narrative, nor did she ever completely surrender her third-person prose to the limitations of a subjective point of view. She undertook the offices of writer with all the freedoms of traditional storytelling, assuming the omniscient manipulation of fictional destinies with an unquestioning ease. One wonders if she could have written otherwise, for a subjective perspective in fiction writing narrows the authority of the given account; it implies that there can be another point of view, a different set of meanings to assigned events. In turn, this relativity suggests that one can live in doubt, that one can live, as Lionel Trilling has said, ''by means of a question'' instead of by an unassailable religious persuasion.

This was exactly what O'Connor did not want to do—to concede that there could be more than one viable interpretation of reality. In her opinion, conflicts between ways of being constituted a challenge to Christian truth that could not be brooked, and with this certainty of outlook, she reserved final narrative authority for herself. For the hard of hearing she would ''shout,'' for the blind she would ''draw large and startling figures.'' Yet with all this allusion to rhetoric, to bold and unambiguous fictional strategies,

O'Connor was curiously reluctant to exploit the potential of the omniscient voice. Rarely in all these tales of bizarre and violent experience does she reflect on the meaning of the grotesquery or give explicit value to fictional events. She infrequently enunciates in her fictional world what she had no trouble conveying in personal life—that Christian orthodoxy was the consistent measure of experience. This is usually left for the reader to infer, to come upon through the indirections of allusion, incongruities, and distorted hyperbole. . . .

To the extent that she called folly by its right name, she was a truth teller in both a doctrinally condoned and a more widely recognized sense. This is an accomplishment that remains unaffected by the limits of inference. Even when unembellished by revealed anagogical implications, Flannery O'Connor's work retains a weight of human concern that makes the reading of the fiction a disturbing encounter, valuable to readers of any persuasion because its haunting truth rests on sharable experience rather than prohibitive religious allusion.

Carol Shloss. *Flannery O'Connor's Dark Comedies: The Limits of Inference* (Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1980), pp. 102–3, 128

Anyone familiar with the critical canon that has developed around the work of Flannery O'Connor is aware that there are profound differences in the judgments about her fiction. Some of these differences concern questions of execution—of measuring the distance, as it were, between the stories themselves and the explicit theological vision of her essays and letters. Other differences stem from questioning O'Connor's vision itself: in particular, whether the vision is sufficiently complex to deal with the subtle nuances of the modern mind's spiritual struggles, or conversely, whether her vision represents an archaism, a reactionary oversimplification of the spiritual problems of modernity. We know that she was generally hostile to the ''prevailing spirit'' of the times. Was that hostility so strong in her as to induce a refusal to confront the full implications of the modern mind's predicament? Such is the argument, as I have already noted, Lewis Simpson makes in *The Brazen Face of History* when he charges that O'Connor ''oversimplifies the modern situation of the self; her stories employ a series of characters who lack the sophistication to grapple inwardly with the subtleties of the self as a creature of modern secular history. She lacks, perhaps refuses, an intimacy with history'' (244–48).

The central issue raised by Simpson's criticism concerns in the broadest sense the question of the representation of reality in O'Connor's stories: whether or not this representation is true to the dimensions and possibilities of existence as we know it. Although from a literary standpoint the issue must be engaged within the stories themselves by examination of language and structure, the issue cannot be understood exclusively in literary terms. The stories themselves presuppose a certain history and a certain metaphysical view of reality and human nature which are prior to and in the sense ''outside of'' the stories. From a literary standpoint the meaning of those views may only be validated within the stories themselves, but the meaning is inseparable from the larger intellectual context from which those views derive.

To approach this question of the representation of reality in O'Connor's stories necessarily calls for some discussion of her Christian faith as a starting point. Throughout this study I have argued that O'Connor's sense of reality, her vision of history, and her fictional technique are inseparable because they derive from a single source; her belief in Christ's Incarnation, death, and Resurrection. For a believer such as O'Connor the Christ event is *the* event in history. It not only radically changed the direction and meaning of history but also transformed the whole order and possibilities inherent in being. Consequently, the Christ event has a revolutionary effect on the meaning of human personality, including of course the nature and dimensions of consciousness. These aspects of O'Connor's thought, as shaped by her belief in the Christ event, I now want to focus upon in order to explore more fully the question of the representation of reality in her fiction.

John F. Desmond. *Risen Sons: Flannery O'Connor's Vision of History* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Pr., 1987), pp. 93–94

O'Connor was realistic about human nature and its ability to resist grace. She understood the ebbs and flows of faith peculiar to humankind. Perhaps because she felt that conversion was a continuing process, she was troubled but not burdened when her friends experienced momentary setbacks in their faith lives. She wrote to ''A'' who had converted to Catholicism and was now filled with doubts, ''Some people when they lose their faith in Christ, substitute a swollen faith in themselves. I think you are too honest for that, that you never had much faith in yourself in the first place and that now that you don't believe in Christ, you will believe even less in yourself; which itself is regrettable, but let me tell you this: faith comes and goes.''

O'Connor's conviction that our age is deaf and blind to truth appears in all of her writings. How to gain the attention of a handicapped generation is her constant concern. She does it by exaggeration, shouting, or drawing very large pictures, and recommends pushing ''as hard as the age that pushes against you.''

Perhaps the violence that shocks so many first-time readers of O'Connor's fiction seems so unpalatable because it is so personal. We encounter violence daily, but most often at a distance. O'Connor counteracts the desensitizing effect of remote violence by forcing it upon us in a form we cannot escape. Whether it is the drowning of a child in a river, or the murder of an old man in the stairwell of his apartment building, or the massacre of an entire family on a deserted Georgia road, O'Connor pushes her readers to the brink over and over again. ''The kingdom of heaven,'' she writes, ''has to be taken by violence or not at all.'' These stories are particularly difficult for the secular ''good man,'' who will not find in them many examples of the godly life, but who will be continually challenged to define and redefine his own conception of goodness. She wrote to Cecil Dawkins, ''It's not a matter in these stories of Do Unto Others. That can be found in any ethical culture series. It is the fact of the Word made flesh.'' She goes on to identify this emphasis as not only Roman Catholic, but as orthodox Protestant belief, too.

Jill P. Baumgaertner. *Flannery O'Connor: A Proper Scaring* (Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1988), pp. 12–13

For Southern writers whose careers began in the late 1940s and 1950s, the interplay of past and present becomes less significant. As Lewis Lawson points out in *Another Generation: Southern Fiction Since World War II*, the Southern writer now begins to see

the Southerner ''as a product of present social complexities, not of past philosophic simplicities'' and consequently as standing ''almost completely deprived of the help of tradition, custom, or community.'' Cut off from history and tradition, the Southerner finds his or her traditional identity shattered. ''The Southerner's life was once vitalized by his participation in the group, even though it meant sharing the collective guilt of the group,'' Lawson writes. ''Now, however, the Southerner must go it alone, and many of the best recent novels detail the failure of the personality that occurs when one must go it alone.'' Lawson points out that most Southern writers during this period focus less on the disintegration of society than on the disintegration of self, and that what most distinguishes each writer from the others in terms of vision is the mode of survival that each poses.

Flannery O'Connor, whose mature writing career began in 1952 with the publication of *Wise Blood*, belongs in the generation of writers of which Lawson speaks. For her the destruction of the isolated self stems from the self's separation from Christ and the Church and from its failure to embrace a life of Christian commitment. As a widely read student of modern culture, O'Connor was well aware of the process of secularization of modern society and mind that had been under way for several centuries, and she frequently spoke of the consequences in her essays and letters. In ''Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction'' she writes about the worship of mind and rationality, saying that ''for nearly two centuries the popular spirit of each succeeding generation has tended more and more to the view that the mysteries of life will eventually fall before the mind of man.'' She then goes on to discuss the turn inward to consciousness, particularly by modern writers: ''Many modern novelists have been more concerned with the processes of consciousness than with the objective world outside the mind. In twentieth-century fiction it increasingly happens that a meaningless, absurd world impinges upon the sacred consciousness of author or character; author and character seldom now go out to explore and penetrate a world in which the sacred is reflected.''

O'Connor's primary bulwark against the dangers of the isolated self was her Catholic faith; from and with it, she gained strength and purpose to resist any tendency to valorize the individual consciousness. She saw Christ, not herself, at the center of the universe. Nonetheless, O'Connor was also painfully aware that people could become isolated from everyday reality and other people through this faith. Such separation frequently occurred when people embraced their faith with unquestioned enthusiasm, completely ignoring the problems and concerns of the wider world. In a letter (February 19, 1956) to John Lynch, O'Connor characterized this type of faith as ''vapid Catholicism,'' and she said it ''can't influence you except to be shut out of it. The Catholic influence has to come at a deeper level. I was brought up in the novena-rosary tradition too, but you have to save yourself from it someway or dry up.''

> Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr. *The Art & Vision of Flannery O'Connor* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1989), pp. 7–9

As a whole, my study recommends that readers accept the world that O'Connor has created on its own terms, no matter how repugnant and alien, and question the opinion that her work is somehow limited because it is ''ugly.'' Many critics of Southern literature take O'Connor to task for not achieving the tragic sublimity of Faulkner. Instead, Flannery O'Connor's strange comedy has its own aesthetics, its own goals. ''If [an artist] cannot create the perfect form,'' says Lewis Lawson, ''perhaps the next best thing is to create the perfect deformity. Satirists have always chosen the latter course, and that seems to have been Miss O'Connor's choice.'' Flannery O'Connor was a superb comedian, and the grotesque dimension of her work is neither a limitation nor an arbitrary whim. Rather, it is a purposeful accomplishment, deeply rooted in medieval art and satire. If we carefully trace the surface strangeness of her fiction, we will be surprised by its odd richness and beauty—not to mention its peculiar form of health.

> Anthony DiRenzo. *American Gargoyle: Flannery O'Connor and the Medieval Grotesque* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Pr., 1993), p. 16

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ODETS, Clifford (1906–1963)

Awake and Sing . . . reveals as interesting a new talent as I have seen in the theatre for a long time. To say that it deals with the humor and the tragedy of a Jewish family domiciled in the Bronx, that it recreates from shrewd observation the minds and manners of a stubborn and struggling family, is by no means to say enough. . . . Observation is there in full measure but so, too, is something else—enthusiasm, passion, and the same almost painful intensity of feeling that distinguishes the characters. . . . Emotionally he is still close to the people he is writing about, and he understands them from the inside out. . . . The subject of the play is . . . the persistent and many-sided rebellion of human nature against everything which thwarts it.

> Joseph Wood Krutch. *The Nation*. March 13, 1935. p. 314

It seems to me that first thing about Mr. Odets's new play (*Golden Boy*) that we should mention is a certain quality in the dialogue. . . . Where his theatrical gift most appears is in the dialogue's avoidance of the explicit. The explicit, always to be found in poor writers trying for the serious, is the surest sign of lack of talent. To write in terms of what is not said, of combinations elusive and in detail, perhaps, insignificant, of a hidden stream of sequences, and a resulting air of spontaneity and true pressure—that is quite another

matter. In this respect Mr. Odets is the most promising writer our theatre can show.

Stark Young. *New Republic*. Nov. 17, 1937. p. 45

What has been impressive in Mr. Odets's plays has not been their ideas, which are usually pretty confused, or their structure, which has been pretty melodramatic, but the fact that the characterizations and the dialogue have a bite and an originality of turn which set them apart from the somewhat pallid characters and dialogues of most modern plays. . . . Mr. Odets's people are at once primitive and intelligent, and it is this antinomy which imparts to them their color and variety. Neither of these qualities are hurt by the fact that their emotion is not strong enough to conquer their intelligence nor their intelligence deep or keen enough to kill their emotion. It is this struggle of emotion with intelligence which is the basis of much of the great drama of the world, and it is this struggle which is abundantly evident in the half-Americanized Jews of Mr. Odets.

Grenville Vernon. *Commonweal*. Dec. 16, 1938. p. 215

Each of Odets's faults has almost its counterpart in creative quality. Against his extreme subjectiveness can be placed his wise desire to express the nature and the problems of the people that he knows. Against his errors of cause and effect, his intention to give his plays a social background and to make them purposeful enough to carry the burden of their content. Against the fact that he himself does most of the talking in his plays, there is the fact that the talk is exceptionally alive and theatrical, speech for an actor's tongue. Against the fact that the majority of his characters are clichés, the recognition that in almost every play there is at least one that is a real creation, sometimes only a subordinate character, sometimes a leading figure, but recurrently one that has three dimensions and a soul.

Edith J.R. Isaacs. *Theatre Arts*. April, 1939. p. 261

Clifford Odets can do just about what he wants to, because he has the right eye—what he has seen makes a storehouse of vivid people and things and action from the immediate world—and because he has theatrical genius. He is a poet too, of course, and along with Shaw, Kober, Weidman he has tapped a source of homely poetry in Jewish family life. But better poets have written god-awful plays. And very few playwrights have so constantly managed the explosive comment, the juxtaposition of varied types, the rising expectation, the unexpected in a flash, which give even his sermonizings theatre motion. He simply has the gift: his imagination goes in all directions at once, and his selective dramatic sense tells him which of the ways can be brought together to the most effective cross purpose.

Otis Ferguson. *New Republic*. Sept. 27, 1939. p. 216

By a considerable margin, the most important achievement in the literature of the American Jews is that of Clifford Odets. No one else has been able to maintain that degree of confidence in the value of the exact truth which made his best work possible. His social understanding is limited, but he has been able to keep his eyes on reality and to set down his observations with great imagination and remarkable detachment. Jews are never commonplace to him—but neither are they prodigies, either of absurdity or of pathos or of evil. He has perceived that they are human beings living the life which happens to be possible to them.

Robert S. Warshaw. *Commentary*. May, 1946. p. 17

The Big Knife proved that Odets had lost none of his theatrical vigor and that no one writing realistic drama, not excluding the Arthur Miller of *Death of a Salesman*, can surpass his power to write with an explosive force and with a wild and swirling poetry of torment and bedevilment. . . . If *The Big Knife* is not a successfully realized play, it is not because Odets still writes some embarrassingly callow lines of dialogue and has himself under imperfect control. It is because Odets, a product of the agitated left-wing theatre of the 1930's, is heir to its major faults—to the tendency to put too much of the blame on society and too little on the individual.

John Gassner. *Forum*. May, 1949. pp. 286–7

Although *The Country Wife* is not Mr. Odets's best play, it has some of his best writing in it. Moreover, it discloses a new and unexpected Odets. This in itself is reassuring and welcoming. Mr. Odets has usually been associated with dramas of social significance if not social protest. . . . It is interesting to see in *The Country Wife* that Mr. Odets can write from affection with the same intensity and insight with which he first wrote with indignation. . . . His scenes race forward with the drive of his earliest works. His gift for deriving tension from small things is as effective as it used to be in developing large climaxes.

John Mason Brown. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 9, 1950. pp. 26–7

Night Music is a lyric improvisation (a sort of dramatic *suite*) on the basic homelessness of the little man in the big city. It is charmingly sentimental, comically poetic, airy and wholly unpretentious. It's characters are as simple as those of a commedia dell'arte scenario, and its cutely obstreperous hero is a twentieth-century Pierrot—weeping, sighing, cursing and deeply tender and funny withal. . . . In it Odets takes for granted that we all recognize our homelessness, that we all believe the rootlessness and disorientation of his hero to be typical, that we all know that most of the slogans of our society are without substance in terms of our true emotions. In *Night Music* Odets is far more wistful than angry.

Harold Clurman. *New Republic*. April 30, 1951. p. 22

Clifford Odets wrote *Golden Boy* at the height of his powers as an angry, moralizing neo-realist, and it remains his most successful play. Where the earlier *Awake and Sing*, for all its skill in infusing a surface realism with the natural poetry of Jewish-American speech, still moved loosely about the stage in the accepted Chekovian manner, *Golden Boy* pulled the dramatic reins tight and shocked its way through the evening like a series of body-blows. Without

loosing rhythm or imagery, the speech of the play adapted itself to the lean and hard-driving urgency of a thoroughly theatrical structure; the language remained richer than what we had been getting under the guise of keyhole naturalism, and the play moved like lightning besides.

Walter Kerr. *Commonweal*. March 28, 1952. p. 614

I think that one of the reasons for Odets's importance to the American theatre is that his work reflects so strikingly certain American national characteristics: rebelliousness, virility and violence coupled with tenderness, sentiment, and humor. Perhaps this is the very reason Odets has been so successful in England, where other important American playwrights seemingly have not been understood. The English probably find some fascination—perhaps it is a repulsive fascination—in this simple, robust, naked emotion of his, so directly in contrast with their polite expression.

It is interesting to me that Odets's earlier works, sometimes charged with being limited by their topicality, all possess the same underlying general theme—the need and the search for responsibility and self-respect that can help generate the finest nature in man.

Robert Whitehead. *Theatre Arts*. Oct., 1954. p. 25

Waiting for Lefty, *Golden Boy*, and *Rocket to the Moon* did not attempt to speak for America. They spoke of America, of its indestructible good nature. They infused the white-collared, pale-fleshed middle class with the spirit of the expanding West. The shipping clerk could feel like Paul Bunyan. His nature was wedded to Walt Whitman. . . . Odets's audiences listened and heard their inner voices echoing in his expostulation. His protest was an articulation of theirs. His dreams were their yearnings. His testament was that the human being not be nullified. . . . Odets was a member of the family, a friend and relation to all who paid the price of admission.

Barry Hyams. *Theatre Arts*. April, 1955. p. 70

Odets is still himself in important respects, still the romanticist who hurls himself at large questions with little prospect of answers or even of complete definitions. He is a born folk-dramatist, capable of creating vivid characters and writing richly flavored colloquial speech. . . .

With the subject matter, nuances, and intimations of *The Flowering Peach* we might have expected Odets to crystallize the opinion of an age. Instead we get the author's doubts and vacillations. Different ages of the theatre have precipitated different viewpoints which brought them to some revelation and finality of statement. But there does not seem much probability of our creating a contemporary *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Everyman*, or *Faust*. Odets may not have even considered aiming so high. *The Flowering Peach* appeared to be the personal testament of a rueful man content to accept contradictions and shortcomings in man and the world. In the first act the pious are left to perish in the Flood, and at the conclusion of the play, Noah pathetically chooses to spend his feeble old age at the home of his monopolistic, well-to-do son because he will be more comfortable there. It seemed as if Odets, with the example of generations of men before him, had given up hopes for a better world and is ready to accept humanity on its own second-best terms.

John Gassner. *Theatre at the Crossroads* (Holt). 1960. pp. 154–5

One can hardly read the first five plays of Clifford Odets without being keenly aware of the power with which he presents his views of capitalism. At the end of the first major productive period of his career, one may make generalizations about his social outlook. His most obvious concern is, as he has stated himself, with the social mass rather than with the individual. *Golden Boy* may seem to be an exception to this statement; however, if this play is considered on the allegorical rather than the literal level, it becomes evident that Odets is using the individual to represent the mass, just as he used the family in this capacity in *Awake and Sing!* and in *Paradise Lost*. . . .

The plays ultimately focus on the mendacity of human existence, on the falseness of most human relationships, and on the shallowness of most conventional social values. Odets is calling for the recognition of truth and for the banishment of the false values which dominate the society of which he is writing.

Throughout the plays, Odets writes with a reverence for human beings and with a deep concern for their problems. He is not condemnatory even of the unsympathetic characters in his plays, so much as he is of the social institutions which have forced men to compromise with their ideals in order to survive. Odets constantly calls for the very thing that Jacob wanted in *Awake and Sing!*: dignity in human existence. These early plays are forthright in their criticism and condemnation of anything in life which negates this dignity.

R. Baird Shuman. *Clifford Odets* (Twayne). 1962. pp. 88–9

The two choices of the Berger children—one to flee, the other to stay and fight for a better life—however disparate they seem, have as their common source their discontent with life as they live it. Seen in this sense, *Awake and Sing!* is less a play dealing with the class struggle than one embodying the vague dissatisfactions of the lower middle class at the thwarting of normal human desires. ''I never had a pair of black and white shoes!'' cries Ralph, but it is not the shoes alone that he is crying for. That the play is not really a ''revolutionary'' play at all was recognized by the Left press; according to Harold Clurman, who directed the production, the *New Masses* ''spoke gingerly'' of it and the *Daily Worker* called it ''an unimportant play whichever way you look at it.'' Odets' original title, *I Got the Blues*, would seem also to indicate that he was less concerned with the uprising of ''ye that dwell in the dust'' than with the expression of a mood of widespread disquiet. But the final title, together with Ralph's outcry, as the play ends, that he is ''twenty-two and kickin'' and ready to fight for a new life, seemed sufficiently ominous and specific to convince others besides Burns Mantle that Odets was calling for an immediate revolution.

Charles Kaplan. *American Quarterly*. Winter, 1963. pp. 581–2

Odets quickly outgrew the tendency to preach and to intrude forced themes; what is more, even his early plays rise above that weakness through their superior craftsmanship. It is a tribute to Odets' integrity as a dramatist that he constantly strove for newer and more

expressive insights to advance his themes. This integrity helped Odets to survive the decade that had fostered him and to go on writing excellent plays. *Awake and Sing* assumes a stature among the plays of 1935 not because the others were necessarily poor, but because Odets combined certain truths with effective dramaturgy in a manner that most other social protest writers found difficult to accomplish. Economic determinism is there, but so are real people. Marxist stock phrases are much in evidence in all his early plays, but so are rich and accurate colloquialisms. Melodramatic clichés abound in the plotting, but these, too, are outweighed by the great number of honest, natural moments. For Odets was—and is—much more than ''the poet of the Jewish middle class'' or ''the little Jesus of the proletarian theatre.'' His plays remain valid because they deal with universals concretely realized.

Michael J. Mendelsohn. *Drama Survey*. Fall, 1963. pp. 238–9

The significance of the play [*The Flowering Peach*] lies in the fact that Odets finally attempted to come to terms with the esthetic consequences of the loss of his political commitment. It was an acknowledgment long overdue, for, as we have observed, the attempt to exploit the structural advantages of the Marxist metaphor after rejecting its meaning vitiated Odets' post-Depression plays. The essence of *The Flowering Peach* is the acceptance of the loss of political faith. . . .

Odets' utilization of the Noah myth is not subject to a one-to-one allegorical interpretation. There can be no doubt, however, that the play represents an intensely personal statement. Odets is basically concerned with man's reaction to cosmic injustice, his attempt to construct a means whereby he can accept this injustice. It is this concept of acceptance which dominates *The Flowering Peach*.

Gerald Rabkin. *Drama and Commitment* (Indiana). 1964. pp. 209–10

. . .he was capable of no greater judgment than may be credited to the less intelligent dramatists of his generation; in attempting to develop class-consciousness among the Depression's victims for an attack upon their presumed oppressors, he did not recognize that he was merely substituting one brand of materialism for another. More damaging to the growth of his talent was the inability to free himself completely, as the years passed along, from the materialist theme with which he began his career. His perception of the world around him dimmed with the beginning of the national economic recovery late in the prewar decade, and the mind that should have taken cognizance of the new situation contented itself with after-images of the poverty of the Depression's worst years. It is true that Odets took up other issues in certain works, particularly in his late plays; but whether subsidiary or paramount, class-consciousness is never absent, regardless of the year and the remoteness of his characters' concerns from money worries. Having taken a stand with the destitute proletariat, he could not recognize the fact of a rising employment index. After the first six plays, handsomely brought together in an omnibus volume in 1939, Odets's work dwindled in relevance to the age, until finally, after 1954, he could give the stage nothing at all.

Malcolm Goldstein. In *America Drama and Its Critics*, ed. Alan S. Downer (Chicago). 1965. pp. 134–5

In Odets's play [*Awake and Sing*] there was a lyric uplifting of blunt Jewish speech, boiling over and explosive, that did more to arouse the audience than the political catchwords that brought the curtain down. Everybody on that stage was furious, kicking, alive—the words, always real but never flat, brilliantly authentic like no other theater speech on Broadway, aroused the audience to such delight that one could feel it bounding back and uniting itself with the mind of the writer. I wanted to write with that cunning anger and flowing truth; the writer would forget his specialness, his long loneliness, and as he spoke to that mass of faces turning on in the dark, the crowd would embrace him, thank him over and over for bringing their lives out into the light. How interesting we all were, how vivid and strong on the beat of that style!

Alfred Kazin. *Starting Out in the Thirties* (Little). 1965. pp. 80–81

Whatever his faults and inconsistencies as playwright and person, Clifford Odets possessed a vitality combined with a poetic spirit that enabled him to create, with insight and affection, strong characters who reflect the feeling of his times. He has been compared to Chekhov and to Sean O'Casey, but the Odetsian spontaneity, impulsiveness, and passions of his people represent an original American talent that remained intact despite the weakness of his later plays. Accused of writing ''propaganda plays,'' Odets once countered by contending that ''all plays, just like all literature, are essentially propaganda.'' He added, with his customary candor and considerable heat, ''My problem and business in the world is to present truth dramatically, appealingly, and entertainingly.'' And in large measure, he conquered his ''problem.''

Jean Gould. *Modern American Playwrights* (Dodd). 1966. p. 201

Clifford Odets was a complex man, nurtured in a complicated age, but out of his intense struggles with self and society were born six plays of continuing importance. The stock picture of Odets as the radical author of *Waiting For Lefty*, who later abased himself before the Un-American Activities Committee and sold out to the Establishment, makes classification easy for criticism at a gallop. Such a view fails to do justice, however, to the depth, intensity and relevance of Odets' plays. It is simply untrue, for example, that the later work of Odets is uniformly poor. *The Big Knife*, *The Country Girl* and *The Flowering Peach* can stand comparison with *Awake and Sing!*, *Golden Boy* and *Rocket to the Moon*. Indeed, the early *Golden Boy* and the late *The Flowering Peach* are probably—all parts considered—the two best plays Odets wrote in his twenty years as a major American dramatist. . . .

Like every play that has ever been written, *Golden Boy* bears the stamp of its decade. Nevertheless, this fine play also transcends the narrow interests of the thirties, for in Odets' depiction of a young man's struggle between self-realization and self-destruction, between idealism and materialism, *Golden Boy* persists in being meaningful. Similarly, the later plays project specific pre-occupations of the post-Second World War period; yet *The Big Knife*, *The Country Girl*—and, especially, *The Flowering Peach*—also reveal themes that have obsessed imaginative writers in every decade since, at least, the First World War. Odets, in other words, is very much in the mainstream of modern theater and literature. . . .

Even unsympathetic critics of Odets have acknowledged his verbal gifts. This talent has little to do with the accuracy of a tape-recorder, or with the ability to write stunning curtain lines. The Odets canon is full of quotable dialogue . . . , but no line in the best plays is there for its own sake. Odets told [Arthur] Wagner [in an interview] ''there are playwrights who don't know their punctuation isn't very important in the recreation of the character they've written, or that, as we used to say in the Group Theater, their script is only a series of stenographic notes.'' Analysis of Odets' plays nevertheless reveals a highly sophisticated use of dramatic language, an employment of words that can bear close reading and analytical criticism. Dialogue in the best work of Odets performs a number of simultaneous functions: it expresses character; it forwards action; it creates mood; and it exposes theme. But in addition, Odets' language also possesses color, power and variety—that is, it has distinction aside from its service to character, structure and theme. Imagery in some plays—*Golden Boy*, for instance—is especially noteworthy. In short, Odets is one of the rare ''poets'' of the modern drama.

Edward Murray. *Clifford Odets: The Thirties and After* (Ungar, 1968), pp. 219–22

The ear he brought to recording the idiom and rhythms, the substance, the lurking depths of communication below sheer words, all these come from an awareness of the social scene that could not have been contrived or assumed. Odets recorded the experience he lived, one way or another, one place or another. That experience may indeed not have resembled in fine detail the daily events in The Bronx of his heroes and heroines. But he did catch the intensity, however obliquely, the passionate spirit of a group of artists, actors, writers, intellectuals of various sorts, caught up in one of those periods in human history where public events force men to make their own private values, to find their own goals, to commit themselves to community enterprises that give one identity and provide one with a small area of meaning. His awareness of theatrical environment, with its articulately self-conscious and incessant self-expression, was carried over well to the highly verbal world of his striving families. The American economic depression of the 1930's, like the great famines and disasters of history, natural or man made, created a crucible in which forms of art were shaped not only as means for dealing with this specific and enormous enveloping event but also for dealing with oneself, for mapping out territories which had inner integrity and coherence without regard to large political generalizing. . . .

Odets quickly outgrew the tendency to preach and to intrude forced themes; more important, even his early plays rise above that weakness through their superior craftsmanship. It is a tribute to Odets' integrity as a dramatist that he constantly strove for newer and more expressive insights to advance his themes. This integrity helped Odets to survive the decade that had fostered him and to write at least two excellent plays many years later. *Awake and Sing* assumes its stature among the plays of 1935 not because the others were necessarily poor, but because Odets combined certain truths with effective dramaturgy in a manner that other social protest writers found difficult to accomplish. Economic determinism is there, but so are real people. Marxist stock phrases are much in evidence in all the early plays, but so are rich and accurate colloquialisms. Melodramatic clichés abound in the plotting, but these, too, are out-weighed by the great number of honest, natural moments. For Odets was much more than merely ''the little Jesus of the proletarian theatre,'' as one critic called him. His plays remain valid because they deal with universals.

Odets was determined to depict problems of inequality and repressed opportunity in American society. His principal medium for doing so was one often used by American dramatists—the family. . . .

But it is the family as a social organism (rather than specific marital problems) that most often occupied Odets' attention, and there seemed to be a marked calming in the playwright's attitude on this subject that makes a comparison of his early and late plays interesting. In Odets' early dramas, the family mirrors society and the playwright's emphasis is on rebellion. The process can probably be translated into a single axiom: the individual must liberate themselves from the bonds of a repressive society. People must liberate themselves from the bonds of a repressive society. Odets' basic attitude is not abnormal in a Western culture, where the emphasis has tended more and more toward individual achievement, less and less toward a family-oriented social structure. Still, Odets carries the idea to an extreme that is surprising, especially when viewed in the light of the traditional Jewish pattern of close family ties.

Michael J. Mendelsohn. *Clifford Odets: Humane Dramatist* (Everett/Edwards, 1969), pp. xiv–xv, 113–15

The impact of *Awake and Sing!* derives not from its social protest against the horrors of poverty, but from the potency of spirit in its people. At last, although the language was English, not Yiddish, Odets was substituting for the consolatory spectacles and sentimentality in the Yiddish theatre the first deeply felt and formally achieved realism in America. He was daring to put on the stage the lives of recognizable people struggling for life amidst ''petty conditions.'' And he was hoping their conflicts—by reason of their universality—would reach an audience not limited to Jewish-Americans. . . .

Underneath the fiery political message, Odets is counseling himself in *[Waiting for] Lefty* not to wait passively for his personal success or salvation, but to join with his Group [Theatre] brothers and deliver an uppercut to ''the enemy'' responsible for *all* of their problems, ranging from betrayals by women to material deprivation, to his failure to get parts in plays. His indictment of a patently unjust social system is genuine; the personal steam, however, is supplied by his relationship to his parents and by his current yearning not only to overcome his loneliness, but also to deliver an ''uppercut'' to his surrogate fathers, the Group directors—most particularly to [Lee] Strasberg, who, unlike [Harold] Clurman, has not encouraged him in this project. He finds it a ''blessed thing'' to learn from the freedom of collaborative improvisation in working on this one-act play ''how Bach must have felt sometimes''. . . .

The rich, compassionate, emotional flow in *Golden Boy*, with its layers of meaning, its cornucopia of American image, of symbol, of character, and its ornamenting grace notes of oblique dialogue and humor, would perhaps never be surpassed by Odets. Although in his work he would again and again confront the same moral dilemma in a variety of manifest forms, all of them deeply humane, he would not again illuminate it as intensely and profoundly as here. . . . With *Lefty*, the invitation to become the spokesman for a righteous hatred of injustice had successfully allied his private rage to a socially shared and constructive end. In a

subtler way this had happened with *Awake and Sing!*, celebrated by audiences for helping them to feel more ''real.'' However, in the larger and more abstract canvases of *Paradise Lost* and in *The Silent Partner* he was unsuccessful in persuading an audience that his anger spoke *for them*. Perhaps it was because in both those plays he sacrificed his unique gift for detailed immigrant-American characterizations and dialogue to his conscious need to depart from this idiom and to make abstract formulations which would transcend his Jewish-American identity. He often said he wanted the respectability of a Sidney Howard, a Maxwell Anderson, a Robert E. Sherwood.

Margaret Brenman-Gibson. *Clifford Odets, American Playwright: The Years from 1906 to 1940* (Atheneum, 1981), pp. 257, 305, 475

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O'HARA, Frank (1926–1966)

This is the poetry of flat, dead-pan colloquialism. . . . This does not mean that O'Hara is easy or trivial. It is just as hard to be casual and amazing as it is to be catchy and profound. . . . I am not sure that his direct, ''hear me talking to you, I just want to say this and get going'' speech always rises above the flatness of its own colloquialism, but when it does, it is moving in the way that only simple communication can be moving. Certainly his poems always manage a fresh start, free from the dreadful posturings of the conventional verse of his generation.

Kenneth Rexroth. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 6, 1957. p. 43

Most writers about New York exaggerate or sentimentalize; the city has qualities that don't lend themselves easily to lyric expression. I think Mr. O'Hara is the best writer about New York alive, perhaps the only good one; he succeeds in conveying the city's atmosphere not by writing directly about it but by writing about his emotions, all of them somehow filtered through its paint supply stores and its inspiring April smog. . . .

Second Avenue's language has a good deal to do with its success. Like that of [William Carlos] Williams—from which it differs in other respects—Mr. O'Hara's language is convincing and natural. (There isn't a tedious ''literary'' use of a word in the whole poem, except when Mr. O'Hara is parodying the built-in solemnity which has been a chief horror of our poetry for twenty years.) Stilted academic language (in which animals are ''beasts'' and ''trust'' means only ''have faith in'' and not ''a bank'') has never been able to say anything about New York. ''Beat'' language has done a little better; but, accurate as it may be, it remains a jargon which limits the meanings of words (*cool, bust*), and which is not nearly comprehensive enough to deal with ''the most substantial art product of our times.'' Mr. O'Hara's language is hugely comprehensive and capable of the widest and most surprising effects. . . .

Kenneth Koch. *Partisan Review*. Jan.–Feb., 1961. pp. 130–1

No one could have guessed ten years ago that the poems of Frank O'Hara would be among the most seminal influences on the work of the youngest generation of American poets now in their 20s. So much of the work collected in *Meditations in an Emergency* and *Lunch Poems* appeared at first flat, prosaic odds and ends of commonplace events, thoughts, gossip, locations and cliches. . . . Today, one has come to see why such poems are considered pioneering classics not only by the young but by some of O'Hara's contemporaries. Such poems are classics for the obvious reason: O'Hara was probably the first poet to ignore taking the traditional step away from undigested daily experience in order to refine it into formal art. In brief, he was the first and he remains the best of the poets of the impure. . . .

Once one learned how to appreciate this impure quality, the reading of an O'Hara poem was usually like trying on a new pair of glasses. What had been dim or ignored out of habit or prejudice or preconception suddenly became incandescent with poetry. . . .

Wit is another part of his example and legacy. Again, O'Hara's edgy, sometimes corny but always very genuine wit is as commonplace as the time of day or the mildly good high one can feel at a cocktail party. It is, as he might say, ''real.''

At other times, however, O'Hara hides behind a kind of adolescent Wow! and smarty-pants posturing and fails to get at or get across the complex of feelings which clearly originated the poem. Instead, he remains entangled by New York chic and hysterical activity—an acting-out of feelings on the page instead of an exploration into their reality. But at his best, the man speaking in many of O'Hara's poems possesses that rare quality: charm.

Paul Carroll. *The Poem in Its Skin* (Follett). 1968. pp. 221–2

As a poet, [O'Hara] was able to impart existence to things merely by naming them. And he could breathe life into art, or at any rate call attention to the life that was already there, in a way which is hard to pin down but whose aura continues.

''Picasso made me tough and quick, and the world,'' begins an early autobiographical O'Hara poem. . . . Tough *and* quick in order to turn back to Picasso and the world and get the good out of them, this time to remake them in his image, putting something in the empty space between the world and Picasso. He discovered how to do this along with a generation of American artists.

John Ashbery. *Art News*. Jan., 1968. pp. 50–1

[O'Hara's] intense involvement with so many different levels of work, so many different kinds of artist, naturally created great demands on his personal loyalties. But it was part of O'Hara's genius to be oblivious to these demands, to treat the whole thing as

if it were some big, frantic, glamorous movie set. To us he seemed to dance from canvas to canvas, from party to party, from poem to poem—a Fred Astaire with the whole art community as his Ginger Rogers. . . .

It is only now that one sees the truth of this intellectual's intellectual—this Noel Coward's Noel Coward—only now one realizes it was his capacity for work, his stamina, his passion for work, that was the energy going through his life. . . .

Who but the dead know what it is to be alive? Death seems the only metaphor distant enough to truly measure out existence. Frank understood this. That is why these poems [*Collected Poems*], so colloquial, so conversational, nevertheless seem to be reaching us from some other, infinitely distant place. Bad artists throughout history have always tried to make their art like life. Only the artist who is close to his own life gives us an art that is like death.

Morton Feldman. *Art in America*. March, 1972. pp. 53–5

O'Hara himself is one whom other poets love for saying yes but do not actually believe. His influence and popularity are considerably greater than his achievement—a phenomenon attributable to many factors including his sheer entertainment value and the notoriety of his pathetic and unexpected death. But most of all I think his popularity stems from his sybaritic stoicism, or perhaps affirmative skepticism, and from his articulation of strategies, attitudes and values which other poets find themselves momentarily sharing. In addition, many of O'Hara's strategies can be adapted to qualities of experience less camp and aggressively superficial. While O'Hara reduces the present to sheer surface and the creative play of the individual consciousness, he also points to materials and attitudes which might constitute a genuine moral vision free of the systematic and abstract distortions of most philosophical attempts to define value.

Charles Altieri. *Iowa Review*. Winter, 1973. p. 98

So many of O'Hara's poems are playful, ''casually insightful'' celebrations of the esthetic autonomy of the creative act. The last stanza of ''Autobiographia Literaria'' (the serious, Coleridge-inspired title, of course, totally at odds with the spirit of the poem) specifically celebrates this esthetic ego involvement. . . . The wonder here is a mock-wonder—whimsical rather than Whitmanic—but it is aimed at calling our attention to the ''action'' of making the poem. Here, as elsewhere in O'Hara's work, the mock-heroic posturing is only superficially satirical. Underlying the casual chronicles of everyday events in his work is a deep commitment to the transformative qualities of poetry—its ability to open our eyes, sharpen our perceptions, involve us more totally with the world around us. O'Hara's whimsy is, if I may be permitted an oxymoron, a serious whimsy. . . .

O'Hara's work also has apparent affinities with Pop-Art: in poems like the one beginning ''Lana Turner has collapsed'' or the delightful poem called ''The Lay of the Romance of the Associations'' in which the Fifth and Park Avenue Associations in New York attempt to get together, only to be frustrated because ''that bourgeois Madison Avenue continues to obstruct our free intercourse with each other.'' But the sense of playfulness and social satire O'Hara's poems share with Pop-Art seems to me less substantial than the ''action'' involvement of the writer within the poem and the relationship of that literary idea to the painterly esthetic of Abstract Expressionism. . . .

The achievement of O'Hara and the Abstract Expressionists shows us that transient matters can be dealt with in an enduring way. The art of the moment does not always have to be propagandistic and tied to rapidly changing social issues. When the moment-to-moment reality of the individual becomes the focus, the art becomes made up of the very stuff of life itself. Art has always been preoccupied with the universal, these artists seem to be telling us, but life continues to serve up a steady diet of particulars. It is as a careful chronicler of those particulars that O'Hara has made his mark on literary history.

O'Hara's best known and most often anthologized poem, ''The Day Lady Died,'' illustrates how carefully controlled and drafted his ''casual'' art can be and how what is seemingly a random list of selected moments from a day in the poet's life is actually a tightly structured, artfully contrived series of effects. The poem records the deep impression that the news of Billy Holiday's death made on him. The emotional impact of that moment is heightened by its juxtaposition of trivial and impersonal details with O'Hara's recollection of hearing Billy Holiday sing. The poem begins with facts and figures—impersonal, trivial, routine. . . .

''Poem for a Painter'' makes specific O'Hara's painterly sympathies and his inclination to view the art of painting as more able to capture fleeting emotional moments than poetry. In lines reminiscent of Hart Crane, he writes, ''The ice of your imagination lends/ an anchor to the endless sea of pain.'' The painterly imagination is frozen; the event captured on the canvas is its own enduring record. O'Hara wrote a great deal about painters in his poetry as well as his prose, and there can be no question, I think, that he attempted to consolidate the achievement of Abstract Expressionism in literary art.

Fred Moramarco. *Journal of Modern Literature*. Sept., 1976. pp. 441–46

The problem of influence is a major topic, for O'Hara assimilated an astonishing variety of styles. His best poems fuse what he called the ''charming artifice'' of Apollinaire (and of a host of other French poets from Rimbaud to the Surrealists) with the bardic voice of Mayakovsky, the colloquial speech of Williams or the late Auden, the documentary precision of Pound's *Cantos*, and the Rilkean notion of being ''needed by things.'' O'Hara's equivocal response to the English Romantics is especially interesting. Generically, his major poems follow Romantic models, but he almost always injects a note of parody, turning the conventions he uses inside out. Aside from literary models, O'Hara's poetry also incorporates specific film techniques, phonetic and rhythmic devices modeled on the music of John Cage and Erik Satie, and such concepts of Action Painting as ''push and pull,'' the ''all-over,'' and the notion of the canvas as a field which the artist enters. The result of assimilating such varied influences is the creation of a new kind of lyric poem. . . .

O'Hara's poetry is characterized by a remarkable confluence of styles. Aside from the influence of painting, discussed in the last chapter, and the close bonds between O'Hara's lyric and the arts of film and music, the poems reflect an unusual combination of literary influences. Dada and Surrealism continue to stand behind O'Hara's distinctive imagery—an imagery inclining toward artifice and the landscape of dream. The colloquialism and celebration of ordinary experience recall Williams and, to a lesser extent, the

later Auden; but the use of proper names and documentary ''evidence'' seems to derive from Pound rather than Williams. . . .

O'Hara's syntactic structures were influenced by Apollinaire and Reverdy, while his peculiar brand of Personism can be traced back to Mayakovsky, Pasternak, and Rimbaud.

The *Collected Poems* is, in short, a very learned (detractors would say, an eclectic) book. O'Hara's reputation as casual improvisator, unschooled doodler, could hardly miss the mark more completely. . . . One of the special pleasures of reading O'Hara's poetry is to see how the poet reanimates traditional genres. Ode, elegy, pastoral, autobiographical poem, occasional verse, love song, litany—all these turn up in O'Hara's poetry, although his tendency is to parody the model or at least to subvert its ''normal'' conventions.

Marjorie Perloff. *Frank O'Hara: Poet among Painters* (Braziller, 1977), pp. xiii, 138–39

O'Hara's primary achievement has been his use of himself in his own poems as something like the ''visual-biographical emblem'' that [Boris] Pasternak speaks of. The central figure in O'Hara's poetry is himself; but unlike Montaigne, the man is not the book, and there are hints of depths that are never fully sounded. There are no extended childhood memories, no memories of past love affairs, in general, no history of the self at all. One gets to know O'Hara through a series of moments, and one of his constant themes is his perception of himself as an array of separate selves, multifarious and unpredictable, constantly creating himself anew as if he were himself a work of art. Yet the poet as he appears in his own poems does have a recognizable personality, and it might be helpful to try to form some sort of composite description of this figure. . . .

O'Hara rejected the possibility of metaphysical truth. Because he did not believe a poet should seek to impose order on experience, he did not want to impose the order of an elaborate, carefully wrought prosody on his own verse. But though O'Hara claims not to ''like'' poetic devices such as meter, rhyme, assonance and ''all that stuff,'' he nevertheless does seek a kind of shapeliness, the verbal equivalent of ''pants . . . tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you.'' He does not want to be correct, but he does want to be attractive. His humorous reference to the importance of running, rather than turning to face his pursuer and assert his credentials reflects his dislike for a language that asserts its own authority. Poetic language, he believed, ought to come spontaneously to mind under the stress of immediate experience.

Alan Feldman. *Frank O'Hara* (Twayne, 1979), pp. 43, 45

No poetry has been more influenced by the movies than Frank O'Hara's. Many critics have noted that O'Hara employed cinematic technique throughout his work, pointing out, as Marjorie Perloff has, that his images ''move, dissolve, cut into something else, fade in or out'' as scenes in films do. Others, such as James Breslin, view O'Hara's consciousness as ''moving, taking in things . . . with the speed and precision of a movie camera.'' However, O'Hara's use of film goes beyond technique per se. . . .

Fifty-four poems in O'Hara's *Collected Poems* rely on film in varying degrees. Some only allude swiftly and pointedly to scenes or plots, quote snatches of dialogue, or mention actors. Others refer to specific films or make offhand comments about movies in general, which often simply lend poems verisimilitude. In a substantial number of poems, however, O'Hara incorporated film in central, if not primary, roles, illustrating or fortifying major points or suggesting themes, especially about love. The films O'Hara relies upon are decidedly romantic, presenting a fantasy of how love triumphs over any trial and how lovers thus gain a virtual paradise on earth. While such a paradise is, in O'Hara's view, impossible in actuality, it may exist for each of us in our fantasies. In his film-oriented poems, such as ''Ave Maria,'' ''Four Little Elegies,'' and ''Fantasy,'' the homosexual O'Hara ironically chose a decidedly heterosexual medium by which to investigate love, focusing on its transitory nature and on our desire, even need, to believe in the possibility of its permanence, while knowing better. . . .

Between . . . fantasies, however, O'Hara expounds on film as art. He suggests that its ''silvery images'' and ''glamorous country'' provide audiences with ''dreams . . . incredible / fantasies,'' and he asserts, ''The main thing'' for film to do ''is to tell a story. / It is almost / very important.'' The story is the ideal, the romance, the fantasy—what holds viewers' attention, keeps them paying ''a quarter'' for admission, and enables them to recall at will the film in time of need. The ''dreams'' and ''fantasies'' film incites are the added attraction of the movies, which for ''little tykes'' and adults alike is ''sheer gravy.''

Jim Elledge. ''Never Argue with the Movies: Love and the Cinema in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara.'' In Jim Elledge, ed. *Frank O'Hara: To Be True to a City* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Pr., 1990), pp. 350–51, 357, (Reprinted from *Poet & Critic*, [Spring, 1988], pp. 54–62)

If the modernist poets had opened the gates of the city, O'Hara was determined to live there as a native of the place. Focused upon himself, and by extension upon the poetry that was so much a part of his identity, he became the quintessential postmodernist. Although he is seldom credited as a significant innovator, O'Hara stands at the pivotal point for poetry in the mid-twentieth century. His work, far from a minor expression that ''ambles garrulously back through Ginsberg, Cummings, Sandburg, home to Whitman,'' is a kind of watershed, a culmination of the Modernists' efforts to exploit the city, and a prototype for the poetry to come. Astutely seeing O'Hara's importance as a ground-breaker, Thomas Meyer remarks, ''like [Charles] Olson's, O'Hara's work anticipated more than it accomplished, making him as much precursor as influence.''

It is possible to identify in O'Hara's work all the basic elements of poetry written between the mid-fifties and the early eighties: an antiacademic stance characterized by material and language not traditionally considered poetic; an intense examination of his own life that, in the words of Charles Moles-worth, makes ''confessional poetry seem alexandrine or allegorical by comparison''; a fascination with surrealism; and a preoccupation with the act of writing. All of these elements were exploited in various ways in poets ranging from Ginsberg to James Tate, but O'Hara discovered them for himself.

Over a thirty-year period, however, the postmodern elements that seemed so rich and provocative in the beginning have begun to fade. The city-self has limits, and one can travel only so far inward.

Exploitation of the subconscious mind through surrealism, of the conscious mind through confessionalism, and finally of the creative impulse underlying the production of poetry itself leads inevitably to the boundary marker. Going farther is impossible, and so poets since the mid-eighties have begun to move outward once more, which accounts for the renewed interest in formalism. Rather than a regression to the forties, the so-called new formalism is an attempt to move off the dead center of self, the limits of the city that Frank O'Hara and a generation of his successors inhabited so completely.

Neal Bowers. ''The City Limits: Frank O'Hara's Poetry.'' In Jim Elledge, ed. *Frank O'Hara: To Be True to a City* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Pr., 1990), pp. 331–33

In place of the specific intertexts invoked by his earlier pastiches and parodies. O'Hara's ''lunch poems'' foreground the New York cultural text in which modernism is disseminated, both in the institutionalization of ''high art'' and in mass culture. The temporal structure of the lunch break itself dramatizes the sense of exhausted urgency informing the ''quandariness'' of selection: the lunch break positions the poet within, but liminally outside, the restrictions of the employer's time clock, the employer of course epitomizing the ''institution art'' in postwar America, the Museum of Modern Art. Yet the lunch break also evokes the circular structure of what Harold Bloom has called the romantic ''crisis-poem.'' In accentuating the disjunctions of his autobiographical reflections with romantic and modernist constructions of subjectivity and landscape, O'Hara's lunch poems exhibit not so much ''anxiety of influence'' as a ''revaluation'' of lyric subjectivity, a revaluation that foregrounds the postmodern reception of ''tradition.'' As O'Hara claims in ''Nature and New Painting,'' ''nature'' cannot be distinguished from ''human nature'' in his modern urban landscape: ''In past times there was nature and there was human nature; because of the ferocity of modern life, man and nature have become one'' (*Standing Still*). The description of the local in an urban setting therefore always leads to consideration of the modes of signification that define the landscape. Similarly, the circular structure of O'Hara's lunch poems cannot be distinguished from the structure of the lunch break itself. Just as the urban landscape is a product of signification, the lunch break is a product of the work schedule. The urban scene does provoke meditation in these poems, but it is rarely depicted symbolically; significance is immanent in the names of people, places, and events. By adapting the circular pattern to the lunch break, and by transforming that pattern by attention to quotidian urban details, O'Hara interrogates the subject-object relations constructed in the romantic lyric. And by furthering the formal and linguistic experimentation of [William Carlos] Williams's use of the vernacular, O'Hara ''revaluates'' the romantic definition of the local, both geographically and linguistically. In doing so he underscores the romantic impulse of Williams's desire to merge subject and object, while recuperating the formal and linguistic experimentation that revealed the impossibility of such a ''marriage.'' O'Hara simultaneously renews and deconstructs the romantic lyric; the dissonance resulting from this project arises from his postmodernist questioning of the expectations such a form raises.

John Lowney. ''The 'Post-Anti-Esthetic' Poetics of Frank O'Hara.'' *Contemporary Literature*. Summer, 1991, pp. 261–63

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O'HARA, John (1905–1970)

Mr. O'Hara sees his Gibbsville as another Zenith, but there is no satire in his seeing. One characteristic unites all his characters (with one minor exception). They have no values. They are all rudderless, and morally the most satisfactory of them is the gangsters' wop, Al Grecco, who is blissfully unaware of any values but his loins and stomach. He at least rebels when his boss impugns his relations with his mother, but one feels that no one else in this town can really be insulted.

Henry Seidel Canby. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 18, 1934. p. 55

Mr. O'Hara's novel, *Appointment in Samarra*, was one of the sensations of last season. Ernest Hemingway approved it, Dorothy Parker was enthusiastic about it. It bore the *imprimatur* and the *nihil* obstat of the smartest minds. It started the town talking.

To my mind he has written about more significant people in his present book of short stories [*The Doctor's Son and Other Stories*]. . . . The long title story is new and excellent. It is drawn from those youthful impressions that are the most indelible. The Pennsylvania Country Club people of *Appointment in Samarra*, many of them almost unbelievably cheap, were observed and depicted from impressions of a later date. In spite of Mrs. Parker's opinion, it seems to me that they were mercilessly depicted. Naturalism could go no further. No one can quarrel with that attitude on the part of the author; but one may wonder why so brilliant a talent was expended on this particular material. The material in the present book of short stories interests me more, though it may not be such a smack in the eye.

William Rose Benét. *Saturday Review*. March 2, 1935. p. 517

If he should decide (as a great many critics seemed to feel he did in *Butterfield 8*) to write skillful, rather melodramatic novels about people whose inevitable tragedies take place in a moral vacuum and are therefore not tragic or moving in any final sense, he will still be successful, but it won't be what his friends want from him, and I'm sure it won't be what he wants for himself either. If, on the other hand, he can contrive to write about the things he authentically hates—waste and hypocrisy and the sadness of potentially valuable lives failing, but not without some dignity, because they

were not born quite strong enough for the circumstances they had to meet—and if he can write about them with the honesty and understanding which he possesses in as great a measure as anyone writing today, then he will certainly be one of our most important novelists.

Wolcott Gibbs. *Saturday Review*. Feb. 19, 1938. p. 12

O'Hara had been a reporter before he turned to the novel, and he managed, with quiet and exciting grace, to bring the very special and elaborate technique of metropolitan reporting into the novel and even to improve upon it. He wrote with such neat dexterity and cleverness that the sheer perfection of his ear, the casual precision with which he reproduced the manners of the country-club set, a bootlegger eating his Christmas dinner alone in a roadhouse, the mocking modesty of two lovers going to bed, the rhythm of a dance, the subterranean hysteria of a boring dinner-party, seemed remarkably good and staggeringly true. . . . but the final effect was of a virtuosity that had no relation to anything but the drive and weight of its own skill. It would be easy to say that O'Hara's virtuosity was so glittering that he believed it self-sufficient; but the trouble was that he relied upon a criticism of life which he did not fully understand.

Alfred Kazin. *On Native Grounds* (Reynal and Hitchcock). 1942. p. 389

His new novel *Ten North Frederick*. . . . mines the same solid vein of Americana, from civic affairs to conjugal relations and the Social Code, as did *A Rage to Live*. It strips the veil from the myths about the security and respectability of ''the good old days,'' pointing out in passing that deeds undone and words unsaid may be even more representative than those we remember, and it deals effectively with the labels and the badges of schools, colleges, clubs, possessions, success, and family position in the timeless battle between the Arrived and the Climbing. . . . It is not the plot, it is the people who matter here, and the author's attitude toward them might be called more fascinated and more curious than it is sympathetic. These characters credibly affect each other in the smallish frame of their lives. They are complex, significant, full-bodied. One comes away from their story with the impression that a gifted paragrapher, not a long-view novelist, has ticked them off, for in contrast with the electrifying exactness of its short profiles, expositions, and conversational exchanges, the novel's total effect is that of a densely populated glacier moving well within glacier speed.

James Kelly. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 26, 1955. p. 13

O'Hara's great strength is his curiosity about people, about what they do and why they do it. I have an impression that O'Hara doesn't like people, most people, very much, and he shows little compassion in his writings, but it does seem true that nothing human bores him. His sympathy has a limited range, but his interest is unbounded. . . . In a period in which symbolism and fantasy have become more and more important, in which any beginner can talk about levels of meaning, he has come as close to pure realism as a serious writer can. His devotion to the observed fact, though sometimes a liability, has saved his work from a certain sort of triviality.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 25, 1961. p. 21

As always in his stories, O'Hara has an eye for the details of the physical setting in which civilized relations are enacted: he knows about *things* and believes in their fetishistic power. His ear is still very keen, though he has become somewhat vain about it, with the result that patches of dialogue stand out as displays of expertness breaking the line of his stories. He builds these stories with the uninspired conscientiousness of a good carpenter who trusts more to measurement than imagination, and this is not always so great a fault as some modern readers are likely to suppose.

Yet O'Hara is not a first-rate writer, and the main reason is that he does not have a first-rate mind. Writers possessed by a vision, like Faulkner, can for a time dispense with the ordinary uses of intelligence; but writers like O'Hara, who depend mostly upon observation of daily life, need the kind of intelligence that enables them to move beyond the bric-a-brac of what they observe. O'Hara's mind, however, is imprisoned in the kind of small-spirited and skeptical materialism which in this country tends too often to be mistaken for worldliness. It is a leaden, literalistic and insistently mundane mind, and it has an embarrassing way of sliding from pseudo-masculine coarseness to whiskey sentimentalism.

Irving Howe. *New Republic*. Nov. 27, 1961. p. 16

By genius and by devotion to the act of writing, John O'Hara has established himself as perhaps our senior living novelist and certainly as our senior master of realism. . . . As with Farrell's the central passion of O'Hara's writing is verisimilitude. O'Hara's recall seems to be both total and unrelenting, but he has brought his powers of itemization to a technical management and to areas of experience unknown to such a primitive as Farrell.

There is no situation in the American society with which he does not seem to be intimate. . . . The danger of such relentless specification, of course, is that it can become oppressive. Its virtuosity can dazzle, but its accumulation numb.

John Ciardi. *Saturday Review*. August 15, 1964. p. 6

There are more elegant stylists, more profound thinkers, more sensitive spirits. There is no working writer who matches O'Hara's importance as a social historian. When the next century wants to know how Americans lived between 1920 and 1940, it will find what it wants to know in O'Hara. It will find the names of things—the right names—but it will also find accurate analyses of the social structure and characters who are both real and representative. The stories and people may not always fall within the individual reader's experience, but it is difficult to doubt that O'Hara's wide knowledge and deep commitment to the truth would permit him to falsify his material.

Matthew J. Bruccoli in *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties*, ed. David Madden (Southern Illinois). 1968. pp. 129–30

Searching among the basic elements of fiction—story, character, idea—for the secret of O'Hara's tremendous *interest*, one may be

puzzled. Often the story is not expertly dramatized, yet the reader is very curious to know what will happen next. The characters may be talented, testy, unpredictable, and only superficially known, yet the reader will be fascinated in the process of getting to know about them. The ideas are limited in range and very elusive when they pretend to depth, yet they *live* compellingly in the character-action nexus. Somewhere in this complex lies the secret of O'Hara's readability—of the fact that millions of readers find it impossible to lay a story of his aside once they have started it. Perhaps the heart of it is that the characters come alive because the reader is completely involved in the living instant when he sees them responding—often surprisingly—to the problem and the situation through which they exist and grow.

Charles Child Walcutt. *John O'Hara* (Minnesota). 1969. p. 46

The most interesting question raised by O'Hara's death (in 1970) is whether he will be replaced, whether we will get another high-grade popular naturalist pouring out one heavily detailed novel after another, ostensibly giving us the low-down on American society, making his ruthlessness plausible by his commanding technique, his frightening eye and ear, his pleasantly insulting insistence on the dirtiness of sex; and yet for all his Diogenes air, a celebrant of the status quo.

Seventeen novels and eleven volumes of short stories. (Among the latter are some of the best stories ever written about Hollywood, not just a writer's revenge on the studios.) When a man has written that much as well as O'Hara and has been as widely read, his disappearance leaves a gap. My chief curiosity about that gap is to see whether any new author has the energy to fill it—not to mention the professionalism—to patrol that area of the print spectrum; because the popularity of an adroit, nasty, industrious, superficial but intelligent writer like O'Hara was a tribute, in its way, to the very idea of the novel.

Stanley Kauffmann. *New Republic*. Feb. 26, 1972. p. 26

As a novelist and storywriter, John O'Hara is one of those figures who, while seeming less than entirely great, do seem entirely necessary, as a feature or a primary aspect of modern American fiction. What he represents is realism; praised by Allan Nevins as having given the necessary historical record of the 1930s, he has somehow become the best modern case of the writer as social historian. The critics were never quite easy with him, though, perhaps because the public swallowed him with enormous delight. . . .

O'Hara's novels and stories, found excessively frank in their time, postulate a coordinated, respectable and essentially monogamous society, held by code and habit and desire, and struggling within it an essentially adulterous humanity. His first novel starts in an unsatisfactory marital bed, and so, in a sense, does all life in the O'Hara universe. Caught between the two—substantial, virtuous society and practical sexuality and angst—is that recurrent O'Hara type, the respectable reprobate.

His work shares the dominant literary attitudes of his time; it is touched with that mixture of radicalism and nostalgia central to the mood of the early to mid-century American novel, and something of the self-made intellectuality also characteristic of the period. His temper was shorter than that of many of his peers, and his anti-intellectuality (''I'm not some hairy philosopher. I'm just an ordinary guy who happens to write well'') more assertive, leading to stronger declarations that what he possessed was, well, ultimate craft: the gift of getting dialogue right, observation precise, structure under control. Even his sense of grievance was reasonably typical; there was arrogance and defiance as well as social aspiration that passed, as with Fitzgerald, deep into the tenor of his writing. Perhaps the most striking difference from the rest of his rather incestuous generation is in the rhythm of the career. O'Hara was the writer as worker, and the work intensified as time went on. The bulk of the production falls in fact in the post-war period; here came the intensive night writing spells that generated a story a month, enabled him to produce seven books, including three big novels, between 1955 and 1961, and leave a mass of posthumous work which continues to appear (he died in 1970), like the stories of *Good Samaritan*. . . .

But he could write with an extraordinary, clear purity, which is most articulate as a tone. It comes out as a mode of apparent indifference, a hard surface given to the text through a predominance of dialogue or a continuous functionality of scene, through the abstraction of psychological inwardness from the characters through a particular way of spatializing the public and the private, the narrative overview and the inward moves of being. This offended critics who made humanism a requisite of a fictional text. . . .

O'Hara worked best with a very special marriage of accumulated, dense social detail, a given wealth of society, and a sparse and limited mode of writing; this is why he so frequently succeeds most in the short stories.

Malcolm Bradbury. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. May 28, 1976, p. 633

The Lockwood Concern is the fourth of a series of novels that attempt not only to create a fictional region representative of America in the twentieth century, but also to study the American man of action during this period. From Sidney Tate onwards, though Joseph Chapin and Alfred Eaton to George Lockwood, O'Hara presents the psychology of the individual American who is engaged in society and commerce and who is an insider rather than an outsider. Because he did not belong in Pennsylvania, Tate was somewhat ineffectual in his role, while Chapin was his opposite, the product of a small community who had an inappropriately grand ambition. Alfred Eaton is Chapin on a large scale, but he is so external a man that when he is prematurely retired there is nothing for him to do. George Lockwood is more interesting than all of these: he is at once more aggressive and more thoughtful, and he is more introspective than any of the others. As his ''concern'' begins to collapse owing to the disaffection of his children, he begins to realize what has happened to his life and what the family obsession has cost in human terms. But it is too late. Like the others, Lockwood comes to his end with a sense of futility and emptiness. . . .

O'Hara sees that aside from money, modern America has no system of rewards that can engage a mature person's interest. An attractive reward must create a new involvement and a new kind of responsibility. The award or prize is useless unless it has a future life. . . .

Often compared to Anthony Trollope and George Moore, O'Hara was like them because he dealt with the ordinary realities of

his society. He did not write about peripheral people as Hemingway often did, nor did he dwell in a world of grotesques with Faulkner. In the tradition of Lewis and Dreiser and Anderson, he confronted the materialistic, world of middle-class America, and as the spiritual heir of Edith Wharton, he explored the world of society with an intensity few others have even attempted. Yet he was more than the social chronicler who comes to mind in a comparison with Trollope or Moore. He was a man of tremendous feeling who tried to understand how such forces as ambition, sexual passion and jealousy, as well as kindness and love, affect all human beings. There was a turbulence and violence in all his best work, just as there was in him. His vision of humanity was not hopeful, but he put value in loyalty, in communication between individuals and in imaginative kindness. He is a writer about people far more than a chronicler of society. O'Hara's world is not only a mirror of reality but a product of his own feelings and intelligence.

O'Hara's industry—his obsession with writing—was a curse as well as a blessing, for he wrote too much and the quantity of his work confused his public and caused him to be undervalued. His public statements and vanity turned people against him and he was resented and underrated, usually by his inferiors and often by his own associates. By now, however, it is clear what his best work consists of—thirty or forty short stories and novellas, for their artistic delicacy and a psychological acuteness unsurpassed in American literature; *Appointment in Samarra*, for its youthful vitality and honesty; *From the Terrace*, for its ambition, thoroughness and immense readability; and *The Lockwood Concern*, for confronting most completely the values that tormented him through his life. These works make O'Hara one of the half-dozen most important writers of his time.

Frank MacShane. *The Life of John O'Hara* (Dutton, 1981), pp. 225–26, 238

Surprisingly for a writer whose work is sometimes crudely plotted or imperfectly realized, O'Hara's interest is to a large degree aesthetic. He is capable of very refined observation and great finesse in his handling of characters and their developing situations. His short stories reveal these qualities continually, but they appear in the novels too, and in one special quality he is approached by no one. Although his characters are characteristically two-dimensional, he creates a psychological atmosphere around them at times that is extraordinary. His ability to ''sense'' or ''feel'' a character within the context of an introspective mood can be seen in even his worst novels. Mildred Simmons and the party she gives, and Nina Stephens when she first appears, in *The Big Laugh*, have this special quality of being felt through a projected mood that is full of tones. The Eaton mother in her widowhood as she talks to her daughter-in-law in *From the Terrace* is captured with the same psychological inwardness. This power of projection, usually witnessed in O'Hara's women, might be called ''depth of tone,'' and it is but one aspect of an aesthetic richness in O'Hara's that has been slighted or ignored.

O'Hara cannot be called a major novelist, and his achievement is not at the level of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, or Faulkner. But if his best work in fiction is taken together—his short stories, nouvelles, and perhaps seven of his novels—he compares well with his contemporaries: with John Steinbeck, John P. Marquand, James Gould Cozzens, James T. Farrell, and John Hersey. Compared to Steinbeck, O'Hara produced a larger body of superior work, and his social intelligence is almost infinitely more mature. O'Hara is an elusive writer, but if he creates a tradition in American fiction, it is perhaps in the role he adopts as a musing observer of American middle-class despair. The writers who follow him, in his special concerns, are John Cheever and John Updike, who bring a similar sense of disquiet and subterranean anguish to the suburbs. Their characters are portrayed in a closely specified social dimension, and yet are always subject to the terrors that followed O'Hara—their isolation and entrapment within the abysses of themselves. O'Hara's career began with trauma and psychic fixation, from which he was unable to free himself; he could not write them out of his system or evade them. From the fly-by-night hotel rooms he occupied as a reporter to his ''Linebrook'' study outside Princeton, the terror of his loneliness was always part of him. But in his magical moments as a writer—and he has many—his haunting becomes everyone's.

Robert Emmet Long. *John O'Hara* (Ungar, 1983), pp. 173–74

In *O'Hara: A Biography*, Finis Farr suggested that [John] O'Hara's ''achievement was so great that it may take a while for us to realize its extent, as a mountain lifts above the shoreline in the eyes of travelers putting out to sea.'' Farr's simile may have been merely the optimistic hope of a devoted O'Hara friend and fan. It probably would be far-fetched to suggest that a literary revival of the kind enjoyed by Herman Melville, Henry James, or F. Scott Fitzgerald will someday propel O'Hara's reputation to new critical heights. The literary canon is ever changing, however, and there is no doubt a grain of truth in Farr's prediction, because O'Hara and his fiction were so closely identified with a particular time. As the O'Hara years recede into the more distant past, the unique contribution of his fiction in presenting ''the way people talked and thought and felt'' during the first half of the twentieth century may yet secure him a firmer niche in the American literary pantheon. But O'Hara's appeal to future readers will not be based solely on his skills as a social historian, for he felt that his time was too important to be left ''in the hands of the historians and the editors of picture books.'' His strength lies in his artistic ability to render life itself in all of its dimensions. John O'Hara left a vast literary legacy that the literary critics have only begun to explore in depth.

Philip B. Eppard. Introduction. *Critical Essays on John O'Hara* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1994), pp. 16–17

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OLDS, Sharon (1942–)

The Dead and the Living is a family album prefaced by snapshots of the century's agonies—images of executions, race riots and gory death from Tulsa, Okla., to Chile and from Rhodesia to Iran. O.K., we can take it. At this theatrical distance we are not touched to the core. . . .

Such horrors are thawed by the rhythm of words: They remain static conundrums to be puzzled out with a meditative gaze. Only when this photographic technique of intimate exposure is transferred to her family does Sharon Olds come into her own. It is the private scrutiny that shocks—the day of her mother's divorce, her first period, sex after childbirth, a 6-year-old boy's erection on the back seat of a car. Nothing is too personal, too intimate for such scrutiny.

The confidence of the best of these family portraits is astonishing. Only rarely does Miss Olds fall into cliché or sentimentality. Patterns are traced from grandfather to father to son—a family curse of ''cruelty and oblivion'' as relentless as that of the house of Atreus. Not that Miss Olds would make such gestures. She is consumed wholly by the present. . . . Confidences are made without a trace of embarrassment but with a hint of sacrificial pride. Each family, as it were, harbors its own little Dachau. (Here a macabre form of modern self-regard creeps in.) The poet might dream of a perfect father in place of the real one with ''his bad breath, / his slumped posture of failure,'' but the female is as ugly as the male: ''Finally I just gave up and became my father.''

This identification evolved into the brilliant ''Poem to My Husband From My Father's Daughter''. . . .

Even her 6-year-old son is a killer. . . .

So the theme spills over from the public to the private and so to the children themselves. It corrodes the century. Yet Sharon Olds is no Sylvia Plath. Her ''bad grandfather'' who ''wouldn't feed us'' and her Hitler entering Paris are the stuff of very private, generous ruminations. They are not the cries of a soul in torment. What lingers is not horror, but laughter—her grandmother's cackling crack-corn laugh when taken on an outing from her nursing home or the poet's own amused celebration of her son's birthday party, which he and his friends transform into something between a bankers' conference and a war game. . . When the confessional drive is tamed to such life studies, it is not the agony we are likely to remember but the persistent comedy of human love.

Harold Beaver. *New York Times Book Review*. March 18, 1984, p. 30 & 35

[*The Dead and the Living*] explores the bonds of love and terror that hold a family together. This beautifully structured collection, the Lamont poetry selection for 1983, moves from public to private, from poems for the dead to poems for the living. Always, Sharon Old's voice is a private one, even in the ''public'' poems. She insists on making us see the intimate details of public atrocities: the ''pale spider-belly head'' of a newborn dead in Rhodesia, the face of a starving girl in Russia, the ''blazing white shirts'' of white men in Tulsa race riots. Her images in this first section of poems are as unflinching and immediate as news photographs.

Sharon Olds takes risks. This is clear as we move into her ''private'' poems for the dead and the living. ''My bad grandfather wouldn't feed us,'' begins a poem called ''The Eye.'' ''He turned the lights out when we tried to read.'' The effect of this sort of revelation is not to titillate or to unload old grievances, though at times I was taken aback by the poet's boldness. Olds accumulates many details of her family history, some shocking, and with these she weaves new patterns, startling images of recognition. . . .

Sharon Olds's poems for her own children are among the best in this volume. Here her tenderness and her unshrinking eye for detail work together to create new ways of seeing children's growth and vibrant sexuality. Olds is wry, inventive, full of humor and love in these poems. . . . In ''Exclusive,'' the poet watches her daughter at the beach, ''memorizing'' her ''against the time when you will not be with me,'' and concludes: ''Today I see it is there to be learned from you: to love what I do not own.''

I admire Sharon Olds's courage in *The Dead and the Living*. Out of private revelations she makes poems of universal truth, of sex, death, fear, love. Her poems are sometimes jarring, unexpected, bold, but always loving and deeply rewarding.

Elizabeth Gaffney. *America*. June 23–30, 1984, pp. 497–98.

The pleasures of [*The Dead and the Living*]—those it takes in the world and those we take in the poems—are frankly erotic. The imagery is voluptuous and near-at-hand, the voice direct and richly modulated, the conceits—of mountain climbing in ''Ecstasy'' or grade-school mathematics in ''The One Girl at the Boys' Party''—are limpid and readily assimilable. The background narrative, as in Olds's first book, belongs to family romance and sexual coming of age. The body is her credo and her inexhaustible source of metaphor. None of its dramas—puberty, aging, childbirth, hunger, mutilation, miscarriage, sleep, arousal—is beyond her clear-eyed powers of transcription: even a child lost in the fourth week of pregnancy can find a body in these poems, can float for its wrenching moment as ''dark, scalloped shapes'' ''in the pale/green swaying water of the toilet.'' . . . Olds is an eloquent celebrant—I know no contemporary her equal here—of sexual love and its extrapolation in a mother's erotic ties to her children. She also, perhaps inadvertently, records the radical invasiveness of erotic proprietorship: Olds takes in these poems an owner's liberties with her son's erections and her daughter's immanent pubescence. Such causes and such a gift for celebration are enviable, and are meant to be: much of this poet's work might be described as a poem in her previous volume was titled—''The Language of the Brag.'' Displaying a connoisseur's way with the sensuous image, an unabashed advocacy of the flesh, and a seemingly uncensored penetration of domestic life and its progressive revision of female consciousness, these poems can afford to be free with their clarity, as a beautiful woman can afford to be free with photographers.

In the first of five sections in *The Dead and the Living*—the ''Public'' half of ''Poems for the Dead''—immediacy and passion

afford insufficient guidance, despite the white heat of the poet's protest over a murdered Rhodesian mother and child: ''Just don't tell me about the issues . . . I've got eyes, man''. . . . Few readers would wish to tamper with the general lines of partisanship in these anti-elegies, espousing as they do the victims of famine, of war, of political torture (in Iran, in China, in Chile), of racial hatred, and of sexual exploitation (''The Death of Marilyn Monroe''), but our ready-made consensus is somehow part of the problem. These poems anthologize approved causes; their repeated origin in photographs merely enhances the discomfiting impression of scrapbook pages. If their purpose can be neither to proselytize (we already agree) nor to inquire (they explicitly disavow ''the issues''), their primary work, by design or by default, is to set the stakes for the book they introduce, to make an implicit claim for the stature of subject matter and the moral authority to come. And as if to betray such a self-serving project, the poet/persona later compares her cruel father to Nixon resigning from office in shame and to the murderous Shah of Iran; she portrays her bullying older sister for a full poem's length as Hitler invading Paris. The ''public'' poems wish to cast off all issues but those of human suffering and its deep counter-argument, the stubborn faith and sublime intelligence of the human body, its survival and its eloquent reproduction (in children, in photographs, and in imagination). But the opportunistic deployment of public figures in ''private'' poems reminds us that passionate advocacy cannot suspend ''the issues'' indefinitely. When poetry taps and exploits the charged realms of human extremity and public opinion without taking on the real burden of history and choice, it willy-nilly evolves a politics of its own, and one that can only be called exploitative. Olds's portraits of individual anguish in Chile or in racially splintered Tulsa gain much of their momentum, after all, from the increments of public opinion they claim to transcend.

We badly need an intelligent political poetry in America. In *The Dead and the Living*, I find the most convincing political formulations in poems to the living family, where Olds is willing to anatomize the workings of power and principle and partisanship before our eyes. ''Coming home from the women-only bar'' in one poem, she confronts the contrary claims of her beloved, sleeping son: ''Into any new world we enter,'' she writes, ''let us / take this man.'' The moment is a small one as world government goes. . . . The competition between gender loyalty and family loyalty and strategies for the mutual liberation of the sexes constitute less momentous dilemmas, no doubt, than genocide and mass starvation, but they are worthy issues, nevertheless, and they are the issues more deeply interrogated in this book.

Linda Gregerson. *Poetry*. October, 1984, pp. 36–7.

Through four volumes of poetry—*Satan Says* (1980), *The Dead and the Living* (1984), *The Gold Cell* (1987) and now *The Father*—Sharon Olds has engendered a body of work that speaks largely in a voice that is first-person singular. Natural in form (the cadences feel right, like rhythms of the body), conversational in tone, her poems often embrace matters that are unnatural, horrifying, inhuman.

Subjected, with her siblings, to abuse from both parents (poems that relate this history abound in her second and third books), Olds struggles to define herself within the context of the family into which she was born as well as the family she herself has made. Rarely is the speaker of one of her poems a sexual observer or omniscient narrator; usually her role and perspective are sex-defined, and she identifies herself as daughter, woman, mother, sister. ''Prayer,'' the last poem in *Satan Says*, can be seen as Olds's credo; the articles of her faith, the ''central meanings'' she splendidly celebrates, are sex and birth. It is one of many erotic poems in which she convincingly incarnates a sexual consciousness that is male and female at once.

Etymologically speaking, a poet is a maker, this poet adopts several senses of the word—conceiver, creator, shaper, excreter. She knows the shock value of ''foul language'' and can use it to powerful effect. This was evident from the first. . . .

Sharon Old's latest book, *The Father*, is a more capacious repository for her visions, her new versions of relationship to the main—creator and tormentor of her flesh—she terms ''the'' father, but it is neither an elegy for nor a tribute to him. Its first poem, ''The Waiting'', shows her father's head ''calm / and dark between the wings'' of a wing-back chair; he sits unmoving, spiritless, facing the water (''darkness upon the face of it'') of the swimming pool, perhaps less the spit and image of God than of Lucifer fallen.

The book's purgatorial inditement may be the author's purgative attempt to ''work magic.'' As daughter alone, she unremittingly relates fifty-two poems, as if, in recounting in minute detail the course of her father's illness, his death, cremation, burial and her physical longing for him years after these facts, Olds might write herself out of a locked box, one filled with a patrimony of abuse.

There is so much pain in *The Father*, all of it strictly personal. Some of its sources are cited as overt incidents of abuse. Others conceal themselves, as in ''The Want'', where the poet, professing to have ''stopped / longing for [her father] to address [her] from his heart,'' blankly recites how her heart's desire has been granted to her stepmother. In writing only of her individual pain, Olds has stripped off a veil of self-dramatization that—in my eyes—made her as much a suspect as a victim in her earlier books. No longer does she ask us to see her father as Mussolini or the Shah of Iran, her sister as Hitler, herself as a survivor of Auschwitz. Here we see her clearly for what she is, a poet not of the body politic but of the body. . . .

''I have learned / to get pleasure from speaking of pain,'' Olds asserts in ''Waste Sonata''. Do her poems give pleasure? As the forgotten ancestor Wallace Stevens might scold, mustn't they do so in order to achieve their supreme fiction: that the examination of a single personal death can universally move others?

Beautiful, pained, benumbed or repellent, the individual poems of *The Father* will impress and fascinate, no matter if they succeed or fail. The book as a whole will speak directly to those who have survived abuse; it will not appeal to us all. Ordinary *survivors* who care to read about losing a *human* relation should turn elsewhere for now. Only time will tell if the poet's charm has worked, if writing this book has freed her to incorporate the subject matter of human love into the growing body of her work.

Rika Lesser. *The Nation*. December 14, 1992, pp. 748–50.

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OLSEN, Tillie (1913–)

About Mrs. Olsen one is not inclined to say, as might have been said about Bernard Malamud or Philip Roth on their first appearance, that here, no matter what comes of it, is a rich outpouring of talent. Mrs. Olsen's stories [in *Tell Me a Riddle*] depend heavily on her own experience, and that experience seems to be narrow. But, to judge from the stories, it is also one that she has felt very deeply and pondered and imaginatively absorbed. The one remarkable story in her book, ''Tell Me a Riddle,'' is a *tour de force* which pits aging and dying immigrant Jews against their native-born children, prosperous, troubled and helpless. Mrs. Olsen treats this familiar subject with balance, a cool humaneness, as if she were trying to see through the eyes of both generations and accept the self-pity of neither. . . .

Mrs. Olsen writes with steady hardness of tone, clinging to the one perception—the perception of loss and forgetting—which controls her story. In some passages she presses too hard, trying for verbal effects, intensities upon intensities, she cannot quite control, and not allowing her fable to move freely on its own. Nevertheless, the story is a remarkable piece of work, and one can only hope that Mrs. Olsen, having been possessed by the powers of memory, may now move ahead to fiction in which everything depends on the powers of invention.

Irving Howe. *New Republic*. Nov. 13, 1961, p. 22

Four stories make up this first book by a gifted, mature artist with an uncanny sense of compassion. Rarely, at least in recent years, has the literature of alienation been engaged in such devout service of the imagination. In writing which is individualized but not eccentric, experimental but not obscure, Mrs. Olsen has created imagined experience which has the authenticity of autobiography or memoir. With a faultless accuracy, her stories treat the very young, the mature, the dying—poor people without the means to buy or invent lies about their situations—and yet her writing never succumbs to mere naturalism.

Some critics will persist in finding analogies to Mrs. Olsen's work in the socially conscious literature of the thirties. They are there, if one wishes to be blind to everything else, but the truth is that Mrs. Olsen has been more daring. Sometimes she is able to compress within the space of a single sentence or a brief paragraph the peculiar density of a career, a lifetime, in the manner of lyric poetry. It follows that the poverty which she describes never strikes one as formulary or anachronistic, but as an image for contemporary experience. Although addicted to metaphorical language, she uses it flexibly and unself-consciously to record, to analyze, and then to judge, fusing it with thought and feeling in such a way that the prose becomes the central intelligence of these dramas. . . .

Some of these stories have their faults, but they are faults of enthusiasm. Occasionally the prose will get out of hand, or, in choosing to be on such intimate terms with her characters, Mrs. Olsen will descend to a literal-mindedness which is her humanity unrestrained. Even so, there are stories in this collection which are perfectly realized works of art.

The foremost of these is a dramatic monologue entitled ''I Sit Here Ironing,'' in which an unnamed and physically nondescript woman (a voice really), after a lifetime of deprivation, explains as she does the day's ironing the growth of her estrangement from her homely, first-born daughter. As she describes the early slights and disasters which brought such a relationship about, one has revealed the many human forms which loss can take. Mrs. Olsen's woman is burdened with exhaustion, a victim of a world in which all the panaceas have been discredited. To say that she seems ordinary or without stature indicates only the costume she may be wearing, for her suffering is made extraordinarily vivid and historic. . . .

Although she had explored the possibility of multiple consciousnesses functioning within the same dramatic situation in the earlier ''Hey Sailor What Ship,'' one feels that in the final story she has actually fleshed two protagonists of equal vigor, enmeshing them in a marriage which seems as real and as permanent as any one will encounter in recent fiction. ''Tell Me A Riddle'' is a modern day ''Ivan Illych.'' The death of Mrs. Olsen's heroine is the death of social consciousness itself, gruesome, alienated, and without consolation. In the death-struggle of this old activist and her mate (with both continually pitting their dignities against the other), Mrs. Olsen has envisaged a true tragedy of human mortality. In the last grim acts of a social protest which sprang from love, not cant, she puts it more eloquently than I can, in the words of the desolated old man who has been left behind, when he says: ''Aaah, children . . . how we believed, how we belonged.''

Richard M. Elman. *Commonweal*. Dec. 8, 1961, pp. 295–96

Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio* is unfinished, but what we have is an extraordinary achievement. The book was begun in the early 1930s, and worked on intermittently until 1936 or 1937. A few sketches appeared in print during this period, and then nothing. The manuscript of *Yonnondio* was set aside while Mrs. Olsen began to take on ''everyday jobs'' and raise a family. . . .

Yonnondio clearly must take its place as the best novel to come out of the so-called proletarian movement of the '30s. The dogma and stilted characterizations that deform so many of the novels of that period have no place in Tillie Olsen's writing. She is a consummate artist who, in a paragraph such as the following one about the life of a miner, demonstrates just how searingly successful ''protest'' writing can be: ''Someday the bowels (of the earth) will grow monstrous and swollen with these old tired dreams, swell and break, and strong fists batter the fat bellies, and skeletons of starved children batter them, and perhaps you will be slugged by a thug hired by the fat bellies, Andy Kvaternick. Or death will take you to bed at last, or you will strangle with the old crony of miners, the asthma.'' I know of no work that ''bespeaks the consciousness and roots'' of the 1930s as brilliantly as *Yonnondio*.

But it would be a terrible mistake to see *Yonnondio* as a work limited to, and bound by, the '30s. Mrs. Olsen's richness of style, her depth of characterization, and her enormous compassion make *Yonnondio* a work which must not—cannot—be restricted by any particular time or period. Its publication simply reinforces what we already know from *Tell Me a Riddle*: Tillie Olsen is one of the greatest prose stylists now writing. One can only think ruefully of what might have been had she not been ''denied full writing life''—had those 40 years been hers, and so ours, not 40 years of ''unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot.'' Mrs. Olsen is quite right when she says (again, in ''Death

of the Creative Process'') that a writer cannot be reconciled ''for what is lost by unnatural silences.'' ''*Yonnondio! Yonnondio!* The word itself a dirge,'' wrote Whitman. ''Then blank and gone and still, and utterly lost.'' But now, with the publication of the found manuscript—unfinished as it may be—we can say: At least not that—not utterly lost. *Yonnondio* is a magnificent novel, one to be all the more cherished for the disruption it makes into the unnatural silence of Tillie Olsen.

Jack Salzman. *Book World*. April 7, 1974, p. 1

There is no more powerfully moving a piece of fiction in recent years than Tillie Olsen's long story ''Tell Me a Riddle.'' . . . All of the stories of *Tell Me a Riddle* are superb but the title story is the one that remains most vividly in the mind. It will withstand repeated readings—and the sort of close, scrupulous attention ordinarily reserved for poetry. . . .

[*Silence*'s] strengths lie . . . in its polemical passages. Olsen asks why so many more women are silenced than men; she asks why there is only one women writer ''of achievement'' for every 12 men writers; why our culture continues to reflect a masculine point of view almost exclusively. . . .

One feels the author's passion, and cannot help but sympathize with it. Certainly women have been more generally ''silenced'' than men, in all the arts. But the book is marred by numerous inconsistencies and questionable statements offered as facts. . . .

Tillie Olsen must have felt justified in subordinating—or silencing—her own considerable artistic instincts during the composition of *Silences*, and I would not quarrel with her decision. It was a generous one: she wanted to reach out to others, to the living and the dead, who have, evidently, shared her own agony. One must respect such in impulse. But the thinking that underlies *Silences* is simply glib and superficial if set in contrast to the imagination that created *Tell Me a Riddle* and *Yonnondio*, Olsen's novel.

Joyce Carol Oates. *New Republic*. July 29, 1978, pp. 32–24

Tillie Olsen's remarkable power comes from having almost never written at all. A working-class woman who grew up in America in the 1930s, had children, and did ''someone else's work'' for years to support her family, Olsen was likely to have been silenced by daily struggle until, like the dying grandmother of her story ''Tell Me A Riddle,'' she would want only the ''reconciled peace'' of a small, clean, empty house. Instead, through an incredible effort of will, Olsen, like Walt Whitman, used her enforced ''long foreground'' not only to write but to do so with extraordinary empathy. Part of Olsen's present high reputation in America admittedly springs from her role as heroine of her own life. The sheer grit that she needed in order to find the strength and time to write—and to believe she *could* write—has meant that she (usually implicitly) adds the argument of her experience to her discussion in *Silences* of the conditions of creative work: I am the woman, I suffered, I was there.

Olsen is far more than the token working-class writer whose presence soothes the middle-class American women's movement (though she is certainly also being used as that). First a silent, then a vocal conscience for American women's writing, Olsen writes with an elegance, compassion, and directness rare in any period. Though her politicized recognitions form a unique link between 1930s radicalism and the women's movement of the 1980s, Olsen has published little. . . . Olsen's great subject, the emotional life of the working-class family, has been so buried in American culture since the 1930s, that it looks completely new. . . .

Unlike Whitman, Olsen does not sublimate private despair into cosmic affirmation. The external circumstances of her characters generate ironies characteristic of nineteenth-century realism: poverty, dirt, tired bodies, heat, smells, drink, labour, recalcitrant objects and a toxic failure of will that manifests itself in violence or withdrawal. Only sex is left out; as Cora Kaplan remarks in her introduction to *Yonnondio*, Olsen sees neither fulfillment nor release there. Within such limits, family love (maternal passion in particular) is peculiarly generous, since it is felt in full knowledge of inevitable separation and probable crushing of hope. All of Olsen's narratives deal with two generations. . . .

In Olsen's subjective essays motherhood looms large as a cause of silence precisely because it does engage one's deepest emotions: ''There is no one else responsible'' for children's needs. ''It is distraction, not meditation, that becomes habitual; interruption, not continuity; spasmodic, not constant toil.'' In her more objective fiction she sees motherhood as the experience which expresses continuity and separation simultaneously, a paradox which politicizes it: the mother, cut off from experience of the world by sexual division of labour, must nevertheless impart values to her children or see them fall.

Helen McNeil. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. Nov. 14, 1980, p. 1294

Olsen's importance to contemporary women who read and write or who write about literature is widely acknowledged. Yet although her work has been vital for feminists today, and although one article does discuss her background in some depth, few of Olsen's contemporary admirers realize the extent to which her consciousness, vision, and choice of subject are rooted in an earlier heritage of social struggle—the communist Old Left of the thirties and the tradition of radical political thought and action, mostly socialist and anarchist, that dominated the Left in the teens and twenties. Not that we can explain the eloquence of her work in terms of its sociopolitical origins, not even that left-wing politics and culture were the single most important influences on it, but that its informing consciousness, its profound understanding of class and sex and race as shaping influences on people's lives, owes much to that earlier tradition. Olsen's work, in fact, may be seen as part of a literary lineage so far unacknowledged by most contemporary critics: a socialist feminist literary tradition. . . .

On the whole, in spite of the Left's demands on her time and energies, the prescriptiveness of its more dogmatic criticism, and the androcentrism or outright sexism of many of its spokesmen, there is no doubt but that Olsen's Marxian perspective and experience ultimately enriched her literature. . . .

In the fifties, partly out of a spirit of opposition to the McCarthy era, and blessed with increased time as the children grew up and there were temporary respites from financial need, Olsen began to do the work that gave us the serenely beautiful but still politically impassioned stories of the *Tell Me a Riddle* volume. Olsen's

enduring insistence that literature must confront the material realities of people's lives as shaping circumstances, that the very categories of class and race and sex constitute the fabric of reality as we live it, and that literature has an obligation to deepen consciousness and facilitate social change are part of her—and our—inheritance from the radical tradition.

Deborah Rosenfelt. *Feminist Studies*. Fall, 1981, pp. 373–74, 403–4

From the perspective of [Tillie] Olsen's latest period, we can fruitfully reflect upon a metaphorical pattern that has developed through her writing, communicating a vision of human transformation. It is telling that the metaphors are mixed, drawn from nature and human manufacture. Using the *journey* or quest motif, Olsen pictures the human search for a viable place to be, an environment or home in which one may grow and *blossom*. Inheriting an abused and broken world, people search the past and their environment to discover what inheritances may nurture life. The yields of the search, like the members of the community, are *threads of a whole* to be woven or *pieced* together in a pattern of humane coexistence. Thus, full human being, like a quilt or a mosaic, is envisioned as a coherent and patterned search for truths faithful to human needs and visions and leading to actions that elicit mutual wellbeing and wholeness. Like Nelle Morton, who writes in a different mode, Tillie Olsen shows that ''the journey is home.'' Not ends but beginnings and makings are the goal. The way is the negotiated, not pure way of being faithful in relationship. Movements toward human unfolding and being cast light on the journey, disclosing what is essential and true ''for human beings in our time.'' Faithfulness to one's own time and circumstance, not allegiance to distant worlds, is the calling echoed in Olsen's literature.

Elaine Neil Orr. *Tillie Olsen and a Feminist Spiritual Vision* (Jackson: Univ. Pr. of Mississippi, 1987), p. 168

The joy Olsen recounts from her own life and creates in the lives of her fictional characters often comes out of suffering or, more accurately, out of people banding together to oppose it. ''The Strike'' and David and Eva's memories of revolution in Russia are good examples. But Olsen resists a second common temptation, one that leads us to believe that only suffering can bind people together, and that joy from any source other than the struggle against oppression will rupture community bonds. In 1930, Meridel LeSueur wrote in her journal, ''Whittle oneself down on the edge of suffering. We do not know ourselves except when we suffer. . . . In joy I know only myself, in sorrow I know other. . . . In happiness we are seperete [*sic*]. . . . In suffering we are fused.'' To be fair to LeSueur, she was reacting against the urgings of leftist critics that she stress opportunities for women rather than their sufferings. Moreover, her writing does not hew to her own line. I quote her because she is expressing a view that is both common and understandable, given our narrow and individualistic conceptions of the sources and consequences of happiness.

But Olsen banishes quietly, with a line or two, all those old, illusory, competitive sources of happiness: alcohol, casual visits to prostitutes, Jinella's movie magazine dreams in *Yonnondio*, Max and Rosa's all-American dream of prosperity and success in ''Tell Me a Riddle.'' Without resorting to cynicism, she also drains away the power of romantic love, that great domesticator of women in Western life and literature. In ''Tell Me a Riddle,'' we see Jeannie transformed with happiness in caring for her grandmother. . . . Olsen presents not romance or sex or marriage as the source of Jeannie's happiness but rather her devotion to the Mexican-American people she works with and her love for her dying grandmother. For Jeannie, Eva is ''my darling escape . . . my darling Granny'' (116).

In contrast to the shallowness and predictability that often characterize literary depictions of happiness, Olsen's fiction provides glimpses of an intense and liberating joy. It comes from . . . learning, play and celebration, sexual love, work with the hands and the mind, family life of every shape and kind, the care of children, no matter who tenders it. It is true, as [Catharine] Stimpson says, that Olsen often shows women bound in ''a community of sorrow.'' On the other hand, the friendship between Jeannie and Eva is one of several examples in which Olsen depicts women joined in a wide variety of joyful experiences that bridge distances and differences of all kinds—race, religion, class, age, education. In fact, in *Yonnondio* she shows not suffering but joy bringing Mazie and Anna together for an unforgettable moment that heals at least momentarily the pain between mother and daughter.

Mara Faulkner. *Protest and Possibility in the Writing of Tillie Olsen* (Charlottesville: Univ. Pr. of Virginia, 1993), pp. 154–55

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OLSON, Charles (1910–1970)

The Maximus Poems clearly reflects Olson's grassroots radicalism and humanism, which provide the emotional charge for much of the book. The work belongs to the great tradition of long poems of epic intent, of noble voice, in which the theme is of national scope: the founding of a state and the ordering of a good society. Since Olson's politics is not narrowly programmatic, the book escapes the rigidity that often mars works of dogma and persuasion. If anything, it needs a measure of dogma; dogma might have helped the poet to achieve a structure. As it stands the book is shapeless. It has neither beginning nor end; it is all middle. It reminds one of wallpaper rather than of a formally complete, framed picture. One assumes that Olson intended this effect, as corresponding to his sense of reality. . . .

Any student of the work of Charles Olson is bound to come away with respect and admiration for his humanity and his sense of the importance of the workshop and all elemental activity. But,

because much of his work is fragmentary and has the character of notes for poems, jottings, ''pre-poetry,'' it rarely provides a sustained experience of either language or reality.

Stephen Stepanchev. *American Poetry since 1945* (Harper). 1965. pp. 143–5

In *Mayan Letters* we have unequivocal evidence of a *kind* of intelligence which cannot propose the assumption of content prior to its experience of that content, which *looks*, out of its *own* eyes. This does not mean that conjecture is to be absent, insofar as *jacio* means ''throw'' and *con*, ''together''—however simply this point may note the actual process. It is a consistent fact with Olson that he does use his legs, and does depend on what his own instincts and intelligence can discover for him. In this way he *throws together* all he has come to possess.

But humanism, as a system of thought or ordering of persons in their relations to other things in the world, is distinctly absent. Even the most sympathetic ordering of human effects and intelligence leads to unavoidable assumptions, and the test—which is the reality of one's quite literal being—denies any investment of reality prior to its fact.

Robert Creeley. Introduction to *Selected Writings* by Charles Olson (New Directions). 1966. p. 4

The *Maximus Poems*, Olson's major work to date, presents a vision of history obviously modeled on that in [Pound's] *Cantos* and a vision of place (the fishing port of Gloucester, Massachusetts) modeled on that in [W. C. Williams] *Paterson*. . . .

Just as Pound's vision of ''paideuma'' is ultimately characterized in Arcadian terms, as the ideals of Williams and Crane are characterized in terms of a nature myth, so we find Olson speaking of ''polis,'' Plato's ideal state (specifically the spiritual essence of Gloucester, presently degraded), in terms of pastoral images, such as the ''tansy,'' a local flower. The heroes, the so-called root-men, of ''polis'' are the men who lived close to nature and faced its perils with equanimity and purpose: explorers, map-makers, founders of colonies, settlers, and fishermen (all in contrast to ''owners'' and exploiters). But the point is that the technique appropriate to revealing natural-historical truth is purported to be itself natural, and a natural technique involves the ''breath'' of the poet, speech force, personal idiom, and, inevitably, personal experience. . . . Olson's editor calls Maximus ''the man in the Word,'' an accurate enough epithet if it is taken to suggest poetic-colloquial revelation of nature, history, and self—or, conversely, the expansion of personal speech to universal logos.

L.S. Dembo. *Conceptions of Reality in Modern American Poetry* (California). 1966. pp. 211, 213–4

Our traditional response to poetry is to receive consciously the meaning of the words, letting their sounds, including rhythm, affect us at a level beneath that at which our intellect is engaging the meaning. Olson, it seems, wishes us to invert this response: we are to listen to the sounds and let the meaning work upon us as it will, just as we direct our attention to the movement in a ballet, while the changes in lighting provide nuances; at least this, as a rule of thumb in reading Olson's poems, will serve provisionally as a corrective against our more usual and indeed more natural responses.

By receiving the poetry thus, it will be the energy that is transmitted, the process Olson seems to think to be the proper one for a poem. . . . According to Olson's precepts all verse, not just certain passages, conveys energy; and that energy is contained in all the features of the poem, the objects as he calls them—syllable, line, image, sound, and sense. And our response to the poem is not an intellectual one, modified by feelings, but what we must think of as felt energy, in the transmittal of which meaning plays a part but not an overbearing one. Or, to put the same matter another way, we must try to ''see'' the images of the poem as if by way of the touch of our hands, as a child may say, ''Let me *see*,'' as he puts forward his *hand*.

A. Kingsley Weatherhead. *The Edge of the Image* (Washington). 1967. p. 204

Notably, Olson and those congenial with him have worked on the possibilities of the line in poems. Punctuation can signal the reader, and many conventions and habits in language enable a reader to adjust to sequential requirements as he reads; additionally, in poetry, the break or continuance of the line is a usable element. Olson varies line length extremely, and forces the breaks to perform many functions. Others often do this in practice; he has made himself a spokesman for treating the opportunities seriously and with sustained attention.

William Stafford. *Poetry*. March, 1968. p. 415

We might think that Olson chose to concentrate on Gloucester simply because it happened to be the poet's home-town, out of some familiar Romantic notion of mystical properties available for a man in his native origin, his ''roots''. This is not the case; Olson *chose* to make Gloucester his standpoint, there was no mystical compulsion upon him to do so. This is where it's instructive to remember his essay on Melville, with its title *Call Me Ishmael*. Ishmael—the archetypal nomad and wanderer. And in fact Olson's argument about Melville's *Moby Dick* shows once again with what desperate seriousness he takes the matter of geographical location; for his argument is that the greatest character in Melville's great and strange romance is the Pacific Ocean, that the book as a whole celebrates the imaginative discovery and appropriation by Western man, specifically by American man, of that great waste of waters in the West, the Pacific—one more territory which the pioneers could light out into when they had crossed the entire continent and found themselves faced by the sea. The standpoint which Olson . . . [is] concerned to investigate is not characteristically a fixed point, the place where roots are sunk; it is a moving point, the continually changing standpoint of a man who is on the move across continents and oceans.

Donald Davie in *The Survival of Poetry*, edited by Martin Dodsworth (Faber). 1970. p. 224

After years of destructive intestinal fighting, Black Mountain College, the dishevelled progressive school in the Southern mountains, had been reduced to poverty, a handful of students and a tiny

covey of teachers. Charles Olson survived, a disciple of William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound, an extremely infectious teacher. In a few years he gathered a definite school. I don't think any of them read French, certainly not for pleasure, and like almost all American poets, had heard of no one later than Jules Laforgue. Basing themselves on the few Americans of the international avant-garde of the older generation, Louis Zukofsky, the early Walter Lowenfels, Parker Tyler, Gertrude Stein, Walter Conrad Arensberg, Mina Loy, and myself when young, they found their way out of narrow provincialism and pseudo-British insularity, the enforced orthodoxy of the Reactionary Generation and their quarterlies. Olson's outstanding disciple who for a while surpassed his master was Robert Creeley.

Kenneth Rexroth. *With Eye and Ear* (Herder and Herder). 1970. pp. 71–2

Writing under the shadow of Pound's Cantos and Williams' *Paterson*, Olson [in *Maximus Poems, IV, V, VI*] has tried to delve back further than Pound into pre-history and to create a more sharply defined image than Williams of a modern city.

There are passages where Olson succeeds very well in evoking and satirising the realities of urban living. He focuses on Gloucester (Massachusetts) and, to quote [Robert] Duncan's summary of the central conceit, ''Homo maximus wrests his life from the underworld as the Gloucester fisherman wrests his from the sea.'' Gobbets of local history are lovingly dredged up and patiently reassembled. Modern wit sometimes flashes brightly through the historical material but the poem as a whole is maddeningly uneven. His method prevents him from providing linkages. The material must be allowed to speak for itself without any explanation of its relevance, and he incorporates long stretches of (apparently) verbatim quotation from documents which have a bearing on local history, assuming that his placing of them inside his structure will suffice to make them meaningful. It doesn't. At its best, though, his writing has a vitality in common with Duncan's. He is often very successful in making the movement of the verse imitate the movement he is describing.

Ronald Hayman. *Encounter*. Feb., 1970. pp. 85–6

Next to his excellent, somewhat oracular poetry, Olson's great influence rests on his formulation of the process of ''projective'' or ''open'' verse. This provided a new and very usable system of prosody to a whole generation of poets, who may well have felt that a development of some sort was needed from the poetics of Pound and Williams, yet sought something in the same context of freedom. Some took projective verse directly as their own; many more shaped and adapted Olson's theories to their own ends. But what is remarkable is the number of poets—and eventually critics, as well—who were finally deeply affected by this enthusiastic and somewhat eccentric man. Charles Olson mattered greatly. He changed their minds. . . .

Olson's projective verse ideas are in close harmony with the general artistic principles of the Black Mountain group—the emphasis on the organic (''A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it'') and on the process and act of poetry. One is haunted by the notion that if Rauschenberg had been the composer, Cage the poet, and Olson the painter, it might all have come out the same.

Bruce Cook. *The Beat Generation* (Scribner). 1971. pp. 120, 122

There is always some amount of fascination in seeing what things have been made available to another's mind ''by accident'' and have emerged in print as the details of a poem. In presenting his material, Olson is both observant of the way his world, including its history, looks and feels, and determinedly bookish, with the cantankerous and pedantic bluster of his self-educated colleagues Rexroth and Edward Dahlberg. But with or without the help of his theories, he has managed to write a few moderately interesting sections of a long, unsuccessful poem which must have been the labor of years, and these are worth reading. The structure of the poem is only the structure of fortuitous association plus the more obvious devices and literary mannerisms of Pound and Williams, but his mind seems to me quite a capable one, and at all points is working hard to say what has been given it. That is enough, because it has to be.

James Dickey. *Babel to Byzantium* (Grosset). 1971. pp. 138–9

The character, the bearing, and the affect of Olson's verse, its human involvement with the issues of poetry *in extremis*, makes it a telling witness to that continuing pressure which has extended the limits of the poetic almost unrecognizably in our century. It is a curious gathering, the congregation of American poets of our moment, trying in their separate yet related ways to see their own inner selves, and the volatile historical situation, and the crisis of art, in the same single organic vision. They must define the very landscape of their lives, the very language they are to use, the very sense of personality. Here is Lowell, whose frenzied sense of his own suffering is meant to be the key to reality for all of us. Not far off is the late Sylvia Plath, who marked out a pure, all but obscene curve of death, naked and beautiful—that was a kind of suicide of poetry. And Jarrell, who kept reaching for a lost individual possibility, buried somewhere perhaps still in the neglected common life. But the list need not be further proliferated here and now. Charles Olson, who snapped his sentences open like twigs as he wrote, and whose mind moved outward in a series of intersecting ripples pushing against his syntax, sought to mobilize all that he could of language and local human reality and the most cherished memories of tradition against the new ''pejoracracy.'' He was conceivably the unacknowledged leader of all these unacknowledged legislators. Poetic leadership, I suppose, consists not in directives and programs but in accurate perceptions. . . .

M.L. Rosenthal. *Massachusetts Review*. Winter, 1971. p. 56

Olson is unique, and probably the most difficult of recent American poets. No other poet requires such an effort, equivalent to learning a new language, or rather to adjusting the sense we have of the old one, so that we hear the precision of his, and learn to experience a world through it. There are Olson poems I doubt anyone will ever understand except in their general aspect. Others are line and sunlight clear. The best of them hover between formal clarity and

the larger obscurity of the man's mind, a mind so rich that hosts of poets not of his school have paid him the tribute of a Socrates.

His shifts are subtle though major. It is as though in his hands the American language is once again in touch with its roots. He is not quite archaic though he is full or archaisms. His syntax is too alive to be archaic. His focus stops in the noticing of something where you least expect it, and the sudden concentration that is felt brings about a rearrangement of all that has gone before.

Matthew Corrigan. *New York Times Book Section*. July 18, 1971. p. 6

Charles Olson's name comes up often in discussions of the influence of Pound and Williams on younger poets, and rightly so. Shortly before Olson's death, Gerard Malanga asked him whether he could have written *The Maximus Poems* without having known Pound's and Williams's work. Olson answered: ''That's like asking me how I could have written without having read.'' But there has been so little notice taken of the matters that divided Olson. Pound, and Williams that at least one Poundian has glibly dismissed Olson's poetics as almost wholly derivative and surely inferior to Pound's work. Anyone interested in understanding the course of American poetry over the last sixty or seventy years and the directions open to it in the future is likely to be frustrated by this myopic blurring of distinctions. In truth, the story of Olson's relationship to Pound and Williams is a detailed and complex one that casts light on all three poets and especially on their long poems.

Robert von Hallberg. *Contemporary Literature*. Winter, 1974. p. 15

Olson's argument throughout his poetry is that awareness is an event caused by multiple forces, setting multiple forces in action. No force is ever spent. All events are lessons. No event can be isolated.

Olson therefore evolved a kind of poem that would at once project historical ponderables (for history is the ground for all his poetry) and allow him free play for contemplation and response. The poems in *Maximus III* were written ''in gloom on Watch-House Point'' from 1963 to 1969. They constitute the third volume of perhaps one long poem. ''Books VII and After'' (Olson's working title), comparable in American literature to *The Cantos* and *Paterson*; perhaps a suite of poems (the early format of ''letters from Maximus'' allowing for the versatility and spontaneity of a correspondence) like *Leaves of Grass*. . . .

If we allow for the sections of these poems that quote historical documents, and for the occasional jeremiad, we can go a long way toward understanding them by noting that they are variations on Keats' nightingale ode. They are for the large part written at night (by a Timonish Endymion *en pantoufles*, or an insomniac bear with clipboard wandering about Gloucester, caught from time to time in the spotlight of a police cruiser), they share the imagery of bird and flower (cormorant and nasturtium here), fierce seas and bonging bells (buoys on Cape Ann), and they meditate on resonances of the past that can still be heard. . . .

I have not been able here to give any notion of the wideness of these new Maximus poems—the horizon they survey is vast—nor of their depth, which goes back into various histories (the Hittite, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, paleolithic) in new and bright ways (Olson's eyes were open to everything and very little got by him). Nor have I mentioned their religious concern. The best way to offer a summation is to note that a movement is closed by them, a movement that began with Thoreau and Whitman, when America was opening out and possibilities were there to be stumbled over or embraced. Olson is the other term of this moment. He is our anti-Whitman (like Melville before him). He is a prophet crying bad weather ahead, and has the instruments to prove it.

Guy Davenport. *Parnassus*. Spring/Summer, 1976, pp. 255–56, 259

Not only is Olson an unusually interesting theorist, but a case can be made that a study of his poetics should logically precede an examination of his poetry, that his poems cannot be adequately appreciated within the terms of recent poetic theory. . . . Olson deserves close attention precisely because his poems do not conform to what modern critics have argued is essentially poetic. His poetry raises questions of poetic theory with unusual directness, and these questions, rather than the poems themselves, are my subject. What are the attractions of an expository poetics? What ends are served by expository poems? Why should a didactic poet use so exclusive a rhetoric? . . .

In general, . . . Olson's poems and his understanding of the nature of poetry are hardly separable. He is commonly thought to have been one of the most influential American poets during the years following World War II, but influential more as a writer of manifestoes than as a poet. He himself, however, felt that his occasional remarks about poetry and his poetry itself followed from the same motives and envisioned the same goals: ''Projective Verse'' was meant to regroup forces—chiefly Olson's, but Pound's and Williams' too—after a barrage of rejection slips. . . .

Though his main distinction is the ability ''to assimilate and coordinate a large number of preceding inventions,'' his own work significantly develops the range of post-Symbolist poetry. Specifically, his attempt to teach his readers is not burdened, as Pound's is, by a commitment to a nonrational psychology and rhetorical strategy; Olson addresses himself to his readers' understanding in a language unembarrassed by abstraction, and the sequence of his statements usually follows a formulable logic. This reclamation of abstract discourse and of logical organization is based in part on a refined epistemology derived from Whitehead; it is this part of Olson's work . . . that has had the most beneficial influence on contemporary poets, especially on those poets, like Imamu Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) and Edward Dorn, whose pedagogical ambitions are specifically political. . . .

American literary culture appears to have no way of handling a poet like Olson, committed to a pedagogical and rhetorical poetics, short of labeling him a shaman, and Olson perhaps had no experience at rejecting what was, after all, flattery. If this was the case, it is not hard to see why his later poetry was egocentric, though it is depressing to witness how, almost routinely, contemporary culture can corrupt so ambitious and so American a poet.

Robert von Hallberg. *Charles Olson: The Scholar's Art* (Harvard Univ. Pr., 1978), pp. 1–3, 216

Olson's canon has within it a potent utterance: life is strangled by systems. Existence has an order that cannot be isolated from nature;

the order is continually changing and evolving. A system is a halting of change; it seizes upon a possible order and continues to duplicate it endlessly. As it entrenches in the midst of nature, its tyranny upon life grows, until the system is a prison of contradictions.

In his *Maximus* sequence, we are struck at once by the solitude of his protagonist. Olson portrayed himself as a lone adventurer in a world that other human beings have vacated. He celebrates the glory of direct experience, of awareness that is aroused by unmediated contact with nature beyond systematized thought. The poignance of this long, awesome poem comes from the sense that he cannot enjoy the splendor of earth alone; his words are the song that would lure humanity out of doors. Orpheus is one of his heroes. Fighters and redeemers are the gods of his personal mythology.

It may be difficult to accept Olson as a great poet. His poetic ideals were imperfection, the uncompleted, the process without the end, disordered vitality. He is a saboteur of the certainty that thrived in his era: his vision of man is that he is a wild and passionate creature who is being lured into a false Eden of systems and institutions and who barters the realms of nature and his own primal humanity for a few material possessions. As Olson argued throughout his writings, man only now wakes to the splendors of the real, still rubs from his eyes the primordial sleep, but already he is being driven back toward the dark again by a society that thrives on diminishing his awareness. Olson wanted the poet to be the measure of awareness, to be that lone human figure thrust deep into the uncertainty of the real, where he lives and expresses himself joyfully and is ultimately joined by others.

> Paul Christensen. *Charles Olson: Call Him Ishmael* (Univ. of Texas Pr., 1979). p. 212

Though Olson's literary successes were confined to avant-garde circles while he lived, his following was strong and ardent; and his reputation as an initiator of new principles of writing was, by 1970, well established. He came to represent the mind and feelings of a generation of writers coming of age in post—World War II America, reconstituting poetry according to a shifting, still forming metaphysic derived from numerous new disciplines and political changes. Olsen had emerged at the end of European imperialism, and at the start of America's own fretful course at governing the Western and part of the Third World. Much of what he had to say represented a renunciation of the culture that had cultivated the imperial mind, and was a determined effort to ground the imagination in other mythological and cultural systems. Perhaps because he was so eminently the voice of a new generation, he was fated to clash with the disillusioned, darkly suspicious mind of another spokesman, who represented in one of its extreme guises the generation of World War I and the Great Depression.

[Edward] Dahlberg spoke for those who had depended too much upon a political utopia that had ended in disaster, and who could not understand either the pursuit of more ideological alternatives or the relentless reconstitution of the arts in search of a new visionary testament. Not only had two men come to assume the roles of father and son, they had clashed and parted on the very terms of political history that separated two generations of Americans. Emerging out of the chaos of emotion and dispute of these letters were some of the first glimmers of the postmodern imagination. Though caught up entirely in their disputes with one another, they were sometimes baffled by their closeness, the interests they shared in common. Their feud prevented them from knowing how closely each had come to inventing their times.

> Paul Christensen. Introduction. In Paul Christensen, ed. *In Love, in Sorrow: The Complete Correspondence of Charles Olson and Edward Dahlberg* (New York: Paragon House, 1990), pp. xxii–xxiii

[Charles] Olson's course as a writer always obeyed inner currents. Upon his return to Washington he turned away from the West book to wrestle with old ghosts. The spring of 1948 was taken up with the psychic turmoil of renewed struggle with a specter of paternal authority which he felt he'd been shadow-boxing for as long as he could remember. Blocking his full emergence into manhood, throwing him into torments of depression and self-doubt, this imaginal adversary would leave him no peace. His combat with it now became the main theme of a secret confessional journal aptly titled ''Faust Buch.''

Aggravating his problems were difficulties in his sex life, always an area of particular sensitivity. The slightest signal of impatience with him on Connie's part could precipitate a terrifying sense of ''shame or intimidation.'' In such low moments he grew fearful of everything, ''of women, of flesh, of event.'' He was having doubts about his effectiveness as a lover, and it didn't help that Connie diagnosed worrisome homosexual implications in his continuing dreams about men. In her view, much of the trouble came with his concentration on writing, a calling that had induced an increasing inwardness in his makeup; he had lost the ''vigorous decisiveness, carelessness'' that had made him so attractive to her in his years of active involvement in political life. Certainly Charles himself also related his present insecurities to writing, but in a reverse fashion. To him, the psychological woes seemed not the by-product of the cerebral, internalizing habits of the writing, but their cause. It was a vicious circle: he feared that his anxieties about his manhood were unconsciously creating a state of tension that in turn rendered him incapable of performing in a natural, relaxed manner, either in his interpersonal conduct or on paper. The self-demand which was so essential an element of his character was ironically the wellspring of both his prodigious energies and his crippling inhibitions. In his ''Faust Buch,'' he warned himself over and over against ''hopping it up,'' attempting to manufacture an artificial strength: ''Don't try to talk and behave bigger than you are.'' And that spring he made a self-conscious decision to change his approach to writing, to stop evading his deepest concerns and instead confront them at their source. The first step would be a small book of true stories about his father, cast in simple, direct reminiscence form—not elliptical ''assault'' prose but a plain ''mediocre humanitas'' style, intelligible to any common reader. The book would be a kind of litmus test. If he was not cut out to be ''an artist, genius or clever,'' the unadorned prose would once and for all reveal it. If, on the other hand, he really had something important and universal to say, that too would be allowed to come through unimpeded. Further, the effort would not be psychic therapy alone. Mastering the more accessible narrative form would, he hoped, bring him into range of a large mainstream audience so far closed off to him by his exclusively critical and intellectual concentrations.

In his ''Faust Buch'' he blamed himself for never having grown up, for his inability to break out of tedious filial dramas of his own insistent creation. The tales about Karl, he had soon begun to suspect, were less works of art than unsuccessful attempts at discovering ''the path of love transposed.'' The effort to relieve the strains of his personal psychological burden through the mediation of fiction had been vain from the start. A better way to ''cease to be a son'' would be learning ''to keep the experience of dominance'' in himself.

Tom Clark. *The Allegory of a Poet's Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), pp. 120–21, 130–31, 132

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O'NEILL, Eugene (1888–1953)

The Hairy Ape is not a perfect play. Felicity of any kind is not a characteristic of Mr. O'Neill. He is strong and feeble. No touch of beauty or charm ever hides the moments of failure in his work. In *The Hairy Ape* those moments are few. The drama is momentous in its vision, strength, and truth. There is something hard in its quality, but it is the hardness of the earth's rocks; there is something of violence, but it is the violence of an intolerable suffering.

Ludwig Lewisohn. *The Nation*. March 22, 1922. p. 350

Mr. O'Neill reveals the first burst of his emotions in powerful clean-cut pictures that seem almost like simple ballads in our complex world. . . . His first acts impress me as being the strongest; while the last, I shall not say go to pieces but, undoubtedly, are very much weaker than the others. The close of *The Hairy Ape*, as well as that of *The Emperor Jones*, seems to me to be too direct, too simple, too expected; it is a little disappointing to a European with his complex background, to see the arrow strike the target toward which he had watched it speeding all the while.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal. *Freeman*. March 21, 1923. p. 41

The two gifts that Eugene O'Neill up to now has displayed are for feeling and for dramatic image. His plays have often conveyed a poignancy that is unique in the modern drama. You felt that whatever was put down was at the dramatist's own expense; he paid out of himself as he went. His great theatre gift has been in the creation of images that speak for themselves. . . . In *Mourning Becomes Electra* Mr. O'Neill comes now into the full stretch of clear narrative design. He discovers that in expressive pattern lies the possibility of all that parallels life, a form in which fall infinite shadings and details, as the light with its inexhaustible nuances and elements appears on a wall. He has come to what is so rare in Northern art, an understanding of repetition and variation on the same design, as contrasted with matter that is less deep or subtle, though expressed with lively surprise, variety, or novelty.

Stark Young. *New Republic*. Nov. 11, 1931. pp. 354–5

Not only has O'Neill tried to encompass more of life than most American writers of his time but, almost alone among them, he has persistently tried to solve it. . . . Not the minutiae of life, not its feel and color and smell, not its nuance and humor, but the ''great inscrutable forces'' are his interest. He is always moving toward the finality which philosophy sometimes, and religion always, promises. Life and death, good and evil, spirit and flesh, male and female, the all and the one, Anthony and Dionysius—O'Neill's is a world of these antithetical absolutes such as religion rather than philosophy conceives, a world of pluses and minuses; and his literary effort is an algebraic attempt to solve the equations.

Lionell Trilling. *New Republic*. Sept. 23, 1936. pp. 176–7

He has always gone his own austere, fierce, usually frowning way, ignoring the cheap whims of showshops and making the theatre do what he wanted rather than doing what its timid souls thought would be popular.

No dramatist has ever been a more dauntless experimenter or a more fearless innovator. He has dared in play after play to change his pattern, even when successful, and reach for what for him (and usually for the stage) was the untried. With varying degrees of success, ranging from pretentiousness and the preposterous to the very threshold of greatness, he has worked as a naturalist, a realist, an expressionist, a Freudian, a mystic, a symbolist, or as a poet whose poetry was deader than the feeblest prose even when his prose as spoken has burned with the fires of poetry.

John Mason Brown. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 19, 1946. p. 26

That he is the foremost dramatist in the American theatre is . . . generally granted. His eminence is predicated on the fact that no other has anywhere near his ability to delve into and appraise character, his depth of knowledge of his fellow man, his sweep and

pulse and high resolve, his command of a theatre stage and all its manifold workings, and his mastery of the intricacies of dramaturgy. His plays at their best have in them a real universality. His characters are not specific, individual and isolated types but active symbols of mankind in general, with mankind's virtues and faults, groupings and findings, momentary triumphs and doomed defeats. He writes not for a single theatre but for all theatres of the world.

George Jean Nathan. *American Mercury*. Dec., 1946. p. 718

At one time he performed a historic function, that of helping the American theatre grow up. In all his plays an earnest attempt is made to interpret life; this fact in itself places O'Neill above his predecessors in American drama and beside his colleagues in the novel and poetry. He was a good playwright insofar as he kept within the somewhat narrow range of his own sensibility. When he stays close to a fairly simple reality and when, by way of technique, he uses fairly simple forms of realism or fairly simple patterns of melodrama, he can render the bite and tang of reality or, alternatively, he can startle and stir us with his effects. . . . But the more he attempts, the less he succeeds. *Lazarus Laughed* and *The Great God Brown* and *Days Without End* are inferior to *The Emperor Jones* and *Anna Christie* and *Ah, Wilderness!*

Eric Bentley. *Kenyon Review*. Summer, 1952. p. 488

O'Neill was a faulty craftsman; he was not a sound thinker. . . . Yet to dwell on these shortcomings . . . is to confess one's own inadequate and bloodless response to the world we live in. . . . O'Neill not only lived intensely but attempted with perilous honesty to contemplate, absorb and digest the meaning of his life and ours. He possessed an uncompromising devotion to the task he set himself: to present and interpret in stage terms what he had lived through and thought about—a devotion unique in our theatre. . . . O'Neill's work is more than realism. And if it is stammering—it is still the most eloquent and significant stammer of the American theatre. We have not yet developed a cultivated speech that is either superior to it or as good.

Harold Clurman. *The Nation*. March 3, 1956. pp. 182–3

O'Neill can be deeply involved in genuine passion because he is not merely playing a game to exhibit his skill. He can be black enough at times and on occasion fall a victim to the nihilism against which he perpetually struggled. But there may be ''more faith in honest doubt'' if ''honest doubt'' is not ''complacent doubt.'' And O'Neill is never complacent, never other than deeply involved.

Man emerges from the bludgeonings he receives in O'Neill's plays with his essential dignity intact. He is still a creative being worthy of respect. That can hardly be said of either Tennessee Williams or Anouilh. And it may be that the present generation has found O'Neill stimulating for precisely that reason.

Joseph Wood Krutch. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 22, 1957. p. 42

O'Neill thus affords us a clear example of the close, if usually unacknowledged, connection between art and religious or philosophical assertion. To be concerned about the creation of a work of art is to be able to back off far enough from the existential battles to adopt a standing place, on the basis of which the form of the work of art may be established. Those who say, therefore, that O'Neill lacked only the ability to write well miss the point. To be concerned about writing well would have been to deny the very obsession which impelled him to write in the first place. It would have assumed a stasis, a sense of completion or wholeness which his radical pessimism had completely overthrown. In a situation in which the only reality is death and the only question how to meet it, necessarily a tormented question, there are no values, proportions, relationships, traditions, or ultimates according to which the artistic work might be fashioned and judged. The particular existential power of O'Neill's work and its aesthetic raggedness go hand in hand.

Tom Driver. *Drama Review*. Dec., 1957. p. 17

It would be foolish to suggest that all, or even the majority, of O'Neill's plays can be fitted into some neat and air-tight formula, or even that they are all '' about'' the same thing. Nevertheless, many of them possess a basic pattern not unlike that of *The Emperor Jones*. Man, having lost the faith in life and the sense of belonging which were once the concomitants of his primitive oneness with nature, is cast adrift in a storm of conflicting and mutually destructive impulses with no solid faith, no courage of his convictions, no stable set of values to give direction or meaning to them. And, as in that play, the technical devices which O'Neill chooses to employ are his attempt to reveal, as directly as is possible on the stage, both this disassociation or antagonism between man and the world in which he finds himself, and the inner conflicts which this disharmony leaves him prey to.

Robert F. Whitman. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. April, 1960. pp. 158–9

Toward the end of an O'Neill play there almost always comes a moment when the principal characters are for the first time fully revealed to the audience, and often it is only then that they fully understand themselves or their relationships to each other and to the world they live in. These recognition scenes are O'Neill's high points and in his best plays they are very moving. However, there are major differences to observe between these recognitions. In some of them there is a final heroic confrontation with the forces of life or destiny; in others, the hero in retreat reaches the final devastating acknowledgement of despair. O'Neill seems to have thought of his characters' coming to terms with life as movement forward or back.

Eugene M. Waith. *Educational Theatre Journal*. Oct., 1961. p. 185

Though generally recognized as the most important American dramatist of the twentieth century, Eugene O'Neill is misunderstood consistently by his critics. His plays are not the morose, pessimistic view of life that both his admirers and detractors say they are. . . .

To accuse O'Neill of being a total pessimist—a prophet of doom—is to read him superficially. Usually the gloomy tone in

O'Neill is but his way of expressing the tragic consequences that await those who are content with illusions; the gloom is not intended to be understood as an end in itself.

For O'Neill, the tragedy of man lies in the search for spiritual peace among the false gods of ambition, pride, security, physical love, etc. All of these human goals are unreal to O'Neill; they are the illusions that men live by, to avoid the difficulties of reality. His dramas are primarily attempts to depict man in the struggle to distinguish illusion from reality—attempts to restore man's perspective and offer him a solution to his predicament.

Richard E. Langford in *Essays in Modern American Literature*, ed. Richard E. Langford (Stetson). 1963. pp. 65–6

In his early plays, O'Neill wrote sympathetically and straight forwardly about the life in the merchant marine which he knew. In his last plays, when his intellectually shaping and linguistically life-giving faculties had finally matured, he wrote two or three incisive, many-sided, fully fleshed plays whose humanity will not wither with years. But in between he turned out some of the worst plays ever concocted by a major talent, plays based on imperfectly digested European influences meant clearly *pour épater les bourgeois*, not the least impressionable bourgeois being O'Neill himself.

John Simon. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1963. p. 268

As critics and biographers of O'Neill have said, he hated most what he most longed for; and ashamed of that longing (like Dion Anthony), he cheapened it. His preoccupation with this conflict led him to end some plays with ecstatic proclamations that the conflict did not exist or that it could be resolved. The solutions, however, are unconvincing after what has gone before; if one side of the coin is ''hardware,'' no philosophical alchemy can transmute it into gold. His best plays are those in which the vision is single and the action is unified. The comedy in the play (and there is always some) is clearly and honestly there—not just grinning behind the mask of tragedy—and there is no mechanical division between the two. They are inextricably combined to provide a real paradox, not merely a contradiction and canceling out. One tone—one attitude of the author toward his material—predominates, even if that attitude, as in *The Iceman Cometh* is one of bitterness, self-pity, and despair.

Doris V. Falk. *Modern Drama*. Dec., 1963. p. 137

Several factors operated in favor of O'Neill's career. One of these was the fact that as the son of the successful actor-manager James O'Neill and an occasional actor and stage manager in his father's productions, he directed his energies into playwriting after some early endeavors in journalism and poetry. He acquired a strong aptitude for dramatic writing and theatrical effect. He was able to compensate for his defects as a writer with the power of his stage action; had he elected to write novels and been forced to rely on description and narration rather than dramatization and visualization, he might have proved a second-rate author. And had he been constrained to express his restiveness and disorientation in lyric terms his romantic emotionalism and infelicitous phrasing might have made an awkward minor poet of him. His penchant for the sentimental poetry of the eighteen nineties would have dated him by 1920, if not even earlier. Dramatic action, pictorial composition, and sound-effects such as the beating of the tom-toms in *The Emperor Jones* concealed or minimized his literary infelicities, and sustained his intense—often, indeed, over-intense—dramatic intentions.

John Gassner. Introduction to *O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Gassner (Prentice). 1964. p. 2

A reading of O'Neill's plays quickly demonstrates that this playwright's one consistency was an artistic and stylistic inconsistency and that this unevenness of quality was a discouraging flaw. A parallel reading of significant criticism of the plays reveals the many frustrations of the conscientious reviewer who wished to evaluate fairly O'Neill's artistic position in American dramatic literature but who found the playwright's accomplishments constantly fluctuating between monumental achievement and abysmal failure. Furthermore, O'Neill's plays seldom failed to call forth strong emotional responses from the critics who wrote of them. One had to be either for or against them; it was virtually impossible to remain safely balanced in the middle, for the simple reason that O'Neill's dramatic subjects were never routine, never ordinary. They demanded emotional response—and invariably received it. After 1920, when O'Neill emerged as a major artistic power, he drew some of the most extravagant critical praise and most contemptuous scorn ever directed toward a serious modern dramatist.

Jordan Y. Miller. Introduction to *Playwright's Progress: O'Neill and the Critics*, ed. Jordan Y. Miller (Scott, Foresman). 1965. n. p.

Critics commonly contrast the ''happy end'' of the *Oresteia* with the grim pessimism of *Mourning* [*Becomes Electra*] and then either condemn O'Neill for his extreme pessimism or—as Roger Asselineau has done recently—praise him for the deeper insight and greater daring with which he carried the story to its bitter end. But the difference is not one of degree or of mood. We have seen that the *Oresteia* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* employ entirely different concepts of action. It is simply not true that O'Neill, as he said himself, psychologized Greek fate. For the ''fate'' that O'Neill considers so typical of Greek tragedy does not exist. There is no evidence that O'Neill's approach to Greek drama ever freed itself from the critical prejudices that persist even to this day; he saw Greek tragedy through the spectacles of a popular determinism.

Horst Frenz and Martin Mueller. *American Literature*. March, 1966. p. 100

Perhaps his fear of human love carried over into a fear of cosmic love. He had felt them both, so he knew they existed; but he could not feel them for long, nor trust them, nor imagine other men's wisely trusting them. In so far as cosmic love involved his loving the world, he knew his own fickleness; in so far as it depended on the world's treating him well, he knew the world's rebuffs. O'Neill was acutely sensitive to suffering—his own, but other men's, also. This sensitivity impelled his quest for a philosophical/religious justification of pain's existence or for an adequate attitude with which to face it. But whenever he achieved a justification or

attitude, it was assailed by new sensitivity which forced at least a questioning of what he had achieved.

Henry F. Pommer. *Modern Drama*. May, 1966. pp. 38–9

The creative energy of Eugene O'Neill flailed away in all directions. That his unceasing grapple with himself was the dynamo of his talent can no longer be doubted. The prospect of releasing his tensions attracted him to playwriting, but mature expression in him too often was blighted by his over-reliance upon recollection in white heat. He rarely was able to separate out the distorting effects of tittering overstatement, sledge-hammer repetition, and dice-loaded self-pity. Nowhere is this emotional bloodletting more apparent than in his young artist characters, the men of feelings. Like O'Neill himself, these close copies waver endlessly between engagement and disengagement in their quest for identity. Their progress is from hurt to knowledge of hurt to hurt of knowledge.

Robert C. Lee. *Modern Drama*. Sept., 1966. p. 127

In 1934, after the failure of *Days without End*, Eugene O'Neill left the theatre and went into the desert, an appropriate place for meditation. His career was already a success, but it was attended by an air of ambiguous achievement. The work was impressive, one play added to another, but it was not good enough. O'Neill had tried everything. He had gone to school with Strindberg, Ibsen, and Chekhov; he had taken formal lessons from the Greek tragedians, he had studied the resources of symbolism. But it was not enough. By temperament, he took his themes where he found them, in places, conditions, facts, people. He tried to give his characters a representative dimension so that they would not be merely themselves; they would acquire a glow, a quality of radiance, making them memorable. But the sum had not come out right. The more he put into the plays, the less they retained. Making his characters more than themselves, he made them less than anybody. The more elms he added, the harder to believe in the desire. So he went into the desert and, eight years later, wrote *Long Day's Journey into Night*. . . . The main difference between *Long Day's Journey into Night* and the earlier plays is that now, in a far deeper sense than before, O'Neill has committed himself to his own experience.

Denis Donoghue. *The Ordinary Universe* (Macmillan—N.Y.). 1968. p. 151

Again and again in [O'Neill's] plays he wrote about himself and his family, drawing his own and their portraits under various guises, exploring their relations with one another, dramatizing his varying, indeed conflicting feelings towards the others. Of course a great many writers have made literary capital of their personal histories, of their families, but this is more common with novelists, and even among them few have been so obsessive about it as O'Neill.

Tracing relationships between O'Neill's life and his work, viewing one through the other, throws fresh light on both, though not with equal strength. Since his plays originated not only in outward circumstance, in things that had happened to him, but in his inner self, the plays tell us more about the man than his personal history tells us about the plays. His history yields external manifestations for the most part, only occasional glimpses of the inner man; it was the inner man, the essential O'Neill, who wrote the plays. Care is of course imperative in reading him for autobiography: under the functioning of the creative imagination and a writer's opposed drives for self-disclosure (self-justification) and self-concealment (born of self-doubt and guilt feelings), the inner flux and outward reality of his life have undergone transformation, are interwoven with fiction. But it is there, the autobiography, as bedroot throughout his writings.

Louis Sheaffer. *O'Neill: Son and Playwright* (Little). 1968. p. 79

Emperor Jones's ultimate fall [in *The Emperor Jones*], although superstition is involved, occurs because the artifices that have propped him up have been removed. So, exposed and defenseless, Jones—like any other man—falls victim to his fear and his essential, primitive nature. In certain ways, therefore, this is only incidentally a Negro play; it could well have used any man. O'Neill's insight into the human condition is, if anything, marred by the play having a Negro subject. The analogies to *Othello* were too tempting for the reviewers to miss, and few of them understood the play as more than an artful and powerful treatment of travesty of Negro pretense. *The Hairy Ape* treats the same insight in a different way, this time with a white subject. And on this occasion, the reviewers revealed that they had missed the original point entirely. Lawrence Remner, writing in the New York *Herald* (March 10, 1922), felt that *The Hairy Ape* lacked convincing motivation. He noted a ''dramatic form'' similar to *The Emperor Jones*, but confessed. ''it was a much more exciting game to see the negro usurper beaten by fate. He was a clever rascal in his way. The hairy ape is only a feeble giant who is bowled over by the first blow of fate.'' Seen as conventional tragedy, the Negro was more convincing because of this ''clever'' pretense. But the hairy ape was assuming to be a man and civilized, and once the props that sustained him had been challenged—taken away—he was reduced to his essential animal. Perhaps Remner's failure was that he could not see that for a white man humanity might be a pretense. Notably, no critics complained about *The Emperor Jones* for its reduction of the Negro to primitivism; that, of course, was not strange.

Nathan Irvin Huggins. *Harlem Renaissance* (Oxford—N.Y.). 1971. p. 297

One characteristic is consistently evident throughout O'Neill's career: an unusual technical flexibility, a readiness to experiment and take risks, which he never lost even in his later years. His plays explore the full range of dramatic expression, which continued to fascinate him as long as he lived. Parallel to this runs his experimentation with ideas. Many writers have left their mark, stylistic or philosophical, on his work; they include Spengler, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Ibsen, Strindberg, Gerhart Hauptmann, and Georg Kaiser. While O'Neill's work in its totality indicates chaos and helplessness, the individual plays show a tentative reaching out, quickly overcome, toward nihilism and Catholicism, determinism and the triumph of human freedom. This is what St. John Ervine meant when he said that O'Neill does not develop, he just expands. But it was precisely this infinite reluctance to declare or commit himself that constituted the artistic as well as the philosophical and religious freedom so indispensable to

O'Neill. This predilection for epic completeness—or rather ''all-embracingness''—is just as evident in the total *oeuvre* as in the individual later plays and dramatic cycles, which can no longer be contained within conventional limits.

Horst Frenz. *Eugene O'Neill* (Ungar). 1971. pp. 104–5

All the fury and anguish, all the vital agony of living, which had been dissipated in his earlier plays by undigested bits of philosophy and unearned attempts at lyricism, had this time [in *Long Day's Journey into Night*] been given clear, hard outlines. Perhaps because the Tyrones had been constructed around personal remembrance, they were freed from the tendentiousness that fettered so many O'Neill characters, and the terrible truths they told to each other were not statements about life but embodiments of it. They were released also from the need to speak to each other in the fustian vernacular of a Hairy Ape or, like Lazarus, in cloudbursts of grandiloquence. When they argued, teased, cajoled, confessed, and complained, they did so in precise, rich human speech that was colored just enough by the dramatist's art so that it remained both unobtrusive and remarkable. Having overcome the need to prove himself a thinker and poet, a fuzzy combination of Shaw and O'Casey spiced with a bit of Nietzschean suffering, O'Neill was free to be what he superbly was: a dramatist of courage and force who understood very well how to construct the tensions and rhythms of a play so that it becomes infused with crude theatrical life and capable of sustaining the needs of the singular vision that gave it birth.

Jack Richardson. *Commentary*. Jan., 1974. pp. 52–3

There are other problems [in *A Moon for the Misbegotten* besides the obsolete language]: in the way the exposition is handled, for instance; in the heavy, recalcitrant humor that often seems dragged in like an unhappy child torn from its slumber and obliged to do recitations for its parents guests. But in O'Neill's last plays the flaws dissolve before the onslaught of all those feelings the unhappy man could not put into his life, only into his final works. There is in *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, as in the rest of them, a passionate compassion, a torrential pity that isn't lessened by being in large measure also self-pity. For it is hard-won and genuine, based on unswerving insight and on true perception of the ultimate incommensurateness between what we would make of life and what it makes of us. The failings of the ear and the sporadic creakings of the construction are overwhelmed by that tragic vision that nothing extenuates, nor sets down aught in malice.

John Simon. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1974. p. 265

Perhaps a better slogan for O'Neill than art for art's sake would be art for life's sake. He tried to convert the theater back into a church because he had a deep psychological need to do so. Only art could turn doubt into will and despair into acceptance. Only art could release his pain of spirit and allow him to transcend himself. O'Neill was driven by personal demons in all his work, demons that had to be exorcised over and over. The inward turn of his mind away from political or social preoccupations toward its own workings was the turn of his plays. The tension of his inner conflicts was his plays' tension. And this tension, this pain of spirit, could only be released if shared by an audience, by a body of fellow sufferers who in the sharing became father confessors. The exorcising could only take place through the performance of rituals that were communal in nature.

Yet O'Neill's plays amount to more than elaborate confessions or disguised autobiography. For his attempt to make of the theater a place where rituals were acted out had broad cultural significance. It was an attempt to restore to the theater the function it had possessed in ancient Athens and, in more sublimated form, in Elizabethan England—the function of life celebration. . . .

The purpose of the [Provincetown] Players, at least in an aesthetic sense, was religious. And O'Neill's own purpose was equally, if not more, religious. Remaining faithful to his purpose for over thirty years as a playwright, he realized drama on a higher aesthetic level than most American playwrights even contemplated. Not surprisingly, the way to the aesthetic heights was through the psychological depths, and for that reason, along with his personal need, he explored the psyche and its motives without quarter. To dramatize what he uncovered meant shattering genteel morality and conventional dramaturgy. Consequently, there were legal and artistic struggles, but he managed to shatter the morality and dramaturgy both. Through his passion, imagination and daring the American theater finally became three-dimensional in the tradition of the European.

Leonard Chabrowe. *Ritual and Pathos: The Theater of O'Neill* (Bucknell Univ. Pr., 1976), pp. 12, 14–15

I do not wish to present an argument that O'Neill is an absurdist dramatist, but would suggest that in his insistence that his realistic manner must also be expressive, must be ''real realism,'' he did play a part in extending the limits and did assimilate into his form means of exploring areas of human experience which continue to be of pressing interest to us today. Retention of the realistic framework seems to have been essential to the functioning of his creative imagination. He did experiment with expressionist and symbolist techniques but . . . even within such experiments he constantly veered towards sets and situations in which the familiar and human, as opposed to the remote or metaphysical, could be recreated and explored.

And yet, whilst O'Neill never does break the illusion he does go to the edge, does threaten it. Within the conventional performing of the play itself, his characters perform for each other and adopt a succession of different roles. . . .

Similarly, although in the late plays O'Neill does appear to keep to a sequential time span, there is, co-existent with the realistic rhythm of linear time, a different temporal rhythm: a strange recurrence and circularity of the kind that would be explicit in the drama of the post-war period. . . .

The fictional time span of each of O'Neill's late plays occupies only a day or a day and a half of fictional time, and each is limited to a single set. . . . In each, a linear plot drives the action forwards. *The Iceman Cometh*, with its revelations, act by act, about the death of Evelyn and the betrayal of Rosa, is modelled on the detective mystery; *Long Day's Journey into Night*, with its hints, its anticipated telephone calls, its trips to the doctor and drug store, its ominous predictions about the return of the fog, on the well-made play. *A Touch of the Poet* and *Moon for the Misbegotten*, the one with its duel, the other its intrigue over the old homestead and both with seduction plots, follow the course of the old melodrama. The

linear plot is used in each case to hold the audience and stimulate their curiosity, whilst other elements slowly take possession at a deeper level, and meaning accrues to seemingly neutral words and images. Time and space are extended in these plays, within the firm structure of the linear plot, by a succession of vignettes of off-stage characters and events which are integrated into the dialogue in jokes, tall stories, reminiscences and involuntary memories. At their simplest, these present people or events from outside the stage setting but inside the play's fictional time span.

Jean Chothia. *Forging a Language: A Study of the Plays of Eugene O'Neill* (Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1979), pp. 188–89

If *Ah, Wilderness!* marks the high point of O'Neill's optimism about the potential for the achievement of humanistic goals in modern American experience, *The Iceman Cometh* appears to represent the depth of his pessimism. This work, like *Long Day's Journey into Night*, is an American interpretation of what critics such as Joseph Wood Krutch have described as a ''tragic humanism.'' Although these late plays did succeed in revealing the contour of the universe in which modern man lives, they also exposed the failures of their protagonists to achieve humanistic goals. Through Hickey, Larry, and Parritt of *The Iceman Cometh* and the tragic Tyrones of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, O'Neill interpreted what he was finally to concede as humanism's limitations as a religion. They do not, however, seem to indicate his total rejection of a humanism as a social philosophy. Rather, these late plays suggest O'Neill's final acceptance of a tragic view of experience.

O'Neill's ''tragic humanism'' reaffirms the classical proposition that man's condition precludes forever the full realization of his ideals. It is, however, the individual's response to the tragic fact of his limitation that remains not only the measure of man's nobility but also of his humanity.

Esther M. Jackson. In *Eugene O'Neill: A World View*, ed. Virginia Floyd (Ungar, 1979), p. 256

Although *The Iceman Cometh*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* are dramatic fiction, not unfiltered autobiography, biographical questions must be addressed. Most of the inhabitants of Hope's bar were based on the playwright's friends and acquaintances, the Tyrones were extrapolated from the O'Neills, and even Josie Hogan was loosely modeled on a woman the playwright knew. Was [Eugene] O'Neill more honest in his original harsh portrayals, and do his revisions reflect his unwillingness to reveal all the horror he knew or to attack, even through fictional characters, those long dead? This is possible but unlikely. Anyone who has seen these plays on stage (or merely read them) has felt their searing power and shared the anguish that must have gone into the author's creation of a mother who abandons her family for drugs or of tortured men who desire only a peaceful death. Since the final plays contain so much that must have been acutely painful to the playwright, it is doubtful that his revisions grew out of conscious or even unconscious attempts to avoid acknowledging the traumatic. O'Neill's changes in Jamie Tyrone in *Journey* and his counterpart Jim Tyrone in *Moon*—changes that deny the character a possibility for growth—are perhaps the only ones in which we can detect the forces of repression at work during rewriting, and even here we cannot be sure. Was O'Neill implicitly justifying his own failure to save his brother or was he just darkening the pall that in early drafts was already spread over the character—and over so many other doomed figures in his canon?

Moreover, even when early versions contain more biographical details than later ones, this does not necessarily mean they are, in the deepest sense, more ''truthful.'' As O'Neill himself said, ''Facts are facts, but the truth is beyond and outside them.'' Truth is largely a matter of judgment and perspective, and these are what seem to have changed most during the composition process. As O'Neill developed *Iceman*, *Journey*, and *Moon*, he evidently came to appreciate more fully the difficult circumstances in which he had placed his characters as well as the tangled motives that might lie behind their actions. Just as Larry Slade, Edmund Tyrone, and Josie Hogan grew in empathy for others as the plays were rewritten, so too did O'Neill grow in empathy for his characters. The result is gentler handling of figures like the Tyrones, based on the playwright's immediate family, and of those like Don Parritt, with whose ''model'' O'Neill had no personal relationship.

It is inaccurate, of course, to say that any of these plays underwent a radical metamorphosis from early notes to finished drama. Most of the elements present in the final versions are there in the early ones as well: love tinged with or corrupted into hatred, loyalty alternating with betrayal, kindness coupled with cruelty. But *The Iceman Cometh*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* are, in the forms we know them, more finely balanced than they were when O'Neill began writing them. Whether through his growing understanding of his characters O'Neill gained new appreciation for his long-dead family and friends is a question for a psychologist rather than a critic, although his dedicatory inscription to *Journey* suggests that he did. What matters to critics and audiences is that through the complex process of composition—a process at once physical, literary, theatrical, and emotional—O'Neill created three of the finest plays in the American dramatic canon.

Judith E. Barlow. *Final Acts: The Creation of Three Late O'Neill Plays* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Pr., 1985), pp. 161–62

In all three plays [*Mourning Becomes Electra*, *The Iceman Cometh*, and *Long Day's Journey into Night*]—for many critics the three most important plays in O'Neill's canon—he displays his instinctive knowledge of what works in the theater. Stripped of the theatrical devices he used in his experimental plays—although still playing with ''mask-like'' faces in *Mourning Becomes Electra*—these plays are products of a realistic imagination working with sound and light and gesture and movement and setting, to produce highly emotive situations, highly charged moments. In each play he makes enormous demands on his audience, forcing it to listen to the talk of members of a family for hours, stuck in a room or in a saloon or on the steps of a house, and makes the largest demands on his actors as well. As we listen, as we enter deeper into their lives, we begin to care about these people, to feel warmth and compassion. This is more true of our response to the Tyrones and the *Iceman* characters than to the Mannons, but by play's end we care about Lavinia too. O'Neill's dramatic art turns his compassion and understanding to our compassion and understanding. . . .

And like all great drama, they appeal to our emotions. O'Neill believed that ''our emotions are a better guide than our thoughts.

Our emotions are instinctive. They are the result not only of our individual experiences but of the experiences of the whole human race, back through the ages.'' O'Neill insisted that the ''truth usually goes deep. So it reaches you through your emotions.'' He forever pursued the *truth* of man's existence by appealing to *emotions*. He said he would ''never be influenced by any consideration but one: Is it the truth as I know it—or, better still, feel it?'' He himself felt deeply what he wrote, and here the autobiographical pressures exerted on his work—especially in *Long Day's Journey* and *Iceman*, but also in *Mourning Becomes Electra*—must be acknowledged. These personal pressures invest his characters with a dimension of feeling that cannot be analyzed. The intensity of his personal commitment to what he is dramatizing affects the emotions of his audience. The sincerity of his attempt to express the frustrations of our lives, the mystery of the force behind, at times the absurdity of our condition, often seem palpable. Always aware that the darkly inexpressible cannot be expressed, giving voice to his inadequacy through the words of Edmund Tyrone—''I couldn't touch what I tried to tell you just now. I just stammered. That's the best I'll ever do, I mean if I live. Well, it will be faithful realism, at least. Stammering is the native eloquence of us fog people''—he nevertheless managed in his best work, certainly in the three big plays treated [here] to produce works of art that can stand with the best in modern drama.

> Normand Berlin, ed. *Eugene O'Neill, Three Plays: ''Mourning Becomes Electra,'' ''The Iceman Cometh,'' ''Long Day's Journey into Night'': A Casebook* (Basingstoke, England: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 16–18

It has become fashionable to highlight the misogynistic strain in Eugene O'Neill's work and to stress his inability to imagine women as realistic, sympathetic and, above all, human beings. Louis Sheaffer, whose comprehensive biography offers some very interesting ideas about O'Neill and his emotional experience but who stresses O'Neill's particular blindness toward women, has asserted that, paralleling his mentor, Strindberg, O'Neill created in the majority of his leading female characters either bitches and other agents of misfortune or impossibly noble souls. He could praise Woman only in exaggerated, unrealistic terms.

Although Strindberg's influence is considerable in O'Neill's work, there is an important difference between the two writers in their portrayal of women, particularly when these women are presented as ghosts, haunting their lives instead of living them, alienated from self and others. Writing about female ghosts in O'Neill's plays, James Robinson has noted the pattern of female ''absence as presence'' (using Bette Mandl's words) that runs throughout O'Neill's work, illustrating the connection between *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey into Night* and asserting that all O'Neill's ghostly women are experimental figures who anticipate the ultimate female ghost, Mary Tyrone. While Robinson focuses on O'Neill's ambivalent stance toward his mother expressed by these spectral women, Sheaffer himself takes a more negative position, noting, a legion of dead wives and mothers in O'Neill's writings, a clan larger than one may realize, since many of its ghostly members died before the plays begin and are referred to only fleetingly.

It is this ghostly tribe that is, for Sheaffer, a ''sinister fact'' of O'Neill's misogyny; in this view, they represent another piece of evidence supporting O'Neill's apparently negative and oppressive view of women, as if O'Neill had invented women as ghosts to keep them as outsiders, to obstruct their ''fellowship'' as sympathetic characters in his work.

I propose another view of this ghostly collection: namely, that their ghostliness does not constitute an expression of O'Neill's misogyny but reflects his remarkable empathy with women, with their psychic and social imprisonment, with their painful and oftentimes confusing disenfranchisement. This expression of empathy divorces O'Neill, in my view, from a strict imitation of Strindberg and aligns him more closely with Ibsen, whose incipient feminist stance is echoed in O'Neill's presentation of women. . . . Like Ibsen, O'Neill confirms women's displacement in a society that values maleness and male authority and denigrates women's personal and political power. Although this is not the context for an exhaustive study, I will examine several plays in which the presentation of female ghostliness reveals O'Neill's empathy with, rather than hatred for, women.

> Suzanne Burr. ''O'Neill's Ghostly Women.'' In June Schlueter, ed. *Feminist Rereadings of Modern American Drama* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Pr., 1989, pp. 37–38, 46–47

O'Neill's technique in *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey into Night* reveals an adherence to the internal dynamics rather than the outward forms of the novel, a shift in approach that allowed him finally to represent character in terms of a coherent internal tension that relied far less on such external devices as masks, thought asides, split protagonists, or multiple-part cycles and more on a simple but powerfully articulated opposition of dramatized reality and narrative illusion. . . .

The historical subtext is directly relevant to O'Neill's experimentation. That he arrived simultaneously at an impasse and a breakthrough on the eve of World War II is not merely fortuitous. While his despair at the unfolding of world events merged with an increasing sense of artistic frustration, leading him eventually to destroy the bulk of his work on the history cycle. O'Neill also felt the time was right for a more overtly autobiographical drama that would serve far better, ironically, to summarize his analysis of modern history and its underlying values. . . .

O'Neill's last one-act play *Hughie* . . . strikes the right balance between O'Neill's elegiac mood in the early 1940s and his anticipation of a postmodern theatricality. As a companion piece to *The Iceman Cometh*, *Hughie* offers a concise, explicit consideration of the simplifying yet enabling formulations of melodrama within the narratological structures that O'Neill's previous novelistic experiments had helped to establish. This short piece is the playwright's meditation on the perils of modern history but also becomes a parable about creating dramatic dialogue from solipsistic, disconnected narration—perhaps the single greatest problem facing the dramatist in a novelistic age. *Hughie* affirms a dramatic paradigm so crucial to such later playwrights as Beckett, Albee, Pinter, Mamet, and Norman: two voices working against time, affirming the force of dialogue as the basis of identity, family, and history. If for a variety of circumstances O'Neill and his plays have not directly engaged these later playwrights in the fitful dialogue called literary influence, O'Neill nonetheless pioneered the new theatrical

medium in which future playwrights have formulated their own distinctive images of humanity and its necessary fictions.

> Kurt Eisen. *The Inner Strength of Opposites: O'Neill's Novelistic Drama and the Melodramatic Imagination* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Pr., 1994), pp. 5–6, 8

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ORTIZ, Simon (1941–)

Although he has been publishing fine poetry since the mid-1960s, Simon Ortiz, an Acoma Pueblo born in 1941 was until recently read mainly by other American Indian writers and by a handful of small-press addicts. Ortiz's audience widened somewhat after Harper and Row published *Going for the Rain* in 1976. Here is a representative exchange from that volume:

> Q. ''What would you say that the main theme of your poetry is?''
> A. ''. . . to recognize the relationships I share with everything.''

American Indians have always known a good deal about relationships, communion; more than others, their relationships have been forcibly severed. Ortiz's fundamental theme concerns these sacred relationships—and their violations. Although his poems are usually about American Indians, the audience addressed in his work includes the poor, the dispossessed *and* the untranquilized middle class of various hues.

Both new volumes of poetry are testimonials: *Fight Back* to the revolt of the Pueblos (along with mestizos, mulattoes, Navahos and Apaches) against the Spanish colonialists in 1680; *From Sand Creek* marks the 1864 massacre of 133 Arapahoes and Cheyennes, nearly all women and children, in southeastern Colorado.

From Sand Creek is the more cohesive volume of the two. It contains forty-two poems on consecutive recto pages, with the same number of brief prose passages on the facing versos. The prose often introduces a theme or an image that is taken up in the corresponding poem or elsewhere in the volume. Most of the poems contain details about a Veterans Administration hospital in Fort Lyons, Colorado, where their narrator is a patient in 1974 and 1975.

What does the V.A. hospital have to do with Sand Creek? A good deal, really. According to Ortiz's accompanying note, the Cheyennes and Arapahoes who were camped on a bend of Sand Creek thought they were at peace with the whites. President Lincoln himself had presented Black Kettle, one of the guiding elders, with an American flag, which, the Indians were told, would protect them from attack. The flag was flying above Black Kettle's lodge on that cold November dawn when Colonel Chivington and more than 700 volunteers and troops from nearby Fort Lyons swooped down on the 600 Indians and wiped them out.

One-hundred-odd years later, the patients in the V.A. hospital in Fort Lyons include many young American Indians who, like their forebears, wished in some measure to trust the flag, and who fought for it in Vietnam. Those who returned, returned emptied of their trust in the U.S. government and, too often, of their ability to endure as aliens on their own soil.

The words and images with which Ortiz repeatedly characterizes the hospitalized Indians are *blood, dream, breath, shadow, compassion, memory, love, ghost.* Combined, these words have the impact of a mountain or tree rooted in the natural cycle, which, when unimpeded, is perpetual. Only there is impediment everywhere in Ortiz's poems, and his people are reduced to shadows striving, usually fruitlessly, to reconnect with their bodies, their earth, their birthright:

> Looking for Billy . . .
> He was the shadow.
> Memory was his lost trail.

Almost seamlessly, Ortiz imbues his sad, spare hospital scenes not only with the dreadful echo of the Sand Creek massacre but with a selective history of Native American faith, oppression and resistance. Yet the cumulative impression is, admirably, not of gloom and despair but of a renewed faith in the prospect of relationship with the land and solidarity among the dispossessed.

The single non-Indian literary precedent for these poems who comes to mind is Whitman during the Civil War, especially in his ''Wound Dresser'' letters from the veterans hospitals in Washington, D.C. Ortiz is himself a wound dresser, but unlike Whitman, whose rhapsodic brotherhood was often celebrated without identifiable basis, Ortiz's final affirmative, mined as it is from the grieving poems, glows with the luster of someone who has come through.

Ortiz owes much to the great body of invocation, song and prayer that is central to the Native American oral tradition. Aside from a modest number of books, such as Paul Radin's *The*

Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian (1920) and Ruth Underhill's *Singing for Power* (1938), this ''literature'' has been largely unrecorded until recently. But contemporary American Indians have begun to draw on this tradition and to create an impressive canon of imaginative prose and poetry. Because the strongest of these writers (Ortiz, N. Scott Momaday, Vine Deloria, Leslie Marmon Silko, James Welch, Luther Standing Bear and others) have succeeded in fusing fractured present to coherent past, their writings are frequently more problematic than those of their forebears. In Ortiz, for example, the apparently simple, yet elusive, syntax sometimes seems fractionally off, as if the English were adapted from another language.

They should have eaten
whole buffalo.
They should have,
like the people wanted for them.

Fight Back seems a simpler volume than it is. Except for the 27-page ''No More Sacrifices,'' the poems are usually brief narratives about the Pueblos and Navahos and whites who live in the ''Uranium Belt'' west of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Ortiz shows us these people working in the uranium mines or the mills, riding in car pools, planting in a clayey soil, bathing in the sacred hot springs. We observe their distress, their joys and the persistent faith in the natural order that sustains them.

''No More Sacrifices'' is the linchpin of the volume and one of the strongest poems in recent memory. Strictly speaking it is more prose then verse, part meditation, part sociopolitical analysis. The poet has climbed a volcanic mountain called Srhakaiya, west of the village that the white people named McCartys in which he was raised. Descending the mountain and walking home,

I was sick
feeling a sense of ''otherness.''
How can I describe it?
An electric current
coursing in waves through me?
''Otherness.''

It becomes clear that his disconnection was produced by his vision on the mountain. Not so much what he physically saw (though pollution and industrialization were visible) as what he saw through to: the history of the Acoma people from the days before the Spanish conquest to the Pueblo revolt. He saw the invasion of the ''Mericanos'' with their railroads and cavalry and uranium mines. And he saw the people's painful transition from productive landlaborers to wage slaves.

His vision sickens the poet, but then, while resting under a juniper on his walk home, the ''otherness'' recedes, and he sees something else:

. . . horses.
One was a pinto
and the other was red.
The sun had long set.
The horses were alert
to me as I passed by.
Suddenly, they bolted,
and galloped
into the canyon . . .

The sight of the horses enforces his relationship with the land, even as it underscores his realization of what must be done for the future he envisions:

The future will not be mad with loss
and waste though
the memory will be there; eyes will
become kind
and deep, and the bones of this nation
will mend. . .

Harold Jaffe. *The Nation*. April 3, 1982, pp. 406-08.

It is a testament to Simon Ortiz's influential career that *Woven Stone* has been published: three of his books, long out of print, have now been collected into one volume. For those of you who have searched in vain for *Going For The Rain* (1976), *A Good Journey* (1977), and *Fight Back: For the Sake of the People, For the Sake of the Land* (1980), look no further. Reprinted in their entirety, these acclaimed works are now available along with an insightful, in-depth thirty-page preface which chronicles the author's life.

For those not familiar with Simon Ortiz's prolific career, *Going For The Rain* and *A Good Journey* are two works of poetry that use oral histories, narratives and stories. His memories of a traditional upbringing at Acoma Pueblo, New Mexico, intertwine with his encounters of rural and working-class Americans. These cyclical poems are told to us by Ortiz with Coyote's help and vice versa. An ironic sense of humor flows throughout tales of the contemporary world. Always committed to native survival and endurance, Ortiz's gift lies in making us aware of our own personal responsibility; these are not just words on a page, they are a call to political action.

Fight Back is a powerful and beautiful example that art and politics do mix. This book of poetry and prose focuses on the uranium mining in the Acoma-Grants-Laguna area in the early 1950s. Ortiz writes from historical perspectives (the most accurate history being the stories of the workers and their families) as well as from his own memories of working in the mines. The book speaks directly to the social, cultural and economic devastation of the surrounding region.

The introduction is a fascinating autobiographical essay. Ortiz honestly confronts his struggle with alcoholism and his encounters with the white world as a young boy and man from Acoma Pueblo. He also speaks about compassion and convictions—that within every poem lies a story, and that story must be told in order to ensure survival. He contends that we must expand our concerns globally to include indigenous peoples throughout the world. Our responsibility to one another does not end with political borders. Colonialism, poverty and spiritual loss remain critical concerns and, as artists, we can use our talents to not only love and respect each other but also to ''fight back.''

Simon Ortiz has given us indelible proof that the written word is indeed an effective weapon. And we are left with a sense of renewal and hope: ''to behold with passion and awe the wonders and bounty and beauty of creation and the world around us.''

Andrea-Bess Baxter. *Western American Literature*. Summer, 1993, pp. 162-63.

Simon J. Ortiz is highly regarded as both a poet and a short story writer. Born into an important Acoma Pueblo family in New

Mexico in 1941, Ortiz reflects in his writing a groundedness in the experiences and perceptions of contemporary American Indians. Ortiz gained recognition in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the American public became interested in hearing American Indian voices. Ortiz was in the forefront of writers who began to articulate American Indian issues and concerns. Some of these issues had to do with establishing and maintaining identity in what many Indians regard as an alienating and dehumanizing American society. That identity, historically in peril from acculturating federal policies, is reaffirmed by writers like Ortiz, who see the formation of a Native American identity deeply tied to land, culture, and language.

Understanding the values of one's community and its relationship to the land is a central theme in Ortiz's writing, both his poetry and short prose fiction. But full understanding of these values is available only through their articulation in language. Language, for Ortiz, is the heart and soul of existence. In his essays, such as ''Song, Poetry and Language,'' Ortiz explains how language provides us with consciousness, a measure of both our inner and outer lives.

Ortiz has written eloquently about his formation as a writer in the introduction to his volume *Woven Stone.* As a child growing up in a traditional Acoma family in which the primary source of knowledge is acquired through the spoken word, Ortiz did not imagine himself as a writer. That dream came later. But Ortiz had, nonetheless, an intense and interesting relationship to language. He tells here the story of a little boy, probably Ortiz himself, who will not talk. His sisters, out of love for the boy, ask their grandfather to teach him to speak. The family patriarch does so by speaking to the boy, telling the boy that he will speak when it is time; the grandfather says, ''It is with language you will come about for yourself as a person . . . it is with knowledge and words that you will know and express love for yourself and your people.'' After this, the grandfather takes a brass door key out of his pocket, and inserting it into the boy's mouth he tells the boy, ''Now, Grandson, you will speak.''

Speaking the values, knowledge, history, and desires of Acoma people, and American Indian people generally, has been the principle aim of Ortiz's writing. Growing up in the 1960s, a decade of political consciousness-raising among U.S. minorities and Third World peoples throughout the world, Ortiz sees his writing as both politically and spiritually motivated. Writing, for Ortiz, is a way to resist a dominant society that would annihilate the small regional and ethnic cultures, such as the American Indian cultures which have held on and persisted in spite of forces of assimilation. Coming into consciousness of himself as an Indian, as part of a despised minority, Ortiz began to feel the rage, loneliness, and desperation that has been expressed in many works by American Indian writers.

In his short story, ''Woman Singing,'' included in his volume titled *Fightin',* Ortiz writes about migrant farm workers, Southwestern Indians who find themselves picking potatoes in Idaho. In a life characterized by poverty and alcoholism, Ortiz evokes the loneliness of one Indian worker who falls in love with another man's wife because her singing makes him think of his homeland. Finding a way to make a song, his own song ''like those of The People,'' is what gives the man the strength to leave the lonely and desperate life he has led and to go home. The song seems like a small consolation, but Ortiz is also convinced that those who are disenfranchised by poverty, neglect, and racism can overcome these circumstances: language can help us heal. Healing provides us with a way to continue in our humanity, allows us to grow as individuals and to understand our commitment to the People.

Ortiz often expresses this movement of consciousness as a journey, and language—as he says in a biographical note to *The Man to Send Rain Clouds,* ''as a way of life which is a path, a trail which I follow in order to be aware as much as possible of what is around me and what part I am in that life.'' Language, and by extension, writing, thus inscribes a path of knowledge and self-knowledge. It enables a person to find a road for the individual to follow from inside oneself to the outside, and from outside oneself to inside. This journeying in and out can be compared to the journey Ortiz describes in his prologue to his first volume of poetry, *Going for the Rain.* Rain is a scarce but vital resource in the Southwest. In the high arid deserts of New Mexico and Arizona, its presence makes life possible. When Ortiz invokes the motif of rain and journeying, he is calling on a traditional source, the prayers, songs, and journeys that will insure the arrival of the shiwana, those spiritual entities which bring the rain, which insure survival and continuance of people, plants, and animals. Those who go forth in search of the shiwana are engaged in something vital. We can read this as metaphorical, but it is certainly more than that, for all those who go forth and return for the benefit of The People enact a belief in, and commitment to, the creative and generative forces which help Indians and—as Ortiz believes—all the oppressed survive.

Janice Gould. In *Reference Guide to American Literature,* 3rd edition, ed. Jim Kamp (St. James Press, 1994).

The Acoma poet Simon Ortiz spent the winter of 1985-86—the date can be determined by his reference to the *Challenger* disaster of January 1986—as a visiting professor at Sinte Gleska College on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. That year and the profound culture shock which he experienced, caused less by his dealings with the Lakota Sioux of the reservation than by the awesome Dakota prairie and its frightening weather, required a search for ''a way to deal with the reality of my life and the reality in which I lived.'' The result is less a collection of poems, though it is that, than a poetic journal containing poems and prose notes dated from late autumn to the first day of the following spring—the Dakota winter between autumn's last lightning and the first lightning of spring.

The prairie Ortiz experienced is a hard place where brutal work is normal for those who hope to endure, where dreams are smashed, where even murder can occur, but above all where winter and the lonely landscape are a test of character; and to the child of the Great Plains who writes this review, the language Ortiz uses to render the reality of that world seems exactly right. It is a place of ''blistering cold,'' the wind's ''deeply throated frozen moan,'' and an ''icy sunlight glistening off snow-fields,'' and the sun viewed through a few trees is ''so low I have to bend down to see it.'' ''Nothing,'' he says in one poem, ''can measure distance here,'' and in ''this South Dakota wind and snow, a destiny we cannot deny,'' Ortiz came to terms with himself, with his place and time, and with humanity's place in a cosmos which seems more immediate on the plains than anywhere else and where driving the long strip of US 18 is like ''travelling on the farthest reaches of the galactic universe.''

Some readers may think many of the poems too sketchy to stand by themselves; but they work in the context of the steady progression of the season they chronicle, and most of them in fact can stand by themselves and indeed are very strong. They deal with universal

concerns: with the recognition of mortality while chopping wood (''Comprehending'') or driving blind for two seconds after a huge truck passes by in a storm (''Blind Curse''), with the mingled guilt and gratitude felt while cooking venison (''What We Come to Know''), with an abandoned farm and the poet's imagined farmer whose courageous story must be told (''A Story of Courage''). These poems, and for that matter Ortiz's book itself, must be considered his most powerful achievement to date, a major event in the current movement of American Indian poetry, and in fact a significant contribution to our literature in general.

Robert L. Berner. *World Literature Today*. Spring, 1995, p. 409.

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OZICK, Cynthia (1928–)

Miss Ozick's first book, the novel *Trust*—rich, convoluted, even virtuosic—revealed a rare quality of mind and a joy and a facility in language that was almost literally staggering but, because of its very complexity, tended at times to be opaque. In [*The Pagan Rabbi, and Other Stories*] . . . all that was best in the novel—that relentless, passionate, discovering and uncovering intelligence—is present and instantly recognizable, but there is now a difference in the prose. It is sharpened, clarified, controlled and above all beautifully, unceasingly welcoming. . . . Cynthia Ozick is a kind of narrative hypnotist. Her range is extraordinary; there is seemingly nothing she cannot do. Her stories contain passages of intense lyricism and brilliant, hilarious, uncontrollable inventiveness—jokes, lists, letters, poems, parodies, satires.

Johanna Kaplan. *New York Times Book Section*. June 13, 1971. p. 7

Cynthia Ozick is a writer with a lot on her mind. Being American she worries about it and claims at one point that she is as ignorant as a writer must be and reads nothing but sensational newspaper accounts. Being Jewish and intellectual she doesn't push that pose very far and actually gives us [in *Bloodshed, and Three Novellas*] a thoughtful preface along with four substantial stories that contain or point at serious ideas without precisely succumbing to viewiness. What does she think about? About the conflict of cultures taking place in the minds and hearts of young Jews living just a generation past the time of the Holocaust; problems of conduct and belief for those who may want access to Jewish tradition yet who cannot accept the cultic aspect of the religion. . . .

Ozick's thoughts remain interesting even when the reader finds flaws in their logical process or finds them suffused with a sort of parochialism. . . .

All these stories have puzzling endings. That's because Ozick's imagination is adventurous, with a feeling for life as mystery and riddle. When she uses complex forms, as in ''Usurpation,'' it's not for show but because the relationships to be defined between tradition and the individual talent are themselves complicated and morally perplexing. Her prose is often richly colored and nuanced, owing something to Woolf and Lawrence, and she also has an acute ear for the way the varieties of American character betray themselves in the many variations of American vernacular speech, including such ''foreign'' American vernaculars as that of the worker-rabbi in ''Bloodshed'' and the Bulgarian-American doctor in ''An Education.'' Wherever American writing is going now, Cynthia Ozick is a distinctive and bright part of that movement into the future.

Julian Moynahan. *New York Times Book Section*. April 11, 1976. p. 8

Cynthia Ozick could have been a scholar; a generation younger and she might have been a rabbi. What she has become, luckily for us, is a unique and challenging writer whose intellect is vivified by all the lively juices of a storyteller and a reveller in language. Most of Ozick's work is fraught with the tension between rationalist and holy thinker on the one hand, and talemaker, invoker of magic and miracle on the other. . . . So the action of fiction and the action of magic are identical for her—both proceed by a confounding of instances, a perception of the hidden symmetry in creation's parts. . . .

Ozick has no trouble finding ideas for her stories, it's her inventive powers that are less reliable, the inhibition against tale-telling has taken its toll. What she sometimes lacks is the insane, trusting, necessary willingness of the truly relaxed natural tale-teller to let her characters walk off just out of hearing of her commands and live lives that might surprise her, almost as though she were one of her own readers. Her desires for these stories and her overwhelming delight in conundra, at times overwhelm and inhibit them; then they move like Talmudic argument, not like stories on their way to a destination.

Rosellen Brown. *New Republic*. June 5, 1976. p. 30

Self-consciousness about writing fiction can lead to overindulgent prose and the substitution of egoism for ideas. Cynthia Ozick is the most self-conscious writer I know of. Yet she steadfastly shuns overindulgence of any sort, and instead does what too few contemporary fiction writers do on a regular basis—think. Ozick is obsessed with the words she puts on paper, with what it means to imagine a story and to tell it, with what fiction is. The result is a body of work at once as rich as Grace Paley's stories, as deeply rooted in Jewish folklore as Isaac Bashevis Singer's tales, as comically ironic as Franz Kafka's nightmares. . . .

A perfectionist, she has written just one novel, *Trust*, and three collections of short works: *The Pagan Rabbi, and Other Stories, Bloodshed, and Three Novellas*, and now *Levitation: Five Fictions*. Yet she is one of the best. Because she deals with ideas—many of them steeped in Jewish law and history—her stories are ''difficult.'' But by difficult I mean only that they are not in the least bit

fluffy. No word, emotion, or idea is wasted. They are weighty, consequential tales, lightened and at the same time heightened by their visionary aspects.

Ozick writes magically about magical events. But she distrusts sorcery, the stock in trade of fiction writing. This irony gives her work a thought-provoking dialectical quality. Her stories are elusive, mysterious, and disturbing. They shimmer with intelligence, they glory in language, and they puzzle.

In ''Puttermesser: Her Work History, Her Ancestry, Her Afterlife'' [in *Levitation*], we first meet Ruth Puttermesser—34, an unmarried lawyer, something of a feminist—while she is living in her family's apartment in the Bronx. . . .

''Puttermesser and Xanthippe,'' the longest of the five fictions, is an almost perfect novella. Ozick's character, Puttermesser, now 46, is still single. She is still working for the city government. . . . When the mayor ousts her boss, political appointees take over. And ''in their presence the work instantly held its breath and came to a halt as if it were a horse reined in for examination.'' Patronage is in; Puttermesser is out; the city is falling apart.

Puttermesser, pushed beyond fantasy, creates a golem—an artificial creature of cabalist lore—out of the earth in her potted plants. When Puttermesser is fired, the golem, who insists on being called Xanthippe after Socrates's shrewish wife, gets her elected mayor of New York.

Under Puttermesser's rule, the city is transformed: Gangs of youths invade the subway yards and wash the cars; lost wallets are returned; muggers form dancing troupes, traffic grids unlock; out-of-work corrections officers take gardening jobs; litter vanishes; New York extends interest-free loans to the federal government. . . .

Like Ozick, Puttermesser is an intelligent rationalist. Puttermesser makes a golem; Ozick makes up stories. Ozick equates the magic in her stories with the magical process of writing fiction. So writing about rooms levitating and golems becomes writing about writing, about making magic. For Ozick, fiction *is* magic.

Robert R. Harris. *Saturday Review*. Feb., 1982, pp. 58–59

To put the matter bluntly, future Jewish-American writers—to say nothing of readers, Jewish and non-Jewish alike—will ignore [Cynthia] Ozick at their peril. She has changed radically the expectations that we bring to ''stories.'' But that much said, if there is any certainty about Ozick, it is the certainty of exploration, of development, in a word, of *change*. Hers is a restless mind, and an equally restless imagination. That she has been one of the dominant voices in Jewish-American letters for the last fifteen years will assure her an important place in the literary histories of post–World War II literature. At the same time, however, no one would want to ''write Ozick down'' at this stage of her career; she has many books, and many essays, ahead of her.

My hunch is that, as her novellas grow ever longer and more ambitious, she may yet write the important, thick novel that eluded her when she was young. And I am also convinced that, whatever shape this as-yet-unwritten novel will take, it will *not* be a sustained exercise in Jamesian imitation. Rather, it will have Ozick's thumbprint on each delicious page. In short, I can think of no contemporary American fictionist who is better positioned to write the sort of novel that American literature used to produce with great regularity—namely, one in which ''style'' is commensurate with significant issues. I am hardly alone either in my confidence about Ozick's ability or in my anticipation about what she will produce next.

Sanford Pinsker. *The Uncompromising Fictions of Cynthia Ozick* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Pr., 1987), pp. 114–15

INTERVIEWER: How does your Jewishness fit in here? Don't we have to speak about that?

OZICK: To be Jewish is to be a member of a civilization—a civilization with a long, long history, a history that is, in one way of viewing it, a procession of ideas. Jewish history is intellectual history. And all this can become the content of a writer's mind; but it isn't equal to a writer's mind. To be a writer is one thing; to be a Jew is another thing. To combine them is a third thing.

INTERVIEWER: In those writer's classes where one is always told, ''Write about what you know.''

OZICK: Ah! When I've taught those classes, I always say, ''Forget about 'Write about what you know.' Write about what you don't know.'' The point is that the self is limiting. The self—subjectivity—is narrow and bound to be repetitive. We are, after all, a species. When you write about what you don't know, this means you begin to think about the world at large. You begin to think beyond the home-thoughts. You enter dream and imagination.

INTERVIEWER: Where is the vanishing point? What do you mean by these limits of subjectivity? The limits of our gray cells?

OZICK: Our gray cells aren't our limitations. It's our will to enter the world: by the world I mean history, including the history of thought, which is the history of human experience. This isn't an intellectual viewpoint. In fact, it asks for the widening of the senses and of all experience.

INTERVIEWER: But how far do you intend to go?

OZICK: As far as I can. As far as is necessary.

George Plimpton. *Writers at Work: ''The Paris Review'' Interviews* (New York: Penguin, 1988), pp. 209–10

Ozick . . . does not become overwhelmed with the same perplexity at the world's absurdity and malevolence which troubled Melville's Ishmael, who observed: ''There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody's expense but his own'' (*Moby-Dick*). With the exception of Ozick's treatment of the Holocaust in her fiction, she seldom regards life as a cruel joke played upon the undeserving individual by an uncaring deity in a hostile universe. Similarly, she does not adopt the practice of recent ''Gnostics and aestheticians'' who, she claims, cram their fiction with ''grotesqueries of despair that pass for jokes'' (Ozick, ''Toward a New Yiddish'' 175). Like Saul Bellow, she has scant use for such peddlers of doom, such ''pipsqueaks'' ranting ''about Inauthenticity and Forlornness'' (Bellow, *Herzog* 75). Through with and wily argument she upsets their rotten pushcarts and runs them out of business.

This does not mean, however, that Ozick, in her literature, is a Jewish Pollyanna, persistently optimistic, dwelling on only the smiling aspects of life. If she is cheerful, it is in the tongue-in-cheek way Sholom Aleichem's Tevye uses the word when he says, ''Let's talk about something more cheerful. What's new with the cholera in Odessa?'' (''Hodl,'' 69). Similarly, in her fiction,

physical and mental disease are rampant and, for the most part, incurable. But because she recounts them with a mock cheerfulness, we are not to assume they are but whimsical expressions of her exaggerated imagination of disaster. For to deny they exist in their contagious, lethal strength is to undermine the complexity of Ozick's comic vision. While there are ample grounds for pessimism in Ozick's fiction—failed ambition, corrosive envy, emotional bankruptcy. Impoverishment of soul, Jewish self-hatred, futile idolatries. Holocaust atrocities—she does not capitulate to hopelessness. She still retaliates with a Jewish branch of humor ''in which laughter and trembling are so curiously mingled that it is not easy to determine the relations of the two'' (Bellow, Introduction, *Great Jewish Short Stories*, 12). Her laughter, however, is not like that of Milan Kundera's ''laughter and forgetting,'' of which Philip Roth said, ''The devil laughs because God's world seems senseless to him; the angel laughs with joy because everything in God's world has meaning'' (Afterword, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*). Ozick's laughter is, however, one of remembering, not forgetting. Its recollection of the wry and the woeful, the antic and the anguished in the personal and collective Jewish past does not allow her to be a devil or an angel. Rather, she allies herself with Nietzsche's definition of the human as the ''most acutely suffering animal on earth [who] created laughter'' (Epigraph, Cohen, *Comic Relief*).

> Sarah Blacher Cohen. *Cynthia Ozick's Comic Art: From Levity to Liturgy* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Pr., 1994), pp. 3–4

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MODERN AMERICAN LITERATURE

MODERN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Volume III • P–Z
Fifth Edition

ST. JAMES PRESS
AN IMPRINT OF GALE

DETROIT • LONDON

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27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331

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Modern American Literature.—5th ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Contents: v. 1. A-G — v. 2. H-O — v. 3. P-Z
ISBN 1-55862-379-5 (set). — ISBN 1-55862-380-9 (v. 1). —
ISBN 1-55862-381-7 (v. 2). — ISBN 1-55862-382-5 (v. 3).
1. American literature—20th century—History and criticism.
PS221.M53 1998
810.9′005—dc21 98-38952
CIP

Printed in the United States of America

St. James Press is an imprint of Gale

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

FOREWORD TO THE FIFTH EDITION

This new edition of *Modern American Literature* represents a significant advancement in the series. These volumes collate all entries from the original three volumes of the fourth edition, published in 1960, with entries from the three supplements published in 1976, 1985, and 1997, so that all excerpts on a given author now appear in one place. Seventy new entries have been added, bringing the total number of authors discussed to 489, and bibliographies for all authors have been updated. In addition, the format has been simplified. Citations for journal articles now include the full source title, eliminating the need for the abbreviation key used in previous editions, and bibliographies now immediately follow author entries, rather than appearing in a separate section at the back of the book.

The compilers of this edition have built upon the notable efforts of previous editors, each of whom made significant contributions and additions. As in the past, entrants in the series, as well as the sources chosen for excerpting, have been carefully selected to provide broad and instructive overviews of the most significant authors of the modern period in American literature. New authors for this edition have been selected not only on the basis of their prominence but also on their presence in the contemporary curriculum. The richly diverse nature of American letters is reflected in the wide variety of genres represented, from the humorous contemporary tales of Andrei Codrescu to the contemplative nature essays of Annie Dillard to the literary and philosophical speculations of George Steiner. In addition, a concerted effort was made to broaden the cultural scope of the series by presenting discussion of the works of black, Hispanic, and Native American authors, including a number from earlier in this century whose works have until recently been undervalued or ignored, figures such as William Stanley Braithwaite, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, and Alain Locke. As in previous editions, every effort has been made to cull from brief reviews as well as lengthy critical evaluations, and from a wide variety of critical perspectives, showing wherever possible the evolution of an author's reputation and stature.

The function of this work continues to be the illumination of the works of American authors through the presentation of significant analyses. With its greater focus on multicultural authors and its streamlined format, this new edition will be even more useful to students and other researchers seeking critical perspectives on the most significant American writers of the twentieth century.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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GENRE ABBREVIATIONS

Below are the abbreviations and terms used to indicate genres in author bibliographies. Bibliographies include all major works and collections, but are not intended to be exhaustive.

a	autobiography
	adaptation
anthol	anthology
art c	art criticism
b	biography
c	criticism
coll	collection
d	drama/play
e	essay
ed	editor, edition
h	history
	interview
j	journalism
juv	juvenile, children's literature
l	letters
	lecture(s)
m	memoir
misc	miscellany
n	novel, novella
nf	nonfiction
	opera libretto
p	poetry
	pamphlet
	photographs
pd	poetic drama, verse play
r	reminiscence
rd	radio drama
s	story, stories
scrp	screenplay
sk	sketches
t	travel writing
tr	translation
tv	television play, television drama

P

PALEY, Grace (1922–)

At the level of both semantics and narrative structure, [Grace] Paley writes a subversive text, a text that exists in dialogue with the monologic impulses of dominant literature. She is an artist dedicated to making language speak the untold stories of women, even when that means flouting the semantic and narrative conventions that construct women's silence. Paley's standard for an open and polyvocal text is a demanding one, so demanding that she herself fails to fully satisfy it. That very failure becomes a profound critique of the capacity of literary discourse to mute the voice of the other. Even the most well-intentioned listener, Paley reminds us, is prone to suppress voices of difference. Only the most demanding politics of inclusion, one unafraid to turn the critique of monologism on the self, can begin to create the sort of open discourse that will allow everyone to find a voice. Even then, Paley would not be satisfied, for she recognizes that a truly polyvocal literature depends not only on texts that open up to many voices but on many voices creating the tales.

Jacqueline Taylor. *Grace Paley: Illuminating the Dark Lives* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Pr., 1990), p. 128–29

To have all of Grace Paley's stories in one collection seems like an illicit indulgence, like standing for a long time in a hot shower during a drought. For there is drought: there is no voice like hers in the world.

The Collected Stories gathers together her three books, *The Little Disturbances of Man* [1959], *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* [1974], and *Later the Same Day* [1985]. Though all are still in print, reading them together allows us to see Paley's progression as a writer, as well as the continuities between the books. The boundaries of the previous books are in some ways artificial; some stories, widely separated in time, are clearly related, like cousins from two generations who share the same nose. . . .

Paley's simplest stories are the most striking. Her strategy is to tell one story and then, inside it, another—and sometimes another and another—so that the meaning of the piece is not in the trajectory of any one story but in the collision of all of them. . . . In place of a single narrative, what she offers us is voice, mostly hers or [her character] Faith's, sometimes those of neighborhood people. Those voices—inflected, densely ironic, observant, funny—are the real heart of each of [her] stories. . . . Not only the dialogue, but also the narration itself cries out to be spoken, if only for the sake of hearing Paley's own wry, resonant, reflective tones—which is why a collection of Paley's stories is almost, but never enough.

Roz Spafford. ''San Francisco Chronicle.'' *San Francisco Review*. April 3, 1994, pp. 3, 7

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PARKER, Dorothy (1893–1967)

Dorothy Parker runs her little show as if it were a circus; she cracks her whip and the big elephant joke pounds his four legs in glee and the pink ladies of fantastic behavior begin to float in the air like lozenges. . . . Mrs. Parker has begun in the thoroughly familiar Millay manner and worked into something quite her own. . . . Miss Millay remains lyrically, of course, far superior to Mrs. Parker. . . . But there are moods when Dorothy Parker is more acceptable, whiskey straight, not champagne.

Genevieve Taggard. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. March 27, 1927. p. 7

Here is poetry that is ''smart'' in the fashion designer's sense of the word. Mrs. Parker need not hide her head in shame, as the average poet must, when she admits the authorship of this book. For in its lightness, its cynicism, its pose, she has done the right thing; she is in a class with the Prince of Wales, the Theatre Guild, Gramercy Park, and H. L. Mencken. And these somewhat facetious remarks are not intended as disparagement. It is high time that a poet with a monocle looked at the populace, instead of the populace looking at the poet through a lorgnette.

Marie Luhrs. *Poetry*. April, 1927. p. 52

In verse of a Horatian lightness, with an exquisite certainty of technique, which, like the lustre on a Persian bowl, is proof that civilization is itself a philosophy, Dorothy Parker is writing poetry deserving high praise. . . . I suspect that one should quote Latin rather than English to parallel the edged fineness of Dorothy Parker's verse. This belle dame sans merci has the ruthlessness of the great tragic lyricists whose work was allegorized in the fable of the nightingale singing with her breast against a thorn. It is disillusion recollected in tranquillity where the imagination has at last controlled the emotions. It comes out clear, and with the authentic sparkle of a great vintage.

Henry Seidel Canby. *Saturday Review*. June 13, 1931. p. 891

More certain than either death or taxes is the high and shining art of Dorothy Parker. . . . Bitterness, humor, wit, yearning for beauty and love, and a foreknowledge of their futility—with rue her heart is laden, but her lads are gold-plated—these, you might say, are the elements of the Parkerian formula; these, and the divine talent to

find the right word and reject the wrong one. The result is a simplicity that almost startles.

Frankin P. Adams. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. June 14, 1931. p. 7

To say that Mrs. Parker writes well is as fatuous, I'm afraid, as proclaiming that Cellini was clever with his hands. But it's fun to see the lamented English language rise from the Parisian boneyard and race out front with the right jockey in the saddle, and I cannot help attempting to communicate to others my pleasure in the performance. . . . The trick about her writing is the trick about Ring Lardner's writing or Ernest Hemingway's writing. It isn't a trick.

Ogden Nash. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 4, 1933. p. 231

Drunk or sober, angry or affectionate, stupid or inspired, these people of Mrs. Parker's speak with an accent we immediately recognize and relish. Mrs. Parker has listened to her contemporaries with as sharp a pair of ears as anyone has had in the present century, unless, to be sure, Lardner is to be considered, as he probably is, without a rival in this field. Mrs. Parker is more limited than Lardner; she is expert only with sophisticates. . . . But she does her lesser job quite perfectly, achieving as she does it a tone halfway between sympathy and satire. . . . Again it is only Ring Lardner who can be compared with her in the matter of hatred for stupidity, cruelty, and weakness.

Mark Van Doren. *English Journal*. Sept., 1934. pp. 541–2

One comes back to Mrs. Parker's light verse with the greatest pleasure; with its sharp wit, its clean bite, its perfectly conscious—and hence delightful—archness, it stands re-reading amply. Here her high technical polish has great virtue. . . . But what, of course, is more important is the sense of personality that converts what might otherwise be merely a witty idea into a dramatic, however cockeyed, situation; a sense of personality that gives us not cynicism in the abstract but laughter applied to an objective. There is no one else in Mrs. Parker's special field who can do half as much.

Louis Kronenberger. *New York Times Book Section*. Dec. 13, 1936. p. 28

Men have liked her poems because of the half-bitter, half-wistful tribute to their indispensability and their irresistible, fatal charms. A different kind of lover, the lover of light verse, has admired her extraordinary technical competence and the way in which her verse constantly veers over into the domain of genuinely lyric poetry. The wits of the town have been delighted to see a Sappho who could combine a heart-break with a wisecrack.

Irwin Edman. *The Nation*. Dec. 19, 1936. p. 737

The urbanity of these stories is that of a worldly, witty person with a place in a complex and highly-developed society, their ruthlessness that of an expert critical intelligence, about which there is something clinical, something of the probing adroitness of a dentist: the fine-pointed instrument unerringly discovers the carious cavity behind the smile. . . . Mrs. Parker may appear amused, but it is plain that she is really horrified. Her bantering revelations are inspired by a respect for decency, and her pity and sympathy are ready when needed.

William Plomer. *Spectator*. Nov. 17, 1939. p. 708

Mrs. Parker's published work does not bulk large. But most of it has been pure gold and the five winnowed volumes of her shelf—three of poetry, two of prose—are so potent a distillation of nectar and wormwood, of ambrosia and deadly nightshade, as might suggest to the rest of us that we all write far too much. Even though I am one who does not profess to be privy to the intentions of posterity, I do suspect that another generation will not share the confusion into which Mrs. Parker's poetry throws so many of her contemporaries, who, seeing that much of it is witty, dismiss it patronizingly as ''light'' verse, and do not see that some of it is thrilling poetry of a piercing and rueful beauty.

Alexander Woollcott. *The Portable Woollcott* (Viking). 1946.pp. 181–2

. . .in her own stories her acidity bit most often into the gilt and brass of a certain type of American personality, the self-absorbed female snob. This happened to be a type she knew best in its middle-class manifestations. . . . Miss Parker invites comparison with [Ring] Lardner in her focus on the female companion of Lardner's idle middle-class man, also in her frequent use of the diary form, the monologue, and trivial dialogue. Sometimes her idle, middle-class females are smug and aggressive; sometimes they are pathetic like Lardner's ''victims''; sometimes both. Occasionally they are more amusing than anything else.

Norris W. Yates, *The American Humorist* (Iowa State). 1964. p. 266

In print and in person, Miss Parker sparkled with a word or a phrase, for she honed her humor to its most economical size. Her rapier wit, much of it spontaneous, gained its early renown from her membership in the Algonquin Round Table, an informal luncheon club at the Algonquin Hotel in the nineteen-twenties, where some of the city's most sedulous framers of bon mots gathered. . . .

Her lifelong reputation as a glittering, annihilating humorist in poetry, essays, short stories and in conversation was complied and sustained brickbat by brickbat. One of her quips could make a fool a celebrity, and vice versa. She was, however, at bottom a disillusioned romantic, all the fiercer because the world spun against her sentimental nature. She truly loved flowers, dogs and a good cry; and it was this fundamental sadness and shyness that gave her humor its extraordinary bite and intensity.

Alden Whitman. *New York Times (daily)*. June 8, 1967. pp. 1, 38

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PARRINGTON, V.L. (1871–1929)

Now it appears that Mr. Parrington is about to start an unheaval in American literary criticism. He has yanked Miss Beautiful Letters out of the sphere of the higher verbal hokum and fairly set her in the way that leads to contact with pulsating reality—that source and inspiration of all magnificent literature. No doubt, the magpies, busy with the accedence of Horace, the classical allusions of Thoreau, and the use of the adverb by Emerson, will make a big outcry, but plain citizens who believe that the American eagle could soar with unblinking eyes against the full-orbed noonday sun if he had half a chance will clap their hands with joy and make the hills ring with gladness. . . . Our author has traced American political, economic, and social development in broad strokes and has sought to relate letters and opinion to the forces ''anterior to literary schools and movements,'' revealing the substance from which literary culture springs. In carrying out his project he has written a truly significant book; according to signs on every hand, a work that promises to be epochmaking, sending exhilarating gusts through the deadly miasma of academic criticism.

Charles A. Beard. *The Nation*. May 18, 1927. pp. 560–2

Within its limits the book [*Main Currents*] has real merits. It makes clear how much American literature can reveal to the open-minded historian; it gives deserved attention to some writers little remembered today, particularly some nineteenth-century Southerners; and it is especially useful in its contributions to an understanding of certain aspects of ''the colonial mind.'' There should be hearty agreement with Professor Parrington's protest against the narrowness implicit in the purely aesthetic point of view from which most of our colonial literature is seen as uninteresting. Many of his biographical and critical sketches of the writers by whom he charts intellectual currents are admirable; and in some of them the application of new tests to supposedly familiar figures brings real revelation.

Kenneth B. Murdock. *The Yale Review*. Jan., 1928. p. 382

In his *The Colonial Mind* [*Main Currents*, Vol. 1], Professor Vernon Louis Parrington discusses the Puritans and Pilgrims of early Massachusetts from a rather unusual point of view. . . . Briefly, Professor Parrington's contention seems to be this: that, among the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay colony, Calvinist theology and political aristocracy went hand in hand, whereas, among the Pilgrims of Plymouth Plantation, Lutheran theology and political democracy were equally inseparable.

This attitude, especially since it is accompanied by the acceptance of the theory that the Puritan aristocrats finally acceded to Separatist democratic ideals, places an uncommon emphasis upon Lutheranism as a force in the development of colonial Massachusetts. To explain this interpretation, Professor Parrington makes a brief survey of European religious and political movements relevant to Puritanism and Separatism; and, since the value of such a treatment depends upon its validity as history, it seems natural to expect definite references to the investigations of recognized authorities. It may be assumed that Professor Parrington's reading on the subject has been comprehensive, but the works listed in his bibliography do not seem to bear out the theory that the Pilgrims were Lutheran democrats whose influence prevented the Puritans from imprinting upon America a lasting Calvinistic aristocracy.

Esther E. Burch. *American Literature*. May, 1929. p. 115–6

Precisely because the book [*Main Currents*] reveals Parrington as such a vital personality, delicate in perception and felicitous in expression as well as robust of faith in the better possibilities of human life, there is real danger in a conception of literature so hazy as to allow the utilitarian to crowd out the artistic or to let that which is useful merely as a means suppress that which is delightful in itself as the heart's desire. Public issues are of undoubted importance, but serious students must not forget that great literature is concerned also with those vital realities of our inner personal life and those enrapturing super-personal cosmic vistas compared with which the issues of public life are pale and relatively inconsequential.

Professor Parrington's politico-economic progressiveness not only befogs his conception of literature but also prevents him from fully realizing what is involved in any attempt to write of the main currents of thought of any period. For one thing, he did not sufficiently inform himself to do justice to the history of American thought in religion, science, art, education, or even law.

Morris Raphael Cohen. *New Republic*. Jan. 28, 1931. p. 303

It is characteristic, to cite but one example, that in a book dealing with ''critical realism'' in American literature the author should practically ignore literary ideals and critical theory, that Henry George—who ''did more than any other man to spread through America a knowledge of the law of economic determinism''—is given six times as much space as Henry James. The latter is given a scant two pages out of over four hundred, and is rather bitterly derided by the defender of *Jurgen* and *Beyond Life* as representing ''The Nostalgia of Culture.'' The central question which students of literature will have to face is this: have not many contemporary literary scholars, of whom Mr. Parrington is the most gifted spokesman, tended to confuse social history and literature? Everywhere, as a disciple of Taine, Mr. Parrington considers books on the basis of whether or not they represent the ''honest voice'' of their generation in dealing with local and ephemeral topics such as, for example, the Greenback issue.

Harry Hayden Clark. *Bookman*. Feb., 1931. p. 654

A kind of environmental or sociological interpretation of literary movements had already been gaining favor. He sharpened it, gave it point, by making it definitely economic, because of his desire to reveal the motivating interests and real direction of specific works

of literature. Thus his method was part of his general intention. It is inconceivable that he would have investigated with such firmness the social ties of individual writers or been so eager to expose the sectional and class issues underlying the ideological tendency which each writer represented, if his sympathies had not been lower-class. Nowadays ''class-angling'' is not a sport of kings.

Radical—not just liberal or progressive—is the word. He had none of that amiable tolerance which comes of cynicism, nor was he the kind of optimist whose buoyancy is based upon an Olympian idealism. He was partisan from the start—passionately so.

> Bernard Smith in *Books That Changed Our Minds*, edited by Malcolm Cowley and Bernard Smith (Kelmscott). 1939. p. 186

Parrington, then, deals with literature only in so far as literature is a matter of fragmentary ideas clearly visible to the innocent eye; furthermore, he deals only with a limited range of ideas, and relegates the rest to the region of illusion. Had Parrington written, as he seems to imply that he meant to write, a history of Jeffersonian liberalism, and neglected all matter irrelevant to his subject, he might have been more or less successful. But he unquestionably did not do so: he wrote what purports to be a history of American literature, but treated wholly in terms of what he conceives to be the development of Jeffersonian liberalism.

The result could easily have been forecast. His frame-work of ideas has no serious relationship to most of the great writers, and, since he thus has no way of understanding them, his treatment of them is almost purely impressionistic.

> Yvor Winters. *In Defense of Reason* (Swallow). 1947. p. 560. [1943]

The work [*Main Currents*] did not appear until 1927 and became a powerful influence only in the nineteen-thirties. But it represents the most ambitious single effort of the Progressive mind to understand itself, and can be understood only in reference to the idealism, prejudices, and characteristic sentimentality of that mind—all of which Parrington sought almost unwittingly, in the drive of his great idea, to impose upon intellectual history in America. For though Parrington often seemed to go beyond the diverse rebellions of the period, he was astonishingly loyal to them all, and often simultaneously. It was the grass-roots radical, the Populist, the Jeffersonian liberal, even the quasi-Marxist in him, that combined to make him, so outstanding a Progressive intellectual. His culture seems to have been wider than that of the others, his education less pedestrian; but these did not show in the indifference to literary values which his book displayed.

> Alfred Kazin. *On Native Grounds* (Reynal). 1942. p. 155

Vernon L. Parrington, one of our few serious cultural historians, furnishes an interesting contrast in method to Constance Rourke on [*Davy*] Crockett. While she is chiefly interested in the charm of the legends themselves and anxious to deny any evidence she thinks might detract from them, his effort is to place the Crockett legends in terms of political genesis and function. In a withering analysis in *Main Currents of American Thought* he strips the legendary hero down to the real Crockett: a rather pathetic figure, ignorant, boastful, and ambitious; built up as an American symbol by skilled Whig publicists who wanted a coonskin hero to oppose to Jackson; used by the Whigs as long as he was usable; and then when his backwoods constituents repudiated his voting record of uninterrupted support for Eastern banking interests, tossed aside by his Whig friends. Parrington shows how the legend was built step by step, conjectures shrewdly as to who ghosted each of the books, shows the constant anti-Jackson propaganda smuggled into their comedy, and at the end shows Crockett, like so many mythologized real heroes, coming to believe the legends himself.

> Stanley Edgar Hyman. *The Armed Vision* (Knopf). 1948. p. 139

In *Main Currents in American Thought* two tendencies are fused. The brilliant individual characterizations, enriched by affirmative or damaging quotations, the seeking out of a *qualité maîtresse* in a writer, as when Parrington says of Samuel Sewell: ''In his religious life he was the same prudent, plodding soul, that stowed away in his strongbox deeds to ample possessions during his pilgrimage''—these devices remind us that this historian is heir of a tradition stretching back through Moses Coit Tyler and Taine to Sainte-Beuve. But he is also a child of the eighteenth century, which was his spirit's home. His ideals are lucidity, order, a scrupulous and efficient prose. He builds as Gibbon or Voltaire built books—orderly paragraphs marching to schematized ideas. The table of contents to the unfinished third volume is a debater's outline, a lawyer's brief, and shows us how he worked, for his aim is not merely the right word in the right place but also the right author under the right subhead of an argument developed with mathematical rigor. Moreover, his theories of human nature likewise descend from the Enlightenment, or at least from utilitarianism. Because men are supposed to know and follow their best interests, the duty of the writer in America is to persuade and convince, to clarify, defend, and denounce, but not to charm, to astonish, to enrich the soul.

> Howard Mumford Jones. *The Theory of American Literature* (Cornell). 1948. pp. 142–3

Parrington did not regard his task as a judicial one or pretend to be objective, impartial, or aloof. He interpreted American intellectual history as a struggle between the forces of freedom and of privilege, and he deliberately took sides in that struggle.

Indeed this fastidious scholar, himself so aloof from controversy, so remote from the hurly-burly of public affairs, lived all his life in the midst of battle. His splendid pages pulse and glow with passion and excitement, resound with the clash of arms and echo with the rallying cries of chieftains. He was a veritable Creasy, and all the decisive battles of American history were fought out anew in his volumes: the struggle between theocracy and Independency, Old World tyranny and New World liberty, federalism and republicanism, slavery and freedom, frontier and seaboard, agrarianism and capitalism, labor and industry. All his heroes were warriors; those who somehow did not fit into the neat scheme were passed over or made to do service in a civilian capacity, as it were.

What emerged from all this was an identification of democracy with Americanism. The great tradition of American thought,

Parrington insisted, was the tradition of liberalism and revolt; and they were the most American who spoke with the accent of radicalism—the word he originally used instead of the weaker ''liberalism.''

Henry Steele Commager. *The American Mind* (Yale). 1950. pp. 300–1

It is possible to say of V.L. Parrington that with his *Main Currents in American Thought* he has had an influence on our conception of American culture which is not equaled by that of any other writer of the last two decades. His ideas are now the accepted ones wherever the college course in American literature is given by a teacher who conceives himself to be opposed to the genteel and the academic and in alliance with the vigorous and the actual. And whenever the liberal historian of America finds occasion to take account of the national literature, as nowadays he feels it proper to do, it is Parrington who is his standard and guide. Parrington's ideas are the more firmly established because they do not have to be imposed—the teacher or the critic who presents them is likely to find that his task is merely to make articulate for his audience what it has always believed, for Parrington formulated in a classic way the suppositions about our culture which are held by the American middle class so far as that class is at all liberal in its social thought and so far as it begins to understand that literature has anything to do with society. . . .

Yet he had after all but a limited sense of what constitutes a difficulty. Whenever he was confronted with a work of art that was complex, personal and not literal, that was not, as it were, a public document, Parrington was at a loss. . . . It does not occur to Parrington that there is any other relation possible between the artist and reality than this passage of reality through the transparent artist; he meets evidence of imagination and creativeness with a settled hostility the expression of which suggests that he regards them as the natural enemies of democracy.

Lionel Trilling. *The Liberal Imagination* (Viking). 1951. pp. 3–5

America's intellectual history, thought Parrington, fell into the three broad phases of Calvinistic pessimism, romantic optimism, and mechanistic pessimism.

Although much of his material on this last period had a deep gloom, Parrington never failed to strike the courageous note that was a tocsin to a drooping liberalism. No longer were the theologians, political philosophers, industrial masters, or bankers ''the spokesmen of this vibrant life of a continent, but the intellectuals, the dreamers, the critics, the historians, the men of letters, in short; and to them one may turn hopefully for a revelation of American life.'' To the end, Parrington held out Jeffersonian democracy as a hopeful ideal.

There was thrilling writing in these volumes [*Main Currents*] that called a wayward America back from the drab reality of a business civilization to the day-dream of an agrarian democracy. Parrington never escaped the influence of that arch foe of industrialism, William Morris.

M. Kraus. *The Writing of American History* (Oklahoma). 1953. pp. 354

A product of the Progressive era, he shared to a large extent the indictment of the great American fortunes held by Gustavus Myers and the arraignment of business and politics offered by the muckraker. His strictures on capitalism were not, as is obvious, those of the socialists, but of an obsolete agrarianism. Greatly outweighing his faulty economics were his flashes of insight into American writers and political leaders. He was ever alert to the impact of European upon American culture, and he brought to light in all his volumes many a neglected poet, novelist, essayist, critic, and seminal thinker, whose contribution to belles-lettres was small but who offered great insights into the American mind.

H. Wish. *The American Historian* (Oxford). 1960. p. 303

In 1927 appeared the single most important book written by a historian of the frontier tradition, Vernon Louis Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought*. . . . the greatness of the book as a concluding testament to a dying tradition rests on the manner in which it clarifies the roots of this tradition in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and ultimately in seventeenth-century Puritanism. Parrington's book is truly a summary of the main currents of American thought and the fatal impasse these currents had reached by the 1920's. . . . And this is the fundamental significance of Parrington: his was a voice crying out to his people to return to the ways of their ancestors, to reform, to purify themselves before it was too late. *Main Currents* must be seen as a great expression of that peculiar Puritan theological literary form, the Jeremiad. As the Puritan preachers had warned their people at the end of the seventeenth century that they were straying from their special relationship to God as a chosen people and must face disaster if they did not turn back from corruption to live by the national covenant, so Parrington, in the 1920's, warned his people that they must experience the terrors of history unless they too returned to the national covenant expressed by Thomas Jefferson—a covenant which promised the faithful that they might live in harmony as long as they followed nature's principles. But his was a despairing voice from the wilderness because Parrington was not able to offer any hope that the covenant could be fulfilled in urban-industrial America.

D.W. Noble. *Historians Against History* (Minnesota). 1965. pp. 98–9

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PATCHEN, Kenneth (1911–)

At their worst his poems are like the dream compositions of a leftist editorial writer, repeating class sentiments with a strange syntactical or structural distortion. . . . Patchen's word-pour may be praised as creative vitality or condemned as artistic debauchery, but in either case it is more wearisome than interesting.

Robert Fitzgerald. *Poetry*. Sept. 1936. p. 342

Mr. Patchen has the high scorn of a certain type of young man, and the determination to use certain words that poetry has eschewed. This does not make his poetry any better. Neither does certain snarling and scrambled invective. But you have to give the man his head, because he can write desperately and movingly at times, and his era is responsible for him. Mr. Patchen is trying to talk as the tough-minded talk in the street and at the same time write poetry. It is not an easy assignment.

William Rose Benét. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 25, 1939. p. 16

Beyond any book of poems I have encountered *First Will and Testament* gives a lively sense of what it is to be a young man in America in a time when, for more of the young than we like to think, living and dying have lost all meaning. Kenneth Patchen is sure of his vocation as a poet, somewhat less sure of his craft. But he is able and eloquent, witty and strong. And what he is trying to do in this book is through poetry to recover meaning. . . . His poetic speech is contemporary and close to the streets; but he has held to nothing he has heard in the streets unless it has its own vigor to recommend it.

John Peale Bishop. *The Nation*. Dec. 2, 1939. p. 620

Whatever the idealogy of the earlier poems was, the poems themselves had a hard beauty, an imaginative frenzy abstracted out of reality, a moving sad terror. And there was a quality of bewilderment that got into the poems. In his new book (*The Dark Kingdom*) all of those qualities seem to be there, but they are there only as masquerades, larger, vaster in scope, but with less weight. . . . I believe Patchen to be one of the finest talents in America today. He has depth, imagination, and resourcefulness. He is ''endowed'' lyrically, but he appears a little contemptuous of it.

Harvey Breit. *Poetry*. June, 1942. pp. 160, 162

Here (in *The Dark Kingdom*) is proof, if proof is needed, that Mr. Patchen is a poet. But he is also a seer, and there seems to be some danger that the seer will eat up the poet. It is possible that the seer has already taken a chunk out of the poet. What is left is, however, interesting enough. . . . There is a wealth of exciting images and sharp phrases, sometimes splendid, sometimes horrible, always violent and apocalyptic. . . . He affirms his world too vehemently, too wholeheartedly. The seer cannot wait on the slow process of poetic exploration. And this means that though there is poetry in the book there are few poems with a recognizable structure.

Robert Penn Warren. *The Nation*. July 4, 1942. p. 17

Mr. Patchen has and habitually uses the naive vision of life. . . . But to have the naive vision and nothing else is to be a child. . . . It must be granted that Mr. Patchen knows this; the signs of his departure from the childlike approach are manifold, and include the elaborate and evasive technique of the drawing-and-type poem . . . along with other practices. . . . And these devices are to an extent successful, for they generate interesting and even brilliant effects to which the naivete then becomes contributory. Finally, however, I feel that the poems . . . do not ''satisfy''; and I trace this dissatisfaction to the poet's lack of a body of sharp and empirically genuine ideas—of perhaps a political and psychological nature.

E.S. Forgotson. *Poetry*. Feb., 1944. p. 280

A representative chunk of Patchen will contain references to immortality, God and death of the gods (à la Nietzsche), capitalism, anarchism, and pacificism, sex, murder, and blood-guilt, and any number of generally unacknowledged leanings toward and derivations from psychoanalysis. . . . The fact that the tradition in which Patchen writes depends to such a large extent on surrealistic maneuvers deprives it of a good deal of the power and wisdom it claims for itself. It has staked all on a sleight-of-hand, a trick of symbolism that actually throws out the deeper human context that it is supposed to provide for literature. Patchen's politics, for example, a kind of anarcho-pacificism, uncompromisingly opposed to capitalism and war, is the nearest thing to an escape from politics that can be contrived in political language.

Isaac Rosenfeld. *New Republic*. Dec. 3, 1945. pp. 773–4

Faced with the problems of our complex and chaotic world, Mr. Patchen, in regarding them, is not serene in the knowledge of invisible realities, nor does he project a better world of the imagination, neither has he a program of revolt; he goes to pieces. . . . There is but one remedy—to hide his face on the breast of his beloved. . . . While he may, as his admirers claim, possess a real spark of genius, his talent is inadequate, thus far, consistently to catch this spark and blow it to a flame.

Jean Starr Untermeyer. *Saturday Review*. March 22, 1947. pp. 15–6

There is no denying the compelling power of his poetry at its best . . . nor the tremendous vitality of the personality from whence it flows. Moreover the coupling of his name with Whitman is in a way inevitable, since the compulsion which drove Whitman to utter his ''barbaric yawp'' in nonmetrical verse is the same which urges Patchen to the audacities of his own free technique; and what transpires from the poetry of both is the sense of a ''fullness of being'' too ebullient to be confined to the sophisticated and severely disciplined modalism of regular versification.

But while Whitman in spite of his ''barbarism'' achieved a kind of Olympian dignity, there is about Patchen a faint aura of darkness which betrays him as a sort of minor chthonian deity, at the same time a little above and a little below the merely human.

Frajam Taylor. *Poetry*. Aug., 1947. pp. 270–1

Kenneth Patchen writes with much more violence (than William Carlos Williams), with a Celtic turbulence and humor, and passion for and against. . . . His descriptions are accurate, sharp with color, sounds, and tastes; and his anger can be cool and the passion turn to a love song of surprising delicacy. . . . There is much of death and graves in the poetry, the rollicking dead under beer cans, the dead of history and legend, all of them envious of those alive, however evil their lot may be.

Eugene Davidson. *The Yale Review*. Summer, 1949. p. 725

Much of Patchen's work is conceived in the limbo of nightmare, in a world where the humor is worse than the horror. Frenzy rules here; phantasmagoria triumphs in slapstick satire, casual killings, and sinister obscenity. But there is more to Patchen than his power to evoke ugliness, violence, and nonchalant treachery. . . . The tone is savage disillusionment, but not apathy; it is rebellious and ribald, indignant and desperate, but clean-cut even in its fury.

Louis Untermeyer. *Modern American Poetry* (Harcourt). 1950. p. 642

It is Patchen who extends the vision of (Henry) Miller and Céline to the farthest stretches of sanity and by the agility and poetry of his language brings their wail to full throat. Patchen, whose basic message, after all the variations, is no more than this:

WE BELIEVE IN YOU. THERE IS NO DANGER. IT IS NOT GETTING DARK. WE LOVE YOU.

He tells you again and again: ''I must tell you what I have said is not true. This is all a damn lie.'' But we still remember what we wanted to see, what we wanted to hear. We must milk dry the doubt he provides us with. It is all he leaves us to combat the terrors he has made rise in us. But one senses, in a stunned way, that it is a very valuable thing to have.

Hugh McGovern. *New Mexico Quarterly*. Summer, 1951. p. 195

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PERCY, Walker (1916–1990)

During the Thirties critics talked a lot about modern man's fragmented image. . . . This subject was illuminated in fiction in the middle of the Nineteenth Century by Dostoevsky in his remarkable expository novel: *Notes from Underground*—though few there were then who grasped his light. In a novel of remarkably similar form, the poet-novelist Albert Camus re-examined the theme in 1956: *The Fall*. And now it has been done, in the milieu of the postmodern barbarians, by Walker Percy in *The Moviegoer*—in like form and comparably sharp illumination.

The formal similarity of these three novels is marked and, I think, significant. Each presents a narrator-hero who reveals himself to be a villain—or, more exactly, a damned man seeking salvation. They report on humanism, however, at different points in its history. In *Notes from Underground* scientific humanism is first *exposed*. In *The Fall* it is recognized for what it is, but through pride that apes humility, still clung to. In the world of *The Moviegoer*, however, it has already been abandoned and our hero stumbles amid its shards and glimmering confusion toward a clear but distant candle.

Brainard Cheney. *Sewanee Review*. Autumn, 1961. p. 691

There are flaws in *The Moviegoer*, certainly. One character, Sam Yerger, a figure of superhuman wisdom who imitates Amos 'n' Andy, is preposterous from start to finish, and a mistake. Sometimes Jack's philosophy, as when he meditates on ''the genie-soul,'' is just blather. There are occasional pretentious attempts to make Jack's search seem not neurotic but deeply spiritual, along the lines of Percy's unfortunate statement on receiving the National Book Award that his novel shows Judaeo-Christian man as ''a wayfarer and a pilgrim.'' These are minor failings in a considerable success. I think that *The Moviegoer* is a better novel than the work it most readily brings to mind, Albert Camus' *The Stranger*. It is patronizing and ridiculous to say of a 46-year-old man who has been late publishing his excellent first novel that he shows ''promise.'' Walker Percy shows performance.

Stanley Edgar Hyman. *New Leader*. April 30, 1962. p. 24

He avoids [in *The Last Gentleman*] plain narrative as if it were poison ivy. Everything is prismatic, discrete, a matter of half-conveyed hints; the reader has to work so hard to sort out what is going on that after a while he begins to congratulate himself: This isn't just any old novel, but a novel written for very alert people. Important questions of motivation are consistently varnished with irony until they become too slick to take hold of. All the characters are lightly brushed with satire, including the central character himself, so that at any given moment it is quite impossible to tell whether Mr. Percy is entirely behind what he is telling us or slightly to one side of it—and if the latter, which side. And—it goes without saying, in this kind of novel—central plot episodes are presented in so glancing a fashion, because of the author's holy dread of straightforward narrative exposition, that the reader, glued to the page in the effort to decipher the story, cannot muster the energy to feel moved.

There is, of course, nothing accidental about this. Mr. Percy is a breathtakingly brilliant writer, and it is part of his brilliance that, having taken one's breath, he hands it back with a smile of ironic knowingness.

John Wain. *New York Review of Books*. July 28, 1966. p. 23

In all of Percy's novels the hero inherits what amounts to an orthodox Christian view of man and his relation to reality, but the

world inhabited by the hero is dominated by ideas that are powerfully twisted away from any orthodox view. In the first three novels the heroes finally achieve, despite the age they live in, a religious apprehension of their own stance in the world. In the fourth novel [*Lancelot*], however, the protagonist is maddened by what he sees as the ineffectuality of Christianity in a world he finds intolerable. Vowing to take matters into his own hands, Lancelot becomes a modern Gnostic. . . .

Two crucial aspects of Gnosticism are worth emphasizing here: (1) Man the creature is not responsible for the evil in which he finds himself. He has a right to blame it on someone or something else. The assumption that ''In Adam's fall/We sinned all'' is to the Gnostic pure nonsense. And (2) Man's salvation depends upon his own efforts. He must rely not upon faith but on gnosis, the secret knowledge that makes it possible for him to evade the snares and entanglements of the demon and to reunite his soul with the divinity from which he has come. . . .

A Gnostic impatience with human limitations can easily convert into a hubristic denial of one's own limitations and an amoral disregard for ethical systems demanding decency in the human community.

That seems to be what happens to Lancelot Andrewes Lamar, the character whom Walker Percy has presented as the complete twentieth-century Gnostic—a millennialist through and through—confident that he knows how to reform a corrupt world and willing to kill if he cannot cure. . . .

The ending of *Lancelot* is ambiguous, but I think that Percy juxtaposes the speaker and the auditor, the Gnostic and the Christian, in order to suggest that we are indeed in an either/or situation. *Either* we accept alienation as our necessary condition—acknowledging the world's evil condition and helping to ameliorate it, but never presuming to believe that we can eliminate it—and live in faith, *or* we will find our own theories inviting and condoning the Hitlers, the Idi Amins, and the Lancelots of the world.

Cleanth Brooks. *Southern Review*. Autumn, 1977, pp. 678, 680, 685–86

Despite repeated protestations that, *as a novelist*, he owes little to the South, Percy has not only located each of his novels in the region, but drawn poignantly of its ''atmosphere''; there are passages in *The Last Gentleman* that reveal the author firmly the realist, as anxious as Zola or Flaubert to capture a limited part of what some of us these days call ''the environment''. . . .

Anyone who has spent time in the Mississippi Delta knows how exact, how fine and right Percy's writing is. He will repeatedly tell a Yankee visitor that unlike Faulkner, Eudora Welty, or Flannery O'Connor, he has spent little time with the region's ''plain folk,'' black or white, and has followed the example of continental novelists, from Dostoevski to Sartre and Camus. Yet Percy loves the South, and if he doesn't give us the weird, bizarre, or overwhelmingly dreary people that many of the region's other novelists have made a point of putting before us, he at the very least evokes the atmosphere, the conditions of life which surround and define the lives of those who belong to a particular region. Not that he is a committed realist, either. Naturalistic observation gives way frequently to flashes of psychological subjectivity. Humorous, beguiling comedy, in no need of any heavy symbolic interpretation, and quite pleasing to the reader, gives way to densely abstract speculation, rendered through an obvious and not especially original literary device: the notebook left inadvertently but conveniently lying about. The notebook is Sutter's, and it is quite worthy of Marcel; and Heidegger, one believes, though he would not be capable of Sutter's earthy, blunt, Rabelaisian side, would certainly recognize the ideas of this wayward, distracted, near-suicidal doctor.

Robert Coles. *Walker Percy: An American Search* (Atlantic–Little Brown, 1978), pp. 181–82

Walker Percy belongs among a small group of writers in our time who have done something for modern American literature that many people thought would never be done. He and novelists like Saul Bellow, Flannery O'Connor, and J.F. Powers—to name people from three regions—have given to contemporary American fiction an intellectual and even a philosophical tone lacking in classic modern writers like Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Percy and writers like him have become intellectually involved with European thinkers and novelists and have used insights gained from this involvement without losing their own native genius for writing fiction. They have not cut themselves off from their ethnic and regional traditions but rather have followed these traditions back to their sources in the Old World. They have derived benefits from being Jewish or Catholic or even Episcopalian that other and perhaps greater writers of the American past often did not know. Thus Percy cannot be pigeonholed as, say, a Catholic novelist. Instead, Percy is a novelist of profound intellectual curiosity and sensitivity. He feels himself more closely aligned with the continental novelists, for ''the European novels are more philosophical, more novels of ideas'' than English and American novels are.

The ideas in Percy's novels are basically Kierkegaardian, but the novels are not simply a framework for presenting the Danish philosopher's ideas. Instead, Kierkegaard is, for Percy, as Emerson was for Whitman, a kind of flame that brought the author to a boiling point. When one writer influences another the way Kierkegaard influenced Percy, it is not because one gives and the other takes certain ideas. It is because the older author brings the younger author face to face with one or more of the archetypes. It is Kierkegaard's encounter with the archetypal mythic quester, his ''knight of faith,'' that helped to shake Percy out of his mental fixation on the general laws of science. Ideas usually inspire men and women to generate more ideas, but archetypes set flowing a stream of images in the psyches of artists who are receiving a torch from their masters.

Ted R. Spivey. In *The Art of Walker Percy: Stratagems for Being*, ed. Panthea Reid Broughton (Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1979), pp. 273–74

Like so many existentialists Percy attempts in his theory of language, as well as his novels, to recover the human being from the Cartesian split of mind and body which dominates much of twentieth-century thinking. Percy is, of course, influenced greatly by Kierkegaard in these matters; and his radical anthropology has its base in the Kierkegaardian insistence on individual sovereignty and choice as well as in the Judeo-Christian view of man as the fallen seeker.

As Percy has often said, he writes in ''the Christian context,'' and his theory of man is also modeled after the Judeo-Christian anthropology. He believes that this theory is flexible enough to be

adapted to the twentieth century, provided that those who adopt it confront the notion of the Fall. The Christian is always faced with the problem of an estrangement which goes beyond the estrangement attributable to technology, to capitalist competition, and failure to adapt to certain social structures. The ''normal,'' common fate of human beings in the Judeo-Christian tradition is alienation. The human being is a seeker, *homo viator*, exploring its alienation from self, others and God.

Cecil L. Eubanks. In *Walker Percy: Art and Ethics*, ed. Jac Tharpe (Univ. Pr. of Mississippi, 1980), pp. 122–23

I see [Walker] Percy's conversion to Catholicism and his acceptance of man's metaphysical dimension, over and above his existence as an integral part of the cosmos, as the most important key to an understanding of his work, a key that seems to have been neglected by a growing number of critics who tend to focus primarily on his literary achievement. From his Christian standpoint, Percy diagnoses our modern human situation of alienation and the role language plays in this, both in his essays and in his fiction. He addressed himself to man's aporia and, based upon his faith, announces that there are messages ''from across the seas.'' Though he thinks of himself as an artist, Percy acts like an Old Testament prophet and an apostle *malgre lui* called to ''proclaim the message and welcome or unwelcome insist on it.'' . . .

In his search for an answer to the human enigma Percy had worked with scientific parameters but had found that neither behaviorism nor psychology in general nor linguists addressed themselves properly to the problem. As one devoted to science, who liked ''its elegance and precision,'' Percy described his approach as ''essentially behavioral, beginning with observable data.'' He was deeply disappointed when he found out that ''science can say everything about man except what he is in himself'' (*Conversations* 59; see also 137, 294). Most of all Percy had hoped for an answer through the study of language, which is strongly based in empiricism yet intersects always with existential insights. But here, too, he came to realize that [Noah] Chomsky's ''Language Acquisition Device,'' for example, ''appears to be a black box whose contents are altogether unknown'' (*Message* 302). At one point, Percy himself was on the verge of falling into the empiricist trap by pointing out a specific location in the brain for the uniquely human delta factor. In ''A Theory of Language'' he suggested tentatively with Norman Geschwind that this location could be ''the human inferior parietal lobule, which includes the angular and supramarginal gyri, to a rough approximation areas 39 and 40 of Brodman'' (*Message* 326). This area is similar to the one which Dr. More in *Love in the Ruins* had tried to measure with his lapsometer, an attempt which Percy in a comment on the novel had disavowed as futile: ''The big mistake was in him, that he could believe he could treat a spiritual disease with a scientific device however sophisticated'' (*Conversations* 85).

Percy increasingly turned to the study of philosophy and theology. He worked his way through Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* and the works of such modern Thomists as Jacques Maritain and Gabriel Marcel, having first studied [Sören] Kierkegaard's existentialist writings. As a scientist he was moved by Aquinas's clear argument that faith is a form of knowledge. He accepted the view that man, though affected by postlapsarian defects, partakes of both animal and angelic natures, and can, therefore, be seen as being essentially different from all other creatures, unique in that he can be characterized with the epithets *ens loquens* and *ens risible*. Percy found his idea of the alienated individual centrally placed in Kierkegaard, whom he gratefully acknowledged as a source of inspiration: ''Here I am a Catholic writer living in Louisiana, and yet the man to whom I owe the greatest debt is this great Protestant theologian'' (*Conversations* 127). He describes Kierkegaard's essay, ''The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle,'' as the single most important essay that led to his conversion. He claims to accept Kierkegaard's distinction between the function of the genius—who sees the word *sub specie aeternitatis* but does not have the authority to tell any news—and that of the apostle—who ''is precisely a man who has the authority to come and tell everybody the news.'' But Percy's writings suggest that he actually acts as an apostle in the guise of a genius.

Karl-Heinz Westarp. ''Message to the Lost Self: Percy's Analysis of the Human Situation.'' *Renascence*. Spring, 1992, pp. 218–19

Walker Percy's indebtedness to existentialism (and specifically to Kierkegaard) has been pointed out so often that there is no need to belabor it here. Suffice it to say that from *The Moviegoer* through *Lancelot*, Percy defines consciousness as exclusively male. As long as Percy remained under this influence, he was virtually unable to create meaningful relationships between men and women. Not only is his portrayal of womanhood distorted in the novels prior to *The Second Coming*, but also his male characters' inability to forge and develop meaningful relationships results from these distortions. It was only after Percy moved away from this sphere of influence that his fiction boasted a rounded depiction of womanhood and a fully meaningful relationship.

Throughout his fiction, Percy connects the rejection and victimization of women with men's fear of their sexuality. In *The Moviegoer*, Binx shies from Kate's ''not whorish bold but theorish bold carrying on'' (200) to the point of impotence. Will Barrett in *The Last Gentleman* can ''hardly'' consummate his union with Kitty. In *Lancelot*, Lance Lamar disintegrates under the sexual demands of his second wife, Margot. And the later Will, fresh from discovering the joy of love and sex combined, repeats his old cliché, musing about Kitty's ''special boldness'' and concluding that ''women grow more lustful as they grow older'' (322).

In Percy's fiction, sexual women are ''punished'' in a number of ways for the sexuality that misogyny has conventionally stigmatized. Kate loses all ''self'' by becoming integrated into the paradigm of male authority: she has to be told what to do and say to the point where her individuality becomes totally erased. . . .

By any feminist standards, this would suffice to ban Percy's works from the feminist syllabus on the grounds of sexism. Or, on the contrary, one might join the scholarly chorus of those who still think that gender issues are not of vital importance to Percy's worldview. Adopting either of the two attitudes, however, means confusing the identities of author and character in Percy's fiction. Percy's male protagonists (the epithet sounds tautological, for prior to *The Second Coming*, *all* Percy's protagonists were male) fail, if not in their quests, then surely in their relationships with women. And their failure in forging and developing relationships with women stems not only from their incomprehension of women in their lives, but also from the nature of their goal: a unique (read: performed solitarily) quest for faith the realization of which could

be threatened by a relationship with a ''separate'' female individual. Binx exemplifies what Northrop Frye calls a ''stylized figure'' (306), a carrier of Kierkegaard's notion of the Knight of Faith. The younger Will wavers among several contending forces in a fashion reminiscent of Jake Horner in John Barth's early novel, *The End of the Road*, sooner resembling an allegorical agent than flesh and blood man. And Lance, likewise embarked on a quest of sorts, epitomizes the characteristics of Percy's earlier protagonists in his incapacity to understand, let alone love, *any* woman.

Nonetheless, it would be a gross exaggeration to say that the extreme case of Lance or Percy's other male protagonists voice their author's convictions about women. If such were the case, why did Percy make of Lance such a pitiful, if not revolting, figure? Why, in the final episode of *The Moviegoer* do we come to pity not only Kate, whom Binx ''hands along'' her journey downtown, but also Binx himself? If Binx's role in their marriage amounts to just this ''handing along,'' then he surely picked up the right profession (at the conclusion of the novel he enters medical school). And why, in *The Last Gentleman*, did Percy make Will miss the import of the crucial scene of Jamie's baptism, just the way Kate missed a parallel event in *The Moviegoer?* Why, in other words, does the Percy protagonist almost invariably fail? Percy provides the answer to these questions in an interview with John Dewey on the subject of his debt to Kierkegaard's thought, where he confesses his unease with Kierkegaard's notion of subjectivity. What he finds lacking in subjectivity is, in Percy's words, an ''understanding or an explanation of inter-subjectivity—caring for the other person'' (*Conversations 119*).

Elzbieta H. Olcksy. ''From Silence and Madness to the Exchange That Multiplies: Walker Percy and the Woman Question.'' *Southern Quarterly*. Spring, 1993, pp. 59–60, 61

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PIERCY, Marge (1936–)

Dance the Eagle [to Sleep] is a novel deeply informed by experience with revolt and revelation during the past decade, but . . . it is not a happy, idyllic romp, a lyrical reassurance that the Generation Gap has opened into Happy Hollow. . . .

The classics that Marge Piercy has chosen as models are those dark fantasies, like *Lord of the Flies* and *Lord of the Rings*, lordbooks heavy with pessimism and persecution, and animated by the age-old Manichean struggle between Good and Evil in which winners are somehow always losers. *Dance the Eagle [to Sleep*] tells the story of some not-too-distant time in which a small army of youth, drawn together by mutual feelings of alienation and hostility towards an oppressive, dehumanized system, declare themselves a nation apart. Secession first takes the form of an armed takeover of a New York City high school and the establishment of a communal lifestyle during the ensuing siege. Though the initial revolt is put down, the rebels retreat to the New Jersey countryside for a prolonged period of communal experience, self-imposed and underground exile which is followed by a suicidal episode of guerrilla counter-attack. The resulting holocaust of repression by ''them'' scatters and decimates the rebels, but like an earlier Civil War, does not diminish the spirit of secession. The firestorm passes, leaving smoldering embers that are carefully nurtured by the surviving few. . . .

Dance the Eagle [to Sleep] is a frightening book, which will reassure only those who can take solace from the fact that it is cast as a futuristic novel. This is no real solace, since Marge Piercy has used the future only as a parabolic mirror of the recent past; her novel is indirectly about the Movement, more specifically about the rise, fragmentation, and fall of the Students for a Democratic Society. The future setting allows her a certain freedom of exaggeration and abstraction, so that she may elevate the rise and fall of Reich III into a Götterdämmerung of symbolic and tragic proportions, and by so doing extrapolate and give fabulous substance to the essential Myth of the Movement.

Seen from this angle, the novel leaves the reader with a devastating sense of how far apart the generations have indeed moved, that the Gap has become an abyss. It is obvious that Piercy feels that her compatriots have passed through a trial by fire, that they are scattered and diminished but that the encounter has been a confrontation of massive proportions and implication. They have gained more than they have lost, and what they have gained is the solidarity of identity, a new consciousness far more sombre in implication than a sappy love of bell-bottoms and peanut butter.

John Seelye. *New Republic*. Dec. 12, 1970, pp. 24–25

At the very beginning and the very end of this rambling novel [*Small Changes*] Marge Piercy powerfully covers that particular quality of lost identity and desperation which, once recognized as common experience, has sparked the rage and solidarity of the women's liberation movement and created the concept of women's consciousness. The novel spans the 1960's in the lives of two women: Beth, the provincial working-class girl who discovers that the ideal marriage she's always dreamed of is a living hell and gathers her strength to escape it; and Miriam, the brilliant, ''independent'' mathematician, who is caught, blinded and thoroughly trapped—at least for the moment—by a middle-class version of the same nightmare.

In exploring both of their lives against a blurry background of late 1960's youth culture and radical politics, Piercy means to show the cross-class experience of women's oppression, to demonstrate the situations in which it occurs and to show some of the ways in which it is confronted. She succeeds in the first, and that success is the novel's strength; but it cannot compensate for the wordy, rhetorical and often monotonous quality of much of the narrative, nor for the fact that its author forces highly unconvincing resolutions to situations that are described at such length that they deserve at least open-ended fates. . . .

A final problem. Many women radicals will understand this novel's hostility to political ''heaviness'' on the American left, and how one of its functions was to celebrate machismo at the same time it relegated women activists to the kind of subservient roles

that a real revolution must banish. But I wonder if most non-movement readers of the book won't assume that the hostility is directed toward the general priorities of the 1960's left. Piercy has been careless about her targets, and her failure to integrate and unify the issues that float through the novel—feminism, the antiwar movement, the oppression of the working class, the Government's outrageous (and continuing) use of grand juries to harass and jail radicals—implies that most of these concerns should be discarded in favor of the more important struggle, sexual equality and freedom. On the basis of Piercy's first two novels, and her often eloquent poetry, I find it hard to believe that she means this; yet it's disturbing that, in a novel of this length, set among highly politicized people, almost all of the characters are obsessively self-concerned: with alternate life-styles, aspects of communal living, their own emotions. Neither poverty nor racism, for example, is more than casually mentioned.

The problem of how to transform the cultural conditioning of women, which is inseparable from transforming the lives of all the exploited and the structure of the society that keeps them that way, is a profound one. Piercy shows what happens when women struggle for themselves (Beth) and what happens when they give up (Miriam). But the context in which the author allows their lives to evolve is too rigid, too blurry and sometimes too downright confused to grant the characters she has created the reality and the strength they deserve.

Sara Blackburn. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 12, 1973. pp. 2–3

Piercy's desire is for a world of wholeness and completeness, where natural growth and development can lead to a satisfying participation in the fullness of life. As individual poems recount instances in which a sense of wholeness is attempted or gained or lost, they also explore the attitudes and actions necessary for a state of sustained community. . . .

As a woman, Piercy is particularly concerned about women and their ability to participate with integrity in a fully-realized life. In a number of poems, she examines the female growing-up process in America; in each case, the young girl is shown to possess great potential strength and individuality which is slowly but surely diverted or covered over. . . . Traditionally, a male/female dichotomy has been assumed in which the male has been viewed primarily as an objective, rational, abstract theorizer, too busy with the important intellectual progress of the world to be bothered by daily problems. The female, on the other hand, has been viewed primarily as an emotional, subjective, grubby doer of ordinary tasks. Man equals mind equals significant mode of knowing and being; woman equals body equals lesser mode of knowing and being. What Piercy wants to do is to change the value assigned to these two modes; and, in addition, she wants to synthesize and unify the separate parts to form whole people: thinking, feeling men and women, confident in mind and body. . . .

Piercy views contemporary America as a dream turned nightmare. The fertile land which once offered a place of freedom and tolerance—a place of growth—has now become full of death and destruction. Possession, subjugation, and selfishness have violated the land itself and the people who live in this society.

Jean Rosenbaum. *Modern Poetry Studies*. Winter, 1977, pp. 193–94, 201–2, 204

Marge Piercy is a prolific novelist and poet, a one-time organizer for SDS, who has become a spokesman for radical feminism. Though she presents herself as a revolutionary, battling against orthodoxies of every kind—political, cultural, sexual—her novels are surprisingly conventional. In conception and style, in the grim determination of her didactic intentions, her work is reminiscent of the radical-proletarian fiction of the 1930's, in which the message outweighed the manner of its telling. In each of her six novels, Miss Piercy seizes upon a problem that she regards as symptomatic of a sick, unjust, patriarchal society, and builds a heavily documented narrative around that problem to drive her moral home.

In *Woman at the Edge of Time* she concentrated on mistreatment of the insane; in *Small Changes* on women trapped in repressive marriages; in *Dance the Eagle to Sleep* on the exploitation of radical women by their sexist comrades; in *The High Cost of Living* on the high cost of being a lesbian in a bigoted academic milieu. Through the exhaustive detailing of social and sexual atrocities, Miss Piercy turns her novels into indictments crackling with outrage. Now and then she has tried to leaven the heavy freight of actuality that is her stock in trade with utopian imaginings, in the spirit of Doris Lessing's more elaborate science fiction, as in the futuristic dream world envisioned in *Woman at the Edge of Time*. But these fantasies are just as programmatic as her realistic novels. . . .

In her most recent novel, *Vida*, Marge Piercy looks back with elegiac nostalgia to the 1960's and the exhilarations of the anti-war movement as remembered by Vida Asch, a Weatherman fugitive. . . .

What is in some ways most bewildering about *Vida* is the way Marge Piercy's ideological severity toward bourgeois values—''We can't make a new society in the shell of the old if we're living a middle-class existence''—is insidiously overwhelmed by her rather girlish enthusiasm for the good things of that life. . . .

Vida is crammed with . . . arcane trivia, the sort of padding that was left out of an earlier and far more affecting fictional account of the antiwar apostles of violence, M. F. Beal's *Amazon One*, published in 1975. In that powerful novel, Miss Beal captured the derangement, the complacency, the resentful and terrified confusion of the Weatherman mentality in fiercely compressed prose that had the authentic ring of imaginative and historical truth. Next to M. F. Beal's radical activists, Marge Piercy's pale into ideological cartoons. *Vida*, almost twice as long as *Amazon One*, is stale and self-indulgent, leaving no breathing space or room for thought between writer and protagonist. At the end of this revolutionary soap opera, our heroine is still free, still running, and charged with unfounded confidence, as she walks into the sunset, that ''What swept through us and cast us forward is a force that will gather and rise again.'' Those who have no sense of history can believe anything.

Pearl K. Bell. *Commentary*. July, 1980, pp. 59–60

Marge Piercy is known in England mainly as a novelist. That the author of *Vida* and *Woman on the Edge of Time* is also a powerful, distinctively American poet may come as a surprise, even to her admirers. As might be expected. *The Moon Is Always Female* reflects the uncompromising bias of the committed feminist, of which some of us by now are weary. But Marge Piercy's poems are so energetic and so intelligent that weariness is out of the question. This is, in fact, her sixth book of poems, and it is an excellent one. A tough, often humorous, sometimes angry view of herself emerges from the poems, yet they are free of embitterment. They lack that harsh edge of hysterical accusation—as if with a few nasty words

one could instantly abolish half the human race—which spoils so many poems by women these days. Here finally is a feminist artist for whom one need rarely blush.

The Moon Is Always Female is gratifyingly longer than most poetry volumes, and absorbing throughout. In effect, Ms. Piercy is still a novelist in her poems; she has perfected an easy flowing unrhymed line in which she says what she means with few frills. If you object to poems that tell you things, then you will not like this book. . . . It is possible, of course, to find all this feminist rabble-rousing annoying. However good the advice, poetry may not be the best vehicle for it. Indeed, if Marge Piercy were only a rabble-rouser she would not be a poet. The fact is, she can be as subtle as anyone writing today. . . . ''At the well'' alone would convince me that Marge Piercy is one of America's major writers. . . . The strength of Piercy's work is its outwardness, its frankness. Even if you do not agree with her, you have to meet Marge Piercy halfway.

> Anne Stevenson. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. Jan. 23, 1981, p. 81

Perhaps no other poet of this generation has more consistently identified herself with the political and social movements of her own times. Her earlier involvements were with the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 60's, which generated in turn the women's-rights and antiwar movements of the 70's. For anyone interested in what's been happening on the cutting edge during the past two decades, she's clearly essential reading.

Miss Piercy has the double vision of the utopian: a view of human possibility—harmony between the sexes, among races and between humankind and nature—that makes the present state of affairs clearly unacceptable by comparison. The huge discrepancy between what is and what could be generates anger, and many of these are angry poems—which, for those who want poetry to be nothing but beautiful, will mean points off. Because her poetry is so deliberately ''political''—which, for some, means anything not about ghosts and roses—how you feel about it will depend on how you feel about subjects such as male-female relations, abortion, war and poverty. Those who don't like these subjects will use adjectives like ''shrill'' to describe the poems. . . .

Taken as a whole—and I recommend you do so only slowly, as this is rich fare—this collection [*Circles on the Water*] presents the spectacle of an agile and passionate mind rooted firmly in time and place and engaging itself with the central dilemmas of its situation. . . .

If poets could be divided into Prioresses and Wives of Bath, Miss Piercy would very definitely be a Wife of Bath. Low on fastidiousness and high on what Hazlitt called ''gusto,'' earthy, bawdy, interested in the dailiness of life rather than in metaphysics, highly conscious of the power relationships between men and women but seeing herself by no means as a passive victim, she is ready to enter the fray with every weapon at her command. She is, in sum, a celebrant of the body in all its phases, including those that used to be thought of as vulgar. Surprisingly, her poetry is more humorous than her novels, although not all of it is what you'd call funny. The Wife of Bath was sometimes a savage ironist, and so is Miss Piercy. Neither has much interest in being ladylike. . . .

Tidiness is not her virtue, but then in the hierarchy of virtues this is surely not at the top. Essentially her poetry is a poetry of statement and story, and metaphor and simile are, characteristically, used by her as illustration rather than as structural principle. This does not bother me very much, since it's a mistake for a reader to look for the same qualities in every poet.

Miss Piercy's emotional range is great, and at her best she can make you laugh, cry, get angry; she can inspire you with social purpose and open doors through which you may walk into lived reality. One effect she almost never achieves, because she almost never tries for it, is that touch of the cold hand at the back of the neck, that glimpse into the borderlands. The darkness she sees is human-created and therefore potentially correctable. . . .

> Margaret Atwood. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 8, 1982, pp. 10–11, 22

In her brief biography at the back of *The Twelve-Spoked Wheel Flashing* (1978), the book from which these lines come, [Marge] Piercy writes that she and her housemates grow all their own vegetables and a ''fair amount'' of fruit. She further notes that she tried to shape the book ''as a growth ring, the record of a year.'' In a review, Diane Wakoski calls Piercy ''one of the pioneers of twentieth-century earth poetry.'' Piercy titled an early book of poems *To Be of Use* (1973), and she speaks repeatedly of the work involved in loving, making a community, gardening—calling a book of poems *Hard Loving* (1969), a novel *Braided Lives*, and a collection of nonfiction prose *Parti-Colored Blocks for a Quilt*. Like [Adrienne] Rich, whom she quotes, Piercy believes ''increasingly that only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experiences can enable women to create a collective description of the world which will be truly ours.'' Her hope is to join with other women who ''are working to make part of the same quit to keep us from freezing to death in a world that grows harsher and bleaker—where male is the norm and the ideal human being is hard, violent, and cold: a macho rock. Every woman who makes of her living something strong and good is sharing bread with us.'' . . .

Piercy's accessible, usually first-person, ''lyric-narrative'' poetic quickly orients her readers, makes them feel at home. Piercy demonstrates what Tess Gallagher describes as the ''cozy use of ego in American poetry in which the 'I' seems often in exact coincidence with the poet in divulging family secrets'' (*Concert of Tenses 53*). I don't agree with Gallagher, however, that such writing produces ''in some poets a state of near psychic bankruptcy,'' especially because Piercy's ''I'' (and eye) seem expansive, what with her commitment to a ''strong sense of responsibility'' toward others. Piercy's work does tally with Gallagher's other astute observation, however, that the lyric poem is often so entirely dependent on narrative and anecdotal strategies that the distinction between the narrative and the lyric has been greatly blurred: ''What we really have now in contemporary poetry is a hybrid of two forms, narrative and lyric. . . . We now have a term like the lyric-narrative to describe the most prevalent contemporary development of these forms'' (72). The patchwork or blurring or doubling or genres is thus early at work in Piercy's poems as well as present in her quilted, hybrid critical prose. Moreover, the way in which Piercy turns art conventionally considered ''low'' (beads glued in a bottle cap) into the subject or seed of an art conventionally thought ''high(er)'' (poetry) is echoed or recycled in a prose style that mixes not only poetry with prose (traditionally considered low relative to poetry) but anecdote and conversation with eloquence, political oratory, and at times, extended poetic conceit. Piercy even makes the conversational form of the interview serve as several of

the ''parti-colored blocks'' that form her quilt of a book, with each block or interview itself a compendium of autobiography and literary theory, jokes and quotes.

> Diane P. Freedman. *An Alchemy of Genius: Cross-Genre Writing by American Feminist Poet-Critics* (Charlottesville: Univ. Pr. of Virginia, 1992), pp. 114, 117–18

Marge Piercy taps a mother as the most likely candidate for time travel in her futuristic novel, *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Visiting the village of Mattapoisett, Massachusetts, in the twenty-second century, Connie Ramos hears a language both familiar and strange. Her future companions speak of ''inknowing and outknowing,'' of ''feel[ing] with other beings . . . [of] coning, going down . . . reach[ing] nevel . . . [of] slow[ing] at will.'' Once she discovers that inknowing and outknowing, coning and reaching nevel, are ''states of consciousness,'' however, Piercy's time-traveler responds with some anger: ''How can you teach somebody to feel? From a book you can learn the multiplication tables. But how can you teach love?'' The new age answer: ''But every mother always has. Or failed to'' (140). Later, Connie learns that ''mothers'' are not necessarily female; indeed, the old tags—male and female—have about as much significance as height or hair color. Instead, embryos grow in a mechanical ''brooder'' and are ceremonially delivered to mothers at the end of gestation. This thematic dissociation of the female body and biological reproduction, rather than neutralizing the maternal issue, nevertheless, seems to up the theoretical ante: what does it mean, for example, that in her nongendered, utopian future, Piercy retains the ''mother'' word, that tantalizing, devastating sign? And why does Piercy choose technological birth when Connie's present suffering has so little to do with pregnancy and so much to do with the already powerful medical and legal technologies of the twentieth century, technologies that infiltrate her most private spaces?

The critical travails of contemporary feminism are nowhere more evident than in discussions of mothering. Response to Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* serves as a familiar case. While Gilligan leans toward a cultural understanding of women as caretakers and inventive sympathizers, her methodological association of mothers' bodies and morality (among other things, she investigates women's response to their own abortions) hints at material bedrock. This ''essentialist'' nod bodes badly for her among readers who fear the rebinding of maternal ties. In other locations, critics argue that feminist energy might be better spent in establishing woman's *human* nature, not her maternal nature. . . .

The reduplicative narration of *Woman on the Edge of Time* not only reassigns mothering duties (a move that might be read as maternal ''resignation'') but textualizes mothering differently. . . .

Put differently, Piercy's *showing* of technological mothering publicizes women's historical labor and amplifies the possibilities for maternal stories.

As Piercy demonstrates, the present world enforces the narrative sentence linking female to ''mother.'' Because a woman *can* mother, she is enrolled as one: subsequently, the scenes of her life include the physical violence of rape, coerced abortion, and unelected hysterectomy as well as the political equivalents: silence and invisibility.

> Elaine Orr. ''Mothering as Good Fiction: Instances from Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*.'' JNT. Spring, 1993. pp. 61–62

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PINSKY, Robert (1940–)

[Robert Pinsky] stands out by virtue of his emotional rightness. Now such an attribute may be more stigmatizing in a cynical age than being called traditional. I mean by emotional rightness that balance of feeling and intelligence that is often hard-won but never agonized in its display. We live in an age, to put it mildly, that doesn't care much for tact. Emotional rightness is nearly a synonym for tact, but it adds to tact a sense of urgency, a willingness to break rules and transgress boundaries when necessary. . . . Pinsky has increasingly become a moral poet, that rarest of modern types, not by being a scourge or a satirist, but by returning to questions and matters of right and wrong, truth and error, and seeking to prove—more in the sense of test than vindication—his feelings about such matters. This is not to say (here comes a disclaimer) that his work has none of our contemporary concerns, such as fascination with popular culture, an obsessive interest in certain mythic topics, and a penchant for psychoanalytic assumptions about human behaviour. Pinsky draws on such concerns and more, but he manages to be personal without being confessional, sophisticated without being glib, and knowledgeable without being world-weary or cutely playful.

Reading Pinsky offers positive delights as well as negative ones, however. His poetic language has many of the best features of good prose, as its connections and complexities flow from a straight-forward approach to his subjects. His subjects, especially in his . . . book, *History of My Heart*, are chosen with an eye to both scale and variety. He can write about a visit to a concentration camp, his New Jersey childhood, Fats Waller, or an apocalyptic vision, all with deft control. As for his critical skills, his book on Walter Savage Landor might be taken as a model of how to approach a neglected, less-than-major figure and show his accomplishments and pertinence to a new generation of readers. His book on contemporary poetry [*The Situation of Poetry*] was the first to offer intelligent scruples about those dominant verse conventions that had become rigidified by the middle of the nineteen-seventies. . . . All in all, a decent claim could be made for Pinsky being

the most accomplished poet-critic in America under the age of fifty. . . . I want especially to argue that Pinsky's strength derives from his use of both irony and compassion in a way that these two attitudes, normally seen as opposites, are called into a test of one another. It is through this test that Pinsky gets at the emotional rightness that is his main focus and creates the artistic complexity that is his achievement. Taking the long view, we can say that such a test and a poet's willingness to submit to it are not the result exclusively of either an experimental or traditional cast of mind or temperament. But it is Pinsky's traditionalism, especially his use of multiple cultural and historical dimensions, that I think best accounts for the special quality of his work.

Charles Molesworth. *The Hollins Critic*. December, 1984, pp. 1-18.

If poets are really the unacknowledged legislators of the world, they have a lot to answer for. In America we would rather believe, with Auden, that poetry makes nothing happen. Even when we write about politics and poetry, and write out of evident anguish and conviction, we tend to create analyses of negation. Both of these books [*Poetry and the World* and *Praises and Dispraises, Poetry and Politics, the 20th Century* by Terrence Des Pres], which approach the problem of politics and poetry from opposed angles, mix deep intelligence about art and history with a pervasive resistance to ideological thinking, a desire for escape from the burdens of history into the haven of poetry. Neither focuses very much on what we usually think of when we think of political poetry—that is, poetry designed, if not to legislate, to make something happen: for instance the antiwar or ecological poetry of the American sixties and seventies. But the reason for this swerving from the troubling questions may not be self-censorship, even unconscious. In Des Pres's case it may be the despair created by the inevitable darkness of the modern radical vision; in Pinsky's traditionalist longings perhaps caused by the present failure of liberalism. . . .

Pinsky's book is far more miscellaneous and uneven than *Praise*, essentially consisting of brief reviews, memoirs, and a few extended theoretical pieces. Like his influential *The Situation of Poetry*, which, in the poetry wars of the sixties and seventies, attacked deep image romanticism and campaigned for discursive poetry and ''reason'' (defined in Enlightenment terms), this is a neo-Wintersian work. There is still the habitual deference to the old curmudgeon Yvor Winters, the emphasis on the morality of forms, the religious longing under the insistent rationalism. There is also an oddly a historical tendency to look to seventeenth-or eighteenth-century poems for comparison with works of modern social commentary, and a faintly elitist or traditionalist tendency to define poetry as an activity of ''the court.'' Pinsky speaks for the fathers. But his tone in this collection is softer, more open and engaged than in his earlier book. Somehow Grandpa Dave is a more benevolent presiding spirit than Father Yvor.

Most of the reviews here are a sharp pleasure to read. It is great fun to watch Pinsky being judgmental but strenuously fair to Philip Larkin while Larkin is being judgmental and atrociously unfair to practically everyone, especially blacks and Jews. And Pinsky consistently demonstrates a remarkable ability to define the movements and strategies of particular poems—especially in his Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore pieces. But the most interesting sections of the book are first the most abstract, then the most personal—the excursions into theory, then the memoirs. These occasional pieces are by no means a systematic attempt to deal with the relation of politics and poetry, but partly because they are casual and frank, they reveal much that is distressing about American approaches to the problem.

Pinsky seems to live in a slightly safer world than Des Pres does, one more protected by the traditional absolutes. But his thinking about poetry's place in that world comes to a similar end, if anything even more removed from the optimistic imagination of activism. Part of the reason for this removal is brilliantly analyzed by Pinsky's ''Responsibilities of the Poet.'' The difficulty he delineates there convincingly explains the contemporary American problem with political poetry as an aspect of a broader problem, the necessity of transformation. ''Before an artist can see a subject—foreign policy, or any other subject—the artist must transform it: answer the received cultural imagination of the subject with something utterly different.'' So the failure of political poetry (or ''poetry of witness''—Pinsky quotes Forché's term) is not a failure of will or conviction but of the capacity for transformation, especially for poets conditioned by a country where politics usually consists of the suppression of ideological thought. Here Pinsky makes an interesting leap: because traditional ideas of ''the poetic'' can blunt the power of poetry to comprehend the world, the real responsibility of the poet is especially to the ''unpoetic,'' for reasons of craft as well as social morality. ''In the most uncompromising sense, this means that whatever important experience seems least poetic to me is likely to be my job.''

Having come this far, Pinsky then abruptly swerves away from the political. He ends the lecture with an analysis of the transformations necessary in poems about, respectively, God and love. These are social subjects, yes, but they are also the subjects that most routinely allow escape from political concerns. Here and in later essays we keep expecting Pinsky's clear analytic eye actually to confront contemporary poetry of engagement. Yes, all poetry is political, but what about *political* poetry? The closest we get, among the poems of this century, is a discussion of William Carlos William's ''To Elsie,'' which is undeniably social commentary, but understandable more in religious terms—a fall from grace—than directly social ones. Uncharacteristically elitist for Williams, it seems full of horror at the mob, at what Pinsky calls ''the terror of the darkness of American freedom.'' Like *The Waste Land* it describes social collapse in terms of bad sex among the peasants. And it presents us, again, with the familiar excremental vision: ''as if the earth under our feet / were / an excrement of some sky / and we degraded prisoners / destined / to hunger until we eat filth.'' Des Pres might assent.

This highly intelligent poet's analysis of poetry in the world continues to go indicatively askew as Pinsky writes about American backgrounds, and his own. Partly the problem is excessive formalism. A discussion of the social implications of the opposition between high and low vocabularies simply goes too far, dragging down Pinsky's own usually clear style as it goes. More important, there emerge questionable assumptions about poetry and culture, the thrust of which is usually to suggest that poetry exists in some absolute realm beyond cultural conditioning. Pinsky claims that art is by definition liberating, for instance, and that ''the appetite for poetry'' achieves the status of the other ''human appetites; the desire for cuisine, beyond nutrition; for eroticism,

beyond sexuality.'' Well, maybe, but this and other vaguely absolutist statements about the nature of things militate against the historical/political understanding of how cultures change.

This problem emerges most clearly in the autobiographical essays that end this collection, because they are both more open and more careless than the critical theorizing. The scope of those essays makes it clear what ''the world'' finally comes down to, in Pinsky's typically American experience. This sense of the world is conditioned by the sense of the past, the collective past, but also the memory of childhood. This world consists most strongly of family, small hometown, religion, and European roots, all lovingly rendered with a sort of glow that suggests a civics class definition of the American tradition. This close to the heart, politics is not allowed.

As he makes himself vulnerable to such a description, Pinsky also shows some understanding of the limits of this conception of things. In fact this is more or less the subject of a piece about a trip to Poland during the 1981 Solidarity struggles. It's here that Pinsky presents himself as the stereotypically American ''hick,'' who ''underestimated history,'' the innocent who amuses the Poles burdened by the shift of politics by explaining that in America anti-Semitism is insignificant. They don't believe his protestations of American innocence. Neither do I, not because of anti-Semitism, especially, but because of history, because of what is omitted from Pinsky's essays on America and his past, which end not in a meditation about justice or injustice, but about the religion of his father.

Even as Pinsky admits he exaggerated America's ''pure freedom from bloody European mania'' he conversely demonstrates his will to believe in it, in what Forché calls ''the lie of our own moral superiority.'' Exploring the territory of our confusion about politics, he becomes an example of that confusion. This is the inevitable problem of someone writing, as Des Pres put it, ''at the center of empire, a malady now widespread in American letters.'' But the malady is compounded by the tendency to perceive empire through the reducing mirror of childhood, as a series of small towns steeped in innocence and opportunity.

Pinsky's good cheer is finally more apolitical than Des Pres's modern gloom. Again nostalgia replaces history. Perhaps our truest political text is still Fitzgerald's novel about the will to restore the past, and the deaths that result when a powerful and loving man falls into nostalgia for the world. So we beat on.

Anthony Libby. *The Kenyon Review*. Spring, 1989, pp. 140–45.

Two years ago Robert Pinsky published a vigorous and engaging collection of essays called *Poetry and the World*. Harvested from a decade's work, it was a miscellaneous group: autobiographical sketches, meditations on the Bible and on political attitudes, reviews of recent books, a pair of public lectures on the origins of an American poetry. But underneath the variety of his subjects, Pinsky's preoccupation throughout the book was to clarify, if not to explain, poetry's function as ''a bridge between the worldly and the spiritual.'' By maintaining a ''decorum, a limiting boundary'' between its voluptuous surfaces and the rigor of its ideas, between the dragging anchor of memory and its flights of imagination, poetry enacts the tension that any reader feels, caught between the communal world of his living and the isolate self of his life. The poets whom Pinsky most admires draw both into their work. ''The qualities of physical grace, lively social texture, and inward revelation'' that he finds in Whitman and Williams mark the strongest American poetry. They are, not coincidentally, qualities Pinsky strives for in his own poems, and wants us to admire there.

The larger question these matters of style address is one Pinsky also touches on, though never plumbs. How does, how should, a poem situate itself in relation to American life, to the heterogeneity of a democratic society? Has poetry any place in a culture that, decade by decade, pushes it further to the side? If it does, and if our poets are to be mythographers rather than merely reporters, how are they to capture and to inspirit the terms of our shape-shifting national life, its abundance of compassion and cruelty, its exhilarating and disturbing freedoms?

Pinsky looks to the style of American poems less to analyze than to praise their fluidity of idiom and tone, their rhetorical restlessness and dramatic resources, their capacity to include so many actual and imagined voices. Pinsky's view is not unlike Tocqueville's when he first arrived in New York. Sailing into the city by way of the East River, he was ''surprised to perceive along the shore, at some distance from the city, a number of little palaces of white marble, several of which were of ancient architecture.'' The next morning, when he went ashore to inspect them, he discovered their walls were of whitewashed brick, their columns of painted wood. Our grandest gestures seem put up overnight, improvised, makeshift, fool-the-eye.

Pinsky's relish for these gestures is apparent in several poems in his new book [*The Want Bone*], poems about language itself. In one, called ''Window,'' our link to the past is defined by language: ''We took their language in our mouth and chewed.'' It fed us, nourished us; and while it formed us—into the Irish or Chinese or Spanish or Yiddish of our words—we helped to remake its own ''bright confusion.'' In another poem, ''The Refinery'' (a new name for the old melting pot), the gods return to drink at that bright confusion, which the poet imagines processed in the great glittering refinery of language:

> The muttering gods
> Greedily penetrate those bright
> pavilions—
> Libation of Benzene, Naphthalene,
> Asphalt,
> Gasoline, Tar: syllables
> Fractioned and cracked from
> unarticulated
> Crude, the smeared keep of life that fed
> On itself in pitchy darkness when the gods
> Were new—inedible, volatile
> And sublimated afresh to sting
> Our tongues who use it, refined from oil
> of stone.

It was Tocqueville who predicted a hybrid American poetry. On his travels around the fledgling nation he found no worthy art, but expected great things. Americans had ''the freedom and the knowledge acquired by their forefathers and the passions which are their own.'' There was, he discovered, no pioneer's hut without its copy of Shakespeare. (Tocqueville himself first read *Henry V* in a log cabin.) But Americans had not yet learned—they would not learn until Whitman—how to write of their own passions. As for an eventual American style, he predicted it would be

> fantastic, incorrect, overburdened, and loose, almost always
> vehement and bold . . . with more wit than erudition, more

> imagination than profundity. The object of authors will be to astonish rather than to please, and to stir the passions more than to charm the taste.

He also predicted that the subject of an American poetry would be not history (Americans have none), not nature (only a mirror that we hold up to ourselves), but the self. Americans, wrote Tocqueville, are ''excited in reality only by a survey of themselves,'' and ''each man instantly sees all his fellows when he surveys himself.'' ''I have only to look at myself,'' he said on their behalf, fifteen years before the publication of *Leaves of Grass*, in order to ''enlarge and to throw light on some of the obscurer recesses of the human heart,'' in order to touch what he called ''the hidden nerve.''

Each poet will have his own phrase for ''the hidden nerve.'' At the start of his career, Pinsky's was ''the dark wind.'' In ''Poems About People,'' the very first poem in his first book, he tells us of his concern for ''the dark wind crossing / The wide spaces between us.'' If we take that wind as an early image for what he refers to, in *Poetry and the World*, as ''the bridge between the worldly and the spiritual,'' then it must be said that his early work lingered on the worldly side of things. Even so, I wince when, in his essays, he confesses his desire to be ''interesting,'' to please the reader of his poems. Those are worthy goals in themselves, but they so underestimate Pinsky's own ambition—at least as it has emerged over the course of his four collections.

> J. D. McClatchy. *The New Republic*. September 24, 1990, pp. 46–8.

Typical of discussions of poetry and politics, and the larger domain of history, is a sense of the necessity or decorum to maintain a division between poetry and the other two areas. The popularization of Adorno's question—can other be poetry after Auschwitz—has further mediated the reception of contemporary poetry, if not the very moment of poesis. Equally prevalent is the argument, generous in some ways, that all poetry is political. Carolyn Forché, in her essay, ''El Salvador: On the Aide Memoire,'' writes:

> In those days I kept my work as a poet and journalist separate, of two distinct *mentalités*, but I could not keep El Salvador from my poems because it had become so much a part of my life. I was cautioned to avoid mixing art and politics, that one damages the other, and it was some time before I realized that ''political poetry'' often means the poetry of protest, accused of polemical didacticism, and not the poetry which implicitly celebrates politically acceptable values.

Forché recognizes this deep-seated impulse to separate and maintain only what is acceptable or decorous as poetry, which in turn maintains the values acceptable to the society as a whole. She also points to the implicit politics of acceptable poetry. Restricting poetry to the decorous—or claiming the opposite, that all poetry is political—denies poetry any efficacy. It certainly limits the poem's imagination by limiting the poem to the rhetoric of decorum or the period's style. In fact, such limitations shift poetry's prospects from the realm of authenticity to that of style. Forché's statement points to the silencing of the poet, a censure of what the writer has noticed within experience or what the writer has experienced within the space of writing.

The poet's work, as Adrienne Rich has often stated, is the critique and revisioning of representation [see her *On Lies, Secrets, and Silences: Selected Prose 1966–1978*, 1979]. The space of writing is a shared, social space, yet it does not deny the individual act of creating that space. Such an act is profoundly difficult and one that requires an ethical responsibility or responsiveness, if it is to be authentic in its space and its outward *regard*. To not view poetry as an ethical process, is to initiate a disturbing leveling that extinguishes the very possibility of a responsive writing. The poem is always in the realm of betweenness or dialogue, neither wholly internal nor external; its space is autonomous yet can only be existent as a shared space. By its presence, this festive or autonomous time and space is a critique of the accumulations of history that have opposed and appropriated the imagination.

Wallace Stevens often articulates both the recourse to an autonomous space and a poetics of resistance. His vocabulary in the essay ''The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words'' [from *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, 1951] is one of opposition that asks of the artist responsibility and claims that art is of necessity the imagination's resistance to the world and its impoverishing realities:

> It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us live our lives.

This violence from within is not identical to ''a violence without''—the external violence, that of reality, is ''without.'' External and empty, the world shapes us if it is not confronted. Furthermore, the imagination is a collaborator, its creation is the history we are caught in.

Robert Pinsky has understood both Forché's and Stevens' positions and offers important elaborations upon them both in his poems and essays. For Pinsky, the tension between public and private is re-visioned by the poet as necessitating transformation. He argues [in *Poetry and the World*] that one of the poet's responsibilities ''is to mediate between the dead and the unborn: we must feel ready to answer, as if asked by the dead if we have handed on what they gave us, or asked by the unborn what we have for them''; furthermore, we as poets, ''must answer for what we see.'' Pinsky, I sense, implicitly rebukes the rhetorical posturing of Adorno or Auden's oft-quoted and misconstrued phrase ''poetry makes nothing happen'' that has led to critical disclaimers about poetry which is political, social, or historical. Pinsky argues that the poet is the place of transmission and therefore transformation.

Although this description of the poet's responsibility is conservative by Pinsky's own admission, it is moreover one of conservation—or resourcefulness, in that old sources are maintained and new ones uncovered or pointed to. Turning to the poems in his collection *The Want Bone*, we find that Pinsky offers a vision of the demands of the imagination when bound or pressed by power, that is, pushed to the extreme, hence a vatic imagination:

> For three weeks after this night vision
> I Daniel, he wrote, ate no pleasant
> Bread nor wine, my comeliness
> Turned to corruption, I retained
> No strength, my own counterance

Changed in me. But I kept the
Matter in my heart, I was mute
And set my face toward the earth.
And afterward I rose up
And did the king's business.
Appalled initiate. Intimate of power.
Scorner of golden images, governor.
In the drinking places they said
He had wished himself unborn,
That he had no navel.
So tawny Belteshazzar or Daniel
With his unclean smell of lion
And his night visions,
Who took the thoughts of the King
Into his mind O Jews, prospered
In the reign of Nebuchadnezzar
And of his son Belshazzar
And in the reign of Darius
And in the reign of Cyrus the Persian.

In these concluding stanzas of ''Visions of Daniel,'' Pinsky critiques Daniel's political cohabitation, while also understanding that it was necessary for his survival. The poem, furthermore, describes Daniel's ability to reverse the relation of power: his knowledge gives him power the king lacks. He is both prophet and interpreter; hence he occupies a privileged position since only he could unfold the secrets of Nebuchadnezzar's dream or the meaningless writing that appeared on Belshazzar's walls. Moreover, Daniel is challenged to interpret—that is to see clearly what is secret—''a vision / Of the world's entire future / Couched in images.'' Disliked by the Jews and subjected to the gossip of the pious, Daniel was no collaborator although he was an ''appointed officer / Of the crown.'' Instead, Daniel becomes an emblem of survival through the intercession of the imagination. Daniel's survival, in fact, allows for the survival and emancipation of the Jews under Cyrus.

Pinsky has selected Daniel as the emblem of the vatic poet in that this position and the story of Daniel reveal the complex relationship of power and the imagination. The imagination literally preserves Daniel's youth while the kings age. Daniel is a subject of generations of kings, yet he is able to subject them to terror. Daniel, through his casting of images, compels Nebuchadnezzar ''on all fours, driven / To eat grass like the oxen. / His body wet by the dews of heaven, / Hair matted like feathers, fingers / Hooked like the claw of the raven.'' Pinsky does not suggest that Daniel merely interprets the king's dreams; instead, Daniel's casting of images transforms the king and renders him senseless. Daniel is the traditional bard, for his words become curses that are made literal or made flesh. The catalog and the fortuitous rhymes emphasized this transformation initiated by language. Daniel serves not only as the prophet of history but also as the maker of history, albeit as an intermediary: ''God has weighed you and found you / Wanting, your power will be given / To the Medes and the Persians.'' History then is seen as a series of transformations—makings and unmakings—produced by a single agency. Pinsky does not intend to critique such a proposition nor does he necessarily accept it. His interest is in the position of the individual voice who witnesses, enacts, and records such conditions.

James McCorkle. *The Kenyon Review*. Winter, 1992, pp. 171–88.

If there is a consistent ground rule for Robert Pinsky's poems, it is that apparent simplicity is the invitation to troubling complexity. There is an attractive movement of the mind, finding exceptions to simple rules, unexpected textures to smooth surfaces, division and ambivalence to simple feelings. The strategies are abundance, surprise, and variations on a theme. In the first poem in his first book *(Sadness and Happiness),* ''Poem about People,'' what begins as genial and compassionate people watching—

Balding young men in work shoes
And green work pants, beer belly
And white T-shirt, the porky walk
Back to the truck, polite; possible
To feel briefly like Jesus,
A gust of diffuse tenderness . . .

—turns to a friend's painful divorce and then to a movie clip that in turn leads to a burning vision of desperate personal shame:

. . . the sensitive
Young Jewish soldier nearly drowns
Trying to rescue the thrashing
Anti-semitic bully, swimming across
The river raked by nazi fire,
The awful part is the part truth:
Hate my whole kind, but me,
Love me for myself.

It is not a predictable sequence.

The most ambitious poems in the book are meditative sequences that are in the form of theme and variations: ''Tennis,'' the title poem ''Sadness and Happiness,'' and ''Essay on Psychiatrists.'' The latter includes comic social scenes, satire, a discussion of Pentheus and Dionysus as psychiatrists, and Yvor Winters's defense of madness in poets, and it concludes that we are all psychiatrists fumbling our way among stars. It is a poem designed to make psychiatrists uneasy, being itself uneasy about their claims to power over the secret life. Psychiatrists might say, predictably, that jealousy for their mastery of the sexual secret underlies the poem.

An Explanation of America is just that. Its classical antecedent is not Juvenal-Johnson-Lowell's ''Vanity of Human Wishes'' but rather Horace's Epistle I, xvi, from his Sabine farm, which Pinsky translates as part of his text. It is philosophical discourse, not satire. The poem is addressed to his oldest daughter, much of it quite genuinely—the mode of address is not merely a trope in some of the poem's very challenging passages. The daughter is often a real presence in the poem and appears to be too iconoclastic, intelligent, and searching to be satisfied with easy answers. She is a critic of ''that tyrant and sycophantic lout, the Majority'' and

. . . Political Science bores you,
You prefer the truth, and with a Jesuit firmness
Return to your slogan: ''Voting *is not fair.*''

A sense of the poem's complexity and uneasiness of feeling is implicit in this list:

I want for you to see the things I see
And more, Colonial Diners, Disney, films
Of concentration camps, the napalmed child
Trotting through famous news film in her diaper

And tattered flaps of skin, *Deep Throat,* the rest.

This is not an America free of cruelty, and with the last entry the monologue to the daughter is not easy about domesticated sexuality. The explanation is not tidy or even terribly analytic. It is impressionistic, rather, and concludes with a sense of America as dreamlike, ''So large, and strangely broken, and unforeseen.''

Pinsky's commitment to discursive poetry is seen in his next book, *History of My Heart,* where he adopts his method defiantly, in the face of the dominant approach to his subject, which is the shaping of his feelings. Instead of confession or epiphanies of the atomistic ego or intimations of moral instructions that thwart childhood narcissism, Pinsky offers explanation that is complex, ironic, and allusive. In the title poem of this volume history becomes family mythmaking in his mother's fantasy, drawn from a movie, of meeting Fats Waller, the way language creates experience in an account of a first sexual tryst (''To see eyes melting so I could think *This is it,/They're melting!*''), and in a cluster of images we are presented with the overarching erotic reverie that

> Makes the one who feels seem beautiful to the beholder
> Witnessing the idea of the giving of desire—nothing more
> wanted
> Than the little singing notes of wanting—the heart
> Yearning further into giving itself into the air, breath
> Strained into song emptying the golden bell it comes from,
> The pure source poured altogether out and away.

It should be clear that the explanatory and discursive mode has not eliminated lyricism. It has in fact restored to the lyric the modes of discourse that have been rare in this century. The strategy is continued in the remainder of the book. In ''The Unseen,'' set in a tour of a concentration camp, Pinsky addresses the absent God:

> O discredited Lord of Hosts, your servant gapes
> Obediently to swallow various doings of us, the most
> Capable of all your former creatures—we have no shape,
> We are poured out like water, but still
> We try to take in what won't be turned from in despair.

This is not cold exposition but instead intelligent discourse about the heart's history in history. In his poem ''The Cold'' he retrieves that exhausted, fashionable word and moves the philosophical cold outdoors, as weather, where it belongs:

> Or like me, working in a room alone,
> Watching out from a window . . .
> . . . not having been out in hours
> I come up close idly to feel the cold,
> Forgetting for a minute what I was doing.

The Want Bone is not a phallic image but an oral one, the dried mouth bones of a shark, an emblem of its desire to live. It is death longing for life and love, food, and family. Pastiche and assemblage have joined the technique of variations on a theme in this book with a deliberate derangement of Pinsky's apparent subjects and greater tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces in the poems. We find an explicit celebration and savoring of the richness of words, their anarchic history. There is more play with language in this book than in the previous ones, and Pinsky has adapted Apocryphal stories of Jesus' childhood and embroidered the story of the prophet Daniel. In a prose section Jesus in the form of a ciclogriff befriends Isolde to learn about love. The violent Tristan is a bard, and therefore Jesus himself cannot save either him or Isolde, who is boundlessly committed to him. Although we see it coming, the charm is in the telling. This is a book of a middle-aged poet determined to expand his art. He maintains from his earliest days a sense of the well-shaped line, stanza, and poem. Pinsky strays far from the iambic, but never entirely out of range. His rhymes, typically off-rhymes, are inventive and formal without being insistent. He is one of the most sophisticated technicians of his generation and may well prove one of its finest poets.

The new poems in *The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems* extend this mastery and include works that may well become American classics, particularly a poem central to a sequence about cities, ''Avenue,'' and an elegy for Elliot Gilbert, called ''Impossible to Tell,'' built around two jokes. This is new and daring for an elegy, and I like to imagine the author of ''Lycidas'' being thrilled by its rightness. The new poems in the volume are not a random assortment, however. In a note on ''Avenue,'' in reference to the explanation of Yom Kippur as the day of ''at-one-ment,'' Pinsky says, ''All, one: a play of unity and diversity that in turn makes me think of the fragmented, plural American city, held together visibly by words, by the signs and spoken or sung syllables of its streets, where all our 'they' is somehow 'one.''' This motif is woven through the new poems in the volume, many of them dealing with the city as the figure for the multiplicity and ''numerousness'' of the soul. The interwoven web of humanity in which the matrix of Charlie Parker, Pushkin, Sax (the inventor), and the sax-playing Pinsky unites in the ''Ginza Samba.'' Pinsky's vision (and it is right to speak of that) has a lot of the philosophical playfulness of Borges mixed with the air of historical menace of Milosz.

Pinsky includes a poem composed for a Halloween celebration, ''The Rhyme of Reb Nachman,'' among his selection of translations, and a poem by Milosz, ''Incantation,'' among his own poems. Milosz rejected the translation on the grounds that it is an English poem in its own right and not sufficiently subordinated to the Polish. It is an odd situation indeed, and yet it is entirely appropriate to the overlapping boundaries that Pinsky's new work celebrates.

Pinsky's translation of Dantes *Inferno* is the most idiomatic and vigorous adaptation of terza rima in English. His strategy of using consonantal rhyme in place of exact rhyme has enabled him to avoid much of the artificiality of earlier translations and to approximate Dante's famous compression—so much so, in fact, that Dante's tercets seldom last three lines in Pinsky's English and the direct link in Italian between syntax and stanza structure is abandoned. Almost all of Pinsky's tercets are enjambed, unlike the original.

Someone looking for connections between Pinsky and his graduate school mentor, the important and charismatic critic-poet Yvor Winters, would strain to find them. Pinsky is a poet-critic, and the priority of poetry is important. Early in his career he lost Winters's tone of fastidious, moralistic criticism that did not suffer opposition gladly, and he has restored William Carlos Williams to the Winters canon and expanded it to include all sorts of decadent New Yorkers. While there is a vivid, heroic portrait of Winters in the long poem ''Essay on Psychiatrists'' from *Sadness and Happiness,* what survives of that influence in Pinsky's poetry is a struggle with traditional forms and a diction that favors aestheticized

philosophical cold and certitude in only a few early poems. Pinsky's criticism likewise has grown free of Winters's influence. It is urbane, international, and lacks the odor of orthodoxy.

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PLATH, Sylvia (1932–1963)

Sylvia Plath [in *The Colossus*] writes clever, vivacious poetry, which will be enjoyed most by intelligent people capable of having fun with poetry and not just being holy about it. Miss Plath writes from phrase to phrase as well as with an eye on the larger architecture of the poem; each line, each sentence, is put together with a good deal of care for the springy rhythm, the arresting image and—most of all, perhaps—the unusual word. This policy ought to produce quaint, over-gnarled writing, but in fact Miss Plath has a firm enough touch to keep clear of these faults. Here and there one finds traces of ''influences'' not yet completely assimilated (''Snakecharmer,'' for instance, is too like Wallace Stevens for comfort, and the sequence ''Poem for a Birthday'' testifies too flatly to an admiration for Theodore Roethke), but after all, this is a first book, and the surprising thing is how successful Miss Plath has already been in finding an individual manner.

John Wain. *Spectator*. Jan. 13, 1961. p. 50

These last poems of Sylvia Plath's [*Ariel*], once read, hang around one like the smell of morphia, impregnating everything. As the expression, or rather unmodified articulation, of raw pain, with its precommittal intensification of vision and its heightened sharp-edged clarity, they are unique in contemporary poetry. There is little regret or bitterness in them, certainly there is no hope. They are of the moment, looking neither back nor forward, last-gasp cries that long since lost any note of tenderness, or even ironic, self-directed amusement. They are poems for the most part beyond art, as they are also beyond consolation or compassion. Their tone and manner are almost brusquely objective, gestures of vivid dismissal made by someone immune from rescue and without either the mood or the time to modulate or conciliate. Acceptance of conventional, meaningful reality is token, the references to continuing, ordinary life scant. . . .

This is not the sort of book discussable, at this stage anyway, in normal critical terms. It belongs, ironically, to life rather than to literature, its nerve-ends still squirming. In any poetry of such swerving trajectories and imbalance it is easy to lose track: the horrors flap off the walls like vultures, awareness breaks and recedes in hypnotic waves of semi-consciousness. Each of these poems stands recognizable as an act of courage, as a cleanly-struck blow against a superior adversary. But the nature of the conflict is never clearly defined nor the wounded areas properly probed. The ambulance bells are still ringing.

Alan Ross. *London Magazine*. May, 1965. pp. 99, 101

Are these final poems [*Ariel*] entirely legitimate? In what sense does anyone, himself uninvolved and long after the event, commit a subtle larceny when he invokes the echoes and trappings of Auschwitz and appropriates an enormity of ready emotion to his own private design? Was there latent in Sylvia Plath's sensibility, as in that of many of us who remember only by fiat of imagination, a fearful envy, a dim resentment at not having been there, of having missed the rendezvous with hell? In ''Lady Lazarus'' and ''Daddy'' the realization seems to me so complete, the sheer fineness and control so great, that only irresistible need could have brought it off. These poems take tremendous risks, extending Sylvia Plath's essentially austere manner to the very limit. They are a bitter triumph, proof of the capacity of poetry to give to reality the greater permanence of the imagined. She could not return from them.

Already there are poets writing like Sylvia Plath. Certain of her angular mannerisms, her elisions and monotonies of deepening rhyme, can be caught and will undoubtedly have their fashion. But minor poets even of a great intensity—and that is what she was—tend to prove bad models. Sylvia Plath's tricks of voice can be imitated. Not her desperate integrity.

George Steiner. *The Reporter*. Oct. 7, 1965. p. 54

In these poems [in *Ariel*], written in the last months of her life and often rushed out at the rate of two or three a day, Sylvia Plath becomes herself, something imaginary, newly, wildly and subtly created—hardly a person at all, or a woman, certainly not another ''poetess,'' but one of those super-real, hypnotic, great classical heroines. This character is feminine, rather than female, though almost everything we customarily think of as feminine is turned on its head. The voice is now coolly amused, witty, now sour, now fanciful, girlish, charming, now sinking to the strident rasp of the vampire—a Dido, Phaedra, or Medea, who can laugh at herself as ''cow-heavy and floral in my Victorian nightgown.'' Though lines get repeated, and sometimes the plot is lost, language never dies in her mouth.

Everything in these poems is personal, confessional, felt, but the manner of feeling is controlled hallucination, the autobiography of a fever.

Robert Lowell. Foreword to *Ariel* by Sylvia Plath (Harper). 1966. p. vii

Often, very often, Sylvia and I would talk at length about our first suicides; at length, in detail and in depth. . . . Suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem. Sylvia and I often talked opposites. We talked death with burned-up intensity, both of us drawn to it like moths to an electric light bulb. Sucking on it! She told of her first suicide in sweet and loving detail and her description in *The Bell*

Jar is just the same story. It is a wonder that we didn't depress George [Starbuck] with our egocentricity. Instead, I think, we three were stimulated by it, even George, as if death made each of us a little more real at the moment. Thus we went on, in our fashion, ignoring Lowell and the poems left behind. Poems left behind were technique—lasting but, actually, over. We talked death and this was life for us, or better, because of us, our intent eyes, our fingers clutching the glass, three pairs of eyes fixed on someone's—each one's gossip. [1966]

Anne Sexton in *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Charles Newman (Indiana). 1970. p. 175

In [Sylvia Plath], as with perhaps few poets ever, the nature, the poetic genius and the active self, were the same. Maybe we don't need psychological explanations to understand what a difficult and peculiar destiny that means. She had none of the usual guards and remote controls to protect herself from her own reality. She lived right in it, especially during the last two years of her life. Perhaps that is one of the privileges, or prices, of being a woman and at the same time an initiate into the poetic order of events. Though the brains, the strength, the abundance and vivacity of spirits, the artistic virtuosity, the thousand incidental gifts that can turn it into such poetry as hers are another matter. [1966]

Ted Hughes in *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Charles Newman (Indiana). 1970. pp. 187–8

If Sylvia Plath's performance [in *Ariel*] were not so securely knowledgeable, so cannily devised, so richly inventive and so meticulously reined, it would be intolerable. Many of these poems are magnificent; a whole book of them is top-heavy, teetering on that point where the self-created figure threatens to topple over into self-expression and the diversions of psychopathology. Reaching for a poet with whom to compare her, or in whose sphere of influence to ''place'' her—and only the illustrious will do—one hesitates before Blake (too ''big,'' too masculine, too mythopoeic), before Baudelaire (too much the *poseur*, too *raffiné*, perhaps too comfortable in his rancor), and stops at Emily Dickinson. But anguish in Emily Dickinson is a consequence; it partakes of a classical notion of anguish: the great heart victimized by its own humanity. In Sylvia Plath, by contrast, anguish is not a consequence but the whole relentless subject itself. . . . Anything pursued far enough is likely to turn into its opposite: a shriek maintained for eighty-five pages becomes, to say the least, a bore. Nevertheless, what we have here is not, as some bewildered critics have claimed, the death rattle of a sick girl, but the defiantly fulfilling measures of a poet. Taken in small—one is almost forced to say, medicinal—doses, she is a marvel.

John Malcolm Brinnin. *Partisan Review*. Winter, 1967. pp. 156–7

The poetry of Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* is a poetry of surrender, surrender to an imagination that destroys life instead of enhancing it. Nowhere in our literature has a finely wrought art proven so subversive as hers, so utterly at odds with those designs, those structures within which we customarily enclose ourselves to hold experience off at a distance. Emerging from encounter with her poems, as from the murky, subterranean depths of a well, one feels not so much emotionally raped as simply breathless with weariness and confusion. It is as though we had been flung into hideous contact with another order of being, suffocated by a presence too driven and hungry to be supported by the thinness of the air we breathe, a presence thrashing about, taking no notice of us, poor mortal creatures, a presence, finally, reaching, touching, shrieking on a scale that dwarfs into insignificance the familiar scale of our activities. It is with caution and humility that we must approach her art, for it is vaporous with potions that do not intoxicate, but depress and confound. If we listen humbly, there are insistent voices trembling beneath the surface of the poetry, voices which beckon to us, suggesting that we lift our heads from the page and answer the poet in kind, assenting to manipulation by that imagination which has taken everything around it for its own, wringing experience to satisfy its hungers.

Robert Boyers. *Centennial Review*. Spring, 1969. p. 138

Passions of hate and horror prevail in the poetry of Sylvia Plath, running strongly counter to the affirmative and life-enhancing quality of most great English poetry, even in this century. We cannot reconcile her despairing and painful protest with the usual ideological demands of Christian, Marxist, and humanist writers, whether nobly or sympathetically eloquent, like Wordsworth, breezily simplified, like Dylan Thomas, or cunning in ethical and psychological argument, like W.H. Auden or F.R. Leavis. Her poetry rejects instead of accepting, despairs instead of glorying, turns its face with steady consistency towards death, not life. But hating and horrified passions are rooted in love, are rational as well as irrational, lucid as well as bewildered, so humane and honourable that they are constantly enlarged and expanded. We are never enclosed in a private sickness here, and if derangement is a feature of the poetry, it works to enlarge and generalize, not to create an enclosure. Moreover, its enlargement works through passionate reasoning, argument and wit. Its judgement is equal to its genius.

Barbara Hardy in *The Survival of Poetry*, ed. Martin Dodsworth (Faber). 1970. p. 164

Little enough has been said of Sylvia Plath—but perhaps Robert Lowell's description of her poetry as ''controlled hallucination'' (in the introduction to *Ariel*, 1966) is worth volumes. Hers is a sensibility disturbed, which sees reflected in the exterior world the very tensions, conflicts, and fears that haunt the inner spirit. Her power as a poet derives from her capacity to express this state of mind through the evocation of profound horror. The sense of horror springs from many sources: from her habit of dredging up historical atrocities, from the violent intensity of her expression, from the accuracy and hardness of her language, and most significantly, from the nature of her perception. Always she is aware of the doubleness of things, the shark beneath the surface, the tumult beneath the calm, the glitter beneath the veil. The gaze which she turns outward upon the world is schizophrenic; of the things she perceives, her mind asserts, with the speaker in ''Death & Co., '' ''Two, of course there are two.''

This perception leads first to fear and eventually to despair, for it forces upon one the recognition that the world is disjointed, that things are not what they seem. Among Sylvia Plath's works run two rather different ways of expressing poetically the theme of doubleness. One method—the more obvious of the two—proceeds by revealing horror amid an atmosphere of apparent security. This is a somewhat traditional device, certainly not unique with Miss Plath, although in her hands it is capable of vivid effects. A second and somewhat more subtle method illustrates the validity of Lowell's comment: doubleness is conveyed by a sort of hallucinatory vision, a way of seeing simultaneously, the opposing qualities of a thing.

Lynda B. Salamon. *Spirit*. Summer, 1970. p. 34

Sylvia Plath's only novel, the autobiographical *The Bell Jar*, is a deceptively modest, uncommonly fine piece of work. First published in England under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas . . . the book is more than a posthumous footnote to her career as a poet. . . . The novel is in its own right a considerable achievement. It is written to a small scale, but flawlessly—an artistically uncompromising, witty account of the experiences, inner and outer, that led to Miss Plath's earlier breakdown and recovery.

The book is humorous and dramatic, the prose for the most part lean but sometimes, suddenly, full of a transforming imagery. . . .

Miss Plath doesn't claim to ''speak for'' any time or anyone—and yet she does, because she speaks so accurately. . . .

The novel has a sharp and memorable poignancy. With her classical restraint and purity of form, Sylvia Plath is always refusing to break your heart, though in the end she breaks it anyway.

Lucy Rosenthal. *Saturday Review*. April 24, 1971. p. 42

The novel itself [*The Bell Jar*] is no firebrand. It's a slight, charming, sometimes funny and mildly witty, at moments tolerably harrowing ''first'' novel, just the sort of clever book a Smith summa cum laude (which she was) might have written if she weren't given to literary airs. From the beginning our expectations of scandal and startling revelation are disappointed by a modesty of scale and ambition and a jaunty temperateness of tone. The voice is straight out of the 1950's: politely disenchanted, wholesome, yes, wholesome, but never cloying, immediately attractive, nicely confused by it all, incorrigibly truthful; in short, the kind of kid we liked then, the best product of our best schools. The hand of Salinger lay heavy on her.

But this is 1971 and we read her analyst, too wily to be deceived by that decent, smiling, well-scrubbed coed who so wants to be liked and admired. We look for the slips and wait for the voice to crack. We want the bad, the worst news; that's what we're here for, to be made happy by horror, not to be amused by girlish chatter. Our interests are clinical and prurient. A hard case, she confounds us. She never raises her voice.

Saul Maloff. *New Republic*. May 8, 1971. p. 34

I feel in [Sylvia Plath] a special lack of national and local roots, feel it particularly in her poetry, and this I would trace to her foreign ancestors on both sides. They were given and she accepted them as a burden not as a gift; but there they were, somehow cutting her off from what they weren't. . . .

For all the drama of her biography, there is a peculiar remoteness about Sylvia Plath. A destiny of such violent self-destruction does not always bring the real person nearer; it tends, rather, to freeze our assumptions and responses. She is spoken of as a ''legend'' or a ''myth''—but what does that mean?

Sylvia Plath was a luminous talent, self-destroyed at the age of thirty, likely to remain, it seems, one of the most interesting poets in American literature. As an *event* she stands with Hart Crane, Scott Fitzgerald, and Poe rather than with Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, or Elizabeth Bishop.

Elizabeth Hardwick. *New York Review of Books*. Aug. 12, 1971. p. 3

In some strange way, I suspect [Plath] thought of herself as a realist: the deaths and resurrections of ''Lady Lazarus,'' the nightmares of ''Daddy'' and the rest had all been proved on her pulses. That she brought to them an extraordinary inner wealth of imagery and associations was almost beside the point, however essential it is for the poetry itself. Because she felt she was simply describing the facts as they had happened, she was able to tap in the coolest possible way all her large reserves of skill: those subtle rhymes and half-rhymes, the flexible, echoing rhythms and offhand colloquialism by which she preserved, even in her most anguishing probing, complete artistic control. Her internal horrors were as factual and precisely sensed as the barely controllable stallion on which she was learning to ride or the car she had tried to smash up.

So she spoke of suicide with a wry detachment, and without any mention of the suffering or the drama of the act.

A. Alvarez. *The Savage God* (Random). 1972. p. 20

''Such a dark funnel, my father,'' Sylvia Plath cries out in her ''Little Fugue.'' And Otto Plath is a funnel indeed, leading her psyche from the openness of youth down toward the small dark point of death. . . . To date no one has traced the trajectory of her father's memory in the body of Plath's work. We suggest that a pattern of guilt over imagined incest informs all of Plath's prose and poetry. When Otto Plath dies of natural causes in a hospital on November 2, 1940, he might just as well have been a lover jilting his beloved. Indeed, in all her poems Plath makes of this separation a deliberate desertion. In poem after poem the father drowns himself.

This is the central myth of Plath's imagination. Critics have called hers a poetry of annihilation, poetry in which her own suicidal impulses are set against the larger framework of a world which deliberately destroys—the Nazi genocide of the Jews, the Kamikazes, Hiroshima. Even a train is said to eat its track. A favorite Plath image is that of the hook: from the bend in a road, to the corner of her son's smile—both traps for the unsuspecting. Plath's is a terrible, unforgiving nature; in feeling victimized by her father's early death, and later by an unsatisfactory compensatory marriage, she makes no distinction between her tragedy and those of Auschwitz or Nagasaki. [1972]

Robert Philips. *The Confessional Poets* (Southern Illinois). 1973. p. 128

Given the fact that in a few poems Sylvia Plath illustrates an extreme state of existence, one at the very boundary of nonexistence, what illumination—moral, psychological, social—can be provided of either this state or the general human condition by a writer so deeply rooted in the extremity of her plight? Suicide is an eternal possibility of our life and therefore always interesting; but what is the relation between a sensibility so deeply captive to the idea of suicide and the claims and possibilities of human existence in general? That her story is intensely moving, that her talent was notable, that her final breakthrough arouses admiration—of course! Yet in none of the essays devoted to praising Sylvia Plath have I found a coherent statement as to the nature, let alone the value, of her vision. Perhaps it is assumed that to enter the state of mind in which she found herself at the end of her life is its own ground for high valuation; but what will her admirers say to those who reply that precisely this assumption is what needs to be questioned?

Irving Howe. *Harper's Magazine*. Jan., 1972. p. 91

Winter Trees is the slimmest as well as the last of Sylvia Plath's collections; there are nineteen poems here on forty printed pages. But there is ample further evidence of her endless imaginative resource in the restatement of her familiar themes; all proceeding, ultimately, from the ''divided self,'' the self which is alienated, oppressed, disembodied, dissolved. We meet again the familiar images, particularly the (characteristically schizoid) image of the mirror, which appears in all but two of these poems and seems to haunt them with its inevitability and its destructiveness. . . . We are dazed again by the complicated use of colours, almost as a symbolism, to signify states of mind, attitudes; the alienating absolutes of black and white, the terrifying violence red almost always means, the uncertainty of blue, which can signify the cold night-blue of the moon (''What blue, moony ray ices their dreams?''), blue angels—''the cold angels, the abstractions,'' or the sky-blue of a child's eyes; and the occasional consolation of the organic colours, brown and green.

Damian Grant. *The Critical Quarterly*. Spring, 1972. pp. 92–3

The poems we write are the only poems we can. We pretend they are choices when, in fact, they may be so only in the obverse sense: that we are the chosen. Many times we may not even be free to leave them unwritten. This is especially true in a poet as obsessive and emblematic as Sylvia Plath, whose most noteworthy book was produced in something equivalent to Keats' ''great year'' which preceded, like his, a premature death.

Now, ten years later, surely enough time has passed that we can dispense with the ''Plath myth,'' an obscuring glitter around *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar* which wraps them in biographical data. After all, the novel is little more than a psychologically meager but socially accurate portrait of the 1950's. Plath's last poems, however, project a mythic world which is not ''confessional'' in an autobiographical but a sacramental sense. What they achieve, finally, is even beyond their treatment of the persona as ''woman''—a combination saint and witch in Ariel's speaker—a new dimension for the contemporary lyric in which tragedy is again possible because seen from a perspective both comic and magic.

Peter Cooley. *Hollins Critic*. Feb., 1973. pp. 1–2

Tragedy is not a woman, however gifted, dragging her shadow around in a circle or analyzing with dazzling scrupulosity the stale, boring inertia of the circle; tragedy is cultural, mysteriously enlarging the individual so that what he has experienced is both what we have experienced and what we need not experience—because of his, or her, private agony. It is proper to say that Sylvia Plath represents for us a tragic figure involved in a tragic action, and that her tragedy is offered to us as a near-perfect work of art in her books *The Colossus* (1960), *The Bell Jar* (1963), *Ariel* (1965), and the posthumous volumes published in 1971, *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees*. This essay is an attempt to analyze Miss Plath in terms of her cultural significance, to diagnose through her poetry the pathological aspects of our era which make a death of the spirit inevitable—for that era and for all who believe in its assumptions. It is also based upon the certainty that Miss Plath's era is concluded and that we may consider it with the sympathetic detachment with which we consider any era that has gone before us and makes our own possible: the cult of Sylvia Plath insists that she is a saintly martyr, but of course she is something less dramatic than that, though more valuable. The ''I'' of the poems is an artful construction, a tragic figure whose tragedy is classical, the result of a limited vision that believed itself the mirror held up to nature—as in the poem ''Mirror,'' the eye of a little god that imagines itself without preconceptions, ''unmisted by love or dislike.'' This is the audacious hubris of tragedy, the inevitable reality-challenging statement of the participant in a dramatic action which he does not know is ''tragic.'' He dies, and only we can see the purpose of his death—to illustrate the error of a personality that believed itself godlike.

Joyce Carol Oates. *Southern Review*. Summer, 1973. pp. 501–2

For Plath, poetry had always been symbolic action. In *The Colossus*, she had used language to impose an order upon experience, but the order in her poems contradicted her vision of reality as fragmented and perpetually disintegrating. Only in a poem could the world be composed and controlled, and so poetry was artificial; it lied. In the later poetry, she begins to tell the truth. When she comes to see that reality resides in her own mind, words and poems become as real as anything else. The expression of her vision in words unleashes reality, for her poems describe what is real: her own consciousness. The action that is poetry is recognized as symbolic action (she never ceases to know the *difference* between art and life), but the symbols now reflect rather than counteract her own life. . . .

There remains a gap between woman and poet.

As poet, Plath sees with increasing clarity this gap. She sees as well the existence of life and its inevitable corruption into death. The forces in her that gave rise to her awareness of and fascination with death are surely complex; but surely the fact that she existed for so long with a sense of her own self as disparate, bifurcated, contributed to a desire for wholeness that she could equate only with death. The pulse of life was the movement towards disintegration: the stasis of death brought integration. And perfection. For Plath had viewed perfection as a solution to her problem, a perfection that she had been led to believe was achievable through talent and sheer willpower. She needed to be good at everything because in that way she could *be* everything: woman and poet.

Although this program proved impossible, she was left with a belief in, and a desire to achieve, perfection. There was perfection in death.

Suzanne Juhasz. *Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women—A New Tradition* (Octagon Books, 1976), pp. 102–3

If her poetry is understood as constituting a system of symbols that expresses a unified mythic vision, her images may be seen to be emblems of that myth. Red, white and black, for example, the characteristic colors in her late poetry, function as mythic emblems of her state of being much as they do in the mythologies which she drew upon. A great many other particulars of her poetry are similarly determined by her system, and personal and historical details as well are subordinate to it. While a confessional poet might alter certain details to make them more fitting. . . Plath's alteration of details has a deeper significance. Her protagonist in ''Daddy'' says, ''I was ten when they buried you,'' but Plath was only eight when her father died. A magical ''one year in every ten'' cycle, however, conveys the mythic inevitability necessary to define her state of being. It is precisely such details of confessional literalness that Plath most frequently alters or eliminates, when they are not sufficiently mythic. . . .

Without [the awareness of a mythic dimension in Plath's poetry], the elements of suffering, violence, death, and decay will generally be seen as aspects of a self-indulgent stance that is merely—albeit brilliantly—nasty, morbid, and decadent, the extremist exhibitionism. Were she a ''confessional'' poet, this might be the case. But her poetry is of a different order, and these details are absorbed into a broader system of concerns. To see the autobiographical details only as such is to regard Plath's vision of suffering and death as morbid, but to appreciate the deeper significance of her poetry is to understand her fascination with death as connected with and transformed into a broader concern with the themes of rebirth and transcendence.

To deal with the structure of Plath's poetry is primarily to deal with the voices, landscape, characters, images, emblems, and motifs which articulate a mythic drama having something of the eternal necessity of Greek tragedy. The myth has its basis in her biography, but it in turn exercises a selective function on her biography and determines within it an increasingly restricted context of relevance as her work becomes more symbolic and archetypal. . . .

Had Plath survived, it seems likely, given the nature of her concerns at the end of her life, that she would have further developed and further explored the overtly religious themes of some of the last poems, coming more and more to realize her power of what Ted Hughes calls her ''free and controlled access to depths formerly reserved to the primitive ecstatic priests, shamans and Holy men. . .'' and, as in the case of her mythology, evolving a sensibility shaped by several traditions, but with a voice unmistakably her own. The unflinchingness of her gaze, her refusal to compromise the truth, her precision, her intelligence, and her passion—all of these would have qualified her uniquely in the discovery of her wholeness, to convince us that the achievement is possible.

Judith Kroll. *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (Harper & Row, 1976), pp. 4–6, 210–211

Romantic in its immediacy, her sharpened poetic was not quite typical of the sixties, and precisely to the extent that it was Poundian. Poundian in the first place as to eye. Her work unfolds perhaps for the first time the full dramatic potential of what T.E. Hulme called ''the new visual art,'' an art depending ''for its effect not on a kind of half sleep produced by meter, but on arresting the attention, so much so that the succession of visual images should exhaust one.'' (This rapid piling up of ''distinct images'' produces ''the poet's state in the reader.'' Now, despite the avowed classicism of Hulme and Pound, Imagism was actually a centaur poetic of which the basic and stronger half was romantic sensation. To induce the poet's state in the reader when that state is visual ecstasy, a state in which the magic breath of metaphor ripples the dull surface of life, is to write romantically.) But though the new visual art set itself off from leisured traditional description by rapid-fire figuration, it was notorious for being static, limitedly pictorial. The instant fixing of a single impression, as by a jeweled pin, was its convention. Still, there was nothing to prevent its being thickcoming and developmental; it could be galvanized.

Or so Plath, more than any other, was to prove. She made images burst forth and succeed one another under acute psychological pressure, the dramatic crisis of the poem a generating furor. In violent import, color, solidity, and velocity her images are unsurpassed. Even when her spirit ebbs, her imagery ferments. In ''Words,'' for instance, one metaphor instantly gives rise to two others, which are then elaborated in quick succession, each giving way and coming in again, but without any effect of haste. Proliferation has perhaps never been more subtle and vigorous, more constantly deepening.

But the most ''delicate and difficult'' part of the new art, so Hulme implies, is ''fitting the rhythm'' to the image—fitting *all* the sound, I might amend. And Plath's ear is no less gifted than her imaginative eye. For instance, she rivals Pound's hearkening ear for the calling back and forth and expressive rightness of sounds. . . .

With Pound, Plath also shared the decidedly modern ear for what she called the ''straight out'' rhythms and words of prose and colloquial speech; like Pound, if less ambitiously and more evenly, she assimilated them into poetry, creating new verse rhythms. . . .

Plath's poetic, then, is Poundian—romantic. True, classical simplicity shows up in passages, and classical grace and proportion sometimes govern whole poems. Then, too, her persistent use of stanzas reflects the same orderly habit of mind that made her list each morning what she wanted to accomplish during the day. Undeniably, moreover, certain associations of the word ''romantic'' shrivel when held up to her flame. The shriek of her ego, the sound of a tense holding on to little, drove off every softness. She maximized horror as if she lived on menace. All the same, her poetic is full of romantic presence. No retreat, no passivity, can harbor in it; it is the aggressive poetic of one buried alive but not ready to die. (Even in expressing revulsion from reality she reached obsessively and inconsistently for visual analogy, a language of rapport.) What is her struggle against fear, pain, isolation, if not romantic? Perhaps we would deny her reasons for writing at all to think of it as anything else or anything less.

Calvin Bedient. In *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*, ed. Gary Lane (Johns Hopkins Univ. Pr., 1979), pp. 15–18

Plath's moving universe is animated at times by love but more often by the forces that dominated her emotional life, primarily

rage and fear. Her importance as a poet depends upon how successfully she evolves strategies with language to make effective metaphors for the terrific experience of those murderous forces. She is fascinating because the ''shape'' of her psyche is peculiarly bottomless, a world of infinite plunge. . . .

This is perhaps the darkest form of romanticism—a form darker than Roethke's—the evocation of a series of horrors, each more horrible than the last, and of which no man knows the end. Plath's great and underlying terror is always the nausea of movement itself. Even Plath's pleasures crowd in on her this way, threaten to become too much if she cannot somehow bring them under control, slow their onslaught. It is true, as some have suggested, that the poems may be read as attempts to create a mythical self capable of withstanding the changes in her life, the betrayals and the losses. But it's the kinesthetic sense of pitch and roll, the stomach-tilting sensation of that bottomless series of plunges, that we experience most strongly. And the evocation of that sense is her particular genius. . . .

Plath uses many devices, not all of them subtle, to achieve the artistic effect of a world in violent motion. For one thing, many of the late poems make use of the motif of journeying: ''Blackberrying,'' ''On Deck,'' ''Crossing the Water,'' ''Ariel,'' ''Getting There,'' ''The Bee Meeting,'' ''Totem,'' and perhaps ''Words'' as well. There are also poems like ''Black Rook in Rainy Weather'' and ''Letter in November'' that seem to indicate that the shapes of her thoughts, her intuitions, come to her in motion rather than when she is standing still. Another of her devices is the beginning *in medias res*. No one is better than Plath at giving her reader the experience of being swept up in an action that has been gathering momentum for some time. . . . Two devices seem to me a part of her medium not always sufficiently considered when critics have sought to unravel her message. One of them is the deliberate use of ambiguity, of elaborate puns (another of Roethke's intensifying devices), and the other is a manipulation of images that, in some of her better poems, makes her the poetic daughter of Wallace Stevens.

Richard Allen Blessing. In *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*, ed. Gary Lane (John Hopkins Univ. Pr., 1979). pp. 59–61

Plath appears as a unique and disturbing figure in American poetry. She is a poet of enormous talent, who pushes toward a vitalistic account of human existence in its relation to a hostile external reality. Yet she fails to believe in her own theoretical and positive program sufficiently to overcome the corrosive effects of death-fear and death-longing. She enacts repeatedly a drama that can terminate in either life or death, using poetry as a means of playing out the alternate fates reserved for her by existence. The discrete moments of unity and ecstasy in her work anticipate a greater unity of thought and sensation, but that unification of diversity never emerges. As she returns again and again to the same symbolically charged landscapes and the same figures of death and suffering, she seems to lose faith in the ultimate triumph of the life force over the forces of negation. The process of self-transformation winds down into self-annihilation.

Yet it is perhaps absurd to expect that Plath by herself could present an integrated vision of body and mind, of life and death. Our culture has been riddled since Puritan times with intense divisions within its system of ideals and its versions of human purpose. Plath reflects a gigantic split within American culture between its positive valuation of a fierce selfhood and its radical denial of the body's sufficiency. Plath is unusual in the extremity of her rejection of the body, but her search for self-expansion through a denial of the surrounding physical reality—of the body, of the social system, of the limitations of time and space—is the essential American story. . . .

Plath's quest for initiatory change fails because the other cannot be brought under the domination of the self, even when the self wills its own destruction so as to merge with the world. Her fierce and brilliant language is all directed at the other whom she wishes to overcome, but the giants and colossi of her poetry fall down only to rise again; the body immolates itself only to return to its old, guilt-ridden shape. As Kafka says, the suffering the artist undergoes releases him—for more suffering. Plath's initiatory dramas release her from one state of suffering so that she may endure a new agony. For the briefest moment, though, she is set free from the imprisonment of selfhood; and it is this moment that her best poems, ''Ariel,'' ''Fever 103°,'' ''Lady Lazarus,'' and ''The Couriers,'' celebrate. If she could not sustain her liberation beyond the moment, she still provides an intense vision of the irreducible, entwined core of life and death.

Jon Rosenblatt. *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation* (Univ. of North Carolina Pr., 1979), pp. 161–63

More than a decade of readers and critics have been deceived in reading and reacting to Sylvia Plath. She has been neatly positioned under that confessional umbrella where life's irrefutable direction is deathward, where certain emotions have become clichés of madness. Her poems have been petrified into a handful of graven ur-myths (''preexisting options that constitute a state of being'') that attempt to normalize Sivvy at the same time that they rob her poetry of its full range of wit and vitality. . . . It is simply inaccurate to trace Plath's development to a final, glossy union of warring selves, woman and artist, or to place in a matrix the poet's sensibility in guilt over imagined incest with ''Dad.'' Such resolutions betray the same limitation: ultimately they dismiss Plath the poet, who seventeen years after her untimely death we are only beginning to appreciate for her emotional pioneering and remarkably skilled poetics. . . .

In *The Colossus* Plath failed to incorporate a perfect, unitive, imaginative vision into the functioning of her poetic sensibility. By using the most intimate subject matter available to her—women's blood and birth myths, voluntary and involuntary creation—she evaluates her old poetic, its failures and its promises in *Crossing the Water*. While Plath is exploring a new freedom in form, rhythm, and sound, she is also revising inherited stereotypes about women. These simultaneous functions form a more intimate commentary on—and guideline for—her future development than the distanced world of art provided her in *The Colossus*. . . .

Thematically and technically, the last poems, defying both critical and psychological labels, argue for a positive, creative space for ambivalence. Plath demonstrates her mobility between the contradictory extremes of self-effacement and the diminished life on the one hand, and theatrical energy on the other. The speaker reminds us that her enlarged sensibility is always at work weighing, balancing, and combining. Her expansiveness is not a matter of diffused emotions out of control or schizophrenic inattention. Rather, it is a conscious love of motion. . . .

Certain themes are present in slightly altered forms throughout her writings: she counsels physical limitations, warns against the hazards of an exclusive imaginative life, mocks romantic illusions and later marital-love delusions, recognizes the failure of a simple identity. Yet these themes seem less important, less defining, than Plath's consciousness of her changing poetic and her explorations of the startling gamut of emotional options for the speaking voice. By *Ariel and Winter Trees*, she has turned ''fatal equilibrium'' into creative ambivalence, giving a dual artistic authority to passivity and motion in her final poems.

Mary Lynn Broe. *Protean Poetic: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (Univ. of Missouri Pr., 1980), pp. 180–81, 187–91

Committing suicide is desperation, demand for relief, but I don't see how we can ignore the way in which it is edged with pleasure and triumph in Sylvia Plath's work. In *The Bell Jar* she thinks of slashing her wrists in the tub and imagines the water ''gaudy as poppies''—an image like those in her later poems. When she is unable to do the act, she still wants ''to spill a little blood'' for practice. ''Then I felt a small, deep thrill, and a bright seam of red welled up at the lip of the slash. The blood gathered darkly, like fruit, and rolled down my ankle into the cup of my black patent leather shoe.'' These passages, and others much more brilliant in her poems, show a mind in a state of sensual distortion, seeking pain as much as death, contemplating with grisly lucidity the mutilation of the soul and the flesh. . . .

With Sylvia Plath's suicide is a performance. ''Lady Lazarus'' describes it with a raging, confident pride. There is no apology or fearfulness. Suicide is an assertion of power, of the strength, not the weakness, of the personality. . . .

The circumstances of her suicide in London . . . lead [A.] Alvarez to speculate that Sylvia Plath didn't ''entirely'' want to kill herself. She ''risked'' death—and lost.

Elizabeth Hardwick. ''On Sylvia Plath.'' In Paul Alexander, ed. *Ariel Ascending: Writings about Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 104, 106–7

What *The Bell Jar* ultimately showed was a woman struggling to become whole, not a woman who had reached some sense of stable self. And that conclusion, according to Annis Pratt in *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*, is what any reader might expect from a sensitive woman author. As Pratt observes:

> . . . even the most conservative authors create narratives manifesting an acute tension between what any normal human being might desire and what a woman must become. Woman's fiction reflects an experience radically different from men's because our drive towards growth as persons is thwarted by our society's prescriptions concerning gender. . . . We are outcasts in the land.

The Bell Jar must certainly be read as the story of that inevitable clash, a dulled and dulling repetition of lives all too familiar to contemporary readers, and a testimony to the repressive cultural mold that trapped many mid-century women, forcing them outside what should have been their rightful, productive lives. For those of us who lived through the 1950s, *The Bell Jar* moves far beyond being Sylvia Plath's autobiography.

Linda W. Wagner. *Women's Studies*. 1986, pp. 67–68

In her earliest work, Plath directly attacks Christianity but soon goes beyond this merely negative attitude in her search for a religious stance of her own. The search does indeed take her into the world of ''cults,'' or rather of the occult. Her occultism may be taken either as a sign of the attempt to find '' new Holy Ground'' or as a symptom of mental disturbance. One of the values of Anne Stevenson's biography of Plath, *Bitter Fame*, is that it documents the poet's occult interests so thoroughly, even though the biography's rather negative tone makes the occultism seem a mere symptom of psychological instability. Rather than a mere symptom, Plath's occult studies were a stage in her poetic development and a source of her mature symbolism. . . .

In deriving the origins of religion from ambivalence toward the father, Freud in effect identifies the patterns in Plath's work that stem from her love/hate feelings toward her own father: the communication with him in the quasireligious afterlife of occultism, her ambivalence toward figures like Johnny Panic, Pan, and the ''old god'' of ''Ouija,'' the theme of the double that obsessed her from the time of her Smith College thesis to the writing of poems like ''Death & Co.,'' and finally the dualistic mythology of her mature poetry. In other words, considering Plath's occultism as a symptom, or as a compensation for the loss of a father, leads directly to a source for what [Ted] Hughes called her ''chapters in a mythology.''

By using the terms Hughes employs, we may understand her occultism as a creative element in Plath's search for ''new Holy Ground, a new divinity'' and not only as a psychological symptom. Although her ''new divinity'' was no less threatening than the Christian God, it was her own unique conception that inspired rather than oppressed her imagination. . . . When Pan spoke to her from the ring of letters, she heard the unique voice of her inspiration.

Timothy Materer. ''Occultism as Source and Symptom in Sylvia Plath's 'Dialogue over a Ouija Board.''' *Twentieth Century Literature*. Summer, 1991, pp. 132, 145–46

The last poems illuminate the feelings that led to the smile which [D.M.] Thomas described as seraphic, feelings that gave her the same pleasure as a beautiful dream or vision. We think of suicide as an attack on the self, but to fall in love with it is to want it as something you can use, to attack obstacles in the way of peace and harmony and to join yourself with the force which seems to have been working through you. You feel you have been used, and you want to be used more fully. Writing at high speed is like listening to a voice and taking dictation, or working as a medium who lets the spirit take over her voice. . . .

In ''Paralytic'' she produces a variation on the theme of the engine and the track by distinguishing between the iron god who lovingly makes her go on breathing and the lungs which are dust bags, reminiscent of the two gray papery bags in ''Apprehensions.'' But how long will the breathing go on? The lines about the rock and the fingers are ambiguous. We don't know whether her mind is a rock with no fingers or a rock her fingers can't grip. She's lying like a dead egg on a world she can't touch. The dead egg

suggests miscarriage, while the paradox is another image of circularity, linking death with the nonexistence that comes before birth. Other people have no more reality than photographs. She's beyond their reach. Wants and desires have fallen from her.

Ronald Hayman. *Death and Life of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Birch Lane, 1991), pp. 195–96

The foremost obstacle to reading Plath's poems as elegies is probably their harsh ambivalence; but this is precisely her most important contribution to the genre—her enlargement of the elegy's affective parameters beyond the traditional pathos, love, reverence, and competitive camaraderie. Summoning a violent anger at her father, Plath shuns the elegy's affiliations with love poetry and encomium. She uses the genre ''to express anger creatively'': ''Fury,'' she observes of her writing, ''flows out into the figure of the letters'' (*Journals* 273, 256). Plath extracts and magnifies the elegy's potential aggression toward the dead, which canonical elegists convert into male bonding and professional competition or expend on nature, third parties, and themselves. . . .

Moreover, Plath broke taboos not only on desecrating and openly mourning the dead but also on female expressions of rage, thereby setting a precedent of special importance for women poets. The daughter's elegy for the father became, with her help, one of the subgenres that enabled women writers to voice antipatriarchal anger in poetry—anger initially focused on the familial embodiment of masculine authority.

Jahan Ramazini. ''Daddy, I Have Had to Kill You.'' *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*. Oct., 1993, pp. 1143, 1154

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PORTER, Katherine Anne (1890–1980)

Miss Porter has no genius but much talent. Her average level is high, and she doesn't let you down. She is more fundamentally serious than Katherine Mansfield, less neurotic, closer to the earth. She is dry-eyed, even in tragedy: when she jokes, she does not smile. You feel you can trust her. . . . Having praised so much, I pause and wonder just what it is that prevents me from uttering the final, whole-hearted hurrah. . . . She is grave, she is delicate, she is just—but she lacks altogether, for me personally, the vulgar appeal. I cannot imagine that she would ever make me cry, or laugh aloud.

Christopher Isherwood. *New Republic*. April 19, 1929. pp. 312–3

Miss Porter's mind is one of those highly civilized instruments of perception that seems to have come out of old societies, where the ''social trend'' is fixed and assumed. The individual character as the product of such a background also has a certain constancy of behavior which permits the writer to ignore the now common practice of relating individual conduct to some abstract social or psychological law; the character is taken as a fixed and inviolable entity, predictable only in so far as a familiarity may be said to make him so, and finally unique as the center of inexhaustible depths of feeling and action. In this manner Miss Porter approaches her characters, and it is this that probably underlies many of the very specific virtues of her writing.

Allen Tate. *The Nation*. Oct. 1, 1930. pp. 352–3

It is to Miss Porter's high credit that, having fixed upon the exceptional background and event, she has not yielded, in her treatment of them, to queerness and forced originality of form. . . . Miss Porter has a range of effects, but each comes through in its place, and only at the demand of her material. She rejects the exclamatory tricks that wind up style to a spurious intensity, and trusts for the most part, to straightforward writing, to patience in detail and to a thorough imaginative grasp on cause and character.

Louise Bogan. *New Republic*. Oct. 22, 1930. p. 277

Katherine Anne Porter moves in the illustrious company headed by Hawthorne, Flaubert, and Henry James. It is the company of storytellers whose fiction possesses distinct esthetic quality, whose feelings have attained harmonious expression in the work. . . . Each of the narratives maintains its own tone—in the sense of effects of color and modulation and accents appropriate to the expression of its individual sentiment. And each of the poignant little dramas represented by them unfolds continually and unpredictably, never betraying its ultimate turns, which arrive as shocks and surprises. Ideal beauty, a fugitive poetry, again and again flashes through the substance of the narrative. But the tone, too, invariably is unemphatic and quiet.

Paul Rosenfeld. *Saturday Review*. April 1, 1939. p. 7

Emphasis on her style should not obscure the fact that Miss Porter has other attributes of a good fiction writer. At her best she has mastered narrative pace and narrative construction; her dialogue is colloquial and at the same time graceful and dignified: she has observed with minuteness a variety of locales and ways of living; her people are speaking likenesses; she has wit; and there is a shrewd modern intelligence, if not an extremely original or forceful one, dominating the story from some little distance.

Philip Blair Rice. *The Nation*. April 15, 1939. p. 442

The exquisite rightness of this author's art has been commented upon by many; and these sketches and tales reveal to the vague tribe, the discriminating reader, what fundamental brainwork goes into the creating of episodes that, on the surface, seem hastily thrown together. To be sure, this deftness is bought at a price, and the careful casualness of Miss Porter's approach sometimes reminds one of a cat stalking its prey with unnecessary caution. If

some of these narratives were told in the straight-forward narrative manner formerly characteristic of the short story, they might not lose in delicacy and might gain in dramatic power.

Howard Mumford Jones. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 30, 1944. p. 15

Miss Porter's thematic statements are given their extraordinary power through a rich and complex characterization. Four or five outstanding personality traits are usually boldly established, and these are used as reference points from which to thrust with the quick image and the loaded phrase into the spaces of modifying qualification. The qualification made, she retires for a moment to the centre, waits calmly, and then stabs again—this time either farther in the same direction or in a new direction. In the end, though the characters are typical, recognizable types, they are also particular flesh and bones—somewhat fluid, unpredictable, elusive, contradictory.

Charles Allen. *AQ*. Summer, 1946. p. 93

Katherine Anne Porter is conventionally praised for her humanity and warmth and for the stoic virtues which her people show in the face of life's hardships. It is true that she sets up the stoic as the best of behavior. It is also true that the dignity and compassion of her characters are strikingly apparent. But Miss Porter's world is a black and tragic one, filled with disaster, heartbreak, and soul-wrecking disillusionment. The most noble of her characters . . . must submit in the nature of things to sorrows which are not ennobling but destructively abrasive of joy, love, and hope; all of them end with a bleak realization of the Everlasting Nay. They are confronted by the thing ''most cruel of all,'' which in its enormity transcends all other sorrows—the obliteration of hope. The tiny particle of light must always be snuffed out in the depths of the whirlpool.

James William Johnson. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Autumn, 1960. p. 611

[*Ship of Fools*] is a vast portrait gallery, with portraits of all sizes hung here and there on the wall, high and low; and some of the portrayed ones seem to dance down out of their frames; some tumble out, some fight their way out, with fearful vitality. I can think of only one possible reason for anyone's not liking this book: just at the start the characters are almost too strong, one shrinks from them a little. No, you may say, I do not wish to spend another page with this smug glutton, or this hypochondriac drunkard, or this lachrymose widow; no, not another word out of that girl in the green dress! But presently, having read a certain number of pages, you feel a grudging sympathy with one and all, or a rueful empathy, or at least solidarity, as a human being.

Glenway Wescott. *Atlantic Monthly*. April, 1962. p. 48

Her contemptuous and morbid attitude toward human sexuality plays a large part in deflecting her sensibility to its incessant quarrel with human nature and in leading it by inevitable stages to a vision of life that is less vice and folly than a hideously choking slow death. For Miss Porter's versions of political action, artistic creation, religious belief, teaching, and so forth are no less skewed and embittered than her versions of copulation. Further, this clammy connection between sex and evil appears to rule out any feeling toward her characters other than a nagging exasperated irony, and to remove the possibility of any struggle toward deeper insight. As a result, the consciousness that is operating in the book, for all its range of view, is standing, so to speak, on a dime, and has little contact with the sources of imaginative vitality and moral power that renew a long work of fiction.

Theodore Solotaroff. *Commentary*. Oct., 1962. p. 286

Life—which to Miss Porter means personal relationships—is a hazardous affair, however cautiously we try to live it. We walk a tightrope, never more than a step away from possible disaster, so strong and so intimately connected with our need for other people are the primitive impulses of violence and egoism and so thin is the net of civilized behavior that is between us and the pit. Indeed, if in trying to civilize ourselves we have been trying to make order out of chaos, Miss Porter seems to be saying that we have succeeded only in becoming more systematically and efficiently, though less directly violent; the more definite and clear-cut the code by which we live and expect others to live, the more clearly even our ordinary actions reflect the violence that is only imperfectly submerged and that many erupt savagely and nakedly at any time.

Marjorie Ryan. *Critique*. Fall, 1962. p. 94

Innovation in the modern novel is often mere trickiness: to eliminate plot, to eliminate time, even, as in some recent French fiction, to eliminate characters, Katherine Anne Porter in *Ship of Fools* has used no tricks that were not contained in the workbag of George Eliot. Her innovations, however, are still fundamental. Her book not only contains no hero or heroine; it contains no character who is either the reader or the author, no character with whom the reader can ''identify.'' Nor is there anywhere in the book any affirmation of the basic striving upwards or even courage of mankind, always considered essential to a ''great'' novel. To have put it in would have begged the very question the novel asks. And, finally, despite all of Henry James's warnings, Miss Porter has eschewed her ''native pastures.'' Not only does the action take place at sea, between the ports of countries other than the United States, on a German boat, but the American characters are less vivid than the German and Spanish, are even a bit pale beside them. Mrs. Treadwell seems less of a born New Yorker than the Captain seems a Berliner.

Yet the experience of reading *Ship of Fools* is still an exhilarating rather than a somber or depressing one, because Miss Porter has reproduced the very stuff of life in reproducing those twenty-seven days on the *Vera*, and her novel sparkles with vitality and humor.

Louis Auchincloss. *Pioneers and Caretakers* (Minnesota). 1965. p. 151

She has constantly dealt with the chaos of the universe and with the forces within man and within society which have led to man's

alienation. Her probings of the human condition are deeply personal and yet, because of the constant play of irony in everything she writes, impersonal also.

Her often and justly praised style is never mannered, is perfectly adaptable to her material, and is characterized by clarity. She has consciously avoided stylistic characteristics or peculiarities which would make it instantly recognizable. No skeleton keys are needed to unlock her stories or her style. She learned from Sterne, Mrs. Woolf, Joyce, James, and others; but she set out not to imitate them but to write simply and clearly, flowingly and flawlessly. She used her admirable style to create characters of complexity, characters which grip the imagination: María Concepción, Braggioni, Miranda, Stephen, Homer T. Hatch, Papa Müler, to name only a few. She also re-created with authority the social backgrounds of Mexico, of turn-of-the-century Texas, of Denver during wartime, of immigrant Irish in the slums.

George Hendrick. *Katherine Anne Porter* (Twayne). 1965. p. 154

Miss Porter's imagination is statuesque, not dynamic: it does not see life in dramatic terms as the grinding of past and present. She does not think at all in terms of action. In her best stories, to exist is to remember: this is the source of their identity, their stability. (Unamuno says somewhere: ''Intelligence is a terrible thing, it tends to death as memory tends to stability.'') When Miss Porter cares about her characters, she gives them a past dense enough and a memory searching enough to ensure their stability. But she feels a force only when it has fixed its object in position in its frame; and then she probes it by retrospection. A dynamic imagination works differently; as in John Crowe Ransom's poems, for instance, where actions speak louder than words or pictures.

Denis Donoghue. *New York Review of Books*. Nov. 11, 1965. p. 18

She knows, we are forced to believe, that if one is to try to see ''all,'' one must be willing to see the dark side of the moon. She has a will, a ferocious will, to face, but face in its full context, what Herman Melville called the great ''NO'' of life. If stoicism is the underlying attitude in this fiction, it is a stoicism without grimness or arrogance, capable of gaiety, tenderness, and sympathy, and its ethical point of reference is found in those characters who, like Granny Weatherall, have the toughness to survive but who survive by a loving sense of obligation to others, this sense being, in the end, only a full affirmation of the life-sense, a joy in strength.

Robert Penn Warren. *The Yale Review*. Winter, 1966. p. 290

The anger that speaks everywhere in the stories would trouble the heart for their author whom we love except that her anger is pure, the reason for it evident and clear, and the effect exhilarating. She has made it the tool of her work; what we do is rejoice in it. We are aware of the compassion that guides it, as well. Only compassion could have looked where she looks, could have seen and probed what she sees. Real compassion is perhaps always in the end unsparing; it must make itself a part of knowing. Self-pity does not exist here; these stories come out trenchant, bold, defying; they are tough as sanity; unrelinquished sanity, is tough.

Despair is here, as well described as if it were Mexico. It is a despair, however, that is robust and sane, open to negotiation by the light of day. Life seen as a savage ordeal has been investigated by a straightforward courage, unshaken nerve, a rescuing wit, and above all with the searching intelligence that is quite plainly not to be daunted. In the end the stories move us not to despair ourselves but to an emotion quite opposite because they are so seriously and clear-sightedly pointing out what they have been formed to show: that which is true under the skin, that which will remain a fact of the spirit.

Eudora Welty. *The Yale Review*. Winter, 1966. p. 269

What is most striking about all her stories is their air of indestructible composure. Their elements seem admirably balanced and fitted, like parts of a machine. No energy is wasted here; and it is true that when, in stories like *Noon Wine*, the characters confront each other head-on, there is sudden power in the encounter. (Mr. Hatch and Mr. Thompson remain vivid because they are singular; the power of the representation derives from its incisive, unrelenting specificity.) More often, however, the author does not succeed in perceiving particulars with an intensity which would lend them the force and weight of general statement; instead, inventing circumstances which contain foregone conclusions, she elaborates general statements with appropriate details. . . .

. . . if one excludes *Noon Wine* and ''The Jilting of Granny Weatherall'' (a nicely executed *tour de force* of less than major interest), her most memorable stories—''Flowering Judas,'' *Pale Horse*, *Pale Rider*, and *The Leaning Tower*—are those in which the central characters are forced to test themselves against ''other minds and other opinions and other feelings.'' In general, these stories deal with the attempts of individuals to resist everything in their experience which does not fit their own sense of themselves, to protect and preserve the secret myths enabling them to keep their lives in order.

Stephen Donadio. *Partisan Review*. Spring, 1966. pp. 279, 281

For years, [Katherine Anne Porter] was praised by discerning critics as the cleanest, clearest, and as they say of vines, most shy-bearing of the writers of our times: which in my opinion she probably is. Then, after writing the best seller *Ship of Fools*, she came to be regarded in wider circles with a certain uneasiness, as being negative, skeptical, prejudiced, formalistic: which in my opinion she is not. She is no more negative, I must argue, no more skeptical, et cetera, than it is very good to be. . . .

Miss Porter is a Modern, a beneficiary of a discipline which has been known as Modernism, just as surely as any of a number of writers who can be grouped together because of their affinities with James and Proust and Joyce. She is akin to Ezra Pound and Pablo Picasso. She grew up in a period in which the mastery of an art was held to be a lifelong, exacting discipline. It was a period, we can say from this distance, which accepted constraints and past history, as well as freedom and modernity.

Howard Baker in *Sense and Sensibility in Twentieth-Century Writing*, ed. Brom Weber (Southern Illinois). 1970. p. 76

In the stories that have usually been considered Miss Porter's finest work, the central figures are people whose desperate preoccupation with themselves cuts them off from effective communication with all other human beings. In some instances, a family situation, present or remembered, may be responsible for the protagonist's alienation or provide its particular dramatic circumstances. But whether the setting is a New York rooming house, where the protagonist is a long way from home and alone for most of the time of the story's action, or a Texas farmhouse, with the family present most of the time, the reader's attention is fixed upon a totally private agony.

In all but one of these stories, the protagonist is a woman. . . . Especially in the stories about women, it may be in the failure of a sexual union that the fatal pride chiefly shows itself. But sex is ultimately of no greater importance than social class or occupation or level of literacy. What all these characters have in common, from the Miranda of ''Pale Horse, Pale Rider'' to Royal Earle Thompson of ''Noon Wine,'' is a consuming devotion to some idea of themselves—of their own inestimable worth and privilege—which the circumstances of their lives do not permit them to realize in actuality but which they are powerless to abandon. The idea lives in them like a demon, directing all their thoughts and actions. Whatever it may be in which they invest that most precious and indefinable sense of self—a cherished grievance, a need to justify a fatal action, an ideal of order and mental discipline—they pursue it relentlessly, through all discomforts and deprivations, even to death—and if not to the death of the body then of the spirit, incapacitating themselves not only for love but for the enjoyment of any common good of life, to walk forever among strangers.

John Edward Hardy. *Katherine Anne Porter* (Ungar). 1973. pp. 62–3

The most powerful tension in her work is between the emotional involvements and the detachment, the will to shape and assess relations in experience; and the effect of this is sometimes to make a story look and feel strangely different, unanalyzably different, from the ordinary practice. But there is a more significant difference. A great deal of the current handling of the psychology of motive is a kind of clinical reportage. In two respects the work of Katherine Anne Porter is to be distinguished from this. First, she presumably believes that there is not merely pathology in the world, but evil—Evil with a capital *E*, if you will. Along with the pity and humor of her fiction, there is the rigorous, almost puritanical attempt to make an assessment of experience. Second, she presumably believes in the sanctity of what used to be called the individual soul. . . .

It has been said that the work of a major poet, in contrast to that of a minor poet, possesses, among other things, a centrality of coherence—or even obsession. The more we steadily inspect the work of Katherine Anne Porter, the more we see the inner coherence—the work as a deeply imaginative confrontation of a sensibility of genius with the *chiaroscuro* of modern civilization, in which it is often hard to tell light from dark. It becomes clearer and clearer what she meant when she said that she had been working on one central plan ''to understand the logic of this majestic and terrible failure of the life of man in the Western World.''. . .

What we find in the fiction is a hatred of all things that would prize anything above the awareness of human virtue: that is the essence of the author's dissent and the core of the despair that sometimes appears for our future—a future in which the responsible individual disappears into a ''nothing,'' a mere member of what Kierkegaard called a ''public,'' a ''kind of gigantic something, an abstract and deserted void which is everything but nothing.''

Robert Penn Warren. In *Katherine Anne Porter: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Penn Warren (Prentice-Hall, 1979), pp. 9–10, 14–15

Ship of Fools is a brilliant book. Porter herself was fond of it, and she pointed out to carping critics that it developed a major theme present in most of her work—the theme of the life of illusion, of self-deception. But it is not a great novel. The structure is loosely episodic and the crowded cast of characters is far too large. Porter apparently did not have the ability to construct a satisfactory plot of novel length that would bring into a significant relationship a few fully developed characters. *Ship of Fools* cannot stand comparison with the great Victorian novels nor with the major work of Henry James (whom, incidentally, Porter greatly admired). Her true genre was the short story and the novella (or long short story), and her accomplishments in those forms can stand any comparison. Porter once said, ''I don't believe in style: The style is you,'' and she didn't like being called a stylist. Nevertheless, she may be, in fact, the greatest stylist in prose fiction in English of this century. There is of course the aforementioned Henry James, but a comparison, for example, of the opening pages of her ''Hacienda'' with the opening pages of *The Ambassadors* would be instructive to a young writer learning his craft. Sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, Porter is better. Compared to her precise perceptions and carefully modulated rhythms, James's prose is somewhat slow-moving, ponderous, and diffuse. . . .

As time goes by, the accomplishments in American fiction, poetry, and criticism between the wars take on more and more significance. Katherine Anne Porter's stories, especially those written during this period, will be given an increasingly high position in our literary heritage.

Donald E. Stanford. *Southern Review*. Winter, 1981, pp. 1–2

[Katherine Anne] Porter's use of Southern materials both paralleled and transcended the way in which her fellow Texas writers portrayed the South. For one thing, she made her part of Texas seem more lush, more redolent of the deep South than it might otherwise be envisioned. Her formative Texas years were spent in Kyle, in central Texas, sixteen miles south of Austin. The countryside looks western to somebody from East Texas, and it looks like East Texas to somebody from the Panhandle. (There are trees in Kyle.) Kyle partakes of both prairie and farmland, though it's mainly prairie. But when Porter describes Kyle, it's a place of honeyed heat and as luscious as anything in Thomas Wolfe or any of the other Southern lyricists. . . . But even in such a rich description, one notes essential differences between Porter and her fellow Texas writers in the Southern tradition. Porter does not allegorize the landscape; she does not mythicize it into a Virgilian pastoral mode, nor does she politicize it to present, even covertly, the Confederate point of view.

It is precisely here, in her depiction of race, gender, and class, that Porter most completely distances herself from the provincial limitations of lesser writers, such as [Dorothy] Scarborough and

[Laura] Krey. Porter understood better than any other Texas writer the complex interconnectedness of the races in the South, and the stories that bear upon this matter in *The Old Order* are a triumph of clear-headed, unsentimental humanity. . . .

Class, gender, race—in all three issues, Porter transcended the limited perspectives of her time and place. At the same time, she remained absolutely faithful to the actual historical conditions of that time and place—pre-World War I central Texas, Southern to the core. And yet, at the very time Porter was lifting the very considerable body of southern-based Texas writing to the highest level of art ever achieved by a Texas writer, within the state itself the Southern dimension was being erased in favor of the Western. The reasons were many, but three of them were J. Frank Dobie, Walter P. Webb, and Zane Grey. Although Dobie and Webb would not enjoy being linked with Zane Grey, in a true sense that is where they belong. Like Grey, they were interested only in the Texas of cowboys and vaqueros, of longhorns and unfenced prairies. In his 1937 opus *West of the Pecos*, Grey defined *real* Texas, which lay west of the ''small part of Texas which adjoined Louisiana, and partook of its physical and traditional aspects. Now he wanted to find the real Texas—the Texas that had fallen at the Alamo and that in the end had conquered Santa Anna, and was now reaching north and west, an empire in the making.'' The Alamo, Texas Rangers, and cowboys—those were the chief ingredients of the Texas myth that Grey, Dobie, Webb, and a thousand Western movies bought into and recycled until everybody from Alaska to Zimbabwe knew what Texas was: it was Southfork. For too many years, Porter's Texas was obscured by both its similarity to the Deep South and its difference from the prevailing Western myth that sold so well in Texas. Now Porter's Texas is beginning to be better known. It is an act of historical recovery that still awaits its full recognition.

> Don Graham. ''A Southern Writer in Texas.'' In Clinton Machann and William Bedford Clark, eds. *Katherine Anne Porter and Texas; An Uneasy Relationship* (College Station: Texas A&M Univ. Pr., 1990), pp. 64–65, 69–70

Perhaps what Porter in the fifties found most appalling about American democracy was what she saw as the dangerous extremes to which its central philosophical formulation that ''all men are created equal'' was being taken in justifying the leveling of all classes and races into an undifferentiated mass in regard to breeding, education, and talent. Her calls for the right to be able to choose the people with whom she associated embodies her resistance to this democratic leveling—a resistance she believed necessary for maintaining her version of democracy, a democratic elitism. . . .

Porter in the fifties spoke out not only against democratic masses but also against minority groups trying to sway the masses. In light of her cynical views of democracy and her passionate regard for privacy (particularly her understanding of privacy as in part the right to choose one's company), it should come as no surprise that Porter had little sympathy for the civil rights movement, despite having spoken out earlier in her career, especially during the thirties, about the plight of blacks in America. In a 1958 interview with the *Richmond News Leader*, Porter chastised the Supreme Court for its ''moral irresponsibility'' in its 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. She told the paper that she belonged ''to the school of thought that believes the Supreme Court acted recklessly and irresponsibly in precipitating this crisis at the worst possible time when we already had enough crises on hand.'' Clearly she saw blacks' struggle for civil liberties as a threat to her own (the right of privacy in particular) and indeed as a threat to the entire democratic process. . . .

Progressive bitterness and anger do not necessarily signal the weakening of artistic vision, but in Porter's case I believe they did. Ushered along by her totalitarian obsession, Porter's dark vision of the fifties marked a closing off of her openness to the wealth and variety of experience and withdrawal into a stultifying and paranoid cynicism. Near the end of *Ship of Fools*, with the ship approaching its destination, the narrator notes that the people at the captain's table no longer converse: ''They were no longer interested in anything the others had to say—their minds were closing in and folding up once more around their own concerns, their only common hope being to leave that ship and end that voyage and to take up their real and separate lives once more.'' As they had during their preparations for embarking from Mexico, the travelers now each ''chose to maintain his pride and separateness within himself.'' In her writing of *Ship of Fools* Porter likewise suffered, giving herself over unquestioningly to her obsessive thinking. Porter may have seen *Ship of Fools* as an attempt to correct twentieth-century chaos and madness, but what the novel finally became was something close in spirit to Dr. Schumann's calculated detachment and idealism—not a corrective for but an embodiment of the very problem it supposedly combated. With its high-minded authoritarianism, *Ship of Fools* itself points to the totalitarian madness that Porter came to see in everyone but herself. One thinks most obviously here of her blindness in failing to see the connection between her own ugly racism and that of Nazi ideology.

> Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr. *Katherine Anne Porter's Artistic Development: Primitivism, Traditionalism, and Totalitarianism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1993), pp. 204–6, 220

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POUND, Ezra (1885–1972)

He is like a man who goes hunting hedgehogs with bare feet—and finds his prey all prickles; to vary and mix the metaphor, he sits on his little hill in Kensington as if it were Olympian, casting forth winged words which, like boomerangs, are returned unto him an hundred-fold! In the melee his work is disloyally attacked, his least

errors are exposed with a malignant triumph; his sensitiveness, which hides under a cover of bluster, is denounced as conceit; his fineness of perception is misunderstood as triviality. His scholarship, with its rather overwhelming pretension, is suspect; his polemics verge on hysteria. His fault is that he is an anachronism. With the enthusiasm of a Renaissance scholar, one of those whose fine devotion but faulty learning revealed to the fifteenth-century world the civilization of Greece, he lives in an age which looks at literature as a hobby, a freak, a branch of education; but never as a life study, a burning passion.

Richard Aldington. *Poetry*. July, 1920. p. 214

Given a mind that is not averse to labouring, provided that a kernel lies beneath the hard shells, you can reach the purpose of these poems. They contain the subconscious matter deposited by years of reading and observation in one man's mind, and in their residence in this sub-conscious state they have blended into the man's mental and emotional prejudices and undergone a metamorphosis, in which they become his visualization and interpretation of past men's events. Legendary heroes, kings, dukes, queens, soldiers, slaves, they live again as this man would have them live, and speak words that are partly his and partly their own, in the manner of ubermarionettes. Their fragmentary and often tangled existence—quick appearances and vanishings—is a distinctive feature of the subconscious state that enclosed them before they were extracted from the poet.

Maxwell Bodenheim. *Dial*. Jan., 1922. p. 91

There are many so-called educators in our over-instructed world, but few inspired teachers. Ezra Pound is one of the few. . . . His method has been fiercely destructive of rooted prejudices, but magically encouraging to every green shoot of new growth. His mind, being imaginatively creative, presented examples as well as precept, offered beautiful poems to the world. . . . Whether or not he ever offers us more songs, his best work has already the completeness of adequate beauty. As a leader, a revolutionist in the art, he will have a place in literary history; as a poet he will sing into the hearts and minds of all free-singing spirits in the next age—and perhaps in the ages beyond much of our prophecy.

Harriet Monroe. *Poetry*, May, 1925. pp. 94–7

Some would say the facing in many directions of a quadriga drawn by centaurs, that we meet in the Cantos, puts strain on bipedal understanding; there is love of risk; but the experienced grafting of literature upon music is very remarkable—the resonance of color, allusions, tongues, sounding each through the other as in symphonic instrumentation. Even if one understood nothing, one would enjoy the musicianly manipulation. . . . Mr. Pound, in the prose that he writes, has formulated his own commentary upon the Cantos. They are as an armorial coat of attitudes of things that have happened in books and in life; they are not a shield but a coat worn by a man, as in the days when heraldry was beginning.

Marianne Moore. *Poetry*. Oct., 1931. pp. 48–50

The cantos are a sort of *Golden Ass*. There is a likeness, but there is no parallel beyond the mere historical one: both books are the production of worlds without convictions and given over to a hard secular program. Here the similarity ends. For Mr. Pound is a powerful reactionary, a faithful mind devoted to those ages when the myths were not merely pretty, but true. And there is a cloud of melancholy irony hanging over the cantos. He is persuaded that the myths are only beautiful, and he drops them after a glimpse, but he is not reconciled to this aestheticism: he ironically puts the myths against the ugly specimens of modern life that have defeated them. . . . He understands poetry and how to write it.

This is enough for one man to know. And the thirty cantos are enough to occupy a loving and ceaseless study—say a canto a year for thirty years, all thirty to be read every few weeks just for tone.

Allen Tate. *The Nation*. June 10, 1931. pp. 633–4

When we consider this devotion to literature, we come upon the essential characteristic of the Cantos: their philological discussions, their translations, their textual references, their peculiar and unceasing interest in how things are said, not to speak of the various dialects and slangs which are introduced, and the habitual quotation of letters, codices, and other documents. . . . Pound has been the pure literary man, the complete man of letters; the concern with literary things, with the very look of print upon the page, is at the center, the source of his writings. . . . Pound fits one of his own categories: he has been a great inventor in verse, and we know how few can be supposed to know the satisfaction of fulfilling their own canons of excellence.

Delmore Schwartz. *Poetry*. March, 1938. pp. 326–39

But what is Pound's class, and how can it be described without contemptuousness in the description and without giving the effect of anything contemptible in the class; for it is an admirable class and ought to be spoken of with admiration. Essentially it is the class of those who have a care for the purity of the tongue as it is spoken and as it sounds and as it changes in speech and sound, and who know that that purity can only exist in the movement of continuous alternation between the ''fawn's flesh and the saint's vision,'' and who know, so, that the movement, not the alternatives themselves, is the movement of music. . . . Poets like Pound are the executive artists for their generation; he does not provide a new way of looking . . . but he provides the *means* of many ways of looking.

R. P. Blackmur. *Poetry*. Sept., 1946. pp. 344–5

The opinion has been voiced that Pound's eventual reputation will rest upon his criticism and not upon his poetry. (I have been paid the same compliment myself.) I disagree. It is on his total work for literature that he must be judged: on his poetry, *and* his criticism, *and* his influence on men and on events at a turning point in literature. In any case, his criticism takes its significance from the fact that it is the writing of a poet about poetry: it must be read in the light of his own poetry, as well as of poetry by other men whom he championed. . . . Pound's great contribution to the work of other poets (if they choose to accept what he offers) is his insistence upon

the immensity of the amount of *conscious* labor to be performed by the poet. . . . He . . . provides an example of devotion to ''the art of poetry'' which I can only parallel in our time by the example of Valéry.

T. S. Eliot. *Poetry*. Sept., 1946. pp. 331–8

Pound's cantos are the words of a man for whom the thing given has, in general, the upper hand over deliberation, a man whose long isolation in Rapallo and unfretful assurance as to his own technical power have allowed unusual freedom in moving here or there, up or down, forward or backward (like a swimmer in clear water) among verbal or substantial intimations and seizing them, putting them down, when a more hesitant—or sluggish—artist would have left them in the air. . . . In perception or vision he would mount to a *paradisio* as his master, Dante did. . . . Well, the moral universe of the *Divine Comedy* was orthodox, graded, and public, firmly conceived to its uttermost corner; and this of Pound's is quite a different thing. But at their least valuation I submit that these cantos in which light and air—and song—move so freely are more exhilarating poetic sketch-books, *Notes from the Upper Air*, than can be found elsewhere in our literature.

Robert Fitzgerald. *New Republic*. Aug. 16, 1948. pp. 21–3

The Cantos are like a tremendous tapestry in which certain designs predominate, or like a great fugue with recurring motifs, or like a modern Commedia, with the stenches from hell more often than not climbing up to smother purgatory and hover cloudily on the sill of paradise. . . . Pound uses . . . stories, some legendary, some apocryphal, some true, to symbolize or exemplify the cruelties of usury, and to point up his fury with those ''who set money lust before the pleasures of the senses,'' those responsible for the mutilation of men and of art. In his rage he sometimes gets out no more than a stuttered curse or lashes blindly at the innocent, but I do not think even Dante has more powerfully set down the hideousness of corruption, and the fewest lyricists have equaled Pound's gift for evoking particulars of breath-taking delicacy and luster.

Babette Deutsch. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Aug. 22, 1948. p. 7

Pound was one of the most opinionated and unselfish men who ever lived, and he made friends and enemies everywhere by the simple exercise of the classic American constitutional right of free speech. His speech was free to outrageous license. He was completely reckless about making enemies. His so-called anti-Semitism was, hardly anyone has noted, only equaled by his anti-Christianism. It is true he hated most in the Catholic faith the elements of Judaism. It comes down squarely to anti-monotheism. . . . Pound felt himself to be in the direct line of Mediterranean civilization, rooted in Greece. . . . He was a lover of the sublime, and a seeker after perfection, a true poet, of the kind born in a hair shirt—a God-sent disturber of the peace in the arts, the one department of human life where peace is fatal.

Katherine Anne Porter. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 29, 1950. p. 4

I could never take him as a steady diet. Never. He was often brilliant but an ass. But I never (so long as I kept away) got tired of him, or, for a fact, ceased to love him. He had to be loved, even if he kicked you in the teeth for it (but that he never did); he looked as if he might, but he was, at heart, much too gentle, much too good a friend for that. And he had, at bottom, an inexhaustible patience, an infinite depth of human imagination and sympathy. Vicious, catty at times, neglectful, if he trusted you not to mind, but warm and devoted—funny, too, as I have said. We hunted, to some extent at least, together, and not each other.

William Carlos Williams. *Autobiography* (Random). 1951. p. 58

Certainly Ezra Pound can be read and understood in depth only with a detailed explication of his references in the other hand. . . . Yet the fact remains that even a reader who drives through these Cantos at full gallop will see that the poem is epic in intent, that its subject is the history of modern man's consciousness, and that the telling occurs in a kind of perpetual present, a sort of reverie of the racial consciousness. . . . A book, I propose, becomes a good book when it creates a world one can enter credibly in imagination and a perception of a life one can live vicariously. A good book becomes a great book when that world achieves a magnitude and that life-perception a depth that not only satisfies the imagination but enlarges it beyond all expectation. The final measure of the Cantos lies, I believe, in the fact that they do offer such an enlargement to a willing reader.

John Ciardi. *New York Times Book Section*. June 24, 1956. pp. 4–5

Certainly, *Propertius*, like *Mauberley*, is also an ironic survey of Pound's own time and place; in it the Roman becomes curiously modern. . . . It is this that gives [Pound] that resilience and intelligent sense of proportion which reminded Dr. Leavis of the seventeenth-century poets; they too were soaked in classical literature. The difference is that Pound does not, as most modern poets might, get at the Latin through the seventeenth century. He seems to work directly through the foreign language. And this is the essence of his best writing. It owes its freshness and economy to this power of using words as if he had just coined them. His language has no literary incrustations. He is the only poet in the last three hundred years to write English as though he had never read Shakespeare. . . . When I suggested this to him, he replied that his literary ancestor was Dante.

A. Alvarez. *Stewards of Excellence* (Scribner). 1958. pp. 54–5

Perhaps he will turn out to have been the Ossian of the twentieth century. . . . As Whitman's love for himself would drive him to transforming all other selves into aspects of himself in order that he might love them, so Pound's love for himself would drive him to destroy all other selves whose existence his idea of love will prevent him from loving. Whitman's and Pound's means to making an American epic are thus diametrically opposed, but they have at least this in common: they ask that their poetry lead to a totally

unifying sacramentalism. To know, is for Whitman, to become; for Pound, to become or be destroyed.

Roy Harvey Pearce. *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton). 1961. pp. 100–101

. . . the whole point of the *Homage* [*To Sextus Properties*] is the defense of the individual poet's right to make poetry as his own artistic principles, and not as the age, demanded. Love in itself is not Pound's concern here, but the right to produce love poetry and not propaganda. This comparative lack of interest in the subject for its own sake is indicated by the comparatively low temperature of those sections of the *Homage* which were intended to reproduce Propertius' very genuine amorous fire. And this, it might be argued, is a fault, for it underrates the devotion of Propertius to Cynthia *qua* mistress and not *qua* subject for writing poetry. It stresses a more doctrinaire and more literary attitude, which is of course there in Propertius' artistic concern, but does not fit Propertius so much as Pound (''*il miglior fabbro*'').

J. P. Sullivan. *Kenyon Review*. Summer, 1961. pp. 476–7

Fortunately there are kinds of humanism other than those represented by Irving Babbitt and Ezra Pound. To the democratic humanist a number of Pound's attitudes are offensive. The poet's long standing aristocratic bias, his fascist ideals of order, and his crass anti-Semitism are obtrusive faults and limiting features of his poetry and cannot be thought of as simply the aberrations and personal opinions of Pound the man. The meanings of literature are among its most conspicuous formal aspects, and an analysis of the ideas and values in a poem cannot be set apart, as a function distinct in kind, from criticism concerned with its patterns of sound, syntax, and imagery. To attempt to do so, as the Bollingen committee did in awarding a prize to *The Pisan Cantos* for aesthetic or technical considerations, apart from the opinions expressed, is to assume an untenable form-content distinction. A writer's work is assessed for the quality of its ideas and values, as well as for the quality of the other formal elements with which they are interrelated.

To say this is not to damn Pound or deny his achievement. It is too easy to do so self-righteously. The image of the alienated artist which he projected as the caged poet of *The Pisan Cantos* stands as a counter indictment of the world against which he had recoiled in so extreme, a fashion—a world which has in many ways been inimical to the human values (for Pound *has* his humanities) and the creative freedom he has championed for half a century.

Walter Sutton. Introduction to *Ezra Pound: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Walter Sutton (Prentice). 1963. p. 8

This claim for Pound—that he recovered for English verse something lost to it since Campion or at least since Waller—may get more general agreement than any other. And [Charles] Olson is surely right to point to this achievement as rooted in something altogether more basic and less conspicuous than, for instance, the luxurious orchestration of the choruses in *Women of Trachis*. It is something that has to do with the reconstituting of the verse-line as the poetic unit, slowing down the surge from one line into the next in such a way that smaller components within the line (down to the very syllables) can recover weight and value. When Pound is writing at his best we seem to have perceptions succeeding one another at unusual speed at the same time as the syllables succeed one another unusually slowly. But succession, in any case, is what is involved—succession, sequaciousness.

Donald Davie. *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor* (Oxford). 1964. p. 246

A poet's anti-Semitism, a poet's eugenics, may therefore connect him not only with the debased pragmatism of men he ought to despise, but with a crude primitivism of the sort he would never consciously regard as relevant to his own more refined regress. Pound's radio talks were no doubt the work of a man who had lost some of the sense of reality; but above all they represented a failure of what I have called clerical skepticism, and a betrayal rather than a renovation of the tradition which, it is assumed, lies under the threat of destruction by corrupt politics, economics and language.

Frank Kermode. *Partisan Review*. Summer, 1966.pp. 350–1

Underneath all his restive search for a satisfying literary environment, T.S. Eliot wrote of Pound in 1946, ''the future of American letters was what concerned him most.'' The American literature for which he contended, however, was primarily not an autochthonous expression but rather a redemptive agent in the preservation of the finest values evolved by Western civilization. Rooted as his mind was basically in the cultural premises of the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment, he continued to project the axiomatic belief of such Americans as John Adams and Crèvecoeur that the arts traveled Westward with empire, and that America was destined to complete the great circle. Like the eighteenth century, too, he inclined to construe literature not in a merely narrow belletristic sense but as an expression of the full intellectual scope of man. The arts, said Pound during the First World War, must be placed ahead of the church and scholarship as the ''acknowledged guide and lamp of civilization.''

Benjamin T. Spencer. *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*. Dec., 1966. p. 459

. . . when I see Ezra Pound's example appropriated exclusively by one or another group of poets, it seems to me that this is a diminution of his place in our world and that I must do what I can to correct it; for in respect to Pound several possibilities should be borne in mind. First, the possibility of preferring—and preference is not dogma—the poems of *Lustra, Cathay*, *Propertius*, and *Mauberley*, which Pound wrote at the same time as his influential prose statements of theory and criticism, to much of the *Cantos*, which he wrote at a considerably later period. Second, the possibility that Pound by himself re-invented the poetic line as the unit of Poetry, variable and end-stopped, that his concept of modern verse measure was clearer and more workable than anyone else's, and that he came to it long before [William Carlos] Williams conceived his notion of the variable foot. Third, the possibility—indeed, it is much more—that Pound was as closely associated with Eliot as

with Williams *throughout their lives*, that on the other hand he damned London as heartily as he did Concord, and that his immense influence has descended *equally*, though no doubt differently, through the entire conspectus of Anglo-American writing to the present day. . . .

Hayden Carruth. *Poetry*. May, 1967.p.104

I would propose . . . as a way-in to the *Cantos*, that the unity of the poem is that of its dominant figure, Pound himself, the controlling intelligence, teaching the moral significance of history as a mirror for magistrates. His role is that of the great counsellor, close to the strong Prince, governing his state in terms of a coherent political intelligence. This will explain, to start with, why the form of the poem is not a real problem: as long as the words issue from the single controlling intelligence, and as long as the speaker's role remains unchanged, the unity of the poem is built-in, thus guaranteed. The speaker is deemed to be a fixed point, centre of an ever expanding circle of reference; himself immutable. This marks the main difference between Pound and his nearest relative Walt Whitman. Whitman assumes that the self ''is'' through the collusion of its world, the objects it makes its own. Hence these objects, because they contribute to the opulence of the self, should be as vivid and manifold as possible. The equation in this case is X = A plus B plus C plus D, and so on. Each object apprehended enriches the observer. But Pound conceives the self as a being, immutably set off against a world upon which it imposes—or in which it sometimes finds—an idea of order congenial to its nature.

Denis Donoghue. *The Ordinary Universe* (Macmillan—N.Y.). 1968. p. 293

Over and over, in ''Arnold Dolmetsch,'' in ''Psychology and Troubadours,'' and pre-eminently in *Guide to Kulchur*, [Pound] has insisted that each man must define his own microcosm and that erecting subjective validities into putatively universal dogmata does violence to human needs and to truth. For Pound, poetry begins in an interest not in the nature of the ruling deity, but in human experiences. This is one reason why his peculiar sort of neo-Platonism *had* to issue in a polytheistic religion, and why his mysticism did not emerge as specifically Christian—or even as religious, as one expects to think of that word. The more fortunate among us participate in the energy of the Supreme Intelligence, and since each individual is unique (owing to his own *logos* or *virtu*), each man's participation will be objectified in a unique way; yet the ''gods'' representing these objectifications will all be genuine.

Pound's religious concern, therefore—or, better, his moral philosophy—points inward, to one's true self and to the ordered exercise of one's natural energies—ordered and restricted sufficiently to avoid injuring or interfering with other people, but not limited by arbitrary (dogmatic) exclusions and repressions. These observations suggest again that the most important characteristic of Pound's cosmology is what we may call its metaphorical possibilities and that it is primarily a mechanism for the expression of purely subjective concerns.

Thomas H. Jackson. *The Early Poetry of Ezra Pound* (Harvard). 1968. pp. 84–5

Pound's psychological theory of myth may be summarized as follows:

(1) The psychic experience is extraordinary, brief, and yet subjectively true. It is beyond the generally shared realm of common experience, but it is ''vivid and *undeniable*.'' Pound often calls it an ''adventure.''

(2) It is no more than *experience*. It does not reveal an objective, transcendental order. Myths are primarily ''explications of mood,'' and Pound almost never chooses to ''probe deeper.''

(3) The myth or work of art is made out of this rare emotion.

(4) It is an objective verbal *equation* for a basically incommunicable experience. Language cannot convey the primary intensity of the experience itself; it can only reconstruct something else as the ''nearest equation'' that the myth-maker is ''capable of putting into words.''

(5) The myth-maker (poet) cannot relate his experience by speaking out directly in the first person. He must ''screen himself'' and speak indirectly through ''an impersonal or objective story.'' Hence the need for masks and personae.

All of these ideas are central to Pound's theory of poetry as a record of delightful psychic experience.

Hugh Witemeyer. *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* (California). 1969. p. 24

Form was one of the values to which Pound was utterly committed. Not a form of objects—not ''well-wrought-urn-ism''—but a form of events, of process, of lines of force as Fenollosa apprehended them: ''Transferences of power.'' Sight alone can never come to the conception of a universe so full of vital energies that forces are being transferred constantly, but without sight we would have only a vague roaring in our ears from such apprehension. Form, for Pound, is an attempt to focus on the loci of these transferences. His is dynamic form, to be sure. . . . Reading a line from a Canto, we must have a sense that something is ''going on'' all the time; the words do not simply lie in limp patterns, the poem is something happening rather than something over with. But it also has a fixedness, a dance, even in its movement: Pound was a Vorticist, a man who believes that powerful force creates and maintains form. The vortex is a figure for the reconciliation of those mighty opposites, dynamic and static, in a shape whose fixedness is dependent on a certain intensity of movement.

Herbert Schneidau. *Ezra Pound: The Image and the Real* (Louisiana State). 1969. p. 195

Quite apart from Pound's idiosyncratic technique of fragmented rather than sequential presentation (which has long been the subject of criticism), the shifts in his viewpoint and in his preoccupations during the three decades covered by the first eighty-four cantos inevitably detract from the unity of the poem as a whole. But these changes, which sometimes are very abrupt, as in the new direction assumed in the *Eleven New Cantos* (1934), are perhaps more appropriate for a modern epic than a classical unity of subject and tone would be. For *The Cantos* is obviously a poem written ''in process'' by a poet aware of the problems of historical novelty and change and of the difficulties of maintaining his sea legs as a

voyager in the stream of twentieth-century culture. When one considers the misfortunes that befell him, one recognizes the achievement of this Odyssean wanderer in surviving at all.

Walter Sutton in *Sense and Sensibility in Twentieth-Century Writing*, ed. Brom Weber (Southern Illinois). 1970. p. 128

It is Pound's conception of a world in memory sustained within the mind of one man that makes the Cantos one of the great poems in English. Pound calls it, here again, his ''palimpsest,'' and indeed there is no better word to describe the effects of these [*Drafts and Fragments of Cantos CX-CXVII*] as of all the earlier Cantos. Pound's poems are a manuscript written over the faintly discernible words of others, a shifting, glittering, glimmering memory of creative achievement that gleams through the ugliness of existence and makes what Pound here humorously calls ''a nice quiet paradise over the shambles''—a paradise within the mind, holding together man's cultural achievements, retaining the old scripts, making them legible again. It is, of course, the romantic conception of mind that DeQuincey summed up when he said that the human brain was ''a natural and mighty palimpsest.'' Deriving from Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Pound's Cantos pick up and sustain the cultures of the world within the apprehension of an individual mind and pass them on to poets such as [Robert] Lowell.

Louis L. Martz. *The Yale Review*. Winter, 1970. p. 263

Pound's structures, like Jefferson's plough, were meant to be useful: to be validated therefore not by his opinions but by the unarguable existence of what exists. . . . He constellates Luminous Details, naming them, as again and again in the *Cantos* he names the signed column. For the column exists; what it proves about forgotten possibilities it proves by simply existing. And five hundred more such columns would not intensify the proof. Again and again in the *Cantos* single details merely prove that something lies inside the domain of the possible. It is not necessary to prove that the possibility was ever widely actualized; only that it exists. What was done at Worgl—once—by one mayor, in one village—proves that stamp scrip will work. What was done in San Zeno, once, on one column, proves the possibility of a craftsman's pride in an unobtrusive structural member. And anything that is possible can again be. The *Cantos* scan the past for possibilities, but their dynamic is turned toward the future. And they enumerate so many places, so many stones, so many buildings, because nothing is so irrefutable as a stone.

Hugh Kenner. *The Pound Era* (California). 1971. p. 325

The poem upon which ''Near Perigord'' is based, ''Dompna Pois,'' illuminates another important aspect of *The Cantos*: Pound's method of presentation, especially as it applies to his epic hero. In the epigraph preceding ''Na Audiart,'' Pound speaks of ''Dompna Pois'' as a poem in which the artist creates '''Una dompna soiseubuda' a borrowed lady or as the Italians translated it 'Una donna ideale.''' In our discussion of that poem we noticed that it symbolized Pound's poetic method (the creation of an ideal through the accumulation of fragments); this is also the method of *The Cantos*. Pound later called this the ''ideogrammatic method,'' but he discovered it in Provence long before he came across the Fenollosa manuscripts. Pound's epic hero can also be defined in these terms, for he is really ''un om soiseubut,'' a ''borrowed'' (and ''ideal'') man, the composite *persona* who undergoes a series of significant metamorphoses. When considered in this context, the similarities of the individual personae of *The Cantos* become quite apparent.

Stuart Y. McDougal. *Ezra Pound and the Troubador Tradition* (Princeton). 1972. pp. 146–7

Toward the end of his life, Ezra Pound, 86, has found yet another eloquent new voice: silence. This American bard whose *Cantos* transformed the language of English poetry . . . this early champion and benefactor of James Joyce, Robert Frost, Ernest Hemingway, D. H. Lawrence and T.S. Eliot . . . this inspired midwife to Eliot's *Waste Land* . . . speaks now mostly in monosyllables—when he speaks at all.

Some say this has to do with the fatigue of age plus a physical collapse that followed his thirteen years of incarceration as a political prisoner of his own United States. . . . Some say Pound's silence, which deepens from year to year, expresses the profound sense of anti-climax that came with freedom. Some say it spells his disgust with life and mankind. And others say Pound has discovered that words have more to do with lies and misunderstanding than with communication.

Alan Levy. *New York Times Magazine Section*. Jan. 9, 1972. p. 14

Pound's significance, for those who are not principally concerned for poetry, his or any other, may be thought to turn therefore on what we understand by ''a literary civilization''; whether we want any more of it; and, supposing we do, what chance we stand of getting it in any future that we can foresee.

In the first place, such a civilization will have as its avowed end, quite unashamedly, *pleasure*—John Masefield's ''delightful spoil.'' Literature may instruct, and the poet of *The Cantos* certainly acted in the belief that it did; but if it instructs, it instructs only by pleasing—surreptitiously, through the delights that it brings. Moreover, if we trust Pound, the pleasure that literature brings is direct and as if immediate, like the pleasure of cool air brushing against one's bared and heated skin. This depends upon a sensuous aliveness in ourselves such as Pound had when he spoke of the ''effect of a decent climate where a man leaves his nerve-set open, or allows it to tune into its ambience.'' . . .

To Pound it seemed, as it has to others, that in Protestant cultures it was the Hebraic component which instilled fear and distrust of sensuous pleasure; and so he threw his weight always on the side of the Hellenic voice which called on sculptors to make images of the gods, as against the Hebraic iconoclasm which was set against ''graven images.''

Donald Davie. *Ezra Pound* (Penguin, 1975), pp. 100–101

It needs no oracle to tell us that *The Cantos* are an extreme form of sequence. They are, in fact, a sequence of sequences, each growing out of the preoccupations and experiences of a limited period of

time. It is ludicrous to imagine that the whole line of succeeding cantos, developing for almost fifty years, constitutes a single integrated work in any ordinary sense. The normal process of getting a work under way, discovering its form and bearings, and revising it so that all may emerge as organically as possible is simply not open to a poet who writes out of the succeeding phases of his experience, in the chronological order of his private spiritual and empirical history, without leaving time for recasting. . . .

Pound's genius in deploying documentary quotations and other data is extraordinary. He does lose aesthetic perspective and grow lengthy because of his love of the materials and of the sound of the human voice expressing, however drily and repetitiously, certain favorite doctrines that seem to him hard, vibrantly relevant kernels of perception. But he also makes a found poetry of these materials—rearranges them, creates internal rhymes, balances them against snatches of his own phrasing and pure imagistic flashes or other quick poetic notations. The intrinsic poetics of expository speech created a special music for him, so that a phrase like ''every bank of discount'' becomes a refrain in a lyrical sense, not merely a reiterated point of argument. One has only to compare his use of such materials with that of certain of his followers—Charles Olson, for instance—to see how much truer his ear is than theirs. Line by line he is superb, although page by page one does grow a bit weary.

Still, it is interesting that in these volumes written in the 1930's the passionate lyric centers, harking back to early work and usually based on the *Odyssey*, are indispensable. . . .

But it is clear that there is *no* Dantean or Homeric structure—just allusions to those structures that enter the recurring improvisational patterns in the separate volumes. Pound's mind teemed with the phrases and images and figures that populate the works that meant most to him. They are at once fixed points of reference and energizers of the associative process always at work in his imagination. He did not forget impressions or tones of any kind very readily, and all together they created a constant pressure on him not very different from that created by the insistent dead on Odysseus—too much to handle very neatly except in a single poem or passage.

M.L. Rosenthal. *Paideuma*. Spring, 1977, pp. 4, 10–11

As the reader comes to know Pound's poetry, he will increasingly recognize and go beyond the multifarious objects of knowledge that at first dominate the landscape of each poem, and he will become more interested in the poetic character of the presence, seer, protagonist who presents the data. The data are variously instructive, diverting, beautiful or awe-inspiring, and the patterns of emotion and moral value that they create are fascinating or rewarding. Eventually, however, it is the richness and quality of the mind, rather than the *virtù* of the objects it contains and which it salutes, that continue to fascinate and to instruct. It is only at first that Pound's purism of surface and form seem clinically to exclude the presence of a known human speaker. . . .

The *Collected Shorter Poems* can be . . . categorized by provenance or by form. As they are read through, volume by volume, in order of writing, a hardening of Pound's sense of society and of the artist's role in society is noticeable, especially in the modernization of his language in *Lustra*. When, finally, the early Pound is approached by means of such questions as, What does he have to say? What are his typical attitudes?—questions which do not seem often to have been asked—one notices a set of variations upon the theme of the poet, singer, seer or sage—the friend of nature, of beauty, of wisdom, of refinement—engaged in the study of beauty or society, or, more frequently, of both. The emotions are those of exile—aesthetic, ironic, elegiac or indignant. One speaks of emotions and attitudes rather than of thought, ideas or ''message'' in discussing Pound's verse before *Mauberley*. . . . Emotion, indeed, is the origin and end of Pound's poetry, despite his concern for ''direct treatment of the 'thing,''' objectivity, technique, and despite his surgery of rhetoric and gush. What Pound ''has to say'' is ''the world is thus and thus''; but what he communicates is always emotion and attitudes charged with emotion. . . .

The greatness of the *Cantos* is concentrated in the *Pisan Cantos*, though it is liberally scattered elsewhere. Only in the *Pisan Cantos* do the unerring rightness of style and the refinement of phrase have a great job to accomplish, namely the survival of the author's mind, with its extraordinary freight. Not that Pound becomes confessional or emotional—the pathos is largely inadvertent—it is simply that he has so much to tell us and himself, and a great number of interesting things going through his head, as he watches the guards, the clouds and the insects. . . .

The tendentiousness and unevenness of some of Pound's achievement make it difficult to settle squarely on a tolerable generalization about his place among the poets; he is perhaps the greatest of the moderns, since that term does not exactly fit Yeats, nor the Eliot of *Four Quartets*. However, his Promethean gifts are so original that the process of comparison with others does not seem very productive; perhaps he should not be placed among others.

Michael Alexander. *The Poetic Achievement of Ezra Pound* (Univ. of California Pr., 1979), pp. 43, 47, 227–28

In spite of Pound's ''mystical ear'' (to borrow Williams' phrase) for the invention of new musical and rhythmic patterns, it is the daring confidence with which *The Cantos* are able to absorb so much prose narrative and historical documentation that remains one of their most decisive technical accomplishments. Pound himself realized that upon such a strategy depended poetry's chance to ''donner une idée claire et précise,'' and thus to compete successfully with the novel as a significant medium for the expression of social, psychological, and historical judgments. . . .

It is part of the continuing fascination of Pound's work that it compels us to confront its ideas, including the ''wrecks and errors,'' as deliberate social and historical judgments, just as it is part of the epic's aesthetic technique to base much of its rhythm on the inclusiveness of the ''prose tradition.'' Ultimately, it is from Pound himself that the right to question the polemical content of his work on its own terms derives, since few poets have argued as forcefully against the aesthetic as a category necessarily distinct from and indifferent to the social and political spheres of human cognition. Yet I know that my own focus of attention has at times caused me to leave insufficiently analyzed those aspects of the poems, the syntactic and metrical inventions, the audacious use of patterned sounds and images, which attracted me as a reader long before questions of ethical sense or historical argument began to impose their own pressures. In many ways it would have been easier to write a quite different book, one concentrating far more exclusively upon the immediate aesthetic appeal of all three epics, but such an undertaking would undervalue just those features that separate *The Cantos*, *Paterson*, and *The Maximus Poems* from

traditional lyrics, and impose a perspective that risks excluding the texts' specific intentions and governing conventions from scrutiny.

Michael André Bernstein. *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic* (Princeton Univ. Pr., 1980), pp. 279–81

Of the four great American Moderns, Pound was the only poet to believe in what we now call ethnopoetics—the coupling of anthropology and poetry, the opening up of other, nonwestern cultural traditions—both as method and metaphor. In the *Pisan Cantos* Pound was fighting not only for his own personal survival, but for the survival of the Western world as well. For survival, he knew that the industrial West had to turn to cultures which were based on values other than that of profit, and ideals other than that of the economy of abundance with its concomitant disposable and interchangeable objects, its scorn of both masterpiece and craft. He turned to Provence and to Greece, but more significantly he turned to China, and Africa, and even, occasionally, to the American Algonquin.

Thus, to dwell on Pound as exile, as directing his major effort toward breaking the English tradition, represented by the pentameter, is to belittle his achievement. Pound was not so much an exile as he was a citizen of the world. . . .

[His] belief that the province of poetry is ''the whole social order'' is Pound's great strength, his source of optimism, and one of his major contributions. We have him to thank for his persistent affirmation throughout the first half of the twentieth century, a period in Western history preoccupied with its ''heap of broken images,'' of the possibility of a ''new sacred book of the arts,'' as Yeats called it. A sacred book which would heal the splits in culture, remove, in effect, the banks from the position of power and place the artists in the position of authority. . . .

The wisdom of the *Pisan Cantos* is the wisdom of one wise old man, Pound, who himself understands that we must listen to the wisdom of the old, internalize the old, and not fall prey to the tradition of the new (which is an economics of consumption and waste on all levels). ''Philosophy is not for young men'' . . . Pound wrote early in the *Pisan Cantos*. This is another way of saying that wisdom is reserved for, is the privilege of, the old. And as Simone de Beauvoir points out, the important thing to understand is that the status of the old is ''never *won* but always *granted*.''

Kathleen Woodward. *''Last, the Real Distinguished Thing'': The Late Poems of Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Williams* (Ohio State Univ. Pr., 1980), pp. 92, 95–96

The Cantos may be incomplete, may contain errors, may be a rash attempt at epic in an age of experiment. It may be too bulky, too obscure, too idiosyncratic. Despite Pound's remark about Buckminster Fuller's similar geometric (or geodesic) vision—'''Buckie' has gone in for structure (quite rightly) / but consumption is still done by animals'' (*Thrones 97*)—it may be too schematic. Such details as building the Constitution and measuring out the form of a civilization in one sense constitute an infernal machine that could have sunk Pound's effort in *I'esprit de géométrie*. Certainly it made him a servant to his conception and to whatever his historical destiny might bring. He could alter his poem no further than by shifting to the 120-canto alternative and selecting the proper subject that might come to hand. . . .

Such weaknesses may be unavoidable corollaries of Pound's strengths: of the scope of his subject, of the necessary submission to its claims, and of such ethical qualities as energy, purpose, endurance, and faithfulness to an epic vocation that could hardly have been a more exacting mistress. Error, from simple errors of fact to the cataclysmic error of allying himself with historical fascism, may have been part of the cost of trying to realize the motive ''To build the city of Dioce whose terraces are the colour of the stars'' in a poem that might become ''reading matter, singing matter, shouting matter, the tale of the tribe'' precisely *because* he had made his life the vehicle for trying not only to perfect the vision but also to make it fact. He made himself not only the poet of many voices seeking to constitute the mind and life of the normal man wishing to live mentally active in a complacent era, but also the champion of ''these simple men who have fought against jealousy,'' of ''the sensitive'' (as he perceived Joyce when he first met him in 1920), of the artist-saint like Constantin Brancusi—both of what the simple heart feels and of what the intense mind does and might do. If he presumed to voice ''The enormous tragedy of the dream in the peasant's bent shoulders,'' he did it by becoming ''the last American living the tragedy of Europe.''

Forrest Read. *'76: One World and the Cantos of Ezra Pound* (Univ. of North Carolina Pr., 1981), pp. 436, 438

[Ezra] Pound, like Hitler, is a phobic personality. Almost from the very start, his work contains images of indistinct and contaminating creatures, alternately or interchangeably insects and human beings, but in either case representatives of a confused otherness, leaving their slimy trails on the face of the earth. Nor can one doubt Pound's massive fear and hatred of the vague, the confused, the ambiguous, the undifferentiated, the unknown. His hero and model is Hercules, for whom the purpose of culture (as in Pound's translation of Sophocles' *The Women of Trachis*) is to assert, violently if necessary, clear demarcations—to banish chaos, to destroy monsters, to exercise the vague and incommensurable. Having chosen this Herculean task at an early point in his career, Pound confronts the same forms of confusing alterity which trouble the mind of fascism: the unconscious, the isolated self and conscience, the mystery of feminine nature, philosophical abstraction and speculation, metaphysics, the transcendental spirit, the world of microbes—a vast forest of uncertain meanings and ideas in which Pound himself is lost and from which he must escape. Pound turns to fascism because he shares not only its deep fear of indeterminacy but also its central desire, which is to banish the indeterminate from social life and the mind of man. As in fascism, in Pound's work the ultimate sign of such fearful indeterminacy is the Jew. A symbol of virtually every from of dangerous otherness—the threat of disease, labyrinthine inwardness, instinctual passion, the vagina dentata, a plague of vermin, satanic magic, divine violence—the Jew is by projection Pound's very embodiment of confusion itself. It is he against whom Pound unleashes his Herculean rage, as if to destroy in the Jew his own confusion. In Pound as in fascism, the projection of evil and socially undesirable qualities onto this familiar/foreigner has the same function and effect: no longer himself but a ''plastic demon,'' an

unquestioned symbol of monstrous otherness and frightful indeterminacy, the defenseless Jew is the most likely and obvious candidate for scapegoating in periods of social upheaval and undifferentiating violence.

Despite the centrality of the Jew in fascist ideology, anti-Semitism by no means exhausts the fascist implications of Pound's work. For if throughout this book we have tried as much as possible to avoid relying on simple ideological schemata and categories, seeking rather to convey the uniqueness of Pound's mind and language as of his political development, we have shown that much of his thinking on politics, society, religion, and culture repeatedly falls within the typology of Italian and German fascism. This is true of many Poundian beliefs and values which critics do not generally consider fascistic, and which they prefer to treat separately or else apolitically—Pound's antimonotheism, his reverence for the concrete and natural manifold, his emphasis on hierarchy, his suspicion of abstraction and transcendence, his glorification of myth and ritual, his agrarianism, his patriarchy, his antifeminism, his solar religion, his abhorrence of usury, to give only a few examples. All of these taken together form a typical, mutually reinforcing fascist constellation. To treat them in isolation, without regard for their political implications and their interconnection with the whole of Pound's thought, is to place them within a partial perspective and to distort their full ideological significance. [Massimo] Bacigalupo is entirely correct when he describes *The Cantos* as ''the sacred poem of the Nazi-Fascist millennium.''

> Robert Casillo. *The Genealogy of Demons: Anti-Semitism, Fascism, and the Myths of Ezra Pound* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Univ. Pr., 1988), pp. 327–28

I think the best way of reading (the only way really to redeem) *The Cantos* themselves is by reading them as unintended—or better perhaps subintended—parody. [Pound's] magnum opus, I am suggesting, is not a failed epic, though it seemed so to Pound's most sympathetic advocate, T.S. Eliot, and, for that matter, even to him, who when near his death spoke of the long poem at which he had labored for so many years as *sbaglioto*, botched, a mistake from the start. It is rather a mock epic, an anti-epic, a comic travesty of the genre, and consequently (as I would dearly love to believe that at some level he suspected) a joke on himself as well as on the latter-day pious Poundolators who do not realize as much. What else are we to make of the passage in Canto 41, in which he approvingly quotes the comments on a sample of his work by Mussolini: ''Ma gusto'' / said the boss ''è divertente'' (the adjective, of course, means ''amusing,'' not to be taken seriously); then he adds, ''catching the point/before the aesthetes had got there.''

After such a warning, how can ''the aesthetes'' still read *The Cantos* with a straight face? Had Pound not revealed his not-so-secret parodic intent, even before the fact, as it were, in the title of any early poem, which travesties the famous opening line of the *Aeneid*, ''*Famam Librosque Cano*.'' This warns us clearly enough, does it not, that he sings, will continue to sing, *not* like his Latin model, Arms and the Man, Warfare and the Hero, but Fame and Books, which is to say, making it by producing literature about literature, a scarcely heroic—though diverting—theme.

The Cantos, moreover, not only lack a heroic theme; they lack a heroic protagonist as well. Indeed, they have no proper protagonist at all, not even a parodic one. For a little while, in the earlier Cantos, Odysseus promises to play such a role. He is ironized from the start, however, by the fact that he appears not in a text translated by Homer, but the English version of a Renaissance Latin crib of the original, thrice removed from the original. And even this ghost of a ghost of a ghost soon fades from the scene, or rather, persists only in echoes of the false name Odysseus gave himself as part of his bloody practical joke on the Cyclops. ''*Ou tis*'' is that name, No Man, Nobody, an appellation nearly anonymous, and therefore fitting for a poet without a proper persona or voice of his own.

What we hear in *The Cantos* is, finally, Nobody talking in garbled and half-understood tongues about a world in which, culture having become Kulchur, nothing matters. Consequently, despite all the references, literary and historical, the allusions and quotations, the dropped names of the living and the dead, the self-annihilating *Cantos* are about Nothing at all.

> Leslie Fiedler. ''Pound as Parodist.'' In Marcel Smith and William A. Ulmer, eds. *Ezra Pound, the Legacy of Kulchur* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Pr., 1988), pp. 142–44

The Cantos is about Pound's efforts to master Western history. While his definition of an epic as ''a poem including history'' or ''a poem containing history'' is deliberately reductive, it nonetheless testifies to a fundamental conviction, that the epic poet works to fashion a poetic form that can contain what we normally think of as the concerns of history. In fact, as my study demonstrates, the chief problem of the epic in the modern world is the problem of form: how can poetry confront, include, provide meaning to, and thus master the violent and complex world of history?. . .

This demand for the epic to master history is the primary impetus to Pound's search for a principle of organization and unity. Pound's definition of the epic as a long poem containing history can be understood as a call for a ''major form'' capable of ''containing'' the enormous array of material in ''history,'' which is understood by Pound primarily as records from the past capable of representing that past to the present. This major form, which [David] Pearlman defines as ''an over-all design in which the parts are significantly related to the whole'' lies in the figure of Pound's composite wanderer, who, standing for the poet himself, confronts all sorts of records from the past and hopes to have them cohere through the strength of his personality. We should not be surprised that *The Cantos* undergoes striking and significant changes in direction and purpose when we recall that the poem defines a journey almost fifty years in the making. As he changes his understanding of the nature of his journey, his understanding of history and of his role in the historical process undergo several large shifts and a number of smaller adjustments. Pound devises his composite wanderer as his organizing principle in order to announce these changes and provide them with a rigorous sense of meaningful development. We can read *The Cantos* as an organized and perhaps even unified whole only if we grasp how this wanderer is made to function in every aspect of the poem.

> Stephen Sicari. *Pound's Epic Ambition: Dante and the Modern World* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Pr., 1991), pp. ix, 15–16

One of the most politicized anti-Semites of the twentieth century was Ezra Pound. His major accusation against the Jews was that

they were out to substitute Jewish for Christian values, thereby destroying the world. This theme was expressed in more than one hundred twenty wartime broadcasts Pound made on the Rome Radio. England, France, Russia, and the U.S.A. were ''under yid control. Lousy with kikes.'' Jews were ''rats,'' ''bedbugs,'' ''vermin,'' ''worms,'' ''bacilli,'' ''parasites,'' who constitute an overwhelming ''power of putrefaction . . . rot[ting] EVERY nation he has wormed into.'' He saw the Talmud as ''AIMED specifically at the destruction of all nonkike order. It is a dirty book. . . . Out of it came the determination to ruin Europe, to break down Christianity.''

His solution to the Jewish problem mimicked that of Hitler. He insisted that a few hundred American Jews and F.D.R. should legally be hung for their crimes: later in the same paragraph he impatiently insisted that ''all the kike congressmen'' should be bumped off without delay. He called for a *Judenrein* Europe: the ''choice'' was between ''Europe and Jewry.''

> Robert Michael. ''American Anti-Semitism.'' *Midstream*. August/September 1991, p. 28

Insofar as Anglo-Hibernio-American Modernism was a movement, it was largely Pound's creation; it is not too much to say that he was the only one of the figures we now call Modernists for whom the movement as such had any importance. Even those who refuse to honor Pound's achievement as a poet can hardly deny the importance of his presence. If his lasting poetry were judged to consist only of the usual anthology pieces, it would still be accurate to call this period ''the Pound era'' simply because of his dynamic role—to use Eliot's metaphor—as a literary catalyst. In fact there is no figure quite like him anywhere in literary history. Though he was actually a rather shy person, according to many of his intimates, the intensity of his aesthetic convictions led him to make friends, allies, and projects of almost the whole roster of contemporary artists and writers. He became in effect the best literary friend, successively, of William Carlos Williams, Ford Madox Ford, William Butler Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, and James Joyce; later he befriended Ernest Hemingway, E.E. Cummings, and others. Though no feminist, he sponsored and catalyzed the work of the two preeminent women poets of the era, H.D. and Marianne Moore; he did his best to publicize all new talents in poetry even when he did not like them personally, as with Robert Frost and D.H. Lawrence. It would be shorter work to list those who were unaffected by his tireless efforts, for example Wallace Stevens, than those who benefited in one way or another. And though he was remarkably catholic in his tastes—from [Thomas] Hardy to [Jean] Cocteau—and never forced even devoted proteges to conform to his own ideology, he did give Modernism its essential character simply by his example and leadership. As early as 1916, someone as remote from his interests and milieu as Carl Sandburg could testify that anyone who wanted to think about modern literature had to take account of Pound's work and activities, since he ''had done most of living men to incite new impulses in poetry.'' If some [whom] Pound briefly championed have faded in retrospect, such as Edgar Lee Masters, still his links to the giants of the age overshadow these. And to say so much is to say nothing of his relationships with artists like Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Francis Picabia, and Constantin Brancusi.

> Vincent Sherry. *Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and Radical Modernism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1993), p. 203

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POWERS, J.F. (1917–)

Even though the expert technique of these stories is as unemotional and photographic as the later Hemingway, consisting mainly of placing the model in a good clear light and shooting, the collection as a whole leaves one with the impression that the author has a disciplined distaste for materialism and bullying, and that he believes that these two traits account for most of the frustrations and woes of contemporary man, whether in the church or out of it.

Eunice S. Holsaert. *New York Times Book Section*. May 4, 1947. p. 20

He avoids the stereotyped two-dimensional layout, the affected obliquity which keeps everything on the same level, and the colorless neutrality which makes such an obvious pretense of ''objectivity.'' He is unabashedly inside his story, focusing on objects, catching nuances for us, and heightening the volume when he wishes. . . . His perceptions are interesting not only for their acuteness but for the mass of dense particulars which they penetrate.

Henry Rago. *Commonweal*. Aug. 22, 1947. pp. 457–8

Of all modern writers known to me who have dealt with Catholic religious life J. F. Powers . . . is far and away the best. He has his own peculiar technique for handling the subject. Unlike the sentimentalists and satirists, he rarely glances at religion itself, as though it were a light too strong for his eyes. He is interested mainly in the pettiness and vulgarity of a mechanical civilization. . . . After the darkness of so much American fiction this book (*The Presence of Grace*) produces a peculiar shock of delight. Having lived with Mr. Power's first book, *Prince of Darkness*, for some years, I can testify that it is not a delight that disappears as the shock diminishes. Powers is among the greatest of living storytellers.

Frank O'Connor. *Saturday Review*. March 24, 1956. p. 22

Competitiveness is central in Powers's work, whether he is using the secular world or the tight world of the Church. . . . The competitive agitation leads to a distinctive developmental pattern in Powers's stories. Most typical is a centripetal movement that begins on the outskirts of things, with the inconspicuous, literal, mundane detail, and slowly whirls in toward a still point of revelation that in a sense negates all hierarchies. The protagonist is at least temporarily freed of the compulsion to maintain self, sees himself and others as victims of a condition endemic to humanity, glimpses and responses to a motivation that operates as an antidote—that is, there is a release from the pressure of self-interest, with the concomitant experiencing of compassion and even of love.

George Scouffas. *Critique*. Fall, 1958. p. 42

What made these stories so remarkable was maturity. American fiction is always striking an attitude or being ''psychological'' or just reporting the violence of some unusual experience. Mr. Powers's work was about a *world*; it constantly yielded literary vanity to the truth and depth of this world. He was subtle, funny, precise, and always unexpected. The book seemed to come out of a longer background than most young American writers of fiction ever own. . . . I admire Mr. Powers very much—story after story is worked out to the finest possible point; this is work that manages by fusing intelligence and compassion, to come out as humor. There is real love in his heart, but he knows that the *heart* does not write short stories, and that the beauty of grace can appear only against the background of the horrid daily element, which is gravity.

Alfred Kazin. *Contemporaries* (Little). 1962. pp. 223–5

In this novel (*Morte D'Urban*), as in many of his best-known short stories, Powers writes about the Catholic Church with an air of great authority. He writes as an insider, though certainly not *for* insiders. The Order of St. Clement may be his invention, but it is as real as Yoknapatawpha County. Having created a little world of his own, with its particular beliefs and customs, he can write a comedy of manners. There are no dramatic incidents and no large issues, but we do have a quiet, steady revelation of character, a revelation superb in its subtlety and depth. . . . His faith permits him to look with tolerance on the foibles of good men and to recognize the virtues of bad ones.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 15, 1962. p. 21

It seems pretty generally agreed that Satire Is Dead. I'm delighted to inform you that you must revise your opinion, because J. F. Powers has written a book (*Morte D'Urban*) which is satire in the pure sense—not a symbolic action in the manner of Joyce or Kafka, not a psychological comedy in the manner of Kingsley Amis or Peter de Vries, though all these can be turned to critical ends—but a pure satire which will nevertheless please the most sophisticated literary tastes. Powers has done something quite remarkable: he has revived the satire of the Great Age—from Erasmus to Swift, let's say, reverting to tradition—within a modern context of style and attitude. In fact, the stylishness almost—but not quite—obscures the point that his book is a classical satire against mankind based on the exploitation of types.

Hayden Carruth. *New Republic*. Sept. 24, 1962. p. 24

From the start, nearly twenty years ago now, when his writing began to excite the admiration of the readers of *Accent*, it was evident that the stories of J. F. Powers had a very special quality, a rare richness of theme and perception; and, for all their liberal zeal and satirical intent, often an even rarer gentleness of tone. . . . Powers's theme remains truly haunting; it is one that might be framed as a question: how can the spirit express itself in nature

without compromise, without debasement, since one is so distant from the other, and each one is obedient to different laws? Again: can a mind manipulate its work in the world without becoming completely worldly itself? . . . Powers has found the formula for his fiction in all this. He regularly sees the priest in a worldly role. The necessity of this role makes Powers's satire kind. The contradictions implied make his irony deep.

William H. Gass. *The Nation*. Sept. 29, 1962. pp. 182–3

The characters in *Morte D'Urban* have the tangibility that real people have for us in those rare moments when the fog of abstraction and self-absorption lifts, and they come illuminated out of the fog with Powers's rare combination of irony, sympathy and humor. . . . Yet the novel is not simply a gallery of memorable portraits; characters are revealed in action and interaction. Few writers today have as acute a sense of the drama of interpersonal relations as Powers has. . . . *Morte D'Urban* is not simply an anecdotal display of a central character by a writer whose ear for American speech is as good as O'Hara's; in it character and theme are dramatized in a significant complex. . . . It is Powers's version of that most Christian of ironies: the Fortunate Fall.

John P. Sisk. *Critique*. Winter, 1962–3. pp. 101–2

Powers's is a world of the living all too living, and only in such a world can the ethical consideration bear much weight. For the purposes of fiction, he effects a divorce between faith and morals. The question is not whether faith, in the measure his characters have it, makes them greatly better or greatly worse than those outside the fold. The question is whether those inside the fold can sustain the moral life at the level of average good will, self-respect, and taste. If this approach is necessary to Powers as a moral realist, it is also congenial to him as a story teller; and his love of narration in all shapes, sizes and degrees of seriousness is obvious. Stories within stories, ranging from rectory-table anecdotes through biblical parables to scraps of radio serials caught from the airwaves, thicken the fictional atmosphere. Each sentence tends to be an event; yet every event, like every firm but fluent sentence, is an open door into the next half-expected, half-shocking encounter. Thus does J. F. Powers coax stories out of the shabby rectories of his not altogether mythical Minnesota.

F. W. Dupee. *Partisan Review*. Spring, 1963. p. 114

The Prince of Darkness and *The Presence of Grace*, necessary preliminaries to *Morte D'Urban*, have few faults and present less of the big world than Powers's novel. *Morte D'Urban* is not woven tightly; it overuses narrative bridges; it hurries its concluding section; it sometimes exhibits an overindulgence in clever ambiguities; its experiments with the play form within a novel achieve the partial success that calls attention to technical dexterity rather than to the heart of the matter. Yet these faults seem slight flaws as I think back over the experiences of reading the novel. Err though he may, Powers *has* gone on from the smaller provinces where a cat whimsically evaluates or outwits a priest, even beyond the short importance of a good Franciscan's death with his ''will amenable to the divine,'' beautiful though it may be. Here is J. F. Powers's large world, fully peopled with the Clementines he invented and those they contend against and try to tend and live with. Here, fully imagined, is the tragic and comic world where Father Urban lives within, above, and beneath his own and the Order's scheme of values, forgetting and remembering and learning about the God who gives him rein and pulls him to heel.

Harvey Curtis Webster. *Kenyon Review*. Winter, 1963. p. 167

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PRICE, Reynolds (1933–)

A young Southerner, Reynolds Price, has written an exceptionally fine first novel, *A Long and Happy Life*, and, all told, Mr. Price looks like one of the most promising talents to have emerged for some time.

Mr. Price's opening did put me off; the writing seemed lush, and I feared that this might turn into a light trifle of Southern sweet talk and honeysuckle. But very quickly it became clear that this was no purveyor of gossamer sensibility but a very sure and adult writer with a firm grip upon his materials.

These materials are very modest. Mr. Price's people are simple rural folk in North Carolina, and his plot is slight: the seduction of a young girl by her young man, his return to discover she is pregnant, his proposal of marriage, and her acceptance. But this slight thread of plot is so interwoven with all the textures of family life, and Mr. Price's feeling for the girl and what passes in her mind is so sure, that by the time we have finished the book we have been involved in those major matters of life, death, and the dawning of truth upon the human mind that have always been the substance of great fiction.

The book moves toward its close at a beautiful pace. And the ending itself—the girl, about to have her young man at last, sees her future life with him suddenly deflated and common, and yet she must go forward to that future—is a wonderfully sustained portrayal of a delicate shift in perspectives that can stand comparison with Joyce's ''The Dead.'' Romance has been punctured, but what remains, though more troubled, is more human and moving.

William Barrett. *Atlantic Monthly*. April, 1962, p. 160

Reynolds Price's first novel, *A Long and Happy Life* (1962), was an unusually distinguished performance, as impressive in the lyricism of its style as it was in the renewed vitality he brought there to his time-worn theme (the fearful and immense complexities of human love). Amidst a spate of pornographic and programmatic novels, it stood out like a beacon of life and light or, at the least, a breath of fresh country air. Price was not afraid to *narrate* (something many of our fiction writers have either forgotten how to do or now disdain to do), nor was he afraid to retell one of the oldest stories in the world.

Such, however, is not the verdict one must finally render on his second novel, *A Generous Man*. The *story* here is essentially the

coming of age, both sexually and intellectually, of Milo Mustian, older brother of Rosacoke Mustian, the heroine of Price's first novel. . . .

Furthermore, Price's style, which seemed so powerful and moving in his first novel—shot through as it was with perceptions of natural beauty of the freshest intensity—seems to have degenerated here into a *manner*. His prose has become more modish, as his theme has become more muddled. A case in point is his fondness for the simple sentence with a simple subject but endlessly compound predicate, which has a certain hypnotic power but eventually becomes tedious and finally no substitute for a legitimate *style* which supports and reinforces the theme at every step.

This novel is supposed to present, apparently, a dramatic rendering of an elemental human experience, one fraught with pain and peril, which all men must finally undergo. Its possibilities for beauty and drama are certainly endless; but Price appears content to give us a fifteen-year-old North Carolina boy, wise both in speech and in thought far beyond his years—more a suburbanite Ivy Leaguer than a country boy whose folks raise tobacco. When he lets North Carolina speak and act for itself, Price is on home territory and safe. When he tries to impose a false intellectual and stylistic sophistication on his native material, it will simply not support this factitious superstructure, with a resulting loss of clarity and power. For all his implications about the necessity of both give and take in human love, Price's treatment involves largely the give and take of sex: his metaphysics becomes largely acrobatics. Finally, as Rosacoke remarks when Milo is discoursing on the dramatic events of ''Death's'' escape, ''Just call it a snake. I'll know who you mean.'' Price might have done better if he had followed this advice more closely himself. His talent is a very fine one. Let us hope that he will not further abuse it.

Robert Drake. *Southern Review*. Winter, 1967, pp. 248–50

A Generous Man, perhaps better termed a romance than a novel, has suffered considerable indignities from reviewers and critics who have set it down as a playful allegorical quest for the great snake Death. That a part of the author's intention slipped past undetected is not surprising: Price's observation that he let the name Death ''become one more nail in the coffin I was building for the great Southern hunt'' might well come as news even to the attentive reader. Nature, the importance of man's relationship to nature, or, put another way, man's being a natural creature, shows not in the guying of such mythicized solemnities as the hunt but rather in a sense of place radically altered from the one communicated in *A Long and Happy Life*. . . .

Price's more recent novel, *Love and Work*, offers variations on and apparent contradictions to the thesis that the point of contact of man and nature, as of man and the supernatural, is important and may be crucial—that its informed perception could and does change whole lives. . . .

Nature of any description is little in evidence in *Love and Work*, the focus turned inward, the protagonist self-absorbed, living life at second hand or attempting to recreate it in charming vignettes of his parents' meeting and courtship, which his wife, who knows him, sets down as ''easy lies''. . . . Price clearly espouses no program after the manner of the Agrarians. In his fiction the naturalistic perspective receives no adherence; the pastoral mode, in so far as the term describes his first novel, was a point of departure. . . .

Price [is not] a Romantic, for he has already shown that the ''literally human qualities'' of life are best grasped, interpreted, and communicated in and through a place where man's status as created and creating being, where his amphibian nature and the more constant spectacle of his fall from grace, irresistibly present themselves.

Allen Shepherd. *Critique*. 15, 2, 1973, pp. 86, 92–94

When a work of fiction as compelling and original as Reynolds Price's latest novel [*The Surface of Earth*] comes along, it deserves evaluation in its own terms. Why should the reader worry if, in its relatively straightforward narrative, its rich, rhythmical and rather formal language and its brooding obsession with family as a kind of fate which a child must come to terms with before he can be free ''to walk clean away into his own life,'' it seems to be out of step with the march of most contemporary fiction?

More important is the fact that it meets what seems to me the supreme test of a novel: it manages to recreate a world and people it with characters as complex and stubbornly mysterious as those in life, and it draws the reader into that world—sensually, emotionally and intellectually—to the point that he experiences those lives and earns whatever insights may be gained from them.

In this, his longest and most ambitious novel, which took ten years of planning and three years of writing, Reynolds Price focuses on the harm that parents do, through the flawed choices, emotional failures and unsatisfied hungers they pass on to their children unto the third and fourth generation. Indeed, the biblical estimate seems conservative here when one considers that although the action begins in 1903 on the evening of 16-year-old Eva Kendall's elopement with her Latin teacher, Forest Mayfield, the book opens with a conversation in which the Kendall children are drawing from their father details of their maternal grandfather's suicide. (''What's shameful, sir, in wanting the truth?'' Eva asks, ''We're all nearly grown. . . . It's our own story.'') And the novel ends, 491 pages later, with that suicide's great-great grandson, Hutch Mayfield, struggling to put his heavy inheritance behind him.

A narrow focus? Perhaps. But unquestionably an important one which takes the reader beneath the surface of events into the interior world, even the unconscious world, of the principal characters. . . .

Despite the book's length and what begins to seem toward the end a plethora of explanations and confessions from the characters themselves, the narrative remains, on the whole, surprisingly succinct, displaying Mr. Price's gift for catching whole landscapes in a few images, whole characters in a few telling gestures or fragments of talk. And what a luxury it is to be immersed in his majestic prose.

There is, however, a static quality to the novel as fragments of human experience are seized and held for microscopic observation, then analyzed at length from shifting points of view in dreams, in letters and in endless talk. This quality is suggested in the Blake-like image which the author has designed for the jacket of the book—a fixed sun face gazing with an intensity that threatens to burn through surfaces to the mysteries beneath them. . . .

Although this powerful novel seems in the end to be overweighted with wordy explanations of the emotional demands, debts and failures that constrict the Mayfields' and the Kendalls' lives, it represents a leap forward by a gifted novelist into visionary territory which few of his contemporaries have the courage to

explore, territory which, if conquered, can yield the hard-won wisdom of the human heart.

Everyone who is interested in serious fiction ought to read it.

Anne Hobson Freeman. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Autumn, 1975, pp. 637–39, 641

Complexity may be of several types, not all of which are constructive or ultimately enriching to narrative. But in Price's novels one particular type of complexity, which he calls ''dialogue'' . . . does enrich his narrative; in fact Price's technique of ''dialogue'' equips his novels to speak on the multiple levels on which his listeners need narrative. Price's long and complicated novel *The Surface of Earth* is his most recent and most successful experiment in this kind of narrative. By quoting from Augustine's *Confessions* in the epigraph, Price initiates a dialogue that not only results in the enhancement of the theme, but is, in fact, the way the novel is finally told: a long and often fierce debate with Augustine. Complexity, then, is not to be found solely in what abstract statement might be made after the novel is read. It is to be found in the nature of narrative itself.

Invoking Augustine enables Price not only to talk about motion and rest as powerful shapers of human life but also to use them as elements of technique. The *Confessions*, echoing through the small but deliberate aperture of the epigraph, gives *The Surface of Earth* the capacity to generate an intelligible and complex world. . . .

The complex design of *The Surface of Earth* invokes Augustine as the great archetype of the human consciousness troubled in its very humanness. In the lives of three characters, seen in crucial moments, Reynolds Price answers Augustine's model with one of his own. In a ''strong personal vision and voice,'' *The Surface of Earth* rings many changes on immense themes of the nature of mortal consciousness, of love, of the self, of life in motion. Price's accomplishment in the novel is the more amazing because he achieves multiple meaning for his characters, settings, and incidents without emasculating them with allegory. Through the novelist's faithful acts of attention, and through those of his characters, *The Surface of Earth*, from epigraph to Rob's final laugh, insists upon life as the primary experience. Theories, ideas, abstractions, and interpretations of life are appropriately secondary—risky departures from the ground of human existence, the surface of earth.

Michael Kreyling. *Southern Review*. Autumn, 1980, pp. 853–54, 867–68

A fifth novel by an author who won fame with his first book, *A Long and Happy Life*, published nearly 20 years ago, *The Source of Light* continues a family saga begun in *The Surface of Earth* (1975). And there's much to admire in its pages. Reynolds Price has an unplodding imagination. . . .

The Source of Light is a 300-page narrative wherein absurdist savagery has no place and the idea of gentleness as a value isn't once mocked—which is to say, it's a rarity.

It's not, though, speaking bluntly, a compelling or exciting work of fiction. One failing is that the novelist merely assumes that the question whether his hero quits Europe or stays is momentous, but never demonstrates that it is. I was troubled too, by Price's difficulty in finding distinct voices for his characters. Nearly everybody in the book—from Southern preppies to Dilsey-style servants, to Oxford stonemasons, to liberated American women—speaks a lingo best described as Southern-clever-wry, and in time the sameness of the speech becomes disconcerting.

Finally there's the Faulkner problem. Significant differences exist between Hutchins Mayfield and Faulkner's young masculine heroes—and between Faulkner's old people and Price's—and between Faulkner's literary allusions (the Bible and Keats) and Price's (the Bible and Shakespeare)—and between Faulkner's conviction of the uniqueness of the Compsons and Price's conviction of the uniqueness of the Mayfield clan. But while the differences exist, I'm afraid they're not as noticeable as the resemblances. The overall impression left is that of a fictional world rendered indistinct by the spreading shade of the great Faulkner tree; no action or person or style of utterance quite manages to achieve energetically independent being. Dignity and intelligence are always visible in *The Source of Light*; what's missing is the quality of freshness and surprise that makes novels novel.

Benjamin DeMott. *Saturday Review*. April, 1981. p. 72

The good hearts of Reynolds Price's novels live by stories. By day his narrators offer stories to listeners as nourishment, admonition, and entertainment, while at night they continue to create fictions in their own dreams. They read tales in letters and diaries and, like the resilient Kate Vaiden, may even record family history to trace the design of a life's masterplot. Although Price has celebrated this vital passion for narrative as typically Southern (*Common Room* 168), he also hears in his regional tradition the telling sign of a universal hunger. In ''A Single Meaning,'' his preface to translations from Jewish and Christian Scripture, he explains that the ''root of story sprang from need—need for companionship and consolation by a creature as vulnerable, four million years ago and now, as any protozoan in a warm brown swamp'' (*Common Room* 249). As Price listens to the story of all stories in Genesis, Adam first speaks not to assert his authority over beasts and birds but to search for an end to his aloneness, to find the fit helpmate that he lacks.

The descendants of Adam and Eve continue to yearn for such solace. Price speculates that primitive men and women told stories as a way of opposing the chaos around them. By revealing patterns in nature—phases of the moon, cycles of growth, alternations of seasons—such proto-narratives eased the daily struggle to survive through acknowledging predictable sequences around which a stable, understandable life could be built. Once apparently random happenings now became part of a grander plot unfolding in time. As questions about what-happened-when inspired conjectures about why it happened at all, chronology led backwards to etiology and theology, to the venerable tales of myths. Since Adam, the first narrator, Price's story-telling humanity seeks ''credible news that our lives proceed in order toward a pattern which, if tragic here and now, is ultimately pleasing in the mind of a god who sees a totality and *at last* enacts His will. We crave nothing less than perfect story'' (*Common Room* 249).

Having found his greatest satisfaction in the narratives of the Old and New Testaments, Price has sought to intimate the story *par excellence* in his own fiction.

Gary M. Ciuba. ''Price's *Love and Work*: Discovering the 'Perfect Story,''' *Renascence*. Fall, 1991, p. 45

In the year when both his *Collected Stories* and a collection of plays have been published, Reynolds Price provides his readers with the opportunity to witness his evolving perspectives over the last three decades. More specifically, his collection of three plays [*Full Moon and Other Plays*] features protagonists who face personal failures and fears of betrayal as they struggle with their passions and their needs for transformation.

Price's avoid readers who fondly remember Rosacoke Mustian and Wesley Beavers from *A Long and Happy Life* (1962) and *Good Hearts* (1988) will especially welcome their return in *Early Dark*, an adaptation of the former work for the stage. Price, however, warns readers that his view of the story has changed from the ensuing years. In both his first novel and his first play, Rosa struggles with the transition from childhood to womanhood and hopes that her love for Wesley will prove adequate catalyst for change. . . .

In the play's version, . . . Wesley . . . accuses Rosa of turning herself against him ''like a weapon'' (94), and the playwright himself calls her misgivings about Wesley ''*her same child harangue*'' (65). Admirers of Rosacoke's eloquence and sensitivity in Price's novel will be surprised by the author's harsher view of his heroine in the play. . . . Price has clearly grown more critical of how Rosa's imagination creates expectations that hurt those she loves by pointing out how they fail to live up to her dreams. While Price's perspective in the play is quite interesting, it also distances us from his most compelling character. . . .

Full Moon, . . . Price's most recent play (1993), demonstrates most strongly the implications these issues of love and betrayal have beyond the family. . . . In the final scene . . . both fathers remind the young couple that God will judge and severely punish privileged whites for their prejudice, gluttony, and national betrayal of blacks.

Individually and collectively, these plays accrete power as they offer increasing evidence of the consequences that miserly love has in the family drama and outside of it as well. Their growing magnitude demands careful witness. Price's building tensions and evolving perspectives will fascinate readers and theater audiences alike.

R.C. Fuller. *Southern Quarterly*. Winter, 1994, pp. 151–52

I have become certain of one thing in the last half-year: the rich collection of stories in *The Collected Stories of Reynolds Price*—the galley copy of which I have absolutely torn apart, used up, wrecked—will exist somewhere as a thread in the fabric of twentieth-century American literature. The fifty stories here were written over the span of almost forty years (though Price notes in his introduction that he wrote exclusively in other forms between 1970 and 1990), and half of them come from his earlier collections, *The Names and Faces of Heroes* (1963) and *Permanent Errors* (1970). Price has been known as a ''Southern Writer,'' and these stories for the most part would confirm that in their locale, in the situation of the characters (picking ticks, chewing snuff, eating hominy), and in that thing most often evoked by the name of Faulkner, that is a sense of familial mystery and loss—told in a form which many times overtly addresses its own identity as story. That last is exactly the kind of sentence which tries to bale fifty stories with one piece of wire, and it will not work. That ancient sins and secrets are hot for the characters in these stories, that the characters have a keen sense of regret which roils and simmers within them, an urgent need to testify, a fear of being damned and a stoic wonder for the ways they are redeemed—these may start to make this the book of a southern writer, but there is as much Sherwood Anderson here as Faulkner, and there's another thing throughout the stories, the thing most appreciated perhaps, and that is Reynolds Price's ability to infuse his stories with candor, a simple but powerful sense transcendent fiction has that confronts, invades the reader with the knowledge that if one sits at the table long enough with this writer he's going to show all his cards, unexpected as they may be, and in a beautiful way make something true.

Ron Carlson. *Southern Review*. Spring, 1994, pp. 371–72

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PROULX, E. Annie (1935–)

An early traveler's account of the Maritime Provinces says, ''After but a year's visit, one is convinced that the sea has a savage appetite for Newfoundlanders.'' In E. Annie Proulx's vigorous, quirky novel *The Shipping News*, set in present-day Newfoundland, there are indeed a lot of drownings. The main characters are plagued by dangerous undercurrents, both in the physical world and in their own minds. But the local color, ribaldry and uncanny sorts of redemption of Ms. Proulx's third book of fiction keep the reader from slipping under, into the murk of loss. The novel, largely set in the village of Killick-Claw, along Newfoundland's foggy, storm-battered coast, displays Ms. Proulx's surreal humor and her zest for the strange foibles of humanity.

The protagonist is Quoyle, who almost drowns once. Back in New York State, his marriage to Petal Bear had ''a month of fiery happiness. Then six kinked years of suffering.'' Quoyle, however, was smitten to the end. When Petal is killed with a lover in a car wreck, one of Quoyle's first acts of mourning is to stick his head into the sudden cold weather of the refrigerator to cry. Quoyle, a

third-rate newspaper hack with a ''head shaped like a crenshaw, no neck, reddish hair'' and ''features as bunched as kissed fingertips,'' is left with two daughters, Bunny and Sunshine, ages 6 and 4 1/2. Soon Bunny is plagued with nightmares (of a snarling white dog) that match in intensity her father's hallucinatory re-enactments of Petal's grisly death. Life seems stripped of hope until Quoyle's Aunt Agnis Hamm arrives. The aunt, as she is often referred to, regales Quoyle with stories of their Newfoundland ancestors; at once mesmerizing and disquieting, they draw Quoyle in, albeit with some hesitation. ''Quoyle hated the thought of an incestuous, fit-prone, seal-killing child as a grandfather, but there was no choice. The mysteries of unknown family.'' The grandfather had drowned at age 12, having already sired Quoyle's father.

Quoyle sets out for Newfoundland to find the ancestral house. Once there, Quoyle, his aunt and daughters find the dilapidated place, isolated miles down a barely passable road from Killick-Claw, where Quoyle eventually finds work on *The Gammy Bird*, the local newspaper.

Happily for the reader, Ms. Proulx keeps returning to the offices of *The Gammy Bird*. As Quoyle's gypsy family moves from house to trailer, the office becomes his home base. There he meets the staff, true brigands of outback journalism. It is also where the pitch of Ms. Proulx's writing is most finely tuned. There are, among others, Nutbeem, who steals foreign news from the radio; Tert Card, an estimable rewrite man; and Jack Buggit, the belligerent editor. Their spontaneous monologues, when spiced with the local patois, are wonderfully performed riffs of nostalgia, anecdote, indictment and complaint that strike us as Newfoundland's most rollicking oral literature.

The Gammy Bird specializes in sexual-abuse stories, and we get a file of them a mile high. Quoyle is assigned two beats. There is shipping news: a ship's home port, time of arrival, time of departure, cargo, occasionally the antics of captain and crew. In a region of chronic unemployment, just to have these facts of commerce reported seems a kind of optimism. Ms. Proulx's Killick-Claw is barely hanging on to the second half of the century. Far more disturbing is Quoyle's other beat. As it is put to him by Jack Buggit: ''We run a front-page photo of a car wreck every week, whether we have a wreck or not. That's our golden rule. No exceptions.''

Nutbeem observes:

> Have you noticed Jack's uncanny sense about assignments? He gives you a beat that plays on your private inner fears. Look at you. Your wife was killed in an auto accident. What does Jack ask you to cover? Car Wrecks, to get pictures while the upholstery is still on fire and the blood still hot. He gives Billy, who has never married for reasons unknown, the home news, the women's interest page, the details of home and hearth—must be exquisitely painful to the old man. And me. I get to cover the wretched sexual assaults. And with each one I relive my own childhood. I was assaulted at school for three years, first by a miserable geometry teacher, then by older boys who were his cronies. To this day I cannot sleep without wrapping up like a mummy in five or six blankets. And what I don't know is if Jack understands what he's doing, if the pain is supposed to ease and dull through repetitive confrontation, or if it just persists, as fresh as on the day of the first personal event. I'd say it persists.

Claustrophobic winter arrives, locking in Killick-Claw, icing over the coves. As the harsh months go by, it seems that Quoyle is digging out from his own past. He deals compassionately with the last of his disreputable clan, a demented old cousin living in a hut ''crammed with the poverty of another century,'' by securing him in a rest home. Still fending off visions of Petal, he begins to court the all but silent Wavey Prowse, herself widowed by a drowning. He gets his children ensconced in school and deepens his knowledge and delight as a father. He seems for the first time calm in his heart. The children and aunt undergo difficult, healing transformations as well. Our sympathies are strongly invested in all of them, as well as in the village itself.

Throughout *The Shipping News*, the sinuousness of E. Annie Proulx's prose seems to correspond physically with the textures of the weather and sea. Her inventive language is finely, if exhaustively, accomplished. If I have any complaint it is that at times she carries her own brand of poetic compression too far: ''Billy's worn shape down to the bones, cast Quoyle as a sliding mass.'' Weather off-shore or overland can often seem chokingly imbued with portentousness. Near the novel's end, Jack Buggit sits up in his own coffin, spouting water, having both drowned and not drowned; it is a forced invention in a novel otherwise replete with wonderfully natural ones.

Ms. Proulx is never too showy with her research, though *The Shipping News* is almost an encyclopedia of slang and lore. The way her Newfoundlanders talk, the most factual account seems as high-spirited as gossip over a supper of snow crab, cod cheeks, lobster salad and seal-flipper stew.

Eventually, the actual house of Quoyle is blown into the sea, a drowned house. Yet by spring's open water, Quoyle himself has not only survived but also drummed out some of his demons. In the end, it seems triumph enough that neither Quoyle nor Wavey has drowned.

> Howard Norman. *The New York Times Book Review*. April 4, 1993, p. 13.

Novels of small-town life are an American genre that continually generates fine work. For a society obsessed with individual identity, America has a surprising love of those virtues that emerge only in a collective context. A British novel about returning to roots would be a theodicy, reestablishing hierarchies and fitting the protagonists into their preordained rank. But the best American novels of return show people creating, rather than finding, the niche that best fulfills them.

[In *The Shipping News*,] E. Annie Proulx's lumbering hero Quoyle was never much liked by his parents or siblings. He married Petal, who humiliated him with affairs, and has only become a halfway competent journalist because his best friend Partridge saw potential in him. When his parents die, he loses his job, and Petal dies in a car crash after selling their children to a child abuser, from whom they are retrieved physically untouched. Quoyle is open to suggestions about how he should endure the rest of his life, and his aunt drags him off to the family roots in Newfoundland.

It will already be apparent that Proulx is not above throwing in the odd extreme. What follows includes storms at sea, premonitory dreams, decapitations, rescues and the resuscitation of a drowned man during his own wake. Perhaps even more improbably, the battered Quoyle acquires genuine dignity and worth by hard work at a job that he learns to love—turning the shipping news of a small local paper into a column taken seriously by other journalists.

Proulx's triumph is that she makes us swallow all of this. Her work not only describes, but is imbued with, a chancy decency that looks us forthright in the eye and challenges disbelief. This is an artful novel. Proulx takes us to a land of myth—Quoyle is at one level the Holy fool who does not know how to ask the right questions—and urban legend, full of the things we want or fear to believe in.

What risks being mere whimsy has steel behind it, because there is passion here and a real potential for tragedy. Petal died and was horrid, for all that Quoyle tried to love her. One of editor Buggit's sons drowned and the other is obsessed with the sea even though he has nearly drowned once. Aunt Agnes lost her woman lover years ago to cancer and does not feel able to tell even Quoyle about it.

There is precise intelligence, a sense of how small communities work and of how power is divided within them. Quoyle grows into responsibility because there is a vacuum in the community that needs him to fill it. The chapter heads come from a catalogue of knots; Proulx has the good sense not to avoid this potential crudity in her description of the ties that bind her hero to happiness.

> Roz Kaveney. *New Statesman & Society*. December 3, 1993, p. 39.

Arguably one of the most exciting fictionists to come along in decades, E. Annie Proulx is hardly what one might call an overnight success. For nearly two decades, she worked as freelance journalist and was a writer of ''how-to'' books on assignment; meanwhile, stories bubbled inside her. They finally erupted in her first collection, *Heart Songs and Other Stories.* Set in a northern New England, a landscape that can only be described as ''severe,'' the nine stories gave evidence of greatness to follow. Their odd-sounding names and battered conditions were simultaneously a mirror of the landscape and of Proulx's own quirky humor.

Heart Songs was followed by *Postcards,* a novel that won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. In other hands Proulx's decision to launch each chapter with a postcard tied to Loyal Blood, an aimless wanderer who serves as the book's protagonist, would have been a disaster, but Proulx so integrates the furious pace of story with the dazzle of technique that the result seems at once aesthetically coherent and entirely effortless.

Moreover, in documenting the decline-and-fall of a small American farm, one that had been in the Blood family for generations, Proulx was driving toward the very heart of America itself. Not that she preaches her message in an overt, editorializing manner; rather, her fiction dramatizes the particularities of a time and place with the fury of a gothic vision.

Shipping News is also set in an essentially hostile environment: Killick-Claw, a remote coastal village in Newfoundland. Known for its sudden storms and icy seas, the setting seems as unlikely as the postcards faithfully reproduced in Proulx's earlier novel. However, the saga of Quoyle, a hapless journalist who returns to his Newfoundland family home when his faithless wife is killed in a car wreck, serves as the springboard for an ambitious, multilayered novel.

At the center of *The Shipping News* is both the column of maritime comings-and-going that Quoyle writes for *The Gammy Bird* (Prouxl's hilarious send-up of a small town newspaper) and her protagonist's ongoing effort to pull his life together. As Proulx's delightfully quirky style makes clear, he has a long way to go:

> [He had] a great damp loaf of a body. At six he weighed eighty pounds. At sixteen he was buried under a casement of flesh. Head shaped like a crensaw, no neck, reddish hair ruched back. Features as bunched as kissed fingertips. Eyes the color of plastic. The monstrous chin, a freakish shelf jutting from the lower face.

As for *The Gammy Bird,* it specializes in car wrecks (''We run a front-page photo of a car wreck every week, whether we have a wreck or not''), sexual abuse stories garnered from the wire service, and the ''shipping news,'' the paper's effort to spread the good news that commerce still goes on in Killick-Claw.

Quoyle digs out of his disastrous past by digging into work and the strange community he encounters through it. Even more remarkable, what might have been the unrelenting tale of his perpetual loserhood takes a sharp turn at the end toward love. Not only does Quoyle's unlikely column become an unqualified success (rather like *The Shipping News* itself, which won a Pulitzer Prize), but Quoyle finds himself ''coiled'' in the grasp of the community in general and of Wavey Prowse in particular. That he marries her at the end seems as magical—given Quoyle's long history of estrangement—as Newfoundland. But that may well be Proulx's point: darkness, even dark comedy, may not be the final word. Rather,

> Water may be older than light, diamonds crack in hot goat's blood, mountaintops give off cold fire, forests appear in mid-ocean, it may happen that a crab is caught with the shadow of a hand on its back, that the wind be imprisoned in a bit of knotted string. And it may be that love sometimes occurs with pain or misery.

With only three books, Annie Proulx has convinced readers that she is simply not capable of writing unengaging fiction; and they are waiting impatiently for her to prove them right.

> Sanford Pinsker. In *Contemporary Novelists, 6th edition*, ed. Susan Windisch Brown (St. James Press, 1996).

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PURDY, James (1923–)

James Purdy's *Malcolm* comes to us with loud huzzas from Dame Edith Sitwell, Dorothy Parker and David Daiches. I'm afraid that Purdy loses rather than gains from these high claims; he is certainly

a writer of considerable interest, as his two previous books, *63: Dream Palace* and *Colour of Darkness*, have already shown, but there is nothing in *Malcolm*, his best book so far, to show him to be anything but a most delightful but surely not yet major talent. One is reminded of the brittle comedies of Carl Van Vechten and, further in the background, the work of Ronald Firbank. Yet while I think the dominant note of the book is its playfulness, it does certainly have overtones of something larger.

Mr. Purdy depends on a large imagination and a sharp wit—a wit which is sometimes moral and reflective and sometimes malicious. This, I think, divides the book, for one is uncertain of the solidity of the symbolic structure. Most critics have not made much of the symbolic purposes, preferring to delight in Purdy's prose; and I cannot help feeling that they do this because the symbolism is largely fanciful, and provides structure as much as explanation for the book. It is best seen, I think, as a succession of loosely-knit episodes, each of them moral fables (fables in the Aesop sense) about maturity, and linked by the innocence and openness of the central character, Malcolm.

Malcolm Bradbury. *London Magazine*. July, 1960. pp. 81–2

With the publication of *Malcolm*, James Purdy has left no doubt that he is a writer of integrity with a voice of his own. In America today, when most novels seem to be hurriedly manufactured with standardized patterns and interchangeable paragraphs, Purdy's work stands out as something of a rarity. He also has a highly personal vision of his own—bitter, ironic, and grotesque. Perhaps it is this combination of qualities that reminds us of Nathanael West. In two short novels, *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust*, West revealed more of the inner rot of the America of his day than several shelves of the naturalistic ''political'' novels produced by his more popular contemporaries. Similarly, Purdy, in *Color of Darkness* and in *Malcolm*, has said more in fewer words about the hunger and horror of our fragmented, business-cheapened life today than a whole chorus of best-selling, grey-flanneled voices from Irwin Shaw to Herman Wouk.

Much of Purdy's unusual achievement is made possible by his flat, bald style. It is precise and deceptively simple. He uses few of the rhetorical devices available to him in English; he is even sparing of adjectives and adverbs. In *Malcolm* especially his prose is terse, almost naked, sometimes matter-of-fact, dry. His individual voice comes through in a strange twist of a phrase here, an odd choice of a word there, and in a peculiar tension that vibrates from even his least tightly structured paragraphs.

Paul Herr. *Chicago Review*. Autumn-Winter, 1960. p. 19

It is indeed a pleasant surprise to find that James Purdy can produce a compelling and compassionate picture of everyday life within the framework of [*The Nephew*]. . . . No one else could have written this version of small-town American life. For Purdy sees the familiar, the ordinary, with a vision that lies somewhere between that of Blake and Grant Wood. So his picture of the inhabitants of Rainbow Center is, naturally, with all its surface similarity, a far cry from either *Main Street* or *Winesburg, Ohio*.

Richard McLaughlin. *Springfield Republican*. Oct. 30, 1960. p. 4D

I think it undoubted that James Purdy will come to be recognized as one of the greatest living writers of fiction in our language. . . . It is extraordinarily difficult to review [*Children Is All*], because it is impossible to convey the subtlety, depth on depth, that lies beneath what Mr. Angus Wilson, writing of another of Mr. Purdy's works, has described as his ''magnificent simplicity.'' . . . In his precision, avoidance of superfluity, vagueness or romanticism. Mr. Purdy may be regarded as a draughtsman. He has enormous variety. At least three masterpieces in this book, ''Everything Under the Sun,'' ''Daddy Wolf,'' and the almost unbearably anguishing play *Children Is All*, are studies in loneliness, but the movements in which that loneliness is conveyed are entirely different. . . . *Children Is All* is, to my mind, a sublime work of pity and tenderness. It could only have been written by a great writer.

Edith Sitwell. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Nov. 18, 1962. p. 6

I was startled when a perceptive friend of mine abroad wrote that Purdy's first novel *Malcolm* struck him as ''degenerate.'' I had never thought of it as that; but the fact that I hadn't may be simply a deplorable symptom that Americans are beginning to accept as normal the loveless state of affairs in which talk is incessant but communication non-existent. While there are few signs of truly human feeling anywhere today, elsewhere the educated may bear less resemblance than Americans to Purdy's Fenton Riddleway, who ''was able to accept nearly anything . . . the immense dreariness of things as though there were no other possibility.''

The surrealistic world of *Malcolm* is degenerate, but what has made the novel popular is not that it makes this grotesque world appealing, but that it shocks readers into recognizing that it is unmistakably theirs. It is a vastly different matter whether a book's degeneracy results from the writer's offering an enticing escape from reality (as in *Gone With the Wind* or *Lady Chatterley's Lover* or *On the Road*) or from his attempting to make us face unpleasant realities (as in *Suddenly, Last Summer* or *Cards of Identity* or *The Sound and the Fury*).

Warren French in *Essays in Modern American Literature*, edited by Richard E. Langford (Stetson). 1963. p. 113

Among the many labour-saving devices employed by reviewers, one of the commonest is to discuss a writer in terms of his relationship with other writers, alive or dead, and to deduce the influences which have contributed to his style and technique. Applied to such a book as *Children Is All*, however, this method would be the reverse of labour-saving, for Mr. Purdy is not *like* any other writer I can think of, and the task of influence-spotting, in his case, would be an arduous and unrewarding one. In other words, he is a true original, and these stories seem to me quite startlingly effective. Mr. Purdy's method is to spotlight a situation at the moment of its maximum intensity: what has led up to it is deftly and economically implied, usually by means of dialogue, and what comes after is left, as often as not (and sometimes most disquietingly), to the reader's imagination. The stories have an admirable compactness, and Mr. Purdy never uses two words where one will do. He is also remarkably versatile, both in style and content; he can be witty, macabre, touching, and whimsical (in the best sense) by turns. In one of the best stories, a woman's character is built up and

her weaknesses cruelly exposed merely through the random chatter of two female friends; the short ''Sermon'' is a devastating little piece, the preacher being, apparently, no less a person than God Himself. This collection also contains two playlets which, apart from the omission of ''he said'' and ''she said,'' read like the stories, which are themselves written almost entirely in dialogue.

Jocelyn Brooke. *The Listener*. Aug. 15, 1963. p. 249

The terrible, destructive private self each one of us possesses, reflected in the suppressed violence of contemporary social life, is a central subject in the works of James Purdy. . . . Purdy shows us the ''Nightwood'' Djuna Barnes had to explain; he reveals the loneliness Marguerite Duras has attempted to elucidate, but without the latter's cloying self-conscious approach. He never intrudes as he makes us see the desperation with which we live; and the objectivity of his observation finally extends to the furthest limits of grief.

What makes Purdy's stories so vital is the hard esthetic veneer in which he freezes the violent emotions his stories contain. . . . Because his style is so rigid and matter-of-fact, the reader, in Purdy's characteristic device, is shocked as an apparently meaningless event in a character's life reveals a tragic and irreversible truth. . . .

Despite this hard ''veneer,'' Purdy is still capable of exploring innumerable and subtle gradations of character motive; and his unswerving eye for the small gestures of daily existence beautifully penetrates those most private recesses of feeling that few contemporary authors have been able to disclose.

Jonathan Cott in *On Contemporary Literature*, edited by Richard Kostelanetz (Avon). 1964. pp. 498–9

It appears to be generally believed that James Purdy is an important American writer. The publication of his third novel, *Cabot Wright Begins*, offers an occasion for dissent. Purdy is a terrible writer, and worse than that, he is a boring writer. . . .

The early stories are ineptly written, but several of them have a raw power that comes from Purdy's imagining domestic hostility and potential violence as *overt* violence. Thus a son kicks his father in the groin, a husband beats his wife bloody at a party, a boy breaks the neck of his younger brother, and (in ''Why Can't They Tell You Why?'', the best story in *Color of Darkness*) a mother drives her son literally mad.

The later stories, in *Children Is All*, have lost even this power. In its place there is only verbal violence. . . .

Ultimately, Purdy is neither a novelist nor a fiction writer. He is a social satirist, and a times a funny and effective one. The last third of *Cabot Wright Begins* suggests that he missed the true vocation for which his combination of passion and bad taste qualify him, that of sick comic. [1964]

Stanley Edgar Hyman. *Standards* (Horizon). 1966. pp. 254, 256–7

Purdy is a naturalist of unusual subtlety and a fantasist of unusual clarity. . . . A wild, flailing, and finally hysterical attack on everything that bugs him, from *The New Yorker* to Miss Subways to Orville Prescott, [*Cabot Wright Begins*] is redeemed by a brilliantly controlled spoof on American sexuality and book publishing. . . . The first two-thirds or so of *Cabot Wright Begins* is a rich, resonant, and deadly accurate satire on American values, as good as anything we have had since the work of Nathanael West. . . . Through a marvelously flexible and clearly drawn plot line, moreover, Purdy keeps the narrative steadily on the track of its subject. . . . It remains to say, of course, that a writer who takes on our culture today is hard put to maintain his wits amid the witlessness of his subject. But much of *Cabot Wright Begins* is evidence that it can be done, that the detachment and deliberateness of art still remain the best defense against the grotesqueness and biliousness that infect our mind. The main thrust of Purdy's career has been to make us aware of this truth.

Theodore Solotaroff. *Book Week*. Oct. 18, 1964. p. 3

Ten years ago James Purdy was, in the words of the composite kudos, a ''young, bold, individual, arresting and irritating talent.'' Today, four novels and three volumes of short stories later, he is considered part of the older new-guard in American fiction—a ''voice,'' but one that has lately been greeted by diminished bravos, at times cat calls. The critical hatchet job by Stanley Edgar Hyman (memorable, but somewhat in excess of even a purist's obligation to the public) was a reaction partly prompted by Dame Edith Sitwell's pronouncement that Purdy is ''one of the greatest living writers in our language.''. . .

However Purdy's original brilliance may have dimmed of late, however his inventiveness may have flagged, the feeling that he has said all he has to say . . . is not universally shared among critics. Like all writers obsessed by certain themes Purdy does repeat himself. Yet I suspect both the obsession and repetition are lodged in the impossibility of solving the problems he has set for himself through any single artistic coup. . . .

Every character lives the myth of the isolated self, a stranger to himself and to others, locked in his own private hell that seals off the world outside.

Robert K. Morris. *The Nation*. Oct. 9, 1967. p. 342

James Purdy with a Christian vision of love tells in *63: Dream Palace* the story of ''the least among us,'' Fenton Riddleway, ''dumb and innocent and getting to be mad,'' and his little brother Claire, helpless, puny and seemingly feebleminded. To love them means to be shaken with pity and terror. It means to know utter despair, for there is nothing anyone can do to save them. They are doomed.

The ''least'' in Purdy's work is the exiled wanderer, abandoned in a strange world where nothing makes sense, where he can find no hold. Once he leaves his natural home, the golden bench of Malcolm, the West Virginia farm of Fenton, or Cousin Ida's cottage of Amos Ratcliffe, he is Ulysses faced with monsters at every turn. But unlike Ulysses, he cannot slay them. If he is like Bennie of ''Daddy Wolf,'' with no money to spend, he doesn't even rate a perforation on the program card. His auditors accuse him of lacking an indefinable something, of not having what it takes. What he lacks is the ability to be non-human. His humanity is his Achilles heel. He limps through life bleeding with every step he takes.

Bettina Schwarzschild. *The Not-Right House* (Missouri). 1968. p. 1

The method for the stories [*Color of Darkness*] involves an unreal emotional dialectic between friends or among members of a family. Each confrontation results in a revelation of mutual desperation rather than resolution.

The collection takes its title from the story of a man whose wife has deserted him. He suffers from an inability to remember the color of his wife's eyes, or, indeed, those of his maid, Mrs. Zilke, or his son, Baxter. Existential darkness does not facilitate color discrimination. But more importantly this amnesia characterizes what I believe to be the keynote of Purdy's work in the 50s—the impossibility of a rebirth in America. . . .

Despite the desperate denunciation in the themes of these stories, a promise remains in their method. In order to present his vision, Purdy had to perform some magic with technique. The actions proceed within the crucible of irony. In each of these stories, Purdy grounds the decaying spirits of the characters in an animistic world. His stay in Mexico supplied him with a sense of primitivism he delicately balances with America's cultural decadence.

Donald Pease in *The Fifties*, edited by Warren French (Everett/Edwards). 1970. pp. 146–7

Mr. Purdy is and has been a fantasist, despite the creeping realism of some of his short stories. His writing is clearly an outgrowth of the uniquely American strain of comic-nihilistic fantasy which sprang from Nathaniel Hawthorne's guilty Puritan nightmares and bloomed in the 1930's at the hands of Nathanael West. Unfortunately, as satire has gradually been overwhelmed by the absurdity of mid-century life and this dark fantasy has spread and rooted itself in our art, Mr. Purdy's fiction, shocking and revolutionary in the beginning, has come to seem conservative and familiar. . . .

Purdy's polymorphous-perverse sexuality, though it permeates [*I America Elijah Thrush*] as it does practically everything he has written, pales into ingenuousness next to the meticulous concupiscence of Establishment writing. And in an era in which controversy seems to be the lifeblood of literature, Purdy eschews mention of politics, war and ecology, and handles the issue of racism with such a soft touch that one is scarcely aware of the protagonist's color.

Robert Boyd. *The Nation*. May 15, 1972. p. 636

Imagine a critic whose preferences and prejudices when it comes to modern American fiction have been formed by a regular reading of, say, Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer and John Updike—what might he be expected to say about a novel with the following scenario? The narrator is a young black, Albert Peggs, in love with a golden eagle; he becomes involved with an aging actor, ''mime, poet, and painter'' called Elijah Thrush, who is himself in love with his mute great-grandson. He also becomes the memoirist of an heiress, Millicent de Frayne, who stopped growing old in 1913 when she fell in love with Elijah Thrush. All four of these people, plus the bird, are linked together in a number of ways which takes the book far beyond the simply narrative. Albert's account outlines the frightening (and comic) ascendancy of Millicent over all of them, a series of preemptive power plays which culminates in a funereal wedding banquet on board a ship at sea. Albert is last heard taking over, from the doomed Elijah, Elijah's role in his theater.

Our imaginary critic may well be tempted to dismiss it as perverse farce, a weird homoerotic daydream or nightmare, a frivolous and mannered piece of idiosyncratic surrealism, in all cases lacking the sort of pained ''relevance'' which he feels he can find among his preferred novelists. This, I fear, is how some American critics are going to receive James Purdy's most recent novel [*I America Elijah Thrush*], of which the above scenario is a crude outline. Purdy has never, it seems to me, been done justice by many of the leading contemporary critics and one reason, it may be, is that they simply don't know how to read his work properly.

Tony Tanner. *Partisan Review*. Fall, 1972. p. 609

Malcolm, James Purdy's first novel, was published in 1959 and has not suffered from want of acclaim. The praise has been richly deserved, for Purdy may be the most skillful black-humorist around. No one, however, has given Purdy credit for the full achievement of *Malcolm*. The novel generally is applauded for its wit, style, and deft handling of the disturbing themes of loneliness and lack of identity in the bizarre nightmare of modern existence. In addition, Purdy's gift for sharp and sweeping satire rakes such targets as marriage, art and artists, sex, status, and adolescence. The last is a tempting critical morsel, for it makes the novel classifiable as a *bildungsroman*. Without question *Malcolm* is a story of a young man confronting adulthood, for initiation is its central theme. The novel has been called ''an allegory of growing up.'' However, Purdy has not written merely another novel of adolescence in a century already overstocked. Instead, he has offered us a sport on that type, using the genre to satirize it, with a wry approach to form as well as content. Viewed this way, the satire of an already cheerless book is deepened, and the blackness of its humor becomes more pervasive, more complete, and more grim.

Charles Stetler. *Critique*. 14, 3, 1973. p. 91

Purdy's major strength lies in his ability to take so-called repellent subject matter and so work with it that he turns it into a true work of art, much like the ugly driftwood which undergoes a change into something rich and strange when worked upon by a master. All this is accomplished in a style that is not only unique in its simplicity, but which is also characterized by clarity, force and beauty—the three chief qualities of good writing. In addition to Purdy's ability to write unforgettable parables of the way Americans have lived in the past two decades, Purdy's loveless view of life is rich in humor of various kinds—zany, ''black,'' surreal or quietly reflective. . . . Purdy's . . . humor does not serve as a contrast to the dour actions that he usually narrates; instead, his humor is warp and woof of his style. . . .

Purdy's talent is a many-sided one; for, in addition to being an instinctive portrayer of the dark underside of human nature, he is also an excellent regionalist, as is seen in *The Nephew*, and a crack fantasist, as in *Malcolm*. Purdy's ability as a satirist has already been dwelt upon in *Cabot Wright Begins*, but *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* reveals his strength as a Realist who depicts the tragic world of homosexuality. But Purdy has, in fact, created many worlds; and each with its own discernible and distinct features. Each of these worlds is populated with a host of characters: orphans, thoughtless and cruel parents, failed artists, budding

writers and actors, spinsters, grand ladies, teachers and professors, widowers and widows, financiers, homosexuals, and invalids—all of whom form a veritable gallery of typical figures of and for our time.

Henry Chupack. *James Purdy* (Twayne, 1975), pp. 127–28

In a Shallow Grave is a modern Book of Revelation, filled with prophesies, visions and demonaic landscapes. . . . Purdy's most recent novels, *The House of the Solitary Maggot* and *I America Elijah Thrush*, have been cranky, meandering exercises. The books tend to creak. They reflect in a sorry way the beautiful, ribbed dream world of *Malcolm*, Purdy's first novel.

[*In a Shallow Grave*] perhaps will bring to Purdy the wider audience he deserves. Written in a sparse yet rough-edged style, it indicates the dilemmas of Purdy's writing. There have always been briers in his voice, as if he meant to tear at his readers with a kind of harsh music. Purdy is one of the most uncompromising of American novelists. Working in his own dark corner, he has collected his half-fables about a corrosive universe where children search for their fathers and are waylaid by endless charlatans and fools.

The very awkwardness of his lines, that deliberate scratching of the reader's ear, is Purdy's greatest strength. It allows him to mix evil and naïveté without spilling over into melodrama and tedious morality plays. There are no ''legitimate'' people in Purdy's novels, just fleshy ghosts like Garnet and Potter Daventry [in *In a Shallow Grave*]. Underneath Purdy's brittle language is a sadness that is heartbreaking, the horror of isolated beings who manage to collide for a moment, do a funny dance and go their separate ways.

Jerome Charyn. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 8, 1976. p. 3

Purdy's literary career suggests the struggle of a dissenting individual voice to break through patterns of conformity. The earliest work was printed privately by friends and he was first published commercially in England. Though championed by writers such as Dame Edith Sitwell and John Cowper Powys, Purdy has never enjoyed the support or approval of the American literary establishment. Admittedly, when his work began to appear in the late fifties, its highly wrought style and proliferation of bizarre characters might have been expected to disturb popular critics who had ordained a diet of representational social realism with its ''instant relevance''. . . .

The author's distinctive formal and philosophic preoccupations need to be seen in a broader, more tentative perspective. Although it has an urgent bearing upon the present day, there is a timeless quality to his work. The avowed concern for the world of the spirit and its relation to language evokes the native tradition of Melville and Hawthorne with their passion for metaphysics and command of symbolist techniques. As might be expected, there is also an evident fascination with the hellenic age when speculations on human destiny were at an intense pitch. Purdy sees modern America as the enemy of the soul and would subvert the suffocating patterns its culture imposes upon the individual self by his own exemplary fictions. Thus his families and miniature societies are simultaneously the vehicles for an exploration of the national psyche. At another level he re-tells, in his own special idiom, the Christian story of how a being charged with life's spiritual or divine possibilities is denied kinship in the larger world. It is misleading, then, to insist on measuring the characters in such a drama by the criteria of social realism or by those of a strict psychological verisimilitude. They are projections of the inner life, put forward as hypotheses about existence and endowed with the reality of the author's innermost convictions. Regarded in this light, art is accorded the highest functions—it keeps alive the memory of those ingredients that have been excluded from everyday existences and Purdy might more profitably be seen as the ''memorialist'' of the qualities that have gone missing from his native culture. He is the self-styled prophet and chronicler of its omissions.

Stephen D. Adams. *James Purdy* (Barnes & Noble, 1976), pp. 7–9

James Purdy has the unmistakable voice and gently antiquated phrasing of a radio announcer. His stilted, lilting colloquialism infects each of his characters with a common tempera flatness of tone and gives his narration the rickety preciousness of a porch swing. The voice fits the timeless Midwest of Purdy's best stories—and of his new novel, *Mourners Below*—the way Damon Runyon's did Broadway; it cleaves to the rhythms proper to the world it creates, but keeps you aware, by its very pervasiveness, of the bemused, sardonic intelligence behind it all. Purdy may slip in references to ''our town,'' but his sensibility is more like Grant Wood's; in the black humor of his artificial Americana, he seems sometimes as distanced as a puppeteer.

That feeling's reinforced by much of *Mourners Below*, an uneven, out-of-kilter, oddly satisfying novel. Though much of his best work was published before 1965, Purdy has recently been returned—however such things happen—to semivogue, with a selection of his stories available in paperback and the early novels *Malcolm* and *The Nephew* reissued in an omnibus edition by Viking. As if to commemorate his rediscovery, Purdy's come up with a plot that's disconcertingly like a super-imposition of those two works: the picaresque, slightly surreal adventures of an astonishing naif (à la *Malcolm*) add up to a self-revealing search for the truth about a boy killed in battle (à la *The Nephew*).

The Candide here is Duane, at 17 the youngest, slightest, shortest, and most dreamily abstracted of the Bledsoes, known for his figure skating and childlike attention span, and mourning the death of his brothers Justin and Douglas in the (unnamed) war. . . . Purdy's a master of the short story, and his best novels are brief and spare. *Mourners Below* comes in under 300 pages, but it's studded with tempting tangents that often prove defects of structure. . . .

Purdy winds up the novel with a deft change of scale; turning, by implication, the small end of the telescope on his characters, he transforms the grotesque and outlandish back into the mundane. In the context of history, after all, it was simply another Darwinian courtship dance. Casting shadows down the years, Purdy implies untold generations of Bledsoes, each scrambling for the survival of the next, visiting the shrines of women to secure their race of men. That makes them stubborn, heroic, hateful, foolish, and possibly doomed—much like any other family; the long view nudges *Mourners Below* past satiric contrivance and gives it, finally, life.

Debra Rae Cohen. *The Village Voice*. July 22, 1981, p. 37

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PYNCHON, Thomas (1937–)

The book [*V.*] reads like a literary hoax, a parody of the quest romance and tale of international intrigue. We are made to witness violent happenings in Cairo, Florence, and Malta, explorations of the Antarctic and crocodile hunts in the sewers of New York. The fantastic web of events spans three generations, moving back and forth through space and time at will. The characters, as the author puts it, are mostly yo-yos. The style is elliptic and cockeyed, studded with zany names and improbable locutions. The whole novel gives an impression of studied confusion, a mood that expresses both the futility and vitality of human life.

Ihab Hassan. *Saturday Review*. March 23, 1963. p. 44

The trouble, however, goes deeper than this broad, youthful, self-conscious humor with its fatiguing brightness, its bad jokes, and toneless prose. It resides in the fact that Pynchon is an extremely facile writer of caricature. If Virginia Woolf, Gide, Borges, Proust, and Lawrence Durrell, for example, turn up in *V.*, they do so not as ''influences'' but as taking-off points. It is very much as if Pynchon's talent can only work given the springboard of pastiche, as if he can deal with his characters only on the condition that they are isolated and qualified by some literary or psychological tongue-in-cheek. Thus he has great difficulty in stabilizing his characters and in getting them to talk to one another, for they are constantly being defaced by the universal solvent of Pynchon's archness, which functions like some hidden second thought of the writer, something he knows that his characters don't know: that he is the only deviser and player of the pinball game through which they spin.

Irving Feldman. *Commentary*. Sept., 1963. p. 259

V. is, among other things, a novel about, among other places, New York. In contrasting scenes of shifting time and place, Mr. Pynchon creates a bizarre mosaic of modern events against which his characters seek their personal destinies. Herbert Stencil, an Englishman committed to solving the mystery of V. in his father's life, and Benny Profane, a ''schlemihl'' committed to keeping himself alive in a chancy universe, are Mr. Pynchon's *alter egos:* one quixotically pursuing the past in order to find the key to the future and the other doggedly holding on to the present, willing to let the future take care of itself.

V. is rich and inventive, wide and various, overlong and uneven—and in a strange way highly eclectic. It seems, in fact, the apotheosis of the mid-century American novel: one of those loose, baggy monsters that have dominated our post-war fiction.

Paul Levine. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1963. p. 459

Thomas Pynchon's first book, *V.*, published in 1963, established him as a *virtuoso* performer in fiction. There seemed to be nothing he could not render, no style he could not imitate. He had the structural gift as well, and an impressive command over the language of science and historiography. Part of *V.* took place at carefully imagined moments of crisis in European history. Part of it took place in contemporary New York Bohemia. Both parts dovetailed brilliantly into an allegory about how the search for the symbolic meaning of the past can ''animate'' the mind even as the mind's world becomes progressively ''inanimate'' or dead. Maybe *V.* lacked the most important thing—some simple center of sincere feeling to cry out for a piece of us and want to be believed. But in 1963 one ignored this lack in favor of the novelist's sheer inventive and structural power.

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pynchon's theme and method remain essentially what they were in *V.*, though the recent book is shorter, more deliberately whimsical, and somewhat less substantial. . . . As an exercise in epistemology, *Lot 49* is not without theoretical value. And, at times, Pynchon's speculative prose attains the dense suggestiveness of verse. . . . But verbal density and theoretical value are not enough to make a good novel.

Arthur Gold. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. April 24, 1966. p. 5

The first novel, *V.*, was a designed indictment of its own comic elaborateness. The various quests for ''V.'', all of them substitutes for the pursuit of love, are interwoven fantastically, and the coherence thus achieved is willfully fabricated and factitious. Pynchon's intricacies are meant to testify to the waste—a key word in *The Crying of Lot 49*—of imagination that first creates and is then enslaved by its own plottings, its machines, the products of its technology. . . .

Gestures of warmth are the most touching in his novels for being terrifyingly intermittent, shy and worried. . . .Efforts at human communication are lost among Pynchon's characters, nearly all of whom are obsessed with the presumed cryptography in the chance juxtaposition of Things, in the music and idiom of bars like the V-Note or The Scope, or merely in the ''vast sprawl of houses'' that Oedipa [in *The Crying of Lot 49*] sees outside Los Angeles, reminding her of the printed circuit of a transistor radio, with its ''intent to communicate.''

Richard Poirier. *New York Times Book Section*. May 1, 1966. p. 5

The focus of *The Crying of Lot 49*, Thomas Pynchon's new novel, moves feverishly between Southern California's shot-up cities and

their indistinguishable environs. It is a desperately funny book, conceived and executed with an awesome virtuosity. The novel's tone and pace are characterized by their absolute intensity, and Mr. Pynchon's essential technique is suggested most simply by his descriptions, which invariably cut from one layer of the culture to another. . . . The ironies are intricate, the prose composed in styles varying from scholarly exposition to parodies of Jacobean tragedy to TV commercialese; but Mr. Pynchon does not lose control. His primary observation remains central, and it is one which our current foreign policy only seems to confirm: that paranoia is the last sense of community left us.

Stephen Donadio. *Partisan Review*. Summer, 1966. pp. 449–50

The great cultural polarity in *The Education* [*of Henry Adams*] was of course the Virgin (or Virgin-Venus) and the Dynamo. Pynchon too postulates cultural alternatives, but they are never so sharply defined or as clearly polarized. His single central image is abstract, the letter ''V.,'' which subsumes multiple meanings (including one roughly comparable to the Virgin-Venus concept) and undergoes a number of transformations in the course of the narrative. His other recurrent image is both prosaic and ominous. It is of all things the well-known yo-yo, that toy with the simple, repetitive motions. For Adams, the dynamo embodied powerful industrial, technological energies. Pynchon's yo-yo, in various metaphorical forms, comes to characterize a mechanistic and meaningless society: it is his *reductio ad absurdum*.

Don Hausdorff. *Contemporary Literature*. Autumn, 1966. p. 259

The world of *V*. is pluralistic, one of unlimited points of view, with reality presumably emergent out of the reconciliation of these diverse perceptions. Thus chancelleries all over the world piece together their picture of an ever-threatening but unknown enemy. And thus both the Stencils—father and son, British Foreign Office agent and amateur historian in search of his past—grope to connect their scraps of information into a coherent design, Stencil *père* on the scene, so to speak, at first hand and Stencil *fils* at second hand from the tantalizing *memento mori* of his father. This patchwork quilt approach to reality is brilliantly dramatized by Pynchon in the eight versions of the narrative action (more accurately the eight points of view imagined by Herbert Stencil) that comprise all we learn of the intrigues of British spies in Egypt on the eve of the Fashoda incident. The irony is that the eyewitnesses are all peripheral to the action. From the casual observation and incidental eavesdropping of a cafe waiter, a hotel factotum, an English confidence man (who is incidentally a blatant parody of [Nabokov's] Humbert Humbert), a train conductor, a garry driver, a burglar, and a beerhall waitress, only a fragmentary conception of what is happening can be constructed. It is as if the Fashoda incident were rendered on seven picture postcards and mailed by foreign correspondents unable to find transportation to the front or wire service to the home office. Nor in the culmination of the action are we helped to any understanding of what the spies were about. Narrated omnisciently in the elliptical manner of stage directions for a melodrama, the situation is left, as [Robert] Sklar has complained, ''deliberately shrouded in mystery.'' But is not that Pynchon's point about what men call history? that it is an omnia gathering of irrelevancies from which sense is manufactured.

Max F. Schulz. *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties* (Ohio Univ. Pr.). 1973. pp. 79–80

If the shape of *V*. is a redundant row of yoyoing V's, the shape of Pynchon's second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, is an equally futile circle. The reader begins with the hermetic title and ends with the words, ''the crying of lot 49''—''crying'' being a term from auctioneering and ''lot 49'' a particular batch of objects up for sale. The story of Mrs. Oedipa Maas's quest for the meaning of a legacy dwells, even more than *V*., on mythic figurations of destructive self-closure: Oedipus, Narcissus, Echo. And—almost as with the numerological figures that buttress the religious art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance—myth in *The Crying of Lot 49* is buttressed by mathematics, not in headily ascending patterns of three or four or golden sections, but by self-limiting patterns of frustrated numerals, repeating or redundant. The end of Oedipa's quest is as empty as the end of Stencil's, and she finally glimpses a universe compressed into an America of no vocabulary but ones and zeroes, something and nothing, arranged in mindless patterns that alternately suggest a centuries-old conspiracy of waste and death or a mindless muddle.

William Harmon in *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (Rutgers). 1973. pp. 382–3

Chance meetings in Pynchon's novels are exploited as parodies of realism by being accepted as part of the normal, necessary order of events. A line of action that is entirely arbitrary, that is taken by chance, links perfectly with others that are stumbled upon, and all of them lead somehow to the right place. Yet this right place, whether it be V. or a full disclosure of the Tristero system, is never finally reached. The clues that Oedipa Maas assembles about the Tristero in *The Crying of Lot 49* are all happened upon accidentally, through a Jacobean play, a lavatory wall, a chance meeting with another character in a labyrinthine munitions plant, and so on. The atmosphere of a multitude of possibilities is created, an infinite proliferation of plot lines; yet the one that is followed is the only one, the right one, the way out; and yet again, it brings us no closer to an answer, an identity, a V., a meaningful pattern, than we were to begin with.

John Vernon. *The Garden and the Map* (Illinois). 1973. p. 65

Anyone who's read Pynchon before hardly needs to be told that *Gravity's Rainbow* is pyrotechnically brilliant in its juxtaposition of the humblest sludge of pop culture, the specialized vocabularies of organic chemistry or rocket technology, and the rarefied heights of abstract speculation. His immense documentation, neither showoff nor suffocating, enables him to move with ease from London during the blitz to Southwest Africa in 1904 to a remote village in Central Asia. And he is blissfully funny. Where his talent has grown in the ten years since *V*. is just where one would have hoped, in the realm of feeling. The openness and suppleness of his

polysexual tenderness is as breathtaking as his reach into extremes of anguish, obsession and brutality. *Gravity's Rainbow* is moving in ways I don't remember being moved by *V.*, dazzling as that first novel was.

Walter Clemons. *Newsweek*. March 19, 1973. p. 94

Only three American novels of the last seven or eight years even approach *Gravity's Rainbow* in ambition, chutzpah and achievement: Norman Mailer's *An American Dream*, Pynchon's own *The Crying of Lot 49* and E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*. But good as each is in its way, each pales next to this massive, mind-blowing, stomach-turning, monstrously comic new milestone in fiction. *Gravity's Rainbow* combines the encyclopedic scope of *V.*, his first novel, with the intricacy of *The Crying of Lot 49*, his second, yet goes past both of them to grave ribaldry not even they realized. This novel is going to change the shape of fiction, if only because its genius will depress all competitors. . . .

Writing about a world of bizarre irresponsible bastards paranoiacally besieged by systematic cabals, plots, secret cartels within secret conglomerates, Pynchon shows the perpetual paradox of this necessary but inadequate pushing of things to be omens and pushing of omens to be systems. . . . Yet while clearly committed to the Slothrops—the slowly placed inhabitants of paper bureaucracies—he avoids crystallized certainty, refuses to lock himself into any system, perplexes and astonishes us with his satisfyingly unschematic vision of a world far more complex than we have known.

W. T. Lhamon, Jr. *New Republic*. April 14, 1973. pp. 24, 28

Gravity's Rainbow is a picaresque, apocalyptic, absurdist novel that creates a complex mythology to describe our present predicament. It is supposedly about a brief period in the decline of the West—fall, 1944, through fall, 1945. It is actually about our entire century, from the roots of the First World War through the final calamity, which keeps on threatening right up to press time. Beyond that, it is about the whole modern tendency of man to subordinate himself to the whims of the products of his intelligence, to the self-aggrandizing dictates of machines. It is also about the paranoia this subordination instills in men—a paranoia of which they are absolved as their persecution dreams come true and, ironically, destroy them.

If I have suggested an icily intellectual book by these adumbrations, I'm sorry. *Gravity's Rainbow* attempts to conceal its author's ultimately guiding intellect beneath a long series of marvellous, polyglot sideshows that entertain before they edify.

L. E. Sissman. *New Yorker*. May 19, 1973. p. 138

An embarrassment of riches? Perhaps. But the man can write. The real problem is not Pynchon's talent per se, but rather how that talent is applied. The sameness of tone throughout *Gravity's Rainbow* makes for tedium. By the time the reader is halfway through the book (assuming he gets this far), he feels that he has reached a point of diminishing returns. The always cool, hip voice of the constantly winking creator (Look, Ma, I'm writing, playing games, being clever) becomes less and less attractive. Pynchon's canvas, which at first seemed so vast, now appears limited, closed. The reader senses the somewhat sophomoric sensibility behind the book and seeks relief. There is none. Only more characters and events filtered through that same irritating sensibility. Scenes accumulate, there are often striking set-pieces of writing, but the book lacks tension and fails to build. Although Pynchon traces the progress of paranoia, shows men constructing the systems and machinery that will eventually destroy them, creates a nervous world of total confusion and sudden death, he has no particular point of view about any of these things. He demonstrates and records in minute detail, but he doesn't probe, penetrate or seek to illuminate.

Ronald De Feo. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1973–4. pp. 774–5

The essential pattern of life, from dust to order to dust, is echoed in the title image of the novel: gravity's rainbow, the parabolic path that gravity imposes on the V2 rocket. Indeed, Pynchon spends so much time on the biography of the rocket just to point out how apt the parallel is. The rocket, too, starts as a disordered scattering of atoms, from iron in the mountains to alcohol latent in potatoes. Man begins to reduce the entropy of those collected atoms, assembling them in one place, arranging them to take on technological life. ''Beyond simple steel erection, the Rocket was an entire system *won*, away from the feminine darkness, held against the entropies of lovable but scatterbrained Mother Nature . . .'' (p. 324). The rocket is fired, and carrying out its analogy to life, it burns and rises—''You will come to understand that between the two points, in the five minutes, *it* lives an entire life'' (p. 209). Eventually its maximum altitude is reached, where gravity, the manifestation of destiny and the laws of physical process, overcomes the vertical momentum. The rocket must bend to the general flow, and it descends to the earth to disintegrate in a final burst of energy and scattering of atoms. Applied technology has recapitulated fundamental science. Both life and the rocket rise from the rubble, burn bright for a while, and then return to the rubble to be rewoven into life again. The moment of life has been made thermodynamically possible by a continuous process of decay and reconstruction: ''But every true god must be both organizer and destroyer'' (p. 99).

Alan J. Friedman and Manfred Puetz. *Contemporary Literature*. Summer, 1974. pp. 346–7

The single terrible possibility which underlies each of his books, which threatens whatever peace or sanity his characters might find, is that there may be no chance for living—and yet we continue to live, the novocainized and impotent products of a massive psychic prosthesis.

Pynchon's three novels explore this possibility with an obsessiveness that would seem psychotic, were it not for the very real social urgency of the question itself. In *V., The Crying of Lot 49*, and *Gravity's Rainbow* his themes and situations continue to revolve around the major myths of the Conspiracy, the Quest, and what we can call the Unwilling Cyborg. The particular shape each of these terms may take is variable; indeed, Pynchon displays a profligate inventive genius in devising different manifestations, manically wide-ranging versions of them. There is always, in his book, a Conspiracy: a gigantic, subtle, murderous Plot contrived by forces too powerful and too remote ever to be fully known, a Plot which involves more and more of human history the farther one penetrates its ramifications, a Plot whose ultimate goal appears to be the

automatization and subjugation of all things living and creative, ultimate control and ultimate soullessness. There is always, also, a Quest, an Investigation which attempts to bring the Plot to light, to solve and thereby foil its insidious intent. A character may be propelled on his investigation by the most minimal coincidences or clues, but once he embarks on his investigation he begins to discover relevant data and hints everywhere he turns. Between these two elements, Plot and Quest, conspiracy and counterforce, the characters of the novels find themselves caught in the position of being Unwilling Cyborgs; they discover, that is, how much and how secretly the Plot has succeeded, in their own lives, in transforming them into programmed, manipulated antiorganisms robbed of free will. As they struggle to solve the secret of the Plot, then, they struggle also to regain what the Plot has stolen from them. On the surface, this archetypal Pynchon situation owes a good deal to the controlling fiction of William S. Burroughs's junk-universe, from *Naked Lunch* to *Exterminator*—the ''Nova Mob,'' extraterrestrial criminals forcing the people of Earth into addiction and living death. The difference—and, perhaps, the salvation—in Pynchon is that he, unlike Burroughs, admits the possibility of escape, freedom, and cure (though just barely) within the sanctions of ordinary humanity, which is to say within the social and passional purview of the novel form itself. For Burroughs, the only alternative to total enslavement is total, almost Buddhist suspension of ordinary human impulse. Pynchon's characters do what Burroughs's are past doing: they fight against their entrapment, and even win marginal victories over it.

The world Pynchon's characters inhabit is a strange one of half-light, half-truth, where moral choices continue to be made, but where the terms of the choices are never clear enough for anyone to understand why, or often when, a crucial decision has been reached. This is only another way of saying, finally, that they inhabit the world of all European fiction from *The Pilgrim's Progress* to *The Plague*, the world of our own daily attempts to lead a human life.

Frank D. McConnell. *Four Postwar American Novelists* (Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1977), pp. 163–64

In its attention to the interior landscape, recent fiction has forgotten the density of the exterior one. Modernism prefers to speak of the world of politics and ethics in personal and aesthetic terms. Pynchon does the opposite. In his books, character is less important than the network of relations existing either between characters, or between characters and social and historical patterns of meaning. Pynchon also tries to attend to the force with which history, politics, economics, and the necessities of science and language shape personal choices and are in turn shaped by those choices. To see in this a deliberate turning away from novelistic realism. . . . is to confuse certain mediating literary conventions with unmediated reality. For most of this century, fiction has located the origins of human action in the depths of personal psychology. Pynchon comes up for air and looks elsewhere. What he finds seems cold and abstract only to the extent that it remains unfamiliar in literature and art (if nowhere else). . . .

The ethical problems in *Gravity's Rainbow* have analogues in the linguistic and interpretive problems it raises as well. Language for Pynchon is not a system complete in itself but an ethically and socially performative (his word is ''operative'') system, one which can be altered by deliberate acts. The model of language in *Ulysses*, on the other hand, is characteristically self-enclosed. For Joyce, the history of language is, in effect, an embryological history (in the chapter known as ''Oxen of the Sun''), a version of an unconscious cycle unaffected by personal or social choice. *Gravity's Rainbow*'s history of language (in the episode set in the Kirghiz) is instead political, ''less unaware of itself,'' determined by conscious decisions. . . .

In Pynchon, unlike Joyce, the surface details are often incredible and baroque, while the underlying organization is all too plausible and disquieting. Beneath the fantasies and the paranoia, Pynchon organizes his book according to historical and scientific theory—according, that is, to an order independent of *literary* imagination, an order derived more from the realms of politics and physics than from the self-conscious Modernist reflexivities of language and literature. . . .

Pynchon's challenge to literary studies offers one means of turning away from this dead end—there are other means available as well, of course—and to turn instead to methods of reading that have . . . ''a reason that mattered to the world.'' As with criticism, so with the act of reading itself: Pynchon challenges his readers to participate, not merely in the linguistic and philosophical puzzles of his books' interpretation, but in the choices that those books make plain. It is a challenge with special urgency, for it is offered by a writer who—in the judgment of this reader, and of many others—is the greatest living writer in the English-speaking world.

Edward Mendelson. In *Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Prentice-Hall, 1978), pp. 4–5, 13–15

The most abused of [the] critical ''keys'' to Pynchon is the concept of entropy, a corollary to the second law of thermodynamics. According to this law, systems that produce work by the transfer of thermal energy cannot function at perfect efficiency; thus the perpetual motion machine does not exist for the simple reason that all engines run down. Entropy is the measure of inefficiency in such systems: the less efficient the engine, the higher the entropy. The literary mind would probably take little notice of such matters were it not for the fact that the world and the universe of which it is a part are themselves ''systems'' subject to entropy. . . .

Pynchon . . . less interested in the running down of the world or the universe than in the running down of the civilization into which he was born . . . uses entropy as a paradigm of the snowballing deterioration of the West. But unlike some of his characters and certain of his critics, Pynchon realizes that the concept of entropy can be applied to society *only by analogy*, and that, consequently, no ''law'' says that a society's decline must be irreversible. Indeed, civilizations do not decline perpetually, but rather wax and wane.

David Cowart. *Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion* (Southern Illinois Univ. Pr., 1980), pp. 1–2

In *Gravity's Rainbow* Pynchon continues his trend of increasingly more profound analyses of fictions. In this novel he includes only one story. The only other possible story, about Morituri, does not qualify because it only switches narrators in order to carry on the same plot line as the rest of the novel. The only intercalated story, the account of Byron Bulb, resembles *Cashiered* in *The Crying of Lot 49* because it describes a character threatened by a force that certainly exists. Unlike that film, and even though its hero is a light

bulb, this story is not merely a humorous caricature of the problem of a novel's main character. Somehow Pynchon maintains seriousness and makes Byron a paradigm of the alien in a hostile world.

At least a dozen of the characters in *Gravity's Rainbow* create fictions. Even some madmen, such as the man who thinks he is World War II, and some dead people, such as Walter Rathenau and William Slothrop, make fictions. Most noticeably, the characters in this novel make brief fictions—and usually only one apiece—that, compared to the many fictions in the book, offer little promise. Many of the characters construct fictions that explain Slothrop's experiences, but he constructs fewer fictions than does Oedipa. Pynchon makes it clear that she tries to discover whether positing the existence of the Tristero will explain her experiences. In contrast, Slothrop interrupts his search for the rocket, and he often tries to understand its technology rather than any larger, metaphysical meaning it may have. He meditates less and forges on against confusion less resolutely than does Oedipa. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, then, fictions have even more value than in the earlier novels, but constructing them appears to be nearly impossible. . . .

In short, Pynchon's examination of this artistic medium has reached an important juncture. Throughout his career he has speculated on its nature and its relation to other media, thereby casting a coldly intellectual light on his work. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, however, he has both found the understanding he sought and discovered how to make his writing more humanly important. By culminating the first process and beginning the second, his most recent novel achieves the status of a major work. He now stands ready to create even more impressive books. . . . Pynchon's conception of the mission of literature is distinctive. With great skill he manipulates the traditional elements of fiction in order to reveal the inadequacy of realistic literary conventions and commonsense epistemologies, and he builds small new constructs, using information from nonliterary fields, borrowing especially from science, psychology, history, religion, and film. Finally, he gradually creates a complex literary fiction that incorporates, interrelates, and evaluates nonliterary information and ways of organizing it.

> John O. Stark. *Pynchon's Fictions: Thomas Pynchon and the Literature of Information* (Ohio Univ. Pr., 1980), pp. 171–74

By insisting upon the power of language in the world, Pynchon's writing helps preserve a critical distance between private thought and public vision. His writing keeps us in an uncertain but engaged equilibrium between the extremes of self and society. This is the reason he is the most compelling social writer we have. The complexity of his understanding prevents opposition from declining into false division. His fiction reminds us of what a true society would mean, and articulates a society of isolation that already exists. The paradox of Pynchon's career thus far is that a writer so vehemently communal should be so resolutely private; but this is only a seeming paradox, for publicity is not community and exchanges being known well for being well known.

It is in his isolation that Pynchon remains one of us. His perfect absence from the public view contributes to the scattered presence of his Orphic voice. His absence gives his books a curious autonomy they would not otherwise possess and assists them in blurring the readerly distinction between fiction and the real world. His disembodied voice gives vitality and importance to the neglected and private details of the life beyond his fiction. His writing therefore keeps us company and awakens in us the possibility that we are not alone. This awakening is the ''physical grace'' of Thomas Pynchon, at once communal and incomplete, a continuity of song that never resolves. Listen.

> Thomas H. Schaub. *Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity* (Univ. of Illinois Pr., 1981), p. 152

In a recent essay entitled ''Is it OK to Be a Luddite?''—one of few indications since *Gravity's Rainbow* that his pen is alive and well—[Thomas] Pynchon typically relates a historical incident to elucidate a cultural cusp. The Luddites, he tells us, were bands of men who flourished in Britain between 1811 and 1816, and whose object was to destroy the machinery that was replacing them in the textile industry. . . . Pynchon goes on to relate this group of counterrevolutionaries to a persistent but repressed mode of thought in Western culture . . . that denies the divisiveness inherent in the rational arrangement of a mechanical universe. . . .

Pynchon's works are Luddite plots to convert his readers. They disrupt our reliance on rational norms by graphically depicting some of the gruesome by-products of those norms. We witness the enslavement of reason as a tool for self-aggrandizement and the consequent permutations of destruction. . . . Pynchon confronts us with our own preconceptions and shows us their manifestations. His self-referentiality forces an equivalent reader response by exposing our indulgence in lies.

> Robert D. Newman. *Understanding Thomas Pynchon* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina, 1986), pp. 9–10

Pynchon's . . . fluidity . . . is a dreamlike state that owes much to the psychological/mystical system of Jung—a major influence too little noted so far in Pynchon studies. Jung's sense of the ''psycoid'' acausal connectedness and indeterminacy of ground reality is such as to give rise to a ''both/and'' conception of that reality, some of whose implications, as also in Pynchon, are experiential and ethical. In every pulse of experience, every moment of time, both hope and despair, apocalypse and salvation, kindness and cruelty, are immanent in each other, unmanifest until such times as we choose which of the ''paired opposites'' to make manifest. As light is somehow both wave and particle, the plenum below, or prior to, our repressive networks of systems is conceivable as both full and void, One and Zero. Pynchon seems to share Jung's shy faith in the possibility of an ultimate One such that if you blink at the void, the void can *become*; the horrific V-ness of Pynchon's first and third novels offers the metaphysical eye, both a blank vacancy of no meaning and a continuous plenum of meaning, with all inadequate, projected *systems* of meaning melding to fill in the space.

> Thomas Moore. *The Style of Connectedness: Gravity's Rainbow and Thomas Pynchon* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri, 1987), p. 10

Like [Walter] Kuhn and [Frank] Kermode, Pynchon is concerned with the extent to which scientific and literary paradigms determine what we perceive; he thus juxtaposes competing paradigms in search of possible alternatives. Pynchon's practice does not observe essential differences between science and literature, instrumental and emotive uses of language. His writing deliberately

mixes allegory and history, tragedy and satire, metaphoric and literal in pursuit of the state that he ascribes to the fourth act of *The Courier's Tragedy*, his parody of Jacobean revenge tragedies. ''Heretofore the naming of names has gone on either literally or as metaphor. But now, as the Duke gives his fatal command, a new mode of expression takes over. It can only be called a kind of ritual reluctance. Certain things, it is made clear, will not be spoken aloud; certain events will not be shown onstage, though it is difficult to imagine, given the excesses of the preceding acts, what these things could possibly be.'' To produce a text that signifies neither literally nor metaphorically. Pynchon establishes competing versions of the concept of entropy, the concept of Tristero, the myth of Narcissus, and the myth of Oedipus, to point in each case to another mode of meaning outside these shaping paradigms.

Pynchon's narrative thinks *about* the concept of entropy rather than *with it*. . . .

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pynchon employs potentially explanatory metaphors as tools that help in describing our condition, not as truths to be illustrated. He elaborates opposite meanings of Tristero, for example, in order to point beyond both to an undeniable but uncomfortable fact. Through his deliberate use of paradigmatic fictions, he would be a ''liar in the service of truth.''. . .

At the end of *The Crying of Lot 49* the binary choices facing Oedipa and the reader reflect the constraining conditions of scientific models and literary genres, which conspire with the paranoid temper of postmodern times to keep her and us suspended far short of certainty. The auctioning, as lot 49, of Pierce's stamps—uncanceled token of communication that never occurred, of indeterminate, though more than face, value—offers a synecdoche for the paradoxes of the present paradigm, in which meanings and bits of information emerge as parts of an elaborate hoax. Oedipa remains deliberately irresolute and continues her quest by holding back. Out of range the voice of God, ''the cry that would abolish the night,'' she awaits yet another inconclusive epiphany and braces against the forces of history and psychology that would make pure paranoia the shape of true conviction. In plotting the course of Oedipa's paranoid sanity, her refusal to be bound by comforting myths and paradigms, Pynchon cries our lot too.

Frank Palmieri. *Satire in Narrative* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Pr., 1990), pp. 110, 114, 125

In *Vineland* the puzzle of history gets worked out through a character [Prairie] whose very existence, unlike Oedipa's, depends entirely on the past she seeks and creates, since she is a daughter in search of her mother, her mother's past, and therefore her own past and present. . . .

The pattern of coincidence, in fact, precisely enacts the pattern of typological historical method: each ''impossible'' relationship mirrors the impossibility of past and present occupying the same time and space. In some respects the coincidences of relationship are more unusual than the manner through which they are revealed. . . . Prairie's quest constitutes a historian's urge. She not only acts out the simple desire to know and record events; more importantly, she works through the historian's desire to connect the past with the present, to make her own life—indeed, her very birth and present existence—meaningful.

Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds. *College Literature*. Fall, 1992, p. 94

One benefit of analyzing Pynchon's satire . . . is that it restores to *Gravity's Rainbow* that disruptive engagement with history and society so vital to the writing of the novel, in the 1960s and 1970s.

Satire in its severest mode can be a way of playing in verse. In preposterously overthrowing conventional strategies for narrative continuity, symmetry, and closure well symbolized by the Gnostic text, *Gravity's Rainbow* refuses a tradition, and an ideology, of storytelling. One basic convention of this tradition is that readers shall come to ''know'' characters as integral . . . constructs. Such conventions assume, as well, that characters may be ''redeemed'' by a plot whose end totalizes their life, right back to its beginning. Against this kind of paranoid fantasy. Slothrop's ''scattering'' into bits of pop and material culture stuff that are (literally) *about* him can be read as composing a schizoid idea of fictional character, an idea of subjectivity that emphasizes the indeterminate, ''nomadic,'' unbounded.

Steven Weisenburger. *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. Spring, 1992, p. 102

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R

RABE, David (1940–)

It is supposedly a simple matter to write or stage a play depicting the horrors of war. That is not so. People screaming in agony, bodies flung about, wounds inflicted, harsh words yapped, ruthless cruelty on all sides nearly always become commonplace and boring in the usual antiwar play or picture. They are piteous preachments thundered at us in sham stage hyperbole; we do not believe them. This is not the case with *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*. The staging is largely stylized (without artiness), the gunfire is not deafening, no blood spurts out from the injured, but the sense of real men at war is present. We come to know the human abjectness of it all. It is haunting in its personal challenge. . . .

It is the first play provoked by the Vietnamese disaster which has made a real impression on me.

Harold Clurman. *The Nation*. June 7, 1971. p. 733

The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel is the first play to deal successfully with the Vietnam war and the contemporary U.S. Army. Unlike George Tabori's *Pinkville*. which whipped up a froth of hysteria at the Army as a training ground that turned pink-cheeked American kids into savage Blue Meanies, young playwright David Rabe treats the Army as a microcosm of the ironies and personalities at large in the society itself. His unheroic hero, Pavlo Hummel, is a strong dramatic invention, a kid with a weird charm mixed up with streaks of violence and the endemic quasi-madness of our time. . . . The play cuts beneath politics to display the true horror of humans on both sides driven to bestiality, a situation in which the actual killing is only the most extreme example.

Jack Kroll. *Newsweek*. June 14, 1971. p. 70

Although [*The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*] tells us very little about Vietnam, it paints an impressively accurate picture of the military life and its pathetic waste of men and boys. The basic-training phase of the action features a jazzy first sergeant . . . who catches the ironic humor of an experienced soldier having fun dehumanizing recruits into reasonably efficient dogs with the conditioned reflexes that give them a chance for survival in a shooting war.

A second irony in the play is that Pavlo does survive the shooting, but eventually loses his life in a brothel. Here Pavlo encounters another soldier with the girl he wants, and instead of waiting his turn viciously attacks and humiliates his rival. The soldier responds by throwing a grenade into the brothel. There is a flaw in all this, because we are not able to connect Pavlo's sudden sadistic behavior with his Army experience. And although the play includes a chorus character, the significance of the action, beyond a vague suggestion that war is a tragedy of meaningless accidents, fails to emerge. On the other hand, it might have required a wrenching of the material to make this important point clearer. And to wrench the material could have poisoned the honesty of this impressively authentic play.

Henry Hewes. *Saturday Review*. July 10, 1971. p. 36

Nothing in *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* prepared me for the dramatic intensity of *Sticks and Bones*. It has been a long time since I sat in an audience so moved and horrified by what went on in front of them. It was a stage trick that put the cap on the audience's distress, a wrist-cutting which, in the intimacy of the small theater, was so much more real than all the blood that flooded the screen in *The Wild Bunch*. It was not a trick that would have worked, however, if the play—below the surface, at least—had not been driving toward that final, inevitable suicide. Nor would it have been so effective—all those lowered eyes, turned heads, involuntary attempts not to look—had the play not been about the peculiarly American habit of refusing to see, to hear, to admit the ugly and the painful.

Gerald Weales. *Commonweal*. March 10, 1972. p. 15

Sticks and Bones concerns the relationship of a former All-American boy to his family upon his return from Viet Nam. His tour of duty has left him blind and infected from an affair with a ''yellow whore.'' Rehabilitation has already been the subject of post-war dramas from *The Best Years of Our Lives* to *The Men* and beyond. But Rabe's version happens to be about Viet Nam rehabilitation. The father and mother are named Ozzie and Harriet, the kid brother Rick, and the blind son David, of course. He is malevolence personified. As soon as he arrives home, David commences to drive his parents, brother, and priest insane simply by telling the truth about his war experiences. His calm descriptions of American atrocities, his quiet hatred for his family, his patient attempts to torture them form the action of the play.

Sticks and Bones' most interesting facility is the ease with which it switches styles. It bounces from situation comedy to satire to tragic melodrama just when the audience acclimates itself to a set texture. Ozzie and Harriet initially appear in a typical middle-class Levittown home with wall-to-wall Sherwood shag, knotty pine panelling and lots of plastic and brass things hanging around. They watch TV, take aspirin, mouth Americana truisms, and feed Rick fudge and milk as he bounces in and out of the living room strumming a guitar and screeching: ''Hi, Mom! Hi, Dad!'' idiotically. But as the play develops, it becomes progressively difficult for the three to hold onto their life-fabric. David exists only to destroy his family's protective values. When he does, the play's tone changes drastically, Ozzie becomes a contemporary Willie Loman, sick, tortured, eloquent in his failure. Harriet is transformed into a frightened, librium-taking neurotic. And Rick becomes vicious.

Rabe's style, although not yet matured, indicates a brilliant future. He can write heightened parody with accuracy. At the same time, he can give his characters monologues of poetic introspection almost Chekhovian in tone. He is a man with the passion to

describe the new insanity of our Establishment world in a way which cannot be dismissed. If the play seems bumpy and overwritten in spots, there is enough consistently there to justify our enduring the occasional roughness.

Gil Lazier. *Educational Theatre Journal*. May, 1972. p. 197

When I read that Rabe's *The Orphan* was an Orestes play set in both past and present and featuring two Clytemnestras, I resolved to expect little; but never, never would I have expected the author of *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* and *Sticks and Bones* to contrive such a strained, pretentious, muddled, clumsy and almost completely flavorless piece of claptrap. The idea, if it can be called one, is that Orestes is reincarnated in Charles Manson; that Agamemnon, Aegisthus, Calchas are the forerunners of the present American establishment and its materialism, militarism and mumbo-jumbo. Clytemnestra is America herself, the traitorous mother who becomes identified with pregnant Sharon Tate. Rabe was actually seduced by his producer, Joe Papp, into spelling this out in a program note more clotted in its prose than the play itself. The notion is not only an insult to poor Miss Tate, it may even be unfair to Charles Manson. Aeschylus I won't worry about; to his peripatetic shade, it is merely a stinkweed among the asphodel.

John Simon, *New York Magazine*. April 30, 1973. p. 98

[Rabe's] first two plays, produced in 1971 and 1972, got much praise and many awards. Now it's 1973. His latest play, *The Orphan*, was recently produced . . . and the critical consensus was that this writer of exceptional gifts had slipped somewhat. . . . To me, the play was merely infested with the disease that had been evident in the two earlier ones. . . .

His one apparent avenue to effective writing led through antigrandness; his critical reception in general led him to think—or anyway didn't discourage him from thinking—that he is equipped for the grand. Now those who myopically encouraged him can no longer blink at the bankruptcy; after the praise, now come the tsks-tsks. I don't mean that once having praised him they were obliged to go on praising him forever; I mean that *The Orphan* is not much different from or worse than the work they praised; and now they have to know it.

Stanley Kauffmann. *New Republic*. May 26, 1973. p. 22

Unfortunately, [*The Boom Boom Room*] is not a good play, not a good play at all.

Mr. Rabe's heroine is a Philadelphia go-go girl named Chrissy, who is trying as she says, ''to get some goddam order in my stupid life.'' Chrissy is in some ways a female equivalent of the hero of Mr. Rabe's first play, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*: confused, inarticulate, not very bright, yearning and groping and stumbling after some kind of decent life she cannot even envision clearly, and has no real chance of attaining. . . .

The trouble is that Mr. Rabe's play never gets anywhere either. It tells us not very much about Chrissy, and it tells it not very clearly, and what it does tell us seems of no very great significance. The play is loose, flaccid, unfocused, wandering uncertainly in and out of realism and expressionism, comedy and serious drama—not fusing these opposites, not poising them effectively against each other, just wandering.

Julius Novick. *The Village Voice*. Nov. 15, 1973. p. 74

The shock of David Rabe's play [*The Boom Boom Room*] is the shock of truth, the most valid dramatic use of that emotion. Rabe's intention couldn't be clearer. By the creation of a repugnant world of anti-human cruelty, ugliness, and degradation, he throws into sharp relief the plight of his heroine, Chrissy, the go-go dancer and onetime hooker who is desperately trying to escape from that world. There is something fierce about the way he throws himself into Chrissy's tortured soul, not only examining but sharing all the doubt and pain and fear, every drop of the anguished self-loathing she feels for herself. The depth of his capacity for compassionate empathy is astonishing. . . .

The remarkable quality about David Rabe is his willingness to confront the alien culture of the Boom Boom Room and the level of society it represents. Not only does he face it head on, and attempt to understand and communicate the dynamics of the people who live in it, but he also finds amidst the wretchedness and ugliness a good deal of character and dignity. Chrissy—remember—is not one of us, but one of Them. Maybe that's the real threat, the fear that if we look hard enough at Them, ''the others,'' we might see beyond the effects of their dehumanization. We might even see the humanity of these people we would prefer to avoid in life.

Marilyn Stasio. *Cue*. Dec. 3, 1973. p. 2

David Rabe wants to be a great playwright. And he wants to put on the stage the viewpoint of that large and unhappy majority, of lower-and lower-middle-class Americans, who are only beginning to discover that they have a voice. Mr. Rabe has in some ways the power to become a great playwright: the moral reversals wouldn't offend so much if they didn't carry so much conviction. *In the Boom Boom Room* is studded with scenes and speeches of great power, truth, and beauty, especially in the second half. A couple of them, like the go-go captain's monologue, almost make it up to the poetry towards which Rabe aspires.

But the good things get sunk in a mire of uncertainty and awkwardness. . . .

There isn't any doubt about Rabe's integrity. But he isn't, as of yet, an independent artist; he hasn't been able to create a play in which he can pull himself out of the situation and look at it with full kinship and full objectivity. It's awful to have to watch, in so public a place as a theatre (as a Public Theatre), a man's struggle with his own worst instincts. Such dramatic power as there is in Rabe's work right now comes from this struggle. But it's more akin to bear-baiting than to what one usually goes to the theatre for, and I dislike the idea of treating a playwright as a bear, even if he misguidedly offers himself for the role. Some day David Rabe will write a complete play, but until then I propose that we leave him, sympathetically, to work out his self-situation in private.

Michael Feingold. *The Village Voice*. Dec. 16, 1974. pp. 101–2

This is the first time Mr. Rabe has written a totally straightforward play [*Streamers*]—his earlier work has always been full of somewhat elusive and tricky time changes. Here he is telling a plain tale

plainly—and yet very effectively. He has technically set his sights lower, but his image of death as a fall from life is well taken, his characters and dialogue have an air of cinematic familiarity (which nowadays is a fiction almost closer to reality than truth), the play moves to its bloody climax as if chased by the hounds of hell.

He is not above cheap tricks. . . . The drama deliberately sets out to shock—it uses more tomato ketchup than a B feature gangster movie—and quite often its mixture of joshing playfulness and harrowing horror does seem over-contrived. . . . But deep at the back of it lies Mr. Rabe's metaphor of death as an accidental joke, and this in the long run gives what could have been merely a rather bloody barrack-room melodrama the eloquence of resonance.

Clive Barnes. *New York Times (daily)*. Feb. 3, 1976. p. 45

As a veteran, Rabe certainly had an advantage over most of his contemporaries in the theater, whose experiences were more likely to be of antiwar demonstrations than of combat. Curiously, however, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* (1971), the first fruit of [a] playwriting grant and the first of what was to become known as Rabe's Vietnam trilogy, actually offered little evidence of having been written by a veteran of anything but theater classes.

No doubt this apparent distance from personal experience resulted in part from conscious artistic decisions. To begin with, since Rabe conceived of his work as art and not advocacy, he deliberately eschewed any political ''relevance'' (perhaps tacitly acknowledging the superior polemical effectiveness of journalism). . . .

While scrupulously shunning these journalistic snares [such as ''ineffectual haranguing'' and the ''autobiographical mode''], however, Rabe fell into a different trap: excessive familiarity. *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* was one more variation of the pathetic but predictable rites of passage of the classic army misfit, trapped in a situation not of his making and far beyond his limited powers of understanding. All the stock characters and standard scenes were in evidence: the blustery drill sergeant, the squad bully, the uncaring family; the barracks-room banter, the ritual brawls and other crude tests of manhood, and finally the senseless death of the protagonist, a tragicomic climax to a perverse pilgrim's progress.

Perhaps Rabe was trying for a Vietnam version of *Woyzeck*. But instead of creating an agonized and extreme but nonetheless representative figure of humanity, Rabe deliberately designed the character of Pavlo to be a cipher—a literal nobody instead of an Everyman. The net effect was to make his brutalization and anonymous death almost meaningless: The progressive dehumanization of someone scarcely human to begin with involved so little dramatic motion that the play was less revealing of the cruel irony of Pavlo's empty existence than of the barrenness of Rabe's imagination. . . .

Rabe's resurrection of the form of symbolically heightened realism was nevertheless a remarkably audacious act of defending the sovereignty of the sensibility against the numbing assault of both the form and the content of media coverage of Vietnam. But one wishes that his talent had matched his courage, that his symbolism had been less trite or capricious or both. *Sticks and Bones* (1971), his next play, was a bit closer to home, at least in some ways; it had the potential of exhibiting the authenticity that was so woefully missing from *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*. Instead, it took Rabe even further from his proclaimed intent: ''to diagnose, as best I can, certain phenomena that went on in and around me.''

Robert Asahina. *Theater*. Spring, 1978, pp. 35–36

In his Vietnam trilogy—*The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel, Sticks and Bones*, and *Streamers*—Rabe confronts the radical disunities of the American experience and attempts to forge a means of expression to overcome alienation. The problem of language lies at the center of all three plays. In *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, which concentrates on the social roots of an individual rebellion, Rabe demonstrates the alienating effect of the debased American language. In *Sticks and Bones*, which analyzes the destructive impact of this alienation on a family group, he links this debased language to a characteristic American refusal to accept reality. In *Streamers* he treats the problem in a larger context, showing the nearly insurmountable barriers to human communication. While concentrating on the metaphysical conditions which engender the social alienation of the first two plays, Rabe struggles to create a new language based on awareness and human sympathy. Rabe perceives that, as Richard Poirier has observed, the contradictions of the American experience necessitate an essentially new vocabulary, a new style which can adequately express the connections between Ishmael's experience in the crow's nest and that on the deck below. Though Rabe has not yet perfected such a style, he has taken a major step towards it by blending an essentially realistic social revolt in his plays with elements of metaphysical revolt. His rebel characters ultimately fail, but they struggle to articulate their own experience and establish human contact.

Craig Werner. *Educational Theatre Journal*. Dec., 1978, pp. 517–18

Sticks and Bones, with its keen sensitivity to the venality of American society, is a savage satire of middle-class shallowness, smugness, and spiritual deficiency, and a pessimistic vision of the hellish condition of human beings on this earth. The play suggests that America's artificiality and superficiality lead us to narrow, ethnocentric behavior, to stonelike insensitivity, to savage and monstrous mistreatment of others, to the distortion of our lives, and to a condition in which death is better than life. The model from which this social criticism and existential pessimism is projected is a famous American television family, and the central event is the return from Vietnam of their wounded son, David. David drives his family to discover the ugliness and emptiness in their own lives, an ugliness and emptiness that, during the Vietnam era, caused devastation of a foreign land and the maiming of America's youth. . . .

Many critics have admitted difficulty in discussing this play; indeed, it is a difficult work to describe, paraphrase, and analyze satisfactorily. It is explosive; like a poem, its verbal and theatrical images are so associatively and spontaneously presented that it resists simple, direct retelling. Its essence lies in the dynamic interplay of world, stage action, and theatrical resource (props, lighting, costumes, etc.). However, its mixture of the savagely brutal, the hilariously funny, the softly poetic, the pointedly critical, and the darkly pessimistic clearly conveys Rabe's vision of human loneliness in a universe without meaning and of a hellish

American ethos, where people destroy love for security, beauty for plasticity, freedom for material wealth, and humane feeling for petty satisfactions of group affiliation. David Rabe has written a major work of dramatic art: it is little wonder that he has been called the ''best young playwright since Edward Albee,'' someone to be compared favorably, according to the critic John Simon, with America's greatest dramatist, Eugene O'Neill. . . .

Like Jean Claude Van Itallie in *America Hurrah*, Rabe cries out in savage tones against the ugliness of American culture, indeed of all Western culture. But Rabe goes on to project a truly poetic reflection of the dark, lonely condition of human beings; a condition in which materialism, war, ethnocentricity, and mass culture are the means—ugly and terrible—of selfish survival in the face of the void. Brilliantly, Rabe has fused episodic incident and linear plot, associative image and cause and effect development, poetry and prose, monologue and dialogue, comic and tragic impulses, in order to reveal a panorama of truths about American culture and about life and death itself. In *Sticks and Bones*, the intertwining of realistic and Absurdist aesthetic impulses is so effective and complete that we can hardly disentangle the rich linkage without distorting the delicately wrought dramatic arabesque Rabe has created.

Samuel J. Bernstein. *The Strands Entwined: A New Direction in American Drama* (Northeastern Univ. Pr., 1980), pp. 30–31, 34

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RAHV, Philip (1908–1974)

It occurs to me that there may be only two main types of literary critic—one oriented to prose, the other to poetry. Each type has its own special skill. If the second excels in close verbal analysis, the first is usually superior at picking out leading ideas and analyzing the structure of lengthy and complex works of literature.

Mr. Rahv is what one may call a pure example of the first type. Not one of the fourteen essays before me [*Image and Idea*] is concerned with poetry; even when he writes of William Carlos Williams, Mr. Rahv confines himself to that writer's short stories. . . . As a critic, he possesses the specific virtues of his type. The witty simplicity with which he divides all American writers into two groups—Palefaces and Redskins—is only the most striking example of a real gift for sane and striking generalization.

Vivian Mercier. *Commonweal*. July 22, 1949. p. 369

What one admires most in Philip Rahv's essays is the determination to search among our modern cultural closures and total ideologies for ''the cultural forms of dissidence and experiment.'' And what one admires about Rahv's critical method is his abundant ability to use such techniques as Marxism, Freudian psychology, anthropology, and existentialism toward his critical ends without shackling himself to any of them. . . . Rahv is above all a political critic, in the sense that his criticism takes literature to be involved in the upshot of history and the practical transactions of men and public ideas. His skill in handling a complex criticism, which is only infrequently allowed to vanish away into the rigidities of a narrow technique, places these essays [*Image and Idea*] among the very best written by the leftist critics of the 1940's.

Richard Chase. *The Nation*. July 23, 1949. p. 89

Though they were published in a number of magazines over a period of some ten years, and deal with such apparently diverse writers as Hawthorne, Henry James, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Virginia Woolf, Henry Miller, William Carlos Williams, Arthur Koestler and Bernard DeVoto, these fourteen extremely intelligent essays [*Image and Idea*] have a unity of conception and concern which makes it possible to read them as interrelated chapters of a single work. The key to this unity is in the term alienation. It is an alienated age which Philip Rahv is brilliantly analyzing here, and it is an alienated age to which the magazine *Partisan Review*, edited by Rahv and William Phillips since its beginning in 1936, has given such influential and representative expression. . . .

Rahv's writing lacks the connotative precision, the rich immersion in the medium which he admires in James, and it has a little of the journalistic flair for striking simplifications which he criticizes in Koestler. But the way in which he has tried to comprehend his own very representative political and ethical evolution through a reassessment of American and European writers has made *Image and Idea* one of the most clarifying of recent books of criticism.

Robert Gorham Davis. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 14, 1949. p. 6

The specific literary judgments and helpful criticism in this volume [*Image and Idea*] are found almost haphazardly, and frequently in unexpected links and parallels. From a really wide reading, the critic illuminates a writer or a book or a relevant situation by juxtaposition or comparison. Again, a telling judgment may occur in a reference to a writer's background or experience; for example, with deceptive casualness he really puts the finger on Henry Miller when he says that ''the final impression we have of his novels is that of a naturally genial and garrulous American who has been through hell.'' The range of Rahv's taste is extraordinary; characteristic is a balanced and generous estimate of Virginia Woolf. And common sense is indistinguishable from brilliance in an essay called ''Notes on the Decline of Naturalism.''

John Farrelly. *New Republic*. Sept. 26, 1949. p. 24

Another version of the story adds some interesting additions. It begins in 1932, when ''an obscure boy from the Bronx'' mailed an essay on Plekhanov to *The New Masses*. Joseph Freeman read it, liked it, and invited its author, Philip Rahv, to send him more. A

year or so later, Rahv and his friend William Phillips, both active in the New York City John Reed Club, came to Freeman with the complaint that *The New Masses* was too political. They urged the creation of a literary magazine. Freeman not only agreed, but also helped them to start *Partisan Review* and wrote the opening editorial statement. In substance, the editors promised to publish the best work of the New York John Reed Club members and sympathetic nonmembers; to maintain the viewpoint of the working class, to struggle against war and fascism, and to defend the U.S.S.R.; and to combat ''the decadent culture of the exploiting classes,'' narrow-minded sectarianism, and ''debilitating liberalism.''

Was *Partisan Review*, then, founded in opposition to *The New Masses*? On the contrary, it has been argued, it never would have appeared without the active support of *The New Masses* editors and writers, some of whom appeared in its pages as late as October 1936.

Daniel Aaron. *Writers on the Left* (Harcourt). 1961. pp. 298–9

Rahv's title [*The Myth and the Powerhouse*] suggests, in his rejection of both its terms, a strong moral view of literature. It applies to only a few of the essays explicitly, and to some others implicitly. We already know Rahv for his *Image and Idea* (1949) and for his editing and reviewing in various places. That he can be a first-rate critic is demonstrated by the two essays on Dostoevsky, both of them marvels of close reading, philosophical inference and useful knowledge. But Rahv's principal thesis, that modern critics are allowing us to be self-indulgent by substituting myth for a genuine ''orthodoxy'' is, at best, presented here too late to be relevant.

Frederick J. Hoffman. *The Nation*. Nov. 8, 1965. p. 334

The essays in Rahv's first book, *Image and Idea*, were pioneering studies, many of them, in Kafka, in Henry James, in the new re-appraisal of American literature such as his famous alignment of Paleface and Redskin, and in a re-appraisal of Russian literature and Marxism. Among these novelties, Rahv was sensible, solid, and weighty. He still is, and he still has his large Johnsonian gift for reality. But the object of his criticism in this collection [*The Myth and the Powerhouse*] is, necessarily, often criticism itself. . . . Rahv's conception of literary criticism is, sensibly, that it mediates between literature and the great world, that in fact criticism should aid literature to reach out, to locate and struggle with ''experience.'' But except for a few eloquent passages of invocation, and one or two specific references to the past, there is little reaching out here. There is only comment on literature, on literary fads, on literary books.

John Thompson. *New York Review of Books*. Dec. 9, 1965. p. 36

Mr. Rahv . . . deals with the biggest corporate enterprises: Dostoevsky, Gogol, Chekhov, James, Eliot, Joyce, Hemingway, history, Hegel, Tillich, the *Zeitgeist*, God. Mr. Rahv's ''powerhouse'' is history. . . . To give the *Zeitgeist* its due, one must grant that an occasional literary subject is able to penetrate the underbrush of Mr. Rahv's style and preoccupations. He writes intelligently, and even in bearable English, about Dostoevsky, for instance; as if Dostoevsky is political enough to free Mr. Rahv from the compulsion to question everybody else's timeliness and credentials. But his lapses are rare.

Marvin Mudrick. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1965–66. pp. 596–7

[Rahv] had one of the best minds of his time. Through his writing, his editing of the great magazine, *Partisan Review*, his insistence upon the significance of certain writers of the past and the present, through all of this he had a sharp effect upon the intellectual and cultural scene. Rahv's passion was to judge American culture in the light of the best European tradition. He knew Russian, German, and French well, and of course was saturated in English and American cultural history.

The outstanding theme of Rahv's efforts was, I think, a contempt for provincialism, for the tendency to inflate local and fleeting cultural accomplishments. This slashing away at low levels of taste and at small achievements passing as masterly, permanent monuments was a crusade some more bending souls might have grown weary of. But he was not ashamed of his extensive ''negativism'' and instead went on right up to the end scolding vanity and unworthy accommodation.

Elizabeth Hardwick. *New York Review of Books*. Jan. 24, 1974. p. 6

A powerful intellect, a massive, overpowering personality and yet shy, curious, susceptible, confiding. All his life [Rahv] was sternly faithful to Marxism, for him both a tool of analysis and a wondrous cosmogony; but he loved Henry James and every kind of rich, shimmery, soft texture in literature and in the stuff of experience. He was a resolute modernist, which made him in these recent days old-fashioned. It was as though he came into being with the steam engine: for him, literature began with Dostoevsky and stopped with Joyce, Proust and Eliot; politics began with Marx and Engels and stopped with Lenin. He was not interested in Shakespeare, the classics, Greek city states; and he despised most contemporary writing and contemporary political groups, being grumblingly out of sorts with fashion. . . .

Mary McCarthy. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 17, 1974. p. 1

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RAND, Ayn (1905–1982)

Ayn Rand (1905–1982) occupies a curious position on the American intellectual scene. A lifelong outsider, without academic credentials and generally scorned by established scholars, she exerted a powerful influence through her writings and for a while was the center of a movement that elicited passionate commitment from sizable numbers of people . . . .

Rand has been influential among intellectuals on the political right, especially in its libertarian sector (thus the economist Alan Greenspan, one of her early associates, has continued to express his indebtedness to her). Amid the recent resurgence of libertarian thought in the United States, Rand serves as an ideological reference point. . . .

It is [her] ideas, rather than Rand's undoubtedly fascinating personality, that probably hold the clue to her popularity. She set out to provide a philosophical and moral defense of American capitalism, and her success can only be explained by the paucity as well as the intellectual poverty of most comparable attempts. The critics of Rand's work were often motivated by ideological animosity; they were also, on the whole, quite right in their negative judgments. Rand's novels are ponderous, filled with characters that are, indeed, embodiments of principles rather than living human beings. Her philosophy is a vulgarized cross between Adam Smith and Friedrich Nietzsche, a flat Enlightenment rationalism aspiring to an ethic of heroism. Her epistemology of ''objectivity'' is roughly as sophisticated as Lenin's dialectical materialism, her morality is based on selfishness and her political program could not be realized in any modern society.

Yet Rand did understand some central realities—precisely realities that a good number of contemporary American intellectuals fail to see. Foremost among these is the reality that capitalism alone provides the institutional foundation for individual rights, which is why all forms of modern collectivism, of whatever ideological coloration, detest capitalism. Unfortunately, while capitalism does indeed require a moral defense, Ayn Rand's principles hardly provide one. Her ideas, especially as they continue to be espoused by various libertarians, still create agitation on the right. It is noteworthy that the most caustic review of *Atlas Shrugged* appeared in *National Review*; its author, none other than Whittaker Chambers, maintained that Rand's ideas led straight to the gas chambers. The allegation was unfair (Rand always insisted that one must never use force except in self-defense—one of her principles, actually), but it shows the degree of rage provoked by Rand in conventional conservative circles, especially those animated by religious convictions.

Rand was passionately patriotic about her adopted country. There are many things about America, though, that she never understood, and the pervasiveness of religion in this country was certainly one of them. She imagined America as she imagined capitalism, and her success is evidence of the fact that her own fantasies coincided with those of others—and probably that her own simplicities met the need of others for one simple, all-embracing explanation of everything. This makes for a movement, but it doesn't make for good philosophy or viable politics. Capitalism is part and parcel of an inevitably messy empirical reality that can never be captured in a system of axioms. A defense of capitalism that can claim to be both moral and rational will have to take cognizance of its empirical reality—something Rand was temperamentally unable to do.

It is difficult to accord an important place to Ayn Rand either as a novelist or as a thinker. And yet there is something appealing, even a touch of grandeur, about [her]: the young woman who arrives in America clutching her Remington Rand typewriter (she took her name from it); who not only renames herself but proceeds to remake herself in the shape of her passionately held ideals; the hero-worshiper who invented improbably heroic figures in her novels and who convinced very ordinary people that they too could be heroes; the mature and successful figure who always refused compromise, no matter what the cost, and who faced bitter personal disappointment and pain with an unbending courage. One can understand why this individual, whatever her intellectual and personal foibles, could command loyalty and inspire commitment.

Peter L. Berger. *The New York Times Book Review*. July 6, 1986, p. 13

Any discussion of the works of Ayn Rand must include a discussion of her philosophy; it is the essence of her work. Rand could not find a philosophy that reflected her beliefs, so she created her own. She called her philosophy ''objectivism'' because it is based on the premise that reality is an objective absolute; therefore, one's survival depends on one's ability to perceive and understand reality. Since one survives by reason, one's highest value should be one's own ability to reason—one's own mind. To place any concept or consideration above the mind is to act against one's own survival—to choose death instead of life.

Every book Rand wrote is an exploration of the philosophy of objectivism. This does not mean that her novels are dry tomes of academic discourse. The stories are interesting, dramatic, and well-written; and the philosophy is integral to the plot. Her words are not difficult to understand, and her ideas are not difficult to grasp. It simply means that Rand cannot be read casually. The reader must pay attention, because every page is packed with ideas and meanings. Because of this, Rand's novels are not generally considered light reading. . . .

The novella *Anthem* is Rand's simplest work, and explores objectivism only in terms of the value of the individual's mind. *Anthem* imagines a future society where collectivism has been taken to its extreme. It is a society where singular pronouns—I, me, he, she—are unknown. There is only ''the great WE, One, indivisible and forever.'' Not only is an individual's mind not valued, it is considered a sin to even want to think thoughts that no others think. In fact, it is a sin to want to exist for any reason other than to serve the needs of the great WE.

What young adult whose identity has always been defined as a group—the you're-not-important-you're-just-a-kid group—would not share Equality 7-2521's joy in the discovery of the meaning and the value of the word ''I''?

In *We the Living,* objectivism is explored in terms of a young Russian girl, Kira Argounova, entering adulthood just after the Communists came into power. In this, the story reflects Rand's life; she also began her adult life in Russia at the beginning of the Communist regime. Rand says in her forward that, *''We The Living* is as near to an autobiography as I will ever write . . . the specific events of Kira's life were not mine; her ideas, her convictions, her values were and are.''

The title ''We the Living'' refers to both the character and the author's belief that living means consciously choosing life—by making one's own life one's highest value. When Kira heard the Communists claim that ''man must live for the state,'' she believed that it was monstrous to ask anyone to think so little of his or her own life. Kira's one goal is to escape the monstrosity of communist ideology with the man she loves—to find a place where it is possible to choose life.

It is in *We the Living* that the moral code of objectivism is presented: If one's survival depends on one's own mind, then to claim another's mind is to claim another's life. The only moral course of action is to support one's own life by one's own mind—to live for one's own sake—and to allow others to do the same. Rand makes no distinction between those who seek to claim another's mind, and those who abdicate their own mind. Both are immoral: they act against their own survival; they choose death instead of life.

The most striking implication of the objectivist moral code is the role of villains. Villains exist in all of Rand's novels, and their actions affect the protagonists, but they seem strangely irrelevant to the true story. The true story is the conflict between characters who draw different conclusions from the objectivist premise—not good against evil, but good against good-but-different. According to the objectivist moral code, villains are irrelevant. Their existence is granted to them by their victims; they can survive only as long as their victims permit them to survive. This theme is introduced in *The Fountainhead* and explored fully in *Atlas Shrugged*.

By any measure, *Atlas Shrugged* is Rand's masterwork. It superbly integrates a dramatic mystery story with a fully realized philosophy, achieving a scope and maturity of thought only suggested by her earlier works.

Karen J. Gould. In *Twentieth-Century Young Adult Writers*, ed. Laura Standley Berger (St. James Press, 1994)

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RANSOM, John Crowe (1888–1974)

I suppose that if I were set to fill in a literary passport to send Ransom to Parnassus, I should include in a summary of his

Ransomness first, a humorous turn of speech, including a sweetening scepticism; second, a muscular quality of both metre and thought, and third, the periodic detonation of most unlikely and effective phrases.

Robert Graves. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 27, 1924. p. 412

The poet cannot solve his problem (the relation of the artist to the ordered, or disordered society in which he happens to live) by an act of will, but he can attempt to work out some sort of equilibrium that may permit him, even though at odds with himself, to continue the practice of his art without violating his own honesty. Analysis will show that most of Ransom's poems are objectifications of this little interior drama. . . . These poems are not mere commentary, however witty, on the nature and conduct of the external world.

Robert Penn Warren. *Poetry*. May, 1930. p. 111

Mr. Ransom . . . comes through as a kind of enlightened reactionary. He is too well-informed to be lumped with the ivory-tower school and too cynical to be lumped with any liberal one. . . . He has qualities of acumen and wit to which not very many critics of today can lay claim. But the problem of poetry today can hardly not be linked to the problem of human culture, which is plainly being menaced.

Louis Kronenberger. *The Nation*. Aug. 13, 1938. pp. 161–2

No pavilioned clipper ships appear on his horizon; no peculiarities, human or zoological, except the actors in an occasional allegory; no flashing tropical color nor tinkling lilt or harlequinade enter his theater. He reflects sombrely on the inexorable duality of things, the gulf between the senses and the intellect, the body and head; between the life of actuality and the life of contemplation; between scientific knowledge and imaginative vision; between the joys of childhood and adult self-torment. His irony is the most important single element in his poetry. It dictates the subdued key which is so much more susceptible of subtle economics of tone-change than a larger volume would be. It restricts his language to the simple, lucid forms which take on a special sheen and sharpness when an oddity is dropped in their midst or a film of archaism passed over them. It infuses humor into his philosophic reflections and tempers his occasional solemnities.

Elizabeth Drew. *Directions in Modern Poetry* (Norton). 1940. pp. 77–8

He began by excoriating naturalism and positivism, yet ended by affirming that the analysis of the ''structural properties'' of poems were the main business of criticism. . . . This new criticism, based on a vicarious orthodoxy and textual analysis of advanced poetry, seemed . . . the only answer to the havoc of the times. . . . What one saw in the work of critics like Ransom and Tate, Blackmur and Yvor Winters, was the use of form as a mysterious ultimate value, form as a touchstone, a kind of apotheosis in a void.

Alfred Kazin. *On Native Grounds* (Reynal). 1942. pp. 429–31

To be a Ransom in Tennessee is something more precious than it is easy to say. . . . Mr. Ransom's poems are composed of Tennessee. . . . He drew a picture of it, many pictures of it, in his book. The greater the value he set on it, the dearer it became, the more closely he sought out its precise line and look, the more it became a legend of things as they are when they are as we want them to be, without any of the pastiche of which the presence vulgarizes so many legends and possibly everything legendary in things, not as they are, but as we should like them to be.

Wallace Stevens. *Sewanee Review*. Summer, 1948. pp. 367–9

Ransom's production is small—his selected poems take up only seventy-four pages. . . . It is the work of a lifetime. When I reread it, I marveled at its weight—few English poets have written so many lyrics that one wants to read over and over again. . . . There is the language; it's a curious mixture of elaboration and bluntness; courtesy and rudeness. . . . To appreciate the language in Ransom's poems, you must realize that it is the language of one of the best talkers that has ever lived in the United States. . . . There is the unusual structural clarity, the rightness of tone and rhythm, the brisk and effective ingenuity, the rhetorical fire-works of expository description and dialogue; but even more: the sticking to concrete human subjects—the hardest; and a balance, control, matureness, nimbleness, toughness, and gentleness of temperament.

Robert Lowell. *Sewanee Review*. Summer, 1948. pp. 374–6

To my mind the most striking thing about John Crowe Ransom's poems is their elegance. . . . Elegance, in this connection, is a means to a precision of statement, more especially a means to the control of tone: it implies manners, or style. . . . The attitude I seek to distinguish has much to do with irony. . . . The emphasis of the poems is for the most part clearly on intellect and brilliance; the vocabulary is more than usually exotic, the rhymes are witty and boldly slanted, the poet's attitude and stance are in the main remote, often amused.

Howard Nemerov. *Sewanee Review*. Summer, 1948. pp. 417–22

Instead of listening to him through the hands, with closed eyes, as one is sucked deeper and deeper into the maelstrom, one listens with one's eyes wide open and one's head working about as well as it usually works. Most writers become over-rhetorical when they are insisting on more emotion than they actually feel or need to feel; Ransom is just the opposite. He is perpetually insisting, by his detached, mock-pedantic, wittily complicated tone, that he is not feeling much at all, not half as much as he really should be feeling.

Randall Jarrell. *Poetry and the Age* (Knopf). 1953. pp. 98–9

His major contribution to American criticism has been made through the *Kenyon Review*, which he has edited since 1939. . . . It is as a critic that Ransom is best known and most influential. He is the founder and leader of the Kenyon School—literally a school where the most distinguished critics have come to teach and lecture, and, less literally, that phase of contemporary criticism, usually designated as the ''New Criticism,'' which seeks to study poetry in terms of its structure (the logic of the poem) and its texture

(the detail of the poem), quite apart from its historical and social contexts.

Stanley J. Kunitz. *Twentieth Century Authors. First Supplement* (Wilson). 1955. p. 814

. . . my interest here is not in the ''truth'' of Ransom's speculations, but in their illustration of where the search for a suitable theory of poetry as knowledge is likely to lead when the knowledge is not to be prose knowledge—either scientific or, in the words of a critic of the New Critics, ''common knowledge, of things that everyone incipiently knows, or has overlooked, or forgotten.'' Even if you begin as Ransom did with a respect and a love for particulars, you seem to get drawn in the footsteps of Aristotle, Plato, the Hegelians—and of course the great Romantic poets and theorists of the last century—where in the beginning you may have especially wanted *not to go*: ''higher,'' or ''further,'' or ''behind''—or even, like Blackmur, ''below.''

Richard Foster. *The New Romantics*. (Indiana). 1962. p. 144

A number of Ransom's poems concern themselves with knightly combat, an amusing metaphor for the intellectual jousting of literary life. He makes mocking use of such archaic and scholarly words as ''ogive'' (pointed arch), ''thole'' (endure), ''pernoctated'' (passed the night), and ''diuturnity'' (something lasting). Other poems are as far from the domestic and the homely as one can get. ''Armageddon'' is an amazing account of the final battle between Christ and Antichrist, seen as an odd kind of chivalric ballet. ''Antique Harvesters'' harvests history in what appears to be a corner of Kentucky, with everything so numinous that even the fox pursued by spectral hunters becomes a ''lovely ritualist.'' ''Painted Head'' starts as a description of a portrait and in the course of nine quatrains manages to create an esthetics, a metaphysics, and an ethics. . . . As a poet, Ransom remains an original. One can see the faint influence of John Skelton in such a poem as ''Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom,'' of John Donne in ''The Equilibrists,'' of Thomas Hardy in ''Puncture'' and ''Master's in the Garden Again'' (the latter dedicated to him), of Wallace Stevens in ''Prometheus in Straits'' and ''Prelude to an Evening.'' One can see other poems from which Robert Graves has learned, or Robert Lowell, or Howard Nemerov. But in a deeper sense John Crowe Ransom's poetry seems to be without ancestry and descendants, to spring up timeless and beautiful like Indian pipes in deep woods, to delight our minds and refresh our hearts.

Stanley Edgar Hyman. *New Leader*. Aug. 5, 1963. p. 18

Throughout his poetry and prose is an awareness of the radical difference between what men yearn for and what they get. It informs the elements which make up his double vision of man: the ''fury against abstractions,'' the conception of the modern mind as divided and at war with itself; the mistrust of monistic philosophies and sciences; the image of a pluralistic universe and the belief that the arts offer the most comprehensive mode of representing it; the argument in support of an agrarian culture; and the irony of his delivery. Only in death, where the difference seems most immense, does it end. . . .

Balancing opposing forces within a harmonious and unified order is the fundamental principle of Ransom's style and the communication of his unique vision of man. When reading one of his mature poems we have a sense of radical diversity, of complicated lines of stress, of collisions among the elements. At the same time we feel threading among these strong filaments which bind the poem together, and in the end we are left with a satisfying impression of wholeness. If, as usually happens, we are offered two views of and attitudes toward the subject, we find on finishing the poem that they have preserved their separate identities. The opposition has not been resolved though it has been assimilated into the total statement of the poem, which itself affects us as a single entity.

John L. Stewart. *The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians* (Princeton). 1965. pp. 206, 228–9

Ransom sees the poem as developing from a determination of the poet, who knows what he wants to say or how he wants the poem to sound, or both, before writing the poem. The poet starts, then, with a determinate meaning, a determinate sound, or both. But language cannot be mastered so completely; the meaning will not fit into the emergent verse pattern, so it changes until it becomes something the poet did not foresee—indeterminate meaning. Nor will the language bear both the sound and the meaning the poet wanted, so indeterminate sound enters. Here, incidentally, Ransom's theory is far superior to most others we have examined. What happens, Ransom urges, is that the medium in which the poet works is obstinate; it forces him to admit effects of sound and sense which he did not intend and for which he is not entirely responsible. Hence, presumably, arises the ''tissue of irrelevance'' which Ransom considers the peculiar property of poetry.

Lee T. Lemon. *The Partial Critics* (Oxford). 1965. pp. 119–20

Conventional poetry about love follows the easy routes: it assumes that outward Nature is the harmonious ally of inward feeling, provides embellishment by lush, sensuous description of interiors, uses emotional overstatement, the grandiose adjective. In scorning these transparent devices and concentrating on formal audacity, Ransom becomes like his equilibrists, caught between a poet's necessity to deal with emotion and a self-conscious modernist's preoccupation with subtle technical execution. His major weakness seems to be that he often settles for a sophisticated execution without emotional power or the clear lyric line: he frequently incurs more disadvantages than he can transcend through a strict fidelity to his principles. His impotent poems about love (''Spectral Lovers'' for one) are skeletal reflections of his fatal obsession with technique. Sometimes his poetry seems like a deliberate, narcissistic cerebral amusement rather than an adventure in the brave encompassing of life. Only in ''The Equilibrists,'' a flawed masterpiece, does he extract an overwhelming passion from his uncompromisingly meager poetics. But the devices sometimes announce themselves and the passion is intellectual; it is not an aesthetic ecstasy. To achieve that, he has to permit feeling to be first.

In ''Winter Remembered'' all of Ransom's important principles are not only intact, but they are amenable to an unobtrusive sophisticated power. The very indirection is a source of excitement when it works so quietly to unleash emotion. Our awe at discovering that the emotion of love can be intensified by the bizarre image

of frozen parsnips is the best authentication of Ransom's singular control. This reclamation of unpoetic resources is the highest pitch of Ransom's monastic ecstasy.

Thornton H. Parsons. *Modern Language Quarterly*. Dec., 1965. p. 585

A great deal of Ransom's criticism has been actively concerned with limiting the field of aesthetics and making explicit its divorce from the work of the ''moralist.'' His defence of the poem's autonomy, his insistence on ruling out its effect on the critic as reader, his discussion of technique without reference to its function as a medium of communication or expression (denying indeed that this is its function), his analysis of poetic quality only in terms of a texture irrelevant to what moral substance the poem's logical core may possess: all these can be seen as facets of Ransom's dissociation of himself from the moralists whom he evidently considers as his chief opponents.

Andor Gomme. *Attitudes to Criticism* (Southern Illinois). 1966. p. 22

In both cases [of genteel virtue and mythology] Ransom's regret is mostly for the loss of a world in which such virtues, such myths, such learning were relevant, not as things in themselves, although he does concede their value. To continue to practice the virtues or to insist that people should learn classical myths—unless they can be tricked into learning them, as we have noted—seems to strike him as absurd. Ransom has presented a case history of absurdity in the gyrations and activities of his Captain Carpenter, a ridiculous, yet grotesquely splendid figure, who is quixotic, but also fully aware of where his folly is leading him, and persistent in that folly as a way of insisting upon the values by which he lives. I mention this element of grotesquerie qualified by a certain splendor, in turn destroyed almost by its own absurdity, because it seems so typical of so many of Ransom's characters.

Samuel H. Woods. *College English*. Feb., 1966. pp. 411–12

I scarcely need to remind you that this quiet man, whose life has been so perfectly private that it could bear any public scrutiny, has given us poems which are minor only in that they are not long, but major in their inclusive irony. For no poet of our age, not even his exact contemporary T. S. Eliot, has surpassed [Ransom] in the awareness of the shadowy back room of the human condition, where ''invisible evil, deprived and bold'' makes its bid for domination. Yet, looked at closely, all the magnificent poems of the Ransom canon are love poems, celebrating love's triumph even in renunciation. The famous ''precious objects'' are the objects of love, even though they must, like the lovers, vanish into the thin air of human failure and eventually of death.

Allen Tate. *Sewanee Review*. Summer, 1968. p. 376

Ransom's basic impulse is . . . a fury against abstraction, against the predatory and ruthless intellect that would destroy (through its instrument, applied science) or ignore the rich particularity of the world's body; against this he exhibits a protective tenderness for the useless and undefined and helpless: for children, old people, the illogical textural details of poems as against their logical or prose structure: for the preposterously unrealistic Captain Carpenter as against his very efficient opponents. He defends play, enjoyment, contemplation, and the aesthetic experience which is allied to them.

But—and this is a point often ignored or obscured—Ransom is a genuine dualist. One cannot say that he is at bottom a believer in one or the other of the two opposed attitudes. He protests against the abstracting intellect because he believes it to be, as embodied in modern science, a present danger; the danger is that it may win too complete a victory, drying up or denying the pleasures of the innocent sensibility. But Ransom never repudiates logic or science; he would not give a complete victory to emotion, texture, play, innocence, and uselessness even if he could. . . . As his prose makes clear, Ransom himself has always remained a thoroughgoing skeptic: beneath the personal charm and the gentle and courteous manner he has been detached, unbelieving, unillusioned, perhaps inclining rather more to the scientific attitude, or at least increasingly sympathetic toward it. There has been a radical hardheaded skepticism, a kind of bleakness, beneath the ''traditional'' surface. The irony in Ransom's poetry is profound and unresolved; it is tragic, for its only resolution is in the idea of death.

Monroe K. Spears. *Dionysus and the City* (Oxford—N.Y.). 1970. pp. 157–9

It is interesting that Ransom, like many of the poets of this century, believes that myth functions on an unconscious level; his conception of this level of experience, however, is very different from Yeats's, Auden's, Muir's or Aiken's, since for Ransom the significant unconscious communication that myth establishes is essentially religious and dogmatic. Beneath the ''commonplace'' situation of ''Prelude to an Evening'' Ransom sees the pattern of the ''great Familial Configuration which had been ordained in our creation''; thus, from his point of view, the man returning to his household at evening enacts ''a crucial and habit-forming moment in his history,'' which symbolizes the continuous religious history of mankind.

Lillian Feder. *Ancient Myth in Modern Poetry* (Princeton). 1971. p. 397

Ransom's view of the world and his poetry . . . come from the conviction that neither science nor abstract philosophy will avail to make sense of the world, and, while some sort of rational humanism might, this is an attitude for which this world has no use. The world is obsessed by what it cannot use and will not use what it can. To this awareness Ransom brings a Calvinism which denies that man's destiny, or for that matter his right, is to dominate the world he finds himself in. Calvinism is not a world-affirming attitude, but Ransom is more than a Calvinist; he is a poet, and if John Calvin keeps him from trying to master or manipulate the world, he does not keep him from knowing it and loving it. This is all man has left. And to the poet, knowledge and love depend finally upon man's sensibilities, his awareness of the points of contact between his senses and the concrete, phenomenological world.

He takes not a despairing but an ironic view of his inability to master, to overcome the world which is his and yet is not his, and in this ironic pose finds a comfortable detachment. This ironic detachment, in turn, enables him to keep both worlds—the desirable and impossible world of the scientist and the abstract philosopher and

the inescapable and painful world of John Calvin and the poet—balanced one against the other.

Miller Williams. *The Poetry of John Crowe Ransom* (Rutgers). 1972. p. 11

Ransom is . . . no poet of modern alienation. Rather, one of reconciliation. But the poet is hardminded and knows the inescapable biological, historical, and philosophical contexts which dictate that all reconciliation is doomed to be imperfect and fleeting, and that tenderness must ultimately exist in the long perspective of irony. If he is a poet of sentiment, he is a critic of rigorous mind, with an astute sense—in his own poetry as in his poetic theory—of the technical aspects of the literary art. And I should emphasize that for him the polarity of rigor of mind and warmth of heart, though generating an inevitable irony, represent inevitable dimensions of man's fully realized life. But rigor and tenderness, hardheadedness and love—these, in man and work, were united, beyond irony, in a sense of grave joy.

Robert Penn Warren. *Southern Review*. Spring, 1975, p. 249

Unless we understand that Ransom's penchant for logical argumentation, his relentless dialectic, was in part at least a way of organizing and systematizing an intense emotional life, a method of discipline for his strenuous imagination, we will miss an essential truth about this very passionate man and poet. For Ransom, as those of his fellow Fugitives who have written about him all attest, was by no means the friendly, avuncular man of reason that his genial manner and his courtly demeanor seemed to indicate; far from it. He did indeed have a formidable, analytical mind; he took ideas very seriously, and his thinking was methodical and rigorous. He was, as Thomas Daniel Young writes, always willing to debate almost any issue at any time; it was his way of thinking. But there was more to the man than the thought; the same mind that worked out the poetics and the theory wrote the poems. He insisted on poetry as a way of knowing the world, superior in its fullness of apprehension to the partial truths of science and philosophy, and there can be no doubt that he believed this because he perceived it thus in himself. Out of this amiable and unpretentious but ultimately very private and strong-willed man came some of the best poetry of the twentieth century, and also some provocative and creative thinking about poetry and society, and these were the product of passion disciplined by logic and made formally felicitous by strategy. Ransom was no sweet reasoner; that was only his tactical method. He held strong convictions, felt emotions powerfully; and when he took his stand, he meant it.

Louis D. Rubin, Jr. *The Wary Fugitives: Four Poets and the South* (Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1978), pp. 62–63

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RAWLINGS, Marjorie Kinnan (1896–1953)

South Moon Under is laid in a country far removed from the violences of the depression, the Florida scrub. It is a slow, old-fashioned novel, carefully and sometimes beautifully written, beginning with the coming of the Lantrys to the wilderness and ending with the flight of the lost generation to wilderness still deeper. There is a great deal of factual information packed away unobtrusively in the novel, information on such unfamiliar subjects as the making of corn liquor, on the ways of hunting wildcats, or the methods of rafting logs down the river. . . . And if the characters are sometimes a little misty, and seem mere passive agents for observing the multiple details of wild life, they at least always observe clearly.

Robert Cantwell. *New Republic*. March 8, 1933. p. 108

There comes a moment everywhere when ceasing to be a boy may be a tragedy like dying. But the story of that moment has never been more tenderly written than by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings in this novel [*The Yearling*] of Jody, the boy of the Florida hammock country, and Flag, the faun, who grew together out of a frolicking youngness to the bitter realities of maturity.

It is a story sad enough; one, indeed, which might easily fall into the bathos of youth's own humorless seeing of its incomparable despair. But Mrs. Rawlings wisely has not written in the solemn terms of tragedy. Rather her book of the Baxter family is crowded with comedy of character, with full-bodied folk wisdom, and with the silence and the excitement, the ultimate noise and accumulated natural history of the backwoods hunt.

Jonathan Daniels. *Saturday Review*. April 2, 1938. p. 5

If the reader can survive the many ''fragile clusters of lavender bloom,'' ''white tufted sky,'' ''pale green earth,'' ''golden sunlight,'' and finally an ''arched rainbow'' of the first chapter [of *The Yearling*], he has a real treat in store for him, for Mrs. Rawlings writes with a sincere and unusual beauty. Her Cracker dialect is interesting and never becomes tiresome; her characterization is excellent; and her leisurely method of unfolding her plot fascinates the reader to the end of the book.

Philip Hartung. *Commonweal*. April 29, 1938. p. 24

Writing fiction for adults about a child in a child's world is a delicately difficult literary undertaking. . . . Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings has succeeded where so many have failed, and *The Yearling* is a distinguished book. Her Jody Baxter lives, a person in himself, within the boundaries of his own years and his own world. One-third intuition, one-third knowledge, one-third perception, the boy moves through the Florida river country, and the chronicle of his year is unforgettably written. . . . Even a Thoreau cannot report

on the world outdoors as a child might. The naturalist sees only those things which concern his informed eye. To a child the barn and the woodshed are as much a part of the natural workable landscape as the lizard under the log. Mrs. Rawlings has done a small miracle in that she knows this, never stops to interpret, never once steps outside Jody's perceptions, never mars her great skill by pausing to explain. She has captured a child's time sense, in which everything lasts forever and the change of season takes him always unawares.

Frances Woodward. *Atlantic Monthly*. June, 1938. n.p.

Few other contemporary American novelists exhibit so marked a detachment from the problems, the currents of opinion, the pressures and tensions which characterize American life today. So complete is her detachment from the specifically contemporary and the transient as, occasionally, to perplex her readers. . . . In the case of so intelligent and meticulous a craftsman as Mrs. Rawlings, it is absurd to suppose that this detachment, and the rigorous exclusions which it imposes, are purely accidental. They are obviously dictated by a personal perception of life, by a concern for ultimate rather than relative values, and by an intention to present experience in its most simple and enduring forms.

To make this point is merely to suggest that Mrs. Rawlings is essentially a classicist, writing at a moment when the dominant accent of our fiction is romantic. Her work more closely resembles Miss Cather's *My Antonia*, or Mrs. Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, than it does the novels of Ernest Hemingway or Erskine Caldwell. But, although a classicist in her perception of life, she is a romantic in her literary endowment. Sensibility is its most impressive element, and imparts to Mrs. Rawlings's writing certain qualities more familiar in poetry than prose fiction.

Lloyd Morris. *North American Review*. Autumn, 1938.p. 180

There is a deceiving simplicity about *Cross Creek*, a book of pleasant reminiscences of ''a bend in a country road'' by the sharply perceptive author of *The Yearling*. By the time you finish it you realize that it is more than the story of the people and flora and fauna of a backwoods community: it is a way of life—a way that smacks of Thoreau, without Thoreau's asceticism, for the author, while believing that nature possesses the secret of happiness, loves all sorts of people, and records their peculiarities of temper and dialect with zest and humor.

''I do not understand,'' she writes, ''how anyone can live without some small place of enchantment to turn to.'' She herself has found her small place among the colored folk, the white folk, the magnolia trees, the hogs, and the waters of the ''Yearling'' country, and in this narrative of her sojourn there she reveals herself again as an extremely sensitive observer, who sees much that others do not and feels keenly about everything. It is as if color and sound and happiness and sorrow were all heightened for her, and she translates this brightness and sharpness for the reader.

Louis B. Salomon. *The Nation*. March 21, 1942.p. 346

Cross Creek is in a sense an unclassifiable book. It is not a ''local color'' book. Nor would it fit into, although it might nudge the category of ''Florida, Flora, and Fauna. '' It is not even a good sociological report. The Floyd family negate that possibility. No competent sociologist would admit into his records the fact that the Floyds thoroughly enjoyed belonging to the underprivileged class. Rather, and for the lack of anything better, Cross Creek would seem to be pure Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings. It's an autobiography. And for the sake of the record, it is necessary to add that Mrs. Rawlings does not make herself out either quaint, or amusing, or gay, or tragic. In *Cross Creek* she reveals herself as a good cook and an artist. That is an accomplishment, indeed, for one woman.

Carroll Munro. *Saturday Review*. April 4, 1942. p. 6

One does miss the lift of *The Yearling*. It was as if the earlier book were written out of the heart because the author *had* to write it. There are moments in *The Sojourner* which read like so many novels that appear today—as if the author felt that he must go ahead and finish it. Do not let me mislead you. Mrs. Rawlings is a skilled and able writer, and she has a good story to tell. The characters are, as they say, ''well drawn,'' although at times one feels that she is laying on the whimsy a bit thick.

Louis Bromfield. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 3, 1953. p. 10

It is perhaps the author's joy in her work which carries through to the reader so strongly the vitality of the characters and the gusto one feels in their hard and dangerous lives. There is much hardship and sorrow and tragedy in the book [*The Yearling*], but here, possibly more than in any other of her books, Marjorie Rawlings has conveyed the quality of these people who drew her sympathy—their gallantry, their grace of spirit and the joy in living that they find in lives which appear, in the facts, to be merely bitter struggles for survival. . . .

It is clear that the scrub and the hammock and, above all, their inhabitants, the Florida Crackers, were the well-spring of Marjorie Rawlings' inspiration and the lodestone of her writing talent. The best of her writing is that which is close to this land and to these people whom she understood so deeply because of her love for them. Through her they have gained a place in the literature of their country, and through them that literature has been enriched by the achievement of an outstanding writer.

Julia Scribner Bigham. Introduction to *The Marjorie Rawlings Reader* (Scribner). 1956. pp. xviii–xix

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RAY, David (1932–)

Sam Ray was killed in an accident in 1984 at the age of nineteen. Since that time, his father has been composing elegies and lyrics

that chronicle the course of his mourning, and this collection [*Sam's Book*] brings these poems together along with other poems about fathers and sons written during Sam's lifetime. . . . *Sam's Book*, then, is a public act of private grief, a volume by definition more coherent than new volumes of verse can usually hope to be. . . . While [David] Ray's characteristic qualities of gracefulness of ear and lyric intensity inform virtually all of the pieces here, and while some seem particularly inspired . . . others lack the edge of art in their painful working out of the process of bereavement and loss. All are ''small'' perhaps, but if the poet's claim that ''one among a group in any yard is Sam'' is taken as a central motif of this book, then they do succeed in the rather enormous task of giving a face to the beloved ephebe against the annihilating banalities of time.

W.C. Watterson. *Choice*. Jan., 1988, p. 769

The beautiful and the pedestrian cross side by side in David Ray's poetry, and they have been doing so for more than three decades. The metered reports of behavior Ray creates out of his observations are sometimes major documents of modern American poetry and, on occasion, carbon copies of fresh life.

Although Ray is very much an American in his fierce commitment to the confessional spirit and to an openness of plain style, he also bears resemblance to a majestic and flawed modern British poet, D.H. Lawrence. Like Lawrence, Ray has journeyed round the world (unlike Lawrence, Ray has begot children as well as literature); like Lawrence, he believes that experiences are gifts to be cycled for the wheel of writing. In their philosophy the re-creation of experience is a form of sharing—and thus saving—of the experience. Like Lawrence, Ray has written in many forms—fiction, essay, memoir, as well as the short and long poem—and in all these forms the autobiographical element is not so much transformed and alloyed as it is insistently referential.

Ray has, in his own time, written poems of tribute to Lawrence and to Lawrence's earthy Baroness Frieda von Richthofen Weekly. In *Kangaroo Paws* Ray travels the same Australian territory Lawrence and Frieda journeyed years before him. He goes down paths they went, and he records his feelings on walking that same ground of humble road. Knowingly or not, he takes flowers not as they come but as they grow in his eyes, and he turns their spread and color into paeans of commitment and survival. His title poem, a tribute to the unique Australian flower which, in Ray's view, uses its ''paws'' to clutch at the sun, has its parallel in Lawrence's germinal poem, ''Bavarian Gentians,'' in that both are attempts at accepting the pain of sorrow in the face or mortality.

Some of Ray's poems in this volume treat the tragic experience of the death of his son in a traffic accident while a college freshman; they are a record of the continuing affliction of grief he has expressed in earlier work, particularly *Sam's Book*. Some of the poems are literary satires of pretentious would-be critics of all shapes and towns; some are easy gibes at human waste and folly (as in *Gulliver's Travels*). All are experiences reflected on rather than created out of imagined situations—in this sense Ray places limits on both his poetry and autobiography. His imagination is saved for the frozen moment; the unexpungeable past becomes a fresh sheet for musing (and for the amusement of the poet). His poems become then, at their best, wonderful insights into a seeming monochrome. There are poems of this order and level in this newest collection of his, the record of a one-year sojourn in Australia with his wife, his teaching job at a university there, and his travels to the bush country and conversations with post-Aborigines. If there are flawed poems as well, it is wise to remember D.H. Lawrence again. Warts are not to be denied, but neither is the triumph of a rare vision on the other hand.

Herman Saraley. *Confrontation*. Summer/Fall, 1995, pp. 366–67

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RECHY, John (1934–)

[John] Rechy writes about the gay hustler and a world of chaotic, multiple, chance encounters, continual movement, and the constant threats of momentary rejection, police and social repression, violence of all sorts, and relentless aging. Alternatives promising more peaceful, secure life, such as monogamous relationships, marriage, going straight, are considered, but his protagonists reject them as mediocre existence of low intensity. They opt for the danger and excitement of the sex hunt. This choice to remain in what to outsiders appears a chaotic, senseless life is disturbing for the average reader, but one must remember that its rewards in the realm of intensity are presented in the texts as superior, and therefore, worth whatever ''sacrifice'' required. (In this, Rechy's gay world reflects the Chicano minority world, which is also considered by outsiders an anachronic enclave of stubborn holdouts.) Yet it is undeniable that the characters often yearn for a sense of permanence and place, a secure identity, and, ultimately, an understanding of the meaning of their life in the face of the constant danger of negation and exclusion. For the majority of characters, there seems little hope, but, as we might expect by now, for the protagonist-narrator there is the response of the text. . . .

As others we have seen, Rechy knows literature is a response, but not an escape. He refuses to ameliorate the image; life takes the ''shape of loneliness.'' Revealed meaning may be itself a threat to so-called stability. On this Rechy is most disturbing for readers. As all outstanding eroticists, he advocates a surrender to the most intense areas of experience, where the rational order dissolves into

impersonal, uncontrolled experience itself, but without ignoring the danger it implies to mind, body, and identity. . . .

Rechy's world again reflects the human condition. Arbitrary structures—religion, political movements, cultural tradition—respond to chaos, but carry with them limitations which, though providing peace of mind, sooner or later restrict even their creators, or crumble on their arbitrary foundations. . . .

Yet Rechy does more than simply disappear headlong into experience; he writes (perhaps another form of surrender), and in his writing the apparent chaos is revealed as hidden, highly structured, complex and at times beautiful order—reflected in the novels' skillfully achieved design and the intricate choreography of the action, especially the hunt scenes—and the real threat to the characters lies in possible expulsion from that life. . . .

Rechy is the extreme writer of Chicano literary space, but, paradoxically, at the very center of the issue, not only because his works employ the deep paradigm, nor because thematically they respond to disintegration, albeit in their own way, but because he raises questions seemingly implicit in many of the others. His works deny the validity of limiting, simplistic answers to life, stripping the facade from social structures to show their arbitrariness and the vulnerability of their participants. He includes the structures of his own minority, and, by extension, those of others. . . . He questions the reality of so-called reality and the validity of old structures in modern life. Yet he rescues images in literature because his faith is in the writing process; ultimately this is the sole structure a writer can offer readers. . . . Rechy can no longer be ignored. . . .

As an extreme, Rechy somehow proves the norm. Chicano literature is a response to chaos, but at its best it rejects limitations, perversely working from and returning to space of nothingness.

> Bruce-Novoa. *Retrospace: Collected Essays on Chicano Literature, Theory, History* (Houston: Arte Publico, 1990), pp. 110–13

Two themes dominate Rechy and Holleran: the irrecoverable nature of past time, and the impenetrable uniqueness of the individual. The first delivers a brooding anxiety about age and death; the second, the will to live life as tenaciously as one must. God's epiphanies are numberless, but time is an abyss, the ache of desire and the need for love pressing. These visceral, gut experiences are the polarities between which Rechy and [Andrew] Holleran navigate—their Scylla and Charybdis. They describe not gay life, but the life of *some* gays, and others, caught on film. A snapshot of a particular time and place; but timeless too. Timeless because it moves the heart and addresses the mind with all the qualities of tragedy. Each depicts with fine writing and deft coloring the worlds of hustlers and scores, sex and pleasure, of desire and the contradictions involved in satisfying it. Of the fleeting time of youth. Of the emptiness of religion. Of the city as substitute for salvation. They sketch the ''culture of narcissism'' and the sex that makes the loneliness at its heart momentarily vanish. The ambiguities of sexuality, the persistent lack of permanency are delineated in a series of ''case studies''; while a false camaraderie, a dissipation of fellowship are the reality of friendship in the ''society of the spectacle.''

Out of this struggle with life and death, without God, Rechy has discovered the cityscapes of night, glowing neon where the spirit is squandered, an ''ice age of the heart,'' endless, insubstantial faces as a substitute for a proper salvation.

> Terry Woods. ''Starless and Black: Alienation in Gay Literature.'' In Mark Lilly, ed. *Lesbian and Gay Writing: An Anthology of Critical Essays* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Pr., 1990), p. 134

Raymund Paredes, in ''The Evolution of Chicano Literature,'' enumerates its various discursive and literary influences. . . . Paredes's study concludes by characterizing Chicana [sic] literature as ''that body of work produced by United States citizens and residents of Mexican descent for whom a sense of ethnicity is a critical part of their literary sensibilities and for whom the portrayal of their ethnic experience is a major concern'' (1982, p. 74). It includes as part of Chicano literature John Rechy's essay ''El Paso del Norte'' but not his novel *City of Night*, ''which is virtually devoid of ethnic content.'' In delineating the terrain of Chicano literature, Paredes's argument stands judgment over who should be in and who outside the Chicano cultural world. The absence of ''ethnic content'' in Rechy's work could, one might argue, in its silence evoke a most interesting relationship between sexual and ethnic self-identity. Most dangerously, in the case of John Rechy—one of the most prolific Chicano novelists—Paredes's argument excludes an already too marginal constituency: gay Chicanos.

As Juan Bruce-Novoa observes in ''Homosexuality and the Chicano Novel'': ''Homosexuals are absent from the Chicano Movement's self image, and their attempts to gain recognition have had little success. Homophobia may not be more prevalent among Chicanos—though some would aver it—but as products of Mexico and the United States, neither of which tolerates gays, Chicanos reflect norms of their wider sociocultural context'' (1988, p. 98). Unintentionally, no doubt, Paredes's argument circumscribes the ''space'' of Chicano literature by opposing homosexuality to ethnicity, suggesting that the literary representation of one realm precludes—or at least takes precedence over—the other. Paredes's essay replicates forms of discursive erasure that Chicanos cannot afford to commit. In its struggle to note the distinguishing generic, linguistic, rhetorical, and thematic marks of Chicano literature, the literary criticism serves to found cultural identity and yet disenfranchise at the same time. The tensions evident in the literary critical articulation of self make manifest the problem encountered by any discourse seeking to erase marginality. While advocating and celebrating a sense of self, Chicano literary criticism effects a disenfranchisement felt strongly among gay and lesbian Chicana/os, among monolingual speakers of English, among the many Chicana writers who were not included among the founding ''fathers'' of the Chicano Renaissance.

> Rafael Perez-Torres. *Movements in Chicano Poetry: Against Myths, against Margins* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1995), pp. 26–27

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REED, Ishmael (1938–)

Blacks and whites, avant-garde and mass culture, politics, even Reed's alma mater, the University of Buffalo, have their turn [in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*]. Features of the Gothic novel superimposed on an already flimsy plot do not help matters much, although the Reverend Eclair Porkchop makes a fine vampire. The attempt to turn Bukka into a revolutionary ten pages from the end, when he accidentally discovers what goes on in the underground vaults of Harry Sam's motel-castle, seems tacked on and insignificant. . . .

In considering the book's stylistic blunders . . . one cannot help but note that the direction of Reed's experiment deserves attention. Perhaps his next book will resemble a sort of third-person Huckleberry Finn, amalgamating many tongues of black and white America. For the moment we have only a disorganized collection of excellent ideas and brilliant but isolated vignettes.

Barbara Joye. *Phylon*. Winter, 1968. p. 411

Although Ishmael Reed's first novel [*The Free-Lance Pallbearers*] is set in a country where the people are obsessed by excrement, its leader is a cannibalistic pederast, and the police and judicial functions are carried out by idiotic brutes against a general citizenry so repulsively indifferent that it seems to deserve them, the book will make you laugh out loud. The plot is thin to invisible, but Reed's here . . . serves as a weird telescope for a society that is terrifying for its violence and passive hypocrisy. Yet somehow hilarious as well. [*The Free-Lance Pallbearers*] succeeds in doing in 155 pages what Norman Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?* swiped valiantly at. If comparisons are to be made, they should be to Burroughs, but this novel is all Mr. Reed's own. Read it.

Sara Blackburn. *The Nation*. Feb. 5, 1968. p. 186

For all the talk of a black aesthetic, few black novelists have broken sharply with the traditional devices of the realistic novel. One writer who departs from such conventions, however, is 31-year-old Ishmael Reed. Reed writes highly visual, surrealistic fantasies—he calls them ''movie books''—set in far-out lands of his imagination.

His first novel, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, uses an explosive combination of straightforward English prose, exaggerated black dialect, hip jargon, advertising slogans and long, howling, uppercase screams to describe the wanderings of young and innocent Bukka Doopeyduk through a mad *1984*-style country called Harry Sam. . . .

Reed's second novel, a ''Hoo-Doo Western'' called *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* . . . is written in the same irreverent vein.

Robert A. Gross. *Newsweek*. June 16, 1969. pp. 96–96C

We come to realize that the Kid [in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*] is Lucifer (no surprise in a book of changes) and that Drag is the church—specifically, organized religion in America. . . . The elements of fragmentation, the puzzling shifts in language that Reed uses so brilliantly, the seemingly anarchic construction of the book are, in fact, part of a strictly disciplined whole. And to leave it at the confrontation between the Negro and the plastic white American is not enough. . . . If you wish, read this book as a comic satire, as black and sassy as Reed himself. But remember that the author also has a reputation as a poet and you should be aware that the structure of his book is as rigid as the poetic meter of the title.

Leonore Fleischer. *Book World*. Aug. 10, 1969. p. 3

Ishmael Reed is a poet. Like LeRoi Jones, he has taken the American language out on a limb and whipped it to within an inch of its life. In so doing he has revitalized the American language with the nitty-gritty idioms of black people's conceptualization of what it means to live in dese new-nited state of merica. As a poet and a novelist, Reed has the imagination of a psychopath who is God, or who is Satan Himself—ghosts, voo-doo, rattlesnakes, weird rites, hoo-doo, superstitions, multiple schizophrenia, beasts, metempsychosis, demons, charms, visions, hallucinations. In fact, the novel is Reed's voo-doo doll. He once said that the novel is the worst literary form God ever visited upon mankind. Reed has risen the novel from a dead doll with pins in it into a living breathing walking talking animal. This is a thing more authentic, more difficult, more dangerous, more human than science can ever achieve. By this I mean Ishmael Reed employs the mumbo-jumbo witch-doctor experimental epistemology of the Afro-American folk heritage in combination with the psychotic semantic categories of the West to achieve a highly original, secular and existential portrait of what is going on, and has gone on, in our daily lives. Reed is not mad, he is supersane; it is America that is mad and, like the other secular existential black writers Reed depicts—no, Reed *explodes*—this madness before our very eyes.

Calvin C. Hernton in *Amistad I*, edited by John A. Williams and Charles F. Harris (Random). 1970. pp. 221–2

[*Mumbo Jumbo*], written with *black* humor, is a satire on the unfinished race between the races in America and throughout history. It is a book of deliberate unruliness and sophisticated incongruity, a dazzling maze of black-and-white history and fantasy, in-jokes and outrages, erudition and superstition. Not only to white readers like myself will the way into and out of this maze be puzzling. For though it's a novel, the author's method is not novelistic. Wholly original, his book is an unholy cross between the craft of fiction and witchcraft.

I don't mean merely that *Mumbo Jumbo* is *about* such mysteries as HooDoo or VooDoo. . . . I mean that it attempts through its deadpan phantasmagoria of a plot, and through the black art of the Magus as storyteller, to achieve the kind of hold on the reader's mind that from ancient times and in primitive contexts has always been associated with the secret Word, the sacred Text.

Alan Friedman. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 6, 1972. p. 1

This is Reed's own myth, a contemporary black folk tale, created especially for our era. In his own distinctive way, Reed blurs the boundaries between pagan mythology, Biblical and secular history, and fiction. The result is a form embodying something more than the sum of its parts. It's the true spiritual history of the black race, black in its emotional tone as well as its form and point of view. Moreover, it illustrates a critically important quality of the black

spirit, its inextinguishability. However important are the forms by which Jes Grew [in *Mumbo Jumbo*] is known and practiced, they are expendable. . . . Jes Grew doesn't die; only its forms can be destroyed. . . . Others who have expressed similar sentiments have sounded sophomoric at best, ill-humored and pugnacious at worst. Reed, however, wins us over by the breadth of his allusions and the seeming inexhaustibility of his imagination.

Jerry H. Bryant. *The Nation*. Sept. 25, 1972. p. 245

Mumbo Jumbo isn't at all concerned with the traditional province of fiction, the registration of individual consciousness. Rather, as in his earlier books . . . Reed opens fictional art to the forms and mythic possibilities of popular culture, pursuing not psychological description but a perspective on history.

He finds his apparatus in our most naïve and childish imaginings. . . .

Reed's satiric imagination, by putting white and black culture together for his own purposes, plays with a hope for something more than a negative and hostile relation between them. But if blacks are to redeem the white soul from its bondage to sterile reason, they must learn uncompromisingly to be themselves. . . .

Reed's is a quick and mocking mind, and I'm not sure how seriously he means his historical myth. But I'm content to read it as I read the ''systematic'' works of Blake and Yeats, not primarily as analysis but as an act of continuous and powerful invention, a demonstration that the imagination, black or white, when released from conventional forms and the idea of a monolithic history, can be wonderfully entertaining and instructive, moment by moment, about the sorry narrowness of our self-understanding and our expectations about art. Ishmael Reed's elsewhere turns out to be right next door, but his news of it is very new indeed.

Thomas R. Edwards. *New York Review of Books*. Oct. 5, 1972. p. 23

Reed's theory of history as a vast paranoid conspiracy of white against nonwhite reminds me of nothing so much as Thomas Pynchon's last novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, in which the heroine stumbles upon a frightening underground postal system, W.A.S.T.E., that has lasted through the centuries and emigrated from Europe to America. Both Reed and Pynchon bolster their theories with a mass of semifacetious pseudoscholarship. Both create characters that are little more than cartoons. Both use the form of the put-on, the joke, to convey a deadly earnest message: That there are vast and inexplicable forces at work behind modern civilization, which turn us into nothing better than cartoon characters; that history itself has gone out of control. Given all that is irrational in the currents of contemporary history, the crackpot-conspiracy theory of one day becomes the working hypothesis of the next. Why, after all, did Sigmund Freud call America ''a big mistake''? Did he know something we don't know? Ishmael Reed's far-out explanation is as good as any.

Andrew Gordon. *Saturday Review*. Nov., 1972. p. 77

With [*Conjure*] Reed, the author of three well-regarded experimental novels, has created an exceptional set of black-oriented poems. They represent a conscious production of an exclusively black aesthetic for American Negroes, which Reed calls ''Neo-Hoo-Doo.'' The longer poems . . . are almost academic in structure and content, but the explicator will have to be thoroughly briefed in Afro-American culture and ghetto life styles. . . . Reed is a more disciplined but no less angry poet than Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) or Don L. Lee. . . .

Robert S. Bravard. *Library Journal*. Dec. 15, 1972. pp. 3992, 3994

''Patarealism,'' a term coined by Ishmael Reed, aptly describes the extravagant absurdities of his two novels, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967) and *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969). Terror, laughter, and anarchy strike in Reed's imagination, which draws on Black experience—phrases like ''crazy dada nigger'' occur in his work—yet refuses the definitions of any society. Elements of madcap violence, hip argot, tall tale, pornography, and ''Hoo-Doo''—Reed's version of African juju magic—abound in his fiction. As for the novel form itself, a character says: ''It can be anything it wants to be, a vaudeville show, the six o'clock news, the mumblings of wild men saddled by demons.''

Ihab Hassan. *Contemporary American Literature* (Ungar). 1973. pp. 172–3

Ishmael Reed is a prolific writer who . . . writes in more than one medium. His novels . . . have already consolidated his reputation as one of those black writers who refuse to be categorized according to the relevance of his theme. He asks no favors of any orthodoxy, but lets his imagination make its bid for the creation of new forms. Yet one cannot fail to notice the craft and discipline with which he controls the natural swing and bounce of his verse.

In his latest collection, *Conjure*, Reed offers us a sharp and provocative contrast in style. If [Derek] Walcott's echoes are those of the classical humanist, grave and formal, Reed's tone and rhythm derive from the militant tradition of the black underground. But his is an unusual brand of militancy; it is much concerned with the politics of language. He argues for a clean, free struggle between the liberating anarchism of the black tongue and the frozen esthetic of a conventional White Power. . . . His verse is distinguished by a fine critical intelligence, and his stance before the wide variety of American life is supremely confident. He can evoke with poetic realism the savagery which shaped the pioneering spirit as well as crystallize the fraudulence at the heart of the ''civilizing'' mission.

George Lamming. *New York Times Book Section*. May 6, 1973. p. 37

Although Ishmael Reed imports an elaborately constituted mythology from Osirian Egypt and ceaselessly invokes West Indian voodoo ritual to legitimize the African strain in his poetry and fiction, his mode of writing for the most part is essentially newfangled American tall-talk refracted through the hyperbolic declamatory style of William Burroughs. ''Neo-Hoo-Doos are detectives of the metaphysical about to make a pinch,'' Reed writes in his new

book of poetry, *Conjure*. ''We have issued warrants for a god arrest. If Jeho-vah reveals his real name he will be released on his own recognizance de-horned and put out to pasture.'' Burroughs' remarkable ability to transform the street idiom of junkies and criminals into a richly metaphorical language, to project a Manichean view of the modern world that imaginatively comprehends its socio-political realities, has had from the start a profound influence on Reed's approach to writing, but the debt is only partial and the difference significant. The ''nova conditions'' Burroughs describes in *The Soft Machine* and *Nova Express* as the terminal strife of the West read differently on Reed's astral charts. . . . The collapsing star which for Burroughs signifies the status of Western civilization is for Reed the energy of a new galaxy in the throes of creation.

Neil Schmitz. *Modern Poetry Studies*. Autumn, 1973. pp. 218–9

[Reed's] new novel, *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, might serve as a textbook on irony. In it he blends paradox, hyperbole, understatement and signifyin' so expertly that you can almost hear a droll black voice telling the tale as you read it.

One of Reed's best satiric methods is the interweaving of fantastic verbal absurdities with the familiar absurdities of everyday life. . . .

The primary targets of Reed's wit are the black revolutionary organizations that sprang up in places like Berkeley in the 1960s. He condemns their use of revolutionary violence, which was at times indistinguishable from old-fashioned crime. The posturing, the rhetoric and the exploitation that sometimes characterized actual movements symbolize the forces of foolishness and evil in Reed's hoodoo drama. . . .

Reed appears deeply concerned with the relationship between the sexes, but on this topic his perspective is frighteningly distorted. Throughout *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* there is joking contempt toward women, particularly black women. When he satirizes the women's movement his originality disappears and he falls back on the tired stereotype of feminists as man-hating dykes. The method for subduing these ''fierce, rough-looking women'' is attack and rape. . . . Reed's views on a difficult problem are antediluvian and for this reader they cloud the entire impact of his work. If he is so insensitive in this area, how can he be so incisive in others? (Can I laugh with a man who seems so hostile toward me?) As a critic I found *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* brilliant. As a black woman I am not nearly so enthusiastic.

Barbara Smith. *New Republic*. Nov. 23, 1974. pp. 53–4

The American search for a usable past began with our first writers. American historians, cultural critics, and artists have repeatedly rewritten our history in response to evolving philosophies and social issues. And novelists, both serious and popular, have followed close behind, infusing fictional human relations with historical reality to cultivate—or to create—myths about our past. The old, tenacious forms of historical fictional either glamorize the past, reinforcing old myths of greatness, or revise history by exposing the lust, greed, despair, or irrationality of ages or men once considered stable, moral, and vital. But although contemporary novelists like Roth, Doctorow, Pynchon, Barth, and Ishmael Reed still mine and recast history, they have renewed and transformed the once-belittled historical novel. These novelists go beyond mere revisionism, questioning the possibility of historical understanding, rejecting the limits of historical reality and even of verisimilitude, exposing the irrelevance of both revering and rejecting the past.

The most recent example of this new kind of historical novel is Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*. Through parody, exaggeration, anachronism, and the juxtaposition of literary myths, Reed transforms the experiences of slavery and the Civil War into comedy. Reed's two previous excursions into the American past, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* and *Mumbo Jumbo*, exploit eras more easily transformed into comedy: the American West and the Twenties. But slavery, the Civil War, the assassination of Lincoln? Although they furnish material for the countless contradictory these of historians, essayists, poets, and novelists, these aspects of our past have always been considered either tragic or epic. However, Ishmael Reed has little use for the romanticism or social realism traditionally associated with the relations of slave and master. And in *Mumbo Jumbo* he rejected serious protest art, and art of subjection, as a form imposed on Black artists by Western civilization. . . .

Reed has made *Flight to Canada* a work of broadly comic satire. . . . Reed's slave masters expose their corruption in their own features and actions; they need no crushed and humiliated slaves to expose their guilt. Because Reed refuses to depict the abject misery and subjection of the slaves, *Flight to Canada* arouses neither sympathy and guilt nor pity and fear. Instead, Reed liberates the material of slave narratives from the form exploited and imposed by the likes of Harriet Beecher Stowe. He demands that his story be read as fiction rather than as bitter reality, and he demands that we consider him a novelist rather than a spokesman.

Linda Shell Bergmann. *Chicago Review*. Fall, 1976, pp. 200–201

Among the important themes in Reed's fiction are the conflict of blacks and whites, the function of the white critic, the impact of the white man and black woman on the black man, the ''field nigger'' as political opportunist and the importance of self-reliance. In each instance the literary folklore involved varies in focus and intensity. In delineating the black/white conflict the ancient African past serves as the basis for explanation while the Afro-American slave experience plays a similar role in explicating the theme of the ''field nigger'' as political opportunist. Similarly, the role of ''LaBas'' varies: it may be fundamental and precise in making the role of necromancy clear as in *Mumbo Jumbo*; or it may be less crucial and more nebulous as in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*. The literary folklore, especially necromancy and LaBas, are therefore variable. . . .

The scope, intent and method of Reed's literary folklore are what separates him from other black writers with similar concerns. His channeling of millennium old tales and history into an enlightening contemporary context is unique. His intent is not a flag-waving affair which asserts that ''my culture is better than yours'' but rather an attempt to let flow the stifled information and accomplishments of third world (nonwhite) cultures. The method is a structured innovation: all is said but it is said in an unpredictable fashion. The structure relates to historical parallels and the unpredictability to Neo-HooDoo.

Despite what I call ''the political uniqueness'' of Reed's literary folklore, his writing is not heavy in a pedantic sense. It is inclusive, but its inclusiveness is presented in a manner that is exciting. The aesthetic approach of Neo-HooDoo is what allows Reed's writing to cover so much ground without being tired.

Norman Harris. *Obsidian*. Spring/Summer, 1979, pp. 41–42, 49

A Christmas Carol, Dr. Strangelove, The Manchurian Candidate, and Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*—all hover as influences over this latest production [*The Terrible Twos*] by Ishmael Reed, the novelist and poet who has been called the best black writer in America today.

Imagine an America—observed during the decade 1980–1990—in which the cities and the economy are collapsing, radical Catholic clergy do battle with Moral Majoritarians, and a top male model elected president to front for wealthy Western businessmen turns into a compassionate neo-socialist. So does Santa Claus (rebelling against the monopoly that owns ''exclusive rights'' to him), emboldened by the terror spread by ''the Nicolaites, a local cult which believes that St. Nicholas is God.''

Reed's mastery of crosscutting techniques and his extravagant inventiveness keep the madness on the boil and help disguise this novel's essential commitment to savage social criticism. It's a jeremiad against ''the bosses, and the subzero people, the heartless Scrooges,'' a surrealistic accusation that America's prosperity was ''built on the bones of blacks and the blood of injuns.'' In its (many) finer moments, this is matchless comic invective. Ishmael Reed is a one-of-a-kind writer.

Bruce Allen. *Saturday Review of Literature*. June, 1982. p. 72

[Ishmael] Reed has been interpreted as the patricidal son of Ralph Ellison, and as a raucous and razzle-dazzle but lightweight satirist. An examination of Reed's literary endeavor in the context of others struggling with the problematics of control, however, shows that Reed is more intellectually impressive than his critical reputation would suggest. His vision, though inscribed in satiric shorthand, is indeed coherent, and he challenges the structures of control with more of a solution than do his fellow control visionaries. He suggests a way of conceiving of life and society that could reroute the head-long Western (or American) rush toward apocalypse. . . .

The critique of America is flashy and is even compelling to readers disturbed by inequities in the country's treatment of its citizens. Reed's contribution to this strain in American thought becomes evident only when one looks at all his novels together. Examined individually, they are disparate and variably successful; however, the limitations of any one signify little in the series of hallucinatory portraits of America's soul. Each might be likened to a séance in which Reed depicts America as seen from the Hoodoo spirit world, much as [Thomas] Pynchon portrays America from the other side, [Kathy] Acker from a dreamworld, and [William S.] Burroughs through a drug vision. The evils Reed attacks are not just African-American problems; his focus on control demonstrates that he belongs to a group of bitter satirists—female and male, black and white—whose experience with cultural lies appalls them. Their artistic violence aims at breaking through to vantages beyond those of ordinary social and literary consciousness. Such perspectives, they imply, reveal truths normally ignored by privileged members of society. Those ugly truths, not the bourgeois self-image that the contented have cultivated to protect their own comfort, are the reality.

Kathryn Hume. ''Ishmael Reed and the Problematics of Control.'' *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*. May 1993, pp. 507, 516

ZAMIR: There are certain narrative strategies and thematic preoccupations in your work which are also present, in different forms, in the work of [William S.] Burroughs and other contemporary American authors such as Clarence Major, Gerald Vizenor, Charles Wright, and Thomas Pynchon. This configuration seems to me to be at least as fruitful and important for reading your work as placing it accurately within the rich and diverse Afro-American cultural traditions. How do you see some of the similarities and differences between your writing and that of Burroughs, and some of the other writers named here?

REED: There may be similarities in the structures we use, but to say that I was influenced by these writers is probably incorrect. If anything, I would suggest that critics look at *Mumbo Jumbo*, Norman Mailer's *Ancient Evenings*, and Burroughs's *The Western Lands*, and see perhaps that they were influenced by me.

ZAMIR: A few years ago, in a workshop interview edited by Lee Bartlett, you criticized what you saw as an increasingly elitist and hermetic tendency in contemporary and modernist poetry. You say: ''I feel that the primary problem in American poetry today is the great chasm between the poet and the reader. Poets seem to be writing for themselves, or other poets, or tenure, or whatever. But their reasons have little to do with communicating. I just have no patience for that any more, to try and explicate a poem by a writer who thinks he's Plato.'' You said in the same interview that you were becoming more interested in song writing and that the forms of your poetry had become more simplified (which is not to say simplistic!) in recent years. Yet your fiction remains as dense and complex as ever, often with material that may require research and explication. Why is that? Do you see a contradiction here?

REED: I think that there is an elitist and hermetic tendency in contemporary and modernist poetry and I feel that the primary problem in American poetry today is the great chasm between poets and readers. And I think that my songs led me to this conclusion. I really felt that I was communicating when I walked into a black restaurant, and one of my songs which was set to music by Carla Bley, ''The Wardrobe Master of Paradise,'' was on the radio and people were enjoying it. I think soap operas are doing the same thing. They communicate to large numbers of people.

I don't know if my novels are all that complex. I think my novels have become more simplified over the years.

ZAMIR: Do you see a parallel here, apart from the obvious ideological differences between you, with Baraka's frustration with concepts of avant-garde aesthetics and poetics derived from Olson and the Black Mountain poets, and his subsequent search for more popular forms?

REED: I just don't think that I've been influenced all that much by modernism. I've been interested in the *forms* they use, the

discontinuity, but many years ago I discovered that these ideas were not originated by modernists. I think that avant-garde movements tend to take themselves too seriously and believe that they are originating forms which are, in fact, ancient.

REED: Well, here again, we ran up against the prevailing opinion of what black writers ought to be doing. Responding to Cecil Brown's play *Kali*, and my *Savage Wilds*, which I produced along with Ed Bullins's *The Electronic Nigger* at the Black Repertory Theatre in Berkeley, a boomer critic said that Cecil and I were trying to blame the situation of the black males in both plays on aggressive women and the white male power structure. This is one of these white, male California critics, a boomer, who prefers his black men to be Black Panther prisoners, and heroin dealers, whom he and his kind romanticize. I don't even use corny expressions like ''the white male power structure.'' All of the people in my play were ruthless and aggressive, not just the women. The women in the play treat the men below them with contempt, but Uncle Tom to the men who are their bosses.

ZAMIR: So your sense of theater has developed along the line suggested by the title of your new book of essays, that ''writin' is fightin'''?

REED: We use our plays, novels, and other writings as a way of talking back.

Shamoon Zamir. ''An Interview with Ishmael Reed.'' *Callaloo*. Fall, 1994, pp. 1137–38, 1150–51

Airing Dirty Laundry is a compilation of occasional essays spanning the period 1978 to 1993, many of which will be familiar to Reed's dedicated readers. Of the previously unpublished essays, ''Airing Dirty Laundry,'' ''Is There a Black-Jewish Feud?'' and several others provide the connective tissue for the collection. In his preface, Reed briefly traces the conversion in his thinking about social pathology, triggered by his angry reaction to Pete Hamill's 1988 *Esquire* essay, ''Letter to a Black Friend,'' a scathing critique of the behavior of ''the black underclass.''

Reed's argument, the one which sets the tone for *Airing Dirty Laundry*, is that the American media establishment has designated the Black community as the surrogate for the accumulated social pathologies of American life, freely and maliciously airing its dirty laundry at the same time that it indulges and reassures its white constituents by individualizing their problems, or sweeping them into the corner. Reed's solution? Let it all hang out. Hold the social pathologies of every social, racial, and ethnic group: suburban whites, Asian Americans, Latinos, Jews, Irish, Italians, etc. up to public view. This full disclosure of the real depths of American social misery, Reed argues, may provide a better basis for a new social consensus in this country.

Along the way, Reed takes well-aimed shots at many of his favorite satiric targets. . . . At the same time, he castigates Henry Louis Gates, Jr., for his well publicized views on Black anti-Semitism, attacks ''white media feminists'' for their role in the Clarence Thomas hearings, and portrays Mike Tyson as the latest victim of America's perennial quest for a ''great white hope.'' Not easily pigeonholed, Reed often shoots from the hip, even as he documents his claims with numerous and compelling examples from the national press. But throughout these essays, he needles, jabs, irritates, and provokes—chipping away at the forces which stand in the way of the multicultural America he continues to fiercely advocate.

James A. Miller. *Tikkun*. March/April, 1995, p. 85

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REED, John (1887–1920)

Reed's real chance came when the Metropolitan Magazine sent him to Mexico. All his second-rate theory and propaganda seemed to fall away, and the public discovered that whatever John Reed could touch or see or smell he could convey. The variety of his impressions, the resources and color of his language seemed inexhaustible. . . .

Reed has no detachment, and is proud of it, I think. By temperament he is not a professional writer or reporter. He is a person who enjoys himself. Revolution, literature, poetry, they are only things which hold him at times, incidents merely of his living. Now and then he finds adventure by imagining it, oftener he transforms his own experience. He is one of those people who treat as serious possibilities such stock fantasies as shipping before the mast, rescuing women, hunting lions, or trying to fly around the world in an aeroplane. He is the only fellow I know who gets himself pursued by men with revolvers, who is always once more just about to ruin himself.

Walter Lippmann. *New Republic*. Dec. 26, 1914. p. 15

He is content to let the narrative [of *Ten Days That Shook the World*] flow on naturally and quietly, welded together by the hammer of relevant fact after relevant fact, in short paragraphs which frequently end in a tiny row of dots, a happy incorporation of the technique of Wellsian suggestiveness. Often he includes proclamations of the various parties and statements and speeches of the party leaders in the text itself, although the more important of the documentary material is included in an appendix which historians of the future will find as invaluable as the living observers of today. The story does not lack emotional thrill because of this deliberately chosen method of unemphatic presentation. If anything, it gains. Mr. Reed has taken only ten days of the Bolshevik Revolution—the vital ten days—with short glimpses before them and few after. Consequently there is some inevitable repetition. But the effect is cumulative. A picture of the state of mind which made the Bolsheviki uprising inevitable emerges gradually, with the outlines

of the picture becoming sharper and sharper, until finally it stands forth etched with unforgetable definiteness.

Harold Stearns. *Dial*. March 22, 1919. p. 302

No ray of sunshine, no drop of foam, no young animal, bird, or fish, and no star, was as happy as that boy was. If only we could keep him so, we might have a poet at last who would see and sing nothing but joy. Convictions were what I was afraid of. I tried to steer him away from convictions, that he might play; that he might play with life; and see it all, love it all, live it all; tell it all; that he might be it all; but all, not any one thing. And why not? A poet is more revolutionary than any radical. Great days they were, or rather nights, when the boy would bang home late and wake me up to tell me what he had been and seen that day; the most wonderful thing in the world. Yes. Each night he had been and seen the most wonderful thing in the world.

He wrote some of those things. He became all of those things. He fell head over heels in love with every single one of those most wonderful things: with his job; with his friends; with labor; with girls; with strikes; with the I.W.W.; with socialism; with the anarchists; with the bums in the Bowery; with the theatre; with God and Man and Being.

Lincoln Steffens. *The World of Lincoln Steffens*, edited by Ella Winter and Herbert Shapiro (Hill and Wang). 1962. p. 236. [1920]

John Reed was so active in radical politics as to have too little time left for poetry; but in this place it is proper to record that his neglect of the art was accident and not intention. Like Jack London, he was always dreaming of tomorrow's masterpiece. Knowing himself for a poet, he hoped to prove his vocation by many poems worthy to endure; but life was so exciting, and the social struggle in these States and Mexico, in Finland, Russia—everywhere—so tempting to a fighting radical, that poetry had to wait for the leisure which—alas!—never came.

Harriet Monroe. *Poetry*. Jan., 1921. pp. 208–9

The glorious Jack turned his poetry into action, and died in the Russia which has honored him with a monument his own land should have erected. Most of our radicals seem pale pamphleteers and parlor intellectuals in comparison. It was Reed's secret ambition to return to poetry after the battle. He went down at a time when some of his Manhattan allies, wistfully yearning for freedom, began writing popular novels and Hollywood scenarios.

Alfred Kreymborg. *Our Singing Strength* (Coward-McCann). 1929. p. 469

Jack Reed I began to know for the first time; he had been away much of the four years I had been in New York. He was a great, husky, untamed youth of immense energies and infantine countenance, who had helped Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Arturo Giovannitti organize the Paterson strike, had been arrested and jailed there, and then had organized the magnificent Paterson Strike Pageant in Madison Square Garden; he had been a war-correspondent with Villa in Mexico, and then in Europe reporting the World War, and then in Russia. Along the way he tossed off beautiful poems, and poetic plays, and stories full of a profound zest for life. He was adventurer and artist, playboy and propagandist.

Floyd Dell. *Homecoming* (Farrar and Rinehart). 1933. p. 397

It is no wonder that *Ten Days That Shook the World* is a great book. John Reed knew how to use his eyes: *Insurgent Mexico* had shown that. He knew all the tricks that a good newspaperman knows, and could think in terms of headlines as well as in terms of color and romance. And he had learned, slowly and resistingly, the value of accuracy and documentation, learned it at Ludlow and Bayonne and in the fight against war. He was perfectly trained for the task of reporting a revolution. But there was something more than that: he was a participant as well as an observer, and his book was a weapon as well as a report, all the more effective for its restraint and precision. In those three months that he spent bent over a typewriter, surrounded by his great piles of papers and pamphlets, he knew what he was doing: the world must be shaken again and again. . . . Wherever Reed spoke to radical groups, he found that *Ten Days* was regarded as a kind of handbook of revolution. What did he care if Charles Edward Russell damned it in the New York *Times*? Passed from hand to hand, and read till the pages fell apart, the book was what he had wanted it to be—a weapon. ''You are correct,'' he said, in his letter to the *Times*, ''when you call information about Russia Bolshevik propaganda, for the great majority of persons who learn the truth about Russia become convinced Bolsheviki.'' The statement may have been extravagant, but it would not be easy to compute the number of persons whose interest in Communism dates from the reading of *Ten Days That Shook the World*.

Granville Hicks. *John Reed* (Macmillan). 1936. pp. 325–6, 341

John Reed . . . was a swell bourgeois kid in a pioneering, well-to-do family out in young Portland, Oregon. He had a grandmother who indulged an aristocratic waywardness; and as we all know now, a brilliant socialite father who was an idle dude till called by a muckraker to a real job. He sent his boy, the revolutionary-to-be, to swell schools and to Harvard; the very worst. And the boy was not a ''good student'' except where his mind was interested and his muscles engaged. Then he became a pretty good sport and an eager student in a few lines, all for social success in the exclusive clubs, in the swell sets. When he came to New York, Jack was nothing but a bundle of fine nerves, bulging energy, overweening vanity and trembling curiosity, with an egotistical ambition to distinguish himself as a poet.

Lincoln Steffens. *Lincoln Steffens Speaking* (Harcourt). 1936. p. 309

Superficially Jack seemed the playboy *in excelsis*. . . . Only a few of us knew the slowly maturing man. This was the other Jack Reed, the sensitive young night-wanderer, the interpreter of Bowery dives and bread-lines, who wrote, ''It didn't come to me from my books that the workers produced all the wealth of the world, which went to those who did not earn it.'' This was the probing realist, the

disciple of Lincoln Steffens, who gave Jack his first assignment on a periodical with a national circulation; it was the propagandist off-guard, the recorder of heroic defeats, the poet. . . .

That was the Jack Reed I knew—at least that was part of him. The boisterousness and the quiet passion for truth, the insurgency and the integrity, never quite fused until his last phase (the real, not the romantic, revolutionist) when he wrote his masterpiece *Ten Days That Shook the World*.

Louis Untermeyer. *From Another World* (Harcourt). 1939. pp. 58, 62

We were carrying realism so far in those days that it walked us right out of our books. We had a certain scorn of books. We wanted to live our poetry. Jack Reed did especially. His comradeship with Louise Bryant was based on a joint determination to smash through the hulls of custom and tradition and all polite and proper forms of behavior, and touch at all times and all over the earth the raw current of life. It was a companionship in what philistines call adventure, a kind of gypsy compact. And that will to live, to be themselves in the world, and be real, and be honest, and taste the whole tang of it, was more to them than any writing. It was more to them than any particular practical undertaking, even a revolution. It was as though they had agreed to inscribe at least two audacious, deep, and real lives in the book of time and let the gods call it poetry.

Max Eastman. *Heroes I Have Known* (Simon). 1942. p. 213

Reed was elated when the Bolsheviki, activated by their determined and dominating leader Lenin, struck for political power. He tried to be everywhere at once, and shuttled between the two opposing forces in his wish to observe every move on both sides. He was being educated fast in the making of a revolution—by the only method he was able to assimilate: concrete action. When Lenin refused to compromise at a time when concession seemed inevitable, Reed was quicker to grasp his great generalship than many of the seasoned Bolsheviki. . . . Aware that the revolution was shaking the whole world, he assiduously collected data, figures, leaflets, newspapers, reports—every scrap of documentary evidence which recorded the progress of the epochal event. He was determined to record the greatest social cataclysm in modern history so faithfully and factually as to preclude any hostile attempt at distortion. That he was successful in his undertaking became evident after the publication in 1919 of *Ten Days That Shook the World*—still the best one-volume account of the Bolshevik Revolution.

Charles Madison. *Critics and Crusaders* (Holt). 1942. pp. 521–2

Would he have been able to survive the fierce rivalries and intrigues in Moscow? Four years after his death, the work that was his greatest monument, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, became one of the storm centers in the struggle between Stalin and Trotsky. On one point in connection with the Bolshevik uprising of 1917, Trotsky had found confirmation in Reed's book. Stalin counter-attacked by charging that Reed had been ''remote'' from the Bolshevik party, that he had picked up hostile gossip from enemies, and had spread one of their ''absurd rumors.'' It is hard to imagine Reed rallying to the defense of Stalin, who was virtually unknown to him in 1920 and who was moreover allied with Zinoviev in 1924 against Trotsky, whom Reed knew intimately and had portrayed as one of the greatest heroes of the Russian Revolution.

Death took him prematurely, not only as a human being but as a political symbol. The mystery of John Reed is what he would have done in the last act of his own life's drama. No one really knows, and everyone has written it differently in his or her own image.

Theodore Draper. *The Roots of American Communism* (Viking). 1957. pp. 292–3

His sketches and stories written between 1913 and 1918—scenes from the Mexican revolution, New York Bowery life, the war in the Balkans—are sharply observed (he had a wide-ranging and retentive reporter's eye) and set down in the impressionistic or expressionistic manner of Stephen Crane. If they lack Crane's precision, his ''long logic'' and sad irony, and if they are sentimental and romantic where Crane is not, they reveal a sensitive and generously impulsive young man who sympathizes with the down-and-out. A touch of O. Henry can be detected here, a touch of the young Dos Passos. Reed, the gifted and upper-class young man has not yet identified himself completely or unself-consciously with the proletariat. He is still luxuriating in the colors and the paradoxes of the big city. His bums, prostitutes, revolutionaries, capitalists, Mexicans, Serbs are still ''materials'' to be exploited for their journalistic possibilities.

Daniel Aaron. *Writers on the Left* (Harcourt). 1961. p. 39

In fact, the outstanding pieces of writing in the book [*Echoes of Revolt:* The Masses *1911–1917*] are John Reed's story of the famous textile strike in Paterson and his funny accounts of his run-ins with the cops. If only to remind us of what a first-rate journalist John Reed was, *The Masses* would be worth resurrecting, particularly since the conservatism of the last few decades has tended to bury not only the radical ideas but the radical figures of the past.

William Phillips. *New York Review of Books*. March 9, 1967. p. 8

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REXROTH, Kenneth (1905–1982)

At his best, he is a simple-minded man, with a liking for outdoors, in particular the high Sierra, and a decent reverence for nature and the stars. Of these he writes well; his observation is direct and immediate, leading him to the true line—''The stone is clean as light, the light steady as stone.'' . . . Mr. Rexroth's other aspect, the

erudite indoor ponderer over many and difficult texts is less deserving of encouragement. . . . For his poetry's sake he would be well advised . . . to beat out of his head the idea that . . . abstractions, whether simple or involute, are the serviceable material of poetic art.

Rolfe Humphries. *New Republic*. Aug. 12, 1940. p. 221

Rexroth owes a great deal to the early Ezra Pound. Imagism, D. H. Lawrence . . . and the Chino-Japanese lyricists are other discernible influences. . . . Which is not to say that Rexroth is not Rexroth. He has made a style, and an instantly recognizable one, out of the most tenuous elements. But its classicism, the rather self-conscious sensuality expressed in an equally self-conscious avoidance of rhetoric, is not what makes the poetry come to life. This spark is provided by observation, the delight in what used to be called Nature, and the choice of the appropriate word to express that delight.

Selden Rodman. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. May 7, 1950. p. 22

Rexroth is one of the leading craftsmen of the day. There is in him no compromise with the decayed line of past experience. His work is cleanly straightforward. The reek of polluted Shakespeare just isn't in it, or him. . . . As verse, reading them through, the plays (in *Beyond the Mountain*) are a delight to me for the very flow of words themselves. The pith is there, don't mistake me, and there with a jolt to it (in the very line, I want to make it clear) that goes well below the surface. But the way of the writing itself is the primary attraction. It palls, at times, I acknowledge it, but that is the defect of the method. It does not falsify. It is a feat of no mean proportions to raise the colloquial tone to lines of tragic significance.

William Carlos Williams. *New York Times Book Section*. Jan. 28, 1951. p. 5

Anything Kenneth Rexroth writes is worth reading. He has a directness, a virile imaginative power, a seeming self-sufficiency rare among contemporary poets. As it does upon all men so the law of compensation operates upon him, and Rexroth's virtues as poet are liable also to exhibit overdoses of flat prosiness, traces of immature exhibitionism in the virile power, and occasional slapdash carelessness in the self-sufficiency. But take him by and large, he is one of our contemporary poets whose work is always interesting to read. (If that sounds like mild praise, such is not my intention: consider how seldom one can apply it.)

Winfield Townley Scott. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Feb. 1, 1953. p. 8

It is as though in Rexroth we had a Mark Twain who had grown up; who, without yielding an iota of his sense of the absurd and the pitiful, had discarded the clown's motley for the darker dress of the comic philosopher; and who had miraculously been endowed with the power of making poetry. This account (*The Dragon and the Unicorn*) of Rexroth's travels in England, Wales, France, Italy, and so on operates on many levels of which the surface one—narrative, anecdote, description—though the most entertaining, is the least ponderable. It is an indictment of society. It is an indictment of—well, not so much what America is doing to Europe, as what the whole of Western civilization is doing to itself. The *J'accuse*! is unanswerable.

Dudley Fitts. *New Republic*. Feb. 9, 1953. p. 19

Rexroth has invented a form with some help from Pound and Williams of short lines without rhyme. It is hard as prose and lithe as lyric. The combination, with an individualistic and controlled rhythm, makes it possible for the author to sustain his matter indefinitely.

The perfection of this new medium is striking. It enables Rexroth to express his most subtle philosophical generalizations, his strongest passions, the multifarious nature of his ideas with a kind of absolute accuracy. The lines are hard and clear, precise and lean, with continuous tensile strength and nothing fuzzy.

Richard Eberhart. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 15, 1953. p. 25

I, for one, no longer object to this kind of plain, tight metrical practice as much as I did when discovering the great verbal musicians of our age. It has a good deal of variety of its own and is as essential a medium for his feeling as Cummings' syntactical whoopla for his, or Stevens' whimsical extravagance for his. If Rexroth sells short the more elaborate traditions, he does so consciously, and with a born affinity for other traditions no less important to the health of poetry. Rexroth's California, like Winters' and Jeffers', is a tradition in itself, a well-loved fastness from which a poet can hurl transcontinental thunderbolts at anything and everything that gets between him and the sun.

R. W. Flint. *New Republic*. Feb. 18, 1957. p. 19

The poetry of self-exploration, which usually comes early, came late in Rexroth's writing career. It is retrospective in character. . . . Elegies and epistles. Memories of his first wife, Andrée, who died young. Reliving their love in memory, trying to bridge the sense of separation with unmailable letters. . . . Trying to relate the personal experience to the social experience. . . . Trying to convince himself that in abandoning the ''social'' poem . . . or the ''public speech'' . . . he was still performing the function of the social poet. . . . And arriving at the ''religious anarchism'' which he would have us believe has been ''the point of view . . . in all my work'' from the beginning.

Lawrence Lipton. *Poetry*. June, 1957. pp. 173–4

Kenneth Rexroth is the strongest of the West Coast anarchist poets because he is a good deal more than a West Coast anarchist poet. He is a man of wide cultivation and, when he is not too busy shocking the bourgeois reader. . . , a genuine poet. If fate had made Rexroth a Mormon or a Rhode Island Republican lawyer, he would still be able to write excellent poems. . . . Almost everything I have ever read by Rexroth has been worth reading, even when he was indulging himself, even when the piece was only half-finished, and even when he was both wrong and wrongheaded.

M.L. Rosenthal. *The Nation*. Sept. 28, 1957. pp. 199–200

The fineness of Kenneth Rexroth's *In Defense of Earth* depends on several virtues which are rare in this year but which are apparent in almost every one of the Rexroth poems: a lyric-minded-ness that has been prepared by many disciplines to summon up its music; a learning that eats the gifts of the world, knowing . . . how many cultures must be drawn on to make human fare; and that quality which has been talked about so much in speaking of Kenneth Rexroth and of those he has known in San Francisco: rage. . . . There is little enough control around anywhere this year, and less commitment. The sound of commitment comes through as the voice of anger. . . . Kenneth Rexroth is dealing with the plans of women and men in these magnificent poems, which are harsh, full of grace and certainty and grief: poems of the mountain nights.

Muriel Rukeyser. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 9, 1957. p. 15

Rexroth's poetry is in a much older tradition than that of American individualist ecstasy, which he shares in to some extent with Whitman, Hart Crane, and William Carlos Williams. His main tradition is a less provincial one than that, a less strident and ambitious one than that, and one much less prone to artificial supercharging of the sort given it recently by the so-called ''Beat'' poets. I don't know quite how to name it, except to call it the *personal* or *humane* tradition of lyric poetry—from the tragedy and passion and humor of the late Roman and Mediaeval lyric poets to the pathos and sweetness and dignity of the classic Japanese. Perhaps I am only saying that Rexroth is a fine universal lyric poet whose work has affinities with much of the best lyric poetry of the past. He is no barbaric yawper, as I had always believed. . . .

Perhaps the truly essential Rexroth is found in the love poems. Almost all of his good poems could be said to be love poems. From the sweetly reserved translations of Chinese and Japanese poems, to Rexroth's own intense, free-flowing poems, the theme is love. Love—the recognition of mortality, the turning of the seasons and the great, silently commentative drift of the constellations overhead, and the stepping forth into full, intense, imaginative reality of mortal persons, lover, wife, child, and friend.

Richard Foster. *Minnesota Review*. Spring, 1962. pp. 378, 381

We are likely to approach this book [*An Autobiographical Novel*] thinking of Rexroth as ''the last of the great Bohemians,'' associating him with the new apology for jazz and its marriage to poetry, remembering his splendid renderings of Japanese and Chinese short poems as part of the revival of Zen, even considering him a kind of uneasy father to the post-1955 Beat Renaissance—in short, to regard him not only as a veteran swinger but as a contemporary, whatever his nominal age. Yet the forces that cut him off from certain key experiences of his own generation have left him utterly disapproving of, if not entirely isolated from, the contemporary scene. . . .

For whatever the blindnesses of *An Autobiographical Novel*, it is a fascinating record of a world which, even if it once existed, can scarcely be credited any more: the world of the isolated provincial Bohemia where the second-rate, embarrassed by no great talents, can live out the parable of the freedom of art, in a way that it is hard to live it out in great centers or in the presence of the supremely gifted.

Leslie Fiedler. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. March 6, 1966. p. 10

Being a skeptical and conservative fellow, I couldn't help wondering whether Mr. Rexroth was laying it all on a bit thick [in *An Autobiographical Novel*]. So, as we happen to live in the same town, I called on him and asked him bluntly if he was a liar. He said no, he wasn't, and went on to tell me several stories that he'd left out of the book. During an evening of delightful and rambling conversation, he told me several things about my home town in England which I didn't know, including the name of the family who ran the place back in Tudor times and some details about the rood screen in the cathedral. On the basis of this and other aspects of our conversation, I was obliged to conclude that Mr. Rexroth did experience all the events he describes. He himself maintains that the variety was only possible because the social structure in the West was then so open and because it was easy to drift into what would now be much more tightly guarded groups.

As an account of that free-swinging period, Rexroth's reminiscences make valuable social history. One reviewer has castigated him for arrogance, but I consider that unfair. Writing as one of nature's onlookers, I salute him for his energy, for the catholicity of his interests, and for his formidable memory.

Sarel Eimerl. *The Reporter*. May 19, 1966. p. 62

Reading through all of Kenneth Rexroth's shorter poems is a little like immersing oneself in the literary history of the last 40 years; for Rexroth experimented with almost all of the poetic techniques of the time, dealt, at least in passing, with all of its favorite themes.

One moves through imagist lyrics, Chinese and Japanese forms, surreal constructions, poems intended to be read against the improvisations of jazz combos, other poems intended to be sung to the tune of folk ballads, poems influenced by Apollinaire and poems that influenced, one assumes, Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg and Corso. In a great many of the poems, Rexroth makes clear just how he stands on social issues. . . .

And yet to read Rexroth in this way is to miss the heart of the man. For in spite of all of his restless literary experimentation and his obvious concern with the way of the world, he finds very early a technique that he returns to again and again—a rather flat statement, usually in short lines and very often in short poems; and a subject matter that can belong to no one else: himself and the women he has loved—his mother, his wives and, in recent poems, his daughters.

John Unterecker. *New York Times Book Section*. July 23, 1967. p. 8

Kenneth Rexroth has always written poetry in a crystalline, ingratiating style. His poems have an inviting ease and grace, a naturalness that was bound to be welcomed by readers who had grown impatient with the insupportable prolixity of so much modern poetry. But Rexroth's poems have become sadly predictable in recent years. All the saying is in the same key; there is little range or breadth of vision. A genial, meandering voice delicately, if wearily, coasts over the surfaces of things, of thoughts, mildly murmuring in rooms of his dream where he has come to feel too much at home for his own comfort, or for ours. . . . It is a pious poetry, a respectable and dignified poetry of deep sanctity, but alas, a poetry that

conspicuously shuts out all trace of the darker being, the rowdy, earthy, dazzling personality that launched the San Francisco literary ''renaissance'' over a decade ago and continues to electrify his critical works today. One wonders, in vain, why Rexroth seems to have trapped himself early on in a poetics which narrowly restricts itself to a mere corner of his experience.

Laurence Lieberman. *Poetry*. April, 1969. p. 42

Although there is clearly development in Rexroth's work from its beginnings to the present, it is a qualified development. Early poems are tortured in syntax, heavily laden with the terminology and perspectives of science. Some of these, influenced by ''literary cubism''—for example, ''Fundamental Disagreement with Two Contemporaries,'' ''Into the Shandy Westerness''—are more thoroughly fragmentary than any discussed here. These characteristics are soon transformed from general style to occasional device; the clearly defined image, the terse philosophical statement become dominant modes. ''Leaving L'Atelier-Aix-en-Provence,'' for example, one of Rexroth's best imagistic poems, comes not from the period when Imagists were dominant, but from ''Godel's Proof, New Poems 1965.'' These changes, however, are not dramatic; what is dominant in one period is usually present, or at least latent, in the others. Themes vary even less. Of course, contemporary events in the world at large, and in the poet's own life, are reflected in his poems; but the camping trips to the mountains, the concern with woods and stars, the sharp contrasts of the city, are present throughout, as is Rexroth's involvement in the human condition and his wish to order experience.

In one area, though, there is important change; Rexroth has never stopped experimenting with rhythms, which not surprisingly are crucial to the success of his poems. Here his work is most vulnerable; here his successes, when they come, are most striking.

Karl Malkoff. *Southern Review*. Spring, 1970. p. 578

Rexroth . . . approaches poetry as a total organic process—visionary, communicative, sacramental—in which no aspect is extrinsic: all actuality is part of that process of creation. He is by no means indifferent to prosody and other formal considerations; he is, actually, Classical in his precision. But prosody is subordinate to vision. Poetry turns out to be not an imitation of life but a state of being alive. It is not merely artifice or invention, not primarily a formal, verbal construction, nor an instrument for instruction and pleasure. It is not a means to an end but an end in itself—and not art for art's sake, but being for being's sake. Nor is it simply the expression of ideas and feelings, conscious or unconscious; and it is not regarded by Rexroth as the product of ''objective'' (biological or social) or ''subjective'' forces (such as intellect or imagination). Traditional dualisms between life and poetry, poetry and poet, poet and community dissolve in his transcendent view of creative process.

In theory and practice Rexroth is akin to such visionary poets as William Blake, W. B. Yeats, and D. H. Lawrence; like Walt Whitman, the American poet with whom he has the most in common, he is ''a kosmos.''

Morgan Gibson. *Kenneth Rexroth* (Twayne). 1972. pp. 21–2

[*An Autobiographical Novel* is] the detailed account of his first twenty-one years by a man who appears to have total recall of almost everything that has happened to him. It is easy to see why Kenneth Rexroth was regarded almost with reverence by a whole generation of West Coast poets, for he had exemplified in his youth their idea that all life is movement and that all movement should be free. . . .

An Autobiographical Novel is a wonderfully entertaining book. It is also a specifically American odyssey, which has no counterpart in any English life of the period. . . .

There are occasions when one feels that a later Rexroth is speaking for the youthful one, as when he says that at the age of nineteen or twenty he had ''begun to feel that unedited Wyatt was better than Surrey, and that Marsden [sic] was better than Beaumont and Fletcher.'' It may be true, but is very surprising to be told that Wyndham Lewis had ''a greater influence on Chicago painting in those years'' (the very early 1920s) ''than did the major Cubists and Expressionists,'' and when he adds that Lewis was ''never a purely abstract painter,'' and that he used mostly a ''color organization based on crimson and dark green,'' it seems that he can have seen little of Lewis's early work. There are other minor mistakes, and one feels that if dates had been given more might be evident. The title also is a little puzzling. Does it mean that passages in the book are deliberately invented? One would prefer not to think so.

When the words of reservation have been said, however, this remains a fine book, illuminating both about the author and the period in which he grew up. Kenneth Rexroth is a genial polymath (he has translated poetry in six languages) ''who is also a bohemian and a mystic, a scholar and at times a bit of a bum.'' It is not likely that he will ever be widely regarded in England as an important poet, but nobody could read this autobiography without feeling that he is an admirable man.

Julian Symons. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. March 25, 1977, p. 332

His work for 40 years has moved among his passions for the flesh, for human justice and for the natural world. He integrates these loves in the long poems, and sometimes in briefer ones. *The Signature of All Things* may be the best of all. It is the strength of Rexroth's language that it proscribes nothing. Starting from his reading in a Christian mystic (Jacob Boehme, 1575–1624), he writes vividly of the natural world, he refers to *Pilgrim's Progress*, he ranges out into the universe of stars and focuses back upon the world of heifers and minute phosphorescent organisms. It is a poetry of experience and observation, of knowledge—and finally a poetry of wisdom. Nothing is alien to him.

Rexroth's characteristic rhythm moves from the swift and urgent to the slow and meditative, remaining continually powerful; his line hovers around three accents most deployed over seven or eight syllables. It is remarkable how little his line has changed over 40 years, in a world of changing poetic fashion. . . .

In temperament and idea Rexroth is close to D.H. Lawrence, about whom he wrote his first major essay, in 1947; but Lawrence's best poems take off from Whitman's line—and Rexroth's prosody is as far from Whitman's as it can get. Perhaps there is a bit of William Carlos Williams in his enjambed lines; maybe Louis Zukofsky. We could say, throwing up our hands, that he is a

synthesis of Tu Fu, Lawrence and Mallarmé. To an unusual extent Rexroth has made Rexroth up.

> Donald Hall. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 23, 1980, p. 9

Kenneth Rexroth's life was surely a tissue of contradictions. In his personal relationships he professed great love for women in general, and for his mother, wives, and daughters in particular. And yet the women married to him were forced to accept his premise that it was proper for him to dedicate himself first and finally to his art, everything else being secondary. He refused to be controlled or confined by the constraints of a regular job, nor did he adhere to the conventions of a middle-class marriage. A wife of his had to endure sexual infidelity, verbal and intermittent physical abuse, and the jealous rage of a man who could not take what he dished out. But he immortalized them in some of the most exquisite love poems in the English language, and became frantic when threatened by their departure. He insisted that his daughters be photographed for the cover of his *Collected Shorter Poems*, which contains many examples of his pride and delight in fatherhood. He passed on to them a lasting love for art, culture, and nature, and endowed them with a profound worldliness. But too frequently his behaviour—in both small and large ways—reflected a paradoxical detachment, especially in the case of Katharine, about whose paternity at one time he expressed doubts. . . .

He was Delia Rexroth's only child and because her marriage had periods of turmoil, he became the great object of her attention and affection without competition. She died when he was eleven, which encouraged an idealized memory of her—that no other woman seemed capable of replacing. More over, he felt betrayed and abandoned by her early death.

Rexroth's public behavior was also puzzling. He extended warmth and hospitality to countless younger poets, encouraging them to pursue their art and to resist a lifestyle that left them little freedom. He put the weight of his influence behind many of these writers, whose reputation in several instances would later outshine his. Others can recall the sound advice he would give them about establishing their status as conscientious objectors during the Korean and Vietnam Wars. His friends and acquaintances were truly impressed with the breadth and range of his knowledge, and were shocked when they learned that Rexroth had never been graduated from high school. Harder still was it for them to accept the various confabulations Rexroth would relate about his encounters with the famous and the infamous. On one hand, he was a highly cultivated individual capable of discussing the Kronstadt rebellion, Baron von Hugel, the poetry of preliterate societies, and Lady Muraski all in the same book review program. On the other hand, there was within the same body the semblance of a bourgeois cad with a sense of humor straight out of the gutter, and a temperament so vindictive that some of his dearest friends turned their back on him. . . .

Every so often, Rexroth would declare that the life he truly desired was the monastic one. . . . He was a deeply contemplative man who immersed himself in both Western and Eastern philosophy and theology in his search—and a very intense search it was—for spiritual fulfillment. But he was too much in the world.

He resolved this conflict, as he did most nearly all the conflicts of his life, by writing verse. The style that emerged in his most successful volumes—*The Phoenix and the Tortoise*, *The Signature of All Things*, *In Defense of the Earth*, *Natural Numbers*—was one of direct statement and clear images, a poetry that with uncanny, breathtaking precision reproduces his observations of the physical world. . . . Within the context of his art, Rexroth's perceptions exude accuracy—about love, loneliness, political commitment and disillusionment, hope, courage, despair, and transitory moments of revelation. However, the events of his life reveal that like many of us, he could not always get his head and his heart to work together. His poems as well as his translations, especially from the Chinese and Japanese, reveal a marvelous sensitivity about the struggle to do precisely that. If one consistent pattern ran through Kenneth Rexroth's life, it was that he was genuine in his poems the way he could not always be in his life. His vocation became his salvation.

> Linda Hamalian. *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), pp. 372–73, 375

James Wright wrote of Kenneth Rexroth that he was ''a great love poet during the most loveless of times,'' and indeed over forty years Rexroth wrote some of the most moving and durable American verse of our century. Yet there is more. After the appearance of his first volume of poetry in 1940, Rexroth published not only an additional nineteen collections of poems, but also scores of lively essays and reviews (many collected in his seven books of shorter prose), a study of modern American poetry and a history of communalism, an ''autobiographical novel,'' a dozen books of translations from the Greek, Latin, Chinese, Japanese, and French, and a book of plays. In addition, he edited seminal collections of poetry by both D.H. Lawrence and young British poets. . . .

At his death in 1982 at the age of seventy-six, the poet had published over fifty books of poetry, essays, translations, plays, and anthologies, and was at work on the second volume of his autobiography.

Writing an assessment a few months later, Eliot Weinberger argued that, ''Rexroth at his death was among the best known and least read of American poets. It is a sad distinction he shares, not coincidentally, with the poet he most resembles, Hugh MacDiarmid. . . . Nevertheless, there is no question that American literary history will have to be rewritten to accommodate Rexroth, that postwar American poetry is the 'Rexroth Era' as much as (and as little) as the earlier decades are the 'Pound Era.'''

> Lee Bartlett. Introduction. In Kenneth Rexroth and James Laughlin; Lee Bartlett, ed. *Selected Letters* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), pp. xi, xvii

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RICE, Elmer (1892–1967)

Plays

Mr. Rice's vision of the world may infuriate you. . . . You cannot miss it; you cannot withdraw yourself from its coherence and completeness. Examine his plays (*The Adding Machine*) scene by scene, symbol by symbol. The structure stands. There are no holes in its roof. It gives you the pleasure of both poetry and science, the warm beauty of life and love, the icy delight of mathematics. I am aware of the fact . . . that my profound sympathy with Mr. Rice's substance necessarily colored my reaction to his play. Not, however, to its form, not to the heartening fact that here is an American drama with no loose ends or ragged edges or silly last-act compromises, retractions, reconciliations. The work, on its own ground, in its own mood, is honest, finished, sound.

Ludwig Lewisohn. *The Nation*. April 4, 1923. p. 399

Street Scene is, at bottom, conventional in form. Yet the swift, accurate, quickly changing manner of its acting, the finely adopted setting which shadows it and gives it an exciting unity, and the genius of the direction—Mr. Rice did this job himself—make it as new as even the very best of the downright stylized experiments. *Street Scene* proves what many of us have long suspected, that a new form in itself may not be a creation at all, that a traditional form, hammered and polished and fused in a white heat of imagination . . . will glow with as new a light as the wildest expedition into constructivism, expressionism, or any other rebellion born in the travail of dramatic experiment in Berlin or Moscow.

Robert Littell. *Theatre Arts*. March, 1929. pp. 164–5

In everything he has written—melodrama, smart drama, expressionist drama, realist drama, he has shown himself a perfect technician. . . . With this equipment, and the gradual deepening of purpose which is evident through his writing, it is not idle to expect that Elmer Rice's major work in the theatre is yet to be done. The least that he can give is a chronicle of American scenes done in an American way, a procession of characters whose externals of manner and speech are perfectly reproduced . . . , but in his latter plays he has given evidence that he has the power to quicken these characters with the kind of life that makes ''pure music'' out of ''program music.''

Meyer Levin. *Theatre Arts*. Jan., 1932. p. 62

In contrast to *Street Scene* which was universal, Elmer Rice's latest play, *We, the People*, is of a particular day and mood. It is vibrantly of the present moment, almost hysterically so at times. It is a play of angry and ironic protest against the broader aspects of social injustice in times like these and against special and particular forms of injustice and hypocrisy. Hot fury runs through it like a fever, the more so because delusions are often mixed with realities and half truths with honest statements of fact. The delusions and half-truths concern chiefly the inner motives of some of the leading characters. The honest facts relate to happenings recorded with tragic monotony in every edition of every newspaper. . . . The play provides a stirring experience, and makes an appeal, no matter how prejudiced it may seem, to the fires of self-examination which are slowly kindling beneath the agony of our day.

Richard Dana Skinner. *Commonweal*. Feb. 8, 1933. p. 411

As art *We, the People* has now and again precisely the limitations that Mr. Rice's plays have often had. I am surprised that so many judgments of the new piece have turned on the talking, the haranguing, the raw statement of causes and thoughts. This is what Mr. Rice did in *Street Scene* and in *The Left Bank*, though the love story and the various esthetic considerations eased the tedium of a lack of creation in the dramatist. . . . This talk without creation appeared and heavily, in the young heroine's long speech in the last act of *Street Scene*, and almost constantly in *The Left Bank*. As a matter of fact, the new play has less of it, what with the push of the many scenes to be presented.

Stark Young. *New Republic*. Feb. 15, 1933. p. 19

With *Two on an Island* Mr. Rice, I think, resumes his place among the best of our comic writers, along with the Messrs. Behrman, Barry, and Kaufman. . . . Neither the comic insight nor the wit of Mr. Rice is like that of any of the others, and it rests, one might say, on a broader base, derives from the spirit of a larger mass of people. It is not merely that his favorite characters are landladies, taxi drivers, and the like, persons whose knowingness is combined with an innocent unsophistication. It is also that the whole flavor of his writing is more robust, more earthly, less narrowly local, and less highly specialized in spirit if not in manner. Of the four he is the most inclusively American, and without him the quartet would represent far less completely than it does the comic spirit of this nation.

Joseph Wood Krutch. *The Nation*. Feb. 3, 1940. p. 136

Elmer Rice is a heavy-set man with reddish hair who does not look anywhere near fifty-one. A serious, conscientious person, he still has a lot of humor—the wry, understated kind—and his quietness makes it hard to imagine him ever blowing up about anything. Nevertheless he has always been mixed up in controversies; he is a

great man for taking a stand about anything, from the destructive influence of the critics on the theatre to world problems of today. . . . Politically Elmer Rice has always been firmly and vocally to the Left. Which is consistent, because it would be odd if a man who has always been a persistent experimentalist in art forms should turn out to be, ideologically, a conservative.

Elizabeth R. Valentine. *New York Times Book Section mag*. Sept. 12, 1943. p. 15

Elmer Rice in *Dream Girl* has broken away from his usual preoccupation with the state of the nations to contemplate fondly, and at great length, the naive charms of a sweet young thing as she wrestles with her adolescent problems. . . . Mr. Rice plays exclusively with the surface of this young girl's mind. She is not asleep; she is merely indulging in the kind of futile and entirely volitional day dreaming to which we are all prone. She fancies herself in all sorts of heroic attitudes—a prisoner in the dock, a prostitute, a great actress reciting the ''quality of mercy'' speech. As a result the play is a tour-de-force in quick changes and continuous action but it lacks psychological and emotional content.

Rosamond Gilder. *Theatre Arts*. Feb., 1946. pp. 78–9

In the half-bakery of Broadway, the belated recognition of the science of psychiatry usually results in a kind of convention of disorder the moment the faculty of imagination (healthy or otherwise) is summoned by one or other members of a cast. Immediately, enormous, unidentifiable, tenanted, visions—often in the form of ballets—are sprung out of nowhere and swirled and swooped for no discernible reason other than ART, one supposes, or POETRY, or some equivalent miscalculation. In his depiction of a heroine who spends a long day largely dreaming it, while Mr. Rice has given himself almost unlimited opportunities for flight and figment, he has, I think, got off on the right foot. Beginning with *character*, his fantasies are naturally ordered: the dreams fit into the day so to speak; there are no figurations too alarming, interesting, or expensive for the size of the figurer; all the shadows are owned. If the case-history seems somewhat simple, nevertheless it is true, and its people are alive.

Kappo Phelan. *Commonweal*. Feb. 15, 1946. p. 457

In his middle years Mr. Rice was such a generative force in so many aspects of the theater that now it is difficult to remember that for 15 years Broadway did not take him seriously. In 1914 when he was in his early 20's and had just passed a civil service examination in proofreading, he wrote a courtroom play, *On Trial*, that told its story in terms of flashbacks. The technique was new. Much to the surprise of an inexperienced young man, the play was produced and became a fabulous success.

Mr. Rice assumed that he had become part of an established trade, but nine years went by before he had his second success—*The Adding Machine*, his first serious play and now a classic; and his most famous play, *Street Scene*, was rejected by most of Broadway's producers before William Brady accepted it in 1929. The director had so little faith in it that he deserted during the rehearsals and Mr. Rice had to direct it himself. It was the first of his many jobs as director. His play won the Pulitzer Prize for that season. After 15 years he had compelled Broadway to accept him on his own terms.

Brooks Atkinson. *New York Times (daily)*. May 9, 1967. p. 1

Novels

Here in a satire (*Voyage to Purilia*) which is both nimble-witted and pervasive, and which at times attains the implacable complexity of a nightmare, the author of *Street Scene* pays his respects to that planet known to astronomers as Purilia, where life is so utterly different from that of earth as to be almost incomprehensible. Not since Merton of the Movies announced that his wife was his best pal and his severest critic has there been anything as detached and scarifying as this excursion into the unplumbed vacuity of the celluloid. This is satire of a high order, so high that it at times suggests the Golden Ass of Apuleius.

John Carter. *New York Times Book Section*. March 23, 1930. p. 2

Mr. Elmer Rice's *Voyage to Purilia* is an amusing satire on the American film. It is a short book, gracefully and gaily written. Mr. Rice, according to his diary, sets off in an aeroplane for the undiscovered country, known to no terrestial map, where cinema scenarios come into being. From the first moment when he gets among the ''soft, pink mists'' and the unceasing sentimental music that surround the new planet, until the moment when his Purilian bride, much to his disappointment, dissolves on the altar steps in the Nirvana of a fade-out, there is no experience known to humanity, and yet there is no situation or sentiment that is not an admired commonplace of the movies.

Hubert Griffith. *New Statesman and Nation*. Sept. 27, 1930. p. 764

The theatre novel is traditionally a bête noir. . . . Now, in *The Show Must Go On*, Elmer Rice has done very well with the subject. And what could be more appropriate, for he can write as one in authority and not as the scribe. This makes his story, apart from its other qualities, as complete and clinical a primer of how our American theatre runs in its every aspect as any aspirant thereto could desire. It reveals, also, the lofty concept of the theatre artist's obligation to his craft that has always distinguished Mr. Rice and made him one of the most constructive, as well as gifted, people in it. . . . He does not write a distinguished prose but in most other respects, such as characterization and dialogue and story sense, his talents as dramatist carry over into the narrative medium.

Edmund Fuller. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 15, 1949. p. 15

His least friendly contemporaries—and Mr. Rice has had his share of them, his temperament being what it is—never accused him of failing to say what was on his mind. Nor will they charge him with changing his ways in this autobiography [*Minority Report*] to which he turned as he neared the age of 70. Well, yes, he may be somewhat mellower now than he was in his frequently embattled

prime. He says as much toward the end of his chronicle: he wishes that he might have been ''less egotistical, less opinionated, less caustic, less irritable, less impatient, less intolerant.'' He surely means this, but it is not so certain that he would have been the valuable citizen and artist if he had been less opinionated, less caustic, etc.

John K. Hutchens. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Aug. 18, 1963. p. 5

Rice has produced a remarkable body of work—large, varied, experimental, and honest. It ranges from frivolous entertainment to intense seriousness, from irony to pathos, from photographic realism to stark stylization. The best of it truthfully documents almost fifty years of American life; it castigates the follies, it expresses the confusions; and it suggests the remedies for many of the ills which have beset free men of good will in the twentieth century. In a theatre whose most currently prominent voices are the negative ones of a Williams or an Albee, the affirmations of Rice may be unpopular, but they will also be valuable.

Robert Hogan. *The Independence of Elmer Rice* (Southern Illinois). 1965. p. 150

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RICH, Adrienne (1929–)

Miss Rich at 21 is a poet thoroughly trained by masters of verse whom she echoes at times but never slavishly. Thanks to her search for perfection she has composed her poems with an almost flawless perception and sound ear. While one might say that she belongs to an age in which youth is skeptical of a world unmade by tottering elders, she is clearly aware of the artist's place in society, and this without special pleading or self-defenses. She is, in short, the kind of neo-classic poet who relies on true form. In this she resembles another young poet, somewhat older than herself, the perfectionist Richard Wilbur.

Alfred Kreymborg. *New York Times Book Section*. May 13, 1951. p. 27

Adrienne Cecile Rich is distinguished by her uncanny ability to write. Again and again her poetry communicates the peculiar excitement of exactness. Young poets of talent generally have one of two flaws; either they are afflicted with every kind of clumsiness, and must have their poems weeded clear of dead metaphors, extra feet, clichés, and dishonest rhetoric; either that, or they are gifted with easy competence and are plagued by not always sounding quite like themselves. Adrienne Cecile Rich falls into the second category, but she does not fall far. It is easy to greet several of her poems with familiarity: ''How do you do, Mr. Frost? And you, Mr. Auden?'' But even if one should decide to dismiss these poems (which would be foolish), there would be many left to which one could attach no name but the author's own.

The Diamond Cutters is Miss Rich's second volume, and it is superior to *A Change of World*. The earlier book was sometimes tame, and even a little smug about its ability to keep experience away from the door. In the second book, the wolf is inside and is busy writing poems about its successful campaign.

Donald Hall. *Poetry*. Feb., 1956. p. 301

Everybody thinks young things young, Sleeping Beauty beautiful—and the poet whom we see behind the clarity and gravity of Miss Rich's poems cannot help seeming to us a sort of princess in a fairy tale. Her scansion, even, is easy and limpid, close to water, close to air; she lives nearer to perfection (an all-too-easy, perfection, sometimes—there are a few of Schubert's pieces that are better the first time than they ever are again, and some of Miss Rich's poems are like this) than ordinary poets do, and her imperfections themselves are touching as the awkwardness of anything young and natural is touching. The reader feels that she has only begun to change; thinks, ''This young thing, who knows what it may be, old?'' Some of her poems are very different from the others, some of her nature is very far from the rest of it, so that one feels that she has room to live in and to grow out into; liking her for what she is is a way of liking her even better for what she may become.

Randall Jarrell. *The Yale Review*. Autumn, 1956. p. 100

Lynn Fontanne is said to speak our tongue without accent—neither British nor American, but ''standard'' English. Even so Adrienne Rich, and as in Miss Fontanne's case, there is nothing dull about decorum, nothing impersonal about propriety (indeed, the word means ownership), nothing weak about womanliness. The earlier work in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law*, fabricated on the careful loom responsible for the poems in Adrienne Rich's first two books, interest me most, though I can see that in the later pieces she is doing something new, generating a tenser tone, beyond cosiness, and the energy of this reaching style must stand surrogate for the knowingness of her past poems that seemed to be possessed of an effortless control. Naturally such ease is the triumph of hard work, a kind of verbal topiary, and its reward, as in the two most

ambitious pieces of this collection, the title poem and ''Readings of History,'' is a freedom, a sense of possibility apparently unhampered by even the strongest awareness of personal limitation.

Richard Howard. *Poetry*. July, 1963. pp. 258–9

. . .Adrienne Rich's *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* . . . makes it evident that she is more than the able and delicate poetess some of her neat poems have implied. She has a hard vision and restlessness in the confines of her forms which save her from the monotony sometimes resulting from rather neutral language and standard versification. She hasn't the elegance of, say, Richard Wilbur in managing her stanzas and rhymes, nor the vitality and surprise of May Swenson. But she is more relentless than either in working at ragged human feelings, in catching the quality of our senseless isolation as we ride the random tide of history.

Judson Jerome. *Saturday Review*. July 6, 1963. p. 31

Adrienne Rich has grown steadily more interesting from book to book and now in her fourth work, *Necessities of Life*, this advance, tortuous and sometimes tortured as it has been, is an arrival, a poised and intact completion. . . .

From the beginning, there was a yearning, a straining onward, a sense of disproportion between the life of looking and the life of living, tremors of discontent running through a style perhaps too beautiful and contented. After the perfection of *The Diamond Cutters* her work became in *Snap-shots of a Daughter-in-law* more reckless. The opening poems are gnarled, sketchy and obscure. They read like jottings in a notebook, and looked like frayed threads in a spider web. Sometimes we seemed to be watching the terrible and only abstractly imaginable struggle of a beetle to get out of its beetle shell and yet remain a beetle.

Robert Lowell. *New York Times Book Section*. July 17, 1966. p. 5

The dominating quality of Adrienne Rich's work, the quality which knits all, sound, syntax, and sense, into a marvelous unitary structure, is what she herself calls ''fierce attention.'' . . . Other words have been used for it—compression, concern, concentration—and none is exactly right; but the poetry shows what it is: a need not simply to confront experience—in this book [*Necessities of Life*] the experience, disconcerting enough, of a woman who is an artist—not simply to exclaim over it, to apostrophize it (one thinks of Sylvia Path), but to *solve* it; to make it come right. This is a small book, but compact. There is not a glib word in it, nor a wasted breath. The poems stand like the stones of Arizona, singly and distinct, some taller than others, all eroded; but with the natural resolution—balance, place, hardness—of stone.

Hayden Carruth. *Poetry*. Jan., 1967. p. 267

Adrienne Rich, in her fifth book, *Leaflets*, comes to us so garlanded with honors that one tends to expect each poem to be a masterpiece. This is, of course, unfair. Yet she does manage, in the book as an entirety, to display complete mastery, absolute assurance of movement and tone. I do not find the book great, but I do find it faultless. One fashionable mode at the moment is poetry in free verse with surrealistic jumps between its lines and an ending of deliberate banality, a drop into flatness which constitutes the shock of the poem; another is free verse written with conscious flatness, whose last lines lift in sudden flight into sentimental lyricism, which the preceding lines pull back on like a kitestring. Miss Rich avoids both of these over-used methods.

Mona Van Duyn. *Poetry*. March, 1970. p. 433

Like other cultivated poets of her generation—like Merwin, Snodgrass and James Wright—Adrienne Rich is haunted into significance as much by what she has changed *from* as by changing at all or by what she is changing to. Recurrence, memory, any presentiment of the old order, of the poem as contraption, is what this poet obsessively, creatively combats. In her sixth book [*The Will to Change*], then, there will be a constant imagery of inconstancy, of breaking free, of fracturing, of shedding and molting. . . .

The governing (or anarchic) emblems in this taut, overturning book are more likely to be drawn from almost anywhere than from poetry, from anything but verse in its decorous accorded sense, the ritual of a departure and return, a refrain which is indeed a refraining as well, a reluctance to violate repetition. Rather the figures will be derived from dreams and dedications, letters, elegies, photographs, movies. . . . The movies . . . are the major representative form here, and the major piece in this book is an extended series of writings called, focally, ''Shooting Script''—what Adrienne Rich herself calls a conversation of sounds melting constantly into rhythms, ''a cycle whose rhythm begins to change the meanings of words.''

Richard Howard. *Partisan Review*. Winter, 1971–2. pp. 484–5

The forcefulness of *Diving into the Wreck* comes from the wish not to huddle wounded, but to explore the caverns, the scars, the depths of the wreckage. At first these explorations must reactivate all the old wounds, inflame all the scar tissue, awaken all the suppressed anger, and inactivate the old language invented for dealing with the older self. But I find no betrayal of continuity in these later books, only courage in the refusal to write in forms felt to be outgrown. I hope that the curve into more complex expression visible in her earlier books will recur as Rich continues to publish, and that these dispatches from the battlefield will be assimilated into a more complete poetry. Given Rich's precocious and sustained gifts, I see no reason to doubt her future. The title poem that closed *The Diamond Cutters* says that the poetic supply is endless: after one diamond has been cut, ''Africa Will yield you more to do.'' When new books follow, these most recent poems will I think be seen as the transition to a new generosity and a new self-forgetfulness.

Helen Vendler. *Parnassus*. Fall–Winter, 1973. p. 33

It is rare that the poet-turned-activist survives as a poet. Adrienne Rich is an exception. In seven decisive steps from her first volume of poems to her most recent, she has increasingly closed the gap between her public and private selves, never criticizing what is outside herself without criticizing what is within. In so doing, she admits that oppression is as much the creation of the oppressed as the oppressor. To be ''stern with herself'' is thus the axis of her

poetic and political commitment, and it is in this way that her poems are moral without being moralistic, sensitive without bleeding sap.

Language is the weapon of her revolution; the proper naming of her pain as woman, poet, activist, and human being in a decadent civilization is her strategy; the revolution of the human spirit is her goal.

Diving into the Wreck, her seventh volume of poems, is revolutionary in ways we ordinarily think revolutionary: it is feminist, anti-war, pro-ecology, anti-order; it rejects a whole tradition of formal poetics. But it is not a simple rendering of revolutionary themes.

Gale Flynn. *Hollins Critic*. Oct., 1974. pp. 1–2

The poem ''Diving into the Wreck'' [presents] adventures behind the common definitions of sexuality and beyond the damages done by acculturation and conditioning. It is here also that Rich makes her strongest political identification with feminism, in her attempts to define experiences unique to women or to define the damages done by false definitions of sexual identity. Into her images she has been able to concentrate much of what has always been in her poetry: what it is like to feel oppressed, betrayed and unfulfilled. The explicit identification with feminism sometimes sets poems off balance. But this is a matter of presentation and not—as some critics have suggested—because Rich has radically changed the direction or interests of her writing. . . .

Twinned with the anger in [her] recent poems, there is also an enlarged awareness—a new voice, I think, in Rich's work—of the tragedy wrought into human relationships and into the attempts at dialogue and exchange. There are two particularly important examples: on the level of social injustice, her ''Meditations for a Savage Child'' and, less general, a poem of blunted love, ''Cartographies of Silence.'' ''Meditations for a Savage Child'' is a remarkable poem based on the documents Truffaut also used so movingly in his film *L'Enfant Sauvage*, the records of the French doctor, J.M. Itard (now published as *The Wild Boy of Aveyron*). Itard had observed and partly ''civilized'' a savage child in the late eighteenth century. Rich, perhaps following Truffaut, introduces excerpts from the doctor's accounts as points of departure for each of the five sections of her poem. Unlike Truffaut, who chose to play the part of Itard in his film, Rich often takes on the role of the child, or ponders what he has to teach her, as she engages in a series of meditative exchanges with the voice of Itard. The poem is partly a long historical register of Rich's own divided spirit. Itard is an adversary but not an enemy, as they gaze across the ambitious ruins of Enlightenment philosophy. In the solicitous elegance of his prose, she finds words which have been emptied of their meaning: humanity, administrators, protection of the government—the roots of much which would have once engaged her own ardor. But in the mysteries of childrearing, of miseducation, she locates everything which defeats that ardor. . . .

It is hard to know, now that some of Rich's force and passionate intelligence has been directed into prose, just what role poetry will come to play in her life and in her writing. Critics have in the past pointed out how much, in her commitment to the notation of present feelings, the pain of the moment, Rich has given up the traditional retrospective and shaping functions of verse. Poems like ''Meditations for a Savage Child'' and ''Cartographies of Silence'' show that whatever she has relinquished she has given up purposefully, that she understands the price of her ardor without giving up her rights to it.

David Kalstone. *Five Temperaments: Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery* (Oxford Univ. Pr., 1977), pp. 162, 165–66, 169

The interpenetration of psyche and history is . . . a major situation in Adrienne Rich's recent poems. She makes her analysis of individual consciousness and history by uniting the issues of sexuality and war in a way neither of the other poets does. The most intimate relations of love and marriage are traced out in her poems until they are revealed as a terrifying war, and war itself is seen as a fact originating in the patriarchal oppression of women. Domination, depersonalization, and dehumanization are the vectors of the patriarchal soul; multiplied and extended on a national scale, these male traits are, in Rich's view, an ur-political explanation for the Vietnam War and its atrocities. Social dislocation and war stem from an estrangement, at some original moment, between ''male'' and ''female'' components of the human psyche. Rich pursues this split, investigating its origins and its costs. In effect she is conducting a historical examination of the psychic life. . . .

The ultimate intention of *Diving into the Wreck* is to call this whole patriarchal myth into question. Rich does so by dramatizing the process of critique and self-exploration in a new myth that constructs her own version of the origin and history of consciousness. Nor is Rich's myth a simple reversal of [Erich] Neumann's model. For, unlike the fecund captive-treasure of the patriarchal myth, here the captive is dead, arrested in the strained posture of unfulfilled searching. Nothing can be won from this figure except the fact of death. The new ''fruitful center'' in Rich's myth has become the creative antagonism of the woman-hero to traditional consciousness and old patterns of myth—an antagonism motivated because that book of stories and explanations excludes her. So in the course of the journey an androgynous woman has been invented, one appropriating her own fruitfulness and power, and brought into being by her own creative momentum—that is, from the process of critique.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis. In *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Indiana Univ. Pr., 1979), pp. 291–92, 295

A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far assembles in chronological order the poems Adrienne Rich wrote between 1978 and 1981. These poems, given to rhetorical excesses and political simplifications, are far from her best work; but a fair portion of the collection is important. For some time, Rich has been moving towards the extreme of radical feminism; in this volume she arrives humourlessly at its pole. The irony that tempered her depiction of the conflict of the sexes in *The Dream of a Common Language*, her one great book, is gone now. What has survived is a poetry that will, and should, discomfit many readers; it will sometimes move them as well. . . .

Missing from . . . most . . . poems in the book, is a sense of balance. In Rich's worst poems, such as ''Frame'', she wilfully misrepresents men, committing the same act of distortion that she complains about elsewhere. ''Frame'' stoops to vicious clichès,

portraying men as incurable rapists, invoking the stereotype of the Boston policeman who has nothing to do other than pursue and maim young women.

Fortunately, Rich can do better. The self-obsession that characterized much of her earlier work, which was largely concerned with an evolving autobiographical *mythos*, has widened into a concern with the ''selves,'' past and present, around her. While her dream of a common language has never been realized in her own poems, Rich approaches it in pieces such as ''Culture and Anarchy'' and ''The Spirit of Place,'' both of which call up for inspection the lives of earlier women.

Jay Parini. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. Nov. 12. 1982, p. 1251

The poetry of Adrienne Rich presents the clear-sighted instance of a poet whose work began in a formal self-regarding mode devoid of politics; but a poet who has gone on, by virtue of attention to experience, to establish a major voice in forms overtly political. Nor is there an uncertainty about the meaning of politics in Rich's view. . . .

Maturity of vision arrived, for Rich, when she began to feel ''that politics was not something 'out there' but something 'in here' and of the essence of my condition''. Thinking through the body is the bedrock of moral intelligence of much of feminist writing, a way of judging the world in direct relation to physical need and physical vulnerability, including the vulnerability of childbirth and nurturing generally. To recognize this simple concrete condition, furthermore, is to revise some very old and honored principles. The male obsession with high versus low, with spirit versus the flesh, with the cultural versus the natural, gives way in the feminist view to a mutuality of categories, a network of values that are complementary rather than opposed, and care for earth as strong as allegiance to any world. We must, says Rich to her tribe, ''view our physicality as a resource, rather than a destiny.''. . .

This, finally, is where Rich stands: apart from male-sponsored raids on eternity, inside her own body's sorrow and deeply settled into time—''not somewhere else, but here.'' Her language is time's stark vernacular, the idiom of being-in-the-world where ''being'' is female and ''the world,'' as ever, is still a kingdom of the fathers. Against the patriarchal order she sets her art and her life because, as things now stand, it's an order given to conquest and illusions of mastery, hostile to earth and the flesh. In the tradition of bardic practice, her poetry announces communal identify, calls for courage and fortitude in battle, keeps a language (and a lore) by which members of the tribe can stand up, take place, and together realize their collective ''passion to be.'' In Rich's case, moreover, it's not difficult to say when she took up her political station. It began when she ''was finished with the idea of a poem as a single, encapsulated event, a work of art complete in itself.'' It began, that is, when she started appending dates to her poems, beginning with those that make up *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, her volume of 1963 in which she breaks free to imagine herself as ''long about her coming, who must be / more merciless to herself than history.'' To herself she has been merciless, and often to her enemies as well, but with tenderness to temper her anger, and always with ''care for the many-lived, unending / forms in which she finds herself.''

Terrence Des Pres. *Graham House Review*. Spring, 1988, pp. 113, 150–51

Beyond her own lyric celebration of the lesbian cathexis, Rich labors to liberate others from patriarchal oppression. Her poetic discourse more broadly serves as a critique of the cultural representation of the feminine body. ''The woman's body, with its potential for gestating, bringing forth and nourishing new life, has been through the ages a field of contradictions: a space invested with power, and an acute vulnerability; a numinous figure and the incarnation of evil: a hoard of ambivalences, most of which have worked to disqualify women from the collective act of defining culture'' (*Of Women Born*, 90). In Rich's political metaphor, ''patriarchal culture . . . has literally colonized the bodies of women'' (*On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, 225). In challenging patriarchy's ''colonizing'' of the feminine body, she forges new discourses of sexuality that reclaim women's power to reshape our psychic, cultural, and social lives.

All too aware that ''the woman's body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected'' (*Of Women Born*, 38). Rich sets out to empower it both as subject and *semiotic* force in her poetry. And to this extent, her poetics parallels the *écriture féminine* of French theorists Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva. ''Though masculine sexuality gravitates around the penis,'' Cixous writes, ''engendering that centralized body (in political anatomy) under the dictatorship of its parts, woman does not bring about the same regionalization which serves the couple head/genitals and which is inscribed only within boundaries. Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide.'' Cixous's dispersal of women's ''cosmic'' desire dethrones the tyranny of masculine sexuality, centered in the phallus and encoding the body through the dictatorship of its ''political anatomy.'' Likewise, Rich's ''Reforming the Crystal'' (1973) stages the same diffusion of erotic desire. . . . Rich's feminist agenda leads finally to broader ''testing-grounds'' of political change. Having jettisoned modernism's formalist aesthetic, and worked through archetypal feminism, the mother-daughter cathexis, a poetics of *écriture féminine*, and women's history, Rich's ''wild patience'' continues. In the mid-1980s, her writing seeks alignment with other ethnic, racial, and Third World movements of social liberation from patriarchy's ''crumbling form.'' This political agenda will no doubt demand further ''re-visions'' of her poetic discourse in response to America's evolving social text.

Walter Kalaidjian. *Languages of Liberation: The Social Text in Contemporary American Poetry* (New York: Columbia Univ. Pr., 1989), pp. 169–70

In the best and most exciting of Rich's early poems, here collected in one volume excluding juvenilia and covering the years from 1950 to 1970, there is a quality reminiscent of Dickinson's subversive tension, a subversion of which, in the very earliest of Rich's poems, even the poet is unaware.

Adrienne Rich's first two books, *A Change of World* (1951), winner of the prestigious Yale Younger Poets Prize, and *The Diamond Cutters* (1955), do in fact turn more *toward* conventional praise than against it. But there is from the first an undercurrent, ''the undervoice of my own poetry,'' Rich calls it, which seems to defy (in a tentative way initially, and perhaps without the author's approval) the very forms and conventionally ''appropriate'' sentiments her conscious voice seeks to express. . . .

This technique of personal identification with a persona is one which Rich will later develop to great effect in her poems based on

the historical figures of women. It is also the introduction of the theme of the difficulty and importance of the *articulation* of pain, both of her own and that of others, and the way in which they are the same, a theme which will be, from this point on, the major theme of her life. Every poem Rich writes from now on will have these two questions deep inside it—''what's wrong?'' and ''why can't I say?'' And she will make it her job to answer.

We have here the great turning point of her early career, and the four books which follow and which complete the collection presently under review—*Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963), *Necessities of Life* (1966), *Leaflets* (1969), and *The Will to Change* (1971)—are, despite their differences, of a piece of articulating and attempting to answer these two questions.

If this volume is to be valuable to today's young poets, *let it be valuable for this*: these six books represent, when we see them here collected for the first time in a continuous chronological sequence, evidence of a rare artistic act—the ability to turn directly away from praise. Young poets do not know that they can be far more permanently harmed by praise than by criticism. But the young Adrienne Rich had come at this point to realize that fact. In order to continue to *be* a poet, she had to turn away from a style which had been enormously successful in the opinion of the predominantly conservative (New Critically dominated) literary establishment of the day.

Biff Russ. *New Leader*. May, 1993, pp. 3, 14

Rich's critique [*What Is Found There: Notebooks on Politics and Poetry*] of contemporary American culture shares a lot of ground with Robert Hughes's best-selling polemic *The Culture of Complaint*—which is not, to my mind, nearly so good a book as hers. Like Hughes, she combines a critique of American ideological malaise and its accompanying corruptions of language with an assertion of the value of art, insisting that its delights properly belong to everybody; but her attack on the middlebrow language of self-disclosure is sharper and more political than his. She diagnoses the dismal individualist vocabulary of self-help in terms of economics and politics. . . .

This is, then, an unashamedly political book by a poet committed to a radical politics that values the experiences, thoughts, and words of those living outside the charmed circle of privilege, against whose assumptions she articulates an abiding principled anger. Like the late E.P. Thompson, she is a writer who belongs to a tradition of dissent from reaction and orthodoxy, whose words are always powerful, a presence whom we respect, listen to, learn from, do not always assent to, but whom we can never ignore.

Jan Montefiore. *The Nation*. Feb. 7, 1994, pp. 169, 170

Adrienne Rich knows ''poetry means refusing / the choice to kill or die.'' In her new volume [*Dark Fields of the Republic, Poems 1991–1995*] she remains deeply, but never simply, political. Whether about the Holocaust or locked-in women workers burned to death in a poultry-processing factory fire, her poems confront ''acceptable levels of cruelty, steadily rising.''

She's deeply but never simply personal, too. . . . Risking her wildest leaps of imagery yet, Rich frees her rage to connect. It fuels a splendid tension that vibrates through her language, hums with tenderness in her ''Sending Love'' sequence, but always resonates. . . .

The aesthetic and political are now synonomous: ''once we were dissimilar / yet unseparate that beauty.'' Expectably, this will unnerve some critics who have patronized (in both senses) Rich's work. But if women fear she'll ''lose'' her feminism in too large a context, they underestimate the scope of feminist vision—and of poetry. ''This woman / the heart of the matter'' is a Rich refrain.

Robin Morgan. *Ms*. September/October, 1995, p. 95

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RICHTER, Conrad (1890–1968)

Mr. Richter, unmoved by the stormier phases of frontier life, is attracted by small authenticities, by the unaffected kindliness of simple people who face life with bare hands, by a sort of temperature refinement which is characteristic of isolated people, by a romanticism which sees something vague and incomprehensible in the daily walk, by the pathos which hangs about those who play a lone hand.

It must be a careless reader who fails to realize that here is an admirably trained intellect with fine perception of character reproducing impressions of life; not the life of today, but of a past neglected by historians and enshrined in forgotten newspapers.

Charles J. Finger. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 8, 1936. p. 7

Though there is a slight element . . . of sententious platitudinizing . . . there is much more than that. There is research, sincerity, imagination and beauty of writing. It is escape literature of a high-class sort . . . that is, it sets the mind free and refreshes it with images and figures from an innocent, half legendary world; a world as far removed from us as if it were another planet, but real all the same, and comforting as rain in a parched land. . . . Richter makes skilful use of his evidently profound historical studies, and the picture of pioneer life he builds up is extraordinarily concentrated, detailed and vivid.

Rosamond Lehmann. *Spectator*. May 17, 1940. p. 694

Mr. Richter has hoarded up every savorous and homely detail of the life of the early nineteenth century . . .and now pours them out. The result is as American as goldenrod or Indian pudding. . . . (His

novels are) written with infinite care to make the atmosphere and background authentic and convincing. The furniture and utensils in the cabin, the phrases of the dialogue, the hymns sung at the prayer meeting—all seem just right. But one might admire Mr. Richter for his exactitude on these points and still not count him a good novelist. However he does succeed in making the stuff of life flow in the veins of most of the people who inhabit these careful settings of his.

Theodore M. Purdy. *Saturday Review*. April 13, 1946. p. 72

In his handling of the past Conrad Richter is an artist in prose. His short, compact novels demonstrate the fact that story-telling need not be subordinated to documentation of history, for reality of the imagination can be made more compelling than the appearance of fact. To him a story is always a record of human experience, regardless of time or setting. In short, he has been writing novels while other and more popular writers were turning out sword-and-musket romances or historical theses dressed up as fiction.

Dayton Kohler. *English Journal*. September, 1946. p. 364

Conrad Richter has been steadily piling up a record for solid and distinguished achievement. His writing is distinguished and poetic both as to character and image. It is intensely atmospheric and backed in the case of the historical novels on sound research. Moreover he has the supreme gift of novelists in creating a world of utter reality in which the reader is able to lose himself completely after the first page or two.

Louis Bromfield. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. April 23, 1950. p. 5

In 1928 Conrad Richter, thirty-eight years old and all his novels yet unwritten, moved from Pennsylvania to New Mexico. The South-west was not wholly new to him; from early boyhood he had heard tales of New Mexico from relatives who had lived there in territorial times. And having moved two thousand miles away, he did not forget his ancestral country. As a writer he found himself inhabiting both backgrounds and looking back to a vanished past: to the late eighteenth century in the Allegheny frontier and to the late nineteenth century in New Mexico. The two lands, so unlike to the senses, he found alike in their demands upon the people who would possess them and in the opportunity they offered for bold, far-reaching actions. . . . To both his eastern and western frontier settings Conrad Richter brings a chivalrous respect. The great forest and the high plains are the frontiersman's adversaries, and at the same time they are his magnificent birthright.

Walter Havighurst. *Saturday Review*. May 25, 1957. p. 14

. . .Richter's New Mexico books are not as big as the Ohio novels; they are deliberately smaller in compass and design. In each separate novel of the Ohio trilogy there is a strong, free, natural flow of life. The South-western novels are problem stories, tighter, more complicated, less reflective. Yet they are always lyrical, evoking the moods of the land and the commitments of its people. . . . To both his eastern and western frontier settings Conrad Richter brings a chivalrous respect. The great forest and the high plains are the frontiersman's adversaries, and at the same time they are his magnificent birthright.

Walter Havighurst. *Saturday Review*. May 25, 1957. p. 14

. . .his trilogy of the Pennsylvania-Ohio border—*The Trees*, *The Fields*, and *The Town*—has few parallels as a fictional record of early establishment, and the magnificently drawn pioneer heroine of these books, Sayward Luckett Wheeler, is challenged only by O. E. Rolvaag's Beret Holm. . . .

But although his historical trilogy is his most distinguished work to date, he is limited neither by one region nor by one fictional type. The three novels about middle western settlement are specific, documentary, and detailed, although their canvas is rather small. But his fiction about the Southwest is atmospheric, dramatic, and episodic. His four books of stories about his adopted environment are as authentic and vivid as his studies of Pennsylvania and Ohio life, yet they are different in tone and even technique. Remembering Hawthorne's distinction [between novel and romance], one is tempted to call them romances despite the fact that the old term is now obsolete.

John T. Flanagan. *Southwest Review*. Summer, 1958. pp. 189–90

So John Donner [in *The Waters of Kronos*] moves on the edges of a life long since gone, seeing people and scenes as they were and not as memory would have them, probing deeply into ''the dream that others called reality.'' The climax of John Donner's awareness comes when he solves the perennial father-son antagonism, the myth of rebellion and hatred: it is that the fear of the father is one's instinctive fear of ''the older self to come.''

The Waters of Kronos is a brilliantly evocative treatment of past and present, sensitive and reflective. Mr. Richter begs off a bit at the end when it comes to a final reconciling of the literal and figurative. Perhaps he merely pushes that reconciliation to the page just after the last one, the page that every reader of this book will write for himself.

Riley Hughes. *Catholic World*. July, 1960. p. 254

Indeed, [*A Simple Honorable Man*] is hardly a novel in the conventional sense at all, but rather a loosely sketched portrait of the truly spiritual man; a man not without faults, who yet achieves a large measure of the grace of God. We see in him, perhaps, a reflection of the recent past, where such achievement was easier, rather than a guide to a future in which the conditions for moral survival are complex and sophisticated.

This ''frontier quality'' of the American past is the mine that Richter has worked in all his books, and while he has not glorified it beyond recognition, he does select those aspects which we like to think of as representing the best in our heritage. Simplicity and honor are certainly among them.

David Dempsey. *Saturday Review*. April 28, 1962. p. 19

What is not clearly evident in these early stories, but what is an important aspect of all of his thinking, is his nostalgia for his

ancestors and his own youth, and with this, a nostalgia for America's past. It is easy to see the basis for this interest in a time and race gone by. Even ordinary people who have died take on a somewhat heroic stature in our memories. Through story and research he uncovered in the American past a breed of giants that satisfied his deep desire for an image of man as hard working and persevering, as a force which triumphed over adversity. . . . In the work of Conrad Richter, choosing the more difficult way always leads to success. . . . Conrad Richter has never written a novel which does not have as one of its themes the American pioneer's struggle and resultant strength.

Marvin J. LaHood. *University Review*. Summer, 1964. p. 313

Richter is one of America's most autobiographical writers. Whether he is writing of his own time or of the past, he draws largely on personal experience—either that of himself or of his family and other persons he has known. But for his historical fiction he has added to materials obtained from these oral sources those gleaned from old documents, letters, newspapers. The use of the familiar, of course, is not inherently meritorious. To the contrary, it can result (as occasionally it does for Richter) in a tendency toward sentimentality. Too, it can lead (as it does not for Richter) toward didacticism. The real significance of Richter's dependence on the familiar is that it has turned him toward an introspection that prompts his works to veer more often than generally recognized toward the mystical and mythical.

Again, the indulgence in mysticism and myth, especially for the mere sake of esotericism, fails to distinguish a writer. What does merit acclaim is the successful attempt to utilize mysticism and myth to find new forms for the novel and new concepts of man and history. But to suggest that Richter has thus succeeded would be to misrepresent his accomplishment. For the mysticism and myth with which he works are not new but conventional: the alienation from the earthly and Spiritual fathers and the subsequent search for reconciliation, and the assumption of guilt; and the myths of the making of the American racial unconscious; and time and individual identity.

Edwin W. Gaston. *Conrad Richter* (Twayne). 1965. p. 153

The Trilogy—The Trees, The Fields, The Town

Mr. Richter's indubitable learning is worn so lightly that one has no sense at all that this is a ''historical'' novel or that its people are playing character parts in a costume play. You feel them as individuals, some of whom lived by the forest; others, to subdue it; and still others to be killed by it. In a setting so alien that it is hard for city folks to realize it, he shows movingly what were those other ways in which these Americans found joy, terror, and satisfaction in living, in which they earned their livelihood, showed their love of family and home.

Mary Ross. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. March 3, 1940. p. 2

Mr. Richter saw his trilogy, both structurally and humanly, in the shape of one of those trees, the fate which symbolizes the entire progress in Sayward's mind. *The Trees*, in which Sayward must turn mother and father to her brothers and sisters in their forest hut, is a kind of trunk to the whole, a direct and simple tale of a life narrow and strong and dark. In *The Fields*, with the coming of neighbors and clearings, and the development of Sayward's own life as wife and actual mother, there is a branching out of purposes and interests and a brightening of atmosphere. And now, in *The Town*, the longest and most complex story of the three, comes the leafing out of the many who flourish better in the sun of man's laws than in the primeval gloom of nature's.

Walter Van Tilburg Clark. *New York Times Book Section*. April 23, 1950. p. 4

Like all good works of fiction Conrad Richter's fiction means different things to different people. Simply stated, his trilogy is the story of the realization of the great American dream. In the time between the Revolution and the Civil War a port of timber by a river grew to be Americus, a prosperous town with a waterfront, many churches, and a railroad; and in this town there was a fine house where died a rich old woman who remembered the green twilight of the great forest and how it was to live from the woods with neither bread nor salt. The pioneers have conquered everything—trees, Indians, loneliness, mud, distance, ignorance, poverty—for some everything is conquered except ambition, death, fear of change, and such things as ugliness and the smell of the waterfront.

Harriette Arnow. *Saturday Review*. May 16, 1953. p. 13

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ROBERTS, Elizabeth Madox (1886–1941)

Again and again of course she returned (and still returns) to Kentucky; I never saw her there. But wherever she is, it evidently underlays the outbranching experience, folded shadowily into the typical scenes of an author's life—an immense territorial ghost. Its past, still animated in her imagination, accompanied the present. One who knew her but had never traveled to Louisville and beyond was always aware of it, as vivid in her talk, her shepherdess's farsighted gaze, the archaic foldings of her hands, as on the most evocative pages; in her company one never seemed to be altogether where one was in reality, with that spiritual landscape in the air!

And with herself, though always keeping in character, it also underwent impressive changes.

Glenway Wescott. *Bookman*. March, 1930. p. 13

Miss Roberts' work is free of sentimentality, but its realism, like that of Chaucer, is permeated with romance, with glamour. This is possible because she has discarded the poor old worn-out duality of body and mind from which the sordidness of realism springs. Her leading characters, to whom she entrusts the task of directly or obliquely conveying her idea, experience life with their whole bodies indivisible, think with their whole bodies. This extraordinary sensitiveness not only enriches common experience, but establishes also a community of living between the character and the grasses, the cows, the birds, amidst which she works.

J.D. Robins. *Canadian Forum*. Nov., 1930. pp. 66–7

Her language, it should be said at once, is in itself a thing of perpetual delight—taut with wit as well as languorous with longing for certitude. It is the mixture of these elements in it that accounts for its pre-eminence over the language of other southern novelists today who try perhaps to do the same thing Miss Roberts is doing. They fail because they lack her complexity of mind which, after everything else is said, is the thing we come back to when we are explaining the excellence of a novelist or artist of any kind. Her language is the language of her own mind; and so is everything in her novels typical of her own character.

Mark Van Doren. *English Journal*. Sept., 1932. p. 528

The time is ripe, I think, to evaluate the work of Elizabeth Madox Roberts in the novel. Let me say at the outset that I consider her to be a writer of genius, one who at her best has written scenes which stand with the finest in the history of fiction. I draw no qualifications to this—I say the finest and I mean the finest, whether in the Russian, French, or English novel. I think that this occasional mastery of hers has not yet received its due recognition, and I think too that her work as a path-breaker in the art of fiction has not yet been fully understood. At the same time I am equally of the opinion that her shortcomings have not been adequately discussed. She has received high praise which was not high enough; but also, along with some very invalid adverse criticism, there has been insufficient mention of certain weaknesses which have kept Miss Roberts from reaching her potential stature as a creative artist. . . . They are in part the product, it seems to me, of a too great turning inward—an ever present danger to the mystically inclined mind. The very habits of thought which give depth and power to her work are also those which obscure it. . . . Her style, as everyone who knows her work is aware, is extraordinarily perceptive, rich in the power of suggestion, and sustained by subtle and very beautiful rhythms. But it is sometimes and, I think, increasingly, indirect and tenuous.

J. Donald Adams. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Jan., 1936. pp. 80–90

The critical neglect of Elizabeth Madox Roberts during the last few years of her life and since her death in 1941 is indeed hard to account for. . . . Though Miss Roberts did not write so much as Cather, her four best novels are on the whole quite as good as the four best of Cather; in fact, in some ways, especially in her poetic imagination and her gift for penetrating satire, Miss Roberts is decidedly superior to Cather. Indeed Miss Roberts' poetic imagination, or what E. M. Forster in reference to D. H. Lawrence has called ''the rapt bardic quality,'' makes her best work worthy of comparison in this respect with the best of Lawrence and Faulkner.

Harry Modean Campbell. *Southwest Review*. Autumn, 1954. p. 337

The Time of Man

I have compared this novel to Reymont's tetralogy and, putting the relative smallness of the scale aside, Miss Roberts' book does not suffer much from the comparison. Like Reymont, Miss Roberts seems absolutely saturated in her material and capable of using it with a freedom which suggests rather an intimate experience than any laborious documentation. Moreover she seems to owe little to any of the schools of fiction which have hitherto busied themselves with the treatment of American provincial life. Her mood is original, powerful, and without ever verging upon sentimentality, tender.

Joseph Wood Krutch. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 28, 1926. p. 69

Poetry

Miss Roberts's art consists most often in juxtaposing simple physical details of a landscape or situation in such a way that they act upon and limit each other definitely and minutely, without being at any point similar or parts of each other. They are simply carefully ordered parts of a whole, and bear in every case an intimate relationship to the sound movement. . . . Occasionally she lets a rhythm that has already been used in this manner carry over its emotion as a sort of superimposed comment upon lines, the content of which is too far removed from the physical to fuse with sound.

Yvor Winters. *Poetry*. April, 1923. p. 47

Miss Roberts's most characteristic invention is a poem of the following kind . . . : a combination of an impulsive feeling, somewhat indeterminate in its object—longing, the sense of being haunted—with an objective and even minute picture of agricultural activity. The feeling is given especially in the lilting rhythm, either moderately lilting, as with anapests among iambs, or strongly lilting, breaking down ordinary double-meters into amphimacer and amphibrachs, to the point of song. . . . At her best, Miss Roberts is deep in the forty years of the American Renascence, drawing on both its inspiration of expressing feeling by pictures and feeling and thought by actuality.

Paul Goodman. *Poetry*. Oct., 1940. pp. 43–5

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Forth a Raven, 1935 (n); *Black Is My True Love's Hair*, 1938 (n); *Song in the Meadow*, 1940 (p); *Not by Strange Gods*, 1941 (n)

ROBERTS, Kenneth (1885–1957)

Surely in these novels the reader enjoys a remarkable visualization of place and incident. One never loses touch with the people or their story. The secret of this power is probably in the apt use of a vast store of historical details gathered through years of study. This power of keeping the object clearly before the reader is also, I believe, a direct result of Mr. Roberts' years of experience as a newspaperman. Journalism is a good training for a novelist, for it teaches him to get the necessary details for a clear view of an incident and for a coherent story. One also enjoys knowing that in Roberts' novels the specific details of history are the authentic results of sound research.

Chilson H. Leonard. *Kenneth Roberts* (Doubleday). 1936. p. 16

His earlier books, the stories of Arundel and the two sea stories, are conventional historical narratives, traditionally romantic in outline but original and realistic in detail, unreflective, rapid, and usually superficial in their feeling for history. By superficial I do not mean to derogate from Mr. Roberts' rich inventiveness nor to deny that he has a fine eye for the characteristic, the picturesque, and the historically appropriate; I mean that he has been indifferent to the energies and movements of which the events he describes were a specific expression, that he has not bothered about their relation to the age.

Bernard DeVoto. *Saturday Review*. July 3, 1937. p. 5

For something like twenty years Kenneth Roberts has been reminding Americans of their heritage—how once men discovered that this was a mighty continent, a land of untold wealth for hardy people, with huge forests to be turned into homes, fertile lands to till, great rivers for fish and traffic, abundance of wild life and mountains full of metals. The hardy men came, his romances report, from several nations, to fight and scheme against one another and the original possessors, and against the wily boys from home with an eye to their own main chance. In spite of his Saturday Evening Post background of affiliations and ideas, Kenneth Roberts has written some good novels about this country; the black and white demarcations of his pamphleteering shade off into the lighter and darker grays of reality in his best fiction.

B.E. Bettinger. *New Republic*. July 14, 1937. p. 287

One of my numerous and heretical opinions is that Kenneth Roberts has no particular talent for writing fiction. As a novelist he gets by, I think, as in the Arundel series and in *Northwest Passage*, wholly because he is primarily a most excellent nonfiction writer. . . . He gets some fire and force into his yarns out of pure resentment against the myths handed down from one to another, by the academic historians. . . . If we decide we are going to have history and put it into books, let it be history, not legend. Roberts feels that way about it, and I'm for him.

The thing that makes him good in this respect, of course, is the thing that militates against his being a very good writer of fiction. Fiction . . . is not concerned with facts or even with minor truths: it is concerned with the universal truths.

Burton Rascoe. *Newsweek*. June 20, 1938. p. 31

Mr. Roberts' . . . best talents lie in the swift narration of some tale of heroic exertions or resistances. Nobody better than he can bring a battle, a siege, a toilsome march, a wrestle with overmastering moral and material forces, vividly before us. He has a fine power of visualization, an even finer faculty for enlisting the reader in the ardors and endurances of some embattled body of men. When it comes to the presentation of gentler scenes, whether in drawing rooms, courts, or congresses, he is much less effective. Nor is he skilled in the integration of a far-reaching and highly varied piece of fiction.

Allan Nevins. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 23, 1940. p. 5

He is a hater of shams, pretensions, self-deceptions, fallacies; and he particularly hates the persistent distortion of history. In what would be for him the best possible world, every history would be written with a fine impartiality and by a neutral party. He is tireless in hunting out proof that Colonials during the Revolutionary period were (a) dauntless heroes, or (b) blovalating politicians and self-seekers; the choice depending on which misconception he is at the moment engaged in setting right. He is equally tireless in proving that all British and Tories were (a) cultivated and intelligent gentlemen abused by the Colonials, or (b) tyrannical rascals abusing the Colonials.

For Ken, who expects from the historian a remote impartiality, himself always has a thesis to demonstrate. His thesis is the unrecognized truth; and he will with the most laborious research write a book to prove that on a given subject everyone who believes what everyone else believes is wrong!

Ben Ames Williams. Introduction to *The Kenneth Roberts Reader* (Dutton). 1945. p. ix

I wish Mr. Roberts had a clearer idea of what to eliminate from his first drafts. His novels, even the best of them, have a tendency to sprawl, and in this case (*Lydia Bailey*), as in *Northwest Passage*, there are a beginning, a middle, and an end, and then without pause for breath, another beginning and middle and end. It adds up to too much, and in the protraction, in the constant shift from one background to the next, the main characters lose their orientation, they become flat rather than forceful, the victims of romance rather than of a reality.

Edward Weeks. *Atlantic Monthly*. Feb. 1947. p. 130

Kenneth Roberts is a big, hearty, vital, opinionated, hasty-tempered man. He hates politicians, hypocrisy, corruption, cowardice, and tyranny. He loves food, action, valor, independence, and the very stuff of history itself. All this is plain as a pikestaff in his books. He is uninterested in, or incapable of, the subtleties of

fiction as an art. His plots are crude and clumsy, his virtuous characters only stilted puppets. But he is a superb chronicler of violence, battle, massacre, rape, flight, and pursuit. He is wonderfully effective in his portraits of picturesque, eccentric, lusty men of action. And always his enormous relish for the life of the past endows his work with a living background of interest in itself.

Orville Prescott. *The Yale Review*. Spring, 1947. p. 573

Though his novels . . . suffer from unnecessary repetitions and occasional lags, they have a definite advantage over most other period novels, and this is the unobstrusive introduction of a fundamental human problem—namely the clash of the attitude of loyalty with independent pragmatic judgment in one and the same person. . . . It is true that this conception does not appear to be strong enough to lift these novels to the plane of an irrational and feverish search for some kind of non-pragmatic values as, say, in Thomas Wolfe's novels, but it carries enough weight to keep the intelligent reader's attention and sympathy through the stories.

Heinrich Straumann. *American Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Hutchinson). 1951. p. 67

This ''implacable detestation of false men and evil measures,'' this moral impatience which he attributes to America, severely cripples Mr. Roberts' imagination. No doubt his intolerance is well grounded in reason and experience, and it will be as Richard Wilbur puts it, that ''In a time of continual dry abdication/ And of damp complicities'' Mr. Roberts' narrow rectitude is the proper tonic. I doubt it, though.

Thomas E. Curley. *Commonweal*. Feb. 10, 1956. p. 496

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ROBINSON, Edwin Arlington (1869–1935)

He has an ascetic hatred for the trite word, the facile phrase, the rhetorical cadence. His individual idiom—as clearly marked as John Donne's, whom he resembles in many ways—was apparent from the first. . . . The thought it packed very tight, except in the humorous diffusion and willful Wordsworthian flatness of occasional passages in the monologues. The athletic sparseness of epithet, the suppression of climaxes, the projection of the planes of the poem beyond the lines of the poem itself—these are Robinsonian characteristics that will continue to repel some readers as certainly as they fascinate the adepts.

Bliss Perry. *New York Times Book Section*. Dec. 21, 1919. p. 765

Robinson had discovered that simply by making a plain statement of certain important things, he achieved a poetic effect unlike anything known to poetry except possibly the ballad. . . . Robinson wrote in the old meters. He often employed stock poetic phrases. But all the stanza forms he used resolved themselves to the level of the ballad statement of fact, and stock poetic phrases were an ironic reflection on the poverty of a life of which the phrase was the sole grandeur.

Samuel Roth. *Bookman*. Jan., 1920. pp. 507–8

Now Mr. Robinson is a dyed-in-the-wool New Englander, and that must never be forgotten. His tenacity of purpose is thoroughly New England, so is his austerity and his horror of exuberance of expression. His insight into people is pure Yankee shrewdness, as is also his violent and controlled passion. He is absolutely a native of his place, the trouble was that he was not a native of his time. He was twenty years ahead of his time, and that advance has set the seal of melancholy upon him; or, to speak in the cant of the day, it has wound him in inhibitions which he has been unable to shake off.

Amy Lowell. *Dial*. Feb., 1922. p. 133

Mr. Robinson, even in youth, was a poet of failure and regret. He was preoccupied with New England in decay. In the moonlight of an eternal autumn he sat brooding on the poor ghosts of men—brooding sadly rather than in grief. . . . And since Mr. Robinson began in autumn he has never had his rightful spring. He was old from the very first. When his time came for him to be really old, his trees were doubly bare.

Edmund Wilson. *Dial*. May, 1923. p. 516

If the psychology of failure, or of that uncertain middle ground between spiritual success and failure, is Robinson's recurrent motive, it may be interesting to study his attitudes and his methods in presenting that motive in art. It is heroic, not ignoble, struggle that engages him, or if not heroic, at least the struggle of highly strung, sensitive souls to fulfil their manifest destiny; ending either in acceptance of compromise, or in tragic spiritual revolt that induces some kind of dark eclipse. The form is usually narrative, with the poet as the narrator, under some assumption of friendship or at least neighborliness; but in the longer poems we have, as a rule, monologue and dialogue, the characters unfolding their perplexities, or recording their action upon each other, in long speeches which are not talk, as talk actually ever was or could be, but which are talk intensified into an extraluminous self-revelation;

as if an x-ray, turned into the suffering soul, made clear its hidden structural mysteries.

Harriet Monroe. *Poetry*. Jan., 1925. p. 210

Mr. Robinson's shorter poems are many and various, and the perfection they reach is remarkably many-sided. In blank verse, in talkative rhyme, in suave epigram, in running eloquence he has found his forms; in men of all conditions and characters he has found his material. But he is still consistent . . . in his presentation of the problem which existence is. A little light in a great deal of darkness, a wisp of music in a universe of irregular and ominous drums—it is in such images that he tells . . . of man's never wholly vain struggle for self-respect.

Mark Van Doren. *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (Literary Guild). 1927. pp. 49–50

Robinson's portrait of the American failure (a failure arrived at through the misapplication of New England pragmatism) is so complete, that the fact many of his books became best sellers must be a source of quiet amusement to him. There lies the irony more profound than anything Robinson has written. He remains, as always, the most unshaken, the most unmoved of America's critics, his clinical finger piercing an open wound. He has made his one discovery, has patented it; sometimes the statement produces poetry, sometimes merely words, but there it is; and it would take another reincarnation of Robinson to deny it.

Horace Gregory. *Poetry*. Dec., 1934. pp. 160–1

His artistry has much of the Yankee in it: on the one hand, its laconic, word-sparing quality and its tendency to understatement; on the other, its gift for circumlocution when this device will either conceal or veil what the Yankee has in mind or what is in his mood. . . . Moreover, it is this trait of expressing by indirection that makes Robinson seem more exclusively intellectual than he actually is. The man who does not wear his heart on his sleeve is not therefor heartless, but he is bound sometimes to produce that impression. And the man who on occasion talks by indirection or . . . so curtly that he throws away everything but the meaning—and keeps that to himself, does not always suffer from a tertian ague of tongue-tiedness and verbosity.

Percy H. Boynton. *Literature and American Life* (Ginn). 1936. pp. 804–5

His lyric perceptions, like his human values, are rooted in the known and possible—the capacities of a man which survive even in his sorriest condition of stultification and confusion. . . . He is a realist not only in conscience but in style and diction; in *milieu* as much as in imagery; and this gives him his license to explore the problems of abstract casuistry and moral contradiction which he filed down into that style of attenuated rumination, impassioned hair-splitting, and bleak aphorism which will always remain unmistakably his own.

Morton D. Zabel. *Literary Opinion in America* (Harper). 1937. p. 405

Edwin Arlington Robinson personified winter. Abandoning New England, he had carried to New York an aura of blight, desolation, decay, and defeat. His view of the world was wintry,—so was his life,—and his style and his personality were bleak and bare. Had there ever been a poet who loved life less or found so little joy in the turning of the seasons? In the down-east phrase, Robinson was ''master chilly.''

Van Wyck Brooks. *New England: Indian Summer* (Dutton). 1940. pp. 490–1

As with the passage of time their quality stands out from the bulky later work that tends to hide them, as the nation in maturing, gains in respect for the intellectual and contemplative virtues and sees behind material satisfactions the tragedy of human condition and feels the glory of art that in accepting tragedy transcends it, Robinson's figure will grow.

Emery Neff. *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (Sloane). 1948. p. 259

The fact is that he *likes* people. Shy, austere, fastidious, distressed by the taste of the general public (''as for the democratization of art, there ain't no such animal''), and distrustful of its intelligence (as he makes plain in *Dionysus in Doubt*), with no capacity or desire to be a ''popular'' poet, he nevertheless distinguishes the person from the mob; and piercing the armor of apparent nonentity, he finds a human being like himself and lends an attentive ear to his unique variant, comic or tragic, of the story common to mankind.

Ellsworth Barnard. *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (Macmillan). 1952. p. 179

Because his own poetry was based so firmly on his personal and sensitive appreciation of what was unchanging and available in the poetry of the past, Robinson was finally able to contemplate the future with some equanimity. Subsequent revolutions in taste have somewhat impared the reputation he finally won toward the end of his career, but these revolutions have also shown that some of Robinson's poetry did attain the stature at which he aimed and that it will not be quickly forgotten. There can be little doubt that his best work is now part of the ideal order by which he always wished to be measured.

Edwin S. Fussell. *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (California). 1954. p. 186

It is a village world, to be sure, but a village world whose sense of community has been destroyed. Most of its inhabitants are failures: sometimes resigned to their failure, sometimes unresignedly crushed by it. They have no means of declaring directly their sense of themselves; if such a sense exists, we are given to know it only inferentially, as, putting himself in the position of the inevitable outsider, Robinson can make us know it. They are in and of themselves not expressive; they have lost the power, if they have had it, of direct communication. . . . Even the relative successes like Flammonde cannot communicate. Still, whatever their degree

of failure or success, they are as persons meaningful to us. For they signify something important in the nature of the modern psyche—even if it is only as they are made to recall, in their inability to communicate directly, a condition and a time when such a thing as self-reliance (in any of its various forms) was a radical possibility for all men. In them, Robinson pushes to an outer limit a sense of the exhaustion, perhaps the bankruptcy, of the simple, separate person. Tilbury Town is the underworld of Walden and Paumanok.

Roy Harvey Pearce. *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton). 1961. p. 258

Although strongly influenced by Balzac, Zola, Henry James, Crabbe, Browning, and at first by Kipling, he soon found his own authentic voice. He did not rebel against, but pointedly ignored, the traditional distinction between poetic and unpoetic matter. He wrote interesting poetry about the disintegrated inner life of contemporary civilized men, using the language and word order of sophisticated conversation. His style, quite devoid of unction and afflatus, was remarkable for its coolness and dry precision. Many of his most serious poems were tinged with ironic wit. Best of all, he had the precious gift of ambiguity: it was often hard to see what he was driving at.

There are several reasons why these facts have largely been forgotten. Robinson's traditional verse patterns make him seem old-fashioned even when he is most original. He reacts against Tennysonianism not by attempting to create a new poetic language but by writing poetry in good though sometimes tortuous prose. This prose is essentially discursive: feeling and thinking are related in a structure of statements, not fused in symbolic images. The surface dramatic impersonality does not conceal the fact that he is usually talking about himself. He makes no attempt to heal the dissociation of sensibility by shaping an autotelic poem-world. More important for us, however, is the fact that under close inspection this sophisticated, ironic, disenchanted man so often proves to be embarrassingly ''inspirational.'' As with his master Browning, his simplicities undermine his complexities.

Hoxie Neale Fairchild. *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, vol. V (Columbia). 1962. pp. 238–9

Robinson's characters . . . are on the periphery of things—either voted in the high-school year book as the most popular, the most likely to succeed, or altogether at the time ignored and forgotten. It does not follow, however, that Tilbury Town is a town of peripheral people, intended to be quite different from other towns. The population is obviously composed mostly of those whom Robinson does not write about at all. And these emerge from the poetry, rather obliquely, as a group of austere, uncommunicative New Englanders who are unaware of, and unresponsive to, the people around them. It is possible to conclude, in fact, that Robinson's characterizations are far less an *evocation* of Tilbury Town than they are a message *to* it. The poet himself, a kind of outcast from Gardiner, Maine, creates with his poetry a bond of sympathy with humanity that he feels too few of us share. Indeed, Robinson's poetry is also evidence of his own inner light that the home town folks evidently never believed was burning within him.

Robert N. Hertz. *Minnesota Review*. Spring, 1962. p. 349

Altogether, what Robinson called his ''idealism'' was nothing of the sort. It made no attempt to define exclusive reality, it set up no archetypes, no ultimates. It was no more than an assertion of his preference for the life of the mind within ''thought's impenetrable mail,'' the contemplation by his outer conscious self of his inner unconscious self whose subsensuous activity was a mood, a mood of universal clairvoyance composite of being, perceiving, and loving. This mood possessed Robinson more completely and continuously than it does most people, even most artists, and his delight in it was the ''joy'' of ''idealism'' for which he was willing to forego ''all those pleasures which are said to make up the happiness of this life.'' Variously accoutered with the materials of outer experience, the clairvoyant mood motivated his poetry and his ''philosophic'' notions. Its universal love gave him his concern for all individuals. Its identity with all Being gave him his religion.

Chard Powers Smith. *Where the Light Falls: A Portrait of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (Macmillan). 1965. p. 290

. . .although there can be no doubt that Robinson means himself when he uses the first person singular in such poems as the ''Octaves'' and ''Credo,'' the vision in these poems and in *Captain Craig* is as exaggeratedly exalted as the vision in ''The Night Before'' is anguished. ''The Night Before'' and *Captain Craig* present, in fact, the two poles of Robinson's experience. The circumstances of their heroes are identical in the respect that they are men who have been scarred by life and who are now at the point of death; but Craig has won his way to love, truth, and light, whereas the condemned man has sunk too deeply into passion and darkness to attain more than a liberating glimpse of what Craig sees. As man and poet, Robinson had ideas about what he wanted to see and what he ought to see; but actuality—what he did see—was something else again.

James G. Hepburn. *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*. June, 1965. p. 268

Robinson's sense of conscience shares much with Thoreau's but with a difference. Both want, in a way and to a degree, to protest against the narrowing of conscience to the Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, village code. Good writing is as much a matter of conscience as good ploughing or honest shopkeeping. But Robinson *seems*—and I think was—more troubled than Thoreau: his periodic alcoholism was one symptom.

New England standards had deteriorated in the period after the Civil War, and [Henry] Adams, Henry James, and Robinson could no longer live there. I see something in common between all three which is partly, but only partly, prefigured in Thoreau. . . .

There is yet one more thing to add: Conscience requires utmost veracity with oneself and with others. This shows itself even in syntax: and *The Man Against the Sky* shows its cerebral structure in the repeated, and structurally located, conjunctions and conjunctions adverbs—the alternative possibilities of interpretation: ''or,'' ''again,'' ''or maybe,'' ''may have,'' ''if,'' ''or.''

New England once had, in its intellectuals, dogmatic assurance. By the times of Adams and Robinson, such dogmatic assurance is no longer possible to the lettered. But one can keep himself from

feigning an assurance he no longer feels and from uttering dogmas all too plainly subjective.

Austin Warren. *The New England Conscience* (Michigan). 1966. pp. 190, 193

Unlike his contemporaries . . . Robinson had a great deal of success in accomplishing a meaningful movement from dark or gray or dead gods to light and color and life. Perhaps this is because his genius separated him from them in nothing more clearly than in its depriving him of his youth. Not only did he serve out his apprenticeship in greater geographical isolation than did they, not only did he live a celibate's life, but he also had the stamina to deny himself a young man's outlook on the world. His was a dramatic imagination, and, somewhat like Sarah Jewett, he was able to see himself in older people and to check his impatience at the darkness ahead by seeing that it was ahead only because he was young; that, in point of fact, it was behind for many, and, because they had experienced it, it was not all darkness. He could project a drama involving this perception so completely that his assertions of the light glimmering somewhere were validated by the felt experience set forth in the poem, since a life had been lived there, rather than sounding, as in the poems of his contemporaries, like the pronouncements of youthful bravado.

Larzer Ziff. *The American 1890s* (Viking). 1966. pp. 330–1

There are two kinds of alienation, however, and they serve to separate the characters in Robinson. One class is made up of those who have seen the truth about themselves and cannot get it out of their minds. These characters, the realists, have two choices: they may commit suicide (Barnard counts fourteen suicides in E. A. Robinson) or they may silently withdraw from life. The second class, the romantics, is made up of those who have made a covenant with themselves not to see the truth. With the aid of their illusions, they survive, but they are rejected by their fellow men, who find their illusions either contemptible or laughable. . . . If there is a message in Robinson's best poetry, it is that we are probably happier if we remain ignorant of the hell that is life on earth, but that any such happiness is necessarily hollow and meaningless.

Scott Donaldson. *American Literature*. May, 1966. p. 225

Robinson's heroes were bound to be antiheroes, like Captain Craig (or his heir, John Crowe Ransom's ''Captain Carpenter'') and the scores who followed him out of Tilbury Town or those in the Arthurian cycle—misfits and alienated men whose moral heroism is paradoxically made possible by the fact of their irredeemable failure. ''I shall never be a Prominent Citizen,'' Robinson wrote in 1895, ''and I thank God for it, but I shall be something just as good perhaps and possibly a little more permanent.'' Exploring personal alienation and social failure, he achieved success; setting forth the actuality of despair, he secured hope (''I suppose I'm the damnedest optimist that ever lived,'' he wrote in 1913); dramatizing the reign of the antihero, he defined and made relevant a hero for the modern world.

Jay Martin. *Harvests of Change* (Prentice). 1967. p. 155

The center of Robinson's region is a town; he usually deals with town-dwellers, while Frost and Hardy usually deal with countrymen. Furthermore, Robinson's speakers, unlike those of Frost and Hardy, are seldom outsiders looking in. They are not city-dwellers regarding the country, or country people regarding the ways of the town, or people with a sense of the past regarding the present. Rather, they almost always participate exclusively in the social and moral milieu which they examine. They may sense weaknesses in that milieu, but their points of view seldom provide larger contexts from which the situation can be more accurately assessed. By implication, such contexts exist; but readers must find them for themselves, or find them on the basis of very limited hints in the poetry.

Paul Zietlow. *New England Quarterly*. June, 1967. p. 191

The quality of Robinson's newness has almost always been a subject for argument. But by the time of his *Man against the Sky* volume, he had fairly outlasted rejection by his elders, who genteelly deprecated his work for its prosiness and inglorious realism. Almost at once the tables were turned, and he found himself classed as obsolete by young men who denounced him as genteel and conventional. With his long look back to Wordsworth and the language and form in which he cast his latter-day Immortality Ode [''The Man against the Sky''], he was identified with the nineteenth-century world whose passing he tried to measure. His juniors were tempted to think that Prufrock's evening ''spread out against the sky/Like a patient etherized upon a table'' reduced to triteness the old-fashioned sunset which, early and late, was a controlling symbol in the older poet's work. Within five years, Eliot was dismissing Robinson as ''negligible,'' and all the disdainful young men joined in. Readers who were arrested by the highly dramatic language of Eliot's monologues felt themselves merely deterred by Robinson's slow-paced reflectiveness. His grave manner did not call attention to itself in any case, but when minds were tuning to the flashing wit of a brilliant modernism, his subtlety and strength were easy to miss. His being formal was misunderstood by those who were reacting against the politeness of polite letters. His tone of consideration and reconsideration led them rashly to conclude that he was stolid. Formality, thoughtfulness, and reticence concealed his emotional depth—though not from everyone.

J.C. Levenson. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Autumn, 1968. pp. 591–2

Robinson's poetic problem . . . was to transform the abstract ideas and sentimental, cliché-ridden metaphors of his day into poetry. In a sense he was trying to restore life to a worn-out language without abandoning that language. He succeeded to the degree to which he could place sufficient distance between his ideas and his own voice through the use of character. When, as in ''Captain Craig,'' the persona voice articulates Robinson's ideas, the success is qualified. When, as in ''Flammonde,'' the idea is embodied in the whole perceptual process of the poem, Robinson achieves a degree of artfulness superior to that of anyone writing at the turn of the century.

The strategy of ''Flammonde'' forms the basis of Robinson's most successful character poems. ''Richard Cory,'' ''Old King Cole,'' ''Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford,'' ''Bewick

Finzer,'' ''Cliff Klingenhagen,'' ''Aaron Stark''—all are ultimately as mysterious as is ''Flammonde.'' In each case the simple perception of the persona voice falls into an unresolved paradox which leaves the final impression of a spiritual order above man's comprehension, yet controlling his destiny with an unswerving necessity. Although such poems use the language of a materialistic century, Robinson's strategy of character allowed him to make it express his faith in the power of spirit.

Part of Robinson's triumph as a poet is that he could formulate such a strategy given the language with which he had to work. Part of his limitation is that he could never go beyond it. The new poetic language born with Pound and Eliot achieved an integration of image and feeling and an artful distance produced by density of context which remained beyond Robinson's talent.

William J. Free in *Edwin Arlington Robinson: Centenary Essays*, ed. Ellsworth Barnard (Georgia). 1969. p. 29

Though love acquires a sensual power in *Tristram* which is new in Robinson's work, it does not change in any fundamental way old views toward the basic problems of human existence. We can see in Robinson's Arthurian poems an extension of those in *The Torrent and the Night Before* and in *The Children of the Night*. There, we may recall, man is shackled by the weaknesses of his own nature—by selfishness, indifference, and stupidity, limitations that create a twilight world more akin to death than life. Hope exists in the confidence that the Light will come. How? We don't quite know. Robinson suggests somewhat tentatively that improvement in man's estate rests in God's love and in art. If we turn our eyes to the Arthurian scene, we shall discover that man's vices have become something more malignant than ''sin's frail distress.'' Selfishness is now vulgar self-indulgence; indifference, now treachery and disloyalty; and stupidity, the criminal neglect of urgent responsibilities. What stands as a dyke holding back the flood of destruction is art—Merlin's, indeed, and Arthur's—and love—any form of it, not exclusively God's. Here it is preeminently the nobler passions of an Arthur not twisted by Gawaine's hate or of a white Isolt who attains ultimate understanding on a lonely beach in Brittany. In Robinson's Camelot we have no pure Galahad and no Holy Grail; we are left, when Camelot has vanished in flames, only with the figure of a battered Lancelot who possesses the hope that in the darkness ''the Light'' would come and the confidence that ''There are worlds enough to follow.'' . . . Robinson has erected the towers of Camelot on familiar ground, perhaps, even in New England, well within the walking range of men of his own time, and of later times.

Charles T. Davis in *Edwin Arlington Robinson: Centenary Essays*, ed. Ellsworth Barnard (Georgia). 1969. pp. 102–3

If one were to suggest a contemporary American artist to illustrate the poems of Robinson, it would be David Levine, the brilliant caricaturist of the *New York Review of Books*, the Daumier of the Left. We can imagine Levine dispatching Richard Cory, Aaron Stark, Cliff Klingenhagen, Reuben Bright, and Flammonde, to name only a few characters, with easily rendered, hard-edged lines. He could, because Robinson's characters, especially those of the short poems, display a rigidity that is, in a sense, a parody of authentic identity. They have, to use Wilhelm Reich's phrase, seemingly impenetrable ''character armor.'' In fact, when their ''armor'' is broken, often in violent and self-destructive ways, as in ''Richard Cory'' and ''Reuben Bright,'' a first impulse is to laugh. The sudden imposition of the human upon the mechanical, to use Henri Bergson's formula for comedy, provokes a momentary exhilaration. These characters seem always to overthrow their rigid, defensive selves—the selves that are machinelike in their repetition-compulsions. In their efforts, what underlying forces are trying to come into being are not always clear. Little or no dialogue occurs between the contending impulses, and when the self is so divided as to have unconscious materials completely cut off from consciousness, the break-through takes on hysterical qualities.

H.R. Wolf in *Modern American Poetry*, ed. Jerome Mazzaro (McKay). 1970. pp. 46–7

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ROETHKE, Theodore (1908–1963)

A good poet can be recognized by his tense awareness of both chaos and order, the arbitrary and the necessary, the fact and the pattern. . . . By such a test Mr. Roethke is instantly recognizable as a good poet. . . . Many people have the experience of feeling physically soiled and humiliated by life; some quickly put it out of their mind, others gloat narcissistically on its unimportant details; but both to remember and to transform the humiliation into something beautiful, as Mr. Roethke does, is rare.

W.H. Auden. *Saturday Review*. April 5, 1941. pp. 30–1

What Roethke brings us . . . is news of the root, of the minimal, of the primordial. The sub-human is given tongue; and the tongue proclaims the agony of coming alive, the painful miracle of growth. Here is poetry immersed in the destructive element.

Stanley Kunitz. *Poetry*. Jan., 1949. p. 225

He meets, in his way, the problem which Eliot met in another by expanding his poetry to encompass theological doctrine, and

thereby including a terminology which, within the Roethke rules, would be ungainly (unless used ironically—and children don't take to irony). Eliot added winds of doctrine. Roethke ''regressed'' as thoroughly as he could, even at considerable risk, toward a language of sheer intuition.

Kenneth Burke. *Sewanee Review*. Jan., 1950. p. 102

With many a writer who affects to plumb the depths of his own unconsciousness, one feels that after he has dived into the bathysphere, he is only too apt to emerge with nothing but the bathetic—or the banal—and that if he comes up with something rich and strange, or only grotesque, one cannot feel sure but that he has planted his deep-sea bucket in advance with a few specimens of starfish and sea-urchins, not to mention an old boot or two, just to make it look better. Mr. Roethke is more convincing; he has established, and this is a matter of technique as surely as feats of prosody, avenues of communication to his own unconsciousness. . . . Adept at breathing, so to speak through his gills, Mr. Roethke seems to me a little less sure of himself when it is time to use his lungs.

Rolfe Humphries. *The Nation*. March 22, 1952. p. 284

Roethke's work is his own. His shorter poems are distinguished not so much by their matter . . . but by their tone. He manages to escape the pedestrian flatness of some of his fellows and the strained intellectualism of others. He has as much to say of the interior landscape as of that without, and writes with particular acuteness of the nameless malaise of the spirit. His work gains from the fact that his childhood was intimately bound up with the life of a Michigan greenhouse, which physically and otherwise, was to afford the material for some of his best lyrics. . . . Shifting cadences and homely images taken from childhood memories of the floriculturist's world, meanings as evasive as some secretive animal and equally frightening, produce unusual and powerful effects. These poems are an account of the journey through the dark wood—here symbolized by stagnant water, among other forms of death—into the light that clothes the visible in the garments of eternity.

Babette Deutsch. *Poetry in Our Time*. (Holt). 1952. pp. 182–3

Roethke's is the poetry of therapy; it dances its way from madness (symbolized by the wet riot of vegetable roots and the grossness of flesh) to a reflective calm (winter and distance). It is the richness and variety of Roethke's rhythm together with the shock and clarity of his broken phrases that persuades. Roethke slams into his dance, arms in air and ranting like a sibyl. His style seems most nearly founded on Christopher Smart, Blake, the Elizabethan rant, and the backwoods brag, all scattering free, but always with a sense of breaking through a tremendous formal control. Roethke's strength is that he never talks about his subject matter but enters and performs it. The best measure of his achievement is that there are now a subject, a rhythm, and a kind of perception that are specifically Roethkean.

John Ciardi. *The Nation*. Nov. 14, 1953. p. 410

A very good poet is Theodore Roethke. From the precise statements of *Open House* (1941) through the sensuous wilderness of *Praise to the End* (1951) he has arrived at the wild precision of his most recent verse. . . . Never, in Roethke's ''free verse,'' is there a hint of the arbitrary; every line is glued in place, as fixed as in his regular forms. . . . He is more accomplished outside conventional forms than any poet since Wallace Stevens.

Donald Hall. *New World Writing* 7. 1955. pp. 236–7

It is sufficiently clear by now that Theodore Roethke is a very important poet. . . . These poems appear, at first glance, to be uncontrollable and subliminal outcries, the voices of roots, stones, leaves, logs, small birds; and they also resemble the songs in Shakespearean plays, Ophelia's songs perhaps most of all. This surface impression is genuine and ought not to be disregarded. But it is only the surface, however moving, and as such it can be misleading or superficial. The reader who supposes that Roethke is really a primitive lyric poet loses or misses a great deal. . . . Throughout his work, Roethke uses a *variety* of devices with the utmost cunning and craft to bring the unconsciousness to the surface of articulate expression.

Delmore Schwartz. *Poetry*. June, 1959. p. 203

Roethke is an intensely introspective poet. His chief subject is himself, but the poems range from his childhood to his maturity, from his frustrations to the freeing himself from these frustrations, from almost crippling inner tensions to the achievement of a balanced maturity with his emotional and intellectual faculties in equipoise, from a mistaken to a positive self-knowledge. His poetry has been of value to him and is to us because of its analysis in depth. Technically, he is both conservative and revolutionary. His most successful device is his use of symbols drawn from his close and intimate association with nature, not only as he has lived with it along the streams, marshes, stagnant pools, forests in and near the ''thumb'' district of Michigan, but as he has encountered it in the forcing area of a greenhouse. He has, it is true, written several poems Frostian in quality, and he has looked so steadily and perceptively at the minutiae of nature that his symbol-free early descriptions in the light of his later work assume a symbolic quality. He has, too, written some moving poems on death. Basically, however, death, nature, and love are only a few of the subjects which have helped him rid himself of his inner tensions. Roethke is not a prolific poet, and understandably so when the reader is aware of the intensity of his concentration on isolated moments.

James G. Southworth. *College English*. March, 1960. pp. 326–7

There was something of a cry in each of Roethke's lines: a cry of astonishment at finding the thing—tree, stone, shell, woman—*really* there, and himself also there at the same time: a cry of affirmation at knowing some how that he and it *would* be there. This may account for the fact that there is some mindless, elemental quality in the sound of his voice, something primitive and animistic, something with the wariness and inhuman grace of the wild beast,

and with it another thing that could not be and never has been animal-like. His poems are human poems in the full weight of that adjective: poems of a creature animal enough to enter *half* into unthinking nature and unanimal enough to be uneasy there, taking thought at what the animal half discerns and feels. This position, which at times seems triumphantly an extraordinary kind of wholeness impossible to animals and possible to men only at rare times, is the quality that Roethke has caught in his best poems.

James Dickey. *Poetry*. Nov., 1964. pp. 120–1

I am myself too much influenced and shaped by Roethke's use of language to be at the moment a good critical judge of his work. I know that what he does involves a great deal of daring, because it includes opening the word to its broadest areas of connotation, admitting and controlling the most formidable body of possibility. Often one may begin discussing a Roethke poem in terms of limited reference: it is *about* religious experience or *about* madness. But in the end one discovers that ''about'' is the wrong word, that what Roethke has done is to abandon abouts, and to try instead to deal with central patterns and motions of human experience, patterns which recur, are relevant, in terms of religious experience or madness, but which are really larger than any one of their limited manifestations suggests. The effort of Roethke's poetry is an incredible effort; it wants to admit everything. What is even more incredible is the fact that it does, it succeeds.

William Dickey. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1964–65. p. 596

In his poems, Roethke seems often to be dancing. This is not the dance transcended and purified in the poetry, the entry into a metaphysical pattern of theological joy of Auden or Eliot, nor is it the tragic dancing on the graves of the dead of Yeats—it is simply Roethke incredibly and almost against his will dancing. He is the boy who is waltzed round by his father of the whiskeyed breath; the sensual man swaying toward the woman swaying toward him; the dying man dancing his way out of his body toward God.

There was never, one might say, such ungainly yet compulsive dancing, as in Roethke. . . .

Stephen Spender in *Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry*, ed. Arnold Stein (Washington). 1965. p. 5

More reliable than reason, for instance. In his search for a viable and live order, Roethke used his mind for all it was worth, but he would not vote for reason. He did not believe that you could pit the rational powers against the weeds of circumstance and hope to win. When he spoke of reason, it was invariably Stevens' ''Reason's click-clack,'' a mechanical affair. In one poem Roethke says, ''Reason? That dreary shed, that hutch for grubby schoolboys!'' Indeed, reason normally appears in his poems, at least officially, as a constriction. Commenting on his poem ''In a Dark Time,'' Roethke said that it was an attempt ''to break through the barriers of rational experience.'' The self, the daily world, reason, meant bondage: to come close to God you had to break through; these things were never the medium of one's encounter with God, always obstacles in its way. For such encounters you had to transcend reason; if you managed it, you touched that greater thing which is the ''reason in madness'' of *King Lear*. The good man takes the risk of darkness. If reason's click-clack is useless there remains in man a primitive striving toward the light. Nature, seldom a friend to man, at least offers him a few saving analogies; one being that of darkness and light.

Denis Donoghue in *Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry*, ed. Arnold Stein (Washington). 1965. p. 151

His poems controlled, they sympathized. They only began, at the end, fully to give. They controlled the wide and deep areas of the personal, the widest and deepest, I am persuaded, in the work of any contemporary American poet. And they demonstrated again and again how we have access to those areas only through sympathy—the power of human sympathy as it at first derives and then differentiates itself from the power which maintains the natural order of things. Roethke began to learn, and to make poems which teach, that out of the power of sympathy there comes the power to give, thus to be given to. He began to comprehend the full range of the other, that chain of being which moves from the minimal to God.

The poems in *The Far Field* indicate the distance he had come. Many of the love poems are centered on the consciousness of woman, an ''I'' different enough from the center of consciousness of the earlier love poems to manifest not only the power of sympathy but of identity with another.

Roy Harvey Pearce in *Theodore Roethke: Essays on the Poetry*, ed. Arnold Stein (Washington). 1965. p. 190

Roethke's passionate and near-microscopic scrutiny of the chemistry of growth extended beyond ''the lives on a leaf'' to the world of what he termed ''the minimal,'' or ''the lovely diminutives,'' the very least of creation, including ''beetles in caves, newts, stone-deaf fishes, lice tethered to long limp subterranean weeds, squirmers in bogs, and bacterial creepers.'' These are creatures still wet with the waters of the beginning. At or below the threshold of the visible they correspond to that darting, multitudinous life of the mind under the floor of the rational, in the wet of the subconscious.

Roethke's immersion in these waters led to his most heroic enterprise, the sequence of interior monologues which he initiated with the title poem of *The Lost Son*, which he continued in *Praise to the End* (1951), and which he persisted up to the last in returning to, through a variety of modifications and developments. . . .

The protagonist, who recurrently undertakes the dark journey into his own underworld, is engaged in a quest for spiritual identity. The quest is simultaneously a flight, for he is being pursued by the man he has become, implacable, lost, soiled, confused. In order to find himself he must lose himself by reexperiencing all the stages of his growth, by reenacting all the transmutations of his being from seed-time to maturity. We must remember that it is the poet himself who plays all the parts. He is Proteus and all the forms of Proteus—flower, fish, reptile, amphibian, bird, dog, etc.—and he is the adversary who hides among the rocks to pounce on Proteus, never letting go his hold, while the old man of the sea writhes through his many shapes until, exhausted by the struggle, he consents to prophesy in the *claritas* of his found identity.

Stanley Kunitz. *New Republic*. Jan. 23, 1965. p. 24

As a poet, Roethke was involved in still another quest: for the best means of presenting that direct expression of human experience. Beginning with the intellectuality of the metaphysical school, with discourse and analysis, he moved inexorably toward the sensuous, the symbolic, the organic metaphor. Extending the doctrine of correspondences, he did not merely speculate about, but, in the greenhouse poems, actually entered the world of the subhuman and the prerational; and he used the techniques developed there for brilliant explorations of the growth of the psyche in *Praise to the End!* From the private world of psychology, Roethke's concern with death, and the meaning of life, brought him to the more public realms of philosophy and religion, and therefore to an appropriately more formal lyric. But even here, Roethke attempted to be less sophisticated, and more direct, than the poetic tradition he had assimilated. And the new sequences of meditations, more discursive versions of the ''primary process'' patterns of *Praise to the End!*, derive much of their power from a system of evocative correspondences between inner and outer, primitive and adult, worlds.

Karl Malkoff. *Theodore Roethke: An Introduction to the Poetry* (Columbia). 1966. p. 221

I am not sure how well Roethke's memory was served by his very uneven last poems, which he had been readying for the press when he died in August 1963. The poems are touching in at least two ways. First, they refer to his illness and seem aware of imminent death, though he was only fifty-five or younger when they were written. Second, behind their assumption of an achieved, transcendent quietude lies a deeper impression of inability to cope with the old, still unresolved hysteria, which Roethke had unloosed in his earlier work, and of a consequent resort to the stock cosmic pieties of sagedom from Chuang-tzu on down.

M. L. Rosenthal. *The New Poets* (Oxford). 1967. p. 113

Roethke came closest of the poets of our time to repossessing the essential ways of knowing and feeling of our major poetic tradition, the tradition defined by Emerson, Whitman, and Dickinson. . . . Roethke was a Transcendental poet, a nature poet, and a poet of the transcendent self conceived both as representative and as defined by its capacity for growth. He was a poet dedicated to a new or ''high'' kind of ''seeing,'' ultimately to illumination or mystic vision, a realization in experience, not in theory, of what Emerson referred to as the seer ''becoming'' what he sees. He was a poet who hoped to speak both for and to his time by discovering his own identity—and then creating a new identity capable of moving in a larger circumference by recognizing, accepting, and including within the self more ''things,'' more of ''fate,'' more of the tough resilience of the ''not-me.''

Hyatt H. Waggoner. *American Poets from the Puritans to the Present* (Houghton). 1968. pp. 564–5

The two chief questions which the collection of Roethke's poems [*Collected Poems*] poses are (1) whether he digested his obvious borrowings from Eliot, Yeats, Hopkins, Dylan Thomas and Whitman, and (2) whether he ever got beyond the undoubted achievement of the ''green-house poems'' in his 1948 volume *The Lost Son*. Breaking things down in these poems to their lowest common factors, he speaks with his own voice and with a painful urgency. The poems smell of the earth and crawl with life; plants and little creatures like snails are seen not just closely but as equals. The verse runs its fingers right down into the roots of vegetable and animal existence. But it is a child's vision, which threatens to dissolve each time the poet comes anywhere near to putting it in an adult perspective. . . .

Roethke shared (or got infected with) his father's love of order, and it seems to have been a failure to achieve it in his own right that drove him both to his eclecticism and to the rather confused mysticism which falsifies the focus of so many of his later, more ambitious poems.

Ronald Hayman. *Encounter*. Feb., 1969. pp. 74–5

[Roethke's] poetry is often close to nursery rhymes and nonsense verse, and he cultivates his affinity to earlier mad poets: Traherne, Smart, Blake, the mad old wicked Yeats. In this non-human visionary world of childhood fears and adult madness, the Dionysian element is very plain. But the weakness is also plain: the world of normal adult experience is so remote that, both in content and technique, the poetry is limited, tending to obsessive concern with certain experiences and to incoherence on the verge of real obscurity. Roethke apparently realized this, and in his later verse was moving out toward a wider range and clearer organization, as in ''Four for Sir John Davies.''

Monroe K. Spears. *Dionysus and the City* (Oxford—N.Y.). 1970. p. 247

At his death in 1963 Roethke left 277 notebooks in which he had jotted down, for 20 years, fragments of verse, aphorisms, elliptical injunctions to himself, remarks about teaching poetry, reveries and random observations (surprisingly few and mild) about other poets. The notebooks evidently served Roethke as a verbal compost heap. He would on occasion raid it for lines and images and graft them onto his current work.

David Wagoner, the poet who selected and grouped the extracts that compose *Straw for the Fire*, suggests that Roethke didn't use the material because ''he was sometimes dealing with material too painful to complete'' and ''he loved incompleteness, perhaps because it represented a promise that he would never exhaust himself.'' . . .

More likely, though, the material did not meet Roethke's high artistic standards. For the melancholy fact is that there is very little here that is not more eloquently said in the *Collected Poems* and in *On the Poet and His Craft*.

Herbert Leibowitz. *New York Times Book Section*. April 9, 1972. p. 4

Nature does not by itself define Roethke's sensibility, both tortured and naïve, so human and animal. He is also a poet of the unconscious, of childhood, leaning to beginnings, clutching for roots; he returns farther back than where life began, to start again; and like

many Romantics, he reaches for death. He is a dream poet, wishing his way everywhere; a love singer, sensual and pure; an author of nonsense verse and childhood lyrics. A bare Self—''I'm naked to the bone''—undergoing journeys to the interior, moving outward toward a woman, an animal, a flower, speaks in rhythms of its own. . . .

There are moments when Roethke comes too close to the great authors who influenced his work; when his poetry gives itself to clichés of doxology; or when the focus of his insight, excluding much of the human world, seems too special. These moments are infrequent. More often, he is a poet of the indicative; being, not doing, is his joy. He is the recipient of some aboriginal magic, nature-blessed, master of some hysteria no Word can allay. He is, finally, a true original who may not shape American verse, yet henceforth must occupy a unique place in the soul of poetry.

Ihab Hassan. *Contemporary American Literature* (Ungar). 1973. pp. 98–9

This unity of opposites indicates the way in which Roethke's world is a total alternative to the dualistic structures of classical Western thought, an alternative that is manifest in our most primary, everyday experience. Body and world, subject and object, time and space, fantasy and reality, child and man, all exist in a perfect unity, a unity given previous to any reflection, and a unity that couldn't conceivably be otherwise. But each exists also as perfectly autonomous; each is bounded and liberated by itself; each is a hole, a mouth. The garden, Roethke's world, is the condition of growth; it is open-ended, a mouth, since it leaves itself and fills itself in the becoming motion that is growth. This includes the world of inanimate as well as animate things, since the life of that world is the perfect unity of life and death, of Being and Nonbeing, that infuses every moment of our lives.

John Vernon. *The Garden and the Map* (Illinois). 1973. p. 190

The life Roethke loves is a process, a cosmic dance with Bird, Leaf, Fish, and Snail in which the Eye half-perceives and half-creates all of the dancers. The abiding Leaf, ever-decaying, never to be decayed, and the questing Snail, ever evolving, never to be evolved, are Roethke's partners. They suggest the rhythm (and the limits) of the dance. Nothing is ever lost; nothing ever fully arrives. And it is Love and the love of Love which moves them all.

Blake is evolved, both by name and by imitation, as the representative poet-mystic, the visionary who saw the sun to be a choir of angels chanting ''holy, holy, holy.'' The eye of such a poet has the ''altering power'' in abundance, making Blake one of the mystical brotherhood of singers who, perhaps, are as one singer in the cosmic vision.

We come, at the end which is not an end, to One, which is where we began in ''In a Dark Time.'' There *one* became *One*. Now ''everything comes to One.'' The sense of Oneness has enlarged to include all of creation, all of the dancers. Some of the loneliness of the ''dark time'' has been dispelled, and the motion here is that of the dance, not of ''the tearing wind.'' The third ''dance on,'' like Gertrude Stein's third rose, suggests infinite repetition. The dance goes on, still and still moving, into the silence beyond the poem.

Like the aging instant which forever vanishes just ahead of us, each poem in *Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical* has independent worth and identity, yet each is enlarged in meaning and value by its relationship to other of the poems and to the whole. And, like that vanishing instant, each poem in the *Sequence* destroys itself to make way for the next poem. Ever decaying, never to be decayed; ever evolving, never to be evolved, the poems of *Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical* prove that each ending is a new beginning, and that endings and beginnings alike are ''perpetual.'' The sequence of twelve poems may not wholly master the complexities of a world in process, but, taken together, the poems represent a remarkable attempt to wed the motion of the creative mind to the motion that is life itself.

Richard Allen Blessing. *Theodore Roethke's Dynamic Vision* (Indiana Univ. Pr., 1974), pp. 218–19

If one were to search for the persistent pattern which unifies Roethke's work, making it such a coherent body of work, one would have to settle on the pattern of rebirth. . . . The starting point of Roethke's work is this passion for rebirth, to strip away encumbrances in order to get back to first things. This impulse might possibly be connected with the manic-depressive pattern of his own personal experience, with its violent oscillations between extreme states of joy when the sense of being gained greatest access, and unendurable anxiety which threatened the very stability of the self. These oscillations clearly undermined any sense of continuity of self which Roethke might have been able to secure. The self was for him something that had to be perpetually recreated. It was an extremely tenuous concept since it had to be based on assurances of spiritual identity, and confidence continually wavered. Roethke called himself a perpetual beginner. Each time in each new poem, it was as if he had to begin over again, no previous gain being sufficient in the arduous process of self-definition. His work is therefore completely autobiographical in the broadest sense—a compulsive and continual reassessment of the nature of identity. . . .

Roethke never claimed that he had reached the final stages of mystical illumination. He was interested in mysticism as a psychological process that terminates in an undefinable but somehow potent sense of illumination. Such an analysis offered him a means to objectify his search for spiritual identity within a structure that is universally recognizable, but this structure always had to be justified in personal terms. His mystical poems actually record the desperate struggle for belief, rather than a formularized ritual.

In both his early and late poetry, if Roethke took the problems of the self as his theme, he was neither egocentric nor narcissistic. The self in his poetry becomes a symbol, interesting to him only when it impinges on representative concerns and not otherwise. In fact he is the least confessional of modern poets. His poems are never private complaints, the record of domestic misfortunes which move for their human content but seem never to exceed themselves. Yet he never evaded the personal either. His poems show how the violence of the self—the problems of alienation, discontinuity, and homelessness—can be written about with subtlety and passion. . . .

With Theodore Roethke, the pressure of his own imagination, the inescapable presence of his own individuality, is always recognizable in the depth of his penetration into the interior

processes of personality, and in his acute sensitivity to the subliminal, irrational forces of life.

Rosemary Sullivan. *Theodore Roethke: The Garden Master* (Univ. of Washington Pr., 1975), pp. 190–91, 194–95, 198

His sense of tradition encompassed not only a conscious historical attitude, but a psychological state, and his act of imitation was not a mechanical process, but a basic component of those imaginative faculties most directly involved in the creation of a poem. The degree to which his sense of tradition was an emotional attitude involving his whole psychological condition is most clearly demonstrated in his belief that while he was writing ''The Dance'' Yeats was in his presence.

The strongest single influence on Roethke's concept of his tradition, and one of the most important poets in that tradition, is T.S. Eliot. . . .

Roethke offers in his poems a number of metaphors marking his evolving conception of the relationship between ''tradition and the individual talent.'' In his earliest book, the poetry of the past is viewed as an inherited burden. The pressure of the past is a sinister force against which the modern poet self-consciously struggles to assert his own originality. Later, Roethke begins to discover that a literary inheritance is not given as a birthright but must be created as a means for permitting the poet to realize his own abilities through imitation and finally assimilation—arts that at their worst are mimicry and blatant theft and at their best enable the poet to find ''the accent'' of his own speech and yet at the same time to overcome the limitations of the solitary talent unsupported by tradition. . . .

Had Roethke lived longer, it is likely that his most important metaphors for his sense and use of tradition would have developed into something like myths. If he had enlarged his metaphor of ''rocking'' into a concept of history explaining the reanimation of the past in the present, it might well have been similar to Yeats's gyres. ''The dance'' in which ''everything comes to One,'' if extended, might have become, like Blake's *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, an all-encompassing myth for the total assimilation of past into present poets and the realization of self through absorption into the organic structure of the poem. Perhaps Roethke would have found the descent of Milton into the mind of Blake and the embrace of Creator and created at the end of *Jerusalem* prototypal myths for that process whereby the poet becomes his tradition and the tradition becomes the poet.

Jenijoy La Belle. *The Echoing Wood of Theodore Roethke* (Princeton Univ. Pr., 1976), pp. 166–68

There is no explicit mention of God in ''The Lost Son,'' but there is ''Father Fear,'' whom one can assume as a substitute, since God, house, and father often fuse their meanings in ''The Lost Son'' sequence in the *Praise to the End!* volume. In effect, God takes on the masculine qualities of a father in ''The Lost Son,'' and the poem itself, as an act of creation, emphasizes the sense of hierarchy and order associated with the greenhouse. . . . ''The Lost Son'' is the only poem in the sequence that dramatizes the need for dying, and it is the only poem that perfects a sense of stasis, that is, a mystical sense of stillness for its own sake. . . .

The animism in the surrounding poems is affirmatively alive and more intense than that in ''The Lost Son'' . . . and for this reason there is very little or nothing of a quiet sense of stasis, of being on the edge between life and death that the last section of ''The Lost Son'' conveys so well. This central poem gives Roethke a way out, a ''going-forward'' in the journey out of the self that defines the Roethkean mode of identity, because ''The last time I nearly whispered myself away. /I was far back, farther than anybody else.''. . . One could say, then, that the animism from the surrounding sequence of poems is conditioned by the central poem, toned down in effect, and made to bear the burden of death. The poetry in ''The Lost Son'' carries this idea, not only by assertion . . . but also through the mood of stasis, especially by means of the slowed down, sometimes monometric, rhythms and the barren field imagery. This conditioned animism is what Roethke develops in the subsequent long poems, and brings to perfection in the last of these long poems, ''North American Sequence.'' It is a kind of trope really, . . . a regenerative pattern in the poetry, and if it succeeds as a defining characteristic of Roethke's poetry, of the Roethkean mode of identity, it is because this regenerative animism is conditioned by the reality of death and stasis, the beginning expression of which is found for the first time in ''The Lost Son.''

Emphasizing the shifting nature of the mind in ''The Lost Son'' (''Tell me:/Which is the way I take''), Roethke lays much stress on repetition—repetition of images, of moods, of rhythmic forms (everything twice), and it is this repetitive form that supports the tragic element in this and subsequent long poems, for only in repetition is the epic theme manifest, the dance between life and death, joy and sorrow, pity and fear. One could say that the shifting nature of the mind that Roethke's repetitive forms create defines a real or dramatic sense of the edge between the lost son and the found father, between the empty house and the full house (flower filled), and between the false self and the true self.

Harry Williams. *''The Edge Is What I Have'': Theodore Roethke and After* (Bucknell Univ. Pr., 1977). pp. 66–68

Roethke's poetry will never be properly understood unless read within the context of Romanticism in its American manifestation. The work of recent critics has been invaluable in showing the breadth and continuity of the Romantic movement from its origins in eighteenth-century Germany to the present. What seems constant in this nearly intractable movement is the recognition that every man is cut off from nature; given this state of affairs, art becomes indispensable in the process of reconciliation between self and nature (subject and object). Every man has either to make his peace with nature or wage his own ''war between the mind and sky'' (as Stevens called it). . . .

Roethke's specific connections were Romantic, especially with the American visionary side. More so than any other contemporary poet, he carried on an exhaustive dialogue with his precursors. . . .

In all, *The Lost Son* remains the central volume, this poet's most durable achievement, and the key to his work. This is not to dismiss the love lyrics of his middle period or the best of his later meditative sequences, which deepen and extend the autobiographical mythos at the core of all his best writing, the quest for the greenhouse Eden. The cycles of death and rebirth are crucial here, providing the contrarieties that generate creative energy. The long poem sequences, Roethke's favorite medium, make constant use of this

pattern; the poet's most basic movement is from desolation and fear to consolation and joy. In this, Roethke becomes a meditative poet par excellence.

It looks clear now that Roethke has earned a permanent place in the literature of American Romanticism. Finally, it is Roethke's fierce honesty with himself that illumines his best work; when he succeeds, it is because he has managed to speak directly about his most personal and, often, disturbing experiences. When he fails, it is because of self-deception or affectation.

> Jay Parini. *Theodore Roethke: An American Romantic* (Univ. of Massachusetts Pr., 1979). pp. 4, 188

Despite the hard-won sense of reconciliation and joy that concludes *The Far Field*, Roethke was never completely at peace with himself. Death remained for him, until the end, a terrible consequence. For Roethke, as for the protagonist in his poetry, spiritual advancement was always accompanied by some slipping back, and the gains he made in the poems of his final volume were apparently only temporary, though that final struggle did represent, in Roethke's words, some progress. His push toward the Absolute was indeed among those experiences that are ''so powerful and so profound . . . that they repeat themselves . . . again and again . . . each time bringing us closer to our own most particular (and thus most universal) reality.'' In his last poems, it appears that Roethke drew as near to his particular and universal reality as life would allow. To go further meant to go beyond life, to die.

If Roethke was haunted by a fear of death, he was also haunted by an attraction to it. From the very beginning, in *Open House*, those taut little poems of self-loathing such as ''Epidermal Macabre'' and ''Prayer before Study'' reveal something of a death wish. And therein lies the ultimate irony of Roethke's poetry, that his struggle for identity inevitably necessitated the loss of his identity. Roethke discovered that in order to find himself he had to lose himself, and the truth of that paradox produced in him the conflicting drives that are most clearly revealed in ''Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical.'' His desire was to attain ultimate union, but he could not bear to pay the ultimate cost, the loss of his own individual identity. What he passionately desired was an impossible contradiction, ''to be something else, yet still to be!''. . .

The remarkable unity of Roethke's work is attributable to Roethke's persistence, to his ''spiritual toughness,'' for he never once grew lax in the pursuit of his ultimate identity. Like the mystic, Roethke's awareness of another level of reality, one more real and significant than that which is normally perceived, led him to dedicate himself to the attainment of the Absolute.

> Neal Bowers. *Theodore Roethke: The Journey from I to Otherwise* (Univ. of Missouri Pr., 1982), pp. 208–10

The poetry created by [Theodore] Roethke embodies the revelation which is the fruit of his practice of meditation and natural contemplation. It is a unifying vision grounded in his ''sacramental view of nature.'' Roethke comments in ''On 'Identity''' that he experienced a ''feeling of the oneness of the universe,'' an intuition which is dramatized in the cosmic dance at the end of ''Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical'':

> the ''oneness,'' is, of course, the first stage in mystical illumination, an experience many men have had, and still have: the sense that all is one and one is all. . . . This experience has come to me so many times, in so many varying circumstances, that I cannot suspect its validity: it is not one of the devil's traps, an hallucination, a voice, a snare.

The foundation of Roethke's pantheistic experience of oneness, and indeed of all the mystical moments in the poetry is best expressed in this statement by Robert Sencourt which Roethke recorded in a 1962–63 notebook:

> Everything, if looked at rightly, is but a symbol and therefore a disclosure, of things unseen and of the underlying reality which is the mind of God.

Roethke shares with William Blake and Jacob Boehme a vision of the World of Becoming as infused by a spirit that touches the invisible order of the universe. For Roethke, ''everything that lives is holy.'' His poetic world manifests the sacred and therefore points beyond itself. Rooted in a belief in the sacredness of all living things, Roethke's poetry demonstrates an expansion of consciousness which entails, as [Evelyn] Underhill notes, ''the discovery of the Perfect One self-revealed in the Many, not the forsaking of the Many in order to find the One.'' This is the essential nature of Roethke's vision of unity, a discovery peculiar to poets, not mystics.

> Ann T. Foster. *Theodore Roethke's Meditative Sequences: Contemplation and the Creative Process* (Lewiston, New York: E. Mellen Pr., 1985), p. 175

The poems of *The Far Field* reiterate the central themes of Roethke's poetry; they also generate, yet again, the major issues important in previous critical discussions of his verse. Though he gathered to his poetry a world of elemental things, plants and animals, and people he loved, to the end Roethke's central theme remained the self; his ability to reach beyond that self was not limitless and, some argue, not considerable. Nonetheless, Roethke's last poems show, primarily by indirection, that he could respond to the variety of things that formed his world. Not the least of such responses was his reaction to the various objections leveled at the scope and nature of his work. Against the charge that he could write convincingly only of the self, for example, Roethke aimed to ''personalize'' the Love Poems of *Words for the Wind* and *The Far Field*, and against the charge that he was unaffected by his historical circumstances (in fact, an absurd charge) he ventured to come to terms, in what way those circumstances allowed, with his moment and his geographic place in the poems of the ''North American Sequence.''

And yet Roethke's last poems are no capitulation to earlier criticism of his work. They show courage and the constancy of his method and intent. After his controversial appropriation of the poetic voice of William Butler Yeats in his poems of the 1950s, Roethke dared to compete with another influential poet, T.S. Eliot, in his last volume of poems. To do so was quite in accord with his theoretical commitment to the value of writing by imitation. It might also be said that had Roethke not acknowledged his indebtedness to Yeats so directly, his echoes of T.S. Eliot in the ''North American Sequence'' might register more faintly on the critical ear. In addition, Roethke's last volume shows that the formal poems of the 1950s were not anomalous, no dead end. Formal

poetry appears again in the ''Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical,'' and those poems thus extend and vindicate to a degree the controversial lyrics of *Words for the Wind*. Though the self-consciously mystical vision and the theological language of the ''Sequence, Sometimes Metaphysical'' raise questions, the presence of the sequence itself in Roethke's last volume does help throw into relief the various formalist tendencies in his poetry.

> Randall Stiffler. *Theodore Roethke: The Poet and His Critics* (Chicago: American Library Assoc., 1986), pp. 190–91

Roethke's maturation during the middle decade of the century gave him a healthy and creative perspective on modernism as well as a broad cultural vantage point. For as a midcentury American poet, he was able to bring together—to synthesize in his idiosyncratic way—dominant post-Christian intellectual movements: Romanticism, Darwinism, and modern psychology (Freudian and Jungian). Roethke had enough historical distance from these intellectual world views to be able to create out of them a set of assumptions and ultimately an aesthetic myth from which his language and poetic concerns could evolve.

Critics have examined at length the importance of British Romanticism, American Transcendentalism, and Freudian and Jungian psychology in Roethke's work. But Roethke's organic aestheticism is also, at least in part, an emanation of Darwinism. He is, of course, in no way a Darwinist; in the obvious sense, he is neither secular nor deterministic. Rather, proceeding from certain Darwinian assumptions, he extends his own version of what can be called post-Darwinian myth. Darwin's organic conception of life, growth, and evolution, and his idea of an organic architecture unifying the entire scheme of plant and animal life, had immense meaning for Roethke. His ability to identify with the subhuman world of plants, stones, and microorganisms in *The Lost Son* and *Praise to the End!*, his assertion in ''The Waking'' that ''the lowly worm climbs up a winding stair,'' and his sense of phylogenetic origins in ''The Far Field,'' where we find him ''Fingering a shell,/ Thinking:/ Once I was something like this, mindless,/ Or perhaps with another mind, less peculiar,'' exemplify how thoroughly he absorbed a vision of the Darwinian cosmos.

Viewing Roethke from the vantage point of the century's final decade, one might say that he pioneered our first important postmodernist poems. In creating a mythic autobiography out of his vision of certain intersecting intellectual forces that shaped America at midcentury, he was able to find a relationship between an idea of the transcendent, a modern notion of the natural world, and a concept of the contemporary human self. In forming a new script from the intellectual realms his imagination filtered to the supple language of his rhetoric, the greenhouse keeper's son and the spiritually driven manic-depressive poet forget our first contemporary confessional persona.

> Peter Balakian. *Theodore Roethke's Far Fields: The Evolution of His Poetry* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1989), pp. 12–13

Though Roethke's different styles, particularly in his earlier work, show some elements of current literary vogues—the taut metaphysical poem of the thirties, the musical surrealism of Dylan Thomas in the next decade—Roethke's ''perpetual beginnings'' were not mere responses to fashion. Each new style was based on significant changes in the compositional process: a new way of writing for a new approach to experience. The different conclusions the ''perpetual beginner'' reached in his career reflect these changes in writing methods. When Roethke switched, say, from striving toward a formal stanza early in the writing process to long periods of ''looking,'' or from extended plunges into the unconscious to the generation of interchangeable iambic lines, he was not seeking a style to express ideas he already had but was rather working toward a new way of thinking through writing. . . .

More importantly, however, the unique compositional approaches of the ''perpetual beginner'' reflect the intensity of his commitment to the task at hand. Roethke might have found writing more easy if he had been content with less. A devotion to artistic craftsmanship is one facet of this commitment. In a letter to Roethke just before the poet's death, another master ''craftsman,'' Robert Lowell, captured this quality; ''One of the things I marvel at in your poems is the impression they give of having been worked an extra half day, when another writer would have curled up with exhaustion.'' But for Roethke, as for [Robert] Lowell and others, aesthetic skill and control did not exist in a vacuum; craft was only a tool, the perfected poem only a part of a larger process. . . . Lowell [in a letter] compares himself and Roethke with the other poets of their generation, concluding that ''to write we seem to have to go at it with such single-minded intensity that we are always on the point of drowning.'' The intensity Lowell notes reflects the deep connection between the process of writing and the self in both Roethke's and Lowell's work. It was this central relation that led to the richness and variety in the different stages of Roethke's career. . . . We can look at [his] career as a series of ''traps''; . . . each kind of poem Roethke wrote gradually revealed its limitations as the poet developed its strengths. That Roethke was able to see these traps and break again and again into new work shows his dedication and skill as a poet. It also shows his courage. . . . In progressing from self-creation, through self-discovery, to the ''long journey out of the self,'' Roethke forged a complex and dynamic relation between personal identity and the writing process. The strength of his work is rooted in this convergence of life and art.

> Don Bogen. *A Necessary Order: Theodore Roethke and the Writing Process* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Pr., 1991), pp. 171, 174–75

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RÖLVAAG, Ole (1876–1931)

Does Rölvaag's work belong legitimately to Norwegian or to American literature? The problem has unusual and interesting

features. The volume before us deals with American life, and with one of the most characteristically American episodes in our history. It opens on the western plains; its material is altogether American. Yet it was written in Norwegian, and gained its first recognition in Norway. Whatever we may decide, it has already become a part of Norwegian literature. Rölvaag's art seems mainly European; Rölvaag himself, as I have said, is typically American. His life and future are bound up in the New World; yet he will continue to write in a foreign language. Had he been born in America, would his art have been the same? It seems unlikely. On the other hand, had he remained in Norway—had he accepted the boat that fine, clear day in Nordland—how would his art have fared?

Lincoln Colcord. Introduction to *Giants in the Earth* by Ole Rölvaag (Harper). 1927. pp. xxii–xxiii

Giants in the Earth is a great and beautiful book that suggests the wealth of human potentialities brought to America year after year by the peasant immigrants who pass through Ellis Island and scatter the length and breadth of the land. Written in Norwegian, and stemming from a rich old-world literary tradition, it is at the same time deeply and vitally American. The very atmosphere of the Dakota plains is in its pages, and it could have been written only by one to whom the background was a familiar scene. The artist has lived with these peasant folk; he is one of them, and he penetrates sympathetically to the simple kindly hearts hidden to alien eyes by the unfamiliar folk ways. To gather up and preserve in letters these diverse folk strains before they are submerged and lost in the common American *mores*, would seem to be a business that our fiction might undertake with profit.

Vernon L. Parrington. Introduction to *Giants in the Earth* by Ole Rölvaag (Harper). 1927. pp. xviii–xix

[*Giants in the Earth*] is probably the best novel that has yet been written about the American pioneer. That romanticized American is here viewed, not through the spectacles of prosperous descendants, but by a man who has been one and can still remember the experience through European eyes. . . .

The book records the partial conquest of the American prairie by the pioneer, and the partial conquest of the pioneer's heart and mind by the prairie. It would be untrue to say that either had completely won over the other—and Rölvaag above all else is distinguished as a truth teller. . . . Before the novel ends, every joy and sorrow, hope and terror that can come to the heart of the frontier is set down in the course of Per Hansa's story and that of his wife. There is much fierce courage, hope, and joyful accomplishment packed into the book, though in the end the prairie with something of the fierceness and fatality of the sea takes its toll of the pioneer settlement.

Charles R. Walker. *Independent*. July 9, 1927. p. 44

The prairie filled with excitable wrangling men [in *Peder Victorious*] doesn't excite us as did the prairie empty except for that preposterous little band from Nordland [in *Giants in the Earth*]. The prairie itself was the hero of that magical book, and on it there appeared a tiny maggot in the form of the ingenious and whimsical Per Hansa, who refused to be daunted by its silence or its winds, its vastness or its cold; who thought up the most incredible ways to evade it, and ultimately to tame it. The prairie got him at last, but his children spread over it, breaking up its rich virgin sod, building ugly little towns and ugly little houses.

What they did to it we like too little to sympathize greatly with their exertions in the doing. What Per Hansa might have done to it died with him. We are faced in the story, as in contemporary life, with the fact that the second generation, which built our Western towns, is far less interesting than the first, which drove its rickety covered wagons through the pathless grass of the prairies. *Giants in the Earth* was a fairy tale, one of the most wistful, the saltiest, the most prodigious of all fairy tales. *Peder Victorious* is an ordinary story of ordinary beings like you and me, engaged in discovering their toes.

Alice Beal Parsons. *The Nation*. March 13, 1929. p. 317

Giants in the Earth is presented in two parts. I have tried to suggest the essentials of the former in terms of primitive ethnology: man and nature in their eternal conflict; man as part of the tide of human life inexorably certain of success; man, the individual, ephemeral as the grass of the field. In ''The Land Taking'' [the second part] the conflict is presented, the sentence is pronounced alike on human strength and human weakness, but Peder Victorious is born. Man falls in the taking of the land, but his seed survives for the founding of the kingdom. . . .

The concluding picture in *Giants in the Earth* is of Per Hansa in the horrid dissolution of death, struck down by the Monster of the Plain. The concluding scene in *Peder Victorious* is of mother Beret bending to the inevitable. Her son, promise of the future, is advancing to meet it, speaking the alien tongue of a new land, marrying an alien immigrant from another land, their son to be American-born of American-born. For her it is either estrangement or surrender, and the final choice is inevitable. Once more and in another way the pioneer is overcome, even while in the act of creating a new America.

Percy H. Boynton. *English Journal*. Sept., 1929. pp. 539–40

Beneath the appalling wreck of amiable Lars Houglum's life [in *Pure Gold*], with all his simple aspirations swept away by the flame-like greed of his wife's thoroughly mean nature, even as she burned their house to ashes, there is the ancient tragedy of farm life—its meagreness, isolation, suspicion, its monotony, cruel toil and rare fulfillment.

Professor Rölvaag, one of the most interesting literary phenomena of our day, progresses unerringly toward his objective. There is something better than realism in his work—he has found within his breast that ''crucible'' wherein, according to Benedetto Croce, ''the certain is converted into the true.'' Like many of the great Scandinavians, Rölvaag has genuine moral force and he has also that understanding of lives lived close to the soil, which is the essence of Hamsun's genius.

Outlook. Feb. 12, 1930. p. 267

As a piece of literature *The Boat of Longing* is noteworthy for its combination of two widely dissimilar strains, the mystical folktale and the realistic novel. On one page we read of an ecstatic vision

followed by a mysterious disappearance; on the next, of a confidence game in a Y.M.C.A. Strangely enough, it is in the latter vein that Rölvaag is most authentic. When he writes in the manner of the old legends he is transparently the professor; it is too literary to grip us. But when he sets down simply the adventures of his hero in the New World he makes a real contribution. What is more, it is then that he is most Scandinavian, for the blood of the ancient Norsemen seems to prefer to show itself, not in romantic imitation of the sagas, but in the humdrum and commonplace of a Minneapolis alley.

Gerald Sykes. *Bookman*. March, 1933. pp. 302–3

The problems that arise from pioneering are discussed in *Giants in the Earth*. The problems that come from pioneers contrasted with new settlers, age versus youth, the coming into manhood and womanhood of the sons and daughters of the pioneers are discussed in *Peder Victorious*. The problems that the children of the pioneers, now the leaders of the community, have to face are expressed in *Their Father's God*. Besides this general progressive theme there are three other important themes that run through the trilogy: language and customs, shall they be given up? religion—first the lack of church organization, then the division of the church, and then inter-religious marriages, the social and political revolt of the youth of the settlement, and the conflict between age and youth. . . . The characters are, paradoxical as it may seem, both types and individuals in the novels of Rölvaag. As types they are used as symbols to express one of the main themes of the novel. For example, Per is the full embodiment of the spirit of adventure. He has deliberately chosen to come to the west to wrestle a living from nature. The elements are strong against him, the loneliness of the country sinks into his soul, discouragements array themselves before him, but he is possessed of that spirit which dares and fights to the end.

George Leroy White. *Scandinavian Themes in American Fiction* (Pennsylvania). 1937. p. 100

The transformation in the character of the pioneer, as described by [F. J.] Turner, is revealed in the two leading characters of the novel [*Giants in the Earth*], Per Hansa and his wife Beret, and to a lesser degree in the minor figures. Through the use of a mixed point of view and a modified stream-of-consciousness technique. Rölvaag ably demonstrates the varying results of the influence of the frontier upon the Norse. Per Hansa and Beret are case studies in frontier personality; their psychological natures cause them to react in startingly opposite ways to the stimuli of the prairie and its challenge. And, ironically, their fates are in inverse proportion to their attitudes: Per, stubborn, strong, resourceful, and optimistic, dies in a blinding blizzard; Beret, only partially recovered from her recurrent insanity, ascends to a plateau of serenity—the malignant prairie can no longer harm her.

Robert C. Steensma. *North Dakota Quarterly*. Autumn, 1959. p. 101

But if one is asked to select the most famous or the best South Dakota novel, he is likely to name Ole Rölvaag's masterful *Giants in the Earth* (1927). Rölvaag's trilogy of early life in Dakota Territory and South Dakota has been largely ignored by historians and critics of American literature (he is given three scanty paragraphs in the *Literary History of the United States*). It may be true that *Peder Victorious* (1929) and *Their Father's God* (1931) do not measure up to the earliest novel, but the fact that Rölvaag, limited as his literary production might have been, has been given a back seat to such intellectual and artistic mediocrities as Dreiser, Farrell, Dos Passos, and, in certain respects, Sinclair Lewis, is a sad reflection on American criticism. The reasons for this eclipse are obvious. Some still think of Rölvaag as a Norwegian writer. While it is true that his books often made their first appearance in Norwegian, the translations were also his own work except for certain suggestions made by his close friends, among them Lincoln Colcord and Nora Solum. And there is also the possibility that Rölvaag was foolish and idealistic enough to write about pioneers in an age which was far more interested in jazz, gin, and the Charleston, both in its daily life and its fiction.

Robert C. Steensma. *North Dakota Quarterly*. Spring, 1962. p. 41

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ROSSNER, Judith (1935–)

To the Precipice, a first novel, is about love and marriage. Except that the Ruth of the novel doesn't marry the man she loves, it is a familiar tale, sure enough. But Mrs. Rossner makes it new, dramatic not sentimental, grown-up, not adolescent or sticky. Her people, buffeted by their feelings, act irrationally; but they can also show a maturity and a sense of responsibility that run counter to their previous behavior.

Ruth comes from New York's Lower East Side where she lives in a tenement slum. The toilet is outside; the shower (but no tub) is arranged over a cemented corner of the kitchen.

Her father is a violent, stubborn man, who expresses his feeling of failure and love of family by a continual, frightening belligerence. The mother is a stolid, suffering woman, old long before her time. The son, harried by the father and his own yearnings, feels hemmed in and caged.

And there is David, whom Ruth has known since they were children. David has been comforter, guide, confessor and later Ruth's lover. Without thinking much about it, she assumes that when she marries, it will be to David. A life without him would be unthinkable.

To get out of the city one summer, Ruth accepts a job as a tutor and companion to two children of a wealthy family, the Stamms, and she gets a taste of life denied her before. Mrs. Stamm is an interesting woman: biting, hard, very capable—nobody obviously to push around. Ruth does not like her, but the reader won't agree. Indeed, I wish Mrs. Rossner had told us more about her.

The husband, overshadowed by his wife, is diffident and retiring; in love as well as in life his character is ''that of a small boy promised a reward he is too timid to accept.''

He is also 18 years older than Ruth. Nevertheless, after his divorce from his wife, he asks Ruth to marry him and she does. Why? Mrs. Rossner tells us why and also why the relationship between David and Ruth does not stop at her marriage—a relationship that comes to a crisis. The ending is one the reader will acknowledge as reasonable though not necessarily as a happy one.

Her novel shows its apprentice side. She tends to overfurnish it for one. She can't step into a room without describing its contents or wallpaper. It is not enough for the mother to make tea. The author supplies a boiling kettle, a strainer, lemon, the works. And there is an ambiguity about some of her characters I'm not sure she intended.

Her greatest strength is that she carries off the big scenes, the climaxes and crises with a sure hand. Their tone is right; their language expressive. And she has a true novelist's understanding of human behavior—an understanding that comes by instinct, not by study. And, as her subject shows, she is willing to aim at big targets. She is a lady we will hear from again.

Thomas Lask. *New York Times (daily)*. Feb. 24, 1967, p. 33

Ms. Rossner says that she wanted to deal in her novel [*Any Minute I Can Split*] with ''comparisons between the standard family and alternatives, from casual affairs to communes.'' The standard family is represented here by Margaret and her unloving, overbearing, shiftless, bed-hopping husband, and by his wealthy, mindless, heartless parents. Margaret's main casual affair is with a nineteen-year-old who feels no affection for anyone; it ends when he beats her up, rapes her, and walks off. The commune offers a spider web of crisscrossing tensions under superficial friendliness. As the novel's title suggests, every relationship is uneasy and tentative; the indication is that we are beginning to see in America the ironic triumph of situational existence.

Situational morality, which seemed such a bold and happy idea back in the bold and happy Sixties, asserted that moral judgments could not be general and absolute but had to be custom-tailored, had to give each particular situation its due. Similarly, in less significant areas, Americans learned to judge people, actions, jobs, and relationships relatively, with regard to particular situations. And of course they learned to appear, act, and relate to others situationally. We became merely the raw material of situations; context determined character. Ms. Rossner shows us the results: Relationships have no fixity; morality varies with the individual, his situation, and his mood; other people become mere stage props in the scene each individual stages for himself; emotional relationships are sadomasochistic; and human identity dwindles down to a self-centered bundle of memories, hangups, and desires. . . .

Ms. Rossner is too willing to write about ideas; instead of being incited to thought, we are too often obliged to hear Margaret's expository thinking. . . . But she evokes the commune well, and her unpleasant scenes are especially credible.

J.D. O'Hara. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 5, 1972, pp. 52–53

Judith Rossner has impeccable literary credentials. Her first three novels were beautifully reviewed and didn't sell. *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* is so good a read, so stunningly commercial as a novel, that it runs the risk of being consigned to artistic oblivion.

That would be a mistake. The sureness of Judith Rossner's writing and her almost flawless sense of timing create a complex and chilling portrait of a woman's descent into hell that gives this book considerable literary merit. . . .

Passivity is a theme that has been dealt with much of late. Sumner Locke Elliot's brilliant novel, *Going*, describes a Nixon-like United States where nobody acts until it's too late, and they're all dead. Erica Jong explored that emotional disease in women whose pathology is not only similar to cancer's but whose morbidity is greater. Passivity may kill more slowly, but it is more efficient; it kills a whole lot more people in the end. Judith Rossner gives passivity an added dimension of horror. She anatomizes its growth, step by chilling step, showing how it can be as effective a means of suicide as poison or a gun.

It is a measure of *Mr. Goodbar*'s richness and complexity that it can be read on many levels. Catholics might view it as a passion play; feminists might consider Theresa a political victim of rape. Men may focus on the book's sexuality. (Men have tended to overreact to the wider use of sex in recent writing by women, but I don't think there's all that much behind this new freedom; sex is simply another area of experience for the woman novelist to mime in the same sense that the freedom to write about being Jewish, say, is for Jewish writers.) What adds to my view of *Mr. Goodbar* as an exploration of passivity is the angry and frustrated reaction of a number of women who have read the book. *Mr. Goodbar* may, for them, have driven the final stake through the heart of the axiom that passive is a good way to be if you're a woman.

Another thing that has to go is the assumption that any book written by a woman about a woman who even vaguely resembles herself fits neatly into a genre labeled ''women's fiction.'' You can bet that the current and upcoming novels by middle-aged men—Bellow, Heller, Roth, Styron—won't be labeled ''male menopausal fiction.''

Nor should *Mr. Goodbar* be shunted off into the genre of ''commercial fiction,'' a convenience by which reviewers are able to measure literary merit simply as inversely proportionate to the number of people who buy a book.

If there is a genre into which *Mr. Goodbar* falls, it is a genre of uncommonly well-written and well-constructed fiction, easily accessible, but full of insight and intelligence and illumination. It is a noble genre. And Rossner's heroine, Theresa Dunn, in this tough and powerfully controlled novel, takes her place beside Henry James's Isabel Archer and Scott Fitzgerald's Nicole Diver as another victim of the American Dream, a woman who never roused herself enough to wake up from the nightmare.

Carol Eisen Rinzler. *New York Times Book Section*. June 8, 1975, pp. 24–26

On pages 97 and 98 of *Attachments* we learn in one three-minute sweep of the eye all the ''news'' (for that is what *novel* means) that Rossner has to impart to us. On those two pages we are given in graphic detail the answer to the major question raised by the novel: How does a woman, the heroine, Nadine, ''do it'' with her Siamese-twin husband? And when her best friend, Dianne, marries the other twin, how do *they* do it? Once these momentous questions of logistics are solved, there remain a few others that ought to create curiosity, but somehow—because of the endless, flat terrain of language we have to travel across—they do not. Only one further question of consequence is posed: What happens to the two

marriages when the twins decide to risk the operation and are separated? The predictable answer past, there is no nourishment left in the book.

Put aside the essential poverty of the sensational idea and the attenuated workings-out of the occasional complications. . . . Rossner uses words carelessly; she is deaf to the natural music of good sentences because she is so preoccupied with the ramifications of her catchy idea. . . . There is no grace, no imagery that is not tired and hackneyed. The prose has a tone-deaf quality (''Far from the rest of the house, in feeling if not in fact''). It proceeds doggedly along its synthetic paths.

Doris Grumbach. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 1, 1977, pp. 30–31

The backwoods of Fayette, Maine, and the cotton mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, in the mid-19th century where *Emmeline* takes place are worlds away from the New York City streets where Judith Rossner set *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, the best seller that made her famous five years ago. But Rossner's literary leap is not as admirably adventurous as it sounds. *Emmeline* is not a full-fledged historical novel, but a historical romance, heavier on the petticoated swoons than on the subtle interweaving of public and private destinies in the newly industrialized America of the 1840s.

In setting her historical scene Rossner relies heavily on two elementary facts about 19th-century America: that religion was the dominant tradition and industrialization the alienating innovation. She adds historical detail—mill machinery, boarding-house routine, railroad building, exciting tales from the west, and ominous news from the south. But Rossner's old New England seems arranged from the outside rather than imagined from within.

This simplicity of vision is partly justified by Rossner's identification with her unsophisticated protagonist. When 14-year-old Emmeline is sent from the poverty-stricken family farm in Maine to make money in the Lowell mills, it is appropriate that she has only a crude understanding of the new world she enters and an unreflective attachment to the religion she brings with her. Rossner convincingly evokes Emmeline's initial horror at the monster mill and then her naive willingness to see the mill in familial terms; the lonely girl is easily and uncomprehendingly seduced by the fatherly Irish overseer in the weaving room who offers, briefly, the care and warmth she finds nowhere else.

However, as Emmeline's youthful shape takes on womanly contours, the historical perspective remains flat. The book turns into a predictable melodrama, which I won't quite give away, though it gives itself away almost immediately. The crux of the plot is that Emmeline's contours get even more womanly as a result of Mr. Maguire's attentions. Illicit sex and incest are the supposedly shocking revelations of the book. ''You have to kind of gentle down readers if you're using a subject like this,'' Rossner explained in a recent *Publishers Weekly* interview. Her strategy works too well. We flip through pages of her clear prose, our sympathies never really roused by her transparent plot or characters, our sensibilities barely jarred by the broken taboos.

Rossner, however, had a very different reaction when she heard about Emmeline's tragedy from a real-life Fayette resident, 94-year-old Nettie Mitchell (whom Rossner credits in the novel's epigraph). ''Nettie's remembering gave me goose pimples,'' Rossner told the *Publishers Weekly* interviewer, ''and that's a sure sign for me.'' Unfortunately that's not a sure sign for her readers. Rossner has not made her imagination work hard enough at transforming the melodramatic truth into more than shallow fiction.

Ann Hulbert. *New Republic*. Oct. 11, 1980, pp. 38–39

August, Judith Rossner's seventh, in many ways remarkable novel, is about a four-year psychoanalysis. The patient, Dawn Henley, a tall, beautiful Barnard freshman with considerable artistic talent, enters treatment at 18, after falling asleep at the wheel of her car and running it into a tree. We see Dawn exclusively during her sessions; the people who touch her life are glimpsed through her impressions alone. Among the principals are the women who raised Dawn: Vera, her father's sister and physical double, and Vera's lesbian lover, Tony. The child calls Vera ''daddy'' and Tony ''mommy,'' until a teacher, who does not know both parents are women, explains that Tony is ''daddy,'' because Tony is the one who goes to work. Dawn's search for information about her ''birth parents,'' as she refers to them, particularly events surrounding her father's death, becomes the primary project of her analysis. She learns that her mother committed suicide when she was six months old, and that a year later her father, a homosexual, drowned in a boating accident. . . .

Rossner's depiction of the intimate, yet laboratory-like atmosphere behind the closed office door is masterfully real. Dawn's story is absorbing, partly because Rossner has invented an intriguing case history, but more importantly because she has plunged imaginatively into her character with the same freedom and abandon patients strive for in psychoanalysis. Dawn, who is intelligent and in pain, begins her probe on page one, and although pruned of the inevitable fogbound accounts and broken-record repetitions of actual analyses, her monologues capture their ragged, suspense-story tempo. With each association, a little dust lifts from the buried origins of personality. . . .

August is limited by its characters' (and author's) insularity, but the power of the analysis is never diminished. It is a moving, distinguished achievement, full of delight and surprise. Lulu fits her patient like a glass slipper, providing the young woman with a chance to gain her life. And the analyst, too, is rewarded beyond calculation.

Laurie Stone. *The Village Voice*. Sept. 6, 1983, p. 34

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ROTH, Henry (1915–1995)

So much for the preparation; we know the story. But one is soon aware that this [*Call It Sleep*] is not merely a human document. Three levels of language are used to tell that story: one is the language of the narrator, another a direct translation of Yiddish into English, another a dialect that is neither English nor Yiddish but a

transition between the two, at first a difficult and awkward tongue, ugly and harsh, yet slowly gaining speed and flexibility. Through the medium of these three levels a set of characters emerge: David the boy, his father, his mother, Aunt Bertha, and Rabbi Yidel Pankower, who is master within the whitewashed walls of a cheder. The technical device that Henry Roth employs reveals the various levels of experience in which his characters participate, and through the eyes of David we share something of that complex world: its transition between the hope and fear, between fantasy and reality, between dreams of the old world left behind and the poverty—stricken terror of the new.

Horace Gregory. *The Nation*. Feb. 27, 1935. p. 255

Although poverty . . . is the all-embracing, brutally dominating fact in slum tenement life, its climate, so to say, and its very soil, the author in his depiction almost completely ignores its role. What also helps to make the novel [*Call It Sleep*] seem unreal as a transcript of life is the author's injection of passages and chapters of stylized writing in the ultramodern tradition.

But the distortion of the picture—for, by and large, his picture is distorted—must be laid to the author's temper, which casts over familiar scenes and people a hectic light and creates an atmosphere in which human beings could not long survive. Mr. Roth's east side is an extremely violent and febrile world; rarely a moment of peace there, a breath of respite; nothing but poisonous life goes on. . . . There is much, to be sure, that is true in Mr. Roth's novel; he has a sensitive ear for speech; his characters speak from character and in the idioms of their land; he remembers amazingly and reports photographically; still, let me repeat, the book in part and as a whole does violence to the truth.

Joseph Gollomb. *Saturday Review*. March 16, 1935. p. 553

Since Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money* is likewise concerned with life in the East Side Ghetto at roughly the same historical time, it is instructive to compare his book with *Call It Sleep*. Though Gold's intentions were—to be fair—somewhat different from Roth's, the comparison shows the difference in result between the operations of the Coleridgian ''fancy'' and ''imagination.'' Gold's book is that of a man with strong impulses and sympathies, but without, as the very sketch form of the book suggests, the capacity for sustained artistic vision. Roth's impulses and sympathies are strong also, but he has the ability, essential for the first-rate writer, to express them fully while simultaneously remaining in control of them, shaping them into the most effective form for transmission to the reader. Though the presence of an actual plot in *Call It Sleep* may seem contrived to some, the real force of the author is revealed in the intricate strength of his symbolic pattern. Both men, moreover, write with respect for their characters, even the hopelessly twisted ones; but Gold's people are simplified literally into sketches, while Roth's are given all the tangled complexity of human beings. Gold's pictures of the Ghetto are frequently blurred by a warm rush of sentiment or jarred out of focus by a kind of hysteria; Roth's view of the same life has the dizzying intensity of the mystic who sees all things at once, even the most minute, in utter clarity.

Walter Rideout. *The Radical Novel in the United States* (Harvard). 1956. pp. 187–8

No book insists more [than does *Call It Sleep*] on the distance between the foulness man lives and the purity he dreams; but none makes more clear how deeply rooted that dream is in the existence which seems to contradict it. It is, perhaps, this double insight which gives to Roth's book a Jewish character, quite independent of the subject matter with which he happens to deal. . . .

It is possible to imagine many reasons for Roth's retreating to childhood from adult experience; for retreat it does seem in the light of his second withdrawal, after the publication of a single book, into the silence in which he has persisted until now. To have written such a book and no other is to betray some deep trouble not only in finding words but in loving the life one has lived enough to *want* to find words for it. A retreat from all that 1935 meant to Roth: from the exigencies of adult sexuality and political commitment alike—this is what *Call It Sleep* seems to the retrospective insight of 1960.

Leslie Fiedler. *Commentary*. Aug., 1960. p. 105

The scenes [in *Call It Sleep*] in the cheder, or Hebrew school, are both realistic and idealistic. The aggravated melamed, or teacher, is irritated and frustrated. The children of the New York immigrant Jews want to tear themselves away from their religious studies, but they fear their teacher. He uses a stick on them, shouts at them, but is delighted when one of them shows an aptitude for study. David is a good boy; he is willing to learn. The letters of the Hebrew alphabet come to him easily, and the blessings and prayers trip from his youthful lips. The teacher likes him for that. But the moment David becomes daring in class, or does something he shouldn't, the teacher—to whom Torah is of paramount importance—becomes a scourge and a tormentor. There is violence in these sketches, but the novelist writes out of love and understanding—and knowledge.

These are elements which have for a long time been missing in American Jewish writing. Where there is knowledge, there too frequently appears cynicism. And love and understanding are usually absent.

Harold U. Ribalow. *Contemporary Literature*. Fall, 1962. p. 11

Nineteen thirty-four began with a major event in publishing, the first American edition of Joyce's *Ulysses*. When *Call It Sleep* was published eleven months later, reviewers were struck by similarities between the two novels. Comparison of the two is inevitable: both make massive use of stream-of-consciousness; both are ''noisy,'' their authors fascinated by the sheer clamor of interior and exterior experience. There are certain similarities of characterization. The placid femininity of Genya Schearl relates her to Molly Bloom; there are moments when the rabbi Yidel Pankower conjures up the alienated Leopold.

Certainly both can be called—using the term loosely—Freudian novels, novels based upon the assumption that total character can be revealed only when overt acts and speech are presented in relation to the freely associative flow of psychic experience. Roth's technical handling of this assumption is often highly Joycean: one might guess that both the Sirens and Circe chapters of *Ulysses*, in particular, exercised a strong influence on Roth's presentation of the events in Chapter XXI of *Call It Sleep*, where young David

Schearl runs through a wild storm of exterior and interior experience surrounding the climatic act of the novel.

Call It Sleep, however, is technically far less elaborate than *Ulysses*, and it is therefore surprising to find that the experience of reading it is somewhat more intense. . . . We have little choice but to rediscover ourselves in David Schearl; all the terrors, all the joys of childhood seem to dwell in his consciousness. In a very real sense, reading *Call It Sleep* is a psychoanalytic experience, capable of producing an unusual degree of emotional discomfort in the reader.

Sidney A. Knowles. *Modern Fiction Studies*. Winter, 1965–66. p. 396

The imagination does not literally create, it transforms, and what it transforms are the very materials which Roth has transfigured in *Call It Sleep*—the fears, the anguish, the pain, and the ugliness of life—here a young boy's life on the Lower East Side. The important point, though, is that Roth has transfigured his raw materials without distorting them out of recognizable shape. For the myths of redemption and rebirth are implicit in the story of David Schearl, and both are rendered largely by means of a symbolic image pattern that is part of David's own conscious awareness and that is viewed symbolically by his own fertile imagination as well as by the reader. Such a fusion of myth, symbol, and profound realism does more than raise *Call It Sleep* far beyond the level of most of the proletarian fiction that once obscured it. It makes Roth's novel one of those too rare works of fiction that we can both live and admire, simultaneously.

William Freedman in *The Thirties*, ed. Warren French (Everett Edwards). 1967. p. 114

These are not exactly salad days for American letters. Publishing houses, after a decade of corporate annexation, are suddenly folding like stage-flats on all sides. So long, Summit. Bon voyage, Poseidon. Adieu, Atheneum. All this bottom-line divestment means, among other things, that a number of very good editors are home spending quality time with the kids. Even the elite houses now rely upon a steady diet of sex and murder, and that's in their literary novels—a distinction which admittedly, at this point in the culture, begins to seem almost quaint.

Under these depressed conditions, then, who can be blamed for seizing on a story as fantastically rich and improbably hopeful as the third coming of Henry Roth?

Roth's now-classic first novel, *Call It Sleep*, was published in 1934. He was twenty-eight. This makes him roughly a contemporary of John Steinbeck and James T. Farrell; or, to put it another way, within easy generational hailing distance of such modernist titans as Hemingway, Faulkner, and Joyce. A second novel was signed up by Maxwell Perkins and then abandoned in the late 1930s. The sixty-year publication gap that followed is one of those other-wordly statistics, like [Joe] DiMaggio's hitting streak, which looms at the outer reaches of possibility, dwarfing all comers in shadow. Even J.D. Salinger (thirty-four years) seems, by comparison, merely coy, after all. Everyone knows he's alive. But who knew Henry Roth was alive, and still writing, until his reappearance this past year?

Incredibly, this has all happened to Roth before.

Thirty years ago, utterly blocked, he was living in Maine with his family and working as, of all things, a waterfowl farmer, when *Call It Sleep* made an astonishing resurrection. Out of print for decades, the book—a coming of age story set among the Yiddish-speaking immigrants of lower Manhattan—was roused from slumbering obscurity by an enterprising young editor, dusted off and given new life as a mass market paperback. The results were, literally, phenomenal. . . .

An entire new generation of readers, perhaps two, discovered the squalid, noisy beauty of Roth's Lower East Side, and entered the labyrinth of longing, rage, and incomprehension through which seven-year-old David Schearl—mother-haunted, father-plagued—wanders in search of a self. . . .

I go on like this about *Call It Sleep* because I am so grateful to have just reread it—which one had better do before approaching Roth's 3,000-page, six-volume new work, *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, of which *A Star Shines over Mt. Morris Park* is the first volume. It also helps if one has at least some acquaintance with the author's life story: his David Schearlish childhood; his failed ''proletarian novel'' of the thirties, his enduring writers block (or, as he prefers to call it, ''counterdrive''); his half-century marriage to Muriel Parker; his move to New Mexico; his ill health. These inform the new work in ways both obvious and subtle; indeed, the web of their interconnections is its subject. . . .

There is, of course, something almost ludicrously personal about a project like this: a settling of accounts, an ultimate reckoning with what the author refers to, rather bitterly, as ''my golden opportunities''. No doubt it is this obsessional quality, this prodigious breadth of purpose, which accounts for the book's unique, often clumsily hybrid form. Part fictional reconstruction, part self-analysis, part loose essayistic rumination upon matters large and small, public (the Mideast peace process) and private (love for his wife, difficulties with his children, the pain of rheumatoid arthritis, computer troubles)—Roth's *Mercy* is simultaneously wide-open and maddeningly hermetic, an enveloping, self-referential system which the casual reader may well decide is not worth the entry. Not that this is a bad thing, necessarily. Sixty years, after all, is a pretty uncasual length of time. Why should Roth care?

Still, prose style is a delicate instrument; one would hesitate to put down a violin and take it up again a half-century later. As a piece of writing—which is all, strictly speaking, a novel is—*Mercy* often feels somewhat sketchy and rushed, even at times perfunctory (''1920. Summer was near. Things were happening, simultaneously, integrally''); only occasionally does it recall the fervid, muscular beauty of *Call It Sleep*.

Robert Cohn. *Tikkun*. July/August, 1994, pp. 65–67

A Star Shines over Mt. Morris Park returns to the world of *Call It Sleep*, but importantly reconceives it. It begins at almost exactly the moment the earlier novel left off, in 1914, a momentous year for Roth's eight-year-old fictional alter ego, now called Ira Stigman rather than David Schearl. Though the outbreak of war is immediately recorded (and will eventually affect Ira's larger family), the event that matters most in the opening pages is local: Ira's family moves. The exclusively Jewish Lower East Side of *Call It Sleep*

gives way to a tiny enclave of Jewish families within a largely Irish-Catholic neighborhood in Harlem. The consequences of this removal Roth sees as disastrous; Ira becomes self-conscious, self-hating, a victim. . . .

Though Roth's new work often goes too far in its rejection of ''action from within''—is, indeed, insufficiently shaped and worked—the recollections themselves ring true, and make his story utterly absorbing. Here, one feels, is the vanished immigrant world, a world which in turn allows the reader to deduce a prior ''old country''. . .

Though *Mercy of a Rude Stream* may be something less than art, . . . two things [are clear]: Henry Roth can write, and his story is still worth listening to.

Zachary Leader. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*, Feb. 25, 1994, p. 20

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ROTH, Philip (1933–)

It's not far from Newark to Short Hills—or from the Bronx to Westchester—but the gap is sometimes unbridgeable, no matter how steep a toll one is prepared to pay. It is about the middle-class Jewish residents of both these worlds that Philip Roth writes in his first book, *Goodbye*, *Columbus*. . . . Philip Roth surveys the role of the Jew in modern American society with keen perception. Underlying his stories is the Jews' century-old tragic sense of life, leavened with warmth and humor, and with compassion. There are no excesses of sentimentality or bitterness: his characters cannot be typed as either Molly Goldbergs or Sammy Glicks.

If there is any doubt in my mind, it concerns the validity of these stories for the non-Jewish, or even the non-Eastern, reader. For so much depends on a familiarity with the peculiarly parochial surroundings and the subtle speech inflections.

Arnold Dolin. *Saturday Review*. May 16, 1959. p. 31

In some ways Jews may be thin-skinned and sensitive but in others they have a capacity to mock themselves mercilessly. That is why there are so many superb comedians among them. That is also why their best writers have written of them with an awareness of the thin line between the ludicrous and the pathetic, the comic and the tragic. Among those who have recently exploited this vein is Bernard Malamud. Now Philip Roth joins this company with a short novel and five short stories . . . marked by a comic, almost a caricaturist's, view of character, and effects that are at once funny and dreadful. At his most serious he has an original and most disturbing capacity for converting farce into nightmare.

Milton Rugoff. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. May 17, 1959. p. 3

What many writers spend a lifetime searching for—a unique voice, a secure rhythm, a distinctive subject—seem to have come to Philip Roth totally and immediately. At 26 he is a writer of narrow range but intense effects. He composes stories about the life of middle-class American Jews with a ferocity it would be idle to complain about, so thoroughly do they pour out of his own sense of things.

Mr. Roth's stories do not yield pleasure as much as produce a squirm of recognition: surely one feels, not all of American Jewish life is like this, but all too much is becoming so. Anyone who might object to these stories insofar as they are ''reports'' about a style of life cannot do it on the ground that Mr. Roth is hard-spirited—for given his material what else can he be?—or that he is unskilled—for, like so many other young writers these days, he has quickly absorbed the lessons of modern craftsmanship, perhaps a bit too quickly. If one is to object to these stories on non-literary grounds, out of a concern for the feelings or reputation of middle-class American Jews, it can be done only by charging that, in effect, Mr. Roth is a liar. And that, I am convinced, he is not.

Irving Howe. *New Republic*. June 15, 1959. p. 17

Goodbye, *Columbus* is a first book but it is not the book of a beginner. Unlike those of us who came howling into the world, blind and bare, Mr. Roth appears with nails, hair, and teeth, speaking coherently. At twenty-six he is skillful, witty, and energetic and performs like a virtuoso. His one fault, and I don't expect all the brethren to agree that it is a fault, is that he is so very sophisticated. Sometimes he twinkles too much. The *New York Times* has praised him for being ''wry''. One such word to the wise ought to be sufficient. Mr. Roth has a superior sense of humor (see his story ''Epstein''), and I think he can count on it more safely than on his ''wryness.''

Saul Bellow. *Commentary*. July, 1959. p. 77

The best of the *New Yorker* story writers, like John Cheever, always make me feel that, keen as they are, there is a whole side to their observations of American society that is entirely fantastic, imaginative, almost visionary, and so belongs to themselves alone. Roth, though emphatically not tailored to the *New Yorker*, involuntarily fits it because of a certain excess of intellectual theme over the material. There are too many symbols of present-day society, too many quotable bright sayings; the stories tend too easily to make a point. . . . I admire the edge and fierceness of Mr. Roth's mind, but his book (*Goodbye*, *Columbus*) leaves me worried about his future. For he has put so much of himself into being clear, decisive, straight, his stories are consciously so brave, that I worry whether he hasn't worked himself too neatly into a corner. He shows himself too anxious in each story not only to dramatize a conflict but also to make the issue of the conflict absolutely clear.

Alfred Kazin. *Contemporaries* (Little). 1962. pp. 261–2

That Roth is a careful observer and has a good ear is known to every reader of *Goodbye*, *Columbus*, but these gifts can be abused, and in the novel (*Letting Go*) Roth has abused them. Line by line the writing is fine, but that does not save long stretches from being unpardonably dull and quite superfluous. . . . What the book seems to demonstrate is not that contemporary civilization is a disaster but

that many people manage to mess up their lives—which isn't news. . . . Let me make it clear that Roth is still a figure to be reckoned with. This is the kind of bad book that only a good writer could have written. But, after *Goodbye*, *Columbus*, with its vitality and sureness of touch, *Letting Go* is a disappointment.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. June 16, 1962. p. 16

Letting Go is not just a book that displays the virtues of *Goodbye*, *Columbus* at far greater length. It is also a deliberate and almost too fully achieved realization of the sense of life that Mr. Roth shares to a large extent with his whole generation and in very obvious ways with such writers as Saul Bellow, Harvey Swados, and William Styron (and with Jack Kerouac, too, who provides an unintentional parody of it). This sense of life is oddly self-conscious and limited, despite the talent and insight of these writers, as if they had spent more of their lives with the *Paris Review* crowd or in Iowa City or some similar ''creative writing'' center than was good for them as writers. It is almost exclusively personal. There is a great deal about the public life in these writers, but they always see that life as an unjustifiable, inexplicable—if immovable—obstacle to the realization of the private self, which is inexhaustibly queried, analyzed and suffered over by everyone in their books, as it might be in some incredibly brilliant soap opera or undergraduate short story.

Arthur Mizener. *New York Times Book Section*. June 17, 1962. p. 1

Perhaps it would have been as well for Philip Roth if he hadn't been cited again and again as a leading member of the new school of American-Jewish novelists. Without so portentous a label hung round his neck, he might never have been lured into writing such tawdry, incoherent stuff. . . . Writers like Bellow and Malamud derive their blend of warmth and irony both from the intensity of the past, and from their ambiguous relationship with that past. From Jewish experience they abstract a metaphor for 20th century man: rueful, displaced, tragi-comic. Mr. Roth has borrowed a few externals from this tradition, but his high-gloss prose suggests another line of descent. He really belongs with a very different group of American-Jewish writers, the slick professionals like Irwin Shaw, Jerome Weidman, or even Herman Wouk.

John Gross. *New Statesman and Nation*. Nov. 30, 1962. p. 784

What grieves Roth most is the awareness that normalcy has, like a Procrustes' bed, truncated the range of life, excluding on the one hand the embrace of aspiration, the exhilaration of wonder, and on the other the acceptance of suffering. From this sadness grows Roth's ferocity, directed mainly against those who deny life, against the cowards who fear it, against all who would reduce it to safe insignificance, against all who flee from self and suffering—to seek repose is a travesty of all the realities of life and the potential of man. Roth is committed to his unheroic heroes who yearn and aspire, who want to climb out of the morass ''up the long marble stairs that led to Tahiti.''

Joseph C. Landis. *Massachusetts Review*. Winter, 1962. p. 261

American society as a whole has developed many ways in which personal confrontation can be avoided, and in a story such as ''Eli, the Fanatic'' Roth himself recognizes this and extends his criticism beyond the Jews. But if the avoidance of confrontation, indeed the willful escape from all that it involves, is not limited to the Jew, it is nonetheless, as seen in Roth's stories, the dominant Jewish problem. Perhaps it is here that the Jew is becoming Americanized, and that we can see the assimilation of which Roth's reviewers speak. Still, the author's focus on the need for relationship is a specification of something more than becoming American or middle-class; it is both a sign of Roth's intense involvement in Judaism's deepest values, and a criticism of both the Jew and the middle-class in terms of a problem that is not so much sociological as it is spiritual and fundamentally human.

Norman Leer. *Christian Scholar*. Summer, 1966. p. 134

Philip Roth's *When She Was Good* is a strange book disguised as a conventional one. . . .

All this has the sadness and the authenticity of a small-town graveyard. The simple effort to make a simple life can be tragic. Simple small-town people, who are nicknamed ''Blondie'' and who think this ''corny,'' can go mad with despair. They aspire only to Fort Kean College for Women, and for a family; but are their vocabularies too vulgar even for this? Is it inadequate perhaps even to aspire to a family, to be American, to live in a small town? Why is the author so meticulously absent? Scarcely does he even mock them, as Sinclair Lewis used to do; he does not seem to wish them well, as Sherwood Anderson did, nor to connect them with human fate, as Peter Taylor does. Only once is he really savage, and this is exactly about the inadequacy of their vocabularies, of the vocabulary in which the story is so subtly told. . . . One can only wonder why the author, from whatever height he has concealed himself upon, has watched these people with a gaze so long and pitiless and blank.

John Thompson. *New York Review of Books*. June 15, 1967. pp. 15–16

The deadness at the corner of *When She Was Good* is no accident. It is the deliberate result of Philip Roth's cold persecution of his characters. And a certain ugly power gets generated when a highly gifted writer so relentlessly denies sympathy to his own creations. . . . After a dilly-dallying beginning, Mr. Roth's execution of this subject is straightforward, fast and appallingly flat. At first I took the two-dimensionality as Pop Art, but soon the malice behind the comic-strip simplifications became too audible to ignore. The caricatures are recognizable but Mr. Roth's feeling about them seems privately motivated, to the point where he can do nothing but say it all over and over again. Nothing in what Lucy does, nothing in the people she tortures, deepens our understanding of her or increases our sense of her importance. Rather the opposite—we are moved to protect her. And it seems also to be chiefly Mr. Roth who is victimizing her husband.

With this character, however, it becomes possible to place the quality of Mr. Roth's motive and emotion more accurately. I recognize Roy Bassart—or rather, I recognize my feelings about

the type. Roy Bassart brings to mind words I haven't used much since high school, words like ''jerk'' and ''schnook.''

Robert Garis. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1967. p. 328

In the same year as [Donald Barthelme's] *Snow White* Philip Roth has published *When She Was Good*, which is in effect a posthumous Dreiser novel, with much family-album verisimilitude (''Edward's bronchitis had lingered nearly three weeks'') and some acutely observed American domesticity. Roth continues, clumsily and anachronistically, to be gnawed—as he was in that underrated novel, *Letting Go*—by the problem of sin and responsibility. Why do destructive people behave as they do? How do they persuade themselves that they are good? How does it *feel* to be bad? Roth cares about such questions, stumbling along in the burlap sack of his prose. . . . *When She Was Good* is, most of it, hopelessly old-fashioned, and it is an interesting novel. Why not? The novel, of all artifacts, remains the one least divisible from its artificer, whose idiosyncrasies and judgments may prevail over the demands of the genre itself. Roth's mind, besieged by archaic American dreariness, is more interesting than Barthelme's or [William] Burroughs'. Novels are too long, the novelist can't get away with gimmicks or momentary flashes; he has to disclose substance and continuity somewhere, perhaps in himself.

Marvin Mudrick. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1967. pp. 485–6

Portnoy's complaint presents the schlemiel condition as unbearable; and for all its dialect-humor the punch line seriously implies that the purgation of the narrative ought to be the starting point in the cure. The Jewish joke was conceived as an instrument for turning pain into laughter. *Portnoy's Complaint* reverses the process to expose the full measure of pain lurking beneath the laughter, suggesting that the technique of adjustment may be worse than the situation it was intended to alleviate.

We are back in a new enlightenment, and as the group is thought to have control over its destiny, it must be satirized for failing to execute its proper task. There is no toleration for irony, although irony is the hero's life-style, not to mention the author's, and the willingness to retire with the philosophic shrug, ''Oy, civilization and its discontents,'' is considered a betrayal of joyous potential. The self-hatred of which most unfavorable critics accuse the book grows from the rather self-loving notion that we could be better if only we tried, the tired but persistent thesis of the little engine that could. By this light, the little man who couldn't ceases to be the model of humanity and becomes again the mockery of its failings.

Ruth R. Wisse. *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero* (Chicago). 1971. pp. 120–1

The comedy of *Portnoy's Complaint* is at one level, as Alex complains, that he is ''living in the middle of a Jewish joke''; at another, that the various fantasies, including his own, keep colliding with each other. If in *When She Was Good*, Roth's heroine had trouble living the American middle-class morality she had swallowed because others would not let her, in this novel Portnoy has trouble living the immorality he wants to accept—for the same reason. But like most comedy, at bottom there is little that is really funny at all, and in the wake of Alex Portnoy's misadventures are such finally pathetic characters, however amazing in their fictive particularity, as Mary Jane Reed, ''The Monkey,'' whose vulnerable and nearly chaotic humanity shows up the shallow narcissism of her lover most devastatingly of all.

With others I remain unconvinced, nevertheless, despite all its wealth of particularity, its nostalgic and accurate evocation of Jewish lower middle-class life in the thirties and forties, and its other fictional achievements, that *Portnoy's Complaint* is more than a *tour de force*, an inevitable and logical culmination of the fantasy life that *Playboy* magazine has so studiously fostered among us. The danger—it is an altogether real one—is that we accept the comic fantasy and make it our own; or in other words, that we fall into Caliban's dream and envision all the land peopled with little Portnoys. Our reality is deeper and darker than this. Roth hints at it, as I've indicated, but his great gifts of caricature and humor in this novel are overwhelming.

Jay L. Halio. *Southern Review*. Spring, 1971. pp. 638–9

Roth is not a ''natural'' novelist at all, the kind who loves to tell stories, chronicle social life, pile on characters, and if in his early fiction he seems willfully bent on scoring ''points,'' in the novels his will exhausts itself from the sheer need to get on with things. He is an exceedingly joyless writer, even when being very funny. The reviewers of his novels, many of them sympathetic, noticed his need to rub our noses in the muck of squalid daily existence, his mania for annotating at punitive length the bickerings of his characters. Good clean hatred that might burn through, naturalistic determinism with a grandeur of design if not detail, the fury of social rebellion—any of these would be more *interesting* than the vindictive bleakness of Roth's novels.

Irving Howe. *Commentary*. Dec., 1972. p. 74

Yet what made Roth stand out—there was now a rut of ''Jewish novelists''—was his ''toughness,'' the power of decision and the ability to stand moral isolation that is the subject of his story ''Defender of the Faith.'' There was the refusal of a merely sentimental Jewish solidarity. At a time when the wounds inflicted by Hitler made it almost too easy to express feelings one did not have to account for, but when Jews in America were becoming almost entirely middle-class, Roth emphasized all the bourgeois traits that he found. He cast a cold eye on Jews as a group; he insisted, by the conscious briskness of his style and his full inventory of the exaggerated, injurious, sordid, hysterical, that he was free.

Alfred Kazin. *Bright Book of Life* (Little). 1973. p. 145

Parts of [*My Life as a Man*] are reminiscent of *Portnoy's Complaint*, but what frequently remained undeveloped in that book is more deeply attacked in this one. The stories read as if they were originally written in something approaching hysteria—but then rewritten, and rewritten again. The novel is chaotic in its emotions, but nicely controlled as conscious art, and its more subtle considerations surface when it is read a second time. . . .

Roth's best work, so far, has transformed intense private experience into fiction that speaks for its era, no matter how eccentric the basic metaphor of the works might be. A drop-out

from graduate school at the University of Chicago, Roth is continually aware of himself as a writer in a variety of traditions, and he is ironically aware of the distance between life and the kind of art we are taught to admire.

Joyce Carol Oates. *American Poetry Review*. May–June, 1974. p. 45

In his new book *My Life as a Man*, which deals with the operatically unhappy marriage of a successful young writer, Roth returns to the quasi-autobiographical mode of *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Goodbye, Columbus*, and the result is good enough to confirm the misdirection of the last three books, [*Our Gang*, *The Breast*, *The Great American Novel*], just as *Portnoy's Complaint* revealed what was missing from the three that preceded *it*. It confirms that despite his superb gifts as a mimic, *tummler* and hyperbolist Roth is only good at fantasticating materials from his own life. As a satirist of Nixon or Bill Veeck he is clever but uninspired. (He especially lacks any political savvy.) As a satirist of middle-class Jewish life in Newark or the suburbs he is brilliant and wicked, endowed with a perfect ear and a cold eye, a bit like the early Mary McCarthy. And faced with the traumas of family life and the conflicts of the mental and moral life in *Portnoy's Complaint*, Roth can be not only funny but lyrical—emotion recollected in hysteria—with the poignance of one who is so miserable he can only crack jokes. . . .

At the root of the creative problem is the pervasive ungenerosity that has always marked Roth's work. (His early Jewish critics were misguided; his quarrel was not with Jews but with people.) Even a satirist must love his characters a little, especially if he also loathes them. He must be drawn to them in an animating way, must *need* to give them life. He can't use novels simply to settle old scores. Roth's genius is all for surfaces—the telling descriptive detail, the absurd mannerism, the tics and turns of real speech, the ludicrous flaw of personality—rarely for human depths. He does have an affinity for people at their most frantic, pompous and ridiculous, in part because he admires the sheer energy of human waste, but also because they confirm his own sense of superiority.

Morris Dickstein. *New York Times Book Section*. June 2, 1974. p. 1

Not all readers will find Roth's comedy of desperation [*My Life as a Man*] risible, even those who no longer expect it to rest on the kind of bedrock decency the social humorists of England are used to. This author's rather heartless solipsism will always tend to undermine first-person humour, and here, where there is even fundamental doubt as to the identity of the self in whose name knowledge is claimed, the possibility that one is being browbeaten in laughing more derisively than one would temperamentally like is stronger than ever. What seems certain is that Roth is reserving the last laugh in this instance to himself, and that we might do well to leave him to it, abandoning ourselves in the meantime to the rampant Schadenfreude of these pages.

Russell Davies. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. Nov. 1, 1974. p. 1217

Sardonic wit is never at a loss for subject matter these days; we live in times so absurd that it is no longer necessary to read ponderous essays by French intellectuals. The evening paper provides plenty of material in the unlikely event that the normal events of the day do not. But this avalanche of human folly is as much a curse as it is a blessing to the writer of contemporary fiction, particularly if he has the satirical bent of a Philip Roth. In the years following *Portnoy's Complaint* it became increasingly difficult to find a congenial home for his sizable verbal talents. The grotesquery of the world chipped away at what a literary imagination might conceive, always threatening to outdo in life what one had patterned in art.

In Roth's case, the late sixties took a fearful toll. His next books were pitched on that shaky ground called the playful gimmick. For a writer without his reputation, the results, no doubt, would have been fatal. For Roth, however, even the slimmest straw can lead to a darkly comic drowning. . . .

Our Gang was written in the white heat of indignation and outrage. To call Roth's grasp of politics ''puerile'' would be like equating a temper tantrum with sophisticated diplomacy. But in the context of 1971—with the war in Vietnam still raging and American citizens still deeply divided about its moral justification—critics tended to respond to the righteousness of his position rather than the artfulness of his book. Granted, novels are never written in a cultural vacuum; they always contain some residue of the social environment, such as the baggage of special interest groups and competing claims about what the ''representative'' consists of. Novels pinned to a volatile political climate merely render the problem exasperating.

A post-Watergate rereading of the novel is even more fascinating than reading it during the days when Nixon dictated our foreign policy. What some were quick to dismiss as cranky paranoia in 1971 has surfaced as a highly prophetic reality four years later. If anything, Roth's outrageous parody of Nixon is not outrageous enough for the postimpeachment era. Such are the risks the political satirist runs in our time.

Sanford Pinsker. *The Comedy That ''Hoits''. An Essay on the Fiction of Philip Roth* (Univ. of Missouri Pr., 1975). pp. 71–72

Philip Roth's tenth book [*The Professor of Desire*] is a thoughtful, even gentle, stylistically elegant novel about the paradox of male desire, that lacerating sexual passion which may lead to happiness but cannot survive it.

The effect of the book is more that of discourse than of fiction, high-level discourse adorned with wit, with rhetorical devices new and ancient, and with its piquant illustrations. Its form is that of monologue, rather than first-person storytelling, for the scenes are more often adumbrated than dramatized, the characters more often indicated than developed.

This method, designed to involve the reader intellectually rather than sensationally, is, of course, perfectly intentional—a remark that ought to be unnecessary. But we have been racing through a couple of decades in which the writers have so far outdistanced the critics that it is aggravatingly commonplace to see writing that is in fact subtle and resourceful dismissed as if it were a mistake by commentators whose perceptions simply haven't kept pace.

The monologist in Mr. Roth's novel is David Kepesh, a professor of comparative literature, two of whose enthusiasms are for Chekhov and Kafka. . . .

The author's control of this world seems perfect except perhaps, in one regard. The reader is not as certain as might be wished of the ironic distance between author and narrator, particularly at the end of the book, when Kepesh rages internally against the working-out of the desire-happiness paradox in himself, as if it were a black misfortune and his alone, ''a ridiculous, vicious, inexplicable joke!'' One wants to say to him, and to feel that Mr. Roth is saying of him, that it's a joke all right, but a sad, small, universal, necessary joke that cloaks a piece of folk wisdom David Kepesh is absurdly late in learning. . . .

If this reading is not indicated with absolute clarity, it seems at least a likely one, leaving us with *The Professor of Desire* as a fine display of literary skills, a challenging brief novel, moving when it needs to be, an erudite examination of the troglodyte within us.

Vance Bourjaily. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 16, 1977. pp. 1, 50

The Ghost Writer is . . . a strangely unsatisfying book. These days one is too decently in awe, too empathetic (maybe too sophisticated, or lazy) to demand the Big C from every work of quality. Just the recognition of quality, as distinct from the okay delight, strains the rusty dynamo of critical intelligence. But Catharsis—or its modern impersonation, Insight, the Big I—is what *The Ghost Writer* seems to promise, seems to be rushing us toward, the grail of its endeavor, only we never get there. So at the end and afterward, one remains (not unhappily) in Roth's enticing grip, his thrall, but doesn't quite know why. Everything still impends, but the sense of purpose is diffused. . . .

It is probably clear that I do not think Roth can any longer be judged on the merits of his individual books—though, of course, that shall continue to happen as his individual books appear. *The Ghost Writer* is strangely unsatisfying; it grows less unsatisfying and more strange—more wondrous—as it is connected to what Roth obviously connects it to: his own work, previous writers, aesthetic and moral responsibilities that always threaten to collide and that he makes collide. Roth is stylistically the cleanest of writers, so his ire, and ours, is silhouetted. He plies, always, an abrasive grace; and mucking up the web of his endeavor is a by-now long history of coconspiratorial challenge and disappointment: Why doesn't he do the large, complete, major-theme, Big C novel we can all recognize as truly great?

The answer, I think, is that he has done it, or is doing it, however imperfectly, in all his work; that Roth can be read selectively (anyway will, who has time for anything else?) but not discretely. Is it a fault of *The Ghost Writer* that it requires some knowledge of where Roth has been before and how we have responded and (I think) a brushing-up with James? I suspect a ''yes'' reflects convention, a wish, maybe a practical necessity, certainly reviewer's convenience—and a moral ratio that is insultingly lopsided. . . . Roth's games are inseparable from his candor—his unquenchable yearning, at times of the mind, at times of the groin, to tell, in art, how the madness is. Zuckerman does his best, and it's still tentative; but it's the best, most rigorous (with exceptions), most human, most demanding of our better selves, *least* pulling down of the reader to some common vulgarity, least disinterested in spirit, of any contemporary essay-story I know. *Que sera, sera*, but Roth's uneasy, multifaceted worlds have, in *The Ghost Writer*, become my own, and I think writers' own, Jews' own, our own. The rest is the madness of apathy.

Eliot Fremont-Smith. *The Village Voice*. Oct. 8, 1979, pp. 33, 36

From the outset, Roth's fictional interpretation of American Jews as a regnant bourgeoisie disturbed as much as it amused. Jews of the parent generation, reacting with understandable pique to this parody of their aspirations and achievements, granted Roth what no American contemporary, not even Norman Mailer, had been able to provoke, and what no American author since Henry Miller has more enjoyed—a public antagonism, proof in the form of outrage that his work had hit a nerve. In protesting that he had not portrayed them fairly, these Jews offered the most tangible demonstration of his success. For the critic of bourgeois complacency, what sweeter response than his constituency's cry of ''foul,'' exposing that very obsession with propriety that he has been ridiculing? It was not for Philip Roth to worry, as many other serious American authors have had to do, about artistic irrelevance: he has always had the fuel of audience reaction pumping. . . .

Roth's Jewish bourgeois comedy provided us, during our prolonged adolescence, with models of the lovable hero, whose fumbling attempts at direct self-gratification foiled the inhibited digestive tracts and spirits of his elders, and whose ''honest'' search for a better life exposed the hypocrisy of those with foreordained religious and ethnic guidelines. This was no small thing to owe a writer.

It is tempting to speak of Philip Roth as if he were the author of but a single creation, the chucked-beneath-the chin Jewish college boy who first appeared in *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Letting Go*, resurfaced in *Portnoy's Complaint*, and made his way through difficult marriages and into the difficulties of a literary career in *My Life as a Man* and *The Professor of Desire*. In truth, of course, Philip Roth's highly disciplined professional career included a good deal more. . . .

But though his work has ranged in setting and form, no one could have been surprised, or unhappy, to see the author returning as he has recently done to the fictional adventures of the lad from Newark. In Roth's two most recent novels, *The Ghost Writer* and *Zuckerman Unbound*, this young man has become a writer, in the first novel a fledgling writer visiting a Master, and in the second an all-too-renowned novelist trying to cope with his new fame. . . .

By his own suggestive references to his earlier work and to the cultural milieu from which it emerged, Philip Roth makes it possible to look back now on the development of the character who has become Nathan Zuckerman: indeed, he seems to invite such a consideration. Where the early heroes demonstrated their opposition to embourgeoisement by searching for sexual pleasure, their late counterparts pursue a more substantial form of self-realization through artistic creation. The initial resistance of the protagonist to the Jewish middle-class agenda has gradually expressed and justified itself in a successful writing career. Keeping pace with this thematic progression is the author's own technical development: far more than his previous works, *The Ghost Writer* and *Zuckerman Unbound* are models of compression and formal elegance. . . .

Reading Philip Roth remains pleasurable, but the pleasure has in it the element of predictability. Those who want literature to reassure them by fulfilling the expectations they bring to it will find

in Philip Roth their comfortable assumptions of twenty odd years ago. In order to go beyond this, Roth would have to part with the formula that brought him undeniable success, but at the cost of that greater success his latest heroes espouse: the success of the artist unbound.

Ruth R. Wisse. *Commentary*. Sept., 1981, pp. 56–60

Much has been made of the ingenuity with which Roth spins out the dialectics of life vs. art and hedonism vs. convention, but *Zuckerman Unbound* has neither the concentration and feeling of necessity we expect in a book this short, nor the richness and breadth its many themes require. It's a protracted sketch, a rambling novella lit by some stunning moments—the death of Zuckerman's father is as moving as anything Roth has written—but whose last chapter in no sense flows from its first. What unity it possesses comes from Roth's voice, as always a marvel of fluidity and bite, and from the public persona of Roth, which gives Nathan Zuckerman a resonance and coherence he would not otherwise have.

For all Roth's declaimers of autobiographical intent, he counts heavily on our willingness to read his new book not as fiction but as a document in his ongoing debate with those who call his work, especially *Portnoy*, anti-Semitic, narcissistic and exploitative of those close to him. Thus, the real reason why Nathan's mother is a paragon of sweetness and patience lies outside these pages, in Roth's wish to refute accusations that Mrs. Portnoy, that strident Oedipal nightmare, must have been drawn from life. What holds the book together is not the connection its elements have with each other, but the connection each has with the author. A reader who had missed *Portnoy* and the surrounding brouhaha would have trouble figuring out why *Carnovsky*, the contents of which are barely mentioned, causes such a fuss.

Roth's subject has always been himself, and perhaps that's just not enough anymore. Having already catalogued his more interesting aspects—sexuality, upbringing, Jewishness, ambition—he's left with the infinitely more attenuated subject of his relation to his own literary reputation. Leaving aside the considerable vanity inherent in the assumption that this is a matter of wide concern, what is the reader supposed to do while Roth tap-dances around what seems to be considerable feelings of guilt? If 12 years later Roth is still obsessed by the attacks on *Portnoy*, maybe he *shouldn't* have written the damn book, already. By forcing him to place his enormous gifts in the service of an uneasy self-justification, the *vrai* is indeed having its revenge.

Katha Pollitt. *Mother Jones*. Sept./Oct., 1981, p. 66

From the beginning of his career, he has been explicitly seeking out one spiritual father or another, and though his publications (up until very recently) have each differed in their manner of presentation, he keeps returning to an established set of themes concerned with authority and individuation. It is as if he were ringing changes on Nietzsche's idea of man as ''*das kranke Tier*,'' the sick animal—dis-eased by virtue of his self-consciousness and doomed to ever more ingenious attempts at curing himself. Roth makes much of his coming to maturity in the fifties, that decade of earnestness and of drifting, of ''conformity'' and incipient anti-establishmentarianism. His protagonists thrive on the cultivation of sin and polymorphous perversity, but at the same time their erotic adventures are informed by missionary, redemptive ideals and their transgressions made keener by an exquisite sense of propriety. Faced with temptation, his hero will usually give in—and then use the occasion to test his capacity for conscience. Never wasting, never in line, he synthesizes the stereotypes of pushy Jew and nice Jewish boy. For his parents, and for the women he loves, Roth reserves both his tenderest and his most scabrous outpourings. As he terms Kafka, so is he himself a ''family-haunted son,'' and yet at all junctures he insists on being ''on my own.'' Having hurt his loved ones, he will get a more vivid sense of himself, of human possibilities generally, through the consequent suffering and guilt he experiences. His ambivalence, in other words—his hesitating and pulsating between carnal and spiritual imperatives—is the ambivalence of Stephen Dedalus and Raskolnikov, only in a minor, bluesy key: tragedy verging on farce.

Howard Eiland. In *Critical Essays on Philip Roth*, ed. Sanford Pinsker (G.K. Hall, 1982). p. 256

The fiction of Philip Roth, more than that of any other Jewish American writer, has been intertwined with his readers' responses to his work, with justification of his themes and methods, with literary theory, and with his Jewish identity. Beginning with the publication of *Goodbye, Columbus* in 1959, his satire of Jewish suburbia, and reaching sensational proportions with the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint* in 1969, the controversy about Roth's status, both as artist and as a Jew, has not abated. Roth's talent, according to Irving Howe, ''has been put to the service of a creative vision deeply marred by vulgarity.'' Howe's criticism of Roth is based on his discerning in his writings an ''unfocused hostility'' stemming from his ''thin personal culture.'' In other words, Roth ''comes at the end of a tradition which can no longer nourish his imagination.'' In short, Roth assaults American Jewish life in his satires without being generally nourished or sustained by the culture which he chooses as his central subject. Thus, the critical observation is also an ethical indictment. Roth vulgarizes Jewish life in his fiction. . . .

Were the issue of Roth's loyalty or disloyalty to his people limited to a discursive tug of war between the writer and his critics, his career would pose interesting questions in the sociology of literature alone. But the drama between the Jewish writer bent on freely expressing his desires in his art and his moralistic family, friends, and readers has infiltrated his fiction and gradually has become his central subject, his characters, and his plot. The solely sexual drives of his earlier protagonists evolve into artistic longings, sensual pleasure alone evolves into a devotion to art for its own sake, uninhibited by social, ethical, or historical restraints. As Ruth Wisse has observed, ''where the early heroes demonstrated their opposition to embourgeoisement by searching for sexual pleasure, their late counterparts pursue a more substantial form of self-realization through artistic creation.'' I do not believe, however, as Wisse does, that this reflects the recycling of an old theme into a stereotype that lacks the vigor of the original, that he is merely making the bourgeois Jew an easier and more automatic target of ridicule now that his protagonist is an artist. On the contrary. As his art begins to turn in upon itself, it also seems to be moving toward a stronger and more complex identification with Jewish life.

Hana Wirth-Nesher. *Prooftexts*. Sept., 1983, pp. 263–64

Philip Roth's new novel [*The Anatomy Lesson*] is more necessary than satisfactory. I'm glad he wrote it, but I'm also glad to hear he's now finished with his alter ego, that notorious and embattled Jewish writer, Nathan Zuckerman. Three novels have been enlisted to do the work of perhaps two and a half. *The Anatomy Lesson* offers an important variation on the theme of the trilogy and a few grand comic scenes, but signs of strain have begun to intrude. Roth is overworking his material, stretching it too thin, repeating himself. There's an irony here; in this story, Zuckerman has exhausted his writer's capital; having used up his life in his books, he's unable to write at all.

To recapitulate as briefly as possible; the central theme of the Zuckerman trilogy is ''the unreckoned consequences of art.'' In *The Ghost Writer*, which remains Roth's best novel to date, the young Nathan Zuckerman is exposed to the perils of the life of a literary recluse. In *Zuckerman Unbound*, he must endure the perils of literary celebrity. In *The Anatomy Lesson*, Zuckerman confronts the perils of being a famous writer who is finished with writing. Forget fame and wealth, Roth seems to say, forget the women who pull up their skirts as soon as they enter a writer's room: the writer's life is not a happy one. It is, quite literally, a pain in the neck. . . .

The good stuff in *The Anatomy Lesson* survives a second reading. Both times I've read it, however, I've found myself pushing toward the end. Over the years, Roth has refined his tone of voice, his comedy and his mastery of fictional techniques, but if he's now incapable of conjuring up a dull scene, he's still fully capable of running a good idea into the ground. Flying high on Percodan, Zuckerman engages a limousine with a young woman driver. He says he's Milton Appeal, a publisher of pornography. Talking nonstop—a consequence of the drug—Zuckerman translates himself into another life. It's a marvelous scene until Roth carries it too far: Zuckerman has the details, even the rationale, of this pornographer's business just right. The episode reminds us of Zuckerman's persuasiveness in translating the enigmatic Amy Bellette into Anne Frank in *The Ghost Writer*.

It's impertinent to confuse the author of a book with its protagonist. Zuckerman is not Roth, though he shares some of his biography. Can Zuckerman's ghost have been exorcised with this novel? I hope so, but it's hard to shake the image of Sherlock Holmes crawling back from the brink of the Reichenbach Falls.

Peter S. Prescott. *Newsweek*. Nov. 7. 1983. pp. 132, 132D

[Philip] Roth's preoccupation is with personal psychology and seems to scant the sociology of ethnicity, which is also involved in the content of his writing. His depiction of Jewish characters and of a Jewish milieu, even if it is deprived and diminished by its call upon only a residue of a rich Jewish culture, is nevertheless an ethnic phenomenon. Relics of language and ritual and social custom survive. The ''invented'' Jew of Roth is a species of assimilated Jew who may himself retain traits or turns of mind inherited from a family closer to a fuller ethnicity. Sometimes Jewishness is minimal and consists only of in an awareness of being regarded by others as a Jew. But the ''psychology'' to which Roth refers as the only Jewishness left in him is only the subjective aspect of a social ethnic situation. . . .

Roth's concentration on the psychology of the individual—Jewish or non-Jewish—entails artistic risks which Roth has not, I believe, entirely escaped, and which in the end prevents him from being as great an artist as a Bellow or Malamud. The risk is in fact dual: it may deprive a work of social richness and depth, and the writer may fail to cut the umbilical cord with the artist's personal consciousness. I think Roth's work is diminished in both respects. It is necessary here to caution that his entire corpus roughly divides into two aspects, probing of individual consciousness and satire, and that these are frequently intermixed in the same work. But in both aspects Roth is not entirely in control of his abundant talent and allows it to run away with him, so that he either attenuates the satire or cannot prevent his own personality from intruding on the writing. The result is that his writing is never far from the *personal*, both in relation to the characters depicted and to himself, so that it is robbed of that broad human significance which constitutes the element of greatness in art. Perhaps this is the reason for the widely held belief, which I share, that Roth has not thus far fully realized the promise of his talent. . . .

Roth is still a young man. His power to entertain is undiminished, and one perceives a growth in maturity in the [*Zuckerman Unbound*] trilogy. One looks to his future with decided interest.

Louis Harap. *In the Mainstream: The Jewish Presence in Twentieth-Century American Literature, 1950s–1980s* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Pr., 1987), pp. 136–37, 150

There are many standards against which a writer may be judged, and I'm not persuaded that [Philip] Roth has always been subjected to the most illuminating of them. Clearly, one doesn't apply to Roth the standards of Tolstoy or Flaubert, let alone Sholom Aleichem. Even Kafka, for all Roth's efforts to emulate him, belongs to another world. But there are other standards, all American, by which Roth might be profitably measured: Hawthorne, whom he resembles in degree of torment, in motive hunting, in moral allegory; Whitman, with whom he shares an unending self-recital; Bellow, from whom he has learned something about the desperate monologue, the aromas of the city, and the psychopathologies of everyday life. And there is one other who might provide the most relevant yardstick of all: Issac Rosenfeld, with whom he shares a sense of humor (Rosenfeld was also a gifted mimic), an overbearing superego, a dynamism of suffering, a heart bursting with chicken fat and gall, and a longing to break out.

Roth writes with his whole being, as Rosenfeld often expressed the desire to. He holds nothing back, endeavoring with all his skill to reach beyond skill toward power. The effort has been only fitfully successful—I account *Portnoy's Complaint* and *My Life as a Man* as those of his books that come closest to being powerful novels. *The Anatomy Lesson*, by contrast, achieves at best a kind of force, which is the application of power without grace. And yet *The Anatomy Lesson* exposes the drive, the heat, and the ready irritability that propel Roth's imagination and make him so hard a writer to settle in with. Roth's own refusal to settle, to be ingratiating and ''nice,'' which is constantly at war with his artist's instinct for form, style, and grace, is the basic drama of his writing.

Roth's, then, is not a settled career, its very volatility being the promise of his continuing invention. Roth walks a high wire with each book, not with Mailer's swagger and bravado, but with the artisan's sense of balance and touch, placing one foot carefully before the other, testing the line for tautness and sway, checking his

footing as he goes. We would be foolish not to cheer him on his way.

Mark Schechner. *After the Revolution: Studies in the Contemporary Jewish American Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Pr., 1987), pp. 237–38

Philip Roth, in my opinion, is a Jewish writer, not because he considers himself to be a Jewish writer or because others regard him as a Jewish writer, but because he writes about people called Zuckerman, Epstein, Kepesh, and their mothers, about their lives and their lives' upheavals, in a manner a novelist relates things he knows intimately. As a result, he knows about both the recognizable and the hidden movements of his characters. Whenever possible, he observes them with a scrutinizing attention and without interfering in their lives. He has never idealized the Jew. He has never elevated him to sainthood, never created him faceless; rather he speaks of him as if he is flesh and blood. . . . In Philip Roth's fiction, there is hardly any Jewish philosophy, Jewish tradition, mysticism, or religion, and there is no discussion of who is a Jew or what is a Jew. There are those who are proud of their Judaism and parade it whether there is a need for it or not. And then there are those who are ashamed of it and those for whom Judaism has no importance at all. Roth's Jews are Jews without Judaism.

Because his works do not discuss and make reference to ''typical'' characteristics of the Jewish spirit, let alone events in Jewish history, Philip Roth is often perceived as a very American writer; although the Jew is found in his fiction, he is there because of biographical accident rather than philosophical commitment. The writer is primarily interested in everyday existence and not in raising—to use Jungian terminology—the collective consciousness of the chosen people. Certainly, this point of view can be reinforced by rereadings. To reiterate, Philip Roth's works have no Talmud, no Jewish philosophy, no mysticism, no religion. His literary production does not reveal Jewish sources in the same way as Orthodox Christianity is found in Dostoevsky's and Tolstoy's novels. If this is so, why then are Roth's novels Jewish? I still maintain that Roth is a Jewish writer because all the experiences in his fiction, from *Goodbye*, *Columbus* to his last novel, reflect the facial expressions, words, intonations, the mannerisms of the eye's language of stares and grimaces, with which the Jews are so generously endowed. Add to this the humor and the grotesqueness, and you are faced with works of art that remind you of a family relatedness to such writers as Saul Bellow and I. B. Singer on the one hand and Franz Kafka on the other. I am mentioning these writers because Philip Roth's affinity with them surpasses mere literary kinship.

Aharon Appelfeld. ''The Artist as a Jewish Writer.'' In Asher Z. Milbauer and Donald G. Watson, eds. *Reading Philip Roth* (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 13–14

A long time ago Roth learned some modernist tricks. He ends his work (or more accurately infects the whole of it) with ambiguity and unknowingness, for that is the condition (I believe as he sees it) of modern man. Yet, like Joyce and others, he returns to the scenes of his achievements for further probing. Thus each work is another step along the way to knowledge; each work is but one passage, completed in time, before the next book is started on the same but always new and enriching mysteries.

Consider the reappearance in name as well as identity of spirit of Nathan Zuckerman and David Kepesh. As Roth grows in understanding them, he brings them back on stage. He is, like many writers, an autobiographic fabulator, someone who puts on view his visionary veils of imagery and his nude bodies of painful, persistent, fantastic thought. The parallels between his early and later heroes are obvious, but perhaps not always apparent in their metaphysical boundaries. Zuckerman is a well-known writer, rich and famous largely because he exposed a young man's Oedipal appetites and his sense of guilt and anxiety over his ensuing success. David Kepesh is a more gentle soul, but just as driven and divided. Kepesh is suffering from the trauma of his divorce, of a failed relationship for which he feels some sense of responsibility (and guilt over his own judgment of irresponsibility).

Kepesh's sentence of guilt is his period of becoming (and remaining, the book implies) a breast; the shame he fears is not unlike the fear of Roth's earlier heroes about their emotional withholdings. Indeed Roth's heroes are consistently concerned about their public images. Like good Jewish boys they fear the consequences of acting out of turn. Flaunting is an acceptable act, but firm admission of difference shall not be condoned within the tribe nor forgotten by the elders.

Yet Roth also suggests that his heroes must go through their trials, and expose themselves. Unlike some Jewish writers who may be compassionate about the temptations of lust and blasphemy but who come down on the side of obedience to the Law, Roth inevitably sends his heroes into hell, but tries to bring them back to a new circle. His most significant works have the same kind of ending: a new beginning.

Martin Tucker. ''The Shape of Exile in Philip Roth.'' In Asher Z. Milbauer and Donald G. Watson, eds. *Reading Philip Roth* (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 34–35

A visitor to Prague, under close surveillance, Philip had come at first only in search of traces of Kafka. Seeking one thing, he found another: Kafka, forbidden in a country whose culture had been massacred by the Russian occupation. He wrote about this in his novel *The Professor of Desire*, in one of the book's most beautiful and lucid chapters: Kepesh, an American Kafka specialist, meets a Czech professor, a Kafka specialist as well, who had been dismissed from his university by the Russians. Here is the confrontation of two existences, of two worlds, of two ''professors of Kafka'' but also of two readings of Kafka. For the Czech scholar, Kafka speaks of the impotent solitude of a man confronted by implacable political power. To Kepesh, Kafka speaks of the solitude of an impotent man confronted by the implacable power of his own body. . . .

Roth is infinitely sincere in his desire to tell all, to say everything he has in his heart and to say it openly, ''naively,'' like someone who at confession wants to hold nothing back. Infinitely vulnerable in his sincerity, Roth is infinitely ungraspable in his irony.

Milan Kundera. ''Some Notes on Roth's *My Life as a Man* and *The Professor of Desire*.'' In Asher Z. Milbauer and Donald G. Watson, eds. *Reading Philip Roth* (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 160, 164

Writing an autobiography of the immediate present is one way to ensure that the writer will not forget the past. The goal of such a work, for amateur and professional, is to capture the heat and exactness of the story, giving greater meaning to the narrative than to any old-age commentary of reflection about what happened. It is a story for which immediate self-disclosure has become certain therapy. . . .

One of the best is Philip Roth's *Patrimony* (1991), subtitled a ''true story,'' which pays homage to the importance of a father to all men via the importance of *his* father, Herbert Roth. Roth narrates his father's 1988–89 losing battle to a brain tumor. The book is also studded with Roth's most endearing reminiscences of his dad, a man of his own passions and eccentricities. True, the book is about his father's eventual death, which now is past; but Roth admits to tending his growing book and his dying father simultaneously. . . .

In essence, Roth uses autobiography to resolve for himself the immediate loss of his father much in the way a journalist exposes a contemporary problem or the new social novel confronts current political issues. Many writers now recognize that these stories of immediate personal crisis belong more to their present lives and, therefore, cannot simmer beside their other ''creative'' work. These stores *are* their creative work; they must be told, perhaps not for res publica but for the writer's own need to grieve. Grief, sooner or later, as everyone knows, blows down every door.

Thomas Larson. ''Autobiographies of the Present.'' *Boulevard*. Spring, 1993, pp. 176–77

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ROURKE, Constance (1885–1941)

Certainly these five figures dealt in words: Lyman Beecher and Henry Ward, the preachers, Harriet Beecher Stowe, the novelist who helped make a war, Horace Greeley, incessantly pouring forth words, and often very picturesque words, in his Tribune, and Barnum, the first of the advertisers and persuaders of the mob to believe in miracles.

They had in them a kind of greatness of vision coupled often enough with an inadequacy of thought. Yet they spoke for their time, and the time heard. [In *Trumpets of Jubilee*] Miss Rourke gives solid three-dimensional portraits of these symbols. She is none too gentle with their pretense and their ultimate thinness, but she understands how they molded and also voiced their generation. . . . This volume is not one of debunking, but of de-mything. These so-called giants are caught out of their official poses and stripped of the legends that have helped to make them great. Yet within them resided something of greatness, much of courage, and vast reservoirs of tumultuous energy and democratic faith in mere size that we find missing from our present quiet, but less exciting day.

Leon Whipple. *Survey*. July 1, 1927. p. 390

Here [*Troupers of the Gold Coast*] is a story of the theatre written as such a story should be. The gold-rush days of California in the fifties and sixties were an exuberant, changing pattern of comedy, tragedy, farce, and melodrama, and, strangely enough, a vigorous theatre flourished at the same time and in the same mood. The excitement and color of both, Miss Rourke manages to capture within the pages of her book. Tent-shows, saloon halls, lavish buildings housed these productions in San Francisco, Sacramento, Sonora. The troupers travelling mule-back from mining camp to mining camp played under any roof available. Those were the days of child actors, minstrels, satires, burlesques, varied at times with large quantities of Shakespeare, and increasingly with ballads, jigs, hornpipes, and cruel imitations of rival productions. Those were the days also of audiences who plunged headlong into the spirit of the performance themselves, hurling comments, choruses, bags of nuggets, or missiles with equal extravagance; and of companies led by such actors as Edwin Booth, Laura Keene, Caroline Chapman, Lola Montez.

Vera Kelsey. *Theatre Arts*. Nov., 1928. p. 844

It is a mighty subject, this of American humor: a subject one conceives of as approachable from ever so many unsuspected angles; and it could hardly have fallen, for the moment, into better hands than Miss Rourke's. For one thing, it is not easy to think of many writers capable at once of her industry and of her skill, of her patience in research and her lucidity in exposition; in a word, of her balanced competence. *American Humor* is an erudite book: it is chock full of what are called ''materials''; but among a thousand such it is the one book that stands on its own legs, and allows you, in spite of everything, to see the wood as well as the trees. But this is not all, or indeed the best, that one can say of it. Literary competence is one thing, and gifted insight is another; and what chiefly gratifies a reader of Miss Rourke's is her sense of the many dimensions in her subject, the free play of her mind over more than a few of its aspects: particularly, her recognition that the problem must be constantly referred to psychology and constantly posed against a background of social history. Humor not simply as a formal entity, a literary mode, but humor envisaged dynamically as the product of personal needs and social conflicts, the expression of a whole people's ambitions and disappointments and joy in achievement: such is the subject of her book as Miss Rourke apprehends it.

Newton Arvin. *New Republic*. April 22, 1931. p. 278

This interpretation of the American character—which, by the way, has a malapropos title [*American Humor*] that conveys both too

little and too much—embodies the results of what a politician would call a fishing expedition. For what Miss Rourke has done is to throw her hook into all the waters of the American spirit in the hope of pulling something to the surface with each cast; and she has let what she has fished up dictate her conclusions. There is therefore no air of preconception about her brilliant study; and if she has let one or two fish get away from her, that is because mortal arms are not as strong as Paul Bunyan's or Davy Crockett's or Mike Fink's. Her lucid style is admirably adapted to skirting the abysses of the human spirit without falling in and calling it mysticism; and she makes tenuous matters seem solid as headlands.

Miss Rourke begins with American mythology and ends with the more conscious literature of Henry James, Ring Lardner, Sinclair Lewis, and Willa Cather. She has tried to uncover national characteristics as revealed by what American story tellers have conceived their countrymen to be in various places and at various times. The first clear figure in our mythology is that of the Yankee, the man ''lank as a leafless elm'' from down east (originally from Yorkshire?), who always got the better of a bargain, whether on the coast of the China seas or in swapping a horse on Gus Longstreet's Georgia frontier. . . . Meanwhile in the West, a rival myth was springing up. This was the myth of the gamecock of the wilderness, the man who could whip his weight in wildcats.

John Chamberlain. *Forum*. June, 1931. pp. vi–vii

The first hundred and thirty-seven pages [of *American Humor*] trace the rise of the Yankee cult in the East, the Backwoodsman in the West, and the ''long tail'd blue'' tradition in the South. The trinity of American mythology reveals the fundamental characteristics of the native humor—both folk and professional—: an innate love for masquerade; a perverted self-consciousness; story-telling by means of a monologue which borders on soliloquy; a prepossession for the homely and 'natural'; and an obsession for size, strength, scale, power (cf. the ''tall tale''). . . .

American Humor is in many ways a study of profound value. It would be if it did nothing except call attention to the importance of native influences on our writers, often overlooked, especially in the criticism on Poe. But many of the characteristics which Miss Rourke identifies as American comic traditions may just as accurately be attributed to foreign sources. For example, reverence for the homely and 'natural' is merely a phase of European romanticism; the monologue bordering on soliloquy is found in the Bible, among other places; and since it is usually admitted that practically all the Kentucky ballads are simply paraphrases and adaptations of the original three hundred and six English and Scottish ballads, is it not likely that most of our folk legends have been transported and transmuted from Europe?

Gay Wilson Allen. *Sewanee Review*. Jan.-Mar., 1932. pp. 112–13

Davy Crocket is designed for younger readers, but the simplicity of style and of treatment that Miss Rourke has achieved results not from vulgarization or condescension but from a complete mastery of her material and a scholarship thorough and discriminating. Miss Rourke is steeped in the psychological atmosphere of the American West: she neither interprets nor criticises, but recreates as a dramatist recreates character. *Davy Crockett* has the saltiness, the homely realism, the gusto, and the energy that made *American Humor* one of the notable books of recent years; though a far less ambitious work than the earlier one, the Crockett volume is no less successful. Miss Rourke is, properly, just as concerned with the Crockett myth as with Crockett himself, and she has not sought to distinguish the two with irrelevant precision.

Henry Steele Commager. *The Yale Review*. June, 1934. pp. 846–7

The old question ''Can the artist work in America?'' is the underlying subject of this book [*Charles Sheeler*, *Artist in the American Tradition*]. And in telling the story of Charles Sheeler's career as an American artist Miss Rourke makes an affirmative answer that both convinces the mind and excites the imagination. The question is of such long standing that, as Miss Rourke points out, it has itself functioned as part of the American tradition; and the doubt it expresses, combined with the further assumption that American art is merely the offshoot of European art, has served to limit both the possibilities and the self-assurance of many an artist. It has, moreover, tended to discourage the realization of our native cultural past by its implication that the past is so scanty as not to be worth the trouble. It is Miss Rourke's thesis, on the contrary, that we have a cultural past, particularly in the arts, far richer than we are wont to assume—witness our early portraiture, wall paintings, water colors—and that one of the principal tasks of criticism is to gather it in, give it usable shape, and make it part of the national consciousness—if we are ever to produce a full-blown and distinctively American culture.

Margaret Marshall. *The Nation*. Sept. 17, 1938. p. 270

She was equally at home in music, literature, painting, drama, and the crafts; and she would run down an obscure picture, ferret out a local tale, or rummage through heaps of faded letters with the relentless patience that marks the useful spadeworker. But she had what few ordinary field workers have: a sense of relative values; so that all her special items gained value by their relevance to the greater whole she carried in her mind. . . .

American culture, as Constance Rourke conceived it, had its roots in the folk and emanated from their fresh experience in a new land. Even when it made use of European techniques or materials, it transposed the European notes into another key and another measure. Indians, Negroes, Moravian peasants, Puritans, Shakers, farmers, merchants, miners, lumbermen, cowboys, all had made their contributions to our rich cultural compost: they had never been so materialistic, so preoccupied with the mere urgencies of physical survival, as a more utilitarian interpretation had supposed. What had seemed a lapse of culture in one generation often turned out to be only a lapse of memory in the generation that succeeded it.

Lewis Mumford. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 15, 1942. p. 3

Constance Rourke's first book of genuine folk criticism was *Charles Sheeler*, published in 1938. In Sheeler she found a serious artist (although not so good a one as she believed) who had

discovered an American folk tradition for himself, the functional form of the Shaker artisans, and who had consciously grounded his work in it, to the work's great benefit. Looking at Sheeler's paintings and photographs (many of them reproduced as evidence in the book), she discovered the basic principle that had eluded previous popularizers of the folk tradition, that a tradition is not in subject but in *form*, that the secret does not lie in painting a hillbilly building a silo, but in painting *as* a hillbilly builds a silo. (This was the key realization that helped her to such later insights as that the writers who said we had no native theatrical tradition were wrong. They hadn't known where to look. She looked in the public ceremonial of the Indian treaty, in the dialectic play of the Calvinist sermon, and found it.)

Stanley Edgar Hyman. *The Armed Vision* (Knopf). 1948. p. 130

Her interests reached beyond the bellestristic and included the arts of all kinds, however humble, so long as they were indigenous and representative of the ongoing life of the American people. She directed research and selected material for the *Index of American Design*, making as complete a record as was then possible of the arts and the role they played in American life. This indeed is the sustaining spirit and animating purpose behind her work; she sought to render explicit and give proper emphasis to the organic connection between folk traditions, many of which actively survive, and national art. She set herself the monumental task of assembling and interpreting all the material of this sort that still remained so that the native roots of our culture might be widely known and serve to call forth the best in the creative workers of our land. Unfortunately she died before carrying out her ambitious plan to compose a three-volume *History of American Culture*, but she had succeeded in discovering and making available an American folk tradition that American writers and artists could put constructively to use. This is her most distinctive contribution to the field of American criticism.

Charles Glicksberg. *American Literary Criticism, 1900–1950* (Hendricks House). 1951. pp. 498–9

The march of our [American] experience has been so dominantly expansive, from one rapid disequilibrium to the next, that we have neglected to see what Constance Rourke, among others, has now pointed out so effectively: that notwithstanding the inevitable restlessness of our long era of pioneering, at many stages within that process the strong counter-effort of the settlers was for communal security and permanence. From such islands of realization and fulfilment within the onrushing torrent have come the objects, the order and balance of which now, when we most need them, we can recognize as among the most valuable possessions of our continent. The conspicuous manifestation of these qualities, as [Horatio] Greenough already knew, has been in architecture as the most social of forms, whether in the clipper, or on the New England green, or in the Shaker communities. But the artifacts of the cabinet maker, the potter and the founder, or whatever other utensils have been shaped patiently and devotedly for common service, are likewise a testimony of what Miss Rourke has called our classic art, recognizing that this term ''has nothing to do with grandeur, that it cannot be copied or imported, but is the outgrowth of a special mode of life and feeling.''

F.O. Matthiessen. *American Renaissance* (Oxford). 1954. p. 172

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RUKEYSER, Muriel (1913–1980)

Theory of Flight is one of those rare first volumes which impress by their achievement more than by their promise. It is remarkable poetry to have been written by a girl of twenty-one, and would do credit to most of her elders. . . . Here is a well-stored, vigorous mind attempting to bring its world into some kind of imaginative and human order. . . . Miss Rukeyser's poems are among the few so far written in behalf of the revolutionary cause which combine craftsmanship, restraint, and intellectual honesty.

Philip Blair Rice. *The Nation*. Jan. 29, 1936. p. 134

Miss Rukeyser's first book is remarkable for its self-confidence and lack of hesitation. At twenty-one, she has already covered much of the technical ground of modern American verse, and has learned how to pick up everything she feels capable of consolidating into a poem. . . . Miss Rukeyser's verse, however, unlike that of the immediately preceding generation of modernists, does not emanate from the decorative or phenomenalistic fascination alone; it contains a moral will, a will to make itself useful as statement, and a will to warm itself against the major human situations of our day. Thus the subjective, rarely quieted in her, is redirected towards recurrent themes of class-oppression, death, the historical background, revolution.

Harold Rosenberg. *Poetry*. May, 1936. pp. 107–8

There are moments in *US 1* that are pretty dull, but that's bound to be the character of all good things if they are serious enough: when a devoted and determined person sets out to do a thing he isn't thinking first of being brilliant, he wants to get there even if he has to crawl on his face. When he is able to—whenever he is able to—he gets up and runs. . . . (But) I hope Miss Rukeyser does not lose herself in her injudicious haste for a ''cause,'' accepting, uncritically, what she does as satisfactory, her intentions being of the best. I hope she will stick it out the hardest way, a tough road, and invent! make the form that will embody her rare gifts of intelligence and passion for a social rebirth the chief object of her labors.

William Carlos Williams. *New Republic*. March 9, 1938. pp. 141–2

What most distinguishes Muriel Rukeyser's third book, *A Turning Wind*, from her earlier work is an extension of method and point of view, which has greatly enriched her poetry and at the same time introduced a corresponding, though not, I believe, a necessary obscurity.

The extension of viewpoint may best be described in simplification as a shift of emphasis from the concrete to the abstract, from the immediate concern with evidence of social decay and its remedies to the more speculative concern with its causes, particularly psychological. . . . One reason, I believe, for the occasional failure to communicate is that Miss Rukeyser has not yet been wholly successful in extending her method to keep pace with the extension of viewpoint and subject matter.

Philip Horton. *New Republic*. Jan. 22, 1940. p. 123

If Muriel Rukeyser is—as I believe she is—the most inventive and challenging poet of the generation which has not yet reached thirty, it is because of her provocative language fully as much as because of her audacious ideas. . . . *Theory of Flight* announced a new symbolism as well as a new speech. The style was swift, abrupt, syncopated; it matched the speed of the strepitant post-war world, the crazy energy of murderous machines, the ''intolerable contradiction'' of flight. . . . For her the images of war and industry are all too natural. . . . It is the ''agonies of decision'' which Miss Rukeyser expresses for more than her own generation. . . . In the midst of desperate remedies and clamoring negatives, she affirms the life of people and the life of poetry—the life of the spirit giving all processes and inventions, the creative life which is the double answer to living slavery and to the wish for quick escapes, comforting death.

Louis Untermeyer. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 10, 1940. pp. 11–3

The dilemma of conflict rising from an unresolved dualism in viewpoint has characterized Muriel Rukeyser's recent work. . . . Hers is a poetry of confusion in a confused world—a poetry which submits to that confusion—falls back upon the non-rational: the myth, the dream, the supernatural; or selects as its mouth-pieces a ''drunken girl,'' a ''madboy,'' a ''child.'' By so doing, the poet seemingly justifies lack of organization, disassociated images, abrupt shifts in person and tense, and enigmatical meaning. . . . It seems to me her poems are much more effective when she forgets myth, symbol and dream . . . and turns to factual events or experiences common to the majority of men and women today.

Ruth Lechlitner. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Dec. 31, 1944. p. 4

Muriel Rukeyser is a forcible writer with a considerable talent for emotional rhetoric, but she has a random melodramatic hand and rather unfortunate models and standards for her work—one feels about most of her poems pretty much as one feels about the girl on last year's calendar. . . . One feels, with dismay and delight, that one is listening to the Common Siren of our century, a siren photographed in a sequin bathing suit, on rocks like boiled potatoes, for the week-end edition of PM, in order to bring sex to the deserving poor. . . . Yet all the time the poem keeps repeating, keeps remembering to repeat, that it is a *good* girl—that it is, after all, dying for the people; the reader wanders, full of queasy delight, through the labyrinthine corridors of the strange, moral, sexual wish fantasy for which he is to be awarded, somehow, a gold star by the Perfect State.

Randall Jarrell. *The Nation*. May 8, 1948. pp. 512–3

In a time of shrinking poets and shrinking critics here, at any rate, is one capable in both poetry and criticism, who expands and embraces. . . . Miss Rukeyser disowns little or nothing. With her poet's knack of seeing the symbolic meanings in events and the connections latent in them, and with various and deep reading she adduces and enriches from every quarter of contemporary life, from punctuation to the blues, from Fenellosa to Leadbelly. . . . Yet I have a disturbing sense that in these recent poems Miss Rukeyser's motile, ringing energies are becoming over-agitated. Frenetic is too harsh a word, but her images and rhythms, like Shelley's, seem humid and driven by a general passion behind and so external to all particular items of our experience.

James R. Caldwell. *Saturday Review*. March 11, 1950. p. 26

Non-fiction? Fiction? A poem? Miss Rukeyser tells us in her foreword: ''It is a book, a story, and a song.'' The bookmaking is beautiful, the story is Wendell Willkie's, and power (public and private) is the song. *One Life* is episodic, dissonant, fragmented, and explosive—as Willkie's life was and as his country still is. Indeed, the temptation to condescend to Willkie's human failures, to faint-praise his history, is part of a reader's temptation to faint-praise Muriel Rukeyser's rhetoric, and to condescend to the faults of this book. Yet this is perhaps the most ambitious attempt since *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to define a segment of America, and for that it deserves any reader's praise. . . . The wonder, in all such history, is that Miss Rukeyser doesn't heroize Willkie; she sees, rather, heroic dimensions in his search for identity and in his capacity for growth. He becomes, somehow, a kind of political Sisyphus, in the act of failure succeeding most—all in the amorphous America for which Miss Rukeyser, too, risks so greatly.

Philip Booth. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 3, 1957. p. 12

Of her one does not use the word elegant; rather, primordial. She is longswept Whitmanian without rhyme. She is not didactic. She has a love of life and sings of people and things. Her love and care for mankind are evident in every poem. The strength of her convictions coupled with her integrated conception of the world probably makes for the originality of her style, which is uncompromising in its difference from that of other poets and is always fresh, vibrant, profound.

Poetry is a personal thrusting and stance of being. It is thrown into the relations of mankind. It cannot exist without communication and is thus profoundly allied to society. Miss Rukeyser exemplifies these tenets. Hers is the great insolence of poetry and its great love. Never a cultist, never given to this fad or that, or labeled with the mark of only one decade, she submits her vision to art as a strong personal force and her delighting power to a lifetime of concentrated effort in a unitary plane. It is this striding vigor that I find most American. She is not a jewel-maker but a fire-thrower.

It is the heavy brunt of meaning that we take on every page and in which many readers rejoice.

Richard Eberhart. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 9, 1962. p. 4

Muriel Rukeyser has published a large body of work since her first collection, *Theory of Flight*, appeared when she was only twenty-one. It immediately marked her as an innovator, thoroughly American, Whitman-like in method and scope. Characteristic of her poetry, of which we now have a survey in *Waterlily Fire* (Poems 1935–1962), is the big canvas, the broad stroke, love of primary color and primary emotion. Her method is the opposite of the designer's, her vision is never small, seldom introverted. Her consciousness of *others* around her, of being but one member of a great writhing body of humanity surging out of the past, filling the present, groping passionately toward the future, is a generating force in her work. She celebrates science as much as nature or the restless human heart. . . . Another main fulcrum of her work is psychological, even mystical (but it never departs from a physical, in fact a sexual base), and exploration of being and becoming and then of re-becoming, growing out of her interest in Eastern philosophy as well as Western primitivism.

May Swenson. *The Nation*. Feb. 23, 1963. p. 164

In *The Orgy*, the poet and biographer Muriel Rukeyser has written a book that is less a conventional novel than a record of the experience of Puck Fair as felt through a thoroughly modern sensibility steeped in the literature of anthropology and psychology. It is hard, even, to guess to what extent this record is fiction; the otherwise unidentified narrator is addressed at one point as ''Muriel,'' and there are a number of other references to well-known persons. Miss Rukeyser herself describes the book as a ''free fantasy'' on a real event, and the evidence at hand would appear to indicate that this is a precise and well-chosen term. . . . The narrator and her friends, responding to the dimly understood mysteries of the old, pagan religion, provide on one level a counterpoint of psychoanalysis and comparative anthropology, while on another level they are caught up in the orgiastic spirit of the fair, their partings and rejoinings seeming to have become powerfully infused with new and rather disturbing meanings.

This is a poet's book in a real sense—distilled, allusive, with more suggested than is in plain sight. I read it with great interest, with enthusiasm even, and still feel somewhat under the brooding influence of its dark and troubling beauty.

Kenneth Lamott. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Feb. 28, 1965. p. 20

In a brief preface [to *The Orgy*] Miss Rukeyser's very knowledgeable book is stated to be a free fantasy on the event [Puck Fair in Ireland]. The goat, the fair and the orgy are real. Nevertheless there is so much dropping of actual names throughout her account that it is difficult to avoid regarding it as autobiographical. . . . The book itself is both exciting and intriguing. It is written in an unusual style that might, perhaps, be described as verse, under the disguise of free prose, rather than the more usual prose in the form of free verse. This method has many of the allusive qualities of poetry, together with its concomitant disregard for continuity, and some occasional doubts as to who or what the writer is referring. . . . Miss Rukeyser's technique also has a strong resemblance to that of the documentary cinema—a montage in which the writer piles up a catalogue of visual images, untrammeled on the whole by verbs, in the course of which, like the camera, she is able to focus the attention not on the scene as a whole but on some special element that impresses her. . . . One may perhaps wonder whether so subjective a method is suited to so extrovert an occasion—assuming, of course, that Puck Fair is the actual point of the book.

Denis Johnston. *The Nation*. March 15, 1965. pp. 202–3

Muriel Rukeyser is a poet of dark music, weighty and high-minded. *The Speed of Darkness*, the title of her new book, is indicative of the oracular soothsaying quality of much of her writing—for me, a defeating tendency of her style which often nullifies any attentiveness to detail. Her mystical vision is so dominant in the mentality of some poems, the writing becomes inscrutable, as she packs her lines with excessive symbolism or metaphorical density.

Her firmest art is the linear and straightforward delivery of her story-telling anecdotal poems, the longer biographical poems, and letter-poems to friends expressing an open declaration of personal faith. In all of these genres, her symbolism is balanced by clean, open statement. In ''Endless'' and ''Poem'' . . . personal lyrics irradiating pathos from the recollection of harrowing life-moments, Miss Rukeyser achieves a naive forthrightness—an artlessness—which, as in the most lastingly valuable personal letters (those of Keats, for example), derives a universal moral faith from plainspoken events authentically observed and recorded. In these poems, Miss Rukeyser is most nearly able to make her experience—her recollected terror and madness—our own. Her absorptively sympathetic portrait of the German artist, Käthe Kollwitz, one portion of a continuing sequence of biographical works (*Lives*), is the most arresting long poem in the new collection. Miss Rukeyser displays wisdom as self-critic in choosing to adapt so many recent poems from biographical and historical studies, since the task of accurately restoring a human lifetime in verse compels a precision in the enumeration of items of dailiness that offsets her frequent tendency to drift into cloudy abstraction.

Laurence Lieberman. *Poetry*. April, 1969. pp. 42–3

Rukeyser's first collection of poems, *Theory of Flight*, won the Yale Prize for Younger Poets in 1935. Since that year, new wars, changing attitudes toward minorities, women, the body and sex, and renewed interest in New England Transcendentalism, as well as the pursuit of a more profound understanding of complex and terrifying human relationships, cause us, in the seventies, to define Rukeyser as a poet far different from the one she has traditionally been assumed to be. The neglect her poetry has suffered has delayed recognition of her work as deeply rooted in the Whitman-Transcendental tradition.

Her belief in the unity of Being, her reliance on primary rather than on literary experience as the source of truth and the resultant emphasis on the self, the body and the senses, as well as the rhythmic forms and patterns that inevitably emerge from such beliefs, tie Rukeyser to her forebears in the nineteenth century. At

the same time, through her highly personal contemporary voice, they project her into our era which, with its radical departures from traditional Transcendentalism, is yet a reaffirmation of it, with Rukeyser as one of its important figures.

Virginia R. Terris. *American Poetry Review*. May-June, 1974. p. 10

Upon reading Muriel Rukeyser's latest volume of poems, upon going through *The Gates*, one feels silent, sad, instructed, grateful. No words of prose from a reviewer are needed to explain these poems; and to praise them is almost condescending. The woman who wrote them has been with us 20th century American readers almost a half a century: a gifted observer of this world; a person who can sing to us and make our duller, less responsive minds come more alive; and not least, someone who has proven it possible to be a sensible human being, a woman inclined to give, to extend herself toward others, and also a first-rate poet. We all struggle with the sin of pride; Muriel Rukeyser has been blessed with less narcissism than most of us—especially remarkable in such an introspective, sensitive, and self-aware person, who has for so long been committed to telling others what crosses her mind. She is saved from self-centeredness by a compassionate concern for others, all over the world, and by a wonderful capacity for self-mocking irony.

Robert Coles. *American Poetry Review*. May-June, 1978, p. 15

The publication of Muriel Rukeyser's *Collected Poems* is an occasion for rejoicing. Not only is Miss Rukeyser one of those poets American literature would seem impoverished without, but, like William Carlos Williams, she has been an indestructible force for the good of poetry and poets for decades. For all that the poems have changed over the years, it is impossible to say that there has been a technical development. Miss Rukeyser seems to have been born poetically full-grown, and for this reason it is as rewarding to open the book at any point as to proceed systematically from beginning to end.

But wherever you begin, there is no sense in being niggling about Miss Rukeyser's rhapsodies in language. Yes, there are faults of construction. Yes, there are poems—such as ''Tree of Rivers''—that begin, so to speak, in one key and end surprisingly in another. Never mind. However surprising, disturbing or rhetorically long-winded Miss Rukeyser's poems seem, they never bore you. It is always the same passionate and compassionate poet writing out of her extraordinary, iridescent imagination who confronts you, and although some of the earlier poems may seem dated (history itself is dated), what textbooks still pigeonhole as ''social realism'' makes for moving stories. Miss Rukeyser is fortunate in being among those poets who can tell stories in verse. . . .

Miss Rukeyser's collage method is effective, her indictment of war and American capitalism biting, and her feeling for the American wilderness and man's place in it is as fine as Faulkner's. . . .

Like Melville's, Miss Rukeyser's realism is really a bridge to an intensely visionary state of awareness. The line between world and world is indistinct. The threshold of the miraculous and mystical is never far away. It is as if life were always happening to her on two or three levels. Beneath her passion for social justice and her empathy with all sufferers lie deeper apprehensions of what existence and its paradoxes can lead to. . . .

It is inevitable that Miss Rukeyser will be compared with Whitman; indeed, *Leaves of Grass* must have shown her part of the way. Among modern poets she is the equal of Pablo Neruda, and like him, committed to a vision of humanity that acknowledges pain but leaves little room for despair. She is also patently a feminine poet—feminist but not bitchy. Love poems stud the volume. One of the most beautiful is ''Song, The Brain Coral'' (1939), which is more than a love poem. It condenses into one lyric a whole philosophy of linked humanity.

Anne Stevenson. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 11, 1979, p. 12

Rukeyser is essentially a modern poet of possibility (a word which recurs in her writing and conversation) in the tradition of the transcendental writers of America's Golden Day: Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau. . . . Rukeyser's vision of possibility is . . . based in part on the marvels of technology, but her times—times of war, waiting for war, and living with the vast human devastation of the mid-and later twentieth century—and her personal exploration of the struggle of the individual in a corrupt society . . . caused her vision of possibility to rise from a more inclusive complexity than [Hart] Crane's. Yet the basic source of her vision is her self (in the Emersonian sense), which she sounds in poetic exploration and extends in human involvement thereby discovering the possibility to which all may aspire, despite repression, war, genocide, and the chorus of poets who sing . . . that ''the humanistic way . . . has already been defeated.'' She believes that all her involvements, political, scholarly, artistic, are ''ways of reaching the world and the Self,'' those two ever fertile sources of possibility. . . .

Words that come to mind after a reading of Rukeyser's lyrics are ''strength'' and ''movement.'' Hers is not a tender but a strong lyricism that does not aim to distill or crystallize an emotion or an experience. Rukeyser's aim is to follow the powerful rhythms of experience in herself (and often in her imagining of another) in a world which in its fears about economics and war has conspired to be silent about the deepest human values and to repress impulses which interfere with ''getting ahead.'' Rukeyser would not deny these rhythms, these impulses. She has said that talk about poetry which is ''in terms of the start, the image, the crystallization'' is inadequate. . . . In Rukeyser there is the no less rigorous, wide-ranging exploration of emotion and experience and the attempt to project them onto an imagined other, often a whole society; Rukeyser's world is always *there*, in her poetry. Dickinson is severely alone; there is little expression of an effort to reach another, through touch and speech, as in Rukeyser. Nor is there the expansive impulse (given form in Rukeyser's long lines) to reach the world, to include and transform an unfeeling other. There is no such impulse at exploration and inclusion in Rossetti and Brontë whose poetry is meditative—a distillation, again, a crystallization of very private emotions and experiences.

Louise Kertesz. *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser* (Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1980), pp. 46–17, 75–76

Respect for the indestructible part of ourselves also means a readiness to challenge the concept of the ''obscene'', by using and

detoxifying forbidden language and by recognizing (more fully than is recognized in the classic cases of Lawrence, Joyce, and Henry Miller) the link between outcast words and outcast persons. As with female bawdiness, the object is to dismantle an oppressive mystification. Muriel Rukeyser's ''Despisals'', one of the most important anti-dualistic poems of our period, equates the despised ghettos of our cities with the ghettos—taboo places and acts—of our bodies. . . .

Yet the need for myth of some sort may be ineradicable. Poets, at least, appear to think so. When Muriel Rukeyser in ''The Poem as Mask'', exclaimed, ''No more masks! No more mythologies,'' she was rejecting her own earlier poem that portrays Orpheus and the Bacchic women who slew him as separate from herself. ''It was myself,'' she says, ''split open, unable to speak, in exile from myself''. To recognize this, however, is evidently to heal both the torn self and the torn god; the poem's final lines describe a resurrected Orpheus whose ''fragments join in me with their own music''.

Let me at this point therefore describe the term ''revisionist mythmaking''. . . . Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible.

> Alicia Suskin Ostriker. *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon Pr., 1986), pp. 196, 212–13

Among the writers who have been drawn by this visionary impulse are Muriel Rukeyser and Laura Riding (Jackson). Much of Rukeyser's early work is determinedly modernist, using a radically free verse line, allusive imagery, disruptive syntax and grammar, and an associative structure to capture something of the rapid, disjunctive movements of modern life. Even here, however, the concerns that were to dominate her poetry are quite clear: power and its betrayal, the immense possibilities latent in the human being, his ''dynamics of desire,'' and their denial by a society that ''makes thin the imagination and the bone.'' The title poem from her first volume, for instance, ''Theory of Flight'' contrasts Whitman's dreams of rapid movement through space now translated into a reality (Rukeyser was a student pilot at the time) with the world left on the ground: where ''our superiors, the voting men'' sit ''around the committee-table,'' voting to disavow ''the eyes, and sex, and brain,'' the powers of perception, reproduction, and knowledge—and voting death, too, to all those who would liberate such powers, including poets and visionaries like Blake and Whitman. ''Now, in our time,'' wrote Rukeyser in the introduction to one of her volumes, ''many of the sources of power are obscured . . . or vulgarized . . . I have hoped to indicate some of the valid sources of power.'' The piece with which she chose to begin her *Selected Poems* makes the point in another way. ''I set out once again,'' she says, ''From where I began: / Belief in the love of the world, / Woman, spirit, and man.''

> Richard Gray. *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century* (Essex: Longman, 1990), pp. 200–201

The values of this Left culture are those by which Rukeyser's work must be judged. She was not trying for elegance or detachment or delicacy, for ''wit-writing,'' as she called it. . . .

The second flowering of Left culture in the 1960s brought Rukeyser unexpected renewal of hope, but it did not erase the pain of the struggle she waged all her life: to rest her fingers at the pulse of historical and personal truth, which fade into each other, and to speak her witness, in spite of horror, loss, isolation, and despair. . . . Rukeyser's *Collected Poems*, although unforgivably out of print and thus part of a silence of its own, is a book that anchors paper even in very strong wind. It holds nearly fifty years of insistent poetic speech. Some is bad (she is not afraid of that). . . . Some of what has been included in widely different anthologies . . . some of what has not (small poems like ''Back Tooth,'' ''Woman As Market,'' ''Segre Song,'' and ''In Our Time,'' medium poems like ''St. Roach,'' ''Looking at Each Other,'' ''The Conjugation of the Paramecium,'' ''Paper Anniversary,'' and ''Resurrection of the Right Side,'' large poems like the sequence of ''The Book of the Dead'') is among the most interesting and alive poetry we have. The integrity with which she lived her life is a gift to us; it is woven inextricably into the gift of the poetry itself.

Rukeyser's work can be divided into three distinct periods: 1935–1948 (ages twenty-one to thirty-five), during which she wrote the first five books of poems and the first biography; 1948–1968 (ages thirty-five to fifty-five), which brought three volumes of poetry (two of them selections) and the second biography; and 1968–1980 (age fifty-five to her death at sixty-seven), which brought the third biography and the last three books of poems.

The first period begins with ''Poem out of Childhood'' (''Breathe-in experience, breathe-out poetry:'') and ends with ''Nine Poems for the Unborn Child''. . . ; the range of experience between those two poems would ask great strength of sixty or seventy years, let alone thirty-five. As Louise Kertesz points out, ''By the time she was twenty-four Rukeyser had already tried to cover the Scottsboro trials for a student newspaper and contracted typhoid in an Alabama jail, given streetcorner speeches in New York, made her investigative journey to Gauley, West Virginia, and studied Congressional reports of the miners' deaths there for her long poem in *U.S. 1*, and witnessed the first fighting of the Spanish Civil War.'' By thirty-five she had trained as a film editor, lived in Mexico, survived from a distance the defeat of Republican Spain and the deaths there of people she loved, World War II, and reports of the Holocaust of European Jews; endured several phases of domestic Redbaiting, and had, unmarried, given birth to a son. Her transformations of this experience into poetry are not uniformly successful; her method was to grope, to try more than she could do, to stand at the edge of the unsayable (too large, too deep, too blurred, too secret), determined to make its silences speak. Where she fails, the result is obscurity, sometimes pomposity, sometimes baldness, language stripped of its nuanced power; where she succeeds, the power locked in the risk of her attempts pours into the poems, in a voice both impersonal (in the sense that weather is impersonal, or history) particularly her own. . . .

One of Rukeyser's strengths was her refusal to keep her life ''straight as a single issue''; it is in that diverse soil that her best work flourishes. When she forsakes it, there is a haze over ''the hill, the dock, the city, all the war''; they are mentioned; not created whole and living on the page. It is as if in her vigil by history the sudden jolt of loss and horror—here in the memory of Spain, soon after in the reports from the concentration camps—left her the

courage and keenness Brecht demanded of a writer who would tell the truth, but took away the will and judgment and cunning.

> Suzanne Gadinier. ''A World That Will Not Hold All the People: On Muriel Rukeyser.'' *Kenyon Review*. Summer, 1992, pp. 91, 92–93, 99

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RUNYON, Damon (1880–1946)

Damon Runyon's stories are spiked with sentiment and served with Broadway hard sauce. Here [*Damon Runyon's Blue Plate Special*] are thirteen characteristic dishes, already approved by the palate of the magazine public, including a lively murder mystery called ''What, No Butler?'' and a tear-jerker, entitled ''Little Miss Marker,'' which has been recently perpetuated in enduring celluloid. Chorus girls, cheap sports, race track hustlers and other specimens of Broadway hangers-on comprise Mr. Runyon's cast of characters. He is familiar with their language, their habits and their minds. His fables are fluent, ingenious, first-rate entertainment.

> Lisle Bell. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Aug. 5, 1934. p. 8

In Our Town, a collection of twenty-seven anecdotes, though bereft of the vocabulary and much of the historical present of *Guys and Dolls*, *Money From Home*, *Blue Plate Special*, is still the Runyon of old.

The cynical humor that spoofs at stuffed-shirtism, the simplicity of style, the sympathy for the underdog and the plots that break like a fast curve—they're all here. Moreover, there is none of the maudlin nostalgia that frequently cramps works of elderly writers in search of happy youth. Runyon is still master of the art of anonymity in the first person. There is a quality of the good vignette to these tales, which, in sum, gives a better picture of small-town life and pace than many weightier, sociological tomes.

> Murray Schumach. *New York Times Book Section*. June 2, 1946. p. 27

Another controversy stewed over whether the real Broadwayites talk in the present tense slanguage used by the fictional Runyon guys and dolls. The controversy was taken seriously in England where the Runyon stories were as popular as they were here. Do guys and dolls really talk like that?

Unser Fritz' English was mangled like a shirt in a same-day laundry, yet in ''All Horse Players Die Broke'' he speaks pure Broadwayese, or more correctly, Runyonese. What escapes most who claim Runyon reported what he had heard is that in his stories an anonymous ''I'' tells the tales. It is he who speaks in the present tense even when he is quoting someone like Unser Fritz. The anonymous ''I,'' of course, is Runyon.

It is true that some Broadwayites, especially in the Lindy's set, fall into the present tense in their gabble. . . . However, even those to whom the present tense comes naturally usually mix in the past tense, too. In the Runyon stories this present tense was pure, carried out to every word, and it was laborious writing to make it read smoothly. If anyone talks like that along the Big Street they come after the fact, or rather fiction.

> Damon Runyon, Jr. *Father's Footsteps* (Random). 1954. pp. 112–13

Although Runyon did not lack appreciation of his craftsmanship, he lacked confidence in his ability to produce longer works. He thought he could not write a novel and rejected proposals that he work on one. Yet he maintained interest in the Turps, My Old Man, and another, unnamed, character of his through hundreds of thousands of words—more than the average novel contains. The unnamed character is the narrator of the Broadway Guys and Dolls stories who tells us, ''names make no difference to me, especially on Broadway, because no matter what name a man has, it is not his square moniker,'' and offers us no square moniker, or any shape moniker at all, for himself—one of the most artfully delineated characters in modern literature.

> Clark Kinnaird. Foreword to *A Treasury of Damon Runyon* (Random). 1958. pp. xiv–xv

With the teachers of American literature, Damon Runyon stood and stands nowhere. Critics often dismiss his characters and plots because they are simple, stylized, and sentimental; they pass over the mawkish nature of underworld society, and until 1963 some of them were inclined to believe that such a society did not really exist. It existed and exists, and Damon Runyon came closer than any other man to becoming the social historian of the underworld.

Damon Runyon's Broadway stories, far from his first published fiction, were the outcome of a deep-seated quarrel with society. When he began writing the Broadway stories in the 1920's he had ceased to take any personal responsibility for society's conduct. He was the expatriate whose sensitivity to the wrongs committed in his own country drives him to live abroad among strangers, whose immoralities leave him guilt-free. Damon's retreat was to move into the world of guys and dolls, a world that was real and as exciting to him as the world of the Western gunmen and Indian fighters he had admired as a boy. He said as much in a column he wrote in the third person, analyzing the writing of one Damon Runyon. ''By saying something with a half-boob air, by conveying an air of jocularity, he gets ideas out of his system on the wrongs of

this world.'' Short-story writer Runyon was not a humorist as such, columnist Runyon said, but more of a dramatic writer who did not have the moral courage to protest aloud.

> Edwin P. Hoyt. *A Gentleman of Broadway* (Little). 1964. pp. 6–7

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SALINGER, J.D. (1919–)

J.D. Salinger's writing is original, first rate, serious and beautiful. . . . He has the equipment for a born writer to begin with—his sensitive eye, his incredibly good ear, and something I can think of no word for but grace. There is not a trace of sentimentality about his work, although it is full of children that are bound to be adored. He pronounces no judgments, he is simply gifted with having them passionately. . . . What this reader loves about Mr. Salinger's stories is that they honor what is unique and precious in each person on earth.

Eudora Welty. *New York Times Book Section*. April 5, 1953. p. 4

Salinger is an extreme individualist with a pleasing disregard for conventional narrative form and style. . . . Above all Salinger appears to be ravenously interested in human beings, whom he depicts with an understanding, without either sentimentality or condescension, something unusual in so young a writer. Even his weaker stories are peopled with memorable minor characters, people who appear on stage for a few moments only, but who are endowed with lives of their own.

William Peden. *Saturday Review*. April 11, 1953. pp. 43–4

J.D. Salinger's closest resemblance is to F. Scott Fitzgerald—that is, close in one sense. Salinger is at home with the details of upper middle-class life, and, like Fitzgerald, there is much grace, lightness of touch, and bitter-sweet emotion in his stories. But since Salinger is his own man, and hardly an imitation, the analogy with Fitzgerald ends at a certain point; there is a bitterness and intensity of the young writer's work which is subtly wedded to the charm, and the combination makes Fitzgerald seem romantically old-fashioned by comparison. But both writers have that particular poignance which results from a lyrical identification with subject matter set off by a critical intelligence; they are both lovers, so to speak, who are forced to acknowledge that they have been ''had,'' and this gives their work the emotion of subtle heartbreak.

Seymour Krim. *Commonweal*. April 24, 1953. p. 78

Salinger's fiction convicts us, as readers, of being deeply aware of a haunting inconclusiveness in our own, and in contemporary, emotional relationships—members all of the lonely crowd. His characters exist outside the charmed circle of the well-adjusted, and their thin cries for love and understanding go unheard. They are men, women, and adolescents, not trapped by outside fate, but by their own frightened, and sometimes tragicomic awareness of the uncrossable gulf between their need for love and the futility of trying to achieve it on any forseeable terms.

Salinger's short stories are all variants on the theme of emotional estrangement.

David L. Stevenson. *The Nation*. March 9, 1957. p. 216

In January, 1953, after a year and a half of literary fame and literary silence, Salinger published in the New Yorker a story called ''Teddy,'' which began his latest phase. It reads *methodically*; as if the impulse had first been to write something that was not a story. It has dialogue of a kind then new to his work but now his standard: no longer seducing our belief and lighting up characters with things we had heard but not listened to, but expounding an ordered set of ideas as plainly as can be done without actually destroying the characters into whose mouths they are put. The ideas are mostly Zen.

In the stories Salinger has published since then . . . poignant, beautifully managed philosophic dialogues, really—the doctrine is developed, sometimes in the language of Christian mysticism (after Meister Eckhart) and sometimes as a rather high-flying syncretism.

Donald Barr. *Commonweal*. Oct. 25, 1957. p. 90

What Salinger has seen in American life is the extraordinary tension it sets up between our passion to understand and evaluate our experience for ourselves and our need to belong to a community that is unusually energetic in imposing its understanding and values on its individual members. Whatever one may think of Salinger's answer to the problem, this view of American life is important; it has a long and distinguished history.

But Salinger's achievement is not that he has grasped an abstract idea of American experience, important as that idea may be in itself; it is that he has seen this idea working in the actual life of our time, in our habitual activities, in the very turns of our speech, and he has found a way to make us see it there, too.

Arthur Mizener. *Harper's Magazine*. Feb., 1959. p. 90

For the college generation of the Fifties, Salinger has the kind of importance that Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway had for the young people of the Twenties. He is not a public figure as they were; on the contrary, his zeal for privacy is phenomenal; but he is felt nevertheless as a presence, a significant and congenial presence. There are, I am convinced, millions of young Americans who feel closer to Salinger than to any other writer.

In the first place, he speaks their language. He not only speaks it, he shapes it, just as Hemingway influenced the speech of countless Americans in the Twenties. . . . In the second place, he expresses their rebellion.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. July 25, 1959. p. 13

He has always been open, of course, to the charge of being soft-centered. To youth and laziness he promises a release into the

utopia where every difficulty and agony is understood to be a result of the barbaric insensitivity of Others; at the heart of his myth lies the conviction that no one of merit ought to *work*, that all truly decent folk spring full-brained from the womb and therefore need only to master a few great texts of anti-knowledge—weapons with which to belabor knaves and scholars. Putting it another way: the world of most Salinger stories connects (in its assumptions) not with the general world but with those odd communities that grow up around conservatories and museum schools—societies in which youngsters who haven't read a world of Shakespeare or Spinoza argue violently about Wilhelm Reich or Edmund Begler, M.D., pleasingly pleased with themselves.

Benjamin DeMott. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1961–2. pp. 626–7

Salinger offers no difficult visions; he's guaranteed not to disturb. He permits his reader to eat his cake and have it too—secure in the knowledge that he deserves better cake, but there is none to be had. Salinger is not concerned with genuine (or at least, possible) alternatives to the values and life-styles he deplores. His technique for handling the individual vs. society situation is simply to divide the world between the sensitive few and the vulgar many. You, my reader, he assures us, belong to an elite—not because you want to live differently, but because you are sensitive. You have religious experiences, you have special affinities with little girls, you can't stand phonies, you *understand*. You are so sensitive it's a wonder you go on. In fact, Salinger implies, *you are a hero and your heroism is not based on heroic action but on mere existence*.

Jeremy Larner. *Partisan Review*. Fall, 1962. p. 597

Before the present volume (*Franny and Zooey*), Salinger had always presented madness as a special temptation of males; perhaps because, in the myth he was elaborating, it is a female image of innocence that, at the last moment, lures his almost-lost protagonists back from the brink of insanity: a little girl typically, prepubescent and therefore immune to the world's evil, which, in his work, fully nubile women tend to embody. The series which begins with ''Esme'' goes on through ''A Perfect Day for Banana-fish,'' where the girl-savior appears too late to save Seymour, oldest of the Glass family; and reaches an appropriate climax in *Catcher in the Rye*, where the savior is the little sister and the myth achieves its final form. It is the Orestes-Iphigenia story, we see there, that Salinger all along has been trying to rewrite, the account of a Fury-haunted brother redeemed by his priestess-sister; though Salinger demotes that sister in age, thus downgrading the tone of the legend from tragic to merely pathetic.

Leslie Fiedler. *Partisan Review*. Winter, 1962. p. 130

How did Salinger get hung up on the idea that the Glass menage had to produce a Messiah? It's not really his line of work at all. His concern from the first was with the incoherently, callowly genuine; and with this theme he made excellent fun. But to be a prophet in the wilderness, Saint Salinger Cornishhensis, he simply isn't equipped; he's got nostalgia, he's got confusion, but he has neither faith nor the structured intellect which properly produces it. Having promised a revelation for so long, he's more or less bound to oblige; and the sort of mouse his mountains are liable to yield may be guessed from the wretched rodent that squeaks forth at the end of *Seymour, an Introduction*.

Robert M. Adams. *Partisan Review*. Spring, 1963. p. 129

The marvel of ''Seymour,'' which appeared in 1959 [as a short story], is that Salinger confronts himself. It is a chronicle of the confrontation between the writer and the saint, and he hardly bothers to pretend it is a fiction. How disingenuous it was of all those critics and reviewers to have spoken of the piece as though it were a story, and how heartless it was of them who had loved him so much to have rapped him on the knuckles because he, the emperor, was the first to point out that he was wearing no clothes, had in fact been naked for years. ''Seymour'' is a courageous act, a much more personal display than having photographs published or signing books in department stores or making public appearances. And having given himself totally to those who had been lusting after him ever since *The Catcher*, all they did was respond by crying, ''Shame!''

Yes, of course, ''Seymour'' is mannered and self-conscious and boring, but so were the other Glass pieces—and they were in addition dishonest, except for ''Franny''—even though Salinger managed to keep these things hidden from his readers, if not from himself. What he says in ''Seymour'' is that he cannot live without Seymour, that he cannot give up writing about Seymour even though he *cannot* write about Seymour, that there is no Seymour and he must construct him piece by piece, feature by feature. And in the process of saying so, all the literary pretensions and affectations and mannerisms are knitted into a hair-shirt which he is going to wear because that is the Way he has chosen for himself.

Alfred Chester. *Commentary*. June, 1963. p. 474

The Glass family stories make it increasingly apparent that Salinger is no longer content to produce what it is generally agreed he can do so well—the short sharp fiction, the narrowly constructed *tour de force* dramatizing the desiccating effects of life without meaning. Like the late Eliot, he is now more concerned with the solution than with a reiteration of the problem. Agreeing with Fitzgerald's best vision of the sadness of a shallow, meretricious society—Buddy says that in his youth *The Great Gatsby* was his ''Tom Sawyer''—Salinger ultimately refuses to accept a naturalistic world in which the American dream has turned into nightmare. Seeing the world as it is, the Glasses wholly commit themselves to leading a meaningful life in it. . . . Neither the Jesus Prayer nor expatriation nor even the way of Zen is offered as a sufficient formula. However at least part of the answer is suggested by the moral and aesthetic emphasis which Salinger places on character instead of action, on being rather than event, on awareness rather than status.

Sam S. Baskett. *Contemporary Literature*. Winter, 1963. p. 61

Like all of Salinger's fiction, *Catcher in the Rye* is not only about innocence, it is actively for innocence—as if retaining one's childness were an existential possibility. The metaphor of the title—Holden's fantasy-vision of standing in front of a cliff and protecting playing children from falling (Falling)—is, despite the

impossibility of its realization, the only positive action affirmed in the novel. It is, in Salinger's Manichean universe of child angels and adult ''phonies,'' the only moral alternative—otherwise all is corruption. Since it is spiritually as well as physically impossible to prevent the Fall, Salinger's idealistic heroes are doomed either to suicide (Seymour) or insanity (Holden, Sergeant X) or mysticism (Franny), the ways of sainthood, or to moral dissolution (Eloise, D.B., Mr. Antolini), the way of the world.

Jonathan Baumbach. *Modern Language Quarterly*. Dec., 1964. p. 462

Salinger's long silence after the appearance of ''Seymour: An Introduction'' in 1959 was ended in 1965 with the publication of another chapter in the Glass saga, ''Hapworth 16, 1924.'' This story did nothing to reassure those who hoped for a return to the earlier brilliance of *Catcher in the Rye*. Indeed, it tended to accentuate those characteristics of the later work which most readers found disturbing—a tedious length, a humor often self-consciously cute, a muting of narrative in favor of philosophical asides. But in spite of its apparent defects, the story was an important addition to the life of Glasses, particularly as it shed new light on the remarkable character of Seymour. . . .

Seymour's unusual knowledge of the past and insight into the future derive from ''two, tantalizing, tiny portals'' in his mind which have opened involuntarily and which give him foresight not only of his own life but also of the lives of others. At one point he has a ''stunning glimpse'' of Buddy, ''quite bereft'' of Seymour's ''dubious, loving company,'' busily at work writing stories on his ''very large, jet-black, very moving, gorgeous typewriter.'' The effect of such passages is difficult to describe or assess. They seem both preposterous and ironic.

James E. Miller. *J.D. Salinger* (Minnesota). 1965. pp. 42–3

The most unusual aspect of Salinger's liberated Glasses is that change comes by way of a verbal flow of abstraction. This may be a contradiction-in-terms, for to experience the liberation of Zen by a second-hand conscious verbal overflow is not the usual way of deriving enlightenment. But in Salinger's highly self-conscious world, this is the means by which his characters attain a twentieth century American form of enlightenment. In this enlightened state the Glass children become freed of their critical tendencies, become freed of their highly separate selves, become one with the Fat Lady or the Christ in each that makes for universal empathy. Perhaps Salinger is the keenest social critic of our time. He has, we feel, focused on a major problem in the modern world, on the last stronghold of the sacred, for an atomized self is disastrous.

Bernice and Sanford Goldstein. *Modern Fiction Studies*. Autumn, 1966. p. 324

Buddy's understanding of the Glass saga will always be incomplete. The important fact, however, is the development of that understanding. This is shown most dramatically in his changing attitudes toward Seymour. ''A Perfect Day for Bananafish'' recreates Seymour's suicide with the perspective which Buddy had in 1948. How much of the story is ''factual'' we do not know, and perhaps will never know; it is conceivable, though unlikely, that Buddy could have got most of the facts from the ''witnesses,'' as he did with ''Zooey.'' But the most important witness is his own. In the bananafish story we see a Seymour who is conscious of his own superiority, yet who expects as much of others as he does of himself. But in the later stories a different Seymour emerges each time, until in ''Hapworth'' we have Buddy discovering a Seymour who was, at seven, conscious of being unstable, but also of being ''gloriously normal.'' Buddy's developing insight is a brilliant narrative device; it functions, like the multiple narrators in Faulkner's fiction, to suggest the multiplicity and elusiveness of final truth.

Howard M. Harper. *Desperate Faith* (North Carolina). 1967. p. 93

Despite his limited production Salinger with his complementary creations of Holden Caulfield and Seymour Glass (both surrounded by siblings) so captivated the fancies of the Americans of this intellectually and emotionally arid era that the decade of the 50s can justly be called from more than a literary point of view ''The Age of Salinger.'' The relationship between the world of Salinger's fiction and the world outside is complex, but it is perhaps best suggested in Holden Caulfield's despairing cry after he searches for a ''place that's nice and peaceful,'' ''There isn't any.''. . .

[Salinger] sees the material world as absolutely corrupt. . . . One can save one's self only by limiting one's criticism to one's self and resisting the temptation for public acclaim. The man whose vision is too clear to enable him to close his eyes to this world cannot hope to communicate with it. He can hope to make a spectacular exit that may keep alive some glimmering memory of the ''niceness'' we can know only momentarily.

Warren French in *The Fifties*, ed. Warren French (Everett/Edwards). 1970. pp. 12–3, 37–8

It is easy enough to catalogue Salinger's faults—few important writers are more vulnerable than he; but the more relevant task would seem to be a consideration of why he has interested and often obsessed more readers than any other serious American author since the Second World War, why he has been, as [Norman] Mailer himself admits, ''everybody's favorite.''

We might begin by citing Salinger's compassion for the victims and fallen figures of an urban America; his self-conscious, chastening wit; or his remarkable ability to illuminate character through the finest detail. But the deeper, more permanent attraction of Salinger's work must have something to do with his treatment of suicide and survival, his attempt to suggest a mode of survival in this world that is not without meaning and a little dignity. . . .

In Salinger's fiction one feels a persistent idealism despite the profound distrust of all those forms of authority that contribute to conformity of mind and spirit. Indeed the struggle between idealism and authority causes the special tension of Salinger's work; it is a struggle that drives the hero to the point of madness and suicide.

Theodore L. Gross. *The Heroic Ideal in American Literature* (Free). 1971. pp. 263–4

In a world too plainly made ''absurd'' by our inability to love it, the Glasses are loved by their relative and creator, J.D. Salinger, on

every inexhaustible cherished inch of their lives. His microscopic love for them compels them into our field of vision; we see them through the absoluteness of Salinger's love and grief. And non-Glasses are spiritual trash. . . .

Yet for all this eerie devaluation of everyone outside the Glass family, the whole charm of Salinger's fiction lies in his gift for comedy, his ability to represent society as it is, for telltale gestures and social manners.

Alfred Kazin. *Bright Book of Life* (Little). 1973. p. 115

A while back one could read Salinger and feel him to be not only an original and gifted writer, a marvelous entertainer, a man free of the slogans and clichés the rest of us fall prey to, or welcome as salvation itself, but also a terribly lonely man. Perhaps he still feels lonely; but he is, I think, not so alone these days. The worst in American life he anticipated and portrayed to us a generation ago. The best side of us—Holden and the Glasses—still survives, and more can be heard reaching for expression in various ways and places, however serious the present-day assaults from various ''authorities.'' I put down *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Franny and Zooey* this year again grateful to their author. I wondered once more how to do justice to his sensibility: his wide and generous responsiveness to religious and philosophical ideas, his capacity to evoke the most poignant of human circumstances vividly and honestly, and with a rare kind of humor, both gentle and teasing.

Robert Coles. *New Republic*. April 28, 1973. p. 32

As [J.D.] Salinger steadily decreases the distance between himself and his fictional creations, the narcissistic aspect of his work becomes increasingly distasteful, and Salinger's own ''cleverness'' in ascribing it to an ''alter ego and collaborator'' does not diminish in any way the precision of the indictment. The more one knows about Salinger, in fact, the more he begins to sound very much like a clever but shallow diarist, and it is hard not to feel that this has a great deal to do with his extreme hostility to critics and biographers.

Salinger's solipsism reached a climax of sorts in ''Hapworth 16, 1924,'' a still-uncollected story published in *The New Yorker* in 1965. Indeed, all of Salinger's most exasperating preoccupations achieve apotheosis in this dreadful work, cast in the form of a letter from summer camp written by the seven-year-old Seymour Glass. Not surprisingly, Salinger has published nothing since ''Hapworth 16, 1924,'' though longstanding rumors that he continues to write were confirmed by Salinger himself last October in the deposition he gave in *Salinger v. Random House and Ian Hamilton*. Asked what he had been working on since 1965, he replied, ''Just a work of fiction. That's all. That's the only description I can really give it.''

J.D. Salinger was written off by the majority of American critics after the publication of ''Hapworth 16, 1924.'' But timing is all in matters of popular culture. Salinger's *second* career, in which he emerged enshrined as a cult figure of the Age of Aquarius, was just hitting its stride in 1965, and he would become far more influential in this latter capacity than he ever was as a novelist or short-story writer. . . .

All demographic accidents have unforeseen consequences, and one of the most unlikely cultural outcomes of the baby boom has been the survival of Holden Caulfield into the age of Ronald Reagan. That Salinger's work would have an enduring appeal for the baby boomer was predictable. He is, after all, their Glenn Miller. His books, like Mrs. Glass's ''consecrated chicken soup,'' are a kind of literary comfort food for bruised veterans of the Big Chill. But it is even more significant that some of the baby boomers who read Salinger as teenagers are now teaching him as adults.

For years one of the most widely banned authors in America, J.D. Salinger has now become one of the most widely taught. *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Nine Stories*, with their appealing subject matter, pat ambiguities, and lazy symbolism, are classroom naturals. No self-respecting parent would dare object (in public, anyway) to the mildly vulgar language that once kept Salinger's books as far away from American classrooms as *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. In a better-ordered universe, it may be, such parents would storm the nearest school-board office, baseball bats in hand, to protest having Holden Caulfield's vision of the world forced into the minds of their children. But life is rarely so orderly, and so it looks as if Holden and his nasty friends are here to stay.

Terry Teachout. ''Salinger Then and Now.'' *Commentary*, September, 1987, p. 3

In contrast with the extensive critical attention devoted to *The Catcher in the Rye* the novellas of J.D. Salinger have, with very few exceptions either been greeted with silence or disapproval. They have been attacked for being ''hopelessly prolix'' (Irving Howe), the products of ''an impersonator of adolescence'' (Leslie Fiedler), the result of contradiction since ''Salinger can . . . exercise his art with reverence, while still despising the 'culture' which makes it possible'' (Frank Kermode), or the result of lost detachment since Salinger ''identifies himself too fussily with the spiritual aches and pains of his characters'' (Alfred Kazin). More recently Malcolm Bradbury has argued that Salinger's efforts in these novellas to break through the unavoidable deceits of fiction almost destroy the narrative.

In these attacks there is a consensus that Salinger had lost the critical detachment necessary to view his characters—and especially Seymour Glass—objectively, but [I argue] that the creation of the Glass family as a whole enables Salinger to use a variety of narrative methods which he might otherwise not have had available to him. For the family structure becomes crucial in the definition of his characters and even makes it possible for Salinger to incorporate the reader's anticipated criticisms into his own narrative. Salinger himself evidently viewed his own fictional family with relish for when *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters*, and *Seymour—An Introduction* were published together in book form he declared on the dust jacket that ''the joys and satisfactions of working on the Glass family peculiarly increase and deepen for me with the years.'' It is a relish, however, which has not kept him free of repetition or a certain tortuous self-consciousness. . . .

In *Seymour—An Introduction* (1959) the self-consciousness reaches its maximum. Plot and narrative sequence give way to a monologue on writing. Bernice and Sanford Goldstein have described this work rightly as a ''fictional treatise on the artistic process,'' although ''treatise'' sounds rather heavy to describe Salinger's ruminating and often playful prose style.

As the title of the piece suggests, Salinger is particularly concerned with beginnings, hence his preliminary skirmishings with the ''general reader'' and with the then modish image of the writer as neurotic. The preamble shows Salinger trying to avoid such images and labels, and trying too to avoid any connections with Beat Literature. It becomes increasingly evident that notional distinctions between Buddy as narrator and Salinger himself must break down from the narrator's unmistakable allusions to *The Catcher in the Rye* and to himself as a famous writer. Salinger simultaneously invites the reader to view his statements as directly confessional but sets up a theatrical screen of verbiage where Fieldingesque digressions and agile shifts of narrative posture prevent any sustained self-image from taking shape.

David Seed. ''Keeping It in the Family: The Novellas of J.D. Salinger.'' In A. Robert Lee, ed. *The Modern American Novella* (New York: St. Martin's Pr., 1989), pp. 139–40, 156, 158–59

Skaz is a rather appealing Russian word (suggesting ''jazz'' and ''scat,'' as in ''scat-singing,'' to the English ear) used to designate a type of first-person narration that has the characteristics of the spoken rather than the written word. In this kind of novel or story, the narrator is a character who refers to himself (or herself) as ''I,'' and addresses the reader as ''you.'' He or she uses vocabulary and syntax characteristic of colloquial speech, and appears to be relating the story spontaneously rather than delivering a carefully constructed and polished written account. We don't so much read it as listen to it. . . .

For American novelists *skaz* was an obvious way to free themselves from the inherited literary traditions of England and Europe. The crucial impetus was given by Mark Twain. . . . Twain's masterstroke was to unite a vernacular colloquial style with a naive, immature narrator, an adolescent boy who is wiser than he knows, whose vision of the adult world has a devastating freshness and honesty. . . .

J.D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield is a literary descendant of Huck Finn: more educated and sophisticated, the son of affluent New Yorkers, but like Huck a youthful runaway from a world of adult hypocrisy, venality and, to use one of his own favorite words, phoniness. What particularly appalls Holden is the eagerness of his peers to adopt that corrupt grownup behavior. . . .

It is, as I say, easy enough to describe Holden's style of narration but more difficult to explain how it holds our attention and gives us pleasure for the length of a whole novel. For, make no mistake, it's the style that makes the book interesting. The story it tells is episodic, inconclusive, and largely made up of trivial events. Yet the language is, by normal literary criteria, very impoverished. Salinger, the invisible ventriloquist who speaks to us through Holden, must say everything he has to say about life and death and ultimate values within the limitations of a seventeen-year-old New Yorker's argot, eschewing poetic metaphors, periodic cadences, fine writing of any kind. . . .

In the last analysis, though, there's something surprisingly poetic about this prose, a subtle manipulation of the rhythms of colloquial speech which makes it an effortless pleasure to read, and reread. As jazz musicians say, it swings.

David Lodge. *The Art of Fiction* (New York: Viking, 1992), pp. 18–19, 20

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SANCHEZ, Sonia (1935–)

Sonia Sanchez . . . first came to public attention as one of Broadside Press's New Black Poets writing the militant, anti-white oppression, rhetorical poetry which was then in vogue. . . .She wrote this poetry well, being extremely good at capturing black dialect and devising her own notation to convey it. Like almost all of the New Black Poets, she also gave frequent public readings of her work (especially on the lecture circuit during that time when colleges and universities were being rocked by black student demands). Here, too, she excelled, doing hums, shouts, moans, rhythms, songs, etc. so enchantingly that even those persons who later walked out (in protest of her ''obscenities'') were momentarily seduced. All of this characterizes and parallels the Black Movement in poetry of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Sanchez and other young black women poets were fully a part of that movement.

However, at the same time, most of her poetry derived from a black female core, an aspect of themselves which many of these young women did not slight in their work. She writes of relationships between black men and women, of the problems and possibilities that lie in black children, and, most poignantly, of personal/black female selfhood and pain. . . .

Much of this personal poetry is written in standard English, proving (if it needed to be proven) that she could also ''poet'' in the mainstream tradition and manner. Perhaps the most impressive poem of this kind is her elegy for Malcolm X.

After the flaming heyday of militant poetry, most young black poets began to eschew ''offing whitey'' themes and started to address black people from an even more separatist position of ''black togethery-ness,'' as Gwendolyn Brooks has dubbed it. They also turned to expressing more inwardly directed concerns. Sanchez had been developing along these lines throughout her career. For her, this direction culminated in her 1974 volume, *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women*. . . .

The secrets she tells are autobiographically based ones about herself. However, they chronicle a history which she shares with black women of her time. Sanchez seems to reflect a realization of this fact in the way that she draws on epic and myth for the form and content of this, her most elaborately written and structured work. Part 2, especially, is pregnant with black female history. First, she invites the reader to ''Come into Black geography,'' the geography of herself ''born/musician to two/black braids.'' Then she invokes the earth mother to sing her history, to ''tell me how i have become, became / this woman with razor blades between / her teeth.'' The succeeding sections follow this black girl from her birth, to childhood game playing, to aphasic trauma caused by her stepmother, to teenage grinding in New York City project basements, to love and young womanhood as ''a proper painted / european Black faced american,'' to a crisis in racial identity and breakdown,

to civil rights activism, to finally a womanhood of blackness. Here Sanchez reveals personal and collective history. . . .

Sanchez is undoubtedly one of the most under-appreciated poets writing today. Her pristine lyricism combined with her strong voice and black female themes make her special.

Gloria Hull. In Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, eds. *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 176–79

Sonia Sanchez respects the power of Black language. More than any other poet, she has been responsible for legitimatizing the use of urban Black English in written form. Her use of language is spontaneous and thoughtful. Unlike many poets of the sixties, her use of the so-called profane has been innovatively shocking and uncommonly apropos. Her language is culturally legitimate and genuinely reflects the hard bottom and complicated spectrum of the entire Black community. She has taken Black speech and put it in the context of world literature. This aspect of her work has often been over-looked. However, she, along with Baraka, Neal, Dumas, and a few others of the sixties poets, must be looked upon as a recorder and originator of an urban Black working language. Long before the discovery of Ntozake Shange, Sanchez set the tone and spaces of modern urban written Black poetry. In her early works, we can read and feel the rough city voices screaming full circle in all kinds of human settings.

Haki Madhubuti. In Mari Evans, ed. *Black Women Writers (1950–1980)* (New York: Anchor, 1984), p. 421

The title of Sonia Sanchez's first collection, *Homecoming*, marks with delicate irony the departure point of a journey whose direction and destination can now be considered. *I've Been a Woman*, her most recent book, invites such an appraisal, including as it does a retrospective of her earlier work as well as an articulation of a newly won sense of peace. . . .

The new poems in *I've Been a Woman* benefit from the sense of continuity and evolution conferred by the earlier work. The impact of the section entitled ''Haikus/Tankas & Other Love Syllables'' is immeasurably enhanced by *Love Poems*, for instance; the new poems, drawing on a relatively limited stock of images (water in various forms, trees, morning, sun, different smells), are an accumulation of moments that define love, age, sorrow, and pride in terms of action. Particular configurations recur: the rhythms of sex, the bent silhouettes of old age, the stillness of intense emotion. But taken together, these poems are like the spontaneous eruptions that punctuate, geyserlike, the flow of experience.

The other new poems in *I've Been a Woman* consist of a series of eulogies, collectively titled ''Generations,'' in which Sanchez explicitly claims her place among those who speak of and for Black people. There is a schematic balance operating here: the individual poems respectively eulogize Sterling Brown (age), Gerald Penny (youth), Sanchez's father, and the idea and reality of mothers. The synthesis implied in this design is enacted in the poetry itself; the imagery and rhythms of the verse in this section convey an overwhelming sense of resolution and serenity.

David Williams. In Mari Evans, ed. *Black Women Writers (1950–1980)* (New York: Anchor, 1984), pp. 433, 446

It is appropriate when analyzing a work such as *Homegirls and Handgrenades* (1984) to wonder about what might have been the motivation for its subject matter and form. It might be declared by some that this is just another in a long line of Sonia Sanchez's books of poems. Her very first volume, *Homecoming* (1969), was an impressive display of staggered-lined poems with word-splitting diagonals. *We a BaddDDD People* (1970) and *It's a New Day* (1971) contained even more of the same stylistic devices. Part of Sanchez's early effort was to experiment with words in verse to create a new perspective on how blacks should perceive themselves within the context of a nation struggling to admit them into the fold of social equality. Although that task remains incomplete, one can nevertheless sense a development on the part of the poet as she advances her work to include the mystical *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* (1973) as well as *Love Poems* (1973) where there can be seen an attempt to reconcile all the various aspects of black culture for the benefit of progress. *I've Been a Woman* (1978) and *Under a Soprano Sky* (1987) are further examples of how the author has examined, in particular, the plight of black women as they strive toward freedom in a world not always conductive to that undertaking.

Nonetheless, it is in *Homegirls* where Sanchez delivers what Henry Louis Gates has characterized as ''the revising text. . .written in the language of the tradition, employing its tropes, its rhetorical strategies, and its ostensible subject matter, the so-called Black Experience.''

James Robert Saunders. *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.*. 15, 1988, p. 73

Such brief works as ''poem,'' ''to all sisters,'' and ''definition for blk/children'' are also examples from *Home Coming* of a revolutionary didacticism meant to inspire mass audiences. It is easy to view such efforts as oversimplifications, but in truth, their sentiments, issues, tone, and language fit them out ideally as addresses to an enormously complex situation in which few people speak in abstract syllables or demand wit, ambiguity, and refined tension. If the reception accorded ''to all sisters'' is exemplary, such didactic poems reveal Ms. Sanchez's genius for the vernacular. They also reveal her commitment to one of the most familiar cultural performances in the Afro-American community—''running it down.''

In such performances, the single speaker puts into forceful language the wisdom of the tribe, stripping away pretense and, in almost shamanistic ways, colloquially exorcising demons of racism, sexism, and intraracial dissension. ''Telling it like it 't' is'' describes the process admirably, or, as Ralph Ellison's respondent says in *Invisible Man:* ''We with you, Brother. You pitch 'em we catch 'em!''. . .

If the notion of a black renaissance may be assumed to imply communal leadership and a response among black people themselves—a self-direction, selection, and empowerment that do not recreate bourgeois forms for private gain and white acknowledgment—then Sonia Sanchez and her audience clearly mark a new, postmodern, and dynamically sounding *renaissancism*.

There may well be more celebrated Afro-American women writers, but Sonia Sanchez helps bring an enduring spirit of *black* renaissancism to contemporary effectiveness. Her name is legion; it subsumes the world's dispossessed as referent. Nobody performs

like Sonia Sanchez; nobody brings quintessential black cultural rights to the high note she achieves.

> Houston A. Baker, Jr. In Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* (New York: Meridian, 1990), pp. 332, 345

In her eight volumes of poetry, which appeared between 1969 and 1987, Sanchez's voice is sometimes abrasive but never as profane as the conditions she knows must be eradicated; her tone ranges from gentle to derisive, yet the message is one of redeeming realism. Also undergirding her poetic expression is a deep concern for heritage; for the sovereignty of time with all its ramifications of birth, change, rebirth, and death; for the impress of the past and memories; and for nurture, nature, and God. Moreover, these themes reveal Sanchez's strong Southern imagination, one that was born in the impressionable times of her youth in Alabama, where the tensions of struggle were fed with mama's milk.

Homecoming (1969), Sanchez's first book of poems, is her pledge of allegiance to blackness, to black love, to black heroes, and to her own realization as a woman, an artist; and a revolutionary. The language and the typography are experimental; they are aberrations of standard middle-class Americanese and traditional Western literary forms. As such, they reflect her view of American society, which perceives blacks as aberrations and exploits them through commercialism, drugs, brutality, and institutionalized racism. In this book and the poetry that follows, the vernacular and the forms are clear indications of her fierce determination to redefine her art and rail against Western aesthetics. *Homecoming* also introduces us to a poet who is saturated with the sound and sense of black speech and black music, learned at the knees of Birmingham women discovering themselves full voiced and full spirited. The rhythm and color of black speech—the rapping, reeling, explosive syllables—are her domain, for she is steeped in the tradition of linguistic virtuosity that Stephen Henderson talks about in *Understanding the New Black Poetry*. Black music, especially the jazz sounds of John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Pharoah Sanders, pulse, riff, and slide through her poetry.

In her second volume, *We a BadddDDD People* (1970), Sanchez is wielding a survival sword that rips away the enemy's disguise and shears through the facade of black ignorance and reactionism. Arranged in three groups, ''Survival Poems,'' ''Love/Songs/Chants,'' and ''TCB/EN Poems,'' the poems extend the attack begun in *Homecoming* and tell black people how to survive in a country of death traps (drugs, suicide, sexual exploitation, psychological slaughter via the mass media) and televised assassination. Her message, however, is not one of unrelieved gloom, for it is rooted in optimism and faith: ''know and love yourself.'' Like Sterling A. Brown's ''Strong Men'' and Margaret Walker's ''For My People,'' ''We a BadddDDD People,'' the title poem of the volume, is a praise song that celebrates black love, talent, courage, and continuity. . . .

A *Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* (1974) is a dramatic departure from the poetry of earlier volumes. The scope here is large and sweeping. The language is no longer the raw vernacular of *Homecoming*, though, as in *We a BadddDDD People*, it is possessed by the rhythms of the chants and rituals. At its most prosaic, it is laden with the doctrine of the Nation of Islam and ideologically correct images. At its best, it is intimate, luminous, and apocalyptic. Tucked inside *A Blues Book* is a striking spiritual odyssey that reveals the poet's growing awareness of the psychological and spiritual features of her face.

In 1978, Sanchez culled some of her best poetry from earlier volumes in *I've Been a Woman: New and Selected Poems*. To these she adds a collection of haiku and tankas that is dominated by the theme of love: the sensual love of a man, the love of old people and young, the love for a father and spiritual mothers. . . .

In *homegirls & handgrenades* (1984), Sanchez shows the further deepening of the poet's consciousness, for it is a sterling example of her going inside herself, inside the past, to pull out of her residual memory deeply personal experience. From the past, she draws images that explode the autobiographical into universal truths. The predominant genre in this volume is the sketch, much like those that stud Jean Toomer's *Cane*. . . .

Distinguishing much of her poetry is a prophetic voice that brings the weight of her experience to articulating the significant truths about liberation and love, self-actualization and being, spiritual growth and continuity, heroes, and the cycles of life. Her vision is original because it is both new (a fresh rearrangement of knowledge) and faithful to the ''origins'' of its inspiration. Therefore, it is not surprising that in her most recent volume of poetry, *Under a Soprano Sky* (1987), the mature voice of the poet is giving expression to the sources of her spiritual strength, establishing and reestablishing connections that recognize the family-hood of man/womankind, and singing, as another Lady did, of society's strange fruit sacrificed on the altars of political megalomania, economic greed, and social misunderstanding.

> Joanne Veal Gabbin. In Tonette Bond Inge, ed. *Southern Women Writers: The New Generation* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990), pp. 181–84

As a poet, Sonia Sanchez has evolved since her first book *Homecoming* published in 1969 during the heart of the Black Power Movement. Back then her poetics included a strident tropology that displayed a matriarchal protection of black people. Today, after publishing twelve books of poetry, including the acclaimed *Homegirls and Handgrenades* and *Under a Soprano Sky*, one can still discover poetic conventions developed during the Black Arts Movement. The purpose of this artistic movement involved challenging the Eurocentric hegemony in art by developing a new aesthetic that represented the ethos, pathos, and expression of African Americans. These neo-renaissance artists were inspired by the rhetorical eloquence and activism of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X.

It is obvious that revolutionary fervor characterized some of Sanchez's work, but it is essential for understanding her poetics, as well as the neoaesthetic of the sixties, to recognize that anarchy was not the goal. These poets considered themselves to be word soldiers for black people, defending their right to have equality, honor, and glory. In each of Sanchez's volumes of poetry, for example, one finds the artist handling themes that include love, harmony, race unification, myth, and history.

> Regina B. Jennings. In Carol Aisha Blackshire-Belay, ed. *Language and Literature in the African American Imagination* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992), p. 119

Sanchez is perceived as a militant writer. Such a perception has as much to do with the themes she addresses in her poetry as the form she uses. Critics, however, tend to focus on her militant themes. Certainly it is understandable that critics focus on Sanchez's use of certain themes in her work, but her disruption of the haiku form is directly related to her fusion of function and ethos in poetry, and though she is consistently revolutionary, she is also a skilled artist. Ironically, because of the general perception of her as militant, Sanchez's use of the haiku puzzles some scholars who associate her militancy solely with free verse and rarely with haiku. . . .

Because of her tendency to focus on the human condition in her poetry, Sanchez is often associated with militancy. Two misconceptions account for this tendency: Sanchez's highly militant and often publicized free verse poetry, which employs tropes and themes associated with political struggle, and the conventional notion of haiku that influences both the poetry and critical community. . . .

In transforming haiku, Sonia Sanchez declares her own ''linguistic manumission,'' refusing to be boxed in by its form. As she textualizes the form, forging her Afrocentric vision and Afrocentric structure within the discipline of the haiku form, she moves closer to a unique structure that carries her own signature.

Frenzella Elaine DeLancey. In Carol Aisha Blackshire-Belay, ed. *Language and Literature in the African American Imagination* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992), pp. 32–33, 35–36

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SANDBURG, Carl (1878–1967)

The free rhythms of Mr. Carl Sandburg are a fine achievement in poetry. No one who reads *Chicago Poems* with rhythm particularly in mind can fail to recognize how much beauty he attains in this regard. But the more arresting aspect of Mr. Sandburg's achievement is, for myself, the so-called imagistic aspect. . . . At first these poems may seem too innocent of self-interpretation to mean anything, too impressionistic to compel the name of beauty—to give that completion which has no shadow and knows no end beyond itself. But such exquisite realization of the scenes that gave Mr. Sandburg the mood of beauty is in itself a creation of the beautiful.

Francis Hackett. *Horizons* (Huebsch-Viking). 1918. pp. 304–5, 309

The ''natural rhythms of a manly life'' that Plato insisted upon . . . just as they tumble roughly along in Mr. Sandburg's vibrant verse, beat out from the very unpoetic look of this poet. And when he talks—there is no jabber nor gesticulation nor studied modulation in his talk—and when his eyes burn out their black fire, your attention is gripped by that same honest man-to-man sincerity which he is able to put into the grinding, crashing, angular words of his unrhymed free-rhymed verses, and you can understand more clearly why his verse must be unrhymed, free-rhymed, unfettered. . . . Mr. Sandburg's poems are Mr. Sandburg. They are powerful, live, brutal, gentle, and human—and so is he.

Walter Yust. *Bookman*. Jan., 1921. pp. 286, 290

There must be some powerful principle of life in the man, that he can make one feel so much. There must be some rocky strength, some magnetic iron in him, that compels, despite coatings of muck and dust, and draws iron to iron. For Sandburg is an almost rudimentary artist. His successful effects are almost sparks of fire out of a chaos, sudden tongues of flame that leap out of smoking matter and subside as suddenly again. He appears to be as nearly unconscious as an artist can be and still remain a creator; it is well-nigh in spite of his technique that he manages to communicate.

Paul Rosenfeld. *Bookman*. July, 1921. p. 393

Buried deep within the He man, the hairy, meat eating Sandburg there is another Sandburg, a sensitive, naive, hesitating Carl Sandburg, a Sandburg that hears the voice of the wind over the roofs of houses at night, a Sandburg that wanders often alone through grim city streets on winter nights, a Sandburg that knows and understands the voiceless cry in the heart of the farm girl of the plains when she comes to the kitchen door and sees for the first time the beauty of prairie country.

The poetry of John Guts doesn't excite me much. Hairy, raw meat eating He men are not exceptional in Chicago and the middle west.

As for the other Sandburg, the naive, hesitant, sensitive Sandburg—among all the poets of America he is my poet.

Sherwood Anderson. *Bookman*. Dec., 1921. p. 361

Sandburg is alien to most of the Anglo-Saxon elements in American life. Its aspects which he chooses to describe are those precisely which distinguish it from life in England. . . . He avoids the language along with everything else that is English. He never wrote an American dictionary, but he does something even more hazardous and exciting: he writes American. With earlier authors American was a dialect; it was the speech of the comedian and the soubrette; the hero, when serious, declaimed his Sunday-best Oxford. The case is opposite with Sandburg. . . . Sandburg writes

American like a foreign language, like a language freshly acquired in which each word has a new and fascinating meaning.

Malcolm Cowley. *Dial*. Nov., 1922. pp. 565–6

Sandburg, for all his strength, is not without his weakness. . . . In giving way to a program of mysticism, Sandburg gives the unconscious an absolutely free hand; he lets it dictate its unfettered—and, one might almost add, its unlettered—fantasies. There are times, more frequent than one might wish, when he completely fails to guide the current of his thought; it directs or misdirects him so that he follows blindly what, too often, is merely a blind alley. . . . But though the meaning is not always clear, there is no mistaking the emotion. It is implicit in every line; a concentrated exaltation, rich in its sweeping affirmations, rich in suggestive details.

Louis Untermeyer. *American Poetry since 1900* (Holt). 1923. pp. 86–7

Sandburg's profoundest belief about the world is that the universe is mainly cruel and capricious, that meaning is given it only by the lives of men—pitiful and noble lives which are continually being thwarted by death or disease or the facts of the social order. . . . As Sandburg, because he sets so high a value on men, is continually brought to the thought of death, so, like other mystics, he prizes silence above noise, introspection above activity. . . . He feels keenly that ideas are frail, values are fragile, language is inadequate.

Howard Mumford Jones. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Jan., 1927. pp. 112, 116, 121

Sandburg's poetic instrument is exactly fitted to his purposes: it simply happens that those purposes are too vaguely poetic to make the instrument become anything more than the loose, amorphous, copious, semi-prose medium that it still remains after twenty-five years of use. And one may suppose that if he had exerted more labor on the task of filing and concentrating his verse, giving one phrase or anecdote the pith now thinned out over twenty, he would have arrived at something more fixed and specific in his social beliefs. . . . The potentialities of an epic judgement lie in Sandburg's materials, but he has not realized them.

Morton D. Zabel. *Poetry*. Oct., 1936. pp. 43–4

Carl Sandburg petered out as a poet ten years ago. I imagine he wanted it that way. His poems themselves said what they had to say, piling it up, then just went out like a light. He had no answers, he didn't seek any. Without any attempt at the solace which the limitations of art (as with a Baudelaire) might bring the formlessness of his literary figures was the very formlessness of the materials with which he worked. That was his truth. That was what he wanted truthfully to make plain, that was his compulsion. That form he could accept but at a terrible cost: failure deliberately invited, a gradual inevitable slackening off to ultimate defeat.

William Carlos Williams. *Poetry*. Sept., 1951. p. 346

Everybody loved Carl Sandburg in our town. Nobody knows where he went. . . . Compare ''I Am the People, The Mob'' with *The People, Yes*. It's enough to make you weep. In the early poem you see so clearly behind the abstraction the stark individuals of the other poems in *Chicago Poems*. Behind the second *People* is only mush. . . . It is a terrible pity, but after about 1925 there is nothing of value. Since most of the prose comes after that, Sandburg the historian, novelist, autobiographer, writer of children's stories simply does not exist for literature. I suppose the last thing was the *Songbag*.

Kenneth Rexroth. *The Nation*. Feb. 22, 1958. pp. 171–2

He realizes that many folk with homely virtues and skills are far superior to both lettered and unlettered blockheads, and their society healthier and stabler than a parasitic one where men prey on men.

Sandburg, then, has a basic content which can be summed up in the word Man and which can nourish the mind of the young in the best traditions of Western Civilization. The next question to be raised is, Is what Sandburg writes poetry, and, if so, how good is it?

Sandburg . . . was not sure that he was writing poetry. He was trying to communicate to an audience which was not sophisticated verbally, to whom the connotations of words are very closely related to their denotations, to whom literary allusion and subtle metaphor are meaningless. He has been an exponent of Wordsworth's ''man talking to men.'' But this use of a *lingua communis* carries with it its own trap, as Coleridge pointed out. The language of prose and the language of metrical composition are two different entities. Thus Sandburg's work quite often degenerates into a pedestrian prosaism summed up by the word ''talk.''

Michael Yatron. *English Journal*. Dec., 1959. p. 527

He loves ''facts,'' and has made a career of collecting them to be used in journalism, speeches, biography, a novel, and poetry. Yet he is in no sense a pedant; his facts (when they are facts and not prejudiced supposition) are alive and pertinent, and he is usually willing to let them speak for themselves. ''What is instinct?'' he asks in ''Notes for a Preface'' (and the title itself is characteristic). ''What is thought? Where is the absolute line between the two. Nobody knows—as yet.'' He is still, he says, a ''seeker.'' He might be called a pragmatic humanist. Certainly he is not a Naturalist, who believes that human nature is simply animal nature; or a supernaturalist, who has an equally low opinion of mankind. Among his new poems is a satire on a contemporary poet, probably Eliot, who believes that ''The human race is its own Enemy Number One.'' There is no place for ''original sin'' in Sandburg's theology.

From first to last, Sandburg writes of man in the physical world, and he still regards the enemies of humanity as either social or political. Man's salvation, he thinks, is his instinctive yearning for a better world; in the practical sense: idealism, the ''dream.''

Gay Wilson Allen. *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Summer, 1960. p. 318

America is an urban and highly materialistic culture today and the Lincoln ideas have long been submerged by the exigencies of crisis

government and politics by advertising. While Sandburg embodies that part of the past, he also embodies the victory won by the union men in the bitter labor wars and the successful fight the immigrant waged against entrenched privilege. This is a fight not completely over. When Congress applauds Sandburg on Lincoln's birthday, the Representatives and Senators may be trying to convince themselves they are applauding what they *were*, but down deep perhaps they know they are also applauding what they are. It is not for nothing that Sandburg's parents were immigrants and that Sandburg, long before he undertook the Lincoln biography, described in eloquent poetry the terrible adjustments of immigrants and farmers to an industrial society.

Harry Golden. *Carl Sandburg* (World). 1961. p. 29

We should always be grateful to Sandburg as a pioneer liberator of American poetry from the genteel tradition. Even regardless of historical considerations, here is still a body of poetry in which the old America of the frontier and the new America of the industrial city are imaginatively synthesized by a loving, lofty spirit. And yet it must be said that Sandburg is never a great and seldom even a very good poet. He abounds in potentially poetic feeling, but he is not sufficiently interested in writing poems. Too often he is the victim, too seldom the master, of tender emotions which liquefy his desire to seem hard and tough. He loves real people and real things but does not look at them intently enough to make his images of them come alive: his impressionism saps his realism. His free verse is merely free; he adopted it because it seemed the most unrestricted way of pouring out his feelings and because he mistakenly supposed it to be closer to the natural poetic heart of the folk than rhyme and meter. His formal and spiritual indebtedness to Whitman, though far from slavish, is too obvious to permit us to think of him as a genuine innovator. Like his master, he is more limited than enfranchised by his lack of saturation in European culture.

Beneath the regional and documentary surface of his work, beneath its relative modernity of matter, form, and diction, one discerns the wish to be a quite old-fashioned poet-prophet. His ''message'' is inseparable from a religiosity which is never clearly formulated.

Hoxie Neale Fairchild. *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, vol. V (Columbia). 1962. pp. 499–500

Though he may not have a blueprint for the future, he does show strength in his expression of the minutiae of life. He is a poet to be read not *in toto* nor even in great slabs, but at short sittings. He is what might be called a ''spare-minute'' poet, for his intimate glimpses, his brief expressions of mood, idea, longing, his landscapes and personal etchings, are pleasing—even stimulating—for a limited reading. His talkiness and his tendency to all inclusiveness make the search for the penetrating line, the memorable observation, and the occasional fresh combination of images sometimes, quite frankly, a tiring one. What Sandburg needs more than anything else is a sympathetic but severe editor.

Richard Crowder. *Carl Sandburg* (Twayne). 1964. p. 109

Sandburg deserves to be remembered. He is still, probably, the most important of the Midwestern literary pioneers of the age when Chicago was a raucous nest of singing birds, superior by his range and more attractive in his public persona than Dreiser, Vachel Lindsay or Edgar Lee Masters.

Sandburg was consciously a ''representative man.'' . . . He celebrated the glories of Middle America: Chicago was the ''city of the Big Shoulders.'' Some of Sandburg's verse is still remembered, but he was no Whitman; and the standards of poetic achievement have risen since the remote days when Chicago was the American Athens. . . .

His real epic achievement was his immense life of Lincoln, which was not merely long but often penetrating, despite its numerous academic deficiencies.

TLS: The Times Literary Supplement. Feb. 12, 1971. p. 175

As always in good poetry, it is language that does it. But Sandburg is very difficult in this respect, because his way of using language can be deceptive. It is much like prose in its syntax, and the colloquial vocabulary adds to an apparent casualness. In his best poetry Sandburg *uses* vernacular language, slang even; by this I mean that in Sandburg's instance it isn't the self-conscious employment of a ''low'' vocabulary to call attention to commonness, a vaunting of plebeian virtue (though later in his career Sandburg was prone to do just this, ad nauseam). An expression such as ''the *crack* trains of the nation'' is an organic part of his vocabulary, not an affectation, and he employs the adjective because it is simply the appropriate word to image what he wishes to convey about the train. As such it provides precisely the intensification of language, the heightened awareness of the texture of experience, that the best poetry affords.

I stress this because unless the way in which Sandburg employs vernacular imagery is properly recognized, his way of poetry will be misunderstood. . . .

The best poems in *Chicago Poems* (1916), *Cornhuskers* (1918), and *Smoke and Steel* (1920) succeed because of the tension between the idiom and the subject; their impact lies in the resolution, through language, of that tension. But from using vernacular language to intensify everyday experience into poetry it is an easy, and a fatal, step for one to begin assuming that because the experience is ordinary and the language is of the earth earthy, they are therefore inherently Poetic. To depict in compelling and appropriate language a train moving across the prairie is one thing; it is another and a considerably less interesting matter to assert that because it is a train on the midwestern American prairie, and because the language is avowedly vernacular, the joint appearance within a poem constitutes the poetry. On the contrary the instant that the tension between language and object is slackened, what is produced is not poetry but rhetoric.

This is what begins happening to Sandburg as poet very early in his career: following the *Chicago Poems* his poetry shows an increasing tendency thereafter in almost a kind of geometric progression, to substitute rhetoric about experience for evocation of his experience. Sandburg began to believe his press notices. He was now the Poet of Mid-America, and thenceforward he sought to live up to the title by cataloguing the everyday scene in the Midwest. His poetry had been likened to Walt Whitman's; now he proceeded to imitate the least attractive aspects of Whitman's verse, producing only hot air and chaff. . . .

Those who chronicle and interpret American letters are bound ultimately to rediscover for themselves the excellence of Carl

Sandburg. When that happens, the fine poet and masterful biographer will at last reemerge from the dumps. There have been other poets who have written and spoken silly things—things far sillier and sometimes considerably more sinister than ever he wrote or spoke—and who have woven a public image of specious rhetoric and role-playing about their reputations, and yet been remembered finally because at their best they wrote well. Perhaps the centenary of Sandburg's birth, in 1978, will be made the occasion for his restoration. Very likely, however, it will take a little longer. But the time will come.

Louis D. Rubin, Jr. *Sewanee Review*. Winter, 1977. pp. 182–83. 185–86. 189

Nobody in America could have written [the poems in *The People, Yes*] but Carl Sandburg. They have the thumbprint of his personality, his ear for a good yarn, his sense of the revealing detail, his empathy with folk wisdom, his unique ability to transform the raw materials of common speech into a lyricism with a swing and rhythm recognizably his own. Other poets may from time to time touch on his materials, but their touch is inevitably different from Sandburg's. . . . But each of these contemporaries of Sandburg's would have made a poetry quite different from his. Yeats or Stevens or Frost would assuredly have used regular meters, formal stanzas, rhymes. The free verse of Williams or Pound has an entirely different specific gravity compared to Sandburg's. These are matters of style—but as is ever the case with style, the differences are not merely on the surface. . . .

Much of his work is flawed, but in at least two periods of his long career he achieved a democratic art that lasts. Sandburg's best poems still speak of lives of people in small towns, in city ghettoes, and of the energy and broken patterns of industrial life with the force, the clarity, and the pleasure that first was found in them. And the poetic vision in *The People*, *Yes* is felt, not in the invention of a new language or a novel presentation for poetry, but in the poet's faith that ''the bookless people'' could, in their adversity, provide a thesaurus of idioms commensurate with their strength to endure and their will to survive.

Like the men who broke the plains in Illinois, Carl Sandburg was a pioneer. His vision of life was neither tragic nor cheery, but inclusive of defeat, of doubt, of despair even; these conditions he found life to transcend by its own resilience. He was deeply in the American grain in his pragmatism, his hopefulness. He once said, ''The past is a bucket of ashes.'' He wrote of the present he knew. Now that present and his work have become parts of our past, we can look back at Sandburg's best poems with gratitude for their capturing a portion of the reality of his time. We can thank Sandburg, too, for enlarging the possibilities of subject and language for other poets who came in our century.

Daniel Hoffman. *Georgia Review*. Summer, 1978, pp. 392, 406

Sandburg certainly stands wide of the major thrusts of both the writing and criticism of poetry in our time. Many of the critical terms which condescend to him are indubitably right in their import. At the same time, I think it fair to suggest that their import is less than adequate to Sandburg's whole poetic achievement. He was engaged in the same pursuit of the native which occupied his two Chicago contemporaries [Edgar Lee Masters and Vachel Lindsay], but . . . unlike them he located a poetically constructive imagination of the land in and for which he wrote. His voice gains authenticity when it is considered across its breadth of utterance, and I would find it difficult to make this claim for either Masters or Lindsay. Unlike the latter, his is only occasionally the effort at poetic beatification, and unlike the former he is largely guiltless of ingrown maundering. Instead, . . . though Sandburg shared a certain tentativeness and openness with his contemporaries, he in fact fashioned and for the most part held fast to a close and living sense of the native, one congruent, finally, with his land's own aspect.

What emerges from the whole poetry, in this view, is a wholeness of perception, one rooted in a consistent feel for a land conditioned by a problematic history and filling a landscape difficult to redeem by transcendental gesture. His scene is peopled with the kind of minor movers and doers who in fact have so largely occupied it, and who have little choice but to take their character from the land's own spatial and temporal indeterminateness. The people and their work, or the poet's perception of the land itself, occasionally prompted him to a sort of over-blownness, a raising of cities, the land, or the people to improbably conceived heights, . . . but such rhetoric, sharing something with Lindsay's or Masters' distention, is more occasional than pervasive. . . .

And such indifference of passage transfers from Sandburg's sense of time to his sense of space also. His landscape is no more a deliverer than his history. At such formative points as the perception of time and space, thus, he is the poet of a tolerable but clear disenchantment.

Bernard Duffey. *Centennial Review*. Summer, 1979, pp. 295–97

Carl Sandburg's reputation as the adulatory biographer of Lincoln and as a folksy, silver-haired singer of ballads and reciter of poems has obscured the radically innovative and oppositional character of his earlier poetic work. Set in the context of Sandburg's socialist politics of the teens rather than the moderate populism of his later career, the early poems emerge as protests both against much of conventional American political life and against established literary practice. Most sharply confrontational is *Chicago Poems*, which appeared at a time when Sandburg was active both in socialist politics and in literary circles. These poems reveal that Sandburg was busy propagating American socialism not only in his work as an organizer and a newspaperman, but also in the supposedly apolitical realm of literature. Other materials, particularly reviews of *Chicago Poems* and correspondence between Sandburg, his publisher, and the critics, present another, less visible side to the relationship between politics and poetry: They show the power of literary and publishing establishments to suppress or reinterpret writing that questions their received values. Thus, even though *Chicago Poems* offers significant potential for destabilizing the boundary between literary art and political life, the rhetoric mustered by the critics in response to Sandburg had (and continues to have) great power to reestablish this boundary and thereby blunt the radical critique that Sandburg's work offers. . . .

What I am suggesting is that Sandburg was a far more political poet—at least in his early work—than we have thought and that one function of criticism has been to ''sanitize,'' to depoliticize him

both by encouraging him in his nonpolitical pursuits and by valuing his imagist work more highly than his political.

Mark Van Wienen. ''Taming the Socialist: Carl Sandburg's *Chicago Poems* and Its Critics.'' *American Literature*. March, 1991, pp. 89–90, 98–99

In his poetry, as in his politics, [Sandburg] did not have a mind that much liked to go into things. He was always satisfied to stop at the middle distance. ''He works in a large, loose medium,'' the poet Conrad Aiken once wrote, ''inextricably mixing the vivid with the false.'' Sandburg had no real appetite for complexity. He never went very deep—no deeper, really, than the folk songs he sang and eventually anthologized in a best-selling collection he called *The American Songbag*. When his book-length poem, *The People, Yes*, came out in 1936, Robert Frost objected: ''Sandburg is wrong, I say: The People, *Yes*, and *No!*''

Sandburg's reputation, then, did not grow anywhere near so steadily among serious poets and critics as it did in popular circles. Ezra Pound, the Diaghilev of the modern movement in poetry, invited Sandburg to contribute to an anthology, but also said he was not ''sure whether your 'Chicago' wouldn't hit harder if it began six lines later and ended five lines sooner.'' Still, he granted Sandburg his place. Among other American poets, although Archibald MacLeish continued to think well of Sandburg's verse, [Robert] Frost once remarked that Sandburg's was the only poetry he knew that figured to gain by translation. When the New Criticism came into prominence in the 1940s, Sandburg's prestige dropped further. His rolling rhythms and his garrulity could not hold up under the sort of intense scrutiny practiced by the New Critics.

Read today, Sandburg's poems reveal a dismal sameness. They exhibit mastery over a faded slang, the idiom of a day now done; rhythmically, they still have richness of a kind which allows them to roll on and on, but with a feeling of uniform thinness. . . .

The sensuous garrulity that was always part of Sandburg's writing grew worse with age. When his verse came under attack by critics and fellow poets, the People's Poet looked to the people for self-justification. Modern poets, he averred, the sort of poets vaunted by his enemies the New Critics, were antidemocratic, writing not for the people but for each other. ''I say to hell with the new poetry,'' was his view at seventy-five. Poets today ''don't want poetry to say what it means. They have symbols and abstractions and a code amongst themselves—sometimes I think it's a series of ear wigglings.'' His own poetry, he concluded, because it had a wider audience, must have been better.

Sandburg died at the age of eighty-nine, wealthy, revered, easily the most famous living poet in America, and soon to be almost entirely, if not quite forgotten, unread. He had had a tremendous roll of the dice. Now his work is quite as inert as he. As a young man, in 1909, in a column for the *Milwaukee Journal*, Sandburg unconsciously wrote his own epitaph: ''America has many businessmen but no poets. The reason for this is that we are a nation of hustlers and no poet can be a hustler.'' Funny, the things a man, over a long life, can forget.

Joseph Epstein. *Commentary*. May, 1992, pp. 51, 52

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SANTAYANA, George (1863–1952)

The world has scarcely any objective existence for him. Though in weaving his similitudes he uses the traditional apparatus of flowers and stars, mountains, rivers, and the sea, these things are pure ideas to him, divested of all material attributes. . . . The pageantry of life means little or nothing to him. He has no vision for external nature, but only for the summaries, essences, abstracts of phenomena, recorded in the concave of his soul. . . . Theoretically, this characteristic ought to imply a serious defect in Mr. Santayana's work; practically I find it no defect at all, but rather a source of distinction. It is a relief, for once in a way, to escape from the importunate details of the visible world into a sphere of pure thought and pure melody.

William Archer. *Poets of the Younger Generation* (John Lane). 1902. pp. 373–4

The joy of his verse is not so much its delicacy as its brilliance and the temper of its strength. His manner is the manner of swordsmanship, and the blade, though daintily raised, bites in. He is an exquisite in thrust and parry and a master of the subtle feints of fence, but there is more than swordplay in his skill. There is sometimes a desperate courage in the stab of a phrase as though he drove against a shadowy antagonist always at point to strike and overwhelm. . . . But for all its intensity the poetry of George Santayana never fails of a fine restraint and an unobtrusive mastery of form. His glimpses of reality are labored into closely articulated epigrams, and his

phrases of wonder or of doubt or grief are inevitable unities, perfect to the uses of his will.

Archibald MacLeish. *Bookman*. Oct., 1925. pp. 188–9

His attitude to the world of ideas no less than of the senses has always seemed to be an artist's rather than a philosopher's, and this, while no doubt making him an object of suspicion to his fellow thinkers, makes his philosophical writings enjoyable to the layman. It is notable, too, that he has (again unlike a philosopher) a sensitiveness to literature that has produced first class literary criticism. . . . His novel is therefore really a novel, not an arrangement of mouthpieces for philosophic speeches; the moral tensions he is interested in arise of themselves from the fable and call for little explication; and in his handling of them one is aware only of the (duly self-effacing) artist. The social fable is extended in all directions by the frequent symbolic implications, and behind the overt action one may sense an allegory of the moral life of man.

Q.D. Leavis. *Scrutiny*. Dec., 1935. p. 322

Unashamedly old-fashioned in its method, and in its quiet thoroughness, *The Last Puritan* makes the average contemporary novel, even the best, look two-dimensional by contrast. It has the solidarity of a *Tom Jones* or *Clarissa Harlowe*, does for the New England scene, or a part of it, what those novels did for eighteenth-century England, and with the same air of easy classic competence. Nor is it quite fair to call it old-fashioned: for Santayana's employment of a kind of soliloquy-dialogue is an extremely interesting invention technically, and very skillfully done.

But the whole book is a delight, so richly packed with perceptions and wisdom and humans, not to mention poetry, that it can be read and re-read for its texture alone.

Conrad Aiken. *New Republic*. Feb. 5, 1936. p. 372

The characters are seen only from certain aspects, and are seldom physically vivid. And the dialogue is like none heard in the novel for a generation. It is an exchange of soliloquies or finished essays; it is full of unblushing self-explanation or exposition, not for the benefit of the person ostensibly addressed, but for the reader; and nearly always it is much too intelligent and clairvoyant. . . . These long, explicit, uninterrupted speeches are a device of compression: we come to assume that what is said in one long speech by a character is the meat of what he really said over the course of a whole evening or a week; and the unnatural intelligence and articulateness of everyone is a refreshing relief from the current convention of laconic obtuseness or incoherent stream of consciousness.

Henry Hazlitt. *The Nation*. Feb. 26, 1936. p. 255

Readers must approach this book with a tolerance of fancy. The epicurean wisdom of Peter Alden, the emotionalism and naivete of Fraulein Irma, the fervid Catholicism of Caleb Wetherbee—these must be accepted as significant on their own account and not merely as supplementary to the narrative, because it is these elements which the author has either fused in his thought or systematically excluded from it. The import of this novel is primarily philosophical—of greater value to many readers than its author's abstract works, being as Mario says, a picture painted, and ''all the truer for not professing to be true.'' Mr. Santayana has here realized imaginatively a suggestion he made in a paper over twenty years ago—that one way for a philosopher to justify his system would be for him to acknowledge its personal basis. The proponent, if such he could be called, of any system would merely set forth his cognitive and moral experience, imparting to others that kind of knowledge which any keen observer might arrive at.

Justus Buchler. *New England Quarterly*. June, 1936. p. 282

To him no ties are morally binding but those of common thoughts and purposes. Instead of allowing the accident of family, country or profession to dictate his affection and his future, he has followed his affinities and aspirations. Even the age he has chanced to live in has not kept him from communing with the ancients he admires. . . . He seems to know all that is worth knowing, to feel everything that touches the human heart. He writes with the calm of an ancient philosopher, the passion of a mystic poet, the insight into eternal and intimate things which belongs to the great dead. He writes as if he had lived a long time ago and were writing for all time to come.

Van Meter Ames. *Proust and Santayana* (Willett). 1937. pp. 50, 80. Used by permission of Harper and Brothers

Among philosophical personalities the most urbane and humanistic since Socrates may well be Mr. Santayana. I imagine he is what Emerson might be if Emerson had had a philosophical instead of a theological background; in other words if his Harvard had been the Harvard of today or yesterday. As an Emerson disturbs the theologians, a Santayana disturbs the philosophers—an admirable function. Each speaks luminously, and that dismays his professional colleagues and drives them to speak primly; and each pours out an incessant gnomic wisdom, so that the colleagues look a little innocent or empty. The likeness goes further: each possesses the technical accomplishment of verse. But here the report is not so favorable. Emerson was too much the theologian to be quite released by poetry, and Mr. Santayana is imprisoned with all his graces in the net of his intellectualism. They do not command the freedom of poets.

John Crowe Ransom. *The World's Body* (Scribner). 1938. p. 304

One must of course be attuned to the sensitiveness of such a temperament as Santayana's to detect the emotion which the sonnets and certain of the other more personal verses reveal. One must share his aesthetic responsiveness, his sincere deference in the presence of beauty, his delight in quiet contemplation, his high seriousness. Santayana's Muse asks no plaudits of the crowd, desires no throng of admirers or followers. His poetry is personal and aloof, the discourse of a man with his soul, a soliloquy hardly more than a whisper, or perhaps a prayer.

George W. Howgate. *George Santayana* (Pennsylvania). 1938. p. 85

Without prejudicing in the least the question of the respective validities of the ways of thought and action idealized in the *Life of Reason* and the *Realms of Being*, one cannot ignore the fact that the period in which the second work was written witnessed the disintegration of the world whose stability seemed so assured during the years when he composed that philosophic masterpiece, the *Life of Reason*. He has experienced not so much a metaphysical conversion as a moral revulsion before the tremendous changes in the world he once knew. The situations that are difficult to master when approached as tasks and challenges he has forever settled, in his own mind, by converting them into spectacles.

Sidney Hook. *The Nation*. Nov. 2, 1940. p. 424

Except for William James . . . Santayana's thought would never have taken just the turn it did. . . . It is true that, from Santayana's point of view, America had a merely negative and astringent value for him, and a deep-rooted American will not feel that either *The Last Puritan* or *Persons and Places* does justice to what was most creative in America. . . . American readers of these books can make their own reservations, mainly in silence, and meanwhile there is much to be learned from them. No one but Santayana could have seen what he saw in the New England of the Age of Howells: his memories of those decades have a fictional sharpness, a precision of imagery, a piercing psychological quality that one finds in few comparable American autobiographies.

Newton Arvin. *The Nation*. Jan. 29, 1944. p. 133

He was not, as he says in a well-known sonnet, ''born to be beatified by anguish,'' but ''to stand perplexed aside from so much sorrow.'' Still, there are many cherished writers who experienced neither anguish nor joy but something in the middle ground that helped them to ruminate on life and on the symbols that have been evolved for the explanation of it, writers who often seem to be more knowledgeable, less dense, for the limitation of their experience. Santayana, not only by temperament but by his own plan of life, seems to have been destined for the middle way. Anyhow, he has gone that way and has brought out of it a curious wisdom, something that is a combination of the mundane with the disinterestedly spiritual. His mind has never been distorted by the strain of too intense feeling or by impetuosity, by too much work or a too imprudent sense of duty.

Mary M. Colum. *Saturday Review*. April 21, 1945. p. 8

Although a materialist, Santayana considers himself devout and worshipful. He loves the rites and ceremonies of the Catholic Church. He loves its dogmas, knows them to the last detail, and dwells on them with unreserved emotion. But he does not think they are true. He thinks they express in a symbolic way ideals that are needful to spirits in finding their way through a material world. . . . I do not think going through the motions of religion without genuine belief is a peculiarly Catholic phenomenon—or even a peculiar phenomenon. The peculiar thing about Santayana is his candid confession, or rather bold celebration, of it. He makes a sincerity of being insincere. He is devout with no object of devotion. He is religious without any religion.

Max Eastman. *American Mercury*. Nov., 1951. p. 38

The dominating interest of Santayana, throughout his whole repertory of writings, is psychological. His consistent concern is with the events that occur in the human psyche and in the human spirit. . . . Santayana's moral system, as developed in *The Life of Reason* and in the other volumes which cluster around *The Life of Reason*, seems precisely to accomplish the post-Lockean goal of delineating the structure of human nature, with the added security of an assumed material world as the sum of the existing. Thus, it satisfies at once the demands of a modern faith and those of a humane sensibility. Among philosophical systems of the century, it is uniquely acceptable to persons whose taste may be described as literary and traditional, and whose religion is scientific naturalism. Its aesthetic is marked by unconcern for fashionable, arbitrary, or occult doctrines of poetry and fine art.

Charles T. Harrison. *Sewanee Review*. Spring, 1953. pp. 209, 212

It can hardly be said that Santayana writes like one inspired, or like one with a zeal for either understanding or reforming the world. . . . His style reminds one more of the soliloquy of a dreamer who has never taken the world or even the facts of human life and achievement with intense seriousness or been overly disturbed by the prospect and actuality of catastrophes that have threatened human happiness and existence. The acute observations of, and the definite reactions to, the most crucial problems of living (which form a large part of his contribution to philosophy) are expressed in prose that seems so effortless and such a delight in itself that often one must, as Kant said of Rousseau's writings, read his essays and books several times in order to give attention to the matter rather than to the beauty of the style.

Willard E. Arnett. *Santayana and the Sense of Beauty* (Indiana). 1955. pp. 202–3

It was not Santayana's abstract ''message'' that explains his magic. It was not even the limpid and epigrammatic prose in which he stated it. It was the mixture of irony and sympathy he brought to his great theme, the unrelenting standards combined with the unillusioned acceptance of men as they are; it was the glinting wisdom, and the literary imagination which evoked the inner experience of men living in the most disparate moral climates. Most of all, it was the expression of a frankly relativistic moral outlook that was nevertheless Dantesque in its stringent declaration of preferences, its comprehensiveness, and its consistency. Here was a man with the sobriety of Aristotle writing with the poetry and excitement of Plato on the only things which give anything else meaning—human ideals.

Charles Frankel. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 7, 1956. p. 11

Santayana's peculiar genius is comprehensiveness. This fact, along with the delight provided by the texture of his writing, accounts for the unique interest he has inspired—if not in professional philosophers, at least in the cultivated laity whom he professes to address.

Every student of Santayana's works has observed and discriminated some of the several elements in the Santayanan synthesis. Familiarly, these include materialism and transcendentalism: thus his philosophy serves, at once, the two most imperative of modern intellectual masters—however mutually antipathetic they may immediately appear. Beyond these, and of equally familiar recognition, is the ''Platonism'' which finds value only in intuited essences, non-existent denizens of the realm which commanded Santayana's ultimate exploration. But I should like to signalize a fourth element. I am not sure that this is, strictly, an element in Santayana's system, though I am convinced of its high importance in the substance of his discourse. It, too, is a Platonism (or Aristotelianism), which seems to forget the embarrassed metaphysical status of the essences and which assumes the dignity, the persistence, and the universality of primary ethical and aesthetic forms.

Charles T. Harrison. *Sewanee Review*. Winter, 1957. p. 141

In the pessimism of the eighties and nineties, especially in that of Schopenhauer, Santayana found a mood that tallied with his own and a philosopher with a sense of beauty in art and life. Together with Leopardi and Musset, Byron and Shelley—all early favorites—Schopenhauer taught Santayana that man must rise above the chaos and suffering which threaten him in the world of will, to a salvation through sublime contemplation. Indeed, Schopenhauer's thought was not the passing infatuation Santayana has suggested it was. Schopenhauer provides the basic philosophical structure for almost all of the poetry Santayana wrote in the nineties. The emotional force of the sonnets rises from the tension between the demands of will and the recurrent desire for detachment from the world of will through contemplation of the permanence of dream.

Maurice F. Brown. *New England Quarterly*. June, 1960. p. 158

A spiritual vocation, as Santayana stated in the preface to *The Last Puritan*, can be a devastating thing, putting one at odds with life. More than once Santayana or one of his characters points out that one of Oliver's mistakes [in the novel] was attempting to lead an ordinary life. . . . The Lucifer [of Santayana's play, *Lucifer*] . . . could not countenance a world of partiality and illusion and therefore rebelled. He returned to dally with the world, as Oliver did, but both found in the end that the ways of the world were not for them. Lucifer withdrew in bitterness. Oliver, having no refuge to turn to, merely waited for the end. He ''petered out,'' as his author said. . . . To be sure, Santayana was firmly of the opinion that this predicament need not paralyze, as it did in the case of Lucifer and Oliver. . . . The paradigm of the spiritual life for Santayana was of course not Lucifer but Christ, who possessed among other virtues that of piety. He did not come into the world to rail at it or regulate or reject it but to love it for what it aspired to and thus to be a model of the spiritual life. . . .

Frederick W. Conner. *American Literature*. March, 1961. pp. 16–17

In setting down the history of this portion of his life many years later, Santayana undoubtedly had a tendency to describe his Harvard years in a somewhat abstract or even allegorical fashion: persons and places had become for him merely the materials of a spiritual drama. . . . Any writer's autobiography is a ''deception'' in the sense of its being in some ways as much an imaginative artifact as his professedly literary works. Santayana, in particular, seems to have enjoyed playing the role of the disillusioned philosopher living always in the eternal. And even at the end—faithful, it would seem, to Yeats's idea of the tragic nobility of the artist. . . , Santayana maintained his part in the play.

Joel Porte. *New England Quarterly*. Sept., 1962. p. 345

This change-over, from the tears of things to laughter at them, has more and more impressed me as the vital focus of Santayana's secret and private, his ''poetic,'' his personal, philosophy. Some of his readers may account for such shifts as they discern in his reflections upon value and existence by invoking a clash between his Spanish derivation and his Yankee education; others may attribute the shifts to a disregard for logical consistency, heedless of fitting into each other conflicting insights and divergent utterances; still others will argue that his mind was not professionally philosophical at all, only the mind of a sage who was a bit of a poet, and thought in images and tropes; and still others declare him preeminently a man of letters and a critic of letters. . . .

. . . His design for living was a harmonization of the psyche's impulses into a life of reason, and he appraised this harmony as the topmost reach of an aspiration destined to tragedy, of an accident in a universe of accidents where the reason it achieved was the only reason this universe contained; of a contingency doomed, soon or late, blindly to be destroyed even as it was blindly created. To survive, to postpone, to avert, the doom, man's reason shaped itself a citadel of illusions wherein it could feel at home and safe.

Horace M. Kallen. *Journal of Philosophy*. Jan. 2, 1964. pp. 23–4

What [Wallace] Stevens found in Santayana, then, was a theory of knowledge and of the imagination which was extremely hospitable to aesthetic values and aesthetic experience, which would in fact serve as a justification for poetry and point the way toward a poetic idea, the Supreme Fiction and its hero. The implications of this philosophy in the realm of poetry did not have to be inferred; attached as he was to experience in its aesthetic dimension, Santayana, a poet himself, wrote a great deal about poetry and its possibilities. He was a demanding critic. Even his three philosophical poets, Dante, Lucretius, and Goethe fall short in some respects; they are being measured against the highest and most rigorous standard, against the ideal possibilities of a philosophical poetry. . . . In ideal terms, poetry and religion are nearly identical; both exist in ''the sphere of significant imagery, of relevant fiction, of idealism become the interpretation of the reality it leaves behind.''

David P. Young. *Criticism*. Summer, 1965. pp. 276–7

He had above all an acute sense of man's impotence to control the course of civilization. The material world, progressing or not, could at any stage outstrip the ideals which sponsored it, without in fact making a chaos. There was a conflict, so to speak, between

brain and brain-child such as transcendentalism could never preclude or conceal. He separated the ideal from the institution, and advocated a lively, developing sense of the material world. In his opinion, transcendentalism was a shady, illogical way of admitting that the world didn't always come up to expectations. What he proposed to substitute was an ideal of integration such that, whatever the world produced, the product could be assimilated without its destroying the coherent identity of an individual: such identity constituting for him the most enduring and most sensible achievement possible in the flux.

Paul West. *The Wine of Absurdity* (Pennsylvania State). 1966. p. 192

Disillusioned with life and what it offered a young man so unfortunately situated as he was, Santayana came at the age of thirty to view the world in a new perspective. Just as the poet discovers, in the second sonnet sequence, that physical love, which promises so much, is a transitory and unsatisfying experience, so Santayana discovered that youth and the warm fellowship it afforded him, were transitory and irretrievable. His relationship with his sister was seriously altered by her marriage; his father was dead; his religion had proved false. But a shift in perspective, in the way of assigning value to things, ''separated the inner self from the outer''. The outer self belonged to the temporal flux of experience, but the inner, myth-making, idealizing self could be attuned to the realm of the eternal. This separation, in which both elements are reconciled, provided Santayana with a tenable vision of experience, focused in such a way as to see all things ''under the form of eternity.'' This ''re-adjustment,'' as I have been calling it, this *metanoia*, expressed by the highly stylized conventions of his second sonnet sequence, goes a long way toward explaining the origin and nature of the aloofness and detachment which Santayana's critics have long noted in his work.

Douglas L. Wilson. *New England Quarterly*. March, 1966. p. 25

The Last Puritan analyzes a failure in American culture. The life of Oliver Alden illustrates a serious but ineffectual attempt by sensitive young American intellectuals of the early twentieth century to provide a culture commensurate with the achievements of a mechanized society. Possessing the legacy of puritanism themselves, they were dissatisfied with its precipitant, the genteel tradition. But the conditions of that legacy prevented them from uniting with the vital American Will and redirecting that Will from preoccupation with the control of matter to reflection on the consequences of its control. In a ''mechanized democracy'' content with its physical successes, there was no function for young intellectuals who inherited the ''agonized conscience'' of their forebears. Santayana saw the atavistic puritan as a tragic figure—full of noble intentions but lacking the vigor to effect them.

James C. Ballowe. *American Quarterly*. Summer, 1966. p. 132

The profession of essentialist critic or literary psychologist suited Santayana in a two-fold way. Aesthetically and poetically it enabled him to find beauty in those high contemplative moments in which, as he says in ''A General Confession,'' he felt life to be ''truly vital when routine gives place to intuition, and experience is synthesized and brought before the spirit in its sweep and truth.'' But these were but momentary transports in the act of thinking. Seldom did they obscure his vision of ''unvarnished truths,'' the most pertinent to him being that the liberal age into which he was born ''flowed contentedly towards intellectual dissolution and anarchy.'' For Santayana was naturally and intellectually alienated from the society in which he lived. Doubtless this alienation makes the modulation in the tone and theory of his criticism. But he does not quarrel as a malcontent and the criticism is not intended to be discordant. It is his capacity to remain aloof from and yet understand—even to identify with—those dominations and powers he knew in Western civilization that characterizes his criticism as the work of a sympathetic literary psychologist.

James Ballowe. *The Dalhousie Review*. Summer, 1970. p. 159

Santayana's special role in American intellectual life was to be a poet and philosophical materialist in a time and place when that seemed like a contradiction in terms. He was the most cultivated and literate American philosopher of his time but he boldly spurned belief in God, in immortality, or in final causes; he thought that all causal explanation is physical in nature; and he held with David Hume that there are only two kinds of truths, those established by experience and those established by the analysis of intent or meaning. Although he occasionally made exceedingly penetrating forays into technical philosophy, his accomplishments in that area leave much to be desired. Late in his life he became more and more preoccupied with espousing and defending his rather elaborate doctrine of essences, but in my opinion that is not a very important contribution to the history of American philosophy. Santayana would not have been altogether flattered to hear himself likened to Emerson—we have seen that he believed that Emerson was ''not primarily a philosopher but a Puritan mystic with a poetic fancy and a gift for observation and epigram''—but it is Emerson who comes to my mind when I try to summarize Santayana's position in American philosophy. If Emerson was the sage of American idealism who had a poetic fancy and a gift for observation and epigram, then Santayana was the similarly endowed sage of American materialism.

Morton White. *Science and Sentiment in America* (Oxford—N.Y.). 1972. p. 241

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SAROYAN, William (1908–1981)

Mr. Saroyan is excited, eager, clever, honestly introspective, . . . narcissistic, wistful, humane, tender and the very reverse of naïve while affecting naïveté. He is an original. I see no traceable influence upon him except that of Sherwood Anderson, the untutored, homely honesty of whose early writings Mr. Saroyan has apparently absorbed. . . . There is evidence . . . that a new, refreshing, and interesting talent, is in the first experimental stages of creation. . . . It is an apollonian and eager talent, entertaining us and leaving us expectant.

Burton Rascoe. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Oct. 21, 1934. p. 9

It is obvious . . . that Saroyan is not what is called ''a good writer''; people who smack their lips over good writing will never come within smacking distance of him. But it's equally obvious that what he's shouting about is not just his bumptious Armenian self but something vital. The rub comes in deciding whether he's a blasphemer or a buffoon. Or, perhaps, neither. . . . A good deal of Whitman's writing was promissory, a great deal of it sheer brag. The professors have mummified him into a literary figure, but he was better than that. He could hardly write his name in their language; but he made his mark. William Saroyan is the same sort of fellow.

T.S. Matthews. *New Republic*. March 18, 1936. p. 172

Saroyan takes you to the bar, and he creates for you there a world which is the way the world would be if it conformed to the feelings instilled by drinks. In a word, he achieves the feat of making and keeping us boozy without the use of alcohol and purely by the action of art. . . . These magical feats are accomplished by the enchantment of Saroyan's temperament, which induces us to take from him a good deal that we should not take from anyone else. With Saroyan the whole thing is the temperament: he hardly ever tries to contrive a machine. The good fairy who was present at his christening thus endowed him with one of the most precious gifts that a literary artist can have, and Saroyan never ceases to explain to us how especially fortunate he is.

Edmund Wilson. *New Republic*. Nov. 18, 1940. p. 697

My Name Is Aram, in its highly original way, has linked itself to one of the most fertile lines of the American literary tradition; while at the same time adding a new element of the utmost importance for an imaginative study of America as America is. It is an Armenian book, charged with the Christianized orientalism of the Armenians, rich in the highly humorous contrasts of their ideal of living in California environment, written with the naïve blend of spirituality and realistic cynicism that one finds in Arabic popular literature. And at the same time it is intensely American. . . . I should vote, indeed, for this story of an Armenian boyhood as the most truly American book of the year.

Henry Seidel Canby. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 28, 1940. p. 5

Someone soon will have to make an analysis of his very personal style, for though one might say of it that it is in the Hemingway tradition, there is something added, or is it taken away? For the art is most definitely one of subtraction, of shearing away the trimmings; it becomes an art of inarticulateness, where the silences say more than the words. . . . The writer, of course, has to fill in the significance of the silences, and that is where the art comes in; and he has to manage the business without your noticing what he is after. Mr. Saroyan knows how to do it.

Bonamy Dobrée. *Spectator*. March 28, 1941. p. 354

He can be charming, he can be vastly amusing, he can be tender and innocent and even sometimes, as if by accident or inspiration, profound, but he can never be quite satisfying. Mr. Saroyan is a complete romantic. His fancifulness, his ecstatic love and admiration for children and even half-wits, his enthusiasm, his delight, his wonder at everything and anything, his faith in the promptings of the heart over those of the head . . . , his conviction that good always drives out sickness and evil and that love conquers all, makes him difficult to argue with. One can only disagree.

Wallace Stegner. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 28, 1943. p. 7

No one in any serious sense believes in him any longer as a major prophet.

Saroyan might well have been one. He arrived on the American literary scene at a time when the public was tired of the destructive and cynical dicta of post-war novelists. He tried to affirm by his puckish humor, his Armenian folk-tales, his fables and his naive emotionalism that nothing mattered in the world except love and being true to yourself. He failed because a depression followed the war and another world war followed the depression. . . . We look today at Saroyan's men and women. . . . We love their primitive honesty, but . . . feel . . . that he is a gifted teller of fairy-tales, or

parables, which have little relation to a world faced with continual revolution, starvation, and the threat of another war.

Harrison Smith. *Saturday Review*. June 1, 1946. pp. 7–8

At best Saroyan's fiction gives expression to a philosophy of life which is typically Californian, and also is central to the American transcendental tradition. Unlike the muckraking and socialistic writing of Upton Sinclair, Saroyan has no axe to grind, no gospel to preach. Unlike the naturalistic and sociological fiction of John Steinbeck, Saroyan treats human nature and social injustice without violence and anger. But because he rejects the utopian socialism of Sinclair and the revolutionary violence of Steinbeck, Saroyan does not adopt the pessimistic nihilism of Robinson Jeffers. Rather he reaffirms the old American faith of Emerson and Whitman, who, skeptical both of social reformers and of prophets of doom, proclaimed that the world could be reformed only by reforming the individual, and that this could not be accomplished by social compulsion and physical violence but only by personal freedom and loving tolerance.

Frederic I. Carpenter. *Pacific Spectator*. Winter, 1947. p. 96

Unlike his contemporaries of the late Nineteen Thirties he was given neither to political ranting nor to standardized thinking. In virtually everything he wrote—and he was astonishingly prolific—there was a curious twist of poetry and flashes of genuine humor and imagination. He was almost completely original, seeming to derive from no one at all, and the naïveté that was part of his style contained a winning charm that reflected the pleasant egoism of youth. In addition, he had mastered the integrate art of playwriting from the beginning, a technical feat at which many a fine novelist failed.

Thomas Quinn Curtiss. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 20, 1949. p. 5

Saroyan's concept of goodness, once synonymous with love and gratitude, has become linked with man's tenacity, his will to live. And because this new optimism has a firmer basis in fact and bears out a dramatic element in life, his plays, with all their fantasy, have grown in plausibility. . . . Saroyan's outlook seems to have taken a Shavian turn (and not surprisingly, since Shaw is the one writer he admires). But with one important difference, that Saroyan's faith in the Life Force does not stem from dialectic but from his intuitive feeling of the ultimate meaning of things and events.

Nona Balakian. *New Republic*. Aug. 7, 1950. p. 20

I should say that Saroyan at his best turns out a peculiar literary version of schizophrenia. He writes of a world of strangers and loose ends in which there is no real human contact; it is a world in motion, but the laws of motion are suspended and none of the common patterns persists. Ordinary human feelings, such as hunger and loneliness—the two with which he is most often preoccupied—are presented in a minimum of setting, a social void, in which they are laid bare of the usual association. The attention is concentrated on the isolated action or emotion, which is, in turn, distorted, blown out of its common proportions, by being projected out of context. . . . The distortion heightens the expressive effect, and what comes through . . . represents a perception which is frequently absent in the more crowded ''realistic'' view of the universe. . . . But ''human kind cannot bear very much reality'', and Saroyan can't stand even his own. He is in constant flight from it.

Isaac Rosenfeld. *New Republic*. Dec. 8, 1952

He has not merely, by some august fortuity, happened, chanced or blundered upon a public; he may be said to have charmed one into existence and, by his blend of oddity with persuasive strength, bound his readers to him along his way. . . . Probably since O. Henry nobody has done more than William Saroyan to endear and stabilize the short story, as it were, to guarantee it, to rescue it from its two extremes of possible disrepute—that of being purely esthetic, divorced from life, or purely commercial, divorced from virtue. Also, does not this writer tilt against the deadening uniformity of society, constituting himself the spokesman of the odd man out, the champion of the misfit, the chronicler of the bum? Herein may lie some part of his fascination for those who do not dare deviate, but might wish to. Here, one may infer is a tempting, disturbing, repeated manifestation of innocence, on the part of somebody who has never sold out—the inspired, sometimes flamboyant alien, for whom nothing is yet quite normal in the American scene, and who flutters and dips in Americanism, like a bird in a bird-bath, without being in any way processed by it.

Elizabeth Bowen. *New Republic*. March 9, 1953. p. 18

The story of William Saroyan's amazing success and rapid decline is, in microcosm, a history of American optimism. Saroyan rose in mid-Depression as a bard of the beautiful life, a restorer of faith in man's boundless capacities; he has declined as a troubled pseudo-philosopher, forced to acknowledge man's limitations, yet uncomfortable in the climate of Evil. Indeed, he has come to dwell on Evil in order to deny its reality, reasserting, blatantly and defensively now, the American Dream of Unlimited Possibilities and Inevitable Progress. As a self-styled prophet of a native resurgence—believing in the virtue of self-reliant individualism, in the innate goodness of man and the rightness of his impulses—he has followed the tradition of American transcendentalism. (One critic has quite seriously called Saroyan the creator of ''the new transcendentalism''.) But it need hardly be said that Saroyan is no Emerson, either by temperament or by talent. The extent to which his later work has failed reflects, in one sense, the inadequacy of his equipment for the task he set himself. Yet it is also true that Saroyan is the representative American of the mid-twentieth-century, a man baffled at the failure of the Dream but unwilling to give it up; incapable of facing his dilemma frankly or of articulating it meaningfully.

William J. Fischer. *College English*. March, 1955. p. 336

I wish that more attention had been paid to the vivacity of his affirmations and even his sentimentalities. Saroyan's characters maintained their integrity in a humdrum, practical world that Saroyan took delight in turning topsy-turvy. He was acute enough to know how to confound the workaday, philistine world in such

pieces as *My Heart's in the Highlands*, *The Time of Your Life*, and *The Beautiful People*. A sharp gamin's intelligence played behind the mask of his naïveté and behind the sentimentality of his protestations of brotherly love. In those days Saroyan conquered the commonplace world with a perverse kind of reasoning; he used even his own commonplaces for that purpose. There was a measure of provocative impudence in his gospel of brotherly love which pulled down the mighty. His sentimentality, the element in his work most frequently deplored, sometimes concealed and sometimes flaunted a cutting edge that both his admirers and detractors tended to overlook.

John Gassner. *Theatre at the Crossroads* (Holt). 1960. p. 150

Saroyan is not easy to write about, though his plays are simplicity itself. One cannot speak critically, for instance, of ''Talking With You'' (the first play on the bill) or of ''Across the Board on Tomorrow Morning'' (the second) without seeming sappy. Saroyan writes deliciously, but if you quote his plays you risk making him appear infantile or pretentious—and he is neither.

There *is* naïveté: a naïveté so genuine that it dissolves all other faults—including the embarrassment of a certain awkward sophistication. Saroyan has the spirit of a healthy child, trapped in a world far too chaotic and burdensome for him to be at ease. The ''child'' is really sad, but frisks about, smiles, does little tricks, tries to rouse us to play with him and to reassure us that neither he nor we need feel too bad.

Harold Clurman. *The Nation*. Dec. 2, 1961. p. 460

William Saroyan is probably the freest man in captivity. In fact he is so free it hurts. It hurts the income tax collectors, to whom he still owes $29,000. It hurts Saroyan, who at the age of fifty-two says he hasn't yet picked up the pieces of his life to discover who he is. And it hurts audiences who sit through Saroyan plays with the feeling that each of them could and should be better than it is. . . .

Mr. Saroyan's theory is right, provided the works written with this ease *do* win a horde or even half a horde. The unfortunate fact is that most of his works have not done so, and there seems to be not the slightest chance of ever persuading him either to reorganize and develop or to let someone else reorganize and develop the almost always exciting material he has achieved with such ease.

Henry Hewes. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 23, 1961. p. 30

As a writer Saroyan is a primitive or a natural, and he has always relied on improvisation, often brilliant, to bring off his effects. He is in the tradition of Walt Whitman, with whom he shares, as this book [*Not Dying*] makes clear, a capacity for mysticism and intuitive insight, a warm feeling for the importance of each man and the unity of all men. He is also in the tradition of Mark Twain, with whom he shares, in the spirit of the raconteur, a gay neglect of esthetic form and a desperate need to find material to pad out his manuscript to book—length: *Not Dying* often seems to be a patchwork of irrelevances.

But Whitman and Twain contributed to the tradition of nineteenth-century innocence. Saroyan is a twentieth-century man. His father came to America from Europe, from the Old World to the New, to seek a life of hope that was implicit in the promise of America as nineteenth-century optimism had framed that promise. The largest meaning of this book, for our culture and for the writer, is that it shows Saroyan returning to the Old World and the old life. The journey to the East represents the symbolic abandonment of that optimism and hope. It is the journey toward death.

Chester E. Eisinger. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 31, 1963. p. 46

Saroyan's sense of irony, one of the identifying marks of his early fiction, was compounded of this awareness of death and of an intensified responsiveness to life. It made possible the incongruous but enormously effective metaphor of his title. [*The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze*], and it imparted an indefinable charm to this first book. The Preface closes with the assertion that one must learn to breathe deeply, to taste, and even to sleep with as much zest and responsiveness as one's capacities permit: ''Try to be alive. You will be dead soon enough''. For those who knew the privations of the depression, this plea to make the most of life's simple joys struck a responsive note, and they welcomed this new writer as one who seemed to possess a poet's instinct to express what they themselves had come to feel.

Howard R. Floan. *William Saroyan* (Twayne). 1966. p. 22

Since the early 40s the familiar Saroyan stories have continued to flow, a few novels have appeared and been variously received; and plays both produced and unproduced, with seemingly tireless admonitory prefaces, have been published—all reminders that Saroyan is not only still around but that he is still the same old Saroyan. And, except for the tone of his non-dramatic work, which has grown increasingly solemn and self-conscious, and a few stories written in bile, Saroyan's is indeed the same voice heard in the 30s: there is grief aplenty, but man is a miracle, and merely living confirms life's miraculousness. That which seemed so distinctive to the spirit of the 30s no longer strikes us with the same relevant hopefulness, although such an observation may say more about our times than it does about Saroyan's themes, which were and still are largely prescriptions for ills which the author sees as endemic to no particular time.

James H. Justus in *The Thirties*, ed. Warren French (Everett Edwards). 1967. p. 213

For all the present importance to him of Amiel, Mr. Saroyan's mode of writing and cast of mind have always been deeply American, as American as his situation as the son of an Armenian immigrant would allow him to be and would insist on his being. In his contradictory mixture of melancholy and hopefulness, disaffection and chauvinism, anarchic individualism and common populism, fantasmal absurdity and earthy sentimentality, he is of a various company that may from time to time include Whitman, Twain, Sandburg, Anderson, Williams, Cummings, and Henry Miller. His has been an altogether smaller achievement than that of the greatest of those names, but it has been far from negligible, and he deserves more than his present neglect. He has been one of the last interpreters of an earlier, younger America, in his case the Armenian community of Fresno and its surrounding farmlands fifty years ago, its members homesick for the old country, looking for a better

life in the new. He has portrayed that world generously, humorously, and of course sentimentally. He has also been incessantly committed, not precisely to his art, but to the act of creativity, to a constructive energy which has been his form of celebrating what he has found to be the good fortune of being alive.

TLS: The Times Literary Supplement. July 23, 1971. p. 851

I can think of no other American writer—*no* other writer of serious intent—who has remained boyish throughout his entire career. Mark Twain wrote about childhood through child's eyes, but *The Mysterious Stranger* and *Letters from the Earth* come as no surprise from him, while cognate works would be a surprise from Saroyan.

In the long view, it's a sad career. How much he has poured out and how little sticks. What a fresh, unique, welcome voice he had when he started—those early stories, those first carefree plays. In the mid-30s there were phrases from Saroyan (''cookies, raisins in'') that were catchwords with me and my friends. The voice is still unique: he has had no memorable disciples or even imitators. But mostly it has kept saying the same things, most of which it had already said better.

Well, if he hasn't really grown he is at least much the same. Some of the places in *Places Where I've Done Time* deliver good quick stabs of feeling. (The most ironic section is one in which Saroyan, the perennial boy, can't communicate with his own children.) The book is sometimes gassy, and sometimes gooey, but it's never fake. Honesty is not enough, particularly when it's youthfully lyric honesty, and when a 40-year career is based on it. But the best thing about Saroyan is that he didn't choose to do it that way, he *had* to do it that way, and sometimes—as sometimes in this book—it's lovely.

Stanley Kauffmann. *New Republic*. March 25, 1972. p. 22

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SARTON, May (1912–1995)

A good part of Miss Sarton's poems are love sonnets. . . . To achieve the high polish which these sonnets possess it has been necessary for the poet to employ a good many pre-fabricated emotions, just as the sonnet form itself lends a ready-made gloss to the verse. The result is that the whole performance inevitably calls up Millay *et al*, in their second April moods, and Miss Sarton's sonnets seem to stem from literary rather than personal emotions. . . . The finest piece of work in every way is a lyric in ten fluid parts, ''She Shall Be Called Woman.'' This poem seems to me to reveal that secret access that women have into the core of their sensations and feelings. And it is certainly from that heightened consciousness that their best and unique work always comes. It is to be hoped that Miss Sarton's future writing will take its departure from this point.

Sherman Conrad. *Poetry*. July, 1937. pp. 229–31

Only a poet and, perhaps, only a young poet could have written this beautiful and distinguished first novel (*The Single Hound*). In it May Sarton has created a little world of some half dozen people and she has given them rich, bountiful life, not only pregnant with meaning for this present instant of time in which she has placed them, but deeply rooted in that humanity which is ageless. . . . Here, as in her poems, May Sarton's aim is to arrive at what she calls ''transparency.'' She has, also, in *The Single Hound* exemplified a way of life and enunciated a literary creed.

Jane Spence Southron. *New York Times Book Section*. March 20, 1938. p. 6

Done with something of the eighteenth-century care for the sedate, unemotional line, her poems suggest the even lawns and precise gardens of the time of Queen Anne and the first of the Georges, before the turbulence of the romantic movement rushed in from the left to bewilder and overturn a strictly ordered world. Nevertheless, there is at the same time more emotion beneath the surface of Miss Sarton's dignified verses than was common in eighteenth-century poetry. The result of this slightly paradoxical combination is interesting. Let one try to visualize a butterfly imprisoned within a cake of ice and one will have a fairly good parallel to the poems.

Percy Hutchison. *New York Times Book Section*. March 5, 1939. p. 5

May Sarton is an artist of remarkable powers. She is one of those rare poets who, in making use of simple combinations of words—and of the words of our common speech at that—has achieved a vocabulary and style as distinctly her own as any poet now

writing. . . . She has drawn upon the whole stream of English literature to develop her subtle cadences and delicate, all-but-inaudible rhythms. . . . One wonders at the extreme simplicity of her statement (for such simplicity needs courage), and the more one wonders the more one is aware of the great gifts set forth. . . . Whatever life-images Miss Sarton chooses to turn into poetry become poetry. Her work is worth the admiring attention of everyone who considers himself a reader.

Martha Bacon. *Saturday Review*. April 17, 1948. p. 50

I suspect that what has always been considered the admirable simplicity of May Sarton's poetry is something more than that. . . . She demonstrates a great range of feeling and subject, an unusual strength in describing what comes before her eyes and touches her heart. Whether she speaks of zinnias or swans or the irradiating light of Provence, she testifies to a deep experience of reality which far surpasses purely speculative philosophy. . . . Her words . . . are never deadened by artifice or prose. The ease with which images in her poetry transpose notions provides the notions or the abstractions with their own firmness and poetic vigor.

Wallace Fowlie. *New Republic*. Dec. 14, 1953. p. 19

Hinged on irony, *Faithful Are the Wounds* swings open onto tragedy. The movement of the book is, in its classical climbing and clearing shape, toward light and truth. It has none of that intellectual wasp sting that such a subject might afford itself. It is a quiet and ever-deepening penetration into the roiled darknesses of uncommitted passion, of jelled fervors in the cold air of doubt; it touches that reserve that jails the modern conscience in its own dubious safety from which it can utter only the cry of ''Why can't love help?''. . . . Miss Sarton's method, even as that of her men and women who crave the light of day against self-inflicted darkness, is to turn to light what is shadowed, raise to the level of the common ground what is half-buried underground.

William Goyen. *New York Times Book Section*. March 13, 1955. p. 6

In her new novel, *Faithful Are the Wounds*, May Sarton moves from the world of purely personal relationships, brought to glowing life and examined in minute detail, to one of the most violently burning public questions of our day, democratic dissent in a time of national crisis. Yet the change is much less than the statement implies. . . . Once again the kaleidoscope of feeling is turning throughout and once again the reader feels himself constantly in the presence of a master of English fiction. There is a maturity here, a command, command of the language first of all, and of the situation, the character, the change and growth, that make one terribly impatient with much that the American novel is now bringing forth.

Frank Getlein. *Commonweal*. April 8, 1955. p. 19

The Birth of a Grandfather is not a ''woman's novel,'' a lending library favorite; it is much too precisely observed, truly told and serious minded. But it is limited to much the same material as these contrivances, the feminine world of family and home. What is worse, the delineation of its male characters is weakened by what may well be a conscientious scruple; a refusal (since one is not male) to try to see these characters in male terms, because such as effort would involve invention almost in the sense of falsification.

For a novelist as finely observant, as capable, as Miss Sarton, such scruples are nonsense.

Elizabeth Janeway. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 8, 1957. p. 4

The author has long considered the difficulty of achieving personal harmony through human relationships. All her books, and much of her poetry, have shown preoccupation with the growth of personality, the ability or lack of it to communicate love, or, for that matter, to feel it in the first place, the acceptance of birth and death as cyclical parts of man's continuity. These are primary concerns, usually wrapped in the thunderclouds of *Sturm and Drang*. But Miss Sarton's style is quiet, her dialogue true and sure. She describes no scene ''folkloristically'' yet each has abundant authentic detail. And her situations, though low-keyed, are basic, alive with their own kind of tension, drama, and suspense.

Frances Keene. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 14, 1957. p. 50

May Sarton's *In Time Like Air* is, to a poet at least, a book to carry in the pocket and reread with delight, the sort in which a second reading will disclose things undiscovered at first. What is the difference between this book and run-of-the-mill verse? It is partly a matter of personality, partly, perhaps, a matter of intellectual heritage, in no small degree a matter of the best kind of virtuosity. In Miss Sarton's writing there is passion, discretion, grief, joy, music and the intimation of delight. What gives her work its great distinction is its willingness to achieve its aims by simplicity when simplicity serves best and by elaboration when elaboration is proper. . . . Miss Sarton's extraordinary gift is her ability to make the actualities of physical existence and motion serve as the imaginative metaphor pointing to metaphysical reality.

Raymond Holden. *New York Times Book Section*. Dec. 22, 1957. p. 4

In *I Knew a Phoenix*, May Sarton, poet and novelist, recreates with a commingling of tenderness and reserve, the people who shaped her as she is. Autobiographical in the sense that in each of its chapters the book is concerned with either Miss Sarton's parents, her teachers, or her friends, it is not so much about herself as it is a mirror to refract the very special lights that lit her path to maturity. Because the kind and quality of her experience, rare at any time or in any country, is becoming rarer still in the political and commercial anonymity now threatening to engulf us, this modest story of a highly individual education has a nostalgic poignance all its own.

Virgilia Peterson. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. April 26, 1959. p. 3

''A small, accurate talent, exploited to the limit, let us be quite clear about *that*!'' says F. Hilary Stevens, the seventy-year-old poet who is the heroine of poet May Sarton's latest book [*Mrs. Stevens Hears*

the Mermaids Singing]. And perhaps Mrs. Stevens's definition of her own gift is the best description of her creator's as well. . . .

Miss Sarton's writing is sensitive to the point of fussiness, and totally without humor. The lack of this saving grace inevitably leads her into pitfalls of inadvertent hilarity. And there is something embarrassing about her probing of Art, as there is in the intimate obstetrical confidences of a comparative stranger. It is not that either subject is intrinsically embarrassing; but the acute self-consciousness often foundering in archness, the solemn conviction that here is revelation, make the listener uncomfortable.

Ruth L. Brown. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 23, 1965. p. 68

May Sarton's *A Private Mythology* is remarkable for the savage brilliance of its poems about India, different in style from her previous work. She was offended by India; she was unprepared for it, and her response has the power of resentment and struggle. She was perhaps over-prepared for Greece and Japan; her poems about those countries have the quality of notes thought out in advance and carefully composed. . . .

Aside from the travel series, there is a resistant Lazarus, a first stanza to the Rilkean angels in the opening poem, country scenes of mowing and of pastoral Provence, and two important elegies, which have the wrathful commitment of her India poems: for a fiery child, and one of great power for a psychiatrist. Miss Sarton has moved to a new phase of sensibility with these elegies and the India poems. Considering the established range of abilities in this poet, this is a situation of the utmost promise.

Joseph Bennett. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 13, 1966. p. 6

The style [of *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing*], unguarded by irony (''It was as if she and the boy were standing in a great cleared place''); the set-up situations (the interview forces Hilary to *express* her beliefs, the guidance she gives a young apprentice tempted by homosexuality forces her to *examine* her beliefs, the interviewers demonstrate male and female sensibilities); the stagey names (Sirenica, Mar, Adrian), conversations and directions (people ''rush out of the house,'' their eyes ''twinkle,'' they ''utter'' and ''mutter'' such things as ''Drat the boy!'' or ''Trapped by life!'') make this novel wholly vulnerable. And yet . . . and yet it is moving, it tells the truth, if not convincingly about art, which may require more astringent expression, then at least about love, with a kind of brave disregard for the critical eye. And the critical eye is finally blinded by an integrity that shines out of the book.

Mona Van Duyn. *Poetry*. Feb., 1967. p. 333

There are many brief evocations of an actual rural world [in *A Durable Fire*], but it is, every bit of it, so *used* and directed, that what is concrete in it melts and re-freezes as yet another impenetrable abstraction. So, while this kind of poetry appears superficially to work by equivalencies of fact with emotion, nothing in the end has its own real life to begin from: it is all props on which, we are assured, great inner consequences lean. Looking for perceptions of observed nature, all I can find is how they are, one by one, turned immediately to the grasping uses of Human Nature. . . .

May Sarton's poems to her psychiatrist, so obviously intense in gratitude and love, stand as the absolute embodiment of the poet's failure to transform her life into (or should I say, in) poetry: they admit nothing actual—a reticence anyone deserves—but neither do they communicate any convincing reasons for their intensity; mean reality has been replaced by earnest pieties that describe ''The Action of Therapy.''

Rosellen Brown. *Parnassus*. Spring–Summer, 1973. pp. 49–50

A dialogue of undiminished intensity has been carried on in Sarton's work for thirty-seven years. Its greatest daring, the source of its greatest moral energy, has been openness: to experience, pain, the perils of passion, loneliness, and truthtelling. This has inevitably been the dialogue of an isolated human being, a self-dialogue, recognizable certainly to housewives, desperate in loneliness and devoid of the solitude Sarton has created.

Sarton has not avoided the dangers inherent in such an openness and such a dialogue: the appearance of self-indulgence, self-pity. These dangers might as well be mentioned in their harshest form, together with her other sin: a certain laxity of style, a tendency to seize the first metaphor to hand, rather than search out the one, perfect phrase. In the intensity of her exploration, Sarton has not eschewed the assistance of the familiar metaphor, nor always observed the niceties of point of view.

Carolyn G. Heilbrun. Introduction to *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing* by May Sarton (Norton). 1974. p. xii

May Sarton has designed her *Collected Poems* with a lifelong process in view. Her aim has been to reveal the development of a career and of a person, because the whole of her career is greater than the sum of its stages, despite the brilliance of many individual achievements. She writes of the feminine condition, of art, love, landscape, travel, and the search for a lasting home, and of the inexplicable violence that can wreck even the mildest people. Her tone is often gently didactic. The largeness of her themes makes them worth returning to again and again; her didactic tone helps gives her poetry its distinctiveness, for very few poets of this age seem willing to be purposeful about poetry's power to instruct.

Henry Taylor. *Hollins Critic*. June, 1974. p. 2

Often [Sarton] gives her work (and thus provides us, conveniently with) unusually indicative titles: *Kinds of Love* (1970) or the poetic account of love, aging and her time in psychiatry, *A Durable Fire* (1972). *Journal of a Solitude*, in the same year, advances her conviction that it is not in relationships but in maintaining one's aloneness that a creative woman realizes herself. And *The Small Room* (1961), the book that appealed especially to academic women (I was one then) because it raised (but never tried to solve) the question of how it was possible to be productive, scholarly, creative and yet lead the life women were ''destined'' for.

As a longtime reader of hers I want to join the celebration because I admire the *nature* of her career—serene-seeming despite ''the anguish of my life . . . its rages''; her declared traumas of bisexual love, breakdown, conflict; her increasing productivity (to my mind her book published last summer, *As We Are Now* is one of

her finest achievements), everything she has written entirely professional, solid yet sensitive. As a woman I feel a closeness to her message, an alliance with her lifelong, solitary control.

Doris Grumbach. *New Republic*. June 8, 1974. p. 31

Sarton's work is filled with the longing to touch someone else, and the simultaneous distaste for the unsatisfactory nature of human relations. Art becomes her substitute for human experience, a way of talking about life, not living it. Even art is ''ultimately'' unsatisfactory. Not only do the critics fail to applaud one enough, or at the right time, or for the right reasons, but for the sterile, lonely, childless woman, the work of art itself is only a poor substitute. The childless woman, and particularly the homosexual woman, does not realize that children, like poems, are never what one thought they would be when one created them. . . .

Much of Sarton's work is conceived with the journey as a metaphor for life, and it is a mark of Sarton's new maturity that she faults the journey contained in *Crucial Conversations*. . . .

For most of her central characters, the pain of love, the price, is not worth the joy. As a result, it is hard to care what happens to her characters. All of them have a bloodless quality. They must choose between head and heart, but their heads are not screwed on very straight and their hearts seem shriveled. Sarton's women are like so many ''modern'' women—too easily distracted yet with just enough talent to make them fretful and dissatisfied with themselves and their lives with others. . . . Too concerned with the function of her art for herself, she never asks what the function of her art is for the reader. Sarton's journals, poems, and novels all suffer from this sense of finding one's own center, but never communicating ''these gifts'' to her audience. If art is her surrogate lover, it betrays, as does the lover, because of the excess of her great expectations. That excess is directly connected to her unwillingness or inability to be ''engaged'' with her characters, or to have them ''engaged'' with one another.

We close her books with a sense of promise undelivered. Despite the fact that Sarton herself is not enamored of the novel, *Crucial Conversations* is a step forward, though only a step. The lives of Reed, Poppy, and Philip, or, more accurately, their conversations about their lives, may mark the beginning of a new stage in Sarton's development, where she no longer mistakes the signposts for the journey, and moves forward in her explorations of and commitment to human relationships.

Nancy Yanes Hoffman. *Southwest Review*. Summer, 1977. pp. 259, 263, 266–67

Ostensibly a novel about dying, *A Reckoning* is actually about coming to terms with one's own life. May Sarton, a prolific writer of poetry, memoirs, and fiction, has published over 30 books in the last four decades. *A Reckoning* is her 16th novel and like much of her previous work, it reflects the inner life and passion of a woman, the private life revealed in all its intensity.

The heroine is a 60-year-old widow, Laura Spelman, who is told abruptly on page one that she has inoperable lung cancer. In this moment of crisis, Laura experiences a sudden clarity of vision: unafraid of death, but not of dying, she wants to ''do it well'' her own way. Laura faces death gracefully but her impassioned plea is less for dying well than for living honestly. . . .

Drawing deeper into an inner world of illness and reminiscence, Laura willingly ''lets go her identity as a person in the world'' and becomes ''a listener to music, a watcher of light on the walls.'' Miss Sarton handles this transition well; it allows her to see the world from only Laura's perspective. This is Miss Sarton more as poet than as novelist, a single voice she is obviously most comfortable with. . . .

Cancer and homosexuality are, admittedly, difficult subjects to write well about; until recently, they were, for different reasons, unmentionable as well. But this novel does not deal effectively with either; it is marred by Miss Sarton's style, which tends toward the ready cliché and occasionally teeters on the edge of sentimentality. Miss Sarton is best at evoking the private sensibility of one person. But in *A Reckoning*, where separate voices and the fabric of other lives are necessary to create a world outside the main character, this kind of interior singularity approaches solipsism.

Lore Dickstein. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 12, 1978, p. 14

Sarton confronts . . . the inhumanity of American society toward the elderly and imagines the old as embattled, giving up their lives at the same time as they are fighting for them. The ideal of graceful aging yields to guerrilla warfare. In *As We Are Now*, Sarton's most powerful novel, a frail, single woman in her seventies struggles against the repressive structure of the nursing home and asserts the value of the total human being over the total institution. . . .

Sarton's portrayal of old age is a welcome departure from the Western literary tradition of gerontophobia—fear of aging and disgust for the elderly—particularly since over the centuries the most vicious satire of the elderly has been leveled at female characters. From Sarton's first novel *The Single Hound* (1938), whose heroine is an elderly Belgian poet, to *Kinds of Love* (1970), a passionate encomium to old age, her literary world has been populated with ideal portraits of aging characters and allusions to elderly persons—especially women, and often single women—whom she admires. Aging with grace and dignity has been a persistent, even obsessive theme in her work. . . .

The new complexity of Sarton's vision of old age is reflected in the quality of her writing. *As We Are Now* has a hardness to it that is lacking in her previous fiction, which is basically dominated by aphorism, not power or drama. . . . And Sarton has carried this new understanding of the tragedies of old age into her writing since then. As we have seen, Sarton's vision of old age in her earlier work is unrelievedly romantic. But her recent writing is more cautious and more cognizant of the real physical and mental disabilities of old age in general and of the vulnerability of elderly women in particular.

Kathleen Woodward. In *Gender and Literary Voice*, ed. Janet Todd (Holmes and Meier, 1980), pp. 109, 124

Seldom in our time has a novelist so consistently and courageously defended human freedom against the historic patterns of violence and degradation as has May Sarton. Hardly a form of violence, from physical to psychological, escapes her concern. Stalinism, Communism, Fascism, racism, Nazi-ism, censorship, conscription, laws denying freedom to homosexuals, intellectuals, women, loom large in her work. Since she knows only too well that the power of

the sword and the war machine have failed to achieve the freedoms for which each war was presumably fought, she uses the power of her pen to make a series of convincing arguments for the rights of individuals against repressive institutions and laws which deny human freedom. Hers is a rage for justice, for political and social change, and for international peace.

Sarton is concerned lest in failing to challenge the history of past and present tyrannies we may be condemned to repeat them on an ever more deadly scale in a not too distant future. Political, social, and psychological violence symbolize the forces of darkness against which her heroes and heroines test their moral fibre. By their resistance, passive as it is at times, their personal acts of refusal to serve, like civil disobedience itself, is the price conscience pays for its victory in seeming defeat.

Mary Bryan. In *May Sarton: Woman and Poet*, ed. Constance Hunting (National Poetry Foundation, 1982), p. 133

May Sarton is a secular writer, but she draws freely upon a Christian tradition which has long contemplated the psychology of spiritual growth, the power to accept or to enact a change in one's life for one's inherent moral betterment. In both the Christian tradition and May Sarton's novels, this self-examination essential for growth can never occur productively in an intellectual vacuum of self-adoration but only against an awareness of genuine virtue. Using the language of scripture and liturgy, Sarton attempts to identify that indefinable and indispensable quality of virtue within the particular experiences of the characters in her novels, and presses new meanings both from the traditional emblems of language and from the experiences themselves.

Sarton finds elements of virtue in nature imagery, particularly in her close study of the plants and birds of New England. She treats these natural objects with observant realism, introducing religious terminology only as a common body of images to expose the mind's pondering these things. In *Kinds of Love* (1970) Jane Tuttle receives a dead owl as a love offering from the troubled Nick Comstock: she examines the bird first scientifically, using a reference book to distinguish the Barred *Owl* from a Great Gray, then mythically—'''Athene's bird,' Jane murmured. 'You can see why the owl has haunted men'''—and at last religiously—''She laid a hand gently on the incredible softness of the head, as if to bless it.'' Repeatedly Sarton's characters discover virtue in natural objects by contemplating them with this wholly attentive, admiring respect for the things as they are. . . .

May Sarton also redefines the traditional Christian role of the ministry in her novels of the seventies. Not ordination but response to human need determines a man's role as a minister—or more often, a woman's role. The author makes grave demands of her clergy; they are not mere counselors or administrators but divine comforters, saviors, agents of God. In *As We Are Now* Caro Spenser, left to die in a rest home, imagines a temporary housekeeper, Anna Close, as a ''heavenly nurse [who has] come to be with me.'' Anna comes when Caro is most desperate for the palpable reassurance of a physical human presence. . . .

Although all of Ms. Sarton's seventies' novels are studies of this effort toward intellectual and moral growth, *Crucial Conversations* is the most bitter in its denunciation of society as a stifler of spiritual development. . . .

Christian humility, particularly the tradition of womanly tact, gains a new definition through May Sarton's novels. As the author perceives a widening gap between Christian virtue and public morality, she begins to define anger as a necessary part of virtuous behavior. More and more insistently as these novels develop through the seventies their author demands that her characters turn their moral growth into decisive actions. The self-losing, self-discovering surrender to natural forces and to human affection in *Kinds of Love* (1970) turns to a rebellious insistence on one's own moral integrity by *Crucial Conversations* (1975). Sarton does not use the language of scripture and liturgy as a private code or as a general symbol for goodness but as a means to explore self-conscious psychological experience. She always tests the language in a dramatic situation. This is her art: her novels are not treatises on morals or abstract studies of virtue but a vital working out of the consequences of personal moral decisions in the conscious inquiring minds of their characters.

Gayle Gaskill. In *May Sarton: Woman and Poet*, ed. Constance Hunting (National Poetry Foundation. 1982). pp. 157, 159, 162–63

While [Louise] Bogan praised several poems [in *The Land of Silence*] generously, ''the book is *too long!*'' she admonished. ''Prune! Never publish more than 40 poems at a time!'' In contrast to Bogan's perfectionism, the severe self-limitation that ended in silence, as it did for many women poets, [May] Sarton tended to be prodigal, to free her tongue to speak of anything that might concern her, even if the results were not invariably up to her highest standard. . . .

May Sarton was deeply grateful for Bogan's critical attention, but was gradually obliged to realize that her own tendencies were in the opposite direction, toward freedom and expansiveness, emotional candor rather than self-veiling. Sarton used the word *transparency* to describe the effect she wished to obtain. Bogan obviously did not feel she could help Sarton in a development so contrary to her own assumptions about women, but was willing to stand benignly by and encourage her to follow her own chosen path. One sees May Sarton trying, out of admiration and affection, to apply Bogan's pronouncements to herself. But it only increased the self-doubt and frustration against which she was battling. It was a matter of bitter disappointment to Sarton that over the years Louise Bogan, in her powerful position as poetry editor for *The New Yorker*, never reviewed her work, except for brief mention. . . .

May Sarton's feeling of ''being herself'' upon meeting Louise Bogan resulted from the sudden focus of all her own strivings in this woman of achievement. Sarton's love was an offering of homage, and she hoped for love in return, the kind of love that circulates back to infuse the admirer with confidence and encouragement. ''When I say I love you,'' Sarton told Bogan, ''I am saying that I love poetry.''. . .

It was difficult for Louise Bogan to either understand or accept May Sarton's offering of love, for her own experience had convinced her that love only trapped two people in pain. Sarton had gently to explain, first of all, that ''to confuse such love with sex is perhaps fatal, at least very disturbing.'' Bogan, with her Catholic background, her psychiatric conditioning, and the memory of her mother's infidelities, tended to subsume all emotional attraction between people in the heterosexual pattern. Sarton saw such an equation as typical of male nature, not female. In spite of the broad-mindedness on which she prided herself, Bogan had at times expressed distaste for deviation. Reflecting the gender polarization

so firmly fixed in her outlook, she explained to Sarton that she felt love required the ''other,'' the difference from oneself, in order to attain harmony or completeness (though in her own case it had only produced conflict). Sarton readily conceded the truth of this, but knew that there was another dimension of self-fulfillment which required union with likeness. Without it, there was a danger of self-rejection. Sarton felt that Bogan's shrinking from love was a kind of denial of her own genius, of her own possibilities. . . .

May Sarton seemed to baffle [Bogan] by not differentiating between love and friendship and not identifying love with sex. Ritualized gender relations, of aggression and submission, Sarton tried to explain, do not apply to love between women. . . .

In spite of differences so fundamental, so directly relevant to the creativity of each, Louise Bogan and May Sarton enjoyed a surprisingly successful friendship over nearly two decades, collaborating on translations from Verlaine, talking, writing, visiting often. . . . Survival as artists was more important in the end than an insistence on differences.

Nevertheless, there was a tragic aspect that could be neither overlooked nor exorcised: Bogan's failure to give Sarton the kind of professional encouragement and support she sought during years of self-doubt and the struggle to establish herself. Bogan had only to say a word, to give a nod; but she would not. . . . It seems that Bogan could not separate the demon of emotion she saw in Sarton from Sarton's work; to approve or promote her poetry would be to yield to the feared enemy. But in this stubborn refusal, or incapacity, Bogan unintentionally subverted the female cause. The withholding of love—negating the female bonding that nourishes female creativity—is the ultimate undermining of the creative woman's confidence. When love is not given as it can be, self-esteem is irreparably damaged and the artist suffers a lifelong, unhealing wound. Louise Bogan had, in the blind way of most human beings, re-created with May Sarton the tragedy of separation from her own mother rather than the empowering union they both required.

The unsettled question . . . comes to rest here, in a friendship. How is woman's creative will to be freed? Louise Bogan and May Sarton presented to one another the two alternative answers emerging in their time: to accept women's defensive position and work within the lines of power laid down by men; or to find a new empowerment in a woman-centered vision. The urgency of the question held them together in spite of their differing answers.

William Drake. *The First Wave: Women Poets in America 1915–1945* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 260–61, 262, 264–65

Of the images women chose to express their newly discovered sense of self, none is more striking for its ubiquitousness in the early years of the women's movement than the figure of Medusa. In a radical revision of traditional archetypes, Medusa, the angry or unangelic underside of the self, becomes the muse. In her darkness and rage, as May Sarton writes, these poets now found a source of life. Like [Emily] Dickinson's gun, but without the gun's intractable masculine association, Medusa became the passionate symbol for the women poets' liberated self. . . .

In taking Medusa for their muse, women poets of the past two decades are owning themselves, that is, they are owning those aspects of their being that their families and society have invalidated by treating such qualities as unfeminine and unacceptable. And in repossessing these aspects of themselves they are repossessing the creative as well as the destructive energies to which they give rise. . . .

The sequence of anger followed by the emergence of an integrated and individuated self . . . lies at the core of . . . poems by Sarton . . . and is duplicated again and again in the poetry women have written over the past two decades. In these poems witch or Medusa-type figures appear with almost astonishing regularity. In order to remember themselves, women have, it seems, embarked on a quest for figures of empowerment with whom they could identify. Not just gorgons and witches, but amazons, warriors, mother-goddesses, harpies, furies, maenads, and bacchantes crowd their work, taking their place alongside Dickinson's Queen, [Sylvia] Plath's winged lioness, and [Adrienne] Rich's visionary androgyne and shamaness, as figures into whom women's rage and their need for healthy self-assertion could be poured.

Paula Bennett. *My Life as a Loaded Gun: Dickinson, Plath, Rich, and Female Creativity* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Pr., 1990), pp. 245–46, and 255–56

May Sarton, poet, novelist, and the strongest of individualists, died on Sunday at the York Hospital in York, Maine, the town in which she had lived for many years. She was a stoical figure in American culture, writing about love, solitude, and the search for self-knowledge. . . .

During a remarkably prolific career that stretched from early sonnets published in 1929 in *Poetry* magazine to *Coming into Eighty*, her latest collection of poems, in 1994, Ms. Sarton persistently followed her own path and was nurtured by an inner lyricism. She wrote more than 20 books of fiction and many works of nonfiction, including autobiographies and journals, a play and several screenplays. She was best known and most highly regarded as a poet.

Extremely popular on college campuses, she became a heroine to feminists. In 1965, when she revealed that she was a lesbian, she said she lost two jobs as a result. But as with so much in her life, she had no regrets. . . .

For Ms. Sarton, poetry was her life's work. As she said: ''When you're a poet, you're a poet first. When it comes, it's like an angel.'' Although she never had the full recognition attained by many of her peers . . . her work generally received favorable reviews and she had a loyal readership.

Mel Gussow. *New York Times Book Section*. July 18, 1995. p. B7

Having published a substantial body of novels and poetry, with a limited number of readers to show for it, Sarton finally found her audience in her late fifties, when she published *Plant Dreaming Deep* (1980), a memoir of her years living alone in a Vermont village. Oddly enough, an aspect of Sarton's musings that interested readers most was her evocation of the difficulties of being a woman and a writer. . . .

It was Sarton's ''frankness,'' according to [her biographer] Margot Peters [*May Sarton*, 1997], that won her ''more fans than perhaps any other contemporary American woman writer.'' Describing the kind of unquestioning adulation the writer inspired in her admirers (who ran the gamut from gardeners to feminists), Ms.

Peters offers up an exchange that took place during a talk at a bookshop in the 1970s. ''Your journals seem so open,'' a young woman declared. ''Have you always been that honest?'' ''No. It takes time to grow into honesty,'' the sage replied.

May Sarton was only at the beginning of her excursions into honesty, however, *Plant Dreaming Deep* was followed by *Journal of a Solitude*, which in its turn was followed by yet another solitary musing in a different setting (now Maine), followed by self-scrutinies entitled *Recovery*, *At Seventy*, *After the Stroke*, *Endgame*, *Encore*, and finally, the posthumous *At Eighty-two*. Some readers complained of the too-muchness of it all, but many more hung on every word, writing to Sarton gleefully that ''you have changed my life'' or ''you helped my mother die.''

Angeline Goreau. *New York Times Book Review*. April 6, 1997, p. 9

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SCHISGAL, Murray (1926–)

Mr. Schisgal manifests an original talent. His writing lacks distinction and his design still wants concision. But he has humor, and he has found a way of saying certain things, bitter or painful in other dramatists, which in *The Tiger* and *The Typists* are presented with a quizzical playfulness that is wholly engaging.

Mr. Schisgal's theme is by now the universal one of loneliness and alienation. . . . The ''gimmick''—if you wish to call it that—in the second and longer of the two plays, *The Typists*, consists in showing us a man and a woman, typists in a mercantile office, as though their lifetime were compressed into a single day. . . . But the play has no expressionistic stress; it is obliquely sad with a suppressed tenderness.

Harold Clurman. *The Nation*. Feb. 23, 1963. pp. 166–7

One thing, at least, becomes more and more clear: how right Kenneth Tynan is in his contention that if you took the Jews away from the Broadway scene, there would be no comedy left. I know, I know, but I am not resigned. . . . So it is that praise must be given Murray Schisgal for his two short plays, *The Typists* and *The Tiger*, even though the first of these does not come off at all, and the second weakens as it goes along. But Mr. Schisgal has made the decent attempt to explore the platitudes and idiosyncrasies that underlie the business of living, irrespective of clique or clan. He has found the commonplaces that are common to all, and the quirks that can crop up anywhere just as easily as somewhere.

John Simon. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1963. p. 271

In Murray Schisgal's merry new lampoon of the banal idiocies that attend love—or ''luv,'' as he calls it—he has provided a challenging scenario for three inventive performers. The action of *Luv* is simple. A character named Milt sees a man about to jump off the Brooklyn Bridge. Since this is a common occurrence, he has almost passed by when he recognizes the man as Harry, a college classmate he hasn't seen in fifteen years. The traditional glad hand is in order, and it is only coincidental that their greeting requires a delay in Harry's suicide plans. Thus it is that the Schisgalian dialectic is established. We are in a comic world in which conventional responses and clichéd superficialities have their own logic and compelling force. Devastating events are to be accepted lightly as a matter of course, but trivial annoyances can evoke furious passion. . . .

That personal style is, I suspect, a reflection of Mr. Schisgal's daily irritation with the lack of connection between modern man's impulses and his means of exercising them. Neither in his Off-Broadway success of *The Tiger* and *The Typist* nor in his present Broadway hit does this lead to anything as poetic or profound as one finds in Ionesco. But it does lead to adventurous comic escapades that spring honestly and convincingly from one city-dweller's observation of an existence in which everyone seems to be voluntarily incarcerated on the wrong subway train.

Henry Hewes. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 28, 1964. p. 29

Schisgal, at present, is at an interesting (for us) and (for him) a doubtless strange and exciting moment in his career. He is no young puppy. He is not *old*, to be sure. Who thinks anyone under 57 is *old?* But he is 37, and, at 37, he stands on the threshold of what could very well be a most considerable and significant career in the American theatre. And if that sounds portentous in print, consider how it must seem to Schisgal, who has to do the threshold-standing. To date, there is no doubt that he has done some very good work. *Luv*, in fact, is very likely a ''classic,'' a funny *serious* play which says more about Love, Money, Sex Guilt, Freud—the whole great panoply of (if you will pardon the expression) The Modern Predicament—than the last 92 pretentious, complacent, rhetorical Modern Dramas rolled into one. And how far can he go? Well, it would be downright silly to try to say. Schisgal is a very genuine

talent, a serious man. He will go as far as he can, and nobody, not even he, can know how far that really is.

M.J. Arlen. Introduction to *Fragments, Windows and Other Plays* by Murray Schisgal (Coward-McCann) 1965. p. 15

What this is, of course, is not devastating social satire, still less avant-garde theatre; it is plain and simple burlesque or vaudeville. (The fact that the avant-garde may also draw on burlesque is irrelevant: you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him a water buffalo thereby.) Indeed, *Luv* might make a perfectly acceptable fifteen or twenty-minute sketch in a jauntier nightclub or revue, but it is by no means a full-length play. The old burlesque device of repetition by way of a slow comic build-up serves a dual purpose here: it stretches out a mere playlet into the more marketable commodity of a play, and it allows the playwright's essentially commonplace mind to revel in its natural habitat. . . .

One of the troubles is that Schisgal is not quite up to what he is trying to poke fun at. . . . Another and more serious trouble is that the playwright scatters his shots in all directions, in an attempt to puncture whatever he can hit, without committing himself to any point of view. And that, in anything but a piece of unpretentious zaniness, is immoral.

John Simon. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1965. p. 85

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SCHULBERG, Budd (1914–)

What Makes Sammy Run? is brilliantly effective because it is completely of this time, expressing the beliefs and hopes that begin to stand out in this period, marked in it by the threat of complex defeat. The dialogue is a bit freer, less reticent than even that dialogue that shocked the dear innocent early public of Hemingway. The style is unsweated, but colorful. The story is constantly pointed up with incident. . . . It is unquestionably one of the most interesting and promising first novels to appear in several years.

Robert Van Gelder. *New York Times Book Section*. Mar. 30, 1941. p. 6

If you have frequently looked with fascination at the unmistakable lineaments of big business and have tried to solve the mystery of what must have been the living transformation of the individual into the corporation, then you will follow the quest for the answer to the question posed in the title of Mr. Schulberg's book. . . . The book is uneven; the first part is badly written and developed. . . . Toward the end Mr. Schulberg does say what he wants to say, the writing is good, the plot blooms, and the form is there. Hollywood, that junction of theater and audience, is more honestly, amusingly, and instructively covered than in any other book I know.

L. P. Lazarus. *The Nation*. April 19, 1941. p. 477

Budd Schulberg's new book is a hard-boiled successor to his first and tough little novel, *What Makes Sammy Run?* Just as full of heels and no-goods, and as fast, slangy and wisecracking, *The Harder They Fall* is in many ways a much better novel than *Sammy*. . . . Out of the elements of the Carnera story Schulberg has created a brilliant novel—the first of the modern prize ring, I believe, to be a worthy contender for literary honors. . . . Schulberg owes something to Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Jerome Weidman, and the readers of the sports pages also will recognize rhythms of sports columnist Jimmy Cannon. . . . But the final product is a Schulberg original, a switch on the American success story wherein bad boy makes good.

John Horn. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 10, 1947. p. 3

What gives *The Harder They Fall* its impressive quality is the realism and the scientific accuracy of the deadly picture of a sordid business. Schulberg knows the atmosphere, the history and the technique of the ring and the psychology of its fighters, promoters, hangers-on and public. Even the sentimentalism, the sadness and the rare examples of bravery are credible, because the author sees not only the ugliness but the fascination of the racket that is a sport. . . . Schulberg hates the sordidness, cruelty and corruption of the so-called fight game, but he can get as sentimental as the next man about the battered and punch-drunk veterans of an earlier day and just as excited about a good battle between a couple of fighters who really fight.

Richard Watts, Jr. *New Republic*. Aug. 11, 1947. pp. 27–8

The Harder They Fall is the story of an American heavyweight and of how he got his. . . . Not since Hemingway's ''Fifty Grand'' has there been a story so idiomatic, so physically cruel, so underscored with the disgust of the corrupted. The atmosphere at Stillman's gym, the Sunday luncheon at Nick's country place, Barry Winch playing gin rummy, the sparring of George Blount—these are descriptions or bits of low comedy incomparably well done. I cannot question the tough reality of the episodes—not even the corny scenes with Shirley, a boxer's widow, who would probably be even cornier in real life. But I do wonder whether there is enough change of pace and enough high relief in the book to keep the reader coming.

Edward Weeks. *Atlantic Monthly*. Sept., 1947. p. 120

Mr. Schulberg's gamy, grimy opus is hard-fisted writing at its brass-knuckle, kidney-punching best. . . . *The Harder They Fall* is

an exposé of the prize-fighting business in this country. . . . This, too, is a part of American culture, a conspicuous part; and Mr. Schulberg's combination of contemptuous hatred and reluctant fascination makes for good reading. . . . With no subtleties of characterization, but with wonderfully authentic atmosphere, he has written a scathing indictment of a so-called ''sport.'' And in the process he has never allowed his indignation to get in the way of his story-telling.

Orville Prescott. *The Yale Review*. Autumn, 1947. p. 191

The thirty-six-year-old Mr. Schulberg is a sensitive and gentle companion. In fact, his gentleness transforms itself into an exacting concern in the modulations of an idea—such shadings and qualifications lending to Mr. Schulberg's speech a hesitant and touchingly tormented character. At the same time, within this muted atmosphere that Mr. Schulberg can't help but create, there exists an awareness in his companions that Mr. Schulberg is possessed of a remarkably powerful chest, that he is, as well, the proud possessor of a promising prize-fighter—all of which combines into a nice paradox.

Harvey Breit. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 5, 1950. p. 28

Schulberg has moved up from the heels of *What Makes Sammy Run?* and the punks of *The Harder They Fall*. The flashy, erratic style of those novels often obscured the maturity of his implied judgements, his ability to open people up so that you can decide what makes *them* run. These gifts are more richly displayed, more fully developed in *The Disenchanted*. There are weaknesses: the book seems uneven in spots, too long, and trite and awkward when Schulberg is trying to recreate some scenes with which he appears personally unfamiliar. But there are episodes of great power and vividness, in which the thoughtful reader can discern some penetrating observations on the evils of casting stones.

Paul V. Farrell. *Commonweal*. Nov. 10, 1950. p. 124

Because Budd Schulberg is a sound journalist who draws upon material he has lived with or authenticated, the twenty entries in *Some Faces in a Crowd* are packed with verisimilitude. Few observers know more about Hollywood . . . or about the boxing business. . . . He is suspicious of all Head Men, depicted here as uneasy end-products of a dog-eat-dog process among phonies, ingrates, bullies, eccentrics, and dreamers right out of the final scene of *The Iceman Cometh*. He believes that fame is fleeting, loyalty about as rare as the whooping crane, and moments of glory illusion.

In Schulberg land, the heels are at work, the realities are squalid, and the prognosis is dreary.

James Kelly. *Saturday Review*. May 16, 1953. p. 14

His . . . stories . . . differ from popular magazine fiction chiefly in the way they end. The characters have to take the responsibility for what they do. They have to pay moral costs and face defeats. . . . Mr. Schulberg is like the popular magazine writers, however, in his style and in the ingredients out of which his fictions are made. He obviously admires Hemingway and Lardner and Fitzgerald, but he does not feel their need to get things just right, to see the thing as what in itself it truly is. . . . Villainy is made a little too easy to be against in these stories. Villainy is, nevertheless, very clearly seen and very dramatically presented. And virtue is very clearly seen, too, especially in the war stories.

Robert Gorham Davis. *New York Times Book Section*. May 17, 1953. p. 5

Schulberg . . . seems congenitally unable to see the world except through the special lenses developed by Hemingway (the sentimentalized prize fight and the brutalized deep-sea fishing stories) or Fitzgerald (the beautiful rich girl with a suicidal drive). . . . Schulberg is another of the Jewish writers like Weidman and Shaw whose work has skimmed close to the solid shores of genuine American literary achievement. These writers, in a sense which can serve only as an initial, temporary excuse, have been incapacitated from realizing their promise by a lack of a serious and active artistic tradition, something they give hints of recognizing; but, instead of seeking one, as, say, Lionel Trilling has done, in the depths of history and in the classical values, instead of dealing with the lack as part of the process of developing an authentic idiom, they have casually gone for their guidance to the popular culture heroes.

Morris Freedman. *Commentary*. Oct., 1953. pp. 389–92

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SCHUYLER, James (1923–1991)

James Schuyler's poetry, like Louis Simpson's, is close to prose, but it is far more playful. Whereas Mr. Simpson is almost puritanical in his desire to set down the truth devoid of ornament, Mr. Schuyler wants to be amused, and he wants his reader to be amused as well—an impulse that can result in preciosity. But ''The Morning of the Poem'' eventually disarmed me. It does have its moments of preciosity, when it takes the gee-whiz-isn't-it-all-amazing tone of Kenneth Koch at his worst. . . .

But upon finishing the book, one does not remember these lapses so much as the consistent play of wit, sharp observation and brilliantly evocative language. . . .

The title poem. . .is especially impressive and dominates the collection. It is cast in the form of a letter from the poet, visiting his mother in East Aurora, N.Y., to a painter in Manhattan—his friend and, one gathers, his lover. As the dustjacket blurb, for once articulate, suggests, this occasion allows him to juxtapose scenes of his rural childhood with the life of the city and to turn his verse letter into a verse autobiography as well. . . .

If all Mr. Schuyler did was to string together images, the charm would soon wear off. Pound and Williams knew what they were doing when they keep their imagist poems short. But there is more to this poetry than images. Mr. Schuyler writes as if mindful of Frank O'Hara's statement that ''the poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages.'' We have at least the illusion of coming to know the speaker of these poems and recognizing his presence in their characteristic preoccupations and stylistic traits.

In the title poem, we can piece together the poet's life in considerable detail. . . . His memories of childhood are not totally disheartening, for the poems are themselves evidence of their maker's joy in life. But there is, behind that joy, an abiding sadness.

Mr. Schuyler does not appear to regret his homosexuality; he writes of it with a commendable frankness, treating it as a human desire like any other. But his musings often lead, by a chain of associations, to nostalgia for lost love, lost friendships and lost youth, or to thoughts of death. In one of the shorter poems, ''Trip,'' we are told of recurrent breakdowns and a pervasive ''suicidalness.''. . . The wit, playfulness and appetite for experience become tinged with pathos when we realize that they have more than once collapsed in despair.

The James Schuyler of 11 years ago [when ''Freely Espousing'' was published] was already an accomplished poet, but a less engaging one than he has since become. The sharp imagery is present in abundance, but not the emotional depth and inclusiveness that one finds in ''The Morning of the Poem.''

Paul Breslin. *New York Times Book Review*. November 2, 1980; pp. 12, 28–30.&a35

What's For Dinner? is a comedy of manners all about alcoholism, insanity, adultery, drugs, moderate incest, and death. I mean it is all about how its characters talk to each other while what would be these big novelistic events of their lives take place: they say things like ''What's for dinner?'' Also they do talk about feeling enraged or crazed or sexy. They also get to talk about their furniture and their bridge games and the rainbow in the water pitcher. Someone's tennis-shoes problem and the medication problem of a someone else in the nuthouse seem to take up about the same space of talk. The book really is mostly conversation; a room or a chair may be described, and as beautifully as if it inhabited one of Mr. Schuyler's poems, but no one's mental interior is ever presented to us apart from that person's talk. This method seems to make the characters better company for the reader and more lovable. . . .

Of course it is the particular way these people talk, the kinds of expressions and words they choose, that makes the novel so genius-touched and so lovely to read. . . . [They] talk in a way that's a combination of cliche, camp, suburban archness, who else could care, homily, dated and current slang, and fashion-page and house-and-garden lingo. Or also it's a lot like the talk in Jane Austen's novels—like when the girl in *Emma* rambles on about isn't it wonderful how efficient the postal system is, or just about anytime anyone has an opinion about something small—the weather, a party, the proper consistency of gruel. But in *What's For Dinner?* I think the characters are freer than in Jane Austen's novels to say things that have nothing to do with the plot. I take that quality as a great gift to the reader. . . .

The long title-poem of [*The Morning of the Poem*] is a masterpiece, felt beyond tour-de-force (does that make sense?), and deserving of many superlatives and wonderful adjectives. It is rhapsodic, cosmic, philosophical, autobiographical, specific, personism-istic, full of nature, sexually and homosexually frank, unflinching in the face of life's terribleness, very funny, very sad, and very exalted. . . . The poem is written in an innovative long line in which what appears to be an indented continuation of the preceding line is really a new line and the break before it is really a line break. . . .

[These] pairs of lines are much nicer for the eye and ear than pages and pages of single long lines would be; and Schuyler kept on writing and you keep on reading. . . .

What this line is or this method is, the method of this poem which organizes itself naturally into very long sentences full of colons and semicolons, is a way of gathering together past, present, and future, places all over the globe, friends dead and live and near and far, into this one poem being written and experienced this one morning in this one place. . . .

A whole life happens right now. It's a beautiful morning full of life and death and everything that ever happened to you. What you carry with you and what's happening outside you, in the sky, on the lawn, intersect, overlap, give way to each other, in perfect rhythm. You're about to return to New York City, where everything will happen to you again. It's *The Morning of the Poem*.

Alice Notley. *The American Book Review*. November-December, 1980, p. 10.

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SCHWARTZ, Delmore (1913–1966)

In the story which opens *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*, and in the lyrics which make up the third section, the author displays not only a mastery of technic that is precisely suited to his poems' intention, but also a rare sensitivity of perception, an urgent humanity, and such an honesty of expression as is rare in a day when the manners of poetry ape the sliding faithless manners of international diplomacy. It is hard to believe that this is a first book, the work of a very young man. . . . Almost without exception the

short poems achieve the equilibrium between Thing Said and Way of Saying that is the mark of the finest poetry.

Dudley Fitts. *Saturday Review*. April 29, 1939. p. 29

Much that he has done has been self-conscious rather than conscious of larger meanings than the self. He is not alone in the fault. A whole school of younger poets rely on learning rather than vision. But it is time that Mr. Schwartz find, if he is ever going to, the rhythms and images characteristic of him and of him alone, the convictions which he holds, the vision, not so narcissistic, which makes his voice worth listening to. If he does not do this he will remain one of the several bright young poets who have risen to some fame rather too easily because of their ability to handle form and to echo current ideas and patterns of belief. On a few occasions this poet has written movingly, but more often he has only composed in the more modern forms of poem, play, or short story.

Eda Lou Walton. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Nov. 23, 1941. p. 32

These stories (in *The World Is a Wedding*) are written, for the most part, in a monotonous, even awkward prose. For a writer with a reputation as a poet, they are surprisingly deficient in imagery, or the visual sense. But one soon notices in the explicit themes, in the abstract language, in the political references, and in the tone of polite discussion, a deliberate direction halfway between traditional fiction and the philosophical dialogue.

In a number of instances Schwartz brings it off beautifully; in any case, it's a direction along which writers, here and there, are feeling their way, and one which should have happy consequences for the form and content of fiction.

John Farrelly. *New Republic*. Aug. 2, 1948. p. 27

With a deceptive sparseness and formality of style Delmore Schwartz writes of Jewish middle class family life in New York in this century. His stories, moving from room to room inside the dry vastness of the city, show families divided against themselves, and individuals, who, though terribly interdependent, will never know each other directly in love or friendship. He describes the search for love in these people, even as they fall away from it, their feelings of guilt and self-defense even as the desire to be rid of them, and their resignation even in their frustration. . . . In a comparatively few pages some of the stories encompass generations of family tensions and frustrations without apparent strain. But the style, though quiet, has a kind of muted eloquence which testifies even more strongly to this author's talent.

John Hay. *Commonweal*. Sept. 17, 1948. p. 551

Pleasure in reading Schwartz comes in recognition of worldly values. . . . Schwartz has long been a poet of the city. No illusions are left about it. We feel that we have been dragged through its least place in reading him, for nothing is spared in the depiction of truth. We accept, the gross, the banal, the sentimental, the sensual. . . . There is little of fury or rage, much of philosophic understanding, and a hard-worked control over what is being said. The poems erect substantial orders to mirror the actual urban world, urban life, and the foibles of both.

Richard Eberhart. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 5, 1950. p. 2

No other young poet has realized the inadequacy of Christianity (and the Judaism from which it derives) in the modern Western world with the same appalling consciousness that he has. . . . In his own quiet American way Delmore Schwartz is the desperate counterpart of Rimbaud, whose *Une Saison en Enfer* he has translated. Both are aware that the supports of their respective cultures are tottering and new beliefs must be found to nourish the religious impulse of man. . . .Schwartz is not unaware of the literary value of his heritage. . . . Schwartz makes of Jewishness a symbol of the modern situation. The alienated man apprehends experience as the Jew lives in the modern Christian world, both through a glass darkly.

Morton Seiff. *Jewish Social Studies*. Oct., 1951. pp. 311–2, 316

The poet has risen from a certain moribund view of existence found in his earlier books, and like his Lazarus ''thrusting aside the cold sweated linens,'' looks ''for the first time, wonderstruck.''. . .

This yielding to sensuous expression indicates that some ice-bound spring of feeling has been released. But there is danger in over-ripeness, as well as delight. In a few of the new poems Schwartz lets the happy wanderings of his imagination become too musically articulate and repetitive. But he has not lost his ironic, incisive view of character and events, or his strong philosophic vein. . . .

Schwartz matured in an age of literary self-consciousness influenced by the prevailing winds of doctrine without falling into any of the fashionable ruts. Although a product of contemporary values and techniques he is not a part of any esoteric coterie. Like Baudelaire he has a sense of his own age and its impact—depressions and war, the Marxist doctrines and Freudian theories, an urban life with its background of fervent Jewish culture. All these have kept his poetry from the dryness of intellectual abstraction.

Katherine G. Chapin. *New Republic*. Nov. 9, 1959. pp.24–5

Schwartz's style is the key to his stories. He casts many verbal nets for meaning, and some prove more effective than others. He catches meanings, and he also reveals the difficulty of capturing so slippery an article. (I have again fallen into Schwartz's mannerism: his favorite word is ''and''; his favorite mark of punctuation is the comma that takes its place.) His characters, too, cast nets for elusive meanings, trying to encompass and to fathom life with theories that are as inadequate and as artificial as words. They carry out skilful exercises in self-deception, but they are invariably exposed by the all-wise author, who looks over their shoulders to interpret the thoughts behind the words and behind the thoughts. . . .

Henry Popkin. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 2, 1961. p. 25

At first glance a comedian of alienation, Schwartz also showed a gift for acceptance, a somewhat ambiguous reconcilement with the

demands and depletions of common experience. Many writers have treated similar kinds of material, but even those, like Bellow and Malamud, whose fictions are more inclusive and substantial have not captured quite so keenly as has Schwartz the particular timbre, the tangled reverberations and complications of irony within irony, that once characterized Jewish life in America. And what gave Schwartz's work its distinction was that he avoided the pieties of both fathers and sons, established community and estranged intellectuals; he worked his way past their fixed perspective, unfolding still another nuance of reflection by which to complicate and even undercut his own ironies. His poems and stories rested on what is for our time the most secure of foundations: the tempered humaneness of self doubt. . . .

In both stories and poems his tone was deflated, as if it were looking over its shoulder to see whether it was being followed by rhetoric. It seemed to be composed of several speech layers: the sing-song, slightly pompous intonations of Jewish immigrants educated in night-schools, the self-conscious affectionate mockery of that speech by American-born sons, its abstraction into the jargon of city intellectuals, and finally the whole body of this language flattened into a prose of uneasiness, an anti-rhetoric. . . .

. . .Though not quite so good as his earlier work, the stories collected in *Successful Love* show that he chose the path of risk. Just as his recent poems represent a new development—a somewhat forced venture into lyric rhapsody over the renewed possibilities of life—so his recent stories leave the thirties behind and turn toward the prosperous confusion of post-war America.

Irving Howe. *New Republic*. March 19, 1962. pp. 25–6

If the oppressiveness of Schwartz's long early guilt is in some part responsible for the kinds of tactile and kinesthetic qualities in his first poems, then his latest poetry, celebrating a release from this oppressiveness, reveals qualities equally arresting. Having faced himself, explored his own history, and recognized his debts, he feels free now of all those urgent preoccupations. . . .

With this new approach to the world, Schwartz's poetry quite naturally undergoes a radical transformation. Since the dawn of the ''second world'' is now a major theme, light floods his poetry, replacing in large part the tactile abstractions of his former work. Auditory imagery also finds a larger place here—singing birds are obviously an essential part of any dawn. . . . But most important of all is the change from the formerly much favored blank verse and rimed iambics to the Whitmanesque cadences of these new poems. They reflect not only the release from oppressiveness we have been discussing, but a sensuous apprehension of language that is directly related to his earlier kinesthetic effects.

Jay L. Halio. *Southern Review*. Autumn, 1965. pp. 814-15

Though his ''substratum of sensibility'' is very modern, Schwartz's poetic solution is dated, goes back actually to Whitman, who sought to identify himself with everything; Schwartz tries to identify everything with himself. But this reverse-Whitman solution will not do the trick for Schwartz; it does not save his poetry from the progressive deterioration which seems to attend modern work that is ultimately and continuously romantic.

It is true that Schwartz has irony, but irony is not enough. . . .

His mode is inclusion; his key concept is ''appetite.'' His ultimate recourse is to freedom of sensibility, the first and last reliance of the romantic. Under the guise of ''giving all,'' he must maintain a stand of barefaced candor but behind this is self-congratulation on his ability to maintain a tension of lifelong provisionality. He remains uncommitted and arrives at truth through revelation and confession. Refusing the tools of indirection, myth, central symbol, and limits, he fights fragmentation by proudly exposing his devouring ego, tiny, hateful, and alone, as he himself often points out.

R. H. Deutsch. *Sewanee Review*. Autumn, 1966. pp. 917-18

[Schwartz's] *Selected Poems*, which he edited himself in 1958 and subtitled *Summer Knowledge*, is now re-issued as a paperback. To my mind it contains a great deal of bad poetry; yet never merely bad or merely uninteresting; Schwartz's genius is on every page, twisted, fouled, and set against itself. It is an excruciating record; redeemed (if that is the word) by perfect poems that rise here and there from the tangle, strong, lucid, eloquent, often rather old-fashioned, like wild roses in a bank of weeds. Hence this reprint is useful. But what Schwartz really needs—and let it be soon, before he is forgotten—is a strict selection from all his work in one volume: poems, stories, essays, and some of the wonderful reviews he tossed off so easily to earn a few dollars. If the copyrights can be straightened out (for his relations with his publishers were as chaotic as the rest of his life), this should be undertaken right away by some friendly but tough editor.

Hayden Carruth. *Poetry*. Sept., 1968. p. 426

It is clear why he was held in such respect, for reading through Delmore Schwartz's essays is like touring the monuments of literary modernism in the company of a wise and entertaining guide. As he ranges over the cultural landscape, he picks out deep generalities and details of language, intellectual background and psychological habit which reveal ''the fate of Art and the emotion of the Artist.'' A lucid explainer of texts and difficult ideas—it comes as no surprise that he was a great teacher—he sets to right what he believes are confusions of method or lapses in sensibility without malice or self-promotion. His polemics indeed might serve as a model of the witty correction of error. He seeks to augment knowledge, not overpower us by glittering acrobatics on the dialectical highwire. The passionate seriousness and unhurried civility of his mind, ''his solicitude for all sides of every question,'' insure a commentary that never falls into triviality or academic solemnity.

''*Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas*'' (''Happy is he who can grasp the causes of things''), the refrain of his early long poem ''Genesis,'' might be taken as the heart of Schwartz's literary creed. As poet, fiction writer, movie reviewer and critic, he is the student of causes, the hidden genesis, ''the early morning light.'' His concern with the way the past exercises its expressive and moral power over a writer's subject matter, style and point of view is mirrored in his poems and short stories where the ''family god'' and social circle influence his characters' emotional illusions.

Herbert Leibowitz. *New York Times Book Section*. Jan. 17, 1971. p. 3

Schwartz's theme has more than a personal dimension. He is sounding a note that goes back 150 years to the first stirrings of romanticism in Europe: the alienation of the artist from middle-class society. This was an especial dogma in the wake of the modernist movement of the 1920s, whose difficult art, addressed to a purified elite, was sometimes built on an attack on modern life in toto, and in the wake of the radicalism of the thirties, which identified the middle class as the special villain of contemporary society. . . .

Where this view of modern life prevails the Jew, especially the secular Jewish intellectual, becomes the quintessential modern man: doubly alienated, from the prevailing national culture and from his own traditional culture, uprooted from the European pale and yet cut off from his own uprooted parents. But the artist who is truly interested in other human beings—and has some concern for his own sanity—soon comes to the limits of alienation as a viable ground for his work. . . .

Delmore Schwartz's best stories move away from this starting-point, toward an empathy for other lives, but they never fully evade these limitations. They are exquisitely wrought but excruciatingly self-conscious. No one would call them expansive. Their main theme remains that of the isolated self and the mysteries of identity that can never be solved but never evaded. For the author himself the final paranoia and anonymity, the trail of broken friendships and brilliant memories, to say nothing of the deterioration of his work, were the final seal of the same failure.

Morris Dickstein. *Partisan Review*. No. 1, 1974. pp. 40–1

Whatever its particular failings, *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities* articulated the pervasive disillusion of that era in a voice charged with intellectual passion and self-conscious irony. Delmore's poems were dramatic utterances, full of the vivid inflections he had grown up hearing. Irving Howe's description of his prose could apply to his early verse as well: ''the sing-song, slightly pompous intonations of Jewish immigrants educated in night-schools, the self-conscious affectionate mockery of that speech by American born sons, its abstraction into the jargon of city intellectuals, and finally the whole body of this language flattened into a prose of uneasiness, an anti-rhetoric.'' In the stories Delmore was starting to publish, these echoes would be more deliberate than in his poetry, but they were unmistakable all the same. And while ''the discussion of the Jewish problem'' may have been muted, as he insisted to [James] Laughlin, it was implicit in the poems' very tone. Where Jewish writers like Clifford Odets, Daniel Fuchs, and Henry Roth had confronted their experience directly, Delmore claimed as his imaginative province the cosmopolitan world of letters purveyed in the pages of *Partisan Review*. Faintly Marxist, imbued with a sense of history's fatal flaws in the wake of the Munich Pact and on the verge of World War II. Delmore was, Howe suggests, ''the poet of the historical moment quite as Auden was in England.'' It was as if the self-constituted intelligentsia with which he had allied himself required a spokesman to dramatize its cultural dilemmas.

Delmore had a heroic conception of the poet, and shamelessly identified himself with what he took to be the sensibility of Modernism, calling on those precursors of modern consciousness, Marx and Freud, to guide him in the difficult quest of a ''tradition of the new'' (to use Harold Rosenberg's fine phrase). . . .

It was no doubt [a] Byronic element in his character, combined with the subtle tonalities of a wry Jewish ironist, that made his poetry so attractive to a generation whose intellectual style had been appropriated from Europe. When *In Dreams* appeared, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, and Randall Jarrell had not yet published a line. It was Delmore's lot to take up where his predecessors had left off and define the temper of that uncertain era. No one was more surprised than he when his labors were heralded as the flowering of a new generation.

James Atlas. *Delmore Schwartz: The Life of an American Poet* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977), pp. 140–41

The . . . line [''while History is unforgiven''] is the key to understanding the themes of Delmore's work . . . , his lyric evocations of solitude, of great imaginative masters, of obsession with being caught in a twilight world between past, present, and future. He is constantly dissolving the distinction between universal and personal history. Shadowy philosophers (Plato, Socrates, Marx, Freud, James, Whitehead, Aristotle) are evoked throughout his work to bear witness to events and moods that in themselves appear mysterious, impulsive, melancholy, retrospective. They are appealed to, in effect, to impose intellectual order on a patchwork and exhausted self that yet has immortal longings for beauty, tenderness, grace, and power. Yet these longings too often appear to disguise a brutish, angry, and resentful self. . . .

Delmore's poetry consciously works with the themes of personal history set against the stream of universal history that he sees as deterministic. As a literary critic, he chooses his subjects and makes his emphasis in a similar direction. Part of this emphasis takes the form in the general essays of elucidating the phenomenon of isolation in modern poetry. Much could be said negatively about Delmore's elaboration of commonplace ideas. Yet the very fact that he takes pains to remind his readers of what they may take for granted is a sign of the importance the issues had for him. Modernism, in fact, is the condition which Delmore thought he must define and redefine, no matter if the subject be meter or metaphor or the themes typical of the pre-Romantic or post-Romantic imaginations. . . .

He argues with great precision and a sense of the importance of the commonplace, for instance, that from the ''isolation of poetic sensibility the obscurity of modern poetry also arises.''. . .

[Schwartz made a] conscious effort . . . as a critic to be generous to both the ideas and the particular forms that poets and poems took. He was faithful to his sense of history and to the infinite ways poets took in interacting with history. At the same time that he succeeded so admirably in the primary task of the critic to be a good elucidator and a generous spirit, he also succeeded in commenting indirectly on his own dilemmas as a poetic man. He saw his fellow artists as he saw himself—trying to find a language faithful to the particular torments of our time that his own life so tragically embodied.

David Zucker. *Iowa Review*. Fall, 1977, pp. 98, 101–3

Now that he is dead, the legend of the *poète maudit*—the doomed and sacrificial poet—has already claimed him. And before we submit to the distortions that current sentimentalities are likely to

inject into this kind of legend, we had better attempt a cooler glimpse at the work he has left. It may, surprisingly enough, provide some very strong imperatives to revise our stock notions of the alienation of poetry and the poet today.

Delmore had a beautiful lyrical talent, and so long as he continued to write anything at all, this gift never left him altogether. It's too early to say what in our period, if anything, will be lasting; but my own judgment, perhaps partial, is that some of his lyrics will survive. But the great triumphs of modern poetry were nearly all in the lyric, and he wanted to help restore verse as a narrative medium. He admired Hardy's *Dynasts*, for example, before it became fashionable among some academic critical circles. But where Hardy had dealt with the fate of nations and empires, and the broad sweep of history, Delmore chose a very personal subject matter as the material for his own major narrative effort.

This work is *Genesis*, and the abstract design of it does not look too unpromising. It tells the story of the growing up of a Jewish boy (Delmore himself), of how his forebears came to this country, the strife of the parents and how it is inflicted as a trauma upon the boy. The narrative would be carried by the prose, but a rather cadenced and rhythmic prose that wouldn't be too glaring a contrast to its verse accompaniment. The latter would take the form of a poetic comment and explication of the narrative in the manner of a Greek chorus. Not bad as an idea, though the material is conventional: another version of the archetypal Making of an American. But the execution of the design fails badly. . . .

In fiction, he produced two stories that stand out amid all the writing of this kind in his period; and considering the vast volume of stories written during our time, this is no small accomplishment. One is the near-perfect story, ''In Dreams Begin Responsibilities,'' which—significantly enough—uses a kind of surrogate lyrical form to express his inveterate family material. The other story, however, shows even more strikingly the specific powers of the fiction writer in bringing into compact focus a wealth of social and human observation. The story is ''America! America!'' and it says more in its few pages about the saga of the Jewish lower-middle class in American life than most of the genre novels we have had on this theme. . . .

For literary criticism he had great brilliance and potential, and I believe, had he given himself to it, would have become one of the foremost critics of our time. His early pieces give very alert and sensitive readings of Hardy, Auden, Tate, and others. He was starting from Eliot as a base, but his young man's mind was swarming with ideas, and he was working toward a position and point of view of his own. But the patience and concentration needed for this were denied him—for a number of reasons, partly because his energies were dispersed into other writing, principally perhaps because of his own psychological disturbances. . . .

When you add it all up, what have you? Certainly, not something at all negligible. To have written anything, however fragmentary, which stands out among the productions of one's time, and which may even lay some claim to permanence, is a higher achievement than to turn out a body of work fully formed but glittering only for the moment. But just as certainly, his achievement is a failure—and a failure all the more in relation to the power of the original gifts. For Delmore was not merely one of the many talented persons who go astray; nowadays talented people swarm all over the literary landscape; he happened to have major gifts, and in saying this, I weigh my words. And in the light of those gifts we have to judge his literary career as a human failure. It is that human failure that currently invokes the facile image of the *poète maudit*—the poet exiled and accursed by the tribe.

William Barrett. *The Truants: Adventures among the Intellectuals* (Doubleday, 1982), pp. 233–36

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SCOTT, Winfield Townley (1910–1968)

Winfield Townley Scott is a striking poet working with an original key which was provided him by the techniques of our modern school, but one who exists in an isolated sphere in the same way that Chirico does in contrast to other surrealist painters. Scott's stark contrast to the surrealist poets like Parker Tyler, Weldon Kees, etc., is that he never builds beyond a single phenomenon, whereas they struggle to find a magnet for a series of phenomena. . . . The strange portions of his work, in concept, I feel have been affected through John Wheelwright's influence and the subtle shifting of musical phrases by simulating the poetry of Dylan Thomas. Like Wheelwright's, it is a felt poetry as well as thought, uneven and inclusive and highly original. I expect that he will grow in stature.

Maurice Swan. *New York Times Book Section*. Jan. 18, 1942. p. 5

By whatever critical formulas Scott's poetry is approached and discussed, it would be an obtuse, tired reviewer who could fail to sense the genuineness of this poet's mind, the liveness of the poetic experience he records and makes. . . . For the searcher of speech patterns, they are there, not as indelible and local as Frost's perhaps, and sometimes out of control, but very close and real. The danger of prose ''draining the air'' is successfully overcome in almost every poem. There are enough verses presenting awareness and criticism of twentieth-century environment to meet the demands of the critic who believes modern verse must mirror the times to the last neon tube and microphone.

Marshall Schacht. *Poetry*. April, 1942. p. 47

When he is not celebrating individualists of that region whose transcendentalism enables the poets to include heaven and earth

within their ''regionalism,'' Mr. Scott is reducing the general to the individual (what John Peale Bishop called ''minute particulars'') in the manner of all true poets.

Mr. Scott's eye is acute; his powers of observation show to good advantage in a number of poems. In the transcendental mode he finds wide meaning in narrow corners of nature; his landscapes extend infinitely.

Gerard Previn Meyer. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 9, 1948. p. 32

The Dark Sister is a figure from the Norse saga's *Long Island Book*, the source of all we know about the discovery of America by Lief Ericson in the year 1000 . . . Winfield Scott has been accurate to the mood of the story. We forget that we know so little of our past, what ancestors we come from. . . . Scott has used a long line and diction well suited to the rough speech of his sailor characters who were under their mistress' domination throughout the voyage.

William Carlos Williams. *The Nation*. Feb. 22, 1958. p. 171

Though Winfield Townley Scott has published admirable verse for over twenty years, *The Dark Sister* is his masterpiece and one of the remarkable poems of recent times. It has excitement and depth. With a control of his medium that almost never falters, he handles characterization, narrative, and landscape with equal power in the flexible cadences of his verse. . . . The work is written in loose three-part measures—largely dactyls and amphibrachs with some fine spondees that have almost a quantitative effect. The form is sufficiently fluid to meet the demands of the content, and is notably satisfactory in the seaborne and windswept passages.

Robert Hillyer. *New York Times Book Section*. March 9, 1958. p. 10

Scott's newest book, his seventh, is *The Dark Sister*, a saga not only because it is about Leif Ericson's half sister, Freydis, and the Viking exploration to the new world, but because in this poet's language, narration, and sweep a saga truly rises out of Vinland. The hero is not human, but infinitely greater, the land itself bigger than all the human beings who came to it or were to come for centuries. Scott's descriptive passages of weather, forests, the sea are more the climate of the poem than ''passages,'' but they thrust under our very feet and into our blood. . . . Scott's realization in words of that clean cold land and time is his triumph in this poem.

John Holmes. *Saturday Review*. April 12, 1958. p. 70

Both the conscious skill of understatement and the fine sea-rhythm (somewhat like the best of Jeffers) are present in the new long poem *The Dark Sister*. This is a narrative poem which—I don't know how to suggest the uncomfortable suggestion—tries to be an epic. I enjoyed reading *The Dark Sister*. It is an important contribution to the solution of the problem which seems to fret the good poets of Mr. Scott's generation: the long poem. Its narrative line is always clear, its characterizations are adequately distinct from one another, its heroine is a real four-square howling bitch who would plainly devour her litter. Moreover, Mr. Scott has achieved scenes which are startlingly dramatic.

James Wright. *Poetry*. Oct., 1958. pp. 47–8

Winfield Townley Scott is also a poet who encourages the notion that the poet's job is to walk through woods and think. Seriously. Willfully. Nor will I quarrel with this notion; it simply seems to me that Scott has, like Miss Boyle, written a few too many poems about the crocus spring, a few too many about grand and literary themes (Hamlet, Leif Ericson, Yeats). Yet Scott has a voice that, when he uses it, makes one rejoice. A few of his poems are masterpieces: ''Landscape as Metal and Flowers,'' ''Three American Women and a German Bayonet,'' ''The US Sailor with the Japanese Skull'' and ''Mr. Whittier.'' In such poems, he demonstrates that he has a world, one to which someone, perhaps Robinson, awakened him—a world of the local war monuments, of Grant Wood and Winslow Homer, of Methodist encampments, and memories of the Townleys—a world that is personal, intense.

David Ray. *New Republic*. Nov. 10, 1962. pp. 22–3

His voice is that of a reasonable man talking with an old friend. He has no desire to impress you, his friend, get you to change your mind, charm you, cozy up to you, or burden you with his secret troubles. You must pay attention to understand him, but if you do pay attention you will understand him. His voice is casual in that he is not concerned to press you into listening to him. This is not because he lacks genuine concern; it is because his greatest concern is for meaning. He wants to, and does, put what he says in such a way that you can take it if (but not as) you will. The voice is casual in that it is not oratorical or turgid, or so musical that you cease to care about the sense; especially it is casual in the way of tactfulness.

George P. Elliott. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Sept. 13, 1964. p. 17

Most of the poems in Winfield Townley Scott's new book, *Change of Weather*, are unambitious, which is disappointing. His style has always pleased me greatly, in itself and for the way he worked it out of the New England of Robinson and Frost into a sphere entirely his own; a strong style, flexible and modest, the best style we have, I think, for narrative verse. But it is largely wasted in the new poems, or so it seems to me. They are almost all brief lyrics on themes of declining sex, the approach of old age and death, ancestors, memories of childhood, the towns and landscapes that give rise to these thoughts. In other words they are the poems we have come to expect from every poet who keeps going until his fifties; they are inevitable. . . . His *Collected Poems 1937–1962* is a book of great and perhaps sufficient value, as more and more people are coming to recognize. Nevertheless, without being captious we have a right to state our disappointment.

Hayden Carruth. *Poetry*. July, 1965. pp. 309–10

Scott had an old-fashioned American sense of independence. He was honest and felt this sometimes as a fault. He had the courage in

all these notes [*The Dirty Hand: The Literary Notebooks of Winfield Townley Scott*], so relatively short, easy to read, and fascinating, to entertain justice as a necessity. He writes with a just and fair mind, beyond rancor or pettiness, with modesty and profundity. Reason is his guide, he is in no way frenzied, hortatory, or authoritarian. The judgments of this book shift the emphases of literature as they were felt by his contemporaries and state his own ideas posthumously and well, for our consideration.

The gravity of some of his statements is impressive while the tone of the book is conversational, sane, sometimes witty, always amiable. He is too intelligent to berate others or to defend himself. He knows that poetry cannot change the world. We are let in on a long private conversation, as it were, he had with himself. Sharing this with him after his death is a moving experience. Some of his pronouncements are aphoristic, some are confessional. All have a kind of finality. They exhibit a triumph of reason.

Richard Eberhart. *Poetry*. Feb., 1970. p. 345

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SELBY, Hubert (1928–)

Like most naturalists, Selby depends on the massing of details, but he is more soundly selective than some of his predecessors, and he knows very well how to shape a story. Moreover, though he maintains an air of objectivity, he is capable of compassion. This is hell, he seems to be saying [in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*], and these are people on whom we must have pity. We must resolutely contemplate their squalor, their brutishness, their empty lives, their callousness, and the poverty of their hopes, and we must consider what their existence means to us.

No author that I can think of has presented so impressive and authoritative an account of the life of the people at the bottom of the heap in our so-called affluent society. This is a book that ought to shake us, not because of this word or that, but because a sound craftsman has shown us so much of what we should prefer to ignore.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 7, 1964. pp. 23–4

The profound depression *Last Exit to Brooklyn* causes—once one starts seriously to read it—is a measure of an authentic power which carries through and beyond revulsion. . . . There are serious faults in Selby's stories. The degree of violence, the amount of blood and gore and semen, the sheer grotesqueness, sometimes nullifies or engulfs belief. Yet that the author is able to make one believe at all in this sordid, hopeless world is an extraordinary achievement. He does it by a vision of hell so stern that it cannot be chuckled or raged aside, and by a manner of writing which looks tricky but is not—is instead urgent and necessary to that vision. *Last Exit to Brooklyn* is not a book one ''recommends''—except perhaps to writers. From them, those who wish to read it, it deserves attention.

Eliot Fremont-Smith. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 8, 1964. p. 67

Above all, Selby is writing about the distortion of love, the rottenness of its substitutes, and the horror and pathos of its perversion. The shock produces total recoil. . . . It's almost as though Selby, who has never read Paul Goodman's utopian proposals, had set out to write a fictional demonstration of their urgency. . . . We must infer what love is through experience beyond *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, or through Selby's compassionate act of having written the book. . . . Selby's people do not know what love is and cannot express it, as Goodman has said, because their society has given them no opportunity to find out. . . . We believe Selby's characters and will never [be] able to forget them. But they are not Everyman. In praising Selby's astonishing power to tear our sensibilities, one must remember that this is part, not all, of the world we would weep for.

Webster Schott. *The Nation*. Dec. 7, 1964. p. 440

I am not persuaded by [*Last Exit to Brooklyn*] that life is hell, though Selby has shown me some of the damned (whom I have seen before a good many times, in recent fiction as well as in life). I do not believe it is necessary for a writer to trap his reader in perverse, revolting emotions in order to make him imagine literarily something of what the characters' experience is like. I dread going to hell, I do not want to be locked in there and abandoned to pain, while I am in those doleful regions I need and pray for help to understand what is happening about and within me. However, if for some reason you want to go uncomprehendingly to hell for a few hours and do not know how to make it on your own, this book provides a reliable way to get there.

George P. Elliott. *Commentary*. Jan., 1965. p. 86

Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Last Exit to Brooklyn* [is] serious and disquieting . . . in that Mr. Selby, though often loud-mouthed and pretentious, has an educated understanding of the issues at stake. . . .

Mr. Selby neither pities nor condemns. He describes and, by implication, excuses. These people are what they are because, despite money and social benefits, they have no stable background against which to assess their existence and put a value upon it. The traditional framework (religion, family, craft) have all been bulldozed by the industrial and political forces which have brought money and social benefits as a cheap exchange. Since no one knows *who* he is, all he can do is to assert as loudly as possible *that* he is.

Simon Raven. *London Magazine*. April, 1966. pp. 113–4

Last Exit to Brooklyn has been attacked as immoral and even pornographic. After a series of trials in England, the book was officially suppressed. *Last Exit to Brooklyn* has also been banned in Italy, and has been the subject of controversy in the United States. The characters in Selby's stories are homosexuals, prostitutes, dope addicts, and hoodlums, and his plots illustrate the degenerate, depraved, and doomed existence they live. Selby's realistic style is as objectionable to many readers as the actions he describes. Nevertheless, Selby is not a salacious or pornographic writer; he belongs to the tradition of the religious-moralist-satirist that includes Swift and Pope and which began with the medieval preachers who denounced lechery and gluttony by presenting repulsive portraits of the sins of the flesh. Selby's description of an unlovely and unloving humanity is expressed in the only language appropriate to both his aesthetic and moral intentions.

Charles D. Peavy. *Critique*. 11, 3, 1969. p. 35

Hubert Selby has a gift for capturing the rage that explodes within every American city. No other American writer has conveyed so brilliantly the fierce, primal competitions of the street, or of the way living can shrink to hating. Selby's first book, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, was a volatile vision of the seething, raging life of Brooklyn's back alleys, of workers and thieves who brawl in gutters and bars, people for whom life is an endless down. As Selby portrayed it, Brooklyn was not a place so much as it was a nightmare in which manhood could be won only through one man's tormenting another. The relentless pursuit of *machismo* through all the byways of cruelty, the fear of failure that drives men into deeper and deeper vileness are Selby's most gripping preoccupations. For Selby is a clinician of male violence, an explorer of those recesses of consciousness where the question of sexual identity is always in doubt. *The Room* is about the same nexus of sexual chaos and cruelty that gave *Last Exit to Brooklyn* its remarkable force. . . .

Selby is a poet of our decline, a writer who has an unerring instinct for honing our collapse into novels as glittering and as cutting as pure, black, jagged glass.

Josephine Hendin. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 11, 1971. p. 37

Selby writes with an obsessive concern for explicit detail, for the precise texture of skin and hair, the exact placement of bodies, particular human odors. . . . We recognize ourselves in the prisoner [in *The Room*]. I think *The Room* assures Selby's place in the first rank of American novelists. His work has the power, the intimacy with suffering and morality, the honesty and moral urgency of Dostoevsky's. . . . *The Room* is a novel profoundly concerned, perhaps too deeply, with America and yet a novel which refuses to sentimentalize the American experiences. *The Room* is a great, moral book.

Dotson Rader. *New York Times Book Section*. Dec. 12, 1971. p. 5

Selby is Cubby, no longer Duke as he used to be called. He doesn't look at all any more like the thug whose picture is on the back of *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. Instead he resembles an insurance clerk or somebody's father. . . .

Like himself, the people Selby writes about have been in the gutter. His vision comes from the bowels of America. What he believes, he feels. The heart is more important to him than the mind. When asked about other expressions of violence, such as *A Clockwork Orange* or the films of Sam Peckinpah, he replies that he hasn't been to a movie in years and that his violence comes from the gut and is not connected with ''social themes or any of that crap.''

John S. Friedman. *The Village Voice*. July 14, 1973. p. 30

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SEXTON, Anne (1928–1974)

To Bedlam and Part Way Back is a remarkable book . . . , in which we feel not only the poet's experience but also something of the morality behind recalling and recording it. There is more here than a case-history or a ''cruel glass''.

The experience itself, though involving a stay in an asylum, is simple, moving and universal. Miss Sexton describes the loss of a child, or rather the *estrangement* of a mother from her child. Hardly born it reminds the mother unbearably of her own childhood, and continues to do so after the asylum. . . . With such a theme, developed not paradigmatically in the manner of Yeats, but directly in the manner of Lowell's life studies, did the poet have to exploit the more sensational aspect of her experience?

Geoffrey H. Hartman. *Kenyon Review*. Autumn, 1960. p. 698

She tells stories. Her book [*To Bedlam and Part Way Back*] is full of undistinguished, unmythological people, in tensely dramatic situations which can be exploited only by an equally intense inward sympathy: a lonely empty-headed old woman, a speechless unwed mother, the author's own agonizing journey ''part way back'' from insanity and her complex relation to her dying mother and her unfamiliar child. Sexton's best work has qualities of the modern short story: the brutal tale like a forced confession, ''better unsaid, grim or flat or predatory''; the compressed dramatic pattern of *hybris*, catastrophe, and recognition; the primitive irony of actual experience rather than the witty irony of meditation on it; the intense inward awareness of the teller; the concentration on a narrow circle of concrete persons and events; the forced brevity of narrative and lack of transition; the refusal to easily generalize. When truth bursts from the tight surface of such poems with the violence of sudden discovery, it seems the result of actual struggle.

Neil Myers. *Minnesota Review*. Fall, 1960. p. 99

The most memorable poems in Anne Sexton's new book involve death and the response to death. The title of the volume is taken

from the scene in *Macbeth* in which MacDuff, learning of the entire extinction of his family, cries out ''All my pretty ones?'' in a poignant exclamation of disbelief. How this relates to Mrs. Sexton is made explicit in the dedication to the very first poem, ''The Truth the Dead Know'': ''For my mother, born March 1902, died March 1959, and my father, born February 1900, died June 1959.'' It is easy to understand how so much catastrophe coming so quickly can create crisis. Mrs. Sexton's book is a record of her crisis. . . . The sure attack, the fine use of sound, make it clear from the start that Mrs. Sexton is a lyricist of power. If one does not read carefully and accepts the hypnotic music of the lines, one can even think one is reading a conventional elegy. But of course the poem is no such thing. Earlier epochs would have found it immensely shocking. Not only does the mourner refuse to accompany the body to the grave, but she drives off to the cape ''to cultivate myself where the sun gutters from the sky.'' We are in a post-Christian world where ceremonial has ceased to be important and death is something one seeks to dismiss from one's mind.

Cecil Hemley. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1962–63. p. 613

Her manner, learned from Robert Lowell and W.D. Snodgrass, is at once confessional and understated. . . . A number of the new poems center on the deaths of Mrs. Sexton's parents, neither yet sixty, within a few months of one another. She evokes some of the same terror of the flesh that we feel in [Allen Ginsberg's] *Kaddish*, and as in that poem the emphasis (with love) is on parental weaknesses that were crucial in the poet's early unhappiness. A great difference is in the ultimately more clinical, self-analytical character of Mrs. Sexton's elegies (or anti-elegies) and other poems. Another is the exquisite lyric purity she achieves over and above her energetic self-pursuit and self-exposure.

M.L. Rosenthal. *The Reporter*. Jan. 3, 1963. p. 48

Anne Sexton is, by any standards, a bold and impressive poet. At first glance, the unsuspecting reader may be jolted by the self-revelation that so plainly serves as the basic raw material of her art. . . . Undisguised revelation and examination—of her parents, her lovers, her friends; of the unbelievable torment of both mental and physical illness as she has had to endure them; of her struggles with a religious belief that eludes her but doesn't leave her; of the face of death as she has frequently seen it—comprise Mrs. Sexton's poetic cosmos. The eye the poet brings to bear on these contents of her life is mercilessly lucid; yet she can be compassionate toward others and is without self-pity. Her life, as must be clear by now, has been graced only slightly with what we ordinarily conceive as happiness; its occasional joys and moments of tenderness are wrung from the general pain of experience. Yet these pleasures and affections are the more precious because of the cost involved in obtaining them, and also because of the poet's strong love which brings them about in spite of the odds. Mrs. Sexton has further discovered an ability to introduce order into existence, to allow valued things to survive through the imaginative act that in the making of a poem can create its own patterns of justice, meaning, and love.

Ralph J. Mills. *Contemporary American Poetry* (Random). 1965. pp. 218–19

The literary quality of Anne Sexton's new poems, in *Live or Die*, is impossible to judge, at least in the brief time given a reviewer; they raise the never-solved problem of what literature really is, where you draw the line between art and documentary. Certainly her book is one of the most moving I have read in a long time. It is the record of four years of emotional illness, the turns of fear and despair and suicidal depression, a heartbreaking account. The wonder is that she was able to write any poetry at all. What she has written is strong, clear, rather simple, never repressed and yet never out of hand. Some of the poems wander a little; they are unstructured, they start up, flag, then start again, or slip into references too private for us to understand. But I do not want to give the impression that they are jottings or notes, that they are merely documentary. They are poems. They are the work of a gifted, intelligent, woman almost in control of her material.

Hayden Carruth. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1966–67. p. 698

In her third volume of poetry [*Live or Die*], Anne Sexton has fashioned a brilliantly unified book. Though thematically related to *All My Pretty Ones* and to her first book, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back, Live or Die* is more passionate in its intensity and more abundant in its desperate concentration on vision. . . . This is a crazily sane and beautifully controlled work. It is the Oedipal eye; its poems are honest, terrifying! And the voice is terrifying—the voice of the human being *seeing* the nightmare and the dream that is man.

Philip Legler. *Poetry*. May, 1967. pp. 125–7

Miss Sexton's is a poetry of the nerves and heart. She is never abstract, never permits herself to be distracted from her one true subject—herself and her emotions. It is remarkable that she never flinches from the task at hand, never attempts to use her art as a device for warding off final perception. Unlike a poet like Frederick Seidel, she is willing to make her connections explicit. Her poems lack that hurtling momentum which keeps diverse elements in a sort of perpetual disrelation in the work of Seidel. Miss Sexton is painfully direct, and she refuses to keep her meaning at a tolerable distance. *Live or Die* projects an anguish which is profoundly disturbing precisely because its sources are effable, because the pressure of fantasy has not been permitted to distort or mediate Miss Sexton's vision.

Robert Boyers. *Salmagundi*. Spring, 1967. p. 62

Love Poems is not sentimental, not trivial, it is simply not believable. The poems have little to do with believable love, having none of love's privacy and therefore too frequently repelling the reader; they have as little to do with believable sexuality as an act of intercourse performed onstage for an audience. Because neither revulsion nor amusement is a fair response to a poet with this much talent, one must, for the sake of the poet and the poems, totally suppress the word ''confessional'' and substitute the word ''fictional.'' Only then, when the ''I'' is a character separate from the author, does the woman become as innocent of exhibitionism as Molly Bloom in her soliloquy. One would not, even then, return and return to these poems as one does to other love poems of past and present, because their self-absorption is too great to allow an

empathic entrance. . . . However, it is clear, I think, that it is from Miss Sexton's almost incredible feats of ''indiscretion'' in attitude and image, her grotesque, near-comic concentration on her every emotional and physical pore, and her delineation of femaleness, so fanatical that it makes one wonder, even after many years of being one, what a woman is, that her poems derive their originality and their power, as well as their limitations.

Mona Van Duyn. *Poetry*. March, 1970. pp. 431–2

At a reading at the Guggenheim Museum, Anne Sexton—after three books of poems—finished one of her poems and said, ''But it is not true.'' That hall feels cold and artificial. It was a beautiful woman standing there, in a beautiful dress. The expectation and the gossip around one was of confessional poetry. Now this is a curious genre, one taken to promise a new order of secret, and one finds secrets that everyone knows; taken to promise emergent men, emergent women, who may bring to speech the lives of these generations; too, one is often given disposable poems, made without the structural reinforcements, those lattices on which the crystal grows.

However, when Anne Sexton said, ''But it is not true,'' a waver went through the audience. No, I cannot say that, I can speak only for myself. I thought. ''It may very well be true.'' She had cut through the entire nonsense about confessional writing, and returned me to the poem.

The issue in most of Anne Sexton's poems has been survival, piece by piece of the body, step by step of poetic experience, and even more the life entire, sprung from our matrix of parental madness. It is these people, who have come this way, who have most usefulness for us, they are among our veterans, and we need them to look at their lives and at us.

Muriel Rukeyser. *Parnassus*. Fall–Winter, 1973. p. 215

Vital as her early volumes were, however, *The Death Notebooks* goes far beyond them in making luminous art out of the night thoughts that have haunted this poet for so long. The book's epigraph is a line from Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*—''Look, you con man, make a living out of your death''—which succinctly summarizes the poet's goal, a goal both shrewdly ironic (at least she can write, and thus make a living out of her obsession) and ambitiously metaphysical (what is there to make a living from except death?). But if irony and shrewdness have always characterized Anne Sexton's work, the largeness of her metaphysical ambition is what is newly notable about *The Death Notebooks*. The seductions of suicide no longer concern her; the deaths of friends and relatives are secondary. Now, like John Donne, she is lying down in the inescapable coffin that is her own, ''trying on,'' as she tells us, her ''black necessary trousseau.'' In doing this, she has inevitably to define the death that is neither a handful of pills nor somebody else's funeral but, in a sense, a pre-condition of life itself.

Sandra M. Gilbert. *The Nation*. Sept. 14, 1974. p. 215

If, as ''The Double Image'' and many of her early poems reveal, the cause of Sexton's madness and its accompanying desire for death has been her woman's situation, experience, identity, it is also true that the affirmation of life at which she arrives through the acts of her poems is founded in her womanhood. ''Live,'' the final poem in her third book, *Live or Die*, helps her to locate the source of and reason for life in woman's situation, experience, identity. . . .

Being a poet causes Anne Sexton to understand herself as possessor of ''the excitable gift,'' because the act of poetry unites understanding with experience; its vision is insight. Though her poetry begins as therapy for her personal salvation, because it is a public act it reaches out to others. Yet it is always rooted in her personal self, her private life, as is the sun. It does not, like much of the ''confessional'' poetry of men, abstract or generalize upon its own experiences, either explicitly or implicitly; nevertheless, it communicates to others and offers its gift. . . .

Sexton . . . tries to explain how this gift works. Commenting upon her explorations of self, of ''that narrow diary of my mind,'' she finds their purpose to have been, not beauty, but ''a certain sense of order there.'' If she had tried ''to give [him] something else/something outside of myself,'' he would not then know ''that the worst of anyone/can be, finally,/an accident of hope.'' Generalizing, in other words, destroys the very meaning sought.

Suzanne Juhasz. *Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women, A New Tradition* (Octagon Books, 1976), pp. 124–25

To mourn the woman by telling less than the truth about the poet is to perform no service. She was, let it be said, a flawed poet who became more deeply flawed, as she made of her worst tricks a trade. I did not follow her career attentively. In a life filled with books to read and things to do, one may be excused for giving second place to a poetry that dwells irritably on the squalor of the everyday, without abatement or relief. Did no one acquaint this poet with [Matthew] Arnold's famous words?—that there are ''situations, from the representation of which, though accurate, no poetical enjoyment can be derived? They are those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done. In such situations there is inevitably something morbid, in the description of them something monotonous. When they occur in actual life, they are painful, not tragic; the representation of them in poetry is painful also.'' The amused or wry tone of some of her poems was sheer ballast. She was sustained by a long argument, and a *private* one, which might well have been carried on in prose or in a diary, about whether life was worth its cost in suffering.

She decided not. And in her last book, together with much ballast, there is an evil spirit brooding, and something more hateful than bitterness. It is hatred. A lover is addressed as ''Mr. Panzer-Man.'' He is the Nazi, she the Jew. Sylvia Plath had used the same analogy, in her celebrated attractive-repulsive poem, ''Daddy.'' How far does it hold? Do fathers and lovers seek to exterminate women who are poets, is there a plan to wipe them out, are they hauled from their beds and beaten and killed? No, it is not sincere. Perhaps the subject ought to be dropped: it is too disgusting. Confessional poetry, we must see, has come to us historically in two kinds. There is the terrible secret (Baudelaire) and there is the beautiful secret (Wordsworth). The never confessional poets touched neither of these bases. ''I am desperate,'' they were saying. ''Others are responsible. The world has done this to me. Look!'' *Life Studies* inaugurated the reign of a personal and debased mode

of the poetry of grievances; the author of that book [Robert Lowell] brought a few of his students with him; now they are gone, and his own poetry has grown indistinguishable from theirs.

David Bromwich. *Poetry*. Dec., 1976, pp. 170–71

Of all the confessional poets, none has had quite Sexton's ''courage to make a clean breast of it.'' Nor has any displayed quite her brilliance, her verve, her headlong metaphoric leaps. As with any body of work, some of the later poems display only ragged, intermittent control, as compared to ''The Double Image,'' ''The Operation,'' and ''Some Foreign Letters,'' to choose three arbitrary examples. The later work takes more chances, crosses more boundaries between the rational and the surreal; and time after time it evokes in the reader that sought-after shiver of recognition.

Women poets in particular owe a debt to Anne Sexton, who broke new ground, shattered taboos, and endured a barrage of attacks along the way because of the flamboyance of her subject matter, which, twenty years later, seems far less daring. She wrote openly about menstruation, abortion, masturbation, incest, adultery, and drug addiction at a time when the proprieties embraced none of these as proper topics for poetry. Today, the remonstrances seem almost quaint. Anne delineated the problematic position of women—the neurotic reality of the time—though she was not able to cope in her own life with the personal trouble it created. If it is true that she attracted the worshipful attention of a cult group pruriently interested in her suicidal impulses, her psychotic breakdowns, her frequent hospitalizations, it must equally be acknowledged that her very frankness succored many who clung to her poems as to the Holy Grail. Time will sort out the dross among these poems and burnish the gold. Anne Sexton has earned her place in the canon.

Maxine Kumin. Introduction to *Complete Poems of Anne Sexton*, ed. Maxine Kumin (Houghton Mifflin, 1981), p. xxxiv

Far from being done with the horrors he discovers in his pursuit of truth when he does indeed uncover it and blind himself, Oedipus does not find peace until he awaits death at Colonus, in the wake of years of blind wandering. The Jocastas in Anne Sexton's life begged her not to inquire further; when she did, psychoanalysis held out to her the hope of which [Bruno] Bettelheim speaks on behalf of psychoanalysis: that knowledge of the truth will set one free. Her truth, tougher by far than either the willed ignorance of Jocasta that cannot endure revelation or the mandated liberty of analytic cure, is more like that of the original Oedipus: complex, tragic, and visionary. Sexton did not, like Jocasta, find the sought truth and simply die of it; in the many years between her first exploration of personal and poetic truth in *Bedlam* and her death in 1974, she triumphed over her guilt and her ghosts again and again. The ''strange goddess face'' of the slain mother whom the infant ate—''all my need took / you down like a meal''—is redeemed in a dream of reparation and mutual forgiveness in ''Dreaming of the Breasts.''. . .

No resolution is ever quite so permanent as humans might wish. Anne Sexton could not be utterly and finally freed of her ghosts and her guilt in this life, and her poetry thus reveals these other ''complicated lies'': of poetry as celebration only, of knowledge as ultimate freedom. ''What forms the essence of our humanity—and of [*Oedipus Rex*]—is not our being victims of fate, but our struggle to discover the truth about ourselves.''

Diana Hume George. *Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton* (Champaign: Univ. of Illinois Pr., 1987), pp. 21–23

Sexton looked, usually in vain, for ways to stabilize her poems outside her increasingly precarious self. She based one sequence on horoscope readings, another on the remarks of her therapist ''Doctor Y.,'' another on the life of Jesus, another on the Psalms, another on beasts. The only group that succeeds more often than it fails is the group based on folktales, *Transformations*. The tales—Snow White, Rapunzel, Cinderella, Red Riding Hood, the Frog Prince, Briar Rose, Hansel and Gretel, and others—gave Sexton a structure of the sort she was usually unable to invent for herself, a beginning, a middle, and an ending. . . .

As Sexton passes into the anthologies, the more obviously ''feminist'' poems will no doubt be chosen, and there is no reason not to represent them. . . .

But the evil eye (as Sexton put it) should be in the anthologies too. This ''evil,'' unsympathetic, flat, malicious, gleeful, noticing eye is neither male nor female, but it is Sexton's most distinguishing characteristic. . . .

This is of course superlatively unfair to the doctors and to Sexton herself. But that was Sexton's chief flair—a knack for the flat, two-dimensional cartoon. Some of that shrewd caricature should make its way into the anthologies too.

Helen Vendler. ''Malevolent Flippancy.'' In Steven E. Colburn. *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan, 1988), p. 442

Words for Dr. Y., published posthumously in 1978, is the tenth and last volume of Anne Sexton's work to be published. . . . [It] contains twenty-three poems, all untitled. Because they are untitled, and because they are chronologically arranged and dated, they take the form of journal entries presented as one long poem: records of meetings with the psychiatrist Dr. Y., responses to sessions, examinations of subjects discussed in or occasioned by therapy, notes addressed to Dr. Y., recollected dialogues with the doctor. These poems catalogue the peaks of a ten-year history of fears, desires, failures, psychoses, and triumphs. . . .

Other familiar themes appear here as well; one short entry states that ''this loneliness is just an exile from God'' (*WD*, 10), and in another, where the mocking speaker declares that ''God is only mocked by believers!'' God turns away: ''And God was bored. / He turned on his side like an opium eater / and slept.'' (*WD*, 32), says the speaker to both of them. Evil and guilt appear here as well, as one might expect. The poet weaves evil into the practice of her craft: ''None of them (John, Maxine, George) has / the sense of evil that I have/evil that jaw breaker, / that word *wife*'' (*WD*, 7). Here and in another poem, evil is given the name of ''wife,'' indicating deep self-loathing in the very formation of this linguistic identification.

Caroline King Barnard Hall. *Anne Sexton* (Boston: Twayne, 1989), pp. 161–63

No one who knew Anne Sexton well was surprised by her suicide, but it was shocking all the same. . . . Denise Levertov echoed this

theme in a thoughtful obituary she wrote for a Boston paper. ''Anne Sexton's tragedy will not be without influence in the tragedies of other lives,'' she foresaw. ''We who are alive must make clear, as she could not, the distinction between creativity and self-destruction. . . . To recognize that for a few years of her life Anne Sexton was an artist 'even though' she had so hard a struggle against her desire for death is to fittingly honor her memory.'' She had been right, back in 1961, when she told Dr. Orne, ''You see, I've taken care of that 'live' part by writing my poems.''

Diane Wood Middlebrook. *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1991), pp. 58–59, 397–98

[In *Transformations*] Sexton's narrator is a modern ''middle-aged witch'' who proclaims her collection of poems to be a ''book of odd tales''—odd, perhaps, because she keeps the plots of the Grimm tales (pun intended) but tells them in contemporary vernacular and with popular allusions. The result is a synthesis of myth and modernity that forces a fresh look at powerful and cultural documents through which children's imaginations are shaped.

For high-school students, these poems offer unsurpassed access to the connections between tone and figurative language. Snow White's stepmother, for instance, devours the boar's heart ''like a cube steak,'' the seven dwarfs walk around like ''little hot dogs,'' and the thrice-fooled ''dumb bunny'' (thirteen year-old Snow White herself) gets turned into a glass doll that even the dwarfs can't resuscitate. Although Sexton's similes never fail to startle, they also bear heavy messages, both personal and societal.

Joan A. Burke. *English*. March, 1994, pp. 96–97

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SHANGE, Ntozake (1948–)

During the last two decades, American women poets have been writing about their bodies with decreasing embarrassment and increasing enthusiasm. They write about the sensations of making love. They write about sitting on the toilet. They write about their faces and hands, their arms, their breasts, their wombs, their menstrual periods. Necks and throats, knees and teeth. They write about giving birth, giving suck, growing old. Poems about abortion, poems about breast surgery, poems about rape, have become part of women's poetic repertoire. In sum, whether or not they deal directly with the self, or with sexuality as such, contemporary women poets employ anatomical imagery both more frequently and far more intimately than male poets. Their female audiences enjoy this. Male readers, and indeed conservative critics of any stripe, tend to be made uncomfortable by women's body imagery, to feel that it is inartistic, and to take it as evidence of the writer's shallowness, narcissism, and unseemly aggressiveness. More than one writer has observed the consequences of female candor. As Ntozake Shange remarks, when women writers ''start alla this foolishness bout their bodies & blood & kids & what's really goin on at home,'' their men friends usually flee the scene ''in fear of becoming unclean.'' For the issue is not in fact an aesthetic one but reaches deeply into the question of what our bodies mean to us. . . .

Resonantly female symbols in women's erotic poems plainly signal the centrality rather than the marginality of female sexuality to women writers. As a general rule, however, women in love urge similitude in love. Pairs are often called ''we,'' their genders minimized, their likenesses maximized, and ingenious arrays of nongendered metaphors help erase ''the hee and shee'' without erasing the physicality. . . . Ntozake Shange tells her love that the mental space his love creates for her is ''where the nile flows into the ganges . . . where the mississippi meets the amazon.'' . . .

As the female self recognizes its multiplicity, it sometimes moves into extended chantlike forms which structurally exemplify the possibility of an unlimited plurality while tonally and rhythmically suggesting a sacred and communal primitivism. Some of our most striking contemporary poems, composed for oral performance, are incantatory. Audre Lord, who constructs in *The Black Unicorn* an African-based mythology of a self who is female, black, powerful, passionately loving and hating, immortal and magic, frequently composes in chant form, as does Ntozake Shange. For both men and women black poets, the traditions of Afro-American music—field shout, gospel, blues, and jazz singing—and the highly rhythmed style of Afro-American preaching, have been vivifying formal influences.

Alicia Suskin Ostriker. *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), pp. 98, 173, 203

All of Shange's theater pieces, even *a photograph: lovers in motion* (1977) and *boogie woogie landscapes* (1978), unfold as collections of stories rather than following the linear/oedipal narrative continuum. John Timpane points out that Shange's use of fragmentation and collage stands in deliberate resistance to the emphasis on closure and completion linked to the ''white European theatrical tradition.'' The events are generated less from actual interactions as they unfold in the ''present'' of the play (except perhaps in *a photograph*) than from the monologue speakers' *re-creations* of separate dramas. The implied privilege of the storyteller to create alternate worlds, as well as the fluidity of the narratives themselves and the characters in them, relies heavily upon the immense power African-American culture has assigned to the spoken word.

Deborah R. Geis. *Postmodern Theatric(k)s: Monologue in Contemporary American Drama* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Pr., 1993), p. 37

INTERVIEWER: You have written four collections of poetry, the last being *The Love Space Demands: A Continuous Saga*. What is that about and how did the title come about?

SHANGE: This is how I think. This is my regular thought process. . . . It literally means what it says. . . . Now I can't help . . . beyond that. The exegesis of that you'll have to get scholars to do. . . . Black people want to know where the great black love story of their time is. . . . This is my contribution to ending this dilemma. I have two nameless lovers who go through their various stages of enamorment. This will help us as people of color define the terms with which we will approach one another since the AIDS epidemic and alleged financial liberation of women. It's a documentation of a great romance. Love among people of color who speak English in this country is constantly traumatized. Our personal relationships are constantly under siege because of the nature of racism and the nature of impoverishment. The brutality of all that at some point in all our lives penetrates the most beautiful thing we want to offer one another. So that's what it's about: trying to sustain a romance in a very hostile environment.

Edward K. Brown II. Interview. *Poets & Writers*. May/June, 1993, p. 46

INTERVIEWER: I thought that where I would start would be with a question about *for colored girls*. I saw that play, I think, in five different cities. I saw it in New York, in St. Louis, in Detroit, in Los Angeles, in San Francisco, and I was really struck by how different it was depending on the audience. I think some of the actors changed in it, and I know that at one point you were actually in it, when it first started. Could you talk about its construction and how it came about? It's such an unconventional play, yet it took the audience by storm. People loved it, and I think part of the reason they loved it was because it was unexpected. There was something different, something immediate, about it. Could you talk about how you constructed that play?

SHANGE: This presents a real dilemma for me because I specifically called *for colored girls* a ''choreopoem'' because it's not a play. I wasn't trying to write a play, because I was primarily a poet at the time. I think I had only written two short stories in my life; all I had written was poetry, so that gets rid of the ideas of how I constructed it. How it evolved is that I had worked myself up to being a featured poet at fairly important readings in the Bay area in the early seventies at some point. Since I was developing a following of some sort, people who would always come see me, I did two things: I wanted to have a new poem every time I went to read, because I knew that the people had seen me in the not too far distant past; and I also wanted to not scare them away, so that I would generally do fairly humorous or anecdotal kinds of poems and then in the middle of the reading start to go toward issues that were very serious and very hazardous to one's emotional health. That kind of art is essentially what I still do, because I'm not following a plot line so much as I'm following the surrender of my audience's emotions to the dynamic of the realities of my characters.

Jackson R. Bryer, ed. *The Playwright's Art: Conversations with Contemporary American Dramatists* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Pr., 1995), p. 206

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SHAPIRO, Karl (1913–)

As a member of the generation that grew up between the wars, I can't help taking a certain collective pride in the poems of Karl Shapiro. They would be good poems in any generation, but for mine they express with such unusual accuracy and poignancy a set of hitherto faintly articulated attitudes that they arrive as a kind of culmination. The bitterness may be more concentrated in the poems of Kenneth Fearing. The aloof nobility of Spender . . . or the desperate humility of James Agee may not be here quite equalled. But the peculiar affirmations and negations of this generation are focused by Shapiro for the first time in a characteristic idiom. . . . Like Hart Crane, Shapiro sees life with an acute urgency. But unlike Crane, in the mirror of a well-developed social conscience. And unlike the Marxists, without wishful distortions.

Selden Rodman. *New Republic*. Dec. 21, 1942. p. 834

The manner and especially the diction of Shapiro's writing is all from Auden. . . . In Shapiro . . . the borrowed style is an aid and not an obstacle; the result is a growing originality.

The source of this originality is undoubtedly Shapiro's inexhaustible power of observation. He can see a great deal, he has taken a long, cunning, and intelligent look at the important objects of modern life, and has serious and important feelings about what he sees. Yet this strength has, like most virtues, its danger and its weaknesses. There is not only a sameness of tone and feeling in a good many of these poems but also a tendency to rely too much on dramatic observation, organized merely as a succession of items, to solve all problems and provide the insight which the subject requires.

Delmore Schwartz. *The Nation*. Jan. 9, 1943. pp. 63–4

Shapiro is a developing craftsman, applying himself conscientiously to problems of poetic technique and illustrating the results in his verse. Much of his work is still in the experimental stage: his technique is sometimes inept, his poems sometimes don't come off at all. But on the whole he is coming along very nicely, and has already produced a few really good poems. Let us remember, incidentally, that very few people indeed produce any really good poems, though many spend a lifetime trying. . . . Shapiro is doing all right, working his passage to salvation the hard way.

David Daiches. *Poetry*. Aug., 1945. pp. 266–7, 273

Whatever else one may conclude about the merits or demerits of Mr. Karl Shapiro's remarkable tour de force, *Essay on Rime*, and

perhaps all the more because it is certain to be violently liked or disliked for an immense variety of reasons, whether esthetic, psychological, sociological or philosophic, one feels assured of one thing: this little book is destined to become a kind of literary watershed. . . . His ''attack'' is, one dares to use the word, masterly. As for the poem itself, and the prosody, if one finds it sometimes *too* near the prose level, and certainly oftener pedestrian than equestrian, and if it far too seldom delights the ear, nevertheless it is very cunningly calculated for its purpose: and it is questionable whether, by tightening and formalizing it further, more might not have been lost than gained. Let us be properly grateful to Mr. Shapiro. He has put himself in an enviable and dangerous position, at the head of his generation.

Conrad Aiken. *New Republic*. Dec. 3, 1945. pp. 752–4

He isn't a liar, he isn't an ape, he isn't just sad over the state of the world and the stars, he doesn't even bother to concern himself with humanity, or economics, or sociology or any other trio.

He's almost painfully interested in writing as it has been, masterfully, in the world and as it may be (under changed and changing conditions) in the world again. He keeps on the subject. And that's rare. More power to him. I hope he finds her rarest treasures—I am not jealous.

William Carlos Williams. *Kenyon Review*. Winter, 1946. p. 125

He can be tenderly emotional, savagely spiritual, and bitterly intellectual without apparently worrying over who is going to think him what.

It seems to me from his works so far . . . that Mr. Shapiro has equipped himself to handle the dark matter at the roots of the tree of poetry and the metaphysical sap of the trunk and branches as well as the mystical flower and fruit. If his apparent assumption that the poet is, in large part, an antisocial madman does not keep him too far from compassionate experience of his world, I feel that he may turn out to be that rarest of all sea-serpents, a poet whose work will be more substantial, more valid, and more perfect twenty years from now than it is today.

Raymond Holden. *Saturday Review*. March 20, 1948. p. 16

Fortunately, the Good Lord made Karl Shapiro a genuine poet even though He skimped somewhat on the logical and critical endowment. Despite the traumatic basis of their movement into compassion, a number of his poems reach beautiful resolution. Others explode ponderous themes—the ease with which we forget history's most dreadful lessons, the incommunicability of certain essential differences of tradition and life-principles, and so on—without losing their buoyancy and independent character as works of feeling with a design independent of doctrinal interests. Indeed, when Shapiro succeeds it is through his vibrant language and rhythm, his unabashed candor, and his irresistible emotional force that *will* bring out his true meanings even when he himself is not quite sure of them.

M.L. Rosenthal. *The Nation*. July 5, 1958. p. 15

Shapiro is at his best in his satiric poems. When he feels strongly enough about a thing to attack it, he finds the right form for his thoughts. His satiric lash strikes broadly. He cites the different attitude we take toward maimed things in the animal and human worlds, pointing out how from fear and pity a mother lavishes a kindness on the deformed whereas in the animal world the mother would kill maimed offspring. His satire is sharper in his attack on those who, denying their senses, harm the world. He trenchantly depicts the emotionally and intellectually immature businessman, the organization man; nor does he show any mercy toward the pseudo-intellectual.

James G. Southworth. *English Journal*. March, 1962. p. 163

He often appears Don Quixotish [in *In Defense of Ignorance*], given to rash overstatements, vexed by the static learnedness and wise-wishiness of many a don. Not all eyes are open to the view that his cause is good and vital. His cause is: (1) to ask the reader to believe in himself and therefore to assess the poems of his time on the basis of his own response, and (2) to ask that the poet believe in the poetic validity of his own experience and in his power to give new form to that experience. In other words, he asks a freshening of our view of what is original. The readers, the audience, should be able to find good things in writings, and the poets should find good things in life and art, things other than that which is established. Surely if men are to have or to do that which is fresh and unimpeded, they must value what is original and unassessed by culture—what is fresh within individual selves.

Sam Bradley. *University of Kansas City Review*. Summer, 1963. p. 277

. . . Shapiro is recognizably a rebellious egotist writing in the mode of Henry Miller. He also proclaims his philosophical allegiance to Sade: he aspires to nihilistic Satanism and inveighs against order like a true Sadist (not the sadist of ordinary usage, but a person who understands the Marquis' teachings and examples). However, coming as it does in a time without authority or firm conventions and rules, Shapiro's would-be nihilism has the effect of being highly literary, derivative, and out-of-date. Sadistic rebellion is so designed as to work well against a tyrannical king, but against a permissive and floundering democracy it is at most perniciously nasty without achieving any major destruction. . . .

The Bourgeois Poet certainly does not fail because Shapiro cannot write good enough self-prophesying incantation; on the contrary, his ear is still excellent though he abuses it, his wit is lively, his intelligence and learning are considerable, his emotions vigorous. Partly the failure is due to anachronism. But chiefly it comes from the way he confesses. This in turn is caused by defects of Shapiro's own self, defects which, in the days when he was a pro poet, he either did not have or else disguised and turned to advantage.

George P. Elliott. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1964. p. 463

The former compiler of *A Bibliography of Modern Prosody* now [in *The Bourgeois Poet*] seeks to be one with what is natural and essential in the poetic process, seeks to get in the swim, switching his old blue mantle (the-poet-as-maker) for a very loose bikini (the-poet-as-sidestroker). For him there is no question of a tension

between what is to be found and what is to be formed. Mr. Shapiro's is not a dialectical spirit; as I have said, he is a terrorist, and refuses to acknowledge the possibility, let alone the value, of an exchange, a mutual tempering, between what he calls with appropriate pleonasm ''the formlessness that should make you dizzy, nauseated and give you vertigo'' and what for Blake was ''mechanical excellence, the only vehicle of genius.''

Richard Howard. *Poetry*. June, 1965. p. 228

Perhaps Shapiro's poetic irresolution grows out of this inability to ''choose'' either the Romantic or the Realistic faith, or to choose finally to stand between them. The ''Preface'' to *Poems of a Jew* seems to reveal a wish that the name be *applied* to him as a sort of arbitrary grace whether the assigner be God, history, biology, sociology or the Gentiles. I think this attitude partially explains his own religious and philosophical peregrinations, his alternation between the synagogue and the cathedral.

This is not to say that a poet cannot be religiously perplexed and still be a great poet. Indeed, Shapiro's own best productions, poems such as ''Messias,'' ''Synagogue'' and ''Mongolian Idiot,'' are great as poems because they create religious and philosophical problems through their unorthodox inquisitiveness. Unfortunately, Shapiro seems unable to live with only the ''certainty of uncertainty,'' an inability which too often leads him to stridency in defense, or causes him to abandon the attempt to wring meaning out of large enigmas.

Richard Slotkin. *American Quarterly*. Summer, 1966. p. 226

In *The Bourgeois Poet* we find still the seeker for ''reality'' in an age when no one knows any longer what ''reality'' is (''I am an atheist who says his prayers''). We find a full recognition of the subjectivity of [Shapiro's] early ''reporting'' poems, with their so much insisted upon ''objective'' manner (''This is the camera with the built-in lie''). We find insights into the poet's self that strike us as true (''Longing for the Primitive I survive as a Modern, barely''). *The Bourgeois Poet* exhibits Shapiro in his chosen role as the primeval American poet, the ''man who begins at the beginning—all over again,'' the ''first white aboriginal.'' The role demands immense renunciations, which only future development of the poet can justify. But Shapiro ought to be heartened by the examples of Emerson and Dickinson, as he says he is heartened by the example of Whitman.

Hyatt H. Waggoner. *American Poets from the Puritans to the Present* (Houghton). 1968. p. 596

The main thrust of Shapiro's middle career has been the search for a technical means to liberate his passional nature from the overbearing rigor of his intellect. . . . In his poetry, his radicalism took the form of the prose poems of *The Bourgeois Poet*. Whatever the shortcomings of that book, we mustn't forget it is no small triumph to revolt successfully against a guaranteed blue-ribbon instrument for turning out the well-made poem. Merely to have closed the door, unalterably, on his celebrated old style and plunged into total risk of the new is a healthy mechanism for artistic survival. The book's positive force obtains from the impact of Shapiro's middle-aged personality on his youthful learned intelligence, as reflected in the contest between logic and the imagery of hysteria. Though he cannot always break the grip of his intellect, he consistently infuses hallucinatory intensity into the struggle. We witness in this poetry the drama of the critical intelligence, which knows too much for its own health, trying to free itself from insights that threaten to become self-devouring, and so attain a higher graciousness of loving selfhood. This conversion, when successful, is the essence that informs Shapiro's best writing. The freedom he has won for the subject, the image, the language of his poetry in *The Bourgeois Poet* is an astonishing breakthrough out of the fixity of his old constrictive forms. He has unleashed a kind of pure adventurousness of sensibility.

Laurence Lieberman. *Poetry*. April, 1969. p. 46

Few poets in America today have gone through as many transformations of style or as many varieties of subject matter as Karl Shapiro. Beginning as a modern formalist, he later renounced this work as ''trash basket'' poetry and went on to write free verse paragraphics; recently he returned to traditional songs and sonnets. Among our major poets today, only Robert Lowell has had more success with a similar triple shift from cerebral to visceral to cerebral verse. Just as striking are the varied configurations of Shapiro's major themes. He began as the poet of urban middle-class America, went to topics of war, eventually stressed the Jewishness of his work as its dominant ''undercurrent,'' returned to an assessment of our bourgeois culture, and finally, in his first really happy book, he revelled in the joys of conjugal love.

Not surprisingly, these larger configurations of style and theme have totally obscured another element in his early work—his Southernness. In addition to these major subjects of middle-class urbanism, war, Jewishness, and love, he wrote a dozen or more poems in the 1940's that explicitly concern themselves with aspects of the Southern experience, especially as this experience clusters around the two poles of Jeffersonian social thought and Poesque psychic moods.

Alfred S. Reid. *Southern Humanities Review*. Winter, 1972. p. 35

At 63, Shapiro has now published a new collection of poems, *Adult Bookstore*, in which he returns to the idiom and themes of earlier poems. The diction and rhythm are plainer and smoother, the verse possesses that simplicity called for in the *Essay on Rime* but missing in much of the subsequent work. Here at last is a volume worthy of that auspicious beginning, here is the mature poet in full control of his craft and his heart.

Shapiro puts aside his dreams of being the reformer of modern poetry and modestly sets out his own claim to speak in his own voice. In ''My Father's Funeral,'' he contrasts his memories of his father with those of Dylan Thomas, Sylvia Plath and Arthur Miller. . . .

The poet does not spare himself in this realistic look around him. In ''My Fame's Not Feeling Well,'' he takes an objective view of the reputation that has disappointed the critics. He does so with humor and in a straightforward style. Only a balanced man could write so balanced a poem. . . .

The title poem ''Adult Bookstore'' captures the mad world of pornography in a few spare sentences: ''Every thing is sanitary, wrapped in cellophane.'' The poem ends with a quotation from Shakespeare: ''The expense of spirit in a waste of shame/Is sold forever to the single stag/Who takes it home in a brown paper bag.'' The ironic omission of the reference to ''lust in action'' emphasizes how even our vices have been sterilized today. ''Girls Working in Banks'' offers the same idea in another context.

The final section of this book includes poems on Japan, translations of Catullus and a retelling of the myth of Philomela. The story loses none of its original horror and goriness in Shapiro's version, but such exercises are not what this poet will be remembered for. His mirror of society in wartime and in postwar America has been a unique contribution, and his individual voice speaking for the disenchantment and the dreams of his generation has been a generous gift to poetry as a source of human awareness. Now that he has hit his stride, we can look to more poems that reflect the many faces of man.

James Finn Cotter. *America*. Nov. 20, 1976, p. 356

Shapiro succeeds where other poets fail (Robert Lowell is the most obvious example) in making history a part of his poems, showing the reader an event, a period, a world that is on the verge of disappearing, even as it begins to engage our attention. He is a surprisingly naturalistic writer (Delmore Schwartz once referred to Shapiro's ''inexhaustible power of observation''), whose work provides one of the most accurate portraits we have of America from the late Thirties until the early Sixties. His poems tell us what it was like to be alive during those decades, just as his essays—written ''with gusto and sassiness, with the delight of an amateur filling in,'' as he says—rage against the indignities and excesses of those years. . . .

What older contemporary poet, besides Theodore Roethke, has written so many necessary poems? Certainly not Lowell, John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, or a host of other writers often regarded as more ''important'' than Shapiro, people who, in spite of their achievements, have given few poems to the common heritage of American literature. Who, other than he, has written this many poems known and loved by an audience beyond the confines of academic courses and writers' workshops? . . . It may sound strange to speak of Karl Shapiro as a ''neglected'' writer. But in a peculiar way, he is. While critics and scholars rush to sort out the confused lines and tangled lives of confessional or suicidal poets his age and younger, in a torrent of scholarly articles, dissertations, and books, Shapiro remains persistently unstudied. . . . One obvious answer to the question about the lack of extended discussion of such an important writer is that his reputation rests on more solid ground than that rarified turf in the groves of academe. By the popularity of his books . . . [and] the authority of his essays, he continues to enjoy that happy condition of being read for pleasure rather than merely studied.

Long known for his biting wit and occasionally irascible temper, he may simply have scared away any commentators for whom poetry is merely academic.

By virtue of his range of subject matter and his skill, Karl Shapiro is our greatest living poet; and *Collected Poems* is, quite simply, the latest and best evidence for saying so.

Michael True. *Commonweal*. Nov. 10, 1978, p. 725

Karl Shapiro is basically a loner whose poetry is related . . . to several movements and tendencies in modern poetry. The specific movements, quite well-defined in literary history, are the Fugitives of the early 1920s and the Beat Generation of the 1950s. The general ''tendencies'' are the Confessional disposition of many poets of the 1960s, and the Romantic impulse that has been with American poetry since the mid-nineteenth century. These are . . . ''qualified influences.'' No other term is really possible. . . .

Shapiro's habit of managing his poetry in a manner that parallels existing movements, while somehow maintaining individuality, independence, and distance, is characteristic of his relationship with the so-called Beat Generation of Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, and Brother Antoninus. Jack Kerouac, the novelist, was also a member of this group. Shapiro's defiantly titled *Poems of a Jew* (1956) and *Defense of Ignorance* (1960) were published when the Beat Generation was at its height (1952–1960). . . .

Unlike the Fugitives and the Beats, the ''Confessionals'' are not, in a strict sense, a school or movement of poetry. Such inclinations in Shapiro, like everything else, also predate the beginnings of the so-called ''Confessional school'' in 1959–60, with the publication of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, Anne Sexton's *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, and Sylvia Plath's *Colossus*. . . .

Shapiro's poetry partakes of the mentality of the Beats and the Confessionals (here identified with the academics), but with one paradoxical difference: his poetry ultimately acknowledges no ''Innocence,'' and correspondingly confesses no ''Guilt.'' From these qualities it derives an often stunning power, but by contrast and unfortunately, also the not-uncommon revulsion of so many readers—the price the author must pay for this so-called ''honesty.''

Joseph Reino. *Karl Shapiro* (Twayne, 1981), p. 157, 160–63

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SHAW, Irwin (1913–1984)

He strikes a fine balance between the sentimentality of the soft-boiled and the sentimentality of the hard-boiled. The warmth of feeling, the heart, the humanity that underlies his stories is genuine and moving. The pathos is not cheap and the humor is not facile. . . . Shaw's stories are contemporary to a degree and New Yorkerish to a degree. There are in them elements that in other writers would be merely a modish despair, a modish heartbreak, a modish ''social consciousness.'' But Shaw's genuine warmth and

rightness of feeling, his mature and discriminating sensibility, gives the best of them what one feels is a solid and lasting quality.

H.N. Doughty, Jr. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Jan. 25, 1942. p. 6

Mr. Shaw has throughout his career been a clear spokesman of his well-meaning generation. . . . As an artist he has been an exemplary citizen—devoted, energetic, too intelligent to be too pious yet too pious to be disturbing, his talents as a writer beautifully tuned to the intellectual pitch of his society. But at last, after its long period of sounding on one note—the note of political decency—this society gives signs of having to recognize the existence of a much fuller scale of human motives and values. . . . This is the new freedom that now appears, if only by hints, in Mr. Shaw's novel (*The Young Lions*). . . . Mr. Shaw has the novelist's power—if he has the courage to release it—to overturn the conventions of truth and dig up a few of the real facts about people and the societies they create.

Diana Trilling. *The Nation*. Oct. 9, 1948. p. 409

It was for this image, I suspect, that Shaw wrote his book: to tell what the army did to a nice sensitive bookish young man named Private Noah Ackerman. Noah's ordeal at the hands of his violently anti-Semitic company in Florida has haunted the reviewers into awe-stricken prose. . . . What they all mean to say, I think, is that they have gotten something really new out of a war novel; they have had a shocking emotional discovery of the cruelty in our society from a Jewish writer who is, for all his easy Broadway skill, driven by his experience as a Jew. Shaw has put into the story of Private Noah Ackerman all that Jews have felt in these last years with such particular anguish, and to see Noah there, a shy and liberal intellectual slowly petrifying into another Jew on the cross, is to awaken with horror to a victim who is more real than the millions of victims we read about, for he is familiar and yet absolutely alone.

Alfred Kazin. *Commentary*. Dec., 1948. p. 497

The Young Lions is a more mature work than *The Naked and the Dead* and a more complete novel than *The Gallery*; yet it shares their common weakness. On the first level, Shaw seems to be making a passionate and deeply human affirmation of the power of decency and justice to survive and even triumph amid the misery and horror of modern war. Yet if we look closely, it becomes apparent that these values do not arise out of the experience presented in the novel but remain outside and above it. Shaw, like Mailer and Burns, has seen the need for belief, but he has been able to objectify the need only and not the belief itself.

John W. Aldridge. *Saturday Review*. Feb. 12, 1949. p. 8

Mr. Shaw's people seem wonderfully alive, even when the author descends to caricature and burlesque. Like Dickens, Mr. Shaw has created, prodigally, a crowded gallery of memorable people. Like Dickens, too, he handles scenes superbly; from the crummy atmosphere of a third-rate New York hotel to the oppressive heat of an Army newspaper office in Algiers, his stories are firmly anchored in time and space. And he communicates experience with a narrative felicity and sincerity which redeem even a frequently far-fetched sentimental or one-sided situation.

William Peden. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 18, 1950. p. 28

I am inclined to believe that nothing Mr. Shaw might write could be wholly lacking in interest of one kind or another. For one thing, he always *does* observe and he always *does* feel, and even when he is facile in observation and sentiment he is not insincere. And then he has established himself in a position which guarantees at least the historical or sociological or cultural interest of whatever he writes. He has undertaken the guidance of the moral and political emotions of a large and important class of people, those whom he once called ''the gentle people.'' These are men and women usually of a middling position in our society. They are involved with ideas because modern life seems to make their very existence depend upon the involvement, but they are modest in what they demand by way of ideas and are quite willing to settle for attitudes. . . . In general and almost as a function of his good will Mr. Shaw has been content to tell his audience that decency is a kind of simplicity, that modern life is ghastly because it is an affront to simplicity, and that the simple virtues are all we have for our defense.

Lionel Trilling. *Saturday Review*. June 9, 1951. p. 8

He is essentially a master of episode. . . . And it is in the short story . . . that his talents have found their most congenial scope.

Many of his stories deal with Jews. Some relate their sufferings in pogroms and concentration camps, their aspirations and agonies in Palestine. The better ones, as stories, deal with their everyday life in America. . . . Shaw's material is fresh. His people come in off the streets; they are not literary derivatives. His emotional restraint often makes them seem superficial and reduces their griefs and tragedies to an indiscriminate misery. But, where his pity overcomes his self-restraint and still evades his indignation, he has produced some of the best short stories in contemporary literature.

Bergen Evans. *English Journal*. Nov., 1951. pp. 490–1

The group for whom he writes often appear as characters in his fiction . . . the well-heeled beneficiaries of mass communications with their regrets and ''higher'' yearnings. . . . It is part of Irwin Shaw's uncanny flair for what is topical in this world (which is the world of everyone, for its writers smuggle daily into their copy these bootleg ideas) that has brought him on the long journey from *Bury the Dead* to *Lucy Crown*. In a way, he is vindicating his repeated protest that he was not ever really a propagandist, though he wrote against war when pacificism was the reigning passion of the young (in *Bury the Dead*), then for a war against fascism when feeling had shifted in that direction (in his sadist-sentimental parable *The Gentle People*), about Nazis and non-conformists in World War II when the age demanded The Big War Book once more (in *The Young Lions*), about McCarthyism and Communism when the newspapers were trying to persuade us we could think of nothing else (in *The Troubled Air*). When no one seems to care about political subjects for the moment, or when at least they have

ceased to sell, Shaw can give up politics without a quiver of regret and return to the human subject, to sex and the family, as if he had never left home. . . . At the end of this road is *Lucy Crown*, the book an author like Shaw writes when the times no longer provide him with an ostensible public subject and he must do his best with his own *Ladies' Home Journal* kind of imagination.

Leslie A. Fiedler. *Commentary*. July, 1956. pp. 71–3

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SHEED, Wilfrid (1930–)

The easiest comparison is to say that *A Middle Class Education* is something like the early work of Evelyn Waugh. But the early work of Waugh was economically shaped; it never was prolonged or overdone. Here the trouble is one of wasteful size; it is a trouble caused by writing too much about too little. Yet a genuine glitter comes up from this prose repeatedly. There's wit and brilliance, concern and understanding; and these virtues help to compensate for the want of structural control, of firm ordering and economy, and of what Henry James called the ''angle of illumination.''

Richard Sullivan. *Chicago Sunday Tribune Book Section*. Jan. 29, 1961. p. 9

Wilfrid Sheed's theme [in *The Hack*] is . . . a breakdown in faith, but he deals with it . . . ferociously, indeed with the savage glee one has come to take for granted in Roman Catholic novelists writing about their co-religionists. The hack of the title is Bert Flax, a writer of inspirational stories and verse for the American Catholic lay press, a professional good man whose inspiration suddenly dries up on Christmas Eve. Much as he flogs himself he cannot bring it back, and he falls into a mental collapse. Flax himself I did not find easy to take seriously; but as a satirical study of life in a New York suburb, with Christmas in full cry, the unpaid bills mounting and last year's toys already broken in the basement, it is often very funny indeed, the reality behind *Satevepost* ads for gracious living and togetherness seen through eyes liverish from jaundice or hangover. There are some splendid glum priests and, to counterbalance them, an equally splendid militantly anti-Catholic American matron, Flax's mother-in-law, ever itching to hand out the birth control pamphlets.

Walter Allen. *New Statesman*. Feb. 22, 1963. p. 281

There is much refreshing [in *Square's Progress*] in Mr. Sheed's approach to the fashionable insinuations always being made about the deadly horrors of suburban living and the supposed enchantments of the alternatives. It is also a welcome surprise to find a writer suggesting that it is more important to be good than sophisticated. But despite many splendid satiric touches and a style which often flashes with brilliance, Mr. Sheed avoids the hazards of his subjects only by a hair's breadth. . . . If Fred Cope had been a little less stupid and Alison a little less mean, one could take them more seriously and believe in their solution more fully. Mr. Sheed's book is provocative, sensible, and often witty. But it is neither visionary nor devastating.

Robert Kiely. *Christian Science Monitor*. Sept. 2, 1965. p. 7

[Mr. Sheed has] an admirably cool comic sense, neither shocked nor much disposed to scold about the pettiness turned up in [*Office Politics*]. He uses his characters observantly but not waspishly to make the point and get on. . . . Wilfrid Sheed has failings of course. For one thing, he has no range outside the middle class and even inside it he sometimes seems to know only magazine writers. . . . Also [he] has a touch of sexual primness . . . and his books sometimes lack body therapy. Sheed knows what he is about though, and if he keeps writing books as witty and shrewd and entertaining as *Office Politics*, nobody will have reason to complain.

Warren Coffey. *Book Week*. Sept. 11, 1966. p. 4

Instead of being the ''exploration of a sensitive man's awakening into integrity'' (as we are told on the dust jacket—in fact, as we are told on almost every dust jacket these days), *Office Politics* is more a tempest in a teapot. Except for perhaps George Wren, Sheed's characters are essentially uninteresting. Their struggle for power is real enough—a struggle that can be as compelling in the small office or the small college as it can on Wall Street or in Washington. Yet, as functionaries, as mere pasteboard masks, these characters are pitifully without past or future, exist in a still-well of time, and their struggle is as one dimensional as they are themselves.

The trouble with *Office Politics* is that Sheed is successful in showing modern man divested of hope and expectation. However, when he depicts such men whose lives have given way to ennui, boredom becomes the subject of the novel; and like so many novels about boredom, *Office Politics* becomes a bit of a bore.

Richard Lehan. *Contemporary Literature*. Summer, 1967. pp. 445–6

[*The Blacking Factory* and *Pennsylvania Gothic*] deal in different ways with the theme of nostalgia. The nostalgia is of a special kind,

and perhaps it is characteristically American. It is provoked not by the memory of any real order which has passed away, but by a sense of blankness in the present, a rootlessness which threatens our survival and which compels us to invent a past, a lost Eden scraped together from whatever Technicolored ephemera our popular culture provides us with. The consequences are a rudimentary form of fascism as long as the lie is not confronted, and the threat of madness when it is. . . .

Sheed has a fine ear for the wry turns of English and American colloquial speech, for the clipped ironies by which we bring our crises down to a more bearable level of intensity. It is largely due to this stylistic gift that both of his central characters are so well realized. Under pressure, Sheed seems to say, we have much in common with the jaunty, wilfully self-assured stand-up comic of vaudeville, stationed on a high empty stage, urging his snappy repartee forward into the darkness.

Daniel M. Murtaugh. *Commonweal*. Jan. 24, 1969. pp. 532–3

[Max Jamison in *Max Jamison*] was born and raised to examine life critically, and this ceaseless use of the critical intelligence is both his glory and despair. . . . His dilemma is tragically unresolvable (he comes close to madness toward the end) because he really is too good for this world, even though he knows it himself. . . . The decent hero taking arms against a sea of clichés has always been a Sheed speciality, which accounts for his failure to produce a blockbusting novel, since clichés about art and life are the lifeblood of best sellers. But the even larger insight of this new, triumphantly intelligent novel is that criticism is not a mask or a pose, a way for egomaniacs to vent their hostilities or for failed artists to make a buck. It is a deep-dyed view of life, a creatively aggressive attitude to the world rather than the usual mindlessly passive one.

Richard Freedman. *Book World*. April 26, 1970. p. 1

Wilfrid Sheed is a writer in transition, but he is not a writer fumbling for a new voice. The distinction is important. Mr. Sheed seems to know precisely where he is going and what he is doing. He has moved from the deliciously brittle satire of the opening chapters of *Office Politics* toward a fiction which, while the dazzle remains, has gained measurably in depth and subtlety. . . .

Max Jamison . . . is Mr. Sheed's best book. It is funny, sad, tough, compassionate; its title character is realized in every nuance of personality; and the writing is splendid.

Jonathan Yardley. *New Republic*. May 23, 1970. p. 26

Wilfrid Sheed, a gifted phrase-maker and a thoroughly professional writer who not only knows what he is doing but does it extremely well, has created in Max Jamison, down-at-the-heart critic, playboy, lecturer, celebrity-about-town, and perennial poseur, a character who could be Everyman in these gloomy days. . . .

Jamison is painfully introspective, with few moments of genuine action. . . . There is a certain agony in his search for contentment, or at least some permanent opiate to induce forgetfulness. . . .

This is too dismal a view of a darkly engaging book, which may be read purely as entertainment, or, as I am sure Sheed intended it should, as a sympathetic, occasionally ribald, always engrossing portrait of a tragi-comic man, mired in a profession he no longer respects or truly enjoys, a man doomed to boredom and despair, with only an occasional slight flash of pleasure in prospect to keep him alive until the fall of the final curtain.

Robert Cromie. *Saturday Review*. June 6, 1970. pp. 39–40

Sheed is neither a propagandist nor a commissar. He does not come armed to the event, be it literary or political, with an ideological spear and a theoretical net. Nor does he inflict on the reader (and the event) some stupefying ponderous aesthetic scheme that reads as though it had been translated from the Quechua, which is not of course a written language. Books are not criminals to him, having sinned against history or psychoanalysis or the churches of Christ, Empsom and Roland Barthes. Sheed is a humanist, with all the intelligence and generosity, humor and wonder, the term implies; and nothing human fails to interest him according to its own definition. . . .

Indeed, what's most characteristic about Sheed the humanist is the care with which he chooses his subjects. He probes instead of devouring and understands without destroying. The self is not imposed on every book, person, and event; the self stays behind the style; the book, person, or event commands our awareness. Connections are thus marvelously made, consequences mourned, distinctions celebrated, grace bestowed, without the reader ever sickening of a literary self, an unobstructed *me*, all over him like an inky squid of ego.

John Leonard. Foreword to *The Morning After* by Wilfrid Sheed (Farrar). 1971. pp. xix—xx

[*The Morning After*] is a book of reviews by a brilliant reviewer who knows all the tricks and openly despises most of them. . . . Even narcissistic authors and corrupt reviewers, who after all usually know or at least nod to their own little failings, must enjoy Sheed's exposures of narcissism and corruption, so long as the names are changed and some of his own blood gets spilled along with theirs, as it certainly does. . . . *The Morning After* as a title makes its own point about reviewing, about what its pleasures consist of and are finally worth, and it's fascinating, if a little sad, to watch so serious and gifted a man daring himself to respect the work he's so good at, pointing at his professional head a gun that, for all you or I or he knows, may be loaded after all. Sheed is probably the best professional reviewer in the business.

Thomas R. Edwards. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 10, 1971. p. 7

By ''making it'' so thoroughly in America, Sheed may have lost the heritage that would have made him not just a good writer but a great one. I don't know whether his American readers are aware of it, but Sheed's heritage is truly impressive. . . . Sheed is . . . the living representative of four successive generations of men and women of letters, three of them deeply involved with Catholicism. He is probably to some extent trying to escape his heritage—and who could blame him? . . . Perhaps Sheed is reluctant to criticize Americans because in his bones he feels he isn't American. Perhaps his writing would have a little more edge, a little less

urbanity, if he lived in England and criticized English life and letters. . . .

Even as things are, Sheed's most telling pieces revolve around the possession, the lack, or the abandonment of roots.

Vivian Mercier. *The Nation*. Dec. 20, 1971. pp. 662–3

The detail-work in Sheed's account of the process by which Casey's contrary wills and many minds are formed is only one of [*People Will Always Be Kind's*] pleasures. The inside dope on the dealings of politicians and on the sordid highs of campaigning gives the reader another pleasure—the kind that has always addicted readers to the novels of major as well as minor old-fashioned craftsmen. The prose, the pace, the humor are pleasures neither old-fashioned nor new-fangled, but simply unique to Sheed's writing. So is a certain quality of moral intelligence, one graced by an unflappable and chastened sanity, a charity precise and unsentimental.

Robert Graves, who has been called a minor poet for over fifty years now, once pointed out that the distinction between major and minor writers tells us less than the distinction between good and bad ones. *People Will Always Be Kind* is a very good novel by a very good novelist.

George Stade. *New York Times Book Section*. April 8, 1973. p. 2

Wilfrid Sheed, the son of Catholic writers and publishers Frank Sheed and Maisie Ward, was born in England and came to America at the age of ten. He is today every inch an American novelist, however. He has ranged over a variety of characters and subjects in his books, and it would be pressing a bit to say that all are specifically Catholic. *The Hack* certainly is, though; it details the destruction of a hack writer of conventional pieties for Catholic magazines of the old sort—and the message seems to be that what we don't *mean* can hurt us. But his last novel, published earlier this year, is the most Catholic, the most American, and certainly the most powerful of them all. The title is *People Will Always Be Kind*, and it presents the life of a young United States senator from New York named Brian Casey who is running for President. Casey had polio as a child (as did Sheed, incidentally) and the novel is fundamentally an account of the affect of physical disability on someone of immense ability and ambition. It is, with all this, a fiendishly funny book, one that makes you suspect that a peculiar species of black humor is almost natural to Catholic writers.

Bruce Cook. *American Libraries*. Oct., 1973. p. 549

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SHEPARD, Sam (1943–)

I immediately liked *Icarus's Mother*; and I still think it is the best of Sam's plays to date—the fullest, densest, most disturbing and provocative. . . . I was struck by the play's smooth, mysterious ascent from cozy reality to high lyricism and symbolism, its debonair plunge into the sharky deeps of resonant meaning. All Sam's plays use the stage to project images: they do not relate to the spectator by reflecting outside reality (they are not psychological or political); rather they relate to reality by operating directly on the spectator's mind and nerves. The imagery is surreal, the method nonrational, the sensibility hunchy. It's always hard to tell what, if anything, Sam's plays are ''about''—although they are unmistakably alive.

Michael Smith in *Five Plays*, by Sam Shepard (Bobbs-Merrill). 1967. p. 26

Red Cross is a cool play—in the sense that it is dense, not brought to the point of intellectual clarity, embedded in a series of metaphors which are all interconnected—and because it is a cool play, it must be treated as such, *not* ''hotted up'' by filling in the seemingly empty places where not enough is said to make for clear, unitary, conscious meaning. (Two facts are relevant here: (1) Sam can be extraordinarily precise and articulate whenever he feels the necessity of it; (2) He is not a willful obscurantist.) Sam is more interested in *doing* something to audiences than saying something to them, and what he wants to do has no relationship to the purging of emotions through identification or total involvement. It is more like the way changing a room's temperature does something to the people in it.

Jacques Levy in *Five Plays*, by Sam Shepard (Bobbs-Merrill). 1967. pp. 97–8

Sam Shepard, the author of *La Turista*, is twenty-three years old and even so he is not new to the theater. He is not being ''discovered'' in this production. His plays have been off-off [Broadway]; in the Café La Mama reportory; he has been at the Cherry Lane and will soon be in print. *La Turista* is his most ambitious play thus far but still it is in the same style and voice as *Chicago* and his other one-act plays. . . . Formless images and meaningless happenings are peculiarly oppressive to the spirit, and the inanities of the experimental theater could make a man commit suicide. Sam Shepard, on the other hand, possesses the most impressive literary talent and dramatic inventiveness. He is voluble, in love with long, passionate, intense monologues (both of the acts end in these spasms of speech) which almost petrify the audience. His play ends with sweating, breathless actors in a state of exhaustion. The characters put on a shawl and begin to declaim like an auctioneer at a slave mart, or a cowboy suit and fall into Texas harangues. They stop in the midst of jokes, for set pieces, some fixed action from childhood, perhaps influenced by the bit in Albee's *Zoo Story*. Despair and humor, each of a peculiarly expressive kind, are the elements out of which the script of the play is made. The effect is very powerful and if it cannot be reduced to one or two themes it is still clearly about us and our lives. The diction, the acting, the

direction, the ideas are completely American and it is our despair and humor Shepard gets onto the stage.

Elizabeth Hardwick in *La Turista*, by Sam Shepard (Bobbs-Merrill). 1968. pp. xii, xiv

Except for *Melodrama Play*, the most recent of [Shepard's] published *Five Plays*, which has something approximating a conventional plot, his plays are all constructed in the same fashion. He puts a number of not very well differentiated characters into a situation in which an undefined something seems to be going on and lets them talk, either in long monologues or in exchanges that tend toward single-sentence lines. It is possible to find meaning, in the traditional sense, in his works, to assume that the bookcase chore in *Fourteen Hundred Thousand* is a lifetime task, unwillingly undertaken; that *Icarus's Mother* is about the bomb; that *Melodrama Play* is incidentally concerned with making satirical points about the pop-music industry. Yet the communication of ideas is not Shepard's concern. Of *La Turista* (1967), he told a *New York Times* interviewer (March 5, 1967), ''I mean it to be a theatrical event, that's all.''

Gerald Weales. *The Jumping-Off Place* (Macmillan—N.Y.). 1969. pp. 241–2

Sam Shepard, flip, frenetic, anti-ideological, is about as removed from [Ed] Bullins as anyone can be. Trying to describe a Shepard play is like explaining a taste sensation by quoting the relevant parts of a menu. He dispenses verbal and visual images that tell their own story and unravel in their own private world. They are about as accessible as Fort Knox, and one makes the effort only because of a niggling suspicion they are possibly as rich. . . .

Shepard is not so much obscure as he is disjointed. His is a quirky, fey, mildly Saroyanesque turn of mind which trusts its changes of direction as totally as the traveler trusts the instincts of the burro carrying him through the foothills of a foreign countryside. Which is fine for the burro and the traveler.

Charles Marowitz. *New York Times Theater Section*. April 13, 1969. p. 3

At this writing, Sam Shepard has published eight plays, finished a major work, *Operation Sidewinder*, which must be one of the best unproduced plays in the country, and scripted a new Antonioni film, *Zabriskie Point*. For quantity alone, Shepard's achievements are unusual for an Off-Off-Broadway writer who is also a twenty-six-year-old rock drummer. But more importantly, the consistency and energy of Shepard's work are beginning to give off the honeyed smells of a solid, if still minor, resurrection of values in contemporary American theatre.

Shepard's essential contribution—and I am dealing only with his eight published plays—has been to reclaim for the imagination certain territories lost in a variety of recent cultural floodings. He has brought the word back into a theatre where, since the canonization of Artaud, the word and all that it implies—literacy, literature, imaginative connection—has been silted up with non-verbal, sensory overloads. Total Theatre, Living Theatre, Participatory Theatre, Body Theatre, Orgy Theatre, Assault Theatre, Ritual Theatre, Myth Theatre, Ridiculous Theatre, Game Theatre, Light Theatre—this is the theatrical extension of the cultural milieu in which Shepard has been working out his ideas. But I believe his plays, taken as thought in a dramatic mode, have acquired a rather different, a critical and ironic, purchase on the central subject of recent theatre and drama, including Shepard's—the value of performance. I mean here performance as the shared style of a generation, the theatricalization of everyday life.

Renascence Frutkin. *Yale/Theatre*. Summer, 1969. p. 22

When Lincoln Center's Drama Repertory Theater set out to offer a season that would examine American life during four eras, it might safely have attempted nothing but revivals. However, its director, Jules Irving, chose instead to include one new play. Called *Operation Sidewinder*, it was written by twenty-six-year-old Café La Mama playwright Sam Shepard and is both fantastic and relevant to today's world. . . .

The play emerges as a memorable and imaginative scenario. We are charmed from the beginning by the Holy Modal Rounders and the ''rockabilly'' songs they sing between scenes. We are delighted by the blunt candor of the writing, and the playwright's lack of inhibition in treating charged subjects with an irreverent realism. . . .

All in all, this new production established Sam Shepard as an important and frequently compelling new playwright, and *Operation Sidewinder* as a remarkably contemporary work.

Henry Hewes. *Saturday Review*. March 28, 1970. p. 24

Despite my worst instincts I cannot prevent myself from mildly loving the plays of (as he is postulated on the pop-art cartoon cover of his all illustrated, all action, if-get-bored-with-the-play-grab-the-cartoon program) Sam! ack! SHEPARD! He is so sweetly unserious about his play [*The Unseen Hand*], and so desperately serious about what he is saying. . . .

Mr. Shepard takes an apocalyptic view of our civilization, and yet, disconcertingly, instead of moralizing at us, he tells us anecdotal jokes, shaggy dog stories, shaggily and doggedly stretch-stretching out to an infinity they cannot possibly quite reach. . . .

He makes jokes—echoes of old movie comedies, disconcerting jokes of realism to hang onto like rafts in a surrealistic sea. He mocks dramatics—to him nothing would be funnier than a fate worse than death. And he needs discipline the way a hemophiliac needs blood. Yet you cannot be uninterested. Or at least you cannot be uninterested if you are at all interested in the American theater.

Clive Barnes. *New York Times (daily)*. April 2, 1970. p. 43

Sam Shepard is a voice from the ''underground,'' a poet's voice. His plays are mythic. They speak of the contemporary world and subliminally convey a social ''message.'' They possess no specific ideology, they proclaim no prophecy except the ultimate doom of the present state of civilization. They express a yearning for restoration through the ancient virtues of kindness and human brotherhood, unity of flesh and spirit. Because he employs no philosophic identification tags, what he tells us must of necessity remain somewhat vague or ambiguous.

The Tooth of Crime . . . is a characteristic Shepard play and possibly his best. . . . To understand it all prosaically a glossary would have to be supplied. But even as it stands, with much which goes past earshot and quick comprehension, it rings out triumphantly. A good part of the play's merit is in its speech, with its ever changing modalities echoing different jazz or rock styles, crooners, and shouters.

Harold Clurman. *The Nation*. March 26, 1973. p. 411

Partly observed, partly absorbed, the characters of [*The Unseen Hand*] are a weird blending of authentic types and media constructs, as seen in McDonald's hamburger joints, bowling alleys, high-school stadiums, or in sci-fi movies, horror films and westerns. Taken together, they mingle past, present, and future into a pastiche of legend and actuality which describes prole America more effectively than the most fastidious documentary. . . .

As for Shepard, he continues to confront American popular culture with a kind of manic exuberance—not exalting its every wart and pimple, like Andy Warhol, but nevertheless considerably turned on, like many of his generation, even by its more brutalized expressions.

Robert Brustein. *New Republic*. April 21, 1973. p. 23

Widely divergent in quality, all his plays reveal his affinity for aspects of popular culture. Whereas the Ridiculous playwrights capitalize on sophisticated trivialization of pop art, Shepard smiles gently at its stereotypes. His first play, *Cowboys*, is lost, but its very title announces his affection. In his first surviving play, *Rock Garden*, the three comic C's blend; the dialogue is easy and colloquial, the self-conscious positions are redolent of camp, and the characters talk past each other cruelly. Unlike Chekhov's plays, where communication can occur in the interstices between speech, or Pinter's, where dialogue can deliberately veil communication, Shepard's competing monologues delineate the isolation of each character. This technique becomes deft in the *Five Plays*, each one pivoting on a single event: Joy gets a job in *Chicago*; a plane signals to picnickers and then crashes in *Icarus's Mother*: a bookcase for the titular *Fourteen Hundred Thousand* books is begun and then dismantled; crab lice attack husband and then wife in *Red Cross*; Floyd needs a new hit song in *Melodrama Play*. There is much rhythm but little reason to these exploratory sallies. . . .

Shepard's extraordinarily inventive comic range needs the scope of longer plays. *The Unseen Hand* and *Mad Dog Blues*, with their different language blends and lonely agglomerations, outshine the briefer plays in their respective volumes. Preceding them was *La Turista*, a metaphysical farce before Shepard had heard of Ionesco. In later full-length plays Shepard again wields several kinds of colloquialism, cruelties born of isolation, and anachronistic legends that typify camp.

Ruby Cohn. In *Comic Relief: Humor in Contemporary American Literature*, ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen (Univ. of Illinois Pr., 1978), pp. 299, 301

True West seems to be Shepard's most realistic work to date; the dialogue is natural and colloquial; the characters, with the exception of Mom, psychologically motivated; the action, linear and casual. Despite certain structural strains, the play avoids the obvious surrealistic dislocations common in Shepard's earlier work, while his distinctive aria-like monologues are likewise virtually absent. Even the setting of *True West* seems intentionally mundane. . . . In short, it is as if Shepard were stressing the reality of his play in the same way that the magazine *True West* used to certify on its cover that the tales contained inside were ''non-fiction.''. . .

It is typical of Shepard to mix the real and the surreal in his work. Unlike *The Curse of the Starving Class*, however, a play which it resembles in several ways, *True West* does not oscillate between fantasy and reality. Rather, the two levels co-exist; the one seems to displace the other even while the basic realistic framework of the play remains, more or less, intact. In other words, objective and subjective realities are not juxtaposed, they are superimposed; the ''real'' world is not simply challenged or questioned by ''alternative levels of consciousness,'' it is suffused by them. Shepard attempted this technique less successfully or subtly in both *Suicide in B*^{b} and *Buried Child*. As a result, the reality of the play begins to vibrate with subjective energy and meaning; objects become symbols; characters, archetypes; actions, allegories. . . .

Despite its objective reality, and its universal ambiguities and implications, *True West* may, in fact, be Shepard's most subjective, most personal play to date. Like the conflict at its core, the play seems locked in battle with itself: essentially an autodidactic writer, Shepard nevertheless imposes a strict, self-conscious structure on his work; again and again, unaccountably, he tries to pin down his symbols; when he does, they die. And yet the play itself continually rebels, breaks free, comes back to life.

William Kleb. *Theater*. Fall/Winter, 1980, pp. 68, 71

Shepard's plays can be divided roughly into three categories. First were the early plays, mostly one-acts, from 1963 to the mid-seventies: They are abstract collages, consisting of lyrical monologues, stunning imagery, and a sense of paranoid despair. The second group deal with visionaries, who pursue their emotional identity and spiritual freedom, even if it results in isolation and betrayal. Finally, there are Shepard's two great ''family plays,'' *Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*, in which the hero, *after* his visionary quest, attempts to discover if his new-found knowledge can redeem his past—and that of his country.

The difficulty most theatergoers had with the first group was that the plays didn't seem to be ''about'' anything, lacking easily identifiable characters and plots. But once one realized these plays were about pure emotional, psychological, or spiritual states—presented directly to the audience, rather than packaged in ''character'' and ''story''—they became as lucid as dreams. . . .

The second group of Shepard plays, which includes *Melodrama Play*, *Tooth of Crime, Suicide in B Flat*, and *Angel City*, concern the artist as visionary. One of the popularized figures of this media century—from Franz Kafka to Woody Allen—has been the artist who publicly exposes his deepest feelings and conceals his private life.

Shepard's genius has been to see in this theme a metaphor for contemporary life, to transform what could easily become an artist's self-pity into an exploration of the conflict between the integrity of self and the compromises of community.

Again and again in Shepard's plays, the characters are shamans—cowboys, criminals, rock stars, screenwriters—or mythic American figures such as Paul Bunyan or Mae West who embark on a

search for emotional freedom. Sometimes they reach a momentary ecstasy of self-fulfillment, but more often they are forced to surrender their private vision to the service of public commerce. They are spiritually kidnapped, their gifts corrupted, dreams merchandised, souls poisoned. . . .

In the last few years, the Shepard hero—who had frequently referred to himself as an ''escape artist''—has begun to realize that his quest eventually and inevitably leads him back to the family. The monumental power of *Curse of the Starving Class*, the finest ''family play'' since *Long Day's Journey*, comes from Shepard's recognition that the hero has no choice but to confront his past, to accept his blood and transcend it.

Ross Wetzsteon. *New York Magazine*. Nov. 24, 1980, pp. 22–23, 25

Shepard's protagonists only indirectly express an interest in the figures of historical time; rather than shape history and discover the names of their desires, they go after adventure, self-discovery and the authentic forms of play. Shepard's theatre incarnates the Cowboy of Interior Plains, the lumpen prole drifter, the shiftless suburban punk, the self-referential jazz artist, the violent and paranoid rocker, the ratiocinating detective, the off-the-wall madman. With his deeply ingrained Western sense of psychological rootlessness and space, Shepard's work is nonetheless prodded by a conflicting urge to make a home in the contemporary wilderness. Appropriately enough, Shepard himself entered the paradoxically open and enclosed space of the theatre not through the urban fastnesses of ''literature'' but through the ephemera of music, drugs, and the felt needs of an actor working in a decaying Eastern city during a time of intense theatrical experiment and social change. Successfully locating a place in the shattered yet still heroic American landscape, Shepard's theatre evinces a kind of passage home into the blood truths of second innocence.

In his rock plays of the early '70s—*Cowboy Mouth, Mad Dog Blues*, and *The Tooth of Crime*—Shepard approached rock as the extreme embodiment of his fascination with all theatrical forms. Rock was about much more than cheap thrills and expressionist license. In Shepard's view, America's ''temporary culture'' had defined and limited the terms of all performance, forcing the Self to act out the fortunes of limited identity in an atmosphere made feverish by the elusiveness of a more substantive freedom; rock offers a countering style of self-assertion, self-command, ''full of fuckin' courage . . . flying in the eye of contempt,'' he writes in *Tooth*. In Shepard's theatre, characters who aren't clinging, paranoid or nostalgic, to some remnant of a real or imagined past attempt vivid projects of self-invention: immediate, exhibitionistic self-projections, an opening of the self to varying styles of risk, violence and escape. Angry and disappointed, seething with thwarted energy and lost patience, they become the wanderers, outlaws, gamblers and musicians—escape artists, seeking a home in the moment, where the heart lies, merging role-playing with iconoclasm, leaping into the void to find themselves on stage. These restless, liberated *personas* overlap in Shepard's imagination: it's the cowboy, Hank Williams (not Little Richard, for instance) who's the Gate Keeper to Shepard's rock 'n' roll heaven, and Bob Dylan, the self-invented Gypsy Cipher of Shepard's *Rolling Thunder Logbook*, who can vanish ''like the Lone Ranger.'' . . . *The Tooth of Crime* . . . is one of the most extraordinary plays of the '70s, a sci-fi/primitivist vision uniting language, metaphor, action and intention at a level few American plays have achieved. Shepard begins with the assumption that rock is about violence, a sacred criminal violence with its own standards and values. *Tooth* applies the realization that if denied a living historical base, a continuity of myth, past and present, then such violence is empty, and ultimately self-destructive. Rock was the theatre in which an entire generation enacted precisely the same cultural disillusionment.

Robert Coe. In *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard*, ed. Bonnie Marranca (Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1981). pp. 57–59

By retreating from the ''carefully planned regurgitated event'' and entering forcefully into the world as ''play,'' Shepard cuts himself off from the strict social, economic, and sexual objectification that have always characterized American drama. For him drama is no longer a set of formulaic codes but rather an open field. Like the literature of Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, Poe, and Whitman, Shepard's plays construct a homemade world where the building of something new is more important than the architecture of the past. In *Fourteen Hundred Thousand* it comes out in the construction of bookshelves and talk about a cabin. In *The Curse of the Starving Class* it is in the construction of an animal pen and a new door frame. The effort is something like Thoreau's retreat to Walden and to the solace of new imaginative space. In order for the world to be new, a new set of boundaries have to be struck. Like so much in early American literature, the effort in so many of Shepard's plays is to create protective environments that will insulate against the wild perils of the frontier. . . .

Going beyond the themes and conventions of Transcendentalism and Romanticism, and the telling verbal associations that link Shepard with Whitman, one final link needs to be made between Sam Shepard and 19th-century American literature. And that is his recourse to mythic impulses. On one level the reading of myth in his plays is quite classical: the agon between characters of huge proportion (*The Tooth of Crime*). On another level the reading takes a different classical bent: the grievance of son with father (shown in embryo in *The Rock Garden* and in more maturity in *The Curse of the Starving Class*). But for a writer like Shepard, imbued with a whole range of mythic preoccupations that take him as far back as folk and Indian lore, the correspondences run deeper. Shepard himself says: ''Myths speak to everything at once, especially the emotions. By myths I mean a sense of mystery and not necessarily a traditional formula. A character is for me a composite of different mysteries. He's an unknown quantity.'' In fact, what Shepard seems to be saying is that his plays spring from the impulse to get inside this unknown quantity in order to see what's there. What's there, of course, is the play he is writing at any given moment. But through exercising the visual side of his imagination and sketching a scheme towards its conclusion, which in *The Tooth of Crime* took the form of Crow, a totally ''lethal'' and ''savage'' human who needed a victim, Shepard transforms the mystery into something approaching a known quantity. And yet only *just* approaching. For in no sense does Shepard seem to be writing out of some codified mythopoeic tradition but rather a naive American one that takes its savagery to heart and finds literary structures to exorcise it. As Hawthorne and Poe proved, the strategy need not be at all conscious but comes, instead, out of some deep emotional

need to show fear in the face of the unknown and the unseen. In Shepard's dramatic romances and tales fear is a wilderness with no path leading out.

Like those American writers with whom I've tried to connect him, Sam Shepard takes it for granted that the mystery is insoluble and will forever leave its imprint strewn throughout the imaginative landscape of both mind and body. It is simply another feature of his complex and eccentric design.

Michael Earley. In *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard*, ed. Bonnie Marranca (Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1981), pp. 128, 132

Operation Sidewinder was to me, and still is, the only American play that found a proper metaphor for the oppression and optimism of those demented times [the 1960s]. But it was as much a risk for the Vivian Beaumont Theatre [of Lincoln Center] to do Sam Shepard as it was for Shepard to venture above 14th Street. . . .

Up to *Operation Sidewinder*, Shepard's plays were written to fit the postage-stamp stages and beer-money budgets of Off-Off-Broadway. Small cast, one set, minimum props, the plays were one-act epiphanies of paranoia told in startling stage pictures and an idiom that began in naturalism and ended in allegory. . . .

The play dramatized not only the suffocation of a death-dealing society, but the search for new symbols to transcend the terror. Outrageous and threatening, the plot was a typical Shepard dreamscape of the society. A six-foot rattlesnake turns out to be an escaped military computer; black, white, and Indian renegades scheme to capture Air Force planes by putting dope in the military reservoir; and a Hopi snake-dance ritual transforms the sidewinder computer from military property to religious icon. . . .

The show lost the theater thousands of subscribers; but as the playwright Jack Gelber, whose *The Connection* (1959) started the American new wave, said, ''It was the best play ever done at Lincoln Center.'' Yet Shepard eschewed the play and the production. I saw him a month later at the Off-Broadway opening of *Forensic and the Navigators* (1967). Cigarette dangling from his lips, Shepard was playing drums in the lobby. He was happy among his people, and in fat city.

John Lahr. *Automatic Vaudeville* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), pp. 41, 43–44

We know Sam Shepard avoids publicity, hates being photographed to a degree uncommon in actors. . . . We already know how he feels about horses; he prefers them to journalists, also to real people. So, his writing? He nods an okay. We suggest he's being brave and risky with this movie [*Silent Tongue*] that fell through several times and was originally inspired by the sixties Japanese movie *Onibaba*. . . .

Cowboys and Westernism and Native American religious ritual and destiny is something Shepard's always written about. ''Yeah, it's tricky though . . .because it's so easily exploitable now. Since *Dances with Wolves*, it's hot. But I actually wrote this thing in 1988, long before *Dances* came long.''. . .

Shepard addresses the issue of what he's going to do for the rest of his creative life. . . . ''I won't make films back to back, and one thing I do know now. I can't do other people's stuff any more.'' *Voyager* he wanted to do because he identified with Max Frisch's *Homo Faber*. . . .

What do people expect from their scriptwriters or their movies in this country, do they want social stencils or do they need mere entertainment? ''Writing isn't respected either, writers are the low men on the totem pole. We are talking about entertainment here. And acting's only respected as far as agents are gonna make [money] off the actors. It's nothing to do with whether you can write a story or make some kind of emotional impact.''

Does true artistic freedom exist under any ideal circumstances? ''I don't know,'' says Shepard shortly. ''It certainly doesn't exist in this country.'' He laughs. ''Because it's hard getting financing.''. . .

Another thing: ''Somebody'll come along and say, hey, this is a great book for you. Well, that may be, but I don't want to adapt scripts. The struggle to do that is not worth it.'' Too many compromises? ''No. You're just not really able to do your own work. That's what's so great about writing a novel or a play, you don't have to answer to anyone.''

Except that even for him the theater must have shrunk as a popular medium since his days at Cafe La Mama and the Open and Theater Genesis in the sixties, or San Francisco's Magic Theatre glory days. It was there his best works *(True West*, *Buried Child*, *Fool for Love)* were playing in past decades. He looks back on his theater-writing break as a spectacular example of being in the right spot at the right time—on the Lower East Side, living with Charlie Mingus Junior among the Avenue C flophouses. ''I was just lucky,'' he says. ''But I'm no longer able to figure out who the theater audience is, that's the trouble. In the sixties, an audience was real apparent. But I don't know who's gonna pay $150 a pop, who can afford that? I really haven't ever had anything to do with Broadway.''

The theater's no longer the place where you find late-breaking news on the state of the soul—I suggest—because people like him aren't writing for it anymore. ''Whaddya mean?'' ripostes Shepard. ''I wrote a play last week!'' Or rather last year: ''States of Shock,'' a Post-Vietnam drama.

''I'm only interested in things that go way beyond the ordinary, beyond the mainstream of what people think of as good. I've always loved those old Japanese films about Shinto legends.'' Like *Onibaba*, his *Silent Tongue* script has that mythic quality and broad simple brush strokes, all the familiar Shepardian stuff like fathers and sons, ghosts and revenge, dark motivations, symbols in the tree.

Elgy Gillespie, *San Francisco Review of Books*. Fall, 1992, pp. 12–14

Sam Shepard's work has been a movement from the middle of a situation back to its beginning. All his work is, in one sense, a journey to the beginning of something in order that he or his characters can start moving into the venue from which they started; by moving back, they begin moving out and forward again. Their journey is not so much a journey outward—in the beginning of his writing career it was never a journey inward—but rather a manipulation through which he pilots characters into some groping for the first moment of growth, the initiation of awareness of their situations. The moment, and the movements towards it, are tentative, and Shepard avoids all the easy (and, it should be added, some of the difficult) techniques and rationalizations of behavioristic psychology and naturalistic logic in his ensuring dramatic treatments. Ultimately he comes down on the side of the manic monologue, an outpouring by a character in which reigning emotions and desires

are put forth in a dazzling self-centeredness. This manic monologue does not resolve the dramatic situation, but it puts it in a new light or sense of its ''place.'' From this point the beginning of insight follows; from this point the play announces its initiation of the drama that must follow beyond the physical confines of the theater. Shepard's sense of the importance of this kind of ''place'' can be seen in all his plays, and even in the title of the works—compare *Chicago*, *La Turista*, *True West*, among others.

Shepard does not plan his work in this manner. Indeed, his statements on his craft and/or his writing suggest he is an artist who denies self-consciousness. Yet it is a justifiable position that Shepard has a sense of what he is doing and a real sense of where he is going. In examining his work, and in following its sequence, a reader/viewer can see the good Shepard on a pilgrimage to the starting point of a journey. Curiously, Shepard seems to stop at the starting point once he has reached it. *A Lie of the Mind*, his most extensive treatment of themes invidious through his writing up to that play, left Shepard in a six-year quandary with his writing, unable to move forward, or, to his credit, unable to repeat his themes without a new approach to them. He was apparently working on play and film scripts without finishing any of them. Shepard's behavior is familiar in this regard—he is famous for his proclaimed dislike of ''endings'' or resolutions. Whether his view is a rationalized argument of personal defense or an objectified critical stance, his statements on ''endings'' denounce closure as a vitiation of the spontaneous spirit.

Shepard's first-produced play in six years, *States of Shock*, began performances at The American Place Theatre on April 30, 1991. . . . It is familiar territory in which the rites of charge and counter-charge, and the monologues of self-justification reflect a plowing of the ground Shepard has walked on before. Yet, there are differences. For the first time, Shepard's father is given center stage and all other characters revolve round him. In Shepard's earlier work the father was at the core of the drama, but the father's role was subordinate to the son's leading character. Here the father is the protagonist and the son is his foil. It is as if Shakespeare had written a complementary drama to *Hamlet* with Claudius as the central character. Indeed, the ending of *States of Shock* is reminiscent of Shakespeare's tragedy in that the son kills the father after the father has engaged in what amounts, for him, to a prayer—that is, a plea for understanding and a declaration that he will acknowledge his crime of family desertion as well as accept as his son the young man whose crippled state he despises.

> Martin Tucker. *Sam Shepard* (New York: Continuum), 1992, pp. 15–16, 164

Shepard's plays have gone through various ''phases,'' from the early metadramatic experiments to the ''rock'' plays to the ''family'' dramas—and perhaps his most recent piece, *States of Shock* (1991), is the beginning of yet another period in Shepard's career. But the division of Shepard's drama into these phases does not signal a lack of continuity, nor should one necessarily make the argument that Shepard has ''improved'' (or diminished) in a linear fashion throughout his playwriting career. Shepard's refusal to settle for the ordinary or the ''traditional'' (even, as I will argue, in his so-called realistic, or family, plays), his willingness to go against theatrical convention, makes his drama consistently worth approaching. Indeed, his works from all of his stages of interest share the trademark obsession with highly charged theatrical *language*, especially in the form of what may already be known as ''Shepardian'' monologues.

> Deborah R. Geis. *Postmodern Theatric (k)s: Monologue in Contemporary American Drama* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Pr., 1993), pp. 45–46

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SHERWOOD, Robert (1896–1955)

Reunion in Vienna is, of course, far more than another dramatization of a Vienna waltz. It is so much more that I have had moods while reading it (and it should be read as well as seen) of thinking that it is the wisest and ripest comedy every written in America. I cannot at the moment think of another that moves with such a lively grace and still keeps an intelligent head on its shoulders. . . . Sherwood has so often been compared with Shaw that the association of their names is no longer flattering to either, and yet Shaw has done so many things with a provocative badness that it is a satisfaction to see the same things done with a graceful finality. *Reunion in Vienna* is as modern as the latest theory of the neuroses, and yet it is a modernism that is now mature enough to have languors and regrets and nostalgias.

> Thomas H. Dickinson. *Saturday Review*. May 14, 1932. p. 728

In theatrical variety and unexpectedness of effect there is no living English-speaking dramatist the superior of Robert Sherwood. It is rare to find one of his plays which does not appeal to more than one class of people; most of them appeal to five or six. His plays are a

veritable grab-bag of comedy-tragedy-melodrama-farce with always a seasoning of serious meaning. . . . Unlike most Broadway playwrights, Mr. Sherwood has both beliefs and feelings, and unlike the propaganda brethren, he has a subtle mind and a sensitivity of impression which makes him at home in the region of the ironic. Moreover, he knows the world, the great world as well as the work-a-day one.

Grenville Vernon. *Commonweal*. April 10, 1936. p. 664

Reunion in Vienna (is) the first play in which Sherwood showed an aptitude for developing a good theatre situation after he had created it. From this point on, you begin to see clearly in your mind's eye the people of whom he wrote, and although you do not always see them as people walking beside you in the world, they remain with you in the shape of the actors who took part in his plays. If they are not yet people of the real world, they are real people of the theatre world, and for certain plays, such as *Reunion in Vienna*, that is quite enough.

Edith J.R. Isaacs. *Theatre Arts*. Jan., 1939. pp. 34–7

In *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* Robert E. Sherwood is tracing the career of Lincoln from the Thirties and New Salem, Illinois, to the day he entrained for Washington to be inaugurated President. It has been called the best play about Lincoln ever written, which it probably is; the best play by Mr. Sherwood, which is a matter open to argument; and the greatest play by any living American, which it probably is not. But it is a very moving story of one of the world's great figures.

Lewis Nichols. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 26, 1939. p. 18

What Sherwood most wished to tell (in *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*), I think, is summed up in a sentence Speed wrote to Herndon, ''He must believe he was right, and that he had truth and justice with him, or he was a weak man; but no man could be stronger if he thought he was right.'' To show us the weak Lincoln, to show us the gradual infiltration of a belief in the truth and justice of the cause he was called on to lead, an infiltration which met the resistence of doubts and broodings curiously suggestive of Hamlet, and finally to show the emergence of a man who was the champion of democracy as the justice of God, was Mr. Sherwood's task. With what under the circumstances is a minimum of historical invention, this task he has brilliantly performed, brilliantly because he has given us a three dimensional character and because he has not forgotten, also, that he is writing a play which must be effective in the theatre.

Walter Prichard Eaton. *Commonweal*. March 3, 1939. p. 526

There Shall Be No Night is more than a good play. It is one of those events in the theatre that explain its survival and justify the faith of those who see in it one of the highest forms of human expression. . . . The play burns with passion. It is, of course, special pleading. . . . It deals with events that are not only current news but actually, in themselves, violently tragic. Yet these elements are usually obstacles rather than aids to dramatic writing. Mr. Sherwood, in undertaking this subject, dared to measure his artifices against Finland's flaming actualities. It is to the credit of his skill as a craftsman and his discipline as an artist, joined to the skill and discipline of his cast, that the attempt has proved successful.

Rosamond Gilder. *Theatre Arts*. June, 1940. p. 399

Sherwood's world is very pessimistic. He hears the feet of trampling legions stamping out the vestiges of Western civilization. You cannot escape the feeling that, as in *The Petrified Forest*, he still believes that the old civilization is crumbling. The battle he proposes (in *There Shall Be No Night*) is a last ditch stand, which may leave the forces of destruction in triumph. . . . Sherwood believes in the liberal idea of freedom, the democratic ideals to which he testified in his patchwork quilt of Lincolnia, *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*. When he sees these ideals menaced by the philosophy of force, all he can say is fight. Science might save us and religion perhaps, but, anyway, we have to fight.

Robert C. Healey. *Catholic World*. Nov., 1940. pp. 179–80

Among the personalities of the literary world none is more currently conspicuous than Robert Sherwood, and few are more representative of this age both by their revolts and by their conformities. In the theatre he is not only one of the masters of his craft, but the one playwright in the lobby or in the haunts of the after-theatre set who overshadows celebrities of the acting profession without so much as a word on his part to call attention to himself. In the political world he is, barring Archibald MacLeish, the one writer who has found a place both in the government and in the scrimmage line of public controversy. . . . And he is perhaps most significant, in the casual way in which only Sherwood can be significant, as a phenomenon of the liberal mind at work in our day.

John Gassner. *Atlantic Monthly*. Jan., 1942. p. 26

My firm conviction (is) that Mr. Sherwood's plays have always lagged one pace behind his own ever-increasing seriousness. By his own confession he wrote the highly diverting *Reunion in Vienna* in order not to think of certain things which troubled him. By the time he had got to *The Petrified Forest* and *Idiot's Delight* he could no longer wholly disregard them, and in *There Shall Be No Night* he thought that he had gone completely over to responsible seriousness. Actually, however, he has never permitted himself to go beyond journalism, and I risk the assertion that his present concern with specific political issues is as much an ''escape'' from deeper questions too puzzling and too painful to think about as *Reunion in Vienna* was an escape from the relatively more serious things even then struggling in his mind for recognition.

Joseph Wood Krutch. *The Nation*. Nov. 24, 1945. p. 562

He writes a book [*Roosevelt and Hopkins*] that is a pleasure to read; and not the least of his merits is that being a playwright, professionally concerned with exploring the complexities of character, he

knows enough about it to know how much he does not know. He attempts no ''psychograph'' of Roosevelt; Hopkins was a far simpler character, but Sherwood does not always explain him; he merely sets down the record—all of the record. Nothing is extenuated; what needs extenuation seems to some of us trivial beside the accomplishment, but Sherwood sets it down anyway; it happened, and he reports all that happened, good and bad.

Elmer Davis. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 23, 1948. p. 7

This is an amazing book Mr. Sherwood has written [*Roosevelt and Hopkins*]. It is intimate, wonderfully intimate, and yet it is history, full-scaled and far-flung. Immediately it takes its place—a high honor—on the same slim shelf with Winston Churchill's *The Gathering Storm*. The rolling periods are deliberately missing. . . . A different kind of eloquence replaces Mr. Churchill's. It is the eloquence of extreme simplicity. It is as unlike Mr. Churchill's as was Mr. Roosevelt's—a fact which is not surprising since in the preparation of his speeches Mr. Roosevelt depended so often on Mr. Sherwood's aid. . . . The prose is unembellished and swift-moving. . . . It speaks the democratic idiom, movingly, effectively, sometimes humorously.

John Mason Brown. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 13, 1948. pp. 54–5

Written during the lull between two World Wars, *Idiot's Delight* is uncanny in its detailed forecasting of the shape the second was to take. The author was also singularly successful, it now becomes evident, in mirroring the precise attitudes of the period and their vulnerability in the face of events to come: the Marxist brotherliness which, in its fanaticism, was quickly adaptable to the needs of nationalism; the other-worldliness of science, which was to find itself not so much above politics as it had supposed; the British complacency, which was to respond so quickly, almost matter-of-factly, to any challenge to the status quo; and so on. More interesting than any of these things, however, is the sense of helplessness which pervades the play, the mood of surrender to idiocy as though idiocy were the only remaining characteristic of the human race.

Walter Kerr. *Commonweal*. June 8, 1951. p. 213

He was a lean, tall man, six-feet-seven, who surveyed the foibles and the errors of mankind with a kindly and somewhat melancholy glance. . . . Courteous to everyone, he had a sharp tongue for isolationists. He wrote with a complete absorption and astonishing rapidity, producing five plays in two years. . . . During the years of uneasy peace and war he came to his full stature, a kindly man of impeccable honesty, courageous, eloquent in the cause of democracy, and a humorist with a touch of irony. It is often said after a man's death that ''we shall not see his like again.'' It is true of Robert Sherwood.

Harrison Smith. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 26, 1955. p. 31

No stranger could ever encounter Bob without becoming aware that he was in the presence of a formidable brain and personality. No friend of Bob's ever found him lacking in warmth, sympathy or time when there were troubles to be met. Though he was no opportunist, though he said what he thought whenever it was useful, he made few enemies. Many stood in awe of him because of his deft and pungent tongue, but apt as he was in attack or retort, Sherwood was readier still to give mercy, happier to be tolerant than to be angry.

Maxwell Anderson. *Time*. Nov. 28, 1955. p. 26

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SILKO, Leslie Marmon (1948–)

Storyteller, I have claimed, is open to a wide range of voices. What keeps it from entering the poststructuralist, postmodernist, or schizophrenic heteroglossic domain is its commitment to the equivalent of a normative voice. For all the polyvocal openness of [Leslie Marmon] Silko's work, there is always the unabashed sense of the value of Pueblo tradition as a reference point. Now, unlike the Judeo-Christian tradition, Native American tradition has not been exclusivist; thus ''Pueblo tradition'' is more nearly a norm than an orthodoxy. . . .

If my account of *Storyteller*'s semantics, or theory of meaning—and, by extension, the semantics of other Native American autobiographies and all dialogically oriented texts—is at all accurate, then it would follow that its political unconscious is more easily comformable to [Paul] Rabinow's cosmopolitanism, as I have glossed it, than to a utopianized carnival. Thus I would align a commitment to dialogism with that reading of [Mikhail] Bakhtin and of dialogical anthropology that insists upon human and cultural diversity as the way things ''really'' are, an empirical commitment, and as well to the way things ought to be, an ethical and political commitment.

Arnold Kupat. *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Pr., 1989), pp. 199–200

Leslie Silko once stated in an interview, ''Storytelling for Indians is like a natural resource. . . . I think it has to do with community, with growing up in certain kinds of communities as opposed to others'' (''Stories,'' 18). The sharing of stories is, above all, a communal act: among other things it helps alleviate suffering by

guarding against individual isolation. ''I realize now how the telling at Laguna was meant to prevent the withdrawal and isolation at times like this,'' Silko says in a letter. From the rich diversity of her Laguna Pueblo culture she has learned to respect storytelling as an integral and necessary part of life. Her faith in the power of stories to heal and bind in a collective sense offers an alternative to [Alexis de] Tocqueville's judgment of Americans as isolated individuals who ''form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands'' (*Democracy*, 508). . . .

By attributing the novel to the thoughts of the mythic creator Thought-Woman (''I'm telling you the story she is thinking,'' says the narrator), Silko identifies her authorial role as augmenter and transmitter, rather than originator. In the style of oral performances the teller of *Ceremony* is conveying a story that is traditional and, through her act of telling, also new and unique. As Thought-Woman or Spider Woman is creating the story by thinking and naming, Silko the teller is conveying, interpreting, and augmenting. This collaboration suggests both continuity and change—continuity, because stories coming from a mythical deity are part of the people's heritage, and change, since stories are contextualized and re-created with each telling (while the feeling of a story is retained). It also suggests collective as well as individual input: Thought-Woman creates on behalf of the community, and the teller adds his or her input to the narrative. The arrangement forgoes individual ownership of the text in the Eurocentric sense. At the outset of the novel, then, the author places herself within a communal context of shared authorship. The story belongs to everyone. This strategy not only makes a statement about communal values but also sets the stage for the prevalent use of myth in the narrative.

> Bonnie TuSmith. *All My Relatives: Community in Contemporary Ethnic American Literatures* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Pr., 1993), pp. 121–22

In Leslie Silko's novel, *Ceremony*, the cause of Tayo's illness is a centuries-old ''witchery,'' which has possessed his spirit with evil. Through the horrors of being held prisoner in a Japanese concentration camp during World War II, and the problems existing from his mixed-up family background, Tayo experiences the feeling of being ''invisible'' to himself and alienated from his present-day environment. In other words, he senses being out of touch with his past and being alienated from the present. And so he needs to find a cure—one greater than the white man's medicine—a cure only to be found through the ceremony of sandpainting and the knowledge and know-how of a Navajo medicine man.

Within Navajo Indian culture, sandpainting or ''dry painting'' is an involved ceremonial ritual used mainly for healing purposes. An integral part of the Navajo religious tradition, a sandpainting is created out of natural elements by a tribal medicine man with the intended purpose of restoring the spiritual, emotional, physical, and psychological health of an individual. Believed to be greater than the ''white man's'' medicine, and lasting anywhere from one to nine days in duration, a sandpainting ceremony becomes a vehicle through which an individual finds his or her way back to health by becoming united, once again, with the wholeness and balance of the physical and spiritual world. . . .

The intricate and complex symbols, rituals, prayers, songs, and chants of sandpainting ceremonies produce a profound effect on the participants. In *Ceremony*, Leslie Silko creates a similar effect upon the reader with her portrayal of Betonie and the healing ''Bear Cure'' ceremony of Tayo. Due to her insight into the moral wisdom, beliefs, and heritage of the Navajo culture, Silko is able to show the significance of Navajo sandpainting as a healing ceremony as well as a definition which gives meaning to the Navajo universe.

> Valerie Harvey. ''Navajo Sandpainting in *Ceremony.'' In Richard F. Fleck, ed. Critical Perspectives on Native American Fiction* (Washington: Three Continents Pr., 1993), pp. 256, 258

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SIMIC, Charles (1938–)

Charles Simic is Yugoslav and American, skeptic and believer, a poet convinced, as he once wrote, that ''writing is always a rough translation from wordlessness into words''. Poetry ''attracts me because it makes trouble for thinkers,'' he has declared. ''Poetry is an orphan of silence. The words never quite equal the experience behind them. We are always at the beginning, eternal apprentices, thrown back again and again into that condition.''

In his new collection, *The Book of Gods and Devils*, Simic also returns to a ''beginning'' of another kind: his early years (1958–1961) in New York City. In ''The Initiate'' he writes, ''In that whole city you could hear a pin drop./Believe me,/I thought I heard a pin drop and I went looking for it.'' The poetry's locale is 14th Street, Hell's Kitchen and the old Fourth Avenue booksellers' row, where readers find the figure of a young man pursuing ''the great secret which kept eluding me: / knowing who I am. . .''

Simic was a painter first, not a poet. In his essay collection *Wonderful Words, Silent Truth*, published this year by the University of Michigan Press in its Poets on Poetry series, he writes, ''One day, two of my friends confessed that they wrote poetry. I asked them to show it to me. I wasn't impressed with what I saw. I went home and wrote some poems myself in order to demonstrate to them how it's supposed to be done. At first, the act of writing and the initial impression were exhilarating. Then, to my astonishment, I realized that my poems were as stupid as theirs were. I couldn't figure it out . . . [but] in the process of writing, I discovered a part of myself, an imagination and a need to articulate certain things, that I could not afterwards forget.''

His first published poems appeared in the winter 1959 issue of the *Chicago Review*. Simic enthusiastically accepted many influences—Edgar Lee Masters, Vachel Lindsay, Ezra Pound, Walt Whitman, Hart Crane. But while serving in the U.S. Army in 1962, he destroyed his work to date and started over again. As he

explained in a 1972 interview, ''When confronted with the life I was leading at the time, [the poems] struck me as no more than literary vomit. . . . Life and its intensity had conquered.''

The struggle that followed was difficult and prolonged. The results led Simic to join ''a generation of writers who are committed to experimentalism, so much so that I'm struck by the timidity and predictability of a lot of writing today. I read books and get mad. In American poetry at the moment, 75% of American experience is invisible.'' Simic's first book, *What the Grass Says*, was published by Kayak Press in 1967. ''It had a tremendous circulation—something like 27 reviews,'' and was followed by *Somewhere Among Us a Stone Is Taking Notes*, also a Kayak release. . . .

Simic has also translated more than half a dozen volumes of poetry, among these the work of Ivan Lalic, Vasko Popa (''an enormous influence on me'') and Tomaz Salamun. ''In order to do a translation, you have to be a kind of a shaman—you have to pretend, for a moment, that you're somebody else. You realize that the other person is very different from you—*disgustingly* different. That's fascinating.''. . .

''*The World Doesn't End* happened without too much deliberation,'' Simic maintains, marveling at winning the Pulitzer ''lottery.'' What did the prose poem form offer him that poetry had not? ''A lyric impulse is an impulse in which everything stands still,'' he replies. ''It's like a song that repeats. Nothing ever happens in a lyric poem. It's a great acknowledgment of the present moment. In a prose sentence, however, things *do* happen. A prose poem is a dialectic between the two. You write in sentences, and tell a story, but the piece is like a poem because it circles back on itself.

''Books of poems—it takes a long time for the writer to really understand what's inside them,'' he admits. ''It's like being in a period of your life.'' Simic reflects on the version of himself that appears in *The Book of Gods and Devils*. ''It's amusing to see oneself at that distance. It isn't personal anymore. As you get older, the subject of a poem is astonishment at what is before you. It's almost a religious experience, one of standing apart and seeing yourself in awe before the world.''

Molly McQuade. *Publishers Weekly*, November 2, 1990, pp. 56–7.

It will come as no surprise to anyone who has read Charles Simic's *The World Doesn't End* that the book won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. This collection of untitled prose poems may well be the poet's strongest to date, not the least of its charm being, as he writes in one poem, that it ''can be so easily dismissed as preposterous.'' Indeed, it is in the prose poem that Simic appears to have found the most fluid vehicle for his poetry.

Since he first began publishing his neo-surrealist work in the mid-1960s, Simic has always possessed the ability to startle his readers with new ways of viewing the world. ''Go inside a stone/ That would be my way,'' he says in the frequently anthologized ''Stone,'' and in fact one of Simic's great powers is his ability to scrutinize the sort of seemingly mundane objects and situations which we often overlook in everyday life and find wonders hidden in them. In *The World Doesn't End*, the poet continues his investigations of these ordinary mysteries in prose which is so lovely, so non-*prosaic* that it will surprise anyone who has dismissed the prose poem as ''anti-poetry.''

The book is divided into three sections of prose poems, each part dotted with several free verse miniatures or epigrams like ''History Lesson''—''The roaches look like / Comic rustics / In serious dramas''—and ''My Secret Identity Is''—''The room is empty,/And the window is open[.]'' The prose poems are typically based on a surrealistic premise which is described in precise, domestic detail. . . . The poems range in length from nearly a full page to single whimsical sentences like, ''O the great God of Theory, he's just a pencil stub with a worn eraser at the end of a huge scribble.'' And they range in tone from extremely playful—''At least four or five Hamlets on this block alone''—to very dark. ''The stone is a mirror which works poorly,'' Simic writes in one poem which seems to reject the optimism of ''Stone'' ''Nothing in it but dimness. Your dimness or its dimness, who's to say? In the hush your heart sounds like a black cricket.''

Simic, who emigrated to the United States from Yugoslavia in 1949 when he was eleven years old, has frequently countered arguments that his poems are full of wild, impossible images by replying that the world of his poems actually existed, that he saw it as a boy in World War II. And, clearly, a number of the poems in Part I are ''autobiographical'' in that they describe the terrors of war as they must have appeared to a child: ''My mother was a braid of black smoke. She bore me swaddled over the burning cities.'' ''We were so poor I had to take the place of the bait in the mousetrap.'' ''The city had fallen. We came to the window of a house drawn by a madman. The setting sun shone on a few abandoned machines of futility.''

The second and third sections include a variety of meditations on everything from art and philosophy to the tenor of the century (it is a ''century of gathering clouds. Ghost ships arriving and leaving''), but all the poems attempt to bring contradictory ideas and images together and, if not resolve them, at least point to the comedy or tragedy behind the poems' incongruities: ''It's so quiet in the world. One can hear the old river, which in its confusion sometimes forgets and flows backwards.'' Appropriately, ''Let's waltz the rumba'' (a song lyric by Fats Waller) is the epigraph to *The World Doesn't End*.

If there is one fault in this lovely book it is the lack of poem titles, which have always been one of Simic's fortes. ''Concerning My Neighbors the Hittites,'' ''Baby Pictures of Famous Dictators,'' ''My Weariness of Epic Proportions,'' and ''Early Evening Algebra'' are only a few examples of his past inventiveness. Granted, the collection may be more coherent as a book without titles, but surely a number of gems have been lost.

However, the fact that the chief complaint against a book is that it has no titles should indicate the book's excellence. Future critics will have the final say, but it may not be an exaggeration to assert that *The World Doesn't End* can stand with any other book of prose poems since Baudelaire's *Paris Spleen*, the volume which more or less defined the genre. The French poet had asked, ''Which one of us, in his moments of ambition, has not dreamed of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical, without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of reverie, the jibes of conscience?'' Certainly Charles Simic has had just such a dream, and if he has not fulfilled it entirely, it may not be our place to ask that any poet come much closer to perfection.

David Starkey. *Southern Humanities Review*. Winter, 1991, pp. 101–02.

At the opening of Charles Simic's book-length poem *White,* the author hesitates before the blank page, poised for another ''raid on the inarticulate'':

Out of poverty
to begin again
With the color of the bride
And that of blindness,
Touch what I can
Of the quick
Speak and then wait,
As if this light
Will continue to linger
On the threshold

The passage aptly summarizes Simic's poetic project as it voices his desire to articulate a mythic primeval world existing in a silence beyond speech, a world which he has elsewhere described as ''one notch below language . . . that place of original action and desire . . . a world where magic is possible, where chance reigns, where metaphors have their supreme logic, where imagination is free and truthful.'' In the figure of the bride the passage hints at the fulfillment, at once ritual and erotic, which the approach to that archetypal realm promises. Yet the poem, in the rigor of its terse, minimalist lines no less than in its open acknowledgment of the poverty of the poet's language and imagination, promises no shortcut to transcendence. If the mute world is to speak, the poet must listen as much as he talks, and if illumination is to come, it is likely to pass in a moment. More ominously, the mention of blindness hints that it may not come at all.

In the mid-1960s, when he first began publishing poetry, Simic's obsession with this silent world, with what used to be called the sublime, effectively bracketed him with that group of American poets loosely known as the Deep Imagists, the most prominent of whom were Robert Bly and W.S. Merwin. Like them, Simic could point to the influence of Theodore Roethke and the surrealists on the visionary, dreamlike structures of his poems. (Like Bly and Merwin, Simic also would become a prolific translator of his influences, especially eastern European poets like Vasko Popa and Ivan Lalić.) Following the deep Imagists, much of Simic's early verse seeks through a concentrated effort of attention to reach toward a realm of pastoral stillness. In ''Evening'' he writes,

The snail gives off stillness.
The weed is blessed.
At the end of a long day
The man finds joy, the water peace.
Let all be simple. Let all stand still
Without a final direction.
That which brings you into the world
To take you away at death
Is one and the same;
The shadow long and pointy
Is its church

Yet the successful rapproachment with such a blissful silence is comparatively rare in Simic's work. There are other elements in his poetic voice, a sense of humor at once dark and playful, an unflinching recognition of the political horrors of the twentieth century (acquired during the poet's childhood in wartime Yugoslavia), and a consequent suspicion of the very cosmos he would interrogate. These elements give Simic's poems a jaggedly ironic edge and save him from the occasional complacencies of his deep Imagist counterparts.

This ambivalent tone is well captured in the title poem of Simic's first major collection, *Dismantling the Silence,* wherein the archetypal poetic encounter with the sublime is rendered as a clinical, macabre dissection suffused with dread:

Take down its ears first
Carefully so they don't spill over.
With a sharp whistle slit its belly open.
If there are ashes in it, close your eyes
And blow them whichever way the wind is pointing.
If there's water, sleeping water,
Bring the root of a plant that hasn't drunk for a month.
When you reach the bones,
And you haven't got a pack of dogs with you,
And you haven't got a pine coffin
And a wagon pulled by oxen to make them rattle,
Slip them quickly under your skin,
Next time you pick up your sack,
You'll hear them setting your teeth on edge . . .

It is this dread, concentrated around the ghostly, disembodied objects of an unpeopled universe, that defines the world of Simic's early poetry. It is a landscape which seems at once lost in a distant past—the anthropomorphic world of primitive folklore—and curiously contemporary—the stuff of postapocalyptic nightmare. Through this landscape Simic's detached, precise voice picks its ironic way, interrogating one discarded artifact after another, searching for an answer to the bloody riddle of modern history. Often, as in ''Fork,'' that answer seems to point to some primal ignorance and violence shared by humans and animals alike:

This strange thing must have crept
Right out of hell
It resembles a bird's foot
Worn around the cannibal's neck.
As you hold it in your hand,
As you stab with it into a piece of meat,
It is possible to imagine the rest of the bird:
Its head which like your fist
Is large, bald, beakless and blind.

Such poems, balanced as they are between a terse, matter-of-fact narrator and stark, surrealist imagery, carry a tremendous visceral jolt. But they run the risk of burning out their reader, who may be able to endure only so many of these metaphoric shocks before becoming jaded. Hence, in later works Simic has moved away from the hyper-surrealist image, the mordant one-liner, which in his early work was expected to carry the weight of the entire poem. Simic's later verse is quieter, more relaxed, and if it is no less pessimistic, its despair seems diffused throughout the poem, rather than concentrated in a single moment of shock. For the Kafkaesque slaughterhouse of wartime Europe a poem like ''The Partial Explanation'' substitutes the curious emptiness and alienation of postwar America:

Seems like a long time
Since the waiter took my order
Grimy little luncheonette,

The snow falling outside.
Seems like it has grown darker
Since I last heard the kitchen door
Behind my back
Since I last noticed
Anyone pass on the street.
A glass of ice water
Keeps me company
At this table I chose myself
Upon entering
And a longing
Incredible longing
To eavesdrop
On the conversation
Of cooks

Though the settings of these poems remain strangely anonymous, virtually unplaceable in place or time, Simic's universe has gradually acquired a sprinkling of human occupants, and his later poetry has seemed to reach out to such characters in gestures of genuine, if somewhat muted, empathy. In a poem like ''Toward Nightfall,'' from the 1986 collection *Unending Blues,* all of the familiar elements of Simic's verse are assembled—the scaffolds, the bare trees, the smell of spilled blood, the monsters (this time on movie posters)—but the poem ends by reflecting the weight of these elements upon a very human center:

The old man never learned
To read well, and so
Reads on in that half-whisper,
And in that half light
Verging on the dark,
About that day's tragedies
Which supposedly are not
Tragedies in the absence of
Figures endowed with
Classic nobility of soul.

With their spare, even tranquil movement, these poems bring a new, intersubjective dimension to the silence that has never been far from the surface in Simic's work, offering an alternative to the minimalist rigor of his earlier verse.

Anthony G. Stocks. In *Contemporary Poets, 6th edition*, ed. Thomas Riggs (St. James Press, 1996).

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SIMON, Neil (1927–)

Strictly New York in style is Neil Simon's *Come Blow Your Horn*. This new comedy follows one sound rule: When the doorbell rings it must always be the person the characters least want or expect at that particular moment. Beyond that it has, during a substantial portion of the evening, some very funny behavior by three good characters. One is a twenty-one-year-old over protected son facing his first seduction with amusing trepidation. Another is his plump but harried and dyspeptic mother who takes all the brunt of strained father-and-son relations. And best of all is his father, a stubborn Jewish patriarch with an unbeatable technique for turning all his son's reasonable arguments into disgraceful, impious assaults on his just position and his paternal generosity.

Henry Hewes. *Saturday Review*. March 11, 1961. p. 38

The enormous effectiveness of such facetious and arbitrary goings-on may come from the fact that we all recognize how accurately these incidents catch the flavor of starting out married life in today's mad Manhattan. Nowhere else is one called upon to adjust to so much illogical and unusual environment so quickly.

Beyond this, *Barefoot in the Park* manages again and again to achieve the special kind of humor we associate with *New Yorker* cartoons. It is a humor based upon our absurdly casual acceptance of and ways of dealing with contemporary civilization's enforced incongruities.

Henry Hewes. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 9, 1963. p. 32

According to Mike Nichols, who directed *Barefoot in the Park* . . . Simon's genius is for ''comedy and reality, extremely distorted but recognizable, not zany behavior.'' . . . Simon specializes in comic suspense. Who is going to walk through the door next—and when? Even if the audience knows the answer, it savors the confrontation before, during, and after it happens. . . .

Another Simon trademark is repetition. ''His humor has an almost musical rhythm,'' says Stanley Prager, the onetime musical comedy clown who directed *Come Blow Your Horn*. ''He's as aware of the value of reprises as Richard Rodgers is. In fact, he constructs his plays the way a composer might construct a score.''

Alan Levy. *New York Times Book Section mag*. March 7, 1965. pp. 42–3

Neil Simon has followed up *Barefoot in the Park* with *The Odd Couple*, another farce that may well run forever. I find it less good; nothing much more than a joke-book tossed up on the stage. Some

of the jokes are amusing, most of the acting and staging is as cleverly efficient as can be, but the plot is too specious even for farce, and the characters are militantly nonexistent.

John Simon. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1965. p. 251

This ''man's'' show [*The Odd Couple*] . . . is a sort of prolonged and funraising television sketch based on the proposition that two men living together may annoy each other just as much as any mismated husband and wife. There are other incidental sources of laughter, undoubtedly provoked by the pleasure of recognition, although when it comes down to it, *I* don't meet the fellows every Friday night for a game, nor do I often take part in or enjoy pastrami parties. Snobbish? Certainly. If *you* like it, you're welcome to it, and God bless you.

Harold Clurman. *The Nation*. April 5, 1965. p. 373

When Simon jokes, America laughs. He is instant fodder for columnists and cocktail parties. Producers, directors, actors line up to produce, direct and act in his plays. Simon is commercial and his plays are entertainment and he wouldn't have it any other way; he likes being Neil Simon.

Newsweek. Jan. 9, 1967. p. 70

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SIMPSON, Louis (1923–)

The work of this poet can be better understood by searching for its major themes than by trying to see it as a consistent whole. The poems have range and variety, even when they are dealing with the same subject. And, in the poems, things happen. They have a narrative, forward movement. Many of them are, in fact, narratives. ''The Heroes'' and ''The Battle'' are narratives of modern war. ''Early in the Morning'' retells the old story of Antony and Cleopatra. In ''John the Baptist,'' ''The Return,'' ''Ulysses and the Sirens'' and ''Islanders'' people have made, or are making, journeys. . . .

Throughout the book [*Good News of Death*], landscapes and seasons are the stage for the human drama. In ''American Preludes,'' ''West,'' ''Winter,'' ''The Return,'' ''Mississippi,'' ''A Lion in the Wind,'' they have a history and a personality of their own. In these poems, one senses time passing and yet standing still, the contemporaneity of Babylon, Rome, New York, in that blinking of an eye that we call human history.

John Hall Wheelock. Introduction to *Poets of Today, II* (Scribner). 1955. pp. 12–13

A Dream of Governors . . . is his second book, and you will find in it some of the best traditional verse being written by a young American poet today. American poetry needs more than anything else a reinfusion of the narrative element, and Simpson is devoted to narrative. His book contains a long poem about World War II and the feelings of men in battle. It is, unfortunately, less a narrative poem than a short story told in well-written blank verse; its story gains little from having been told in poetic form. When it deals with a dramatic confrontation, as in the final battle when the Germans attack at Bastogne, it succeeds admirably; but it fails in conveying the passage of time, which is one of the hardest things for a narrative in verse to do.

Some of Simpson's shorter narratives do succeed: he retells myths (St. George, Orpheus, and others) in a rich aura of mysticism and moonlight. One day he will have achieved the full flavor of what he is striving for in his narratives; but this collection is uneven, and that time has not yet come. The final group of love poems, however, has things in it as whole and true as in any recent love poems I can remember.

Peter Davison. *Atlantic Monthly*. Sept., 1960. p. 92

Something of his range is indicated by the division of his book [*A Dream of Governors*] into five sections. He modernizes myths to ironic advantage, and contrasts ''My America'' with ''The Old World.'' A fourth group includes some of the best poems to have come out of the Second World War, and the fifth presents love poems effective alike in their delicacy and wry strength. From this catalogue of subjects one would scarcely guess the complexity with which he realizes each, nor the variety of modes and tones his verse commands. Even his exorcisms, his phantasmagoria, his ballad of a lunatic Nazi, are lucid in organization and language, while his rationally-developed poems, such as the neo-neo-classical ''The Green Shepherd'' and ''The Flight to Cytherea,'' are alive with surprises of perception and diction.

Daniel G. Hoffman. *Sewanee Review*. Autumn, 1960. p. 678

In our time, this implied story is never embodied in a complete work—a *Paradise Lost or a Divine Comedy*—, and apparently such an established story cannot be at this time convincingly delivered to us. But some writers do entertain hints that back of the shifting present there impends a meaning. *Atlantic Monthly the End*

of the Open Road bears that kind of extra effect; the thread of the poems recurrently demonstrates the power to be derived from working near the potential of an imminent revelation. . . .

Though these poems are here collected for the first time, a number of them have been so effective in periodicals or so aptly used for touchstones that they are already more than magazine pieces; such poems are ''Walt Whitman at Bear Mountain,'' ''The Marriage of Pocohantas,'' ''My Father in the Dark.'' . . . The authority of such poems helps to make this a resounding book, a solid achievement.

William Stafford. *Poetry*. May, 1964. p. 105

I wish I might omit from Louis Simpson's *Atlantic Monthly the End of the Open Road* the few tame, even timid poems which a lack of editorial care has allowed in. Then I might say, as I believe him to be saying, that too many modern poets are like people in apartment houses—or a ''standing-room only'' America—, who have been silent too long at their living in the too closely populated day and night, for fear that someone in the next room will overhear; that, like these people, who become more silent as the next room becomes more crowded, the poets trim their fine agonies to even finer proportions, and climaxes disappear; that poetry seems to become more and more an international competition in smooth lines and innocuous statements, mostly a matter of surfaces. That people, and poets, have stopped westering.

George Scarbrough. *Sewanee Review*. Winter, 1965. p. 141

A poet of liberal persuasion, he is interested in public issues, in social and philosophical questions relating to the destiny of Europe and America. . . . This is a new realism that Simpson is preaching. He asks us to forget the Adamic innocence of the American past and recognize the seriousness of life in the present; we must cultivate our gardens in full awareness of the imminence of death.

Although he wrote some free verse as a young man, Simpson was deeply committed to traditional technique until 1959; he counted his accented and unaccented syllables carefully and built structures of pleasing but conventional sound, nailed with rhyme. After 1959, largely under the influence of the subjective-image poets, he changed his style drastically. The prosaism of his early work—which required metrics and rhyme in order to give it character as verse—now gave way to rich, fresh, haunting imagery. His philosophical and political speculations achieved a distinction and brilliance that they had lacked before.

Stephen Stepanchev. *American Poetry since 1945* (Harper). 1965. pp. 198–9

There are included in this volume [*Selected Poems*] all of the poems that most of us have admired over the years, but it seemed to me on re-reading them along with ''The Runner'' that Louis Simpson has real ability in handling a narrative form which he ought to be applying more. Some of his poems in fact seem to be truncated narratives, like ''Moving the Walls,'' but his technique in using images and placing them in a context of some sort does not allow him the leeway he ought to have in a real narration.

The twelve wholly new poems included in this volume are neither as formalistic as some of his earlier ones, nor are they as restricted in subject matter; ''Tonight the Famous Psychiatrist'' is particularly well focused, as well as ''The Tailor's Wedding.'' But there is also a kind of tiredness to these new poems—that is, as if *he* were tired. I hope he will strike out in a new direction, toward the narrative again.

Bruce Cutler. *Poetry*. July, 1966. p. 270

The poems in *Adventures of the Letter I* are less cryptic than [Robert] Creeley's and less challenging. But their unflagging charm derives honestly from the poet's own view of his condition. Mr. Simpson seems embarrassed by his blessings. In a world full of naked pain and cruelty, he is almost ashamed to be sane, competent, free. He is also embarrassed by his fellow-countrymen, saddened by the false finale of the American idyll. Implicit in his irony and humour are many of the judgments passed by [Robert] Duncan. But his understatements linger in one's ear; his elegies for an overripe civilization lure and surprise one with their delicate changes of tone, their witty plaintiveness. Surely Mr. Simpson's road would be a good one for more poets to travel.

TLS: The Times Literary Supplement. July 23, 1971. p. 855

The title of Louis Simpson's volume [*Adventures of the Letter I*] might well serve as a collective title for a great deal of recent American writing. Increasingly, the place and function of the writer, the questions of who he is and what he is supposed to be doing, have become the central themes of American poetry and fiction.

Yet it would be a mistake to place Simpson alongside Mailer or even Lowell, for despite its unpromising title his collection of poems forms a reticent and almost Horatian body of work. The poet is in retreat, defining his own position by reference to his forebears (both Russian and American), his favourite writers, and the contemporary political crises of America. The poet's ego acts as focus, but is not paraded with ostentation. . . . There does seem a genuine distrust of ideas, and in consequence an often myopic vision which presents the minutiae of life in a way that brings many of the poems close to Imagism, leaving them strangely purposeless and incoherent. It is as if Simpson had consciously decided to be a minor poet, and had set out to fumble a few of the big themes (the War, mental illness, Nazism, the moon landings) to prove it.

But the honesty of the poems, and Simpson's enormous technical skill, carry us through, for the most part. And the book does add up to a fairly clear, even sympathetic picture of how the world looks to one man with no particular commitments except to poetry and common sense. One suspects, in fact, that this restrained, humorous book may be read when the latest crew of Great American Writers have followed one another into obscurity.

Grevel Lindop. *The Critical Quarterly*. Winter, 1972. pp. 379–80

These are mostly rather dreamlike pieces [in *Adventures of the Letter I*], often evocative of an experience never quite experienced,

as of the Ukraine, where the Jamaica-born poet's mother came from. Because, perhaps, of the subject matter, or for whatever reason, but not, I hope and believe, just to be fashionable, Simpson has here abandoned the precisely articulated stanzaic poems through which he made his reputation. Rhyme is virtually absent, the style is more free and impressionistic, the ear is sure and good. It is difficult to do justice to this collection by quoting. Not only are the poems elusive; many of the shorter ones, with a general drift toward irony, are so carefully understated that they come out sounding trivial. But several of the longer pieces show that quality so rare in our time, a talent for narrative in poetry.

Richmond Lattimore. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1972. p. 478

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SINCLAIR, Upton (1878–1968)

The fierce and humorless intensity of Upton Sinclair's youthful masterpiece *The Jungle* has here (in *Oil!*) given place to a maturer kind of writing, with a surprising new tolerance in it for the weaknesses of human nature, and a new curiosity which fills it with the manifold richness of the American scene on every social plane. It restores Upton Sinclair to us as a novelist, and it constitutes one of the great achievements in the contemporary discovery of America in our fiction.

Floyd Dell. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. June 12, 1927. p. 7

All the figures in Mr. Sinclair's world are automata except the sublime and tormented hero who is at war with them. There is only one thing in Mr. Sinclair's world that he treats with that respect which is due to reality. That is his own conception of his own mission among men. Everything else is stage properties and supers. . . . He has erected a structure of theories in front of his eyes which is so dazzling that nothing in the outer world is clearly visible to him. . . . He is a noisy and voluble saint, but none the less authentically a saint. He has consecrated himself to his own mission. He is a brave man, too, and spasmodically and spectacularly a rather dashing fighter against oppression. . . . I do not happen to admire deeply his type of saintliness, and so perhaps cannot do him full justice.

Walter Lippmann. *Saturday Review*. March 3, 1928. pp. 642–3

As art Sinclair's novel, *Boston*, is worthless; as propaganda it is superb. He has a theme and a character that ride triumphant over technical disabilities. And he has a living conscience. As he works toward a climax, the pretense of fiction gradually falls away and in the last magnificent chapters the book becomes a piece of glorified reporting. Concurrently, the heat of the author's indignation rises steadily higher until, at the end, the reader is left with the sense of having himself been cleansed and purified by fire and humbled by great tragedy.

R. N. Linscott. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 1, 1928. p. 425

The difficulty with Sinclair's characters and situations is not in recognizing them, but in *feeling* them. His characters are rational—or cerebral if you will—rather than emotive creations. One can see them—but not experience them. This is partly due to the fact that, in the main, they are types instead of individuals, types that you know. . . . Sinclair tends to portray his characters in terms of straight lines instead of in terms of all those zigzags of personality, those intricate and irrational contradictions of self, which create individuality in life as well as in fiction.

V.F. Calverton. *The Nation*. Feb. 4, 1931. pp. 132–3

From *The Jungle* (1906) to date he has repeatedly thrust a sharp knife into most of the sore spots of our contemporary civilization: the packing-house filth, the newspaper racket, the oil scandal, ''Massachusetts justice,'' etc. etc. . . . Sophisticated readers, professors and critics, hold that Mr. Sinclair's novels are not ''literature''—whatever that may mean. . . . If a passionate interest in the substance of all great literature—life, if a wide acquaintance with its special manifestations of the writer's own day, if a deep conviction about the values underlying its varied phenomena and the ability to set them forth, count in the making of enduring literature, all these Mr. Sinclair has demonstrated again and again that he possesses.

Robert Herrick. *New Republic*. Oct. 7, 1931. p. 213

Mr. Sinclair has never pretended to be a professional literary critic. He has been a creative artist and a pamphleteer. To those readers who dislike his work he is the latter exclusively. But to the world at large he takes his place as one of the great literary men of the day. His works are almost immediately translated into French, German, Spanish, Swedish, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian, which is a testimony to his popularity, if not to his art. His books contribute to the forming of opinions about America in almost every country on the globe.

C. Hartley Grattan. *Bookman*, April, 1932. p. 61

Sinclair's moral strength has never let him escape an awareness of the degradation and humiliation that are the normal lot of the

oppressed in our republic, and his honesty has never let him remain silent about them. . . . (Yet) Sinclair has scarcely attempted to interpret working-class life since *The Jungle*. His typical story is that of a rich young man who gets mixed up in the radical movement, and the drama lies in the dissolution of his ruling class dogmas.

Robert Cantwell. *New Republic*. Feb. 24, 1937. pp. 70–1

Because his faults are always so conspicuous and never the fashionable ones, Mr. Sinclair has been either dismissed or patronized by the majority of critics and literary historians. Yet I am willing to wager that his chances of survival are as good as those of any living American author. . . . Sinclair is a master of narrative. Like the Victorians, whose habits of underscored characterization and chatty comment he has always imitated, he has the trick of making you want to find out what happens next. . . . With his own kind of magic, Sinclair rushes you from scene to scene, and you have to go on to the end.

Granville Hicks. *New Republic*. June 24, 1940. p. 863

I respect him . . . because he has retained an old-fashioned and innocent love for mankind. Do you think it possible for a man to be too good to become a great novelist? . . . Sinclair . . . is so kindly and trusting—till each new disillusionment—and so convinced that men are naturally good unless distorted by the property system, that you deplore his villains instead of hating them. They are merely products of their environment. . . . Sinclair doesn't believe in Satan; at heart he doesn't even believe in Heinrich Himmler. He is a capable writer when explaining the connections between economics and politics, but he never casts much light on the connection between politics and the human soul.

Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*. Jan. 11, 1943. p. 58

(*Presidential Agent*) is an extraordinary and gigantic job . . . of collation, selection, synthesis, craftsmanship, and interpretation, and one that could only have been done by a novelist as mature and practiced and experienced in thinking as its author. Desperately and nervously exciting, moreover; as desperately and nervously exciting as the desperate times in which we live. . . . Here is the first time that any novelist has had the courage to take the present monstrous shape of evil and show it in its proper proportions and in its inevitable final weakness when it meets courage, endurance, and intelligent good-will.

Struthers Burt. *Saturday Review*, June 10, 1944. p. 8

Mr. Sinclair is a major figure—and I make the statement ungrudgingly. He is a thoroughly American personality. A fluent—a fatally fluent—writer with an unconquerable desire to preach and teach, he has a heart honorably moved by human suffering. . . . His insight into society is sometimes shrewd, and his prophecies are occasionally correct. Above all, his courage is . . . the courage of American individualism, which has nothing to do with the socialism of Mr. Sinclair's dream.

But when Mr. Sinclair explicitly or implicitly demands that one's sympathy for his courage be translated into one's admiration for him as a literary artist, one can only deny the confusing plea.

Howard Mumford Jones. *Atlantic Monthly*. Aug., 1946. p. 151

The secret of Upton Sinclair nobody yet knows—except to the degree that he still represents a flourishing of those provincial rebels, free-thinkers, and eccentrics who in the 1900's, from Robert Ingersoll to Veblen, marked the climax of our earlier agrarian and mercantile society. But what is the secret of the Lanny Budd series? . . . Mr. Sinclair's familiar villains are here, to be sure, including the international bankers, the Fascists, and the military. Yet there is very little sense of evil in this entire chronicle of modern corruption and decay. Even Hitler has sense enough to listen to Lanny Budd. . . . This central view of life, which corresponds to our own earlier dreams of national destiny and to the Europeans' wildest fancy, seems to me the main element in the success of the Lanny Budd novels.

Maxwell Geismar. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 28, 1948. p. 13

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SINGER, Isaac Bashevis (1904–1991)

As sheer story-telling this sprawling, heaving, churning, lustful (and excellently translated) narrative [*The Family Moskat*] is very effective. In spite of its great length, panoramic sweep, multiplicity of interwoven plots, and bewildering variety of bizarre characters, locales, and situations, the novel moves at a fairly brisk pace, sustaining the reader's interest from the first page to the last.

Starting with Reb Meshulam, the octogenarian creator of the prodigious Moskat fortune, Mr. Singer branches out into a detailed account of the vicissitudes in the lives of the patriarch's many children, grandchildren, stepchildren, in-laws, servants, relatives, friends, friends of friends, acquaintances of relatives, children of grandchildren, and so on ad infinitum. The period covered is the momentous half century prior to World War II, and the dominant motif is the disintegration during that time of Jewish life and traditional values under the impact of a belated modernity and the pressure of a savagely intensified Polish anti-semitism.

Joshua Kunitz. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Nov. 19, 1950. p. 24

To the familiar machinery of Yiddish literature—the small self-contained isolated East European town with its stock of ''characters,'' its family situations, its rituals, its appearance, even its cooking—add a story-teller's imagination too artistic to settle for the reader's response ''yeh, yeh, that's how it really was,'' add a sensibility too mature to plump for official piety, too tough for sentimentality, too aware always to keep a straight face, too wise and compassionate to throw a stone, too conscious of mystery and the doubleness of things to strike any factional pose and you have Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Gimpel the Fool, and Other Stories*. Frampol, the little Polish town of some of these tales, is not just a repository of reminiscences but a place, like Joyce's Dublin, Hardy's Wessex, Faulkner's Mississippi, where as Gimpel himself says, ''everything is possible,'' a theatre where the humanly significant takes place, where dream is confounded with reality, where the seemingly beneficent Gentleman from Cracow may turn out to be ''none other than Ketev Mrir, Chief of the Devils.''

Jack Ludwig. *Midstream*. Spring, 1958. p. 90

When I first read ''Gimpel the Fool'' (in the quick and pungent English of Saul Bellow) I felt not only that I was reading an extraordinarily beautiful and witty story, but that I was moving through as many historical levels as an archaeologist at work. This is an experience one often gets from the best Jewish writers. The most ''advanced'' and sophisticated Jewish writers of our time—Babel, Kafka, Bellow—have assimilated, even conquered, the whole tradition of modern literature while reminding us of the unmistakable historic core of the Jewish experience. Equally, a contemporary Yiddish writer like Isaac Bashevis Singer uses all the old Jewish capital of folklore, popular speech and legendry, yet from within this tradition itself is able to duplicate a good deal of the conscious absurdity, the sauciness, the abandon of modern art—without for a moment losing his obvious personal commitment to the immemorial Jewish vision of the world.

Perhaps it is this ability to incarnate all the different periods that Jews have lived through that makes such writers indefinably fascinating to me. They wear whole epochs on their backs; they alone record widely separated centuries in dialogue with each other. Yet all these different periods of history, these many *histories*, represent, if not a single point of view, a common historic character. It is the irony with which ancient dogmas are recorded, the imaginative sympathy with which they are translated and transmuted into contemporary terms, that makes the balance that is art.

Alfred Kazin. *Contemporaries* (Little). 1962. p. 283

Of the four novels of Isaac Bashevis Singer which have so far been translated from Yiddish, only one, an early work, *The Family Moskat*, has the superficial complexity and structure of the contemporary European novel. Singer's other long works, including his newly published novel, *The Slave*, are more skillful fictions which demonstrate a narrative craftsmanship unique to the contemporary literary scene, but they carefully avoid contemporary subject matter, locating themselves in the earlier literary traditions of the moral fable, the parable, the simple tale told naturalistically but having elements of fantasy and the supernatural.

Singer can begin a story by having a devil speak in the first person, or he can proceed to the allegorical, as in *Satan in Goray*, introducing elements of the natural world along the way as frightening common-places. In either case, the burden of disproof rests squarely with the reader since both the supernatural and the natural are always vividly realized in fictional terms. By seeming to remove us from the contemporary, Singer uses his disciplined prose to pose various questions concerning God and men while, at the same time, avoiding two of the most obnoxious elements of much Yiddish literature—a heavy-handed ''social consciousness'' and a bitter-sweet nostalgia.

Richard M. Elman. *Commonweal*. July 6, 1962. p. 38

In *Satan in Goray* and *The Magician of Lublin* . . . a question which is implicit in the other works becomes more explicitly central: what happens when there is a crisis of faith, when faith is threatened? In these two books, as in his others, Singer establishes as a framework what might be called the standard Jewish faith. Primarily this includes belief in the Jewish God, personal, omnipotent, who imposes after death rewards and punishments according to man's

virtues and sins. The way to serve God is through *halacha*, the code of law which is essentially a code of behavior, controlling man's communal and private actions, his objective relations to society, to family, to God.

This framework serves as a standard which is taken for granted in the Jewish communities Singer's characters live in. The novels neither support nor approve it, but use it rather as a background before which the crises of faith operate, and in terms of which they can be understood. In *The Magician of Lublin* the opponent of faith is partly the Spinozist view which plays so important a part in *The Family Moskat* and which holds that there is a Creator but that he is distant and unconcerned with the individual and that after death there is nothing. But faith is more basically opposed in this book by the demands of freedom. In *Satan in Goray* the standard Jewish faith is directly opposed by another, more absolutist and less human, kind of faith.

J. S. Wolkenfeld. *Criticism*. Fall, 1963. p. 350

Singer is too ruthlessly single-minded a writer to content himself with mere slices of representation or displays of the bizarre. His grotesquerie must be taken seriously, perhaps as a recoil from his perception of how ugly—how gratuitously ugly—human life can be. He is a writer completely absorbed by the demands of his vision, a vision gnomic and compulsive but with moments of high exaltation; so that while reading his stories one feels as though one were overhearing bits and snatches of a monologue, the impact of which is both notable and disturbing, but the meaning withheld.

Now these are precisely the qualities that the sophisticated reader, trained to docility before the exactions of ''modernism,'' has come to applaud. Singer's stories work, or prey, upon the nerves. They leave one unsettled and anxious, the way a rationalist might feel if, walking at night in the woods, he suddenly found himself afraid of bats. Unlike most Yiddish fiction, Singer's stories neither round out the cycle of their intentions nor posit a coherent and ordered universe. They can be seen as paradigms of the arbitrariness, the grating injustice, at the heart of life. They offer instances of pointless suffering, dead-end exhaustion, inexplicable grace.

Irving Howe in *On Contemporary Literature*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (Avon). 1964. p. 580

Singer never loses sight of the fact that his forte is the imaginative transmutation of reality, and if this is a limitation it is one only in Goethe's sense when he said that it is ''only by conscious self-limitation that mastery reveals itself.''

It is something of the same sort that Fitzgerald may have had in mind when in *The Great Gatsby* he says, ''life is much more successful looked at from a single window after all,'' and coins the paradox that the ''well-rounded man'' is the most limited of all specialists. A good writer must find the vein of ore which is uniquely his own and mine it conscientiously. Singer has long ago found his vein.

If Singer does not succumb to the temptations of realism, neither is he lured into the vagaries of doctrinaire or fashionable surrealism. Instead, he has made himself at home in an imaginative construct between earth and heaven. His sensitivity, lack of coarseness, shy and elusive charm may well militate against an overwhelming triumph in this country with a large popular audience. But he has made a secure and comfortable place for himself in literature.

Milton Hindus in *Jewish Heritage Reader*, ed. Morris Adler (Taplinger). 1965. p. 252

What is immediately striking about the stories and novels of Isaac Bashevis Singer is the contrast between the formidable barriers to understanding which appear to surround his work and the simplicity and directness of his narrative style. This contrast is of much more than purely literary or formalistic interest: a close look at it can, I think, tell us something not only about the nature of his own achievement, but also about problems which are common to all writers of fiction in a time as culturally confused as our own. His work is instructive, among other reasons, because he has had to face these problems in their most extreme form.

The barriers to understanding referred to above are, in a sense, all the same, all one; but they can be approached or described in different ways. The first is simply the fact that so many of Singer's readers can know his work only in translation—the present writer being one of these. . . . The modes of Yiddish must be more alien to English than those of French or Russian, for example, in exactly the same degree as the society which produced it was so vastly different from any other Europe has known.

That society has ceased to exist: that is the second great barrier to understanding which comes between us and collections of stories like *Gimpel the Fool* or novels like *The Magician of Lublin*. We cannot think of the society existing in a new guise after having undergone a revolutionary transformation, as one is able still to see some of the lineaments of 19th-century England in the England of today. There is no place we can visit, or imagine ourselves visiting, where we can see Singer's people leading anything like the life they lead in his work, or anything organically connected with it. The mass of Jews have abandoned that way of life; those colonies of devoutly Orthodox Jews who still survive do so in corners of cities totally unlike the small towns and villages of 19th-century Poland in which so much of Singer's fiction is set. Everything Singer writes of Europe is a historical reconstruction, having the effect of something willed into existence, either as memorial or parable; it is never a place or a populace we can know for ourselves.

Dan Jacobson. *Commentary*. Feb., 1965. p. 48

If Sholom Aleichem is the Yiddish Mark Twain, Isaac Bashevis Singer is the Yiddish Hawthorne. . . . Singer's style, in the tradition of Hawthorne and Melville, is often rhetorical and flamboyant, but there is not an ounce of fat on his prose. His characters sometimes bandy proverbs wittily, in the fashion of West Africans, and similarly he is sometimes folksy and proverbial. Singer's most characteristic style is one of sophisticated ironic juxtaposition. . . .

Singer seems almost the only writer in America who believes in the real existence of Satan.

Stanley Edgar Hyman. *Standards* (Horizon). 1966. pp. 83–4

For some time now Isaac Bashevis Singer has played a curious role in Yiddish and American letters alike. For a decade after the end of

the Second World War he figured as one of the last vital exponents of Yiddish fiction, writing of a world that no longer existed for a public that was rapidly diminishing. Then, with the publication of *Satan in Goray* in an English translation in 1955, a larger public began to take note of his work. The bulk of his writings have since become accessible in English. By now the quarterlies print his work, the weeklies praise him, and the critics are beginning to speak of him as one of the important *American* writers of the age. They find him a master story-teller whose fiction, with its animated evocation of strange, demon-ridden worlds, is not merely exotic, but the vehicle for a comprehensive vision which would seem to express something vital to the spirit of the age. There is hardness in it, and bleakness, and a sense of the problems of finding order in a world of violence and chaos.

Yet even as American critics praise him, his original public is turning its back on him. Yiddish readers used to regard him as a fine stylist who had redeemed a dimension of the ancestral world from oblivion. But now these virtues fall into the background and the Yiddish public is beginning to question both his integrity and the validity of his picture of that world. His rogues are no longer seen as imaginative creations, to be enjoyed as that, but as a reflection on the virtue of our grandmothers or the virility of our grandfathers.

Baruch Hochman. *Midstream*. March. 1967. p. 66

[Singer] approaches the world from afar—from the recesses of the past and from beyond the grave. His supernatural world seems insulated from modern apparatuses of analysis; his characters are not buttressed by detailed motivations nor are his devils tamed with psychological plausibility. His entire approach and journey are so circuitous and incredible as to be initially unthreatening. But then the artistic sorcery takes hold and the contraries begin to grip. The distant and exotic rapidly become the near and the familiar; Satan appears to know us as well as a psychiatrist knows his patients; the personality begins to recover its hidden shadow or secret sharer; above all, the invitation of inhibited art is taken up by the reader, and the minimum, incomplete vision is fleshed to fullness through response. By building into the structure of his art the Jewish version of the prodigal son, Singer has encouraged his readers—Jewish and not—to undertake a similar journey of historical and biblical transmigration. In the process, the prodigal, like Singer, discovers that his future is his past. Through his vision of the eternal past. Singer also has become typical of the modern writer to whom the longest way round is the shortest way home. Through his aesthetics of the eternal past, Singer is representative of the Jewish writer to whom the oblique and the sensational are the most powerful avenues to the center and to the true.

Irving Buchen. *Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Eternal Past* (New York Univ. Pr.). 1968. pp. 215–6

Because [Singer] is imbued with Old-World Jewish habits of thought more thoroughly than his American counterparts, while continuing undeniably also to be a New-World Jew, the radical sophistication of his creative imagination lends itself uniquely to the attempt to isolate the sources, and to define the achievement of contemporary Jewish-American fiction.

Singer's is a twentieth-century sensibility attempting an imaginative re-creation of the social and religious milieu of Polish Jewry of the previous three centuries. The unique—and now vanished—circumstances of this society confront Singer's historical consciousness with special irrefrangibility. Tolstoy could revert in *War and Peace* to the time of the Napoleonic invasions without risking intellectual dislocation, for his society still assented essentially to the assumptions of his grandfather. But tension of a profound philosophical order, however, affects the moral pattern of Singer's stories as a result of the radically different *Zeitgeists* of the author and his dramatis personae. One of the central paradoxes of Singer's fictional world is that even as he pays loving tribute to the value system of a back-country Jewry, dirty, ignorant, but firm in a simplistic faith in what Dr. Yaretzky in ''The Shadow of a Crib'' calls ''a seeing universe, rather than a blind one,'' Singer questions such a world picture with the narrative structures he composes for them. His rabbis and pious matrons may think and act in unquestioning accord with a Jewish cosmic vision but their lives present the absurd pattern familiar to the modern sensibility. It is not without significance that in at least three of Singer's novels the historical setting is that of a catastrophe wrought upon the Jews by external circumstances, and that his protagonists are caught between rival claims of the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. As in a Greek tragedy impersonal fate and individual responsibility merge ambiguously in his stories.

Max F. Schulz. *Southern Humanities Review*. Winter, 1968. pp. 60–1

Singer has lived in America long enough to leave one intrigued at the ways he differs from other Jewish-American novelists who have retained their imaginative access to the immigrant experience. Principally, instead of portraying man as a social animal, drowning in essential private relationships and hang-ups, he has kept the old Central European sense of man as the pitifully minor participant in a process governed by irresistible historic, religious, economic and political forces—against which he'll be doing well just to keep his head above water.

It is not that on Singer's stage Man is absurd, commitment futile, the Universe mindlessly malevolent, and God would rather not get involved. But while the shlemiehl-heroes of many first-rate Jewish-American novels leave you with a suspicion that all their problems would vanish if ever they could latch on to a good analyst or a good lay, you know that if a Singer hero ever found himself with nothing worse than a soured marriage or a crazy parent, he would be so far ahead of the game there would be no novel worth writing. The hero of a Singer novel comes ready-equipped not only with several millennia of his own history, and all its voracious emotional and ritual demands, but also with scars left by more than a thousand years of the crimes and follies of Christian Europe.

Shimon Wincelberg. *New Leader*. Feb. 26, 1968. p. 26

Isaac Bashevis Singer is a plague and a pleasure to most serious readers and critics of fiction. He is a pleasure because he writes with all the felicity of a 19th-century master—and a plague because no one knows where to place him. He is, on the one hand a Yiddish

writer—an exponent of a dying language (though he recently said in an interview: ''Listen, young man, between dying and dead is a lot of difference''). On the other hand he is full of such modern nuances as irony, the macabre and symbolism. On the one hand he is a chronicler of a certain very special time and place: Polish Jewry and the *shtetl* life in the middle-to-late 19th century (with the exception of *The Slave* which takes place much earlier, during the scourge of Chmielnicki). And on the other hand he is a writer of universals: love, eroticism, passion, God. What to make of him?

Singer is easy to handle if you take his devils, his dybbuks, his saints, his elves as metaphors: mere material designed to illuminate larger symbolic matters. But, I maintain, no one will truly understand the special nature of Singer's genius until they realize he is separated from us by more than the gulf of tradition dividing the old Polish Jew and the modern secular reader. The truth is Singer believes in God, in dybbuks, in magic, in a life after death.

''Let metaphor be God now Gods are metaphors,'' W. H. Gass has written. But what if God is *not* a metaphor? In one sense it is Singer's eroticism that has misled us. Only in this parochial age and this Protestant country could eroticism and religion appear to cancel each other out. In Singer—as in Judaism—God is as real as a woman's body. And if God and love-sex go hand in hand, cannot the devil and a wild, distorted eroticism also coexist?

Daniel Stern. *The Nation*. Dec. 9. 1968. p. 632

Isaac B. Singer in *The Magician of Lublin* is a conjurer who turns his magic to the creation of a vision of a forty-year-old man's crisis of conscience. In this novel—very probably his best—the reader who escapes the power of the storytelling for a moment in order to reflect can discern three separate patterns of meaning. There is first the tale of a man who rejects his past life and turns to penitence. Here, in the literal world of the novel, Singer accomplishes both the vivid realization of an individual character's struggles and the representation of recurrent (perhaps mythic and archetypal) human experiences. Then, around the uncomplicated certainties of literal plot or archetypal situation Singer weaves an examination of the uncertainties of ethical behavior, and here he constructs a moral world that is insolubly ambivalent. And finally, using all the concreteness of his detailed and almost tangible fictional world, Singer turns to metaphysical themes. Thus at the last he forces the reader to revise his understanding both of literal fact and moral choice in the novel, for he suggests that ''facts'' have only the meaning they are assigned by human beings, that man may be a ''magician'' indeed.

Cyrena N. Pondrom in *The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, ed. Marcia Allentuck (Southern Illinois). 1969. p. 93

In Singer, destiny and freedom are interrelated, not distinct. We are faced, then, by a contradiction between what is true to life and what we assume to be the truth of art. In art, we are almost immediately suspicious of any resolution leading to human satisfaction or fulfillment, while we expect life to yield to individual will, to be structured on layers of order. Paradoxically, we ask our fictional protagonists not to surrender that quality of moral choice which differentiates man from animals, and yet we lock them into a system where they must suffer without complaint, or else complain without hope of escape.

Singer questions these assumptions. Arguing for traditional values, he poses disturbing questions *because* he runs counter to so much of current—and unavoidable—pessimism. He appears to feel for things with different nerve endings; that he writes in Yiddish is simply the verbal indication of the other world which engages him. Yet the more we learn about human nature, the more that sociologists, psychiatrists, even statisticians, tell us, the clearer it is that most people are closer to Singer's mode than to the one presented by our other major European writers. Put another way, Singer is their consciousness, only to surface sporadically.

Frederick R. Karl in *The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, ed. Marcia Allentuck (Southern Illinois). 1969. pp. 122–3

To the extent that Singer's fables are almost invariably constructed so as to resonate with both pathological and supernatural overtones he resembles Thomas Mann. Like Mann, Singer expresses a thoroughgoing dualism tending to bring into polarized relationships characters and events which begin by being at first indistinctly balanced between stability and instability, disease and health, good and evil. Like Mann, whom he has translated into Yiddish, Singer sees human types as the expression of incalculably complex but distinct historical traditions. And, like Mann, Singer is the master of the ironic suspension of judgment.

More than once in both Mann and Singer, however, such ironic suspension seems decadent and smacks of diabolism. The fact that good and evil cannot be known except by their consequences encourages an ambiguity that is artistically suggestive but morally questionable.

Michael Fixler in *Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, ed. Irving Malin (New York Univ. Pr.). 1969. p. 73

Ironically, Yiddish critics do not rate Singer as high as do the English speaking. American readers find appealing his offbeat themes and rejection of social philosophies—in short, his existential stance; Yiddish readers, however, often view him with an uneasiness akin to suspicion. Several Yiddish critics have attacked his tales of ''horror and eroticism,'' his ''distasteful blend of superstition and shoddy mysticism,'' and his ''pandering'' to non-Jewish tastes. What merit these criticisms may have is vitiated by the obvious resentment accompanying them—a resentment that develops in some literary corners whenever a writer wins recognition beyond the Yiddish pale. Sholem Asch proved a similar target.

Yet Singer does have a perverse, if not morbid, taste for violence, blood, and animal slaughter, not to mention rape, demons, and the grave—all gothic horror story elements. He relishes those medieval superstitions and fears that clung to *shtetl* life into the twentieth century. His devils, demons, and imps may represent a partial deference to the strong contemporary taste for ''black humor'' in its myriad forms. But primarily his demonology enables Singer to expose the demons driving us all. His devils and imps symbolize those erratic, wayward, and diabolic impulses that detour men from their fathers' piety and morality. Singer's popularity is the more understandable at a time when such practitioners

of the gothic and macabre as William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Tennessee Williams, and Edward Albee have won strong acceptance.

Ben Siegel. *Isaac Bashevis Singer* (Minnesota). 1969. p. 10

Of the critical approaches to I. B. Singer's fiction, the most usual, as one would assume, has been evaluation of his relationship to the mainstream of Yiddish literature. However, an examination of his short stories yields a striking thematic concern, unexpectedly placing Singer squarely in the broader stream of twentieth century literature. While he sensitively recreates a time and place in modern history dead and all but forgotten, and while his stories superficially reflect a preoccupation with Jewish folklore, Singer repetitively and compellingly focuses on the individual's struggle to find a viable faith in an age possessed by this very problem. Thus, the stories, despite their setting in the nineteenth century Eastern European Jewish ghetto and their deceptive mask of simple folk tales, portray and explore this predominant problem of modern man with all its accompanying apprehension and tension. Specifically, Singer predicates his fiction on the idea that the presence or absence of human faith in God is an eternal, omnipresent dilemma which the individual must resolve for himself, and he consistently shows that man's fate after death, to be in Heaven or Hell, is directly correlated with his degree of faith in God. Accordingly, Singer's stories run from unshakeable belief in God to inflexible trust in the Devil.

Linda G. Zatlin. *Critique*. 11, 2, 1969. p. 40

If only [Singer] were left writing in Yiddish it would still be an important literary language. He is certainly one of the most remarkable American authors who has ever lived, as he is one of the most intensely Yiddish. Is Yiddish writing sinewy, grotesque, haunted, bitterly comic, deeply compassionate? Singer is close to being the most sinewy, grotesque, haunted, bitterly comic, deeply and desperately compassionate of all. Is most of it at its best deeply rooted in the ecstatic brotherhood and fantastic folk culture of Hassidism? Singer is a very Zaddik; if he just believed in the efficacy of the Kabbalistic word, I am sure he could make Golems. His stories are Golems enough, they have an amazing life of their own for works of man.

Kenneth Rexroth. *With Eye and Ear* (Herder and Herder). 1970. pp. 192–3

It would be hard to decide how interested or disinterested Singer really is. Sometimes he seems to float above the crowded scene. He has a grave, tragic, and pitying sense, but he also thinks highly of cunning and the bizarre. Yet there is a firm aspect to this: the strong Jewish sense of history which is even, at times, worshipped. A storyteller like Singer is really keeping the archives of the race lively on the tongue. And because of the ghastly destruction of the Jews, their language and culture in Poland, he has felt a passion for rescuing and playing with what he can. It is chilling to know that he is describing ghosts who cannot even haunt because their habitat has been wiped out.

V.S. Pritchett. *New York Review of Books*. May 7, 1970. p. 10

If I. B. Singer had written only ''Gimpel the Fool'' it would have been enough. But his singular power as a cabalistic writer determined to describe the world of Jewish Gothic continues to grow and gather energy. In his middle 60s now, Singer seems to go from strength to strength as though increasing age had become the generative force. This newest book [*A Friend of Kafka*] is by far the best thing we have from him. Singer's short stories are far superior to his novels, as is not entirely surprising in view of the fact that the paradigms for traditional Jewish writing, a ''wisdom literature,'' have always been the proverb, the parable and the folk tale.

Dan Isaac. *The Nation*. Nov. 2, 1970. p. 438

Singer is a religious writer. He is interested primarily in the nature of faith, especially when it is tested by holocaust or crisis. How far should one accept the family, the community and the universe? What is the limit of rebellion? Should Jews be ''modern'' (that is, create new law) or old-fashioned? Such difficult questions appear not only in the comprehensive, open novels but in the closed novels and short stories as well. There is, after all, a unified—shall we call it obsessive?—vision behind *The Family Moskat* and ''Cockadoodledoo.''

I have suggested that at times Singer is so eager to devote his energy to questions of faith that he turns to stereotyped characters—the rebellious Yash or Ezriel; the devout Calman or Schmul-Leibele—and that we feel they are rather easily understood. They are then lifeless and programmatic. There is no doubt that Singer is more comfortable with tense, ambivalent heroes than with humble ones. I am especially impressed, to name only a few, by Yoineh Meir of ''The Slaughterer,'' the narrator of *In My Father's Court*, and Dr. Kalisher of ''The Séance.''

Irving Malin. *Isaac Bashevis Singer* (Ungar). 1972. p. 106

Isaac Bashevis Singer manages to make do with a short list of questions that he relentlessly poses to his wide world of fictional people: Is there a God? Does He rule, or has He abdicated? Is He malign? In the absence of God, what principle moves us? To what end? A few questions, so fundamental that they intimidate most writers, and with good reason: No matter is more likely to disappear in a heat-mist of misbegotten metaphysics than the Big Question—yawn—of what it all means.

Singer, by ruthlessly suppressing rhetorical ornaments, by holding to the principle that a fictional character's given boundaries cannot be violated, brings off grand fables. His two previous novels, *The Manor* and *The Estate*, were family and national epics, panoramas of Jewish life in nineteenth-century Poland. His new novel [*Enemies*] extends Singer's range by limiting his means. It is spare, barren, and strait.

Geoffrey Wolff. *Saturday Review*. July 22, 1972. p. 54

Isaac Bashevis Singer is a master story teller, a Yiddish Poe, impish narrator of things supernatural. His concerns are essentially religious; in large measure Jewish mysticism and folklore structure his vision and determine his style. However, his appeal transcends the parochial, for as his characters incessantly search out their elusive

God, Singer evokes a universe akin to those of secular absurdists, a place where man appears alienated from any source of meaning and where the phenomenal world forever disintegrates about him. But while the vision of the absurdist is a recognition of nothingness and a justification for despair, Singer's is a more paradoxical sighting. He celebrates the impenetrable mysteries of creation, but, because those mysteries may conceal, not the splendor of Jehovah, but the face of evil, the celebration forever gives way to an apparition of eternal torment in worlds as yet unknown. Singer's doubt concerning the nature of eternity produces fiction which maintains an uneasy coalescence of dread and consolation. That same doubt prevents his tales from becoming moral allegories or exempla, for rarely is Singer so arrogant as to proffer an answer to the dilemma of human existence. Yet doubt never precludes the possibility that answers do exist, so always, Job-like, he gropes towards illumination.

Grace Farrell Lee. *Hollins Critic*. Dec., 1973. pp. 1–2

''What can one do? How is one to live?'' the narrator of *Shosha* asks, and though the setting of this novel is Warsaw of the Twenties and Thirties, before the war had given shape to the modern world, the existential dilemmas of philosophy and love behind these questions seem entirely modern. Love is so confusing that Tsutsik, the narrator, conducts affairs with five different women at once, and when he does settle down, it is with Shosha, the moronic and physically stunted sweetheart of his childhood, as if in demonstration of love's inner illogic. Matters of philosophy, which are closer to Tsutsik's heart, prove even more troublesome. He wishes he could find some universe of value and meaning in religion, wishes he could dig up out of the past some useful concept from Jewish mysticism, wishes he could salvage some significance from the old stetl. The only alternatives his friends can offer from the present are Stalin, or Trotsky, or the ideas of a cafe philosopher whose masterwork is a book called, marvelously, *Spiritual Hormones*. But none of this will do. Not unlike Isaac Bashevis Singer himself, one supposes, Tsutsik seems doomed to be a man at a spiritual loss.

All this makes for an entertaining novel, for though Singer is an earnest writer, his earnestness steps lightly, and in any case he provides plenty of amorous women and unexpected turns in Tsutsik's writing career to move things along. But entertaining or not, the novel labors under the growing shadow of Hitler, which ultimately overtakes the story and brings it to a grimly abrupt ending. There are no spiritual hormones, Singer seems to be saying. There are no solutions to existential dilemmas. There is not even a stetl to yearn for anymore, only the rootlessness of the modern world.

Paul Berman. *Harper's*. Sept., 1978, p. 94

Singer's ultimate reputation must rest on his short stories. Here his narrative quickness and philosophic depth show to best advantage, not marred by the structural flaws of some of the novels. ''Gimpel the Fool,'' the title story of the first collection (translated by Saul Bellow), has already been widely anthologized and recognized as a jewel of modern letters. But perhaps the best series of stories, nearly perfect and highly distinctive Singer, fill the third volume of collected stories, *Short Friday*. ''Taibele and Her Demon,'' ''Blood'' (a story widely praised, but also condemned), ''Esther Kreindel the Second,'' ''Jachid and Jechidah,'' ''The Last Demon,'' ''Yentl the Yeshiva Boy'' (also dramatized) and ''A Wedding in Brownsville'' have justly been praised as among the most creative and innovative stories of recent times. *The Spinoza of Market Street* has its title story and ''The Black Wedding,'' which Ted Hughes described as ''a more alive, more ferocious piece of poetic imagination that any living poet . . . would be likely to get near.'' In *A Crown of Feathers* the lead story by the same name and the final tale, ''Grandfather and Grandson,'' also represent the true vigor of Singer's imagination and thought.

Yet despite his storytelling prowess, the creation of special worlds to suit his artistic needs and moral tales, his theological quests, his bold characters both human and superhuman, his stylistic individuality and his poetic imagination, certain criticisms of I.B. Singer have at least limited validity. His oeuvre has undeniable diversity—it even includes widely hailed children's books—still, some questions must be asked about its range. So much reveling in the supernatural tends to create an impression, not altogether justified, of narrow sameness and repetitiveness. (Yet Singer deploys the supernatural for valid and *different* reasons every time he resorts to it.) More justified is the charge of the limited range of psychological states, partly caused by the predominance of obsessions. As one critic has put it, Singer has generally aligned the human will with sexual will. Also, Singer's fusion of the archaic with the modern cannot always succeed, and it doesn't. In his more recent books, especially the memoirs, the partnership between sexuality and spirituality has been baffling at times. But clearly Singer's chief failure—and it is a noble one—is the excess of his questions over the answers he is capable of giving. Skepticism, conservatism, humanistic balance, a poetic vision appear to be modest responses to giant questions. But the great theologians have also failed to find meaningful and sustaining answers to the same questions. The fact that Singer could even convincingly raise them in fictional terms is in itself a tribute to his enormous talent.

Lothar Kahn. *World Literature Today*. Spring, 1979, pp. 200–201

In Singer's case we are dealing with a writer who adheres religiously to the goals of clarity and specificity, writing about only what he knows through some form of direct experience. This is a seminal reason why there is some degree of confusion on the question of his modernity or his contemporary relevance. For Singer is a writer, in an age of cultivated ambiguity, who *wants* us to perceive the epiphanies, doubts, and ambivalences of his characters. The other key term in his brief statement of aesthetics is ''riddle''—for that is finally what the universe is for Singer. What he wants us to understand about his characters are their attempts to comprehend the structure and *modus operandi* of a universe that resists understanding. It is one of his special strengths that his characters are not disembodied creations who merely represent metaphysical problems, or their author's obsessions, but are invariably imbued with exceptional vitality and credibility. One could say without exaggeration that Singer feels and is able to dramatize characters in the same natural way that Kant saw the World in Ideas. The apparent contradiction, then, is of a writer who composes lucid, direct sentences about people and situations he knows, but whose metaphysics like Kafka's and Borges's are rooted and have never

escaped from the interminable riddles of the modern world. It is clarity, then, in the service of illuminating our essential riddle of existence. . . .

Singer [is] spiritually akin to Borges, Kafka, Beckett, and Nabokov, for whom the problem of knowledge itself replaces the essential concerns of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Flaubert. This theme and its particular kind of modernism, or, if you will, postmodernism, are not unique to ''The Bus.'' We find it in the novels *Enemies, A Love Story*, Singer's most recent novel *Shosha*, and to a substantial degree in *The Magician of Lublin*. Moreover, we find it in many of his stories from ''Gimpel the Fool'' to much of *Old Love*. . . .

This writer is somewhat baffled by those critics who relentlessly stress Singer's devotion to traditional literary and ''moral'' values while ignoring the meanings that are apparent behind the surface simplicity of his style, and his natural storyteller's gift. (Remember Joyce and Faulkner, Kafka, Borges, and Nabokov are all good, almost obsessive, storytellers.) ''The Bus,'' then, like most of the fiction in *Old Love*, reveals a writer who manages to dramatize eternal paradoxes in a wholly contemporary fashion without making us overly aware of it. To my knowledge few fictionists have this gift and have demonstrated it so often.

Richard Burgin. *Chicago Review*. Spring, 1980, pp. 62–63, 67

The Penitent is a translation of a short novel called *Der Baal Tshuve* in Yiddish. Perhaps this title should have been translated as *The Master of Turning*, which would have been more literal and also a proper tribute to its distinguished author, who is a master of metamorphoses. But perhaps this book, first published in 1974, ought not to have been translated at all. It is a very unpleasant work, without any redeeming esthetic merit or humane quality. Singer's best book, retroactively worthy of the Nobel Prize he won in 1978, was his *Collected Stories*, published last year. *The Penitent*, a failed attempt at a Swiftian diatribe against the contemporary world, is his worst book, and yet it does expose limitations that are not Singer's alone, and so it sadly defines much that is uneasy and probably insoluble in the dilemmas of Jewish culture at this time.

Singer's strength in *The Collected Stories* is in a rare exuberance of narrative invention, rather than in the creation of character, but *The Penitent* has almost no story and invests itself in the character of its monologuist, Joseph Shapiro. . . .

Unfortunately, the reader can develop no interest in Shapiro because the author develops none. Shapiro is only a voice: negative, intense, apprehensive, fascinated by lust yet filled with revulsion toward it. The voice is indistinguishable from Singer's own, and there is no way to read this book except as Singer's tirade. . . .

How has Singer come down to this? I do not think that we have here only another episode in the decline and fall of practically everybody. Singer, like the somewhat subtler though equally pungent Cynthia Ozick, is representative of what might be called Jewish literary neo-orthodoxy. This attitude condemns as anti-Judaism or idolatry every acknowledged rupture or felt discontinuity that exists between the tradition and contemporary Jewish intellectuals.

Yet it is the illumination of the ambivalences and the ambiguities of such rupture that may have made Freud and Kafka, somewhat unwillingly, the authentic representatives of Jewish culture in and for our time. Miss Ozick has praised Singer as a moralist who ''tells us that it is natural to be good, and unholy to go astray.'' Perhaps that praise is merited by *The Penitent*. Had Singer written often thus, he would indeed be remembered as a master of neo-orthodoxy, but hardly as a master of the intricate turnings of stories.

Harold Bloom. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 25, 1983, pp. 3, 27

[Isaac Bashevis] Singer's treatment of exile and literary transplantation differs from those of [Joseph] Conrad and [Vladimir] Nabokov. Like the Polish and the Russian authors, he examines the nature of an individual's experiences of exile; unlike them, Singer deals not only with an individualized, though representative, character but also with an entire exiled nation. A Jewish writer's task is indeed formidable: after all, the history of his people is the history of exile. It is not surprising, then, that Singer, in his constant search for the right ways to transcend his own transplanted state as well as that of the Jewish people, often turns into an adventurous traveler in time and space. The answers to the vital issues of Jewish survival may be found, Singer implies, only if one can establish an unequivocal link between the causes and effects of the biblical exile and those associated with more recent displacements of his people. Singer's resolutions are both straightforward and ambivalent—they may vary from work to work. . . .

Shosha [is] a recent autobiographical novel that encompasses the most representative traits of Singer's entire literary production and reflects his often ambiguous responses to exile and literary transplantation. My readings of *The Slave*, a genuine laboratory of exile, and *Enemies, A Love Story*, an intricate study in ambiguity . . . help to explain why a son of a rabbi and a product of the European enlightenment finds it so difficult to resolve the often insurmountable problems of Jewish existence and exile.

Asher Z. Milbauer. *Transcending Exile: Conrad, Nabokov, I. B. Singer* (Miami: University Presses of Florida, 1985), p. xv

Can we identify Singer as an ''American'' writer? His first novel, *Satan in Goray*, which some (including me) believe his best, was originally published in Yiddish in Warsaw in 1935 and was reprinted serially in the *Forward* in 1945 and in an English translation by Jacob Sloan in 1955. All his work is first written and even first published in Yiddish; until the mid-1960s, all his stories were set in the *shtetl* or the Polish city, steeped in the minutiae of that life and in its superstitions and its folklore. When Singer felt secure in his knowledge of English and of American life, he ventured to write about New York, but even in these stories he did not cut himself off from the Yiddish milieu. ''I have developed roots here too,'' he wrote in 1973. ''Just the same,'' he added, ''my American stories deal with not only their present way of life but *their* roots—their history, their ways of thinking and expressing themselves.'' While these ''American'' stories are entertaining, there probably would be no dispute over the judgment that they are not his best work. So far as his content is concerned, one cannot regard him as a full-fledged ''American'' writer.

But other considerations are relevant. He has controlled translations of his work by close cooperation with the translator, so that

the English is ultimately his own. Stylistically his work then becomes a story in American English. Indeed, the Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein found it ''puzzling'' that a Singer story ''reads better and pleasanter in English than the original Yiddish.'' And in fact Singer's stories have entered the stream of American writings as one expression of its multiethnic character, as part of the folk memory of one of its constituent ethnic components. As an acculturated American who became a citizen in 1943 Singer is entitled to be regarded as an American writer. If an Irish-American writer were to write fiction based on Vietnamese folklore, would it not be considered American fiction? . . .

Singer's modernism accounts for his popularity in the English-speaking world and beyond. He was a child of the post-World War I disillusionment. The classic Yiddish writers were all dead before the war ended, and when Singer began publishing in the 1920s, the world had changed from the one these masters had known, and literature had changed with it. In Yiddish literature, Singer is roughly analogous with the ''lost generation'' of American writers of the 1920s who struck off into modernism. Singer did not feel bound by the sexual inhibitions and taboos of the masters, and indeed of most prewar literature. He was unaffected by the deep concern of the masters for the Jewish community welfare. As a child, Singer has reported, his father was disturbed by the threat of the enlightenment and he sought to minimize secular contamination of his family by feeding his younger children, Isaac and his younger sister, with ''tales of transmigrated spirits, dybbuks, and miracles performed by wonder rabbis and saints.'' . . .

Endowed with an original and independent spirit, Singer came to maturity when literary modernism was on the rise. In his case freedom from conventional restraints found sanction in the Kabbalah, in Sabbatianism, and in Frankism. The sexual revolution was gaining ground, with the publication of *Ulysses* (1922), for instance. Although I am not aware that Singer was directly influenced by Freudianism, he did adopt from his study of the Kabbalah and Frankism the centrality of sex.

Singer is a superb storyteller whose resources in the Jewish past have helped to deepen general American interest in the literary expression of Jews. By his freedom from parochial feeling, by the detachment with which he depicts his characters and events, his work, for decades sealed off from the English-reading public by sequestration in Yiddish media, reached that audience precisely at the time when it had been made receptive to the Jewish milieu and character by talented second-generation American-Jewish writers . . . His deepest belief is, as he said in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech: ''There must be a way for a man to attain all possible pleasures, all the powers and knowledge that nature can grant him, and still serve God.'' He is simultaneously a theist and a hedonist.

Louis Harap. *In the Mainstream: The Jewish Presence in Twentieth-Century American Literature, 1950s–1980s* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1987), pp. 44, 46, 51

Isaac Bashevis Singer's death in July 1991, at the age of eighty-seven, put scarcely a crimp in his publishing exploits. The first posthumous novel, *Scum*, appeared just months after his death, and was followed a year later by *The Certificate*. *Meshugah* is the third, and we have no reason to suppose that the backlog of unpublished material has been exhausted. Singer's lifelong filibustering for imps, demons, incubi, succubi, dybbuks, and the demonic-at-large gains credibility from the fevered pace at which he wrote for almost sixty years, as if possessed.

Meshugah is one of the New York City books that Singer wrote with increasing frequency in his later years. As such, it is one in which the mythical-spiritual dimension is recessive while the social-historical, at which Singer was also adept, holds court. The year is around 1950, and survivors of the Nazi death camps are finding themselves, and each other, in New York. Each encounter is a miracle, even as each discloses a tragedy.

Everyone has lost a husband, a wife, a lover, a child. It is a despairing time, even for those who have miraculously come away with their lives. . . .

Singer wrote the bulk of his work serially for the *Jewish Daily Forward*, this novel appearing between April 1981 and February 1983 under the title, *Lost Souls*. This serialized fiction has much in common with daytime television, providing readers with vicarious romance and meeting the same technical requirements of episodic narrative everywhere: swift pacing, continual crises, formulaic repetition. To sustain suspense over the long haul, Singer's serialized dramas were invariably repetitive, titillating, and coquettishly scandalous—performing charades of illicit desire while keeping actual flesh discreetly offstage. Passion, feuding and forgiveness, guilt and redemption—page-by-page pathos—were the joists and beams of Singer's fiction. As one character announces to a Singer stand-in in the novel *Shosha*: ''The main thing is don't spare the schmaltz. Today's Jews like three things—sex, Torah, and revolution, all mixed together. Give them those and they'll raise you to the skies.''

The obvious divergence from soap opera is that Singer's version is Jewish melodrama—melodrama under the rule of history. Its licentiousness, far from being a commercial pandering to the market, is a tragic metaphysics, warranted, according to Singer, by the apocalypses of the twentieth century. The Holocaust is source and justification, motive and absolution, for if the universe is truly crazy, what claim does any individual have to exemption? Appetite and irrationality are the quarks, the DNA of the moral universe, and we are their slaves.

Such a doctrine sounds suspiciously like original sin, and Singer's characters do often behave as though they are under a curse for which history itself is a symptom, not a cause.

Mark Schechner. *Tikkun*. September-October, 1994, pp. 79–80

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SMILEY, Jane (1949–)

Jane Smiley's *Barn Blind* makes one think of those preadolescent girls whose ardor for horses with names like Black Stallion and King of the Wind makes even the passion of a Messalina pale by comparison. Imagine such a girl grown into a self-assured and self-absorbed mother of four adolescents, all or any one of whom she is obsessively (and with blind disregard for their own desires) determined to make into the Olympic equestrian star she herself has failed to become. Imagine not a shrew but ''a brisk brown woman'' whose neighbors admire her . . . ; [whose] husband of 20 years is flirtatiously in love with her; and whose children honor and obey and seek to escape from her as Old Testament sinners fled Yahweh's sleepless eye. Such a woman is Kate Karlson, the chilling heroine of this pastoral novel of smooth texture and—like the Middle Western summer in which it is set—rich, drowsy pace.

Kept naively farmbound, safe from drugs and delinquency, the four Karlson teen-agers labor from dawn at character-building chores and at horse-work under the rigorous Prussian coaching of a mother who apparently feels that the family that rides together abides together. But her children, thrashing about in a hormonal flood, balk at her dream. . . . Jane Smiley handles with skill and understanding the mercurial molasses of adolescence, and the inchoate, cumbersome love that family members feel for one another. By summer's end, Kate's Spartan code that her sons should finish a meet on their saddles or not at all is horribly fulfilled. But blinkered by hubris, Kate is barn blind to grief and loss; she is thrown, but never falls.

Michael Malone. *The New York Times Book Review.* August 17, 1980, p. 14.

Though rather too belabored and talky to match the impact of Smiley's impressive *Barn Blind* debut (1980), this claustrophobic, deathbed study of an edgy Des Moines family [*At Paradise Gate*] reaffirms her acute feel for silent wounds, thwarted affections, and complex domestic tensions. Ike Robison, 77, is severely ill from heart disease, staying in bed except for occasional trudgings downstairs—and so the three 50-ish Robison daughters have come to gather 'round mother Anna (the novel's central focus) during what seems to be a deathwatch. But family unity is hardly the result in the 24 hours covered here. . . . [Her daughters, industrious] Claire and beautiful, cosmopolitan, snobbish Helen continue their everlasting verbal duel. Fat realtor Susanna murmurously bemoans her fate: no children, a husband who left her. And when Helen's young daughter Christine arrives, announcing her imminent divorce, a new subject is up for group discussion. . . . [Anna] rakes over the past: her strict Mama, her marriage and life with demanding Ike on a failing ranch, her 20-year refusal to let Ike sleep with her. . . . And through the dead-of-night hours—the novel's best section—the aged couple sleeps hardly at all: Anna is on edge, especially after a weird phone call (her imagination?); Ike's bed is re-made again and again; she rebuffs his wanderings into her room; they bicker and snipe, with an explosion from Anna when Ike says her long-ago friend Elinor ''looked like a piece of beef jerky.'' But the next day, before Ike dies, there'll be a tiny moment—Anna helping Ike in the bathroom—of new closeness: ''For the first time in her life, they overlapped.'' And brand-new widow Anna finally looks ahead, having worked through the ''rules'' and ''demands'' of the past. Most of this is quietly splendid, with plainspoken details, a brooding sense of the house itself, and un-gussied-up dialogue. Unfortunately, however, as if afraid that readers will miss the point, Smiley indulges in flat, repetitious summaries of the feelings involved. And even more marring are the daughters' speechy debates—which escalate when Christine much too neatly (Death and Rebirth) discovers that she's pregnant . . . and which often make this novel seem like an old-fashioned, contrived stageplay. Flawed work, then, but worthy, honest, and—at its best—wry and sternly moving.

Kirkus Reviews. August 1, 1981, p. 963.

[*At Paradise Gate* is] about families and death and the deathlessness of families. . . . [Smiley considers] the afterlife of survivors who, in their grief, encounter both sides of mortality—their relatives' deaths and their own continuing lives. . . . [She also indicates] that death is more than the loss of a life; it is an exposure of human fallibility and an acknowledgment of inextricable kinship.

[In *At Paradise Gate*], Jane Smiley watches the women in a middle-class Iowa family. . . . [The novel suggests] the mutability of family and [reminds] us of its powerful hold. We witness genetic mirrors, primal imprints and failed strokes of communication.

As *At Paradise Gate* opens, Ike Robison's three grown daughters sit downstairs waiting for him to die. Helen, Claire and Susanna claim they came to help their mother, Anna, and to cheer Daddy to recuperation. But their nervous intensity, like the heavy stillness before an earthquake, is an unmistakable omen. . . . Their somberness is interrupted by Ike's granddaughter Christine. Bright, flush-faced Christine presents the family with a further problem—her pregnancy and forthcoming divorce. Jane Smiley strikes delicately all the chords between the women's stolid endurance of Ike's illness and their frenzied attempts to preserve Christine's young family.

So Helen, Claire and Susanna wait in the familiar living room, which is cushioned with unstruck blows, insulated with unsaid words, electrified with decades of family tension. They are decent daughters, available for all the chores, emergencies and rituals of life and death. Reading *At Paradise Gate* is like being confined to an endless Sunday afternoon, anchored at home by too much dinner and too many memories. The women recall their old rivalries, which are not so old after all. They discuss their shared traits and acknowledge that even their differences are the result of their reactions to one other.

Anna, their mother, is the most vital character. Unburdened by sentiment, she is angry that her husband is abandoning her and that her daughters remain so dependent. . . . Her marriage has been

hard—uprooting, violent, cold—but she has grown used to Ike. Who will share the spring lettuce? Anna's tart honesty and acute consciousness hold the book together when the story line dwindles. . . .

At Paradise Gate is not so much about Ike's death as about Anna's life—a retrospective on her difficult past and a resolution of her remaining years. Death's imminence changes the dimensions of time. For Anna, one closely observed day has the complexity of 10 remembered years. As she confronts her finiteness, she achieves a quiet certainty about her right to what's left of her world. . . .

[Smiley views] the next generation with an almost evolutionary optimism. Is it hubris or instinct that draws us forward? Despite the dead, despite the treacherous disappointments of the living, families survive. Perhaps because they provide a continuity for compassion, a place for one more fragile attempt at love. . . .

> Valerie Miner. *The New York Times Book Review*. November 22, 1981, pp. 15, 42-3.

Wordsworth said it right: ''We murder to dissect.'' He was deploring what books to do life's beauteous forms. *Duplicate Keys* proves his case beyond a shadow. Killing off two characters before page 1 . . . , Jane Smiley arrives wielding bright dialogue like a scalpel, disarming us. It takes less than a paragraph before we're on to the fact that neither she nor we are going to care very much who done it, let alone why. We are all in it for the dissection.

Which is as it should be in a novel set in the coolest of places and times—Manhattan, 1980. This may be the anatomy of a murder but only because we happen to be in the neighborhood. More important and far more compelling is the anatomy of friendship, betrayal, . . . and the bittersweet smell of near success that is perhaps the most pungent odor in town.

Jane Smiley's West 84th Street is full of what the city likes to call its affluent young, though in truth they are neither. Already in their mid-20's in the mid-70's, when they blew in from the Middle West, Alice and Susan and Denny and Craig and Noah and Ray arrived in New York full of beans (garbanzo) and beginner's luck (the rock band had a hit record). But they, like the rest of us, have outgrown the 70's, the food, the dreams and the music. Now they have dead-end jobs, plants that need watering and early-30's panic, relieved by Chinese takeout and reruns of old fantasies. . . .

So they go for walks and occasional cocaine. . . . No one has any kids; they have become each other's. No one gets to say no anymore about sharing; they just do—keys, beds, trouble, loss of faith, murder, Jane Smiley knows she's got us where we live.

Meanwhile, what about that double homicide? One of the friends, a young woman with a gorgeous chin who does something vague for a cable television company, sums up the group's feelings: ''I mean, the murder was awful and all that.'' She says this while spearing shrimp toast off another friend's plate. . . .

The operating condition here is affectlessness, formerly known as cool. The author matches her tone to her people with unerring pitch. Images have an elegant, satisfying thwack, like the closing of solid- core doors. . . . In a moment of self-discovery, ''It seemed suddenly true to her that no man would ever do more than kiss her imagination or her life.'' And, most tellingly, expressing emotion: ''I love you,'' Alice says to Susan. ''I know,'' Susan replies, noting that in their lives, this is a phrase that usually means ''you owe it to me to do what I say'' or maybe ''thanks for doing what I said.''

When terror arrives, we are hardly surprised to find ourselves, like them, mesmerized but shockproof. Fear is just another emotion that hangs out, waiting for itself to happen. It drifts through the door like an intruder in overpriced sneakers who has somehow got hold of the key.

This is not an ordinary mystery, but we do get a first-rate cliffhanger. . . . By the way, the detective's name is Honey. He isn't one, of course; he isn't a hero either. A nice touch. Jane Smiley appears to have an unbreakable habit of them.

> Lois Gould. *The New York Times Book Review*. April 29, 1984, p. 14.

In Jane Smiley's recent novella, *The Age of Grief*, a dentist speaks with the patterned incoherence that marks the voice of truly contemporary fiction. He says,

> Teeth are important. Eskimo cultures used to abandon their old folks in the snow when their teeth went, no matter how good their health was otherwise. People in our culture have a lot of privileges. One of them is having no teeth.

In which culture—the one where loss of teeth is fatal or the one where it is a privilege—would a dentist be more important? For *The Age of Grief*'s narrator, that compact allusion to Eskimos is the relic of a world almost inconceivably more arduous than his own privileged life. . . .

The vulgar moral of history is that people in our culture have a lot of privileges. That may be why historical fiction tends to be pulp fiction these days: it reeks of that complacent moral, according to which hardship is just the necessary foil to romance. Even serious historical fiction seldom has the pungency of novels set in the present, offering an elaborate temporal illusion and the reprise of familiar conventions instead of the news we badly want to hear.

Smiley's new book, *The Greenlanders*, is a wonderful exception, a historical novel with the nearness of contemporary fiction. It is a sobering work set in 14th-century Greenland—barely within the confines of European culture—and closely based on what is known of life in the remnant of the colony established there by Erik the Red, who was exiled from Iceland in the tenth century. The Church survives among Smiley's Greenlanders, as do ecclesiastical and secular law; those artifacts and their workings we can imagine, but who can imagine the country? Greenland is bare of everything but difficulty. And yet, as the gentle Norwegian priest Sira Pall Hallvardsson says, ''These Greenlanders declare it a fresh and lovely spot, in the way that all men look about themselves at the earth and think themselves at home.''

The Greenlanders is a chronicle of events occurring within the life-span of Gunnar Asgeirsson, who was born in 1352. The 190 inhabitants of Greenland's Eastern Settlement (a Western Settlement has already perished) live on farms, or steadings, widely separated by fjords and low mountains on the island's southern tip. . . .

When serious historical novels fail, they usually do so through anxiety of evidence: they tell the joke and have to explain the punch line too. Unlike fictions about the way we live now, they cannot rely on what the reader knows, for the reader rarely knows enough (and sometimes—worse—knows too much). Their rhetoric is not that of persuasive storytelling but of over-pleading, so we end by crediting the research, not the characters, the setting and not the plot. Here again, Smiley's novel is a brilliant exception. Of a fellow priest, Sira Pall observes that his impatience lies hidden in the '''ironia' typical of the Greenlanders.'' ''Ironia'' is the mode of this book. It convinces by explaining nothing.

Smiley's narrative manner is an expansive imitation of the terse Norse sagas. Near the end of the book we learn that this work was written by Gunnar Asgeirsson, who meant to let ''all the folk of the world . . . learn what is really the case with us.'' Gunnar is proud and intelligent, one of perhaps three literate men in the Eastern Settlement, but he has never been to the world. His voice remains dissolved within the community of Greenlanders; though he is a storyteller within the story, his tales know no first person. He assumes that the reader lives as he does, though in less isolation. . . . What we will need to know, Gunnar assumes, is the nature of Greenlanders. And he is right. This is the news we want to hear.

The Greenlanders has a profusion of plots broken into tiny narrative units. As the narrative advances, the plots begin to cohere the way stories told about any small community do. Some lives arch across the whole of the novel, notably those of Sira Pall and Gunnar's son, Kollgrim, and Gunnar's older sister Margret. . . .

There is assuredly something stonelike but quivering in the character of these Greenlanders. The bitterness of the land forces them into narrow paths, and their hold on life is stubborn. Self-irony afflicts even their spiritual teachers. . . . They have learned that ''whatever will happen will be good enough,'' and that there is no reason to complain if ''the winter was no colder than previous ones, Lent no longer, and Easter no warmer.'' This sustains them when sand drifts over the fields or starvation visits. It allows them to face equably the sure extinction of their race.

The Greenlanders is a grim book, and yet in its austerity and the caliber of its art it is jubilant, its effect that of a prayer composed by one of the priests at Gardar:

> Lord, we lie in our turf houses,
> As in graves covered with snow,
> And our prayers rise to you as loudly
> As the voices of the dead.
> Lord, You break the ice for us,
> And call forth the green grass,
> And so we rise out of our houses
> And come forth singing.

When this was first read to the congregation, ''only a few praised it,'' because it was too true, but it resonates in the reader's mind. In *The Greenlanders*, singing is the sound you hear above the wind.

Smiley's greatest achievement is not the accuracy of her research, the vividness of her characters, or the simple abundance of her story. It is the uncanny movement of the narrative, which radiates a spirit of acceptance. This is partly a philosophical matter (clearly, the Greenlanders are stoic) and partly a technical matter. Contemporary fiction often moves like a man tripping: it loses its balance and stumbles forward, tumbling into cumulative order. But from the moment *The Greenlanders* begins [until it ends] . . . , the narrative is perfectly balanced, never cascading forward or backward, at ease with the way first one thing and then another thing happens in the lives of these extraordinary people.

This grace arises from the stern resignation—reflected in the storytelling—one feels in the speech and conduct of the Greenlanders. Their deliberate acquiescence to the condition they inhabit is itself ironic. . . . Resignation is never more evident than when it cracks, as it does when Margret, who normally dresses in a conservative purplish wool characteristic of her family's steading, wears a gown of red silk to meet her lover, Skuli. . . . Margret discovers that when the patient, unsurprised ''carapace of self'' shatters, sin and vanity result. She sees

> that this is how it is that folk are made to desire what they know they should not have, they are made to wait for it, so that when it comes, no matter how dark and full of sin and repellent it is, they are glad enough to welcome it.

The Greenlanders portrays the hard place, the harsh relic of being where tradition is fragile and civilization no more durable than winter hay. The reader encounters so much truth in this novel that Sira Pall's analogy between the Greenlanders and all men seems not trite but inevitable. When the book ends, one remembers well the lives of Gunnar and Margret and Kollgrim, but one remembers most of all Sira Pall's (and Smiley's) compassion for the stonelike souls in his cure, souls that can barely be readied for heaven so resolute is their elemental grasp on existence. . . .

> Verlyn Klinkenborg. *The New Republic,*. May 16, 1988, pp. 36, 38–9.

Jane Smiley's congenial turf is the dailiness of daily life, as its domestic rhythms play themselves out in a variety of settings and circumstances. She writes, in short, about families—a subject that once occupied literature's very center but now seems ignored. That Smiley came to wide critical attention with *A Thousand Acres,* a novel that won her both a Pulitzer Prize and a National Circle Critics Award, is true enough, but it is even truer that earlier collections (*The Age of Grief* and *Ordinary Love & Good Will*) amply demonstrated that she could write beautifully about family members.

As a tale of a tyrannical father who resolves to divide his thousand-acre Iowa farm among his three daughters, only to slip into madness, curse his offspring, and venture out alone into a fearsome storm, Smiley's novel is filled with correlations to *King Lear*—not only in terms of allusion and plot but also in its inevitable arc toward tragedy. Generally speaking, reviewer-critics praised Smiley's large ambitions and infectious style, but some worried that the novel's schema was a bit *too* schematic. However, there are at least as many reasons to think of Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* or Arthur Miller's *The Death of a Salesman* as one turns the pages of Smiley's altogether engrossing novel.

Moreover, *King Lear* represents only a fraction of Smiley's concerns; others include farming as it has evolved into big business, dysfunctional families, and even dashes of feminist theory. Perhaps Smiley tried to pack too many disparate concerns between the covers of a single novel (a criticism that might also be made of *Moo,* her effort to squeeze a large land-grant university under the novelist's microscope), but it is clear that *A Thousand Acres* is a brava performance in ways that *Barn Blind, At Paradise Gate,* or even *The Greenlanders* are not. For in *A Thousand Acres,* the slow gathering of quotidian detail means to tackle large, existential questions: Not only what it means to be a true daughter but also, as Ron Carlson points out, ''what is the price to be paid for trying one's whole life to please a proud father who slenderly knows himself—who coveted his land the way he loved his daughters, not wisely but too well?''

By contrast, *Moo* asks what kind of institution is the American university in the 1990s, and it sets about making its estimates by focusing not so much on individual characters (several administrators, a handful of colorful professors, and a slice of students) within an academic setting as on the setting itself. ''What is a university?'' one of her characters asks, and the answer seems hazy at best.

Indeed, the novel's main character is not a human being at all but rather a pig named Earl Butz. Like most of those feeding from the university's deep trough, Smiley's pig lives only to eat and then to eat some more. He is, in short, the deep secret hidden in the bowels of Moo University. As Provost Harstad puts it:

> Over the years . . . everyone around the university had given free reign to his or her desires, and the institution had, with a fine, trembling responsiveness, answered, ''Why not?'' It had become, more than anything, a vast network of interlocking wishes.

No doubt there will be those who resist Smiley's portrait of the university as hog heaven (''Unfair! Unfair!'' I can hear them muttering), just as there must have been those Iowa farmers who did not see their lives on the land accurately reflected in *A Thousand Acres.* But a novelist has other allegiances, and Smiley's commitment to the dictums of art has produced reams of extraordinary prose already and promises even more in the future.

Sanford Pinsker. In *Contemporary Novelists, 6th edition*, ed. Susan Windisch Brown (St. James Press, 1996.)

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SNODGRASS, W.D. (1926–)

Mr. Snodgrass's poems represent the increasingly sought-after effect of the journal entry, of the autobiographical report, not assembled from deep images in a kind of rhetorical patchwork, like so many of Dylan Thomas's reminiscences, for example, but written out of considered reflections, summoned up for judgment, whose preparatory motions would always have seemed to consist rather of pencil nibbling than of vocalizing. In such a form, wit is seldom an end in itself, but instead always serves to keep the open scepticism of the narrator's scrutiny clear of the attractions of abject sentimentality on the one hand, and of self-conscious posturing on the other. Poems like ''April Inventory,'' ''A Cardinal,'' and the title sequence, a group of poems for the poet's daughter (it takes its title from a phrase in a translation of an Old Irish story: ''an only daughter is the needle of the heart''), all succeed in being openly autobiographical, intense and delicate at once, and never embarrassing.

John Hollander. *Partisan Review*. Summer, 1959. p. 504

Snodgrass's universe is about as poor a thing as you could find anywhere in America: quonset huts, zoos, a campus, debris, birds that live like vermin in the gullies beside golf courses. It sounds like a small mill town that got missed by our juggernaut prosperity. But how alive he is there! And how fluently and honestly he writes about it. . . .

Ten poems constitute a cycle of lyrics on one subject, under the title ''Heart's Needle.'' The subject is one that has been discussed endlessly everywhere except, so far as I know, in verse. George Balanchine is said to have remarked that in a ballet you can't tell if someone is supposed to be somebody's mother-in-law. And in poetry would it seem reasonable to write about the relations of a divorced and re-married parent with a child of the first marriage? But someone must once have thought it impossibly unorthodox to write about a man's love for an unattainable woman; it would take so much explaining to make the situation clear, and then it would be so prosaic. Why not keep to the good simple themes? W.D. Snodgrass overcomes all the difficulties. The poems never leave the literal situation, yet they do not depend on appeals to it for their emotions. Each pathetic detail is given without flinching. . . .

John Thompson. *Kenyon Review*. Summer, 1959. pp. 489–90

What is new in *Heart's Needle* is the poetry of divorce instead of love. The title sequence traces, in aching detail, the relationship of the divorced father to his young daughter. Other poems have to do with the uneasy relationship of the poet to the campus which gives him, but not his Muse, daily bread. Let me say at once that Snodgrass is a deft and skilful craftsman who exhibits subtle control of sound and image and fluency of movement. He has found his style—he assimilates ease and elegance along with metrics from Marianne Moore and Richard Wilbur—and practises it so consistently that no one will mistake a poem by Mr. Snodgrass for anyone else's. So we can consider the claims Mr. [Robert] Lowell makes for him. ''*The* poet with content'' has simply junked Pound's, Eliot's, and the imagists' dicta about the impersonality of poetry. His subject is frankly himself.

Daniel G. Hoffman. *Sewanee Review*. Winter, 1960. p. 122

You don't find Snodgrass hymning a dull Georgia boyhood or a weekend in Des Moines in the borrowed cadences of Yeats's ''The Tower'' or in the variegated language of Stevens' ''The Comedian as the Letter C.'' He knows better. It is true that he owes most of what he knows about poetry to his Iowa training; he also recognizes the danger of turning that learning into dogma. In his current effort to write poetry in the larger tradition of Wordsworth, Hardy, and Chaucer, he has gone beyond his Iowa mentors, especially after working with Randall Jarrell at Colorado. Consequently, you can find in his work the unabashed presence of Midwest farmland, the deceptively simple rhythms and statements of nursery rhymes, along with many an unblushing use of such words as ''loveliness'' and ''gentleness.'' This combination of hard indirection and simplicity gives a tone of dreamy precision to his work, especially in his momentary human scenes, like snowdrops in water, that are so full of implications.

Donald T. Torchiana in *Poets in Progress* (Northwestern). 1962. p. 108

But [Robert] Lowell is not alone among contemporary poets in his confessional tendencies. He has said that W.D. Snodgrass used private autobiographical material before him; and Snodgrass and Lowell have contributed heavily to the personal or intimate mood in much current American poetry. Any judgment of this highly

personal disclosure must be founded on the meaningfulness of the artistic object created from it—that is to say, whether it can achieve the imaginative objectivity capable of establishing it as an independent and forceful work.

Ralph J. Mills. *Contemporary American Poetry* (Random). 1965. p. 156

After Experience, a remarkable book, is true to . . . the sense of a poetic fate which is at the same time a poetic vocation. . . . The book is full of care for the things by which life is preserved, if it is preserved; as two lovers try to send a kite aloft, ''to keep in touch with the thing.'' And many poems imply a life, long ago, far away, which man and wife lived and shared. Now the objects of that life are gone, but mortally active, too, as reminders, mementos.

The Orphic poet turns grief into song by turning life into ritual, then into play; as a father plays with his lost child. Mr. Snodgrass tells himself, as if to justify the cost, that something like this has been going on, in art and thought, for a century: the destruction of matter for the energy released by the destruction. . . . Mr. Snodgrass's new poems may be received in this setting, attempts to read the fracture of his personal life as an act of destruction, a necessary act if new energy is to be released.

Denis Donoghue. *New York Review of Books*. April 25, 1968. p. 18

Snodgrass began his career during the doldrums of the fifties when it seemed that every other poet was sitting in a confessional box or lying on his analyst's couch, composing some wry or decorous plaint about the latest domestic row. And while the talent was more brusque, *Heart's Needle* had all the marks of fashion: clever craftsmanship, witty rhymes, careful irony, the cultivation of private sentiment. What is news about *After Experience* is that without sacrificing what Henry James called the ''felicity of scale'' Snodgrass gives promise of shaking free of the academic (and those well-made quatrains) and regraduating his lute.

Herbert Leibowitz. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1968. p. 563

In general, *Heart's Needle* is a poetry of experience, of present tense and present tension; *After Experience* (1968), as its ambiguous title implies, is at once a poetry of the poet's meditation on past happenings and a poetry of his determination to experience new ways of seeing, acting, and feeling. By the time of its appearance—though some of the poems date back to when Snodgrass was composing *Heart's Needle*—the poet has survived certain experiences and is out, after these, looking for others that will continue to make him feel alive. Snodgrass tells us again and again that one can exist only by living the passionate life, by freeing the soul, though this action itself will inevitably bring grief to those we love the most. . . .

Many of the lyrics in *Heart's Needle* are lasting achievements, but the title sequence of ten poems, one for each season over a period of two and a half years, is one that makes Snodgrass' volume as important as, perhaps, only a half dozen others during this century of American verse. The poet-father's voice here is unique: urgent but controlled, muted but passionate, unassuming but instructive. Snodgrass manages a poetry that moves from his own psychological problems to suggest what it feels like to be a man and to live in the mid-century world.

William Heyen in *Modern American Poetry*, ed. Jerome Mazzaro (McKay). 1970. pp. 352–3, 355

[Snodgrass's] verse is witty, candid, and self-ironic. His world is essentially the secular world apprehended through autobiography and all its peculiar embarrassments. His first book, *Heart's Needle* (1959), is also one of the first to adopt the stance of self-exposure among poets trained in verbal *politesse*. Though Snodgrass favors regular verse forms, his language is direct, homey in the nuances of American speech, and striking in its sudden personal twists. A student of Lowell and also an admirer of Jarrell, Snodgrass exemplifies the post-formalist as well as the Post-Romantic trend toward individual expression, neither academic nor Beat. Speaking of his love, his divorce, or his own daughter, he manages also to make echoes of the Korean War part of his voice. Impish in humor, complex in his sincerity, still somehow cool, he seeks in his first book to know his ''name.'' ''Poets of our generation,'' he admits, ''have such extensive resources for disguising ourselves from ourselves.'' Disguise, confession, and self-division—these are the curse and cure of Snodgrass, the burden he seeks to depose in *After Experience* (1968). Reaching for some form of reconciliation richer than psychoanalysis can ever afford the indigent ego, he expresses a Self reborn in poems of ''blunt beauty,'' controlled in their new-found release. His talent, however, remains special, his essential contribution to poetry still moot.

Ihab Hassan. *Contemporary American Literature* (Ungar). 1973. pp. 128–9

The question of how confessional poetry may be distinguished within the long tradition of first-person poetry on personal subjects leads us to a second question: How may Snodgrass's achievement as a confessional poet be distinguished within the confessional mode? . . . We can perhaps agree first on several qualities which tend to separate Snodgrass's work from that of other confessional poets.

First, much of Snodgrass's confessional poetry, like much of his more recent work, attempts what Snodgrass calls the poem of ''becoming,'' the coherent, ''place-centered,'' dynamic poem which is far more like a story than an *object d'art*. Because Snodgrass's poems often dramatize the individual's ability (or inability) to choose, they accordingly have the particular merit of being able to accommodate and portray change, in the poet himself if need be. Partly as a result (a ''story'' must be clear to be effective), Snodgrass shows affinities with such poets as Frost, Auden, and Ransom, who, as Jerome Judson says, ''seem to want us to know what they are talking about.''

Second, as Alan Brownjohn has noted, Snodgrass generally avoids opportunities to generalize from his personal experiences; he withstands the temptation to make public pronouncements. Among those poets we call confessional, Snodgrass concentrates in his early work most exclusively on the examination of his own experience. His reluctance to generalize does not weigh against the universality of his best poetry, however. As we shall discover, Snodgrass's poetry achieves universality not by any explicit claim, but by the perceptiveness and honesty of its chronicle of private experience.

Third, as Paul Carroll has suggested, Snodgrass, unlike some of the other confessional poets, is not typically a poet of the extreme situation. In the first place, his experiences have in themselves not been particularly remarkable, and he has never attempted to convert the ordinary into the extraordinary. In the second place, Snodgrass has characteristically avoided as poetic material those of his experiences that are likely to have been, at least by objective standards, most dramatic. Thus, in ''Heart's Needle,'' a sequence of poems about his loss of his daughter through divorce, Snodgrass treats the moment of initial separation only indirectly, by establishing a sense of felt inevitability in one poem, a sense of regret in another. His candor is balanced throughout his poetry not by reticence, but by gentleness; sincerity and decorum, the poetry of *Heart's Needle* shows, need not be incompatible. . . .

In summary, while Snodgrass is like the other ''confessional'' poets in his sustained close concentration upon the details of his own experience, his poetry at its best is distinctive for the lucidity of its descriptions, the modesty of its claims to public statement, and the respect it embodies for the depths of ostensibly ''ordinary'' experiences.

Paul L. Gaston. *W. D. Snodgrass* (Twayne, 1978), pp. 20–22

The Führer Bunker consists of twenty monologues intended ''to investigate the thoughts and feelings behind the public façade'' of such personages as Adolf Hitler, Eva Braun, Albert Speer, and Joseph Goebbels. Hitler reminisces about a birthday cake his mother made him; Eva Braun sings *Tea for Two*; Goebbels recalls his many lovers. These revelations are meant to tell of character, though as a rule they come off as mere curiosities. . . . The personal revelations in *The Führer Bunker* make the characters seem more kinky than compelling: Hitler fantasizes about a woman urinating and defecating on him. These character sketches can otherwise be subversive because on their own momentum they often become justifications. . . .

Snodgrass once indicated that to render the death-camps even credible was almost beyond the power of literature; in this book, he focuses instead only on those people who visited Hitler's bunker between April 1 and May 1, 1945. The result is a book that is, in view of its ambition, disappointing.

Snodgrass intends this gallery of Nazi ghosts to be psychologically revealing, and the book does have telling moments. The best psychological portrait, ''Hermann Fegelein,'' follows the frantic last thoughts passing through the mind of a mediocre man going to his execution. . . .

Snodgrass has always gone to some trouble to set even conversational diction and syntax to meters, but in this book his meters and stanzas seem to cause more trouble than anything else. The ''visual'' prosody of the Speer poems, set in cute triangular blocks of type, for the Nazi architect, is flat and arbitrary to the ear. . . . Snodgrass . . . resorts to limp redundancies and dislocated prepositions to get those clanking rhymes. Yet despite some stretches of lame exposition (as, for example, pp. 21–23) and flat verse, there are some good lines in the book. These seem to come easiest when Snodgrass's own irony finds a spokesman. . . . If more of his characters could speak with such vigor, the book would be more successful.

Robertson Hallberg. *Chicago Review*. Winter, 1980, pp. 117–20

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SNYDER, Gary (1930–)

In Snyder's first book (*Rip Rap*), he has a poem on the metamorphosis from rural poverty to suburban accretion, closing wryly with the observation that only he, of all the members of his family, had remained poor. But he had not multiplied his wants. . . .

[*Myths and Texts*] remains free of unimportant desires. The substance of the book is an amalgamation of Indians, the Orient, and the vision of an ecological balance witnessed in youth and now destroyed. It's easy and in some quarters smart to smirk at people who take up Buddhism and have a sense of identity with men at work. This can't be done with Snyder: it's all so natural, both the knowledge and the work. He's made a discipline from Buddhism, Amer-Indian myth, and the immediacy of work in an unspoiled natural setting. The work is itself a reward, but it also destroys the very element from which it takes its sustenance. . . . The elegy of involvement: to have witnessed, it was necessary to be one of the destroyers. His sense of involvement keeps him from invective. This world is part of his total fabric, and he cannot falsely externalize it. He cannot point with awe to the objects of his experience, because they have become attached to him through touch and action. It is not even necessary for him to lament this world which, through his poetry, he has preserved. He moves fluently through this world as a local spirit taking the forms of Coyote and Han Shan and a ghostly logger. In these poems, action and contemplation become identical states of being, and both states of secular grace. From this fusion wisdom emerges, and it is not useless but timed to the event. The result is a terrible sanity, a literal clairvoyance, an innate decorum.

Thomas Parkinson. *Prairie Schooner*. Winter, 1960–61. pp. 383–4

Snyder's [*The Back Country*] is plain, spare, approaching the condition of pure verbal notation. Photography, not music, is his ideal medium, or perhaps he is seeking the English equivalent of the Chinese ideogram. . . . It is no wonder that a poet so strongly visual should turn to Japan and China for his inspiration. . . . This is a strange volume, filled with mountains, woods, pine needles, smoke, and snow. Mr. Snyder's best poems are hieroglyphic in the true sense, summoning glimpses of dark gods, of Artemis, of Hell. His weakest poems are merely echoes of the outworn imagist tradition of Williams and Pound. . . . Along with Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, [Snyder] was one of the original San Francisco ''beat'' poets. He figures as the hero of Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*.

Victor Howes. *Christian Science Monitor*. May 29, 1968. p. 11

Snyder is content to describe the great outdoors and sentimental moments; his poems are snapshots taken on the road, bits of quaint information. . . . There is a fallacy in his idea of poetry—I think going back to W. C. Williams—that the poet is a holy man who has only to point to an object; the initiate will perceive its significance. What actually results, however, is a lack of tension, an absence of drama. This may be the peace of the Orient, but I doubt it. I think it just monotony.

Louis Simpson. *Harper's Magazine*. August, 1968. p. 76

The best book of American poetry so far this year is Gary Snyder's *The Back Country*. Some older German poets used to hope they could use common words like ''rock'' and ''kettle'' so crisply, freshly, that they would become the things, and one would see the objects as if for the first time. Snyder can do it. His is no mere Descriptive Poetry, but an acute visual *and* tactile sense reacting on an extraordinary verbal gift. The nouns sparkle, the verbs shimmer, and they clack together like pebbles; the Far West mountain poems are as good as a hike. He is the first writer since Gertrude Stein to make *lists* which are poetry. And to show you how good his verbs are, he can make actions as exciting as things—no one living writes better poems about work.

Gerald Burns. *Southwest Review*. Autumn, 1968. p. 446

Gary Snyder has a much wider range [than Robert Creeley] because he is more fruitfully open to the world outside, but he also falls easily into mannerisms and he is bad at structuring his verse. The shorter poems are the more successful ones.

Most of his verse has the ripe tang of impromptu living about it and if it seems to be *about* something in a way that Creeley's doesn't, it is partly that he has neither lived in order to write nor written in order to live but lived first and written second. He has been a merchant seaman, a wood-cutter, and a student in a Buddhist monastery. He doesn't believe in isolation for the artist. . . . He has also said that the rhythms of his poems follow the rhythms of the physical work he is doing and the life he is leading at the time. This is true, and the poems take their subjects very directly from immediate experience. . . .

Snyder has obviously been influenced by the style and rhythms of Japanese verse, particularly those of the haiku, and it is interesting to see, in the seven or so years that *The Back Country* covers, how he succeeds better and better at assimilating the influence. Some of the earlier poems handle English almost as if it were a foreign language, getting a long way from natural speech rhythms and hammering phrases into a concentrated powder, as if to make a soup cube. But in ''Looking at Pictures to be Put Away,'' the Japanese influence is barely discernible, though clearly he would never have arrived at this kind of distillation but for the earlier experiments. . . . He tends to write in terms of unrelated instants of experience, in present participles and past participles, letting the noun-pictures proliferate and cutting down on verbs which might commit him to deeper participation, or even to a clear statement of attitude. But many of the later poems show his capacities for directness, comedy, abuse and dramatisation. And these surprise us because we've seen so little of them. He has a galloping talent but he hasn't always given it enough rein.

Ronald Hayman. *Encounter*. Feb., 1969. pp. 78–9

[*The Back Country*] puts the earlier works into a unified perspective, and in a sense sums up Snyder's experience as a man living in and reacting to the Western ethos. It constitutes a pilgrimage away from an industrial-suburban civilization, reaching steadily deeper, psychically, toward a human universe involving once again an astonishing physical reality. The pilgrimage is from the West to the Orient, from the city to the American wilderness. Both facets of this pilgrimage complement the other. From the East the poet draws the contemplative, historic-minded inwardness and the sparse, imagistic poetic diction, closely resembling the method of the popular haiku form. He draws from the American wilderness his sense of the salvation possible within our cultural framework, stressing the old myths and realities of our physical heritage, our physical environment.

Edward Zahniser. *Living Wilderness*. Spring, 1969. p. 35

Snyder is the principal controversialist of the counter culture because he simply refuses controversy altogether. He acts on the assumption that the old world is totally, irrevocably, stone dead. He confronts it simply by being there. Why does he stay around? The bodhisattva's vow is, ''I will not enter Nirvana until I can take all sentient creatures with me.'' But the bodhisattva doesn't consciously make a vow. He is a bodhisattva out of transcendental indifference. As far as he is concerned he is just plain old Smoky the Bear.

The dead society was urban, its culture the pleasure of a clerkly caste. Allen Ginsberg cries, ''Woe, woe to the bloody city of Jerusalem!'' Snyder, like Benedict of Nursia, or the yamabushi of Japan, goes to the wilderness. His values are those of the wilderness, of the lynx on the branch, the deer in the meadow. The confrontation is total. There are no bears amongst the roses, only a critic who supposes things false and wrong. . . .

I do not believe that there is a single individual who has more influence on the youth who leave the dead society for the counter culture than Gary Snyder. He makes explicit what the musicians play and sing.

Kenneth Rexroth. *With Eye and Ear* (Herder and Herder). 1970. pp. 214, 217

As a cultural figure, [Snyder's] durability is evidenced by his fame having outlasted all three of the major movements in the American West since World War II—the Beat Generation, the Zen interest of the 50's, and the Hippies of the 60's. The strong points of these currents—creative alienation from robotlife, purified mind, and gentle community, respectively—had been present in Snyder's work from the start, and his steady focus on wilderness clarity helped him avoid the well-publicized pitfalls along the way. Thus he has always seemed ahead of the times, which is essential for a popular American bard-seer. Another, more fundamental requirement for such a figure is that his work, thought, and life be of a piece; as I hope I have shown, it is almost inevitable that this be true of the ecological vision. In our accelerating re-examination of civilization in the light of enduring perceptions and longings, it is not too much to suggest that Gary Snyder's insights can be extremely valuable.

Thomas J. Lyon. *Kansas Quarterly*. Spring, 1970. pp. 123–4

If Allen Ginsberg was the Beat Generation's Walt Whitman, then Gary Snyder was its Henry David Thoreau. Or to put it even more emphatically, Snyder is the present generation's Thoreau, for far from diminishing, his popular influence has increased over the past ten years. . . .

Gary Snyder has become a sort of prophet of the essential in human life, and in his own way a great liberator, too. His concern with ecology and the physical environment of America . . . is not just fashionably recent. It is and has been as fundamental to his own thought as it was to Thoreau's a hundred years before. And he, unlike Thoreau, was born to the pioneer life. . . .

He was on hand to greet Allen Ginsberg when Ginsberg arrived in India and to show him around the country. And that, symbolically, was what Gary Snyder did for many of the Beats and for many times more of the generation that followed them: he introduced them to the East. . . .

Anyone who supposes Gary Snyder's Oriental proclivity separated him from the American literary mainstream in general, or from Henry David Thoreau in particular, simply has no appreciation of the widespread early influence of eastern philosophy and religion on our literature. . . .

A man of remarkable intellect and flexibility, [Snyder] seems less interested in hammering out a synthesis drawn from the best of East and West, than he does simply in containing both within himself.

Bruce Cook. *The Beat Generation* (Scribner). 1971. pp. 28–30

His theme is not, really, ''wild nature''; man and nature are one . . . and to speak of one without the other is meaningless. He asks, What should you know to be a poet? and answers ''all you can about animals as persons.''

The breadth of world-view corresponds to a breadth of terms of reference, sometimes similar to lists but always interesting, highly articulated, and immediately felt, falling naturally into structure. . . .

The relatedness of all things is a cliché in Western civilization, where it is known as the Chain of Being, but it is reinvigorated with an Eastern admixture in Snyder's poetry. And Gary Snyder gives the curious impression of being always outdoors—or creates the illusion that, even when he is indoors, he never stops being also outdoors. . . .

The poems refer directly outward, to the world; in this sense traditional ''craftsmanship'' and hypotaxis are lacking, intentionally so, in favor of another craftsmanship which is rarely taught. It is the fidelity to a sense of the world which makes this poetry so valuable. It is profoundly unsolipsistic. The separations which we often allow to creep into our lives (inner world/outer world; rational/irrational; subjective/objective; ego/id) are absent. Gary Snyder's poems are marvellously undefensive, generous, and contain much joy.

John R. Carpenter. *Poetry*. June, 1972. pp. 168–9

Like the early Romantics, [Snyder] believes that the subjects and language of poetry should be rooted in the common life, which he has known intimately. . . .

Like Thomas Merton, Snyder recognizes the late nineteenth-century ghost dances of the American Indians as an effort to recapture a lost communal culture. He is, however, more optimistic and revolutionary than Merton in his hope that modern society may be able to reach back to its primitive roots through changes in social organization directed toward the ideal of a tribal or communal family of man. . . .

In his veneration of nature, his Eastern mysticism, and his revolutionary hopes, Gary Snyder is very much in the current of the times. Whether or not his revolutionary goals are capable of realization (a point on which Snyder is more optimistic than most poets of his generation), his work is a valuable leaven to the process of continuing change in poetic and social forms.

Walter Sutton. *American Free Verse* (New Directions). 1973. pp. 188–90

Writing, in the main, within the Imagist tradition of Pound, Williams, and the Orient, Snyder's poetry is not solely Imagistic. The gradual development of his work from the crafted to the visionary poem, his interest in primitive oral poetry, and his recent allusions to Whitman, Duncan, and other mystical poets attest to this. Significantly influenced early in his career by the demands of Oriental nature poetry for precision, sharpness, and spontaneity, Snyder's movement into Imagism and later toward the ''visionary'' was assured when he began his study of Buddhism in college. Its influence on the mind of Gary Snyder is profound, and it is deepening as he matures. From the sometimes ''easy'' references of *Riprap* to the basis of his later more mature work, *Regarding Wave* and the later sections of *Mountains and Rivers without End*, one finds this deepening of thought. However, since Buddhist theory is integral to these latter works, their richness and depth may be lost to those who do not have some knowledge of Buddhism. No poet in American literature has made Buddhist psychology so completely his own. Applied to the wilderness locale, found earlier in the work of Kenneth Rexroth, this Buddhist perception of oneness creates a poetry of immediacy and startling originality. . . .

Through Snyder's poems, one senses what archaic religion was all about. As Snyder states, ''The primitive world view, far-out scientific knowledge and the poetic imagination are related forces''. . . . Drawing on these wellsprings, Snyder attempts the creation in his own era of an ecological conscience. And although, as Sherman Paul states, ''We cannot expect literature to cure us,'' it will ''. . . hearten us by showing us new and true possibilities and how much may be achieved in life and art by conscious endeavor. Snyder's work . . . does this.'' Snyder's poetry truly influences one who reads him thoroughly to ''see'' in a startlingly new way. Presenting the vision of an integrated and unified world, this heroic poetic effort cannot but help to create a much needed change of consciousness.

Bob Steuding. *Gary Snyder* (Twayne, 1976), pp. 167–68

Snyder's roots are deep in Whitman and the Transcendentalists of New England, whose own roots were in German idealism, English romanticism, and Oriental (chiefly Hindu) mysticism. Like Whitman, Snyder celebrates nature, the simple, the animal, the sexual, the tribal, the self. Like Whitman, he speaks in the voice of a highly personal persona rooted in his own experience but by no means identical with it. Like Whitman, he sees man as an indissoluble part of the natural environment, flourishing when he accepts and adapts

to that natural heritage, creating a hell on earth and within himself when he is separated from it by his intellect and its technological and societal creations. Like Whitman and Thoreau, though more thoroughly and intensely, Snyder wishes to live in nature and there to confront himself and the essentials, and like Emerson and Thoreau, he does not wish to be saddled with *things*. Like Whitman and Thoreau, he celebrates physical labor, its joys and its ability to educate one in the ''true'' sense. Snyder maintains truly though perhaps not all-inclusively that his poetics have been most influenced by the jobs he has held, that he has learned how to place words in a line by moving stones. Work, he says, is for him a form of play, and he has learned most from such work as he has performed. . . .

The major problem in Snyder's poetry is that he can rarely achieve the unity of thought and language required of a good poem. Usually, he is caught up in that poetic quicksand that swallows so much of the work of Whitman and [William] Carlos Williams and the ''Beats'': the cataloging of natural objects, mundane events, and sensory impressions until they are meaningless and boring. In short, there is a failure of poetic discrimination and organization which is in itself a failure of sensibility. . . .

If Snyder is by no means a great poet, he does have some important things to say about twentieth-century man's pell-mell progress toward environmental and societal disaster, toward destroying the place in which he lives, his home, the earth, as well as his mind, body and spirit; and occasionally, though only occasionally, he is able to embody what he has to say in memorable language, in striking form.

Abraham Rothberg. *Southwest Review*. Winter, 1976, pp. 27–29, 36, 38

Among contemporary poets, no one has led us further back than Gary Snyder. His poetic quests thus include the reversal of popular (mis) conceptions of primitive people. . . .

This urge to get in touch with the virgin soil again, to intimately ''know the ground you're on,'' is not original with Snyder, of course. It is a desire which pervades American literature, and is particularly intense in our post-frontier times. . . .

Gary Snyder . . . leaned west toward the Far East, leaving the mountain forests of America's northwest coast and actually going to Japan, to assimilate Oriental ways of perceiving; but, as the structure of *The Back Country* vividly demonstrates, he did come *back*. . . . His journey, then, took him (as the section titles of *The Back Country* indicate) from the ''Far West'' to the ''Far East,'' but, firmly and finally, ''Back''—east again to America's West. In *Regarding Wave* he reexplored the land, touched it affectionately, but not until *Turtle Island* did he make the radical descent, far below what America is, to what—long ago—it was.

Snyder, in his life and in his poetry, is the culmination of many essential American myths; he re-cycles us to our origins. He re-energizes, for example, both sides of the Christopher Columbus myth/quest: he has fulfilled Columbus' frustrated search for the mysteries of Cathay, and simultaneously he has sought to regain Columbus' initial vision of the New World, to re-envision and maintain that first glimpse of a green world of possibility, unencumbered by European history. Snyder, then, is the twentieth century extension and fulfillment of Columbus' dream; he merges East and West by bringing his Oriental insight to bear on the wilderness beneath present-day America. Snyder thus refers to himself as a ''shaman/healer,'' for ''shaman'' is a term that applies both to North American Indian medicine men and to eastern Asian priests, and Snyder emphasizes the similarity in beliefs and attitudes, even in origin, of native Americans and Orientals. . . .

L. Edwin Folsom. *Western American Literature*. Summer, 1980. pp. 104–6

Gary Snyder's poems sheer away from abstractions, delineating the material world boldly in series of concrete images. Matter-of-fact as they appear, however, Snyder's lyrics depend as much on what they omit as on what they include. Honeycombing his poems with syntactical and structural ellipses, and refusing to fully determine his imagery, Snyder seeks to disrupt our complacent relation to our own experience by short-circuiting our customary ways of dividing and conquering that experience, the chief of which is language.

Grammars, book on usage, manuals of style, and the like seek to make language systematic and reasonable. When conventionally required elements are omitted from linguistic structures, be these structures lines, sentences, or poetic forms, they become unreasonable, and their meanings are consequently problematized. But Snyder's procedures are aimed at more than merely confounding the understanding. His purpose is to use the grammatical, syntactical, and semantic spaces that permeate even language, the model for all structuralist enterprises, to make possible a kind of immediate knowing that language is not theoretically designed to produce. . . .

By eliding the solitary speaker as well as the One in many of his poems, Snyder follows Buddhism in tacitly asserting the illusory nature of the self. Elision of the subject is often accompanied by a replacement of verbs with verbals. Use of these two forms of ellipsis enables the poet to present activity not in terms of an ''I'' who takes action but simply as action that is taking place. . . .

By the term ''elliptical mode,'' applied to Gary Snyder's poetry, I have intended to designate not a consistent poetic form, but a ruled play of absences that has allowed Snyder to cause the most conditional of conditional realities—language—to signify that for which no words are adequate. The very absoluteness of this inequivalence has led Snyder to level the usual structural hierarchy of poetic texts, so that his poems take place as much within their lacunae as within their language.

Snyder's metaphor of poetry as ''riprap of things'' is doubly pertinent as a description of his stylistic procedure: rocks, and other concrete objects, are tangible and easy to get around, as the water of Basho's pond ''gets around'' the frog; and no matter how well fitted the cobble, there is always space between the stones.

The haiku presents itself as a formal paradigm for Snyder's poetics of absence. Not only is the ultimate object of the poetic act unnamed, the actor himself remains grammatically nameless, as he must if he is to succeed. Linguistic ventures into the conditional world take place, to be sure, but ventures whose rational progression is constantly dispersed by transitional crevasses. The mind cannot plod heavily across a thought pause: it must leap.

Shih poetry, in its refusal to abstract man from his natural environment and then, in turn, to reconstitute him as a concrete but privileged subject (as does much of post-Romantic Western poetry), provides a useful corrective for formalized anthropocentrism.

Its systematic disjunctions between images, phrases, and lines provide Snyder with another useful model of the poetic composition of absence.

Snyder's poems strive to be, and are, aesthetic wholes, while simultaneously perforating themselves with holes of a different sort—holes that in a certain sense remain unfilled by either poet or reader. For ultimately, Snyder's poems function to transfer to the reader more than a specific content, as attractive as that content often is: they present a possibility of seeing, a means of comprehending Mind, that nonentity which is both—and neither—''that which you see before you,'' and the ''void which cannot be fathomed'' (Huang Po).

Jody Norton. *Contemporary Literature*. Spring, 1987, pp. 42–43, 65–66

There is probably no other serious American poet writing today who is read more widely outside of academia than Snyder, and he is being read increasingly within the college classroom as well. In addition, *The Practice of the Wild* is attracting an entirely new set of readers, readers who will explore the poetry in order to learn more about Snyder and the ideas developed in his most recent volume. As the ecological movement nationwide and worldwide continues to grow, its participants will be searching out artistic representatives of their aspirations, emotions, and ideals. And Snyder speaks in a voice that they will recognize as one of their own. Snyder has already been recognized by the proponents of Deep Ecology, who generally treat him as their poet laureate. . . .

This does not mean that his future work will ignore or leave behind Buddhism. It remains an integral part of his world view and his spiritual practice. Native American cultures and environmental practices also remain crucial for his views on right living. In *The Practice of the Wild* in particular, he demonstrates a keen ability to link what he has learned from native American peoples across this continent with other inhabitory peoples around the world, such as the Ainu and Australian aborigines. Without ceasing to attend to the specific practices of such people, Snyder has gradually formulated a concept of international bioregionalism based on traditional and innovative practices of inhabitation and reinhabitation.

Patrick D. Murphy. *Understanding Gary Snyder* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Pr., 1992), pp. 167, 169

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SONTAG, Susan (1933–)

The Benefactor is an intricate, ambitious fantasia on themes suggested by European literary modernism roughly up to and including Simone Weil (her speculations on *grâce* and *pesanteur* and Jean Genet (his deliberate choice of inauthenticity as a pretext for action in a hypocritical world) as seen through the eyes of someone deeply committed to the philosophical and psychological premises of the ''cool'' world of the 60's, European *and* American. (I mean the word in no derogatory sense.) Not the mores or the latest jargon, but the idea and essence of the Cool is what she is after; her narrator's crisis straddles the war-time 40's, but she herself is closer in spirit to Robbe-Grillet and Uwe Johnson than to Weil or Genet. It is the prosy, circumstantial deliberateness of what might easily have been merely another flashy exercise in neo-surrealism that strikes one at first. Hence the peculiarly neutral ''translator's English'' of her by no means dull prose and her oddly spotty documentation, meticulous in many details, wholly vague in others. The novel, indeed, is very American in its combination of bookishness, philosophical literalness, and moral hypochondria.

R.W. Flint. *Commentary*. Dec., 1963. p. 490

The Benefactor was published with considerable fanfare and reviewed with some disappointment; it was charged with being too European, too obscure, and too fashionably involved with appearance and reality. It is all of these things, but it is more than involved with appearance and reality, it is an attempt to come to grips with this involvement—the involvement is the subject of *The Benefactor*. In the nameless city, very like Paris, Hippolyte has spent his life dreaming and arranging his life to correspond to his dreams. His dreams are more important to him than his life; the only object of interest in his life is a woman, Frau Anders, and she is more annoying than interesting. Hippolyte keeps trying to dispose of her, by selling her into slavery or burning down her house, and she keeps reappearing; she is a bedraggled, comical, and unexpectedly engaging representative of the external world that Hippolyte can almost, but not quite, extinguish. And it is Hippolyte and his dreams that finally triumph. With the kind of epistemological twist used by Gide in *The Counterfeiters*, we are left uncertain and apprehensive about what has been dream and what has not.

Geoffrey Bush. *The Yale Review*. Winter, 1964. p. 301

Style, dream, and banality: these notions cluster, however loosely, behind Miss Sontag's essays as they do behind her novel, *The Benefactor*, where the psychopathic narrator Hippolyte commits his life to his dreams, which are the style of his existence. Interpreting his dreams ''did not relieve'' Hippolyte, but only substituted irrelevant meanings for them. He detects, too, the falsity of lines ''which people of taste insist on drawing between the banal and the extraordinary.'' Hippolyte trusts his dreams because they are at once extraordinary and banal. Today our most fantastic experiences are banalities. . . .

Obviously Miss Sontag takes positions, and she should. Above all she dreads the cliche in all its manifestations, as when she urges that religion must not be diluted to an acquiescence toward

religion-in-general, or religious fellow-travelling, just as painting of a given period must not be diluted into admiration for Art, or cultural fellow-travelling. But in making these judgments she speaks for a new generation of critics who sense their distance from Culture, for they know it's foolish, or at least impoverishing, always to be requiring impressive meanings. Inevitably at a time when so much is banal, somebody had to tell us that ''the discovery of the good taste of bad taste can be very liberating.'' Miss Sontag is a remarkably liberating writer because she has allowed herself to proceed by ''immersion'' in what she sees and reads. She calls it ''immersion without guidelines.''

Wylie Sypher. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Jan. 30, 1966. p. 2

This is a hard book [*Against Interpretation*] to like and a harder one not to admire. In a free-wheeling collection of twenty-six essays—about half of which were originally published in the *New York Review of Books* or *The Partisan Review*—Susan Sontag indicates with impressive assuredness that she knows a lot about some things and at least as much as any other authority about everything else. What puts one off more than the extravagance of her judgments (''Most American novelists and playwrights are really either journalists or gentlemen sociologists and psychologists''), or the knowing, sometimes messianic shrillness of her tone, is Miss Sontag's concern with being, above and before all, fashionably *avant-garde*. One can't resist the suspicion that ''the new sensibility'' she heralds in these essays is her own, and that much of her esthetic doctrine is a complicated and unconscious self-promotion. . . .

Perhaps what makes *Against Interpretation* valuable and exciting is not so much its erudition, which is considerable, or its high level of intelligence, but its passionate irresponsibility, its determined outrageousness.

Jonathan Baumbach. *Saturday Review*. Feb. 12, 1966. p. 33

Strangely pedantic, confused, or timid about what she would hold to, and never more so than when she produces notes and aphorisms of a fine neatness and futility, Miss Sontag comes through as someone anxious to revise what she takes to be our mistaken view of art. But her cause appears to me less momentous than she seems aware, deriving from a view of art and of persons that belongs to what is by now a quite aged modernism. It is a cause unlikely to enlist readers unacquainted with the strawman philistine—stubbornly holding to the idea of ''content'' in the arts—who falls regularly before her sentences; and equally those who will find her not radical enough and who are getting by various means direct access to the ''eschatology of immanence'' that she finds laid out in Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death*. But no matter; it is Miss Sontag herself who proves interesting and important as she utters the incorrigible Blakean demand on an ''eschatology of immanence,'' a celebration of the body, the flesh, the sensuous appearances of things in the world; and as she records what corresponds to this, her deep disinclination to believe any longer in the self of psychoanalysis and the academic intellectuals—in the self as the New York literary culture conceives it.

Jack Behar. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1966. p. 347

Like everything Miss Sontag writes, *Death Kit* has strokes of wit in its pages. . . . There are quick thrusts of imaginative perception, for example about the inward experience of the blind. The graveyard spectacular produced as a finale—a pastiche of Thomas Browne, Rider Haggard and Kafka—has passages of force.

More important than any of this, there are moments when the reader can peer through the haze of abstract, overconfident cultural critique into a highly human torment and confusion—the suffering of a writer who seems bent on transforming self-hatred into an instrument of objective analysis, yet who nevertheless knows in her deepest self that this feeling cannot be thus elevated, since it is merely another style of pride. (''He who despises himself esteems himself as a self-despiser.'')

Affecting as these moments are, they are too personal and infrequent to redeem the book as a whole. The plain case—no less visible here than in *The Benefactor*—is that the author's most powerful and most valuable impulse, the impulse to rage, is thwarted by novelistic form. Damnation-dealers and ravaged consciences are swallowed up, usually, in fiction. The conventions even of so-called philosophical novels—those forgiving fullnesses of view, obligations of understanding and compassion—tend to trivialize fury.

Benjamin DeMott. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 27, 1967. p. 2

That Susan Sontag is philosophically oriented and has something of a metaphysical impulse to her thinking (although she would undoubtedly reject the word vehemently) is among the reasons why I think her one of the most interesting and valuable critics we possess, a writer from whom it's continually possible to learn, even when you're most dissatisfied with what she's saying, or perhaps especially at those times. For the past several years she has been the chief voice in America of one main tradition of French criticism, which is one of the reasons, I'm convinced, why she is disliked, where she's disliked, with such ferocity and xenophobic scorn. . . .

The truth is that Miss Sontag ought not to be examined under the prevailing American definitions of the literary or cultural critic, any more than the esthetic developments she has been talking about ought to be examined under the rubrics of the criticisms traditional in their realms. Ever since the New Criticism, its mission accomplished and its effects guaranteed, receded into history, we have been unable in America to come near agreeing on what esthetic intelligence is, although this kind of intelligence is surely what we should want to mean when we speak of criticism at all; and it is this kind that Miss Sontag possesses. . . .

The alarm that many people feel at the approach of Susan Sontag, the distaste, resentment and even fury she causes, has, it seems to me, two bases, both of them related to what I have been saying about esthetic independence or contingency. The cruder one is moral and ''humanistic.'' She has been accused of being inhuman or anti-human for ignoring moral and spiritual elements in art, or rather for sanctioning and encouraging the immoral, pornography or camp, for example, violence or extravagance. To this the only answer is that no material, or data, or subject or, for that matter, mood in the esthetic realm has anything to do with being sanctioned or deplored, needs validation or, in short, lies in the moral universe at all. When Henry James said that the only immorality he had ever seen on the stage was the production of a bad play, he told us tersely about the way morality figures in the life

of forms. The moral charge against Miss Sontag, which is mainly a charge against the kinds of art she has been interested in, issues from the same morale such charges always do: apprehension in the face of new consciousness.

Beyond this, Miss Sontag has marched, aggressively and with her great bristling apparatus of learning (an erudition at least as much philosophical and psychological as literary or technically esthetic), pointing every which way but most dangerously at certain processes of literary erudition itself, into some sacred realms, to the consternation of their guardians. At the least newcomers are expected to observe the rules. And one of the chief rules is that criticism is a province of the dispassionate (and fact-finding) intellect, which it is designed to serve and, so to speak, to fill out. . . .

For the problem of her sensibility is also the generating power of its interest and importance for us as she exemplifies and tests and expounds and shapes it into form in her writing. It is precisely classical ability to feel which, as it works itself out in our shibboleths and humanistic myths, means to feel *the way others have*, to feel certain emotions (in certain ways) that have been sanctified as properly human and necessary, that has come into question. One of the chief resistances put up by new literature, or new art of any kind, is to being told how and what to feel. Academic resistance to the new, on the other hand, is a balking at the notion that we don't already know and haven't already worked out the proper forms.

Susan Sontag has been engaged in trying to plot the course of her new feelings, which is to say her responses as a representative advanced consciousness. (She *is* advanced; would we want her laggard?) In doing this she has indicated all the debilities and irresolutions and compensatory aggressions and contradictions that are inevitable in consciousness in transition. The chief content of that transition now is the challenge to Western literary culture, or rather to the supremacy of literature *as* culture; the growing breakdown of the erstwhile separation between art and audience or, more strictly, between art as object for contemplation and as material for reabsorption into total experience; the claim of bodily experience to a place in esthetics; the more insistent relationship between politics and sensibility. These are Miss Sontag's themes [in *Styles of Radical Will*]; and she is the victim of their assaults, in their status as realities, upon our preparation, training, inheritance and need for continuity—on *what we were like before*—as much as she is their elucidator and master in awareness.

Richard Gilman. *New Republic*. May 3, 1969. pp. 23–25

Miss Sontag claims (no doubt correctly) that illness as metaphor is used at the expense of the literally ill: it compounds their physical illness with a cultural judgment, moralizes their position as other, abnormal, ill-omened. Metaphor has a tendency to naturalize a given condition, to make it, through the play of comparison, reconnect with accepted ways of looking at the world, with a moralized network of ideas and beliefs which must always imply, in the case of illness as metaphor, that the disease is somehow chosen; if not deserved, somehow justified. . . .

When Miss Sontag argues that it is not morally permissible to use cancer as metaphor, we may find her ethically noble but utopian, caught in a Platonic dream of a language which would give direct access to realities rather than the displaced symbols of realities. No doubt she is not so naive as to mean this literally: really she wants us to get rid of metaphors whose implications we can't control, which are loosely used and come to be taken as literal. What is needed is not elimination of the metaphor, but the constant showing up of metaphor for what it is, through countermetaphor, through the rhetoric of exposure, which Miss Sontag so effectively manages.

Illness as Metaphor is wholly successful as polemic and as provocation to the rethinking of cultural metaphors. . . . Otherwise, I cannot help but feel that Miss Sontag could tell us much more about the subject, that she is in a position to undertake, somewhat in the manner of Michel Foucault, a more sustained ''archeology'' of the idea of illness in our culture. In particular, one would like to hear her at greater length on the perception that madness has become the modern glamour disease: what was originally a brilliant metaphor for the decentering of perception (in Rimbaud, for instance) has degenerated into an irresponsible literalness, so that one can find serious writers proclaiming that the discourse of schizophrenia is the only authentic language of our time.

Peter Brooks. *Partisan Review*. 46, 3, 1979, pp. 438–39, 443–44

It was the great virtue of *Against Interpretation* (1966) and *Styles of Radical Will* (1969), Sontag's two early volumes of essays, to have responded so authoritatively to the question of identity, defining modernist performances in their abdication from the whole variety of traditional aesthetic values: sublimity, disinterestedness, harmoniousness, completion, etc. . . .

Yet her criticism relied then (as it continues to rely) on a partial estrangement from the vagaries of radical modernism. She has never relinquished her strong sense of the incommensurability of modernism, speaking of it always as a problem or a crisis, never simply as a cultural advent comparable to others. . . .

All of her stories are in some sense productions of the will. They do not (as she once said of the greatest works of art) seem the ripened analogues of nature's forms, but rather *constructs* of an artificer whose hand remains unfailingly in view. Yet at their finest her fictions construct the drama of moral antinomy: the human longing for freedom *and* for bondage; for the completion of knowledge *and* for absolution from knowledge; for the parent's invincible purview *and* the naked need of the child; for an autonomy of self *and* for the dissolution of self into collectivity; for a historical past that is ''arrangement,'' pregnant with meaning, *and* for a past that is heaped, broken—wreckage upon wreckage, pleading no tale.

To say her fictions are willed is only to say that she pursues by means of words what she has already understood to be in excess of their aptitude. . . . In *I, etcetera* her talent extends to a new kind of narrative that is precisely *not* inventive, that in fact tenders nothing that cannot be summoned from the documentary basis of her own life. These pieces—which seem to me the best of the book—may as well be called essays as stories. Identifying them by means of that sizable word, we do well to recall its inventor. ''Project for a Trip to China'' and ''Unguided Tour'' . . . wield an authority that has its sources not in fiction but, like the essays of Montaigne, in the perplexity of being only an individual, a subject, apart and without recourse to any of the forms of ''total imagination,'' whether Calvin or the French Catholic League, Hegel or Reverend Ike. These works comprise the I of *I, etcetera*: in them Sontag has

invented nothing save herself. And it is, in fact, not the storyteller's workshop but instead the bare by-room of an exigent self that serves as the gathering place for her best impulses. Resolved to write what she has done, seen, willed, endured, she persuades us again and again to take counsel. Disciplining the tangle of private experience into words, Sontag declares a persistent, if diminished, possibility of wisdom.

Benjamin Taylor. *Georgia Review*. Winter, 1980, pp. 908–9, 911

In *Under the Sign of Saturn* Sontag is at work again reshaping the canon of modern European literature. Her particular polemic—a strong element in the general thrust of postwar New York literary criticism—is to celebrate the leopards in the temple of literature, not those cool and calm consciousnesses (like the Sophocles and Shakespeare of Matthew Arnold) who abided all questions and saw life whole, but those whose own derangement allowed them to explode the lies of order so that better forms might be discovered. In her criticism she labors to turn even the most self-isolating, uncompromising, and personally outrageous of such figures (I think here especially of Artaud) into humane teachers, whose flame, all the brighter for being trimmed, she will pass on to future generations. . . .

If *On Photography* is Sontag's belated neoplatonist turning away from that image of the critic in vogue, then *Under the Sign of Saturn* is her effort to reassess the public aspect of her pursuit of a career that has been defined historically by its distaste for public life and display. Searching for the shape of other careers, she implicitly meditates on her own: what am I to make of this pile of books that in some way is me? . . .

As always, her intelligence makes her essays refreshing, even though we may often learn less about her subjects than about what she thinks of them and how their ideas affected her. In pursuit of new connections she has fashioned a rhetoric of subordination that puts her forward as the humble lightning rod of culture. This is my tradition, she seems to say, these are my boys, and thus the Romantic project of finding the heart of a culture in its eccentrics winds up recommending instead the eccentricity of its own quest.

Leo Braudy. *New Republic*. Nov. 29, 1980, pp. 43, 45–46

[Susan] Sontag's investigations . . . implicitly ask if meaning and value may not be found in what they exclude, silence or symbolically define and oppose as other. What she seems to recognize is that what is viewed as other by a society cannot be simply erased from it but persists ''as a site of psychological dependence,'' although this dependence may be repressed in social constructions of value and knowledge. . . .

Her most recent extended essays, on cancer, photography, and AIDS, further probe insidious cultural assumptions bred by the self-generating logic of her society's . . . domestication of alternity. In *Illness as Metaphor* she examines how metaphor naturalizes ''the unknown and the unnamed through analogy with the known.'' In *On Photography* she analyzes the illusory intimations of ''freedom,'' individualism, and history provided by images which ''furnish knowledge dissociated from and independent of experience.''. . .

Sontag refuses to separate the question of identity from that of limits, or from that of practice; her criticism of culture is as much concerned with experience of forms as with forms of experience.

Liam Kennedy. *Journal of American Studies*. April, 1990, pp. 29, 38–39

Of all the widely circulated books about AIDS, only one suggests a more useful, less punishing approach: Susan Sontag's *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. It is brief, virtually a pamphlet, and not entirely novel. . . . But its point remains wholesome and tonic. We're in peril, Sontag argues, of transforming AIDS from a viral infection into a devouring moral monster, laden with all our meanest and most destructive cultural prejudices. Sontag is the only widely read writer who observes a peculiarly danger-fraught feature of AIDS: the slipperiness with which it's been defined permits it to be invested with all kinds of pernicious metaphors.

Mark Caldwell. *Dissent*. Summer, 1990, pp. 346–47

For the most part a conventional historical romance about Sir William Hamilton, Lady Hamilton, and Lord Nelson, *The Volcano Lover* has a number of devices that aspire to raise it above the usual level. There's the instant-gnomic trick of abstaining from quotation marks . . . and the ironic technique of dotting the narration with anachronistic allusions—to motorcycles, premenstrual syndrome and *My Fair Lady*. . . .

Throughout the novel, Sontag works two opposing motifs—the collector and the volcano. Sir William, amassing beautiful objects, is particularly susceptible to Emma, the foremost artist's model of the age, for having inspired so many. . . . Yet ''every collector-passion contains within it the fantasy of its own self-abolition. Worn down by the disparity between the collector's need to idealize and all that is base, purely materialistic, in the soul of a lover of beautiful objects and trophies of the glorious past, he may long to be purged by a consuming fire.''

Rhoda Koenig. *New York Magazine*. August 17, 1992, pp. 50–51

Susan Sontag is no academic. Her ability to resist university confinement has been one of the strengths of her long career. Nor is she a recent first-time novelist; her fiction writing began in the 1960s. But she belongs in any consideration of this cultural current, first because she is by any sensible measure a common-law academic who lectures in that sprawling university called New York Culture, and second because if she had not recently been born as a novelist, she has been born again as one.

From the time of her first successful essays in the early 1960s, Sontag has refused the name Critic and fought hard to keep alive her claims to be called Novelist, and later Filmmaker. She stubbornly presented herself as a creative artist who also happened to write interesting essays. But it was a losing battle. Her experimental fiction was politely acknowledged; her films less politely received; her essays were triumphantly influential. Through the 1970s and 1980s, she was never the visionary artist but always the supremely lucid critic—writing of illness as metaphor, of AIDS, of photography.

All of this is what makes *The Volcano Lover* (1992) such a revealing case: it is Sontag's late, large attempt to place her career under the sign of art. Her novel's big sales and favorable reviews make it impossible to confine her within the prison marked Critic. . . .

The real event in *The Volcano Lover* is not the play with perspective, and not the lucidity of intelligence; it is the unveiling of the theater of desire, romantic desire, sensuous desire as performed in the famous ménage of Sir William Hamilton, his wife Emma (born Emily Lyon), and Lord Nelson. The circumstances are irresistible. . . .

It's not much to say that Sontag as a critic has been a Collector who has come only recently to feel the full urgings of the Artist as Lover. What she says of her Emma, we might now say of her: ''She needs her fix of rapture.'' The other drama in the book, the drama beneath the plot, is the struggle between Sontag's old need to understand writing as a serious aesthetic gesture and the new thrill of writing what fancy whispers. This is a drama without conclusion. *The Volcano Lover* activates the emotions inside old conventions, releases ancient energies of the love story, but then hastens to distance its voice and to stylize its forms. If the conflict remains unresolved, we can still learn to love the agitation at a moment of creative instability.

Michael Levinson. *Wilson Quarterly*. Winter, 1994, p. 122

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SOTO, Gary (1952–)

One of the most celebrated contemporary Chicano poets is Gary Soto. He has received recognition from outside Chicano circles and this is partially reflected in his many awards, among them the Academy of American Poets Prize in 1975. . . .

Soto's poetry differs markedly from that of the Movement poets . . . for it does not call its readers to action, nor is it declamatory. It also eschews the often idealized elements of home, and *carnalismo* found in so much Chicano poetry. But it does reflect a Chicano consciousness of racial identity and the despair that can come from poverty and alienation. Many critics have discussed his skill as an artificer of language.

Gary Soto was born in . . . Fresno, California, which is located in the San Joaquin Valley, a fertile and productive agricultural area. This geographic background thoroughly informs his first collection of poems, *The Elements of San Joaquin* (1977). The volume's three divisions include powerful vignettes of Fresno, fieldwork, and private visions of humans in an often meaningless landscape. . . .

Jose Varela-Ibarra has commented that Soto's *San Joaquin* poems are essentially rural and urban landscapes while his second collection of poetry, *The Tale of Sunlight* (1978), treats inner space. Soto does explore the inner world of the emotions as well as memory here, and the mood is not as bleak as in *San Joaquin*; indeed, events are at times even magical. . . .

Black Hair (1985) is a departure in mood from previous collections of Soto's poetry. The economical, acute images are still present, but the desolate feelings so often described in previous poems are usually replaced by more hopeful ones. . . . *Black Hair* chronicles a life, from the boy of eight through adolescence, young manhood, and fatherhood. Humor untouched by sadness is allowed more space here.

Carl R. Shirley and Paula W. Shirley. *Understanding Chicano Literature* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Pr., 1988), pp. 49–50, 51, 55–56

Gary Soto is the epitome of a new trend within Chicano literature. While the ethnic element is not missing from his work, he writes more for a general public than for solely Chicanos. His poetry is well within the mainstream of United States poetic style; concise metaphors, elimination of prosaic or narrative elements, brief illuminations of emotions, conversational tone. He publishes predominantly in mainstream magazines rather than in Chicano outlets. Also, Soto is the first major Chicano writer trained by a major U.S. poet, Philip Levine. Not only has Soto entered the mainstream, but he was groomed for it by someone who could open doors previously closed to many Chicano writers. Young Chicano writers more and more often would like to follow Soto's example.

Bruce-Novoa. *Retrospace: Collected Essays on Chicano Literature, Theory and History* (Houston: Arte Publico Pr., 1990), p. 88

A . . . sense of subjectivity and agency is evident in Gary Soto's ''Between Words.'' the closing poem of *Black Hair*. . . . Animal needs form, ultimately, the essential basis of existence, since, as the poetic voice soon makes clear, all life ends in the gaping smile of death. The poem thus seems to rely on a very traditional theme of lyric poetry: carpe diem. . . .

Certainly this sense of movement between birth and death fits thematically with Soto's collection as a whole. *Black Hair* opens, after all, with the title poem, a celebration of identity and community that has at its center the recollection by a child of his father's death. That first poem places death at the center of life. This final poem places the passage through life at the center of death. A sense of inversion and closure is therefore achieved in Soto's closing lyric expression.

Yet the language and images of ''Between Worlds'' suggest conflict. There is a tension evoked as this crossing between, which suggests a linear movement of never arriving, is described as being ''the point.'' Just as a line indicates continuity and a point fixity, so the act of ''never arriving'' becomes a form of arriving. The only ''arriving'' evoked in the poem, however, is that moment at which the ants ''Climb our faces to undo the smiles.'' So Soto's work probes the border between placement and placelessness, both evoking and undoing an endlessly transient notion of arrival. . . .

The language of the poem celebrates silence and so, too, is caught between the desire to express and the consciousness that it is unable to do so. . . .

By assuming a quintessentially European genre—a genre that at once seems most alien to and yet offers great ground for the Chicano poet to traverse, scrutinize, and mark (a mode of poetic expression that may indeed be ''dead'' to the world that first mapped and circumscribed it)—Chicano lyric poetry negotiates the difficult terrain between the voice, the subject, and the world. It also calls into question the traditional generic boundaries of the lyric form. The mutual interpenetration of subject and object explored by Chicano lyric poetry stands in contradistinction to the traditional lyric as a meditation premised upon the very separation between self and other. The mutually traversing agents and objects suggest a radical reconfiguration of subjectivity, a subjectivity whose artistic expression lives vigorously and productively crossing the border between genres, between languages, between cultures. The terrain marked by the terms modernism and postmodernism, colonial and postcolonial, represent only part of the cultural landscape across which Chicano poetry migrates.

Rafael Perez-Torres. *Movements in Chicano Poetry: Against Myths, Against Margins* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1995), pp. 266, 268–70

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STAFFORD, Jean (1915–1979)

There is no doubt that Jean Stafford, author of *Boston Adventure*, is a remarkable new talent. This is not to say that her first novel is a completely satisfying experience but that Miss Stafford brings to the writing of a novel an unusual native endowment; I would find it hard to name a book of recent years which, page for page or even sentence for sentence, was so lively and so clever. By the light of any one of the incandescent moments of *Boston Adventure*, it may turn out that the book as a whole is strangely disappointing, reminding us that in the final analysis no amount of skill as a writer substitutes for the total novelistic power. But for its manner, for the way in which it stands up to the literary job, Miss Stafford's novel unquestionably demands a place for itself in the best literary tradition.

Diana Trilling. *The Nation*, Sept. 30, 1944. p. 383

Miss Stafford's remarkably fine novel (*Boston Adventure*), has been praised for its range and perception, its style, and for a distinction, as I see it, that springs from the meeting of genuine personal culture with deep independence of sight. It has also, because of certain echoes, been analyzed for its Proustian qualities. But not enough has been said of the real Proustian epic in it. . . . Here, at last, is a novel in which sensibility is not sacrificed to representation; in which the inwardness of man, at once the deposit of events and the shaper of them, is functionally related to bold and objective visual power.

Alfred Kazin. *New Republic*. Oct. 23, 1944. p. 538

(*The Mountain Lion*) is an even finer novel than *Boston Adventure*, though less brilliant. It does not have the startling wealth of anecdote which Jean Stafford offered in her first novel; but it has a deeper richness of child-myth and child-lore—charms against the adult world, rhymes, ritualistic ''dialogues'' and shared ''jokes,'' intimations of mortality—and the statement it makes of good and evil, innocence and experience, is tantalizing in its possibilities of extension. In this narrower plot, the author has found, paradoxically, greater freedom of perception and utterance: her style is cleaner and more athletic.

Henry Rago. *Commonweal*. April 4, 1947. p. 618

The Catherine Wheel—her third and perhaps most complex novel—is supported by few of those subsidiary virtues which gave vitality and idiosyncrasy to her earlier work; for all the elaborate rendition of locale and *decor*, it never really aims—as did *Boston Adventure*—at a systematic investigation of the social fact, nor does it attempt to frame a specialized personal crisis with the masterly precision of *The Mountain Lion*. Its scope is defined by intentions at once more limited and more ambitious than these: Miss Stafford has sought to convey, through two subtly interwoven though distinct narratives, a vision of emotional anarchy assaulting a world of ''traditional sanctity and loveliness''—a vision in which the individual disaster is simultaneously symptom and result of the larger social decline. . . . Miss Stafford has written a novel to compel the imagination and nurture the mind; she has also written one in which pity and terror combine to reach us in the secret, irrational places of the heart.

Richard Hayes. *Commonweal*. Jan. 25, 1952. pp. 404–5

In her superbly controlled novel (*The Catherine Wheel*) Miss Stafford has shown a modern martyrdom; her story discloses the secret torture of two persons, a child and a woman, both caught in a tragic circumstance during a tranquil summer on the coast of Maine. . . . The village in this novel is named Hawthorne, but even without that reminder it is clear that Miss Stafford is concerned with the identical plight that Nathaniel Hawthorne pondered in his stories—the tragedy of human isolation, the devious, painful, perilous struggle for harmony and understanding. *The Catherine Wheel* is a novel of great restraint and of great beauty.

Walter Havighurst. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 26, 1952. p. 11

In each of her novels, she has begun with what her art and imagination can really create: a densely detailed, spatially narrated image of a place, some people, and their relationships, dramatizing the whole in a diffused, remembered time, rather than any too tyrannical chronological time. But then, toward the end, she seems to feel the need for a ''memorable act,'' for some abruptly theatrical violence, which not only intrudes improbably upon the soft-grained texture she has been building up, but for which frankly she has no taste or instinct. . . . The result is false, mutilating, and unworthy of her.

Robert Phelps. *New Republic*. March 10, 1952. p. 21

Character is most important in these stories, but character does not play out a drama of isolated sensibility. Instead, Miss Stafford's people are seen, as it were, in a full round of experience, are set with their problems and conflicts in a milieu that is vital and charged both with intimate and external meaning. To an unusual degree, there is a significant rapport and reciprocal influence between these characters and their environments, and from this ability of Miss Stafford's to relate aspects of character with the details of scene and situation comes a major strength of these stories, their compelling believability.

Gene Baro. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. May 10, 1953. p. 3

Maladies and misfortunes of one sort or other cause Miss Stafford's characters to retreat from the world of customary urges and responses into a never-never land of dreams and unfulfilled desires, a land where sickness is king and despair his consort. Within its boundaries, Miss Stafford writes with certainty, understanding, and beauty. Like her three novels, (her) stories within their impeccable frame-work, are meaningful and complex. They remind me of children's Japanese flower-shells which when submerged in water open silently to disgorge a phantasmagoria of paper flowers, richly colored, varied and vaguely grotesque in contrast to the bland, unrevealing walls of their temporary habitations.

William Peden. *New York Times Book Section*. May 10, 1953. p. 5

We might say that Miss Stafford knows the limits of her talent too well; neither in the Emily stories nor in any of the others does she burden her prose with a sense of personal urgency, of compulsion to speak. The stories mean just what they seem at first glance to mean; the plot itself is the meaning. Thus in one story we witness a beautiful lady's wasted career, and the only matter for reflection is that her career was indeed wasted. In another we see a retired professor disembarrass himself of a sycophantic disciple, and we experience relief: *that's* over with. Similarly, we share the sense of achieved freedom experienced by a young woman who deserts her provincial guardians in Colorado, and of two lovers who foil a pack of busybodies. If there is a recurrent idea in this book [*Bad Characters*] it is the idea of sheer escape, stripped of intellectual content.

Frederick C. Crews. *New York Review of Books*. Nov. 5, 1964. p. 13

Jean Stafford loves the American landscape and the American past: the Colorado desert, the coast of Maine, the old streets of Boston, Miss Pride picking her way through an ancient graveyard, Katharine Congreve wandering about her father's old mansion. Yet she always sees the relevant modern comment and fits it in exactly. She is very conscious of the deodorant in the drugstore window, the giveaway formality of the *arriviste*, the blue or pink head of the dowager. Her great gift is to be able to place the vulgar detail in the center of the picture without making the picture vulgar, making it, on the contrary, something at once more vivid, faintly humorous, accurate, and at the same time fantastic. What she does to the American scene is to show it as a landscape with a billboard in the center, a billboard that represents the human encroachment on nature, at times funny, at times sordid, at times pathetic, but at all times the reader's and the author's principal concern.

Louis Auchincloss. *Pioneers and Caretakers* (Minnesota). 1965. p. 159

Some months ago the major portion of Miss Stafford's interview with the mother of Lee Oswald [*A Mother in History*] appeared in McCall's Magazine. The compelling interest of this self-portrait—for the writer let Mrs. Oswald speak for herself—was equaled only by the nature of the reader reaction to the piece. Letter after letter poured in repeating words like ''disgusted,'' ''shocked,'' ''outraged.'' . . .

None were more surprised at this storm of protest than Miss Stafford herself and the editors of the magazine. For what she had done was—and is—a most valuable analysis of a woman sick with a spiritual and emotional malignancy. Like a good analyst, Miss Stafford hardly speaks at all, letting the wild, interminable flow, alternately deluded and canny, outraged and cosy, spill from the woman's lips into a tape recorder as she exonerates herself and her son from all blame, points condemning fingers at a shifting host of ''Theys'' and heaps scorn on the official establishment and the gullible public alike. . . .

Where Jean Stafford's great skill is manifest is in the brief interpolations, between Mrs. Oswald's copious stream, in which she describes the meticulously neat little house filled with small ''decorative'' objects the owner ''just picked up'' but empty of all roots; observes the owner's mannerisms and idioms, her bustling proffers of coffee and collaboration; tells of her own hideously hilarious struggles with the tape-recorder, of the harrowing visit with the mother to the son's grave; manages to convey the trauma of her own involvement with this woman without ever raising her voice.

Marya Mannes. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Feb. 27, 1966. p. 4

If the facts of her life exerted an influence on [Jean] Stafford's work, the era in which she grew up was significant as well. Jean Stafford, born during the war whose end brought the beginning of the twentieth century and the ''modern'' period was—almost inevitably—a modernist. As ''Souvenirs of Survival'' and many of her stories demonstrate, Stafford was keenly aware of the poverty and injustice of the Great Depression. Her fiction exhibits, too, the pervasive influence of World War II on modern society. . . .

Stafford's fiction, at its best, captures the uncertainty and the agony of her vision. She followed her own advice, wrote for herself, God, and close friends, and as a result remains largely unread. The brittle humor in her work rests usually in clever turns of phrase and satirical characterization, and it is more often than not undercut (remember Molly Fawcett's shocking death [in *The Mountain Lion*]) by her keen awareness of ''the shipwreck of our manners and our morality.'' Generally, Stafford's work is characterized by unrelieved gloom. Her world is one of isolation and introspection, its inhabitants lonely, alone, searching—often in vain—for human understanding. The adept reader, the wise student of human emotions, is not put off by Stafford's sadness, for her work offers an honest, perceptive interpretation of the large horrors and small consolations of an often bleak, always complex, modern world.

Maureen Ryan. *Innocence and Estrangement in the Fiction of Jean Stafford* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1987), pp. 5, 11–12

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STAFFORD, William (1914–1996)

There are poets who pour out rivers of ink, all on good poems. William Stafford is one of these. He has been called America's most prolific poet, and I have no doubt that he is. He turns out so much verse not because he is glib and empty, but because he is a real poet, a born poet, and communicating in lines and images is not only the best way for him to get things said; it is the easiest. His natural mode of speech is a gentle, mystical, half-mocking and highly personal daydreaming about the landscape of the western United States. Everything in this world is available to Mr. Stafford's way of writing, and I for one am very glad it is. The things he chooses to write about—I almost said ''talk''—seem in the beginning more or less arbitrary, but in the end never so. They are caught up so genuinely and intimately in his characteristic way of looking, feeling, and expressing that they emerge as fresh, glowing creations; they *all* do, and that is the surprising and lovely fact about them. [1961]

James Dickey. *Babel to Byzantium* (Grosset). 1971. pp. 139–40

Stafford's subject-matter is usually important in itself. (The theory that subject-matter is nothing, the treatment everything, was invented to comfort little minds.) Also, he deals with his subject directly; that is to say, he has a personal voice. Contrary to what many poets believe nowadays, it is not necessary to spill your guts on the table in order to be ''personal,'' nor to relate the details of your aunt's insanity. What is necessary is originality of imagination and at least a few ideas of your own. Another point in favor of Stafford is that he actually writes about the country he is living in; all sorts of ordinary places, people and animals appear in his poems, and not as subjects of satire, but with the full weight of their own existence. As we read Stafford we are aware of how much has been omitted from modern American poetry only because it is not literary, or because it springs from the life of ordinary, rather than ''alienated'' people. An observer from another country would be struck by the absence from American poetry of the American landscape; he would find, also, that the language of our poetry is not the language of our real thoughts; and he might wonder at the psychic disorder this indicates. As for history—it seems we are trying to forget it. But Stafford is one of the few poets who are able to use the landscape and to feel the mystery and imagination in American life. . . . He is a poet of the people, in the deepest and most meaningful sense. And a poet of Nature—in a time when poets claim our attention because they are unnatural, pitiable, demoralized. His poems are strong and true; rightly understood, they will enrich our lives.

Louis Simpson. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1961. p. 462

Luckily for Mr. Stafford and for us, *West of Your City* is an exceptionally fine first volume. Readers of his widely published work are not surprised. Many agree with Louis Simpson that there is really not so great a distance between the work of William Stafford and the products of the new ''establishment'' as fashionable critical response and major literary awards would suggest.

Perhaps because Mr. Stafford writes a great deal without pushing or pulling too hard he almost always writes well. His idiom is deceptively casual. . . . Even at his best, Mr. Stafford gives me the impression that he is practicing all the time—that he simply needs to throw fewer efforts away each year because he is one of the few people alive who see life from the point of view of a poet.

Whatever their limitations, poets don't happen every year. I have read few first volumes of the order of *West of Your City* since the appearance in 1955 of John Woods' *The Deaths at Paragon, Indiana*. Our nationally acknowledged ''younger poets,'' academic and beat, exhibit a virtuosity of controlled expression or no control at all. Essentially either of these fashionable modes is primarily concerned with the expression of thematic abstractions. For Mr. Stafford, social, religious, and philosophical meanings hover around the poem. They are the radiations only. The westerly direction is not for him an outdated answer to the contemporary predicament. It offers no honey in the horn. But it is the spiritual focus which gives this volume unity and which makes William Stafford a poet of integrity. His intention is consistently to find the formal voice of his immediate experience.

Robert Huff. *Prairie Schooner*. Spring, 1962. pp. 82–3

[Stafford] is a poet of Existential loneliness and Western space. He seems to write out of an autobiographical impulse, a need to describe and understand his personal experience of the mountains and forests of the Far West. He was born in Kansas, was educated in Iowa, and teaches in Oregon. His memories range widely over these territories and fill his books with images of tornadoes, prairie towns, deserts, mountain-climbing, etc. The technique is not dazzling—there are no verbal fireworks—but Stafford describes the objects of his world carefully and exactly: he has the power to see, the patience to wait for his insights and the ability to construct

strong structures of sound and meaning. He is a sort of Western Robert Frost, forever amazed by the spaces of America, inner and outer.

Stephen Stepanchev. *American Poetry since 1945* (Harper). 1965. p. 201

Many of Stafford's best poems are full of nostalgia, some of praise, but they are not of public praise or high rhetoric. They turn the mirror back upon the speaker. Often they are dramas where the point is to recapture something or to face its disappearance, its loss, and yet to gain by having been there. Self-consciously the poems make an odyssey. The speaker is moving back over time to some lost place.

Hazard Adams. *Poetry*. April, 1967. pp. 42–3

William Stafford's grip is always loose, his touch light—almost feathery. Often, a very good poem slips through his fingers, slides away from him, in the closing lines; and this is the risk he takes by his unwillingness to tighten his hold to protect his interests. If the reader feels let down, disappointed, he also senses the poet is content to have lost the poem to save the quiet tenderness of the human voice weaving through it. If we read on, we learn that a few poems end with a magic and bewitching mysticism that is a perfect arrival, a blossoming and fulfillment of the poet's voice, one of the strangest in our literature.

Laurence Lieberman. *The Yale Review*. Winter, 1968. p. 262

One of the most restrained poets writing now, William Stafford deals with landscapes—Montana, Kansas, Oregon—and installs therein quiet murmurations of conscience that dominate even his most vivid characters. . . . Bony, unostentatious, and even-tempered . . . [his] poems haunt like overheard confessions; yet it is in silences that they seem to form themselves. . . . [Stafford's] unforced worldliness is full of reverie; he is very much at home in this world, as in his poems, and I for one find them easy to feel at home in. What a hospitable celebrant he is.

Paul West. *Book World*. May 31, 1970. p. 6

[Stafford's] poems are frequently sharp, cold, clear, epiphanies of a past recaptured, rescued, as it were, from time. In the amber of poem after poem, he preserves the memory of a western past that is part of American history. . . . If you have been wondering where the articulate, readable poems have gone in the last third of the twentieth century, you might start with Stafford.

Victor Howes. *Christian Science Monitor*. Sept. 28, 1970. p. 9

The imagination—its resilience, its stubborn and playful instinct for deriving meaning and awe from the world—is the central theme of Stafford's work. In this respect, despite profound differences in style, Stafford's poetry bears perhaps a closer affinity to the poetry of Wallace Stevens than to that of any other recent American poet. It exhibits a steady consciousness of Romantic tradition, particularly Wordsworth and Thoreau. Like Stevens's Stafford's Romanticism is stylized, abstract, and always informed by a controlling intelligence. Stafford is not considered, as Stevens is, a ''difficult'' poet; his poems exhibit none of the studied, elegant artificiality of a Stevens poem. Most of them move with the apparent artlessness of a great centerfielder drifting back to make the catch of a slicing line-drive look routine. Stafford rarely seems to work hard in a poem, to contrive his results, to wring, as James Dickey often does, more adventitious significance out of a poem than its occasion warrants. In his interviews as well as in his poems, Stafford likes to promote a picture of himself as naïve.

In fact, however, his poems and his conception of poetry are extremely sophisticated. A deft, alert intellect exhibits itself everywhere in his work—through his frequent etymological use of words, through puns, through the construction of deliberate but carefully limited ambiguities and through a scrupulous New-Critical attention to consistency. . . .

Stafford's vision, although it comprehends paradox, is not particularly complicated. And it is precise—far more precise than Stafford's comments or prevalent critical opinion would have us believe. . . . By contemporary standards, Stafford's poems are relatively *closed* -ended and contain a relatively high proportion of didactic content. Stafford's didactic quality, however, does not immediately stand out, because his poems are frequently so cryptic. Without some grasp of Stafford's specialized vocabulary, it is impossible to make much of the ending of a poem like ''So Long''. . . .

Jonathan Holden. *The Mark to Turn: A Reading of William Stafford's Poetry* (Regents Pr. of Kansas, 1976), pp. 6–8

Stafford's poems reveal thematically a singular and unified preoccupation. The voice of his work speaks from a sheltered vista of calm and steady deliberation. The speaker looks backward to a western childhood world that is joyous and at times edenic, even as he gazes with suspicion and some sense of peril upon the state of modern American society. The crux of each volume by Stafford involves the search for that earlier age identifiable by certain spiritual values associated with the wilderness, values which can sustain him and his family as well as the whole of the technological and urban society which surrounds him. The means to this search come through a poetry of images, images frequently and profoundly mythic. . . .

In its larger context, his poetry is essentially Janus-faced: it looks back with nostalgia upon an idealized childhood, but never at a removal from a far more foreboding perspective of modern society. His poetry seeks to chart the connectives between these two worlds. What, then, is the relation between such a thematic preoccupation and the Emotive Imagination? It is precisely in the way by which the poetic imagination seeks to link up the two perspectives. The childhood world is extolled through images of the wilderness; the validity of that world and the accessibility of its values are revealed through a poetry of distinctly archetypal images. . . .

Perhaps William Stafford is equaled only by Theodore Roethke among American poets who cherish the memory of childhood. Stafford goes beyond even Roethke, however, in defining the father as the central occupant of that near-perfect world. . . .

The mythic quality of the childhood world is dominated by the figure of the father who appears in dozens of Stafford's poems. . . .

The father who appears in the poems is heroic: he is provider and protector; his moral strength is steady and independent of worldly expectations; most important of all, he is the high priest of the wilderness. Like Sam Fathers to Isaac McCaslin or Natty Bumppo to the neophytes of the frontier, Stafford's father is initiator and instructor to the son, not only in relation to the wilderness itself, but in the moral values which inhere within it. . . . The figure of the father in these poems occasionally assumes the archetypal dimensions of the universal father.

George S. Lensing and Ronald Moran. *Four Poets and the Emotive Imagination* (Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1976), pp. 178, 184. 187–88

Critics ought to talk more about tonality in Stafford. There are ways of seeing and saying which are, for good and bad, unmistakably his own: ''If your policy is to be friends in the mountains/a rock falls on you: the only real friends—/you can't help it.'' Sometimes this kind of kookiness brings out statements which we have to take on faith if we are to take them at all. Still, when we ease into them they tend to make the sort of sense that the anomalous can make when it opens up part of our lives. In several poems in *The Rescued Year* Stafford attributes his bent for the apt but off-center phrase to ''a turn that is our family's own.'' At his best, he makes this turn into a way of handling poems which combines the precise with the strange, fact with a quirky but frequently illuminating vision. I read through the collected poems [*Stories That Could Be True: New and Collected Poems*] to see what happens to this turn as well as several other characteristic Staffordisms. It grows less and less prevalent as he goes on, mellowing into a ripeness of distinctive seeing which produces row after row of brilliant poems in the later work. The relationship of those turns, early and mellow, to the quietness which everyone speaks of, is one of the bases of Stafford's voice. There are other recurrent elements in his tonality, such as the vast compassion which used to seem mainly for the forsaken but turns out, as the collected poems show, to be for all of us. Stafford can touch us with a delicate grace, bringing over to us an understanding of how others face the difficulties of their ordinary pains and places.

Frederick Garber. *American Poetry Review*. Jan./Feb., 1980, p. 18

In the past few years, Stafford has published a number of prose pieces about how his poems come to be. Many of these have been collected in *Writing the Australian Crawl* (1978) and *You Must Revise Your Life* (1986), both published in the University of Michigan's Poets on Poetry series. It is widely recognized by now that Stafford presents himself as a poet for whom the process is in many ways more important than the product. He wants an openness to any possibility during the initial stages of—I almost said *composition*. He is therefore suspicious of technique, especially if used for its own sake, or used to force a poem in a preconceived direction. His rhetorical stance toward these matters is exemplified in ''Some Notes on Writing,'' a prose statement at the beginning of *An Oregon Message* (1987). . . .

If we think of technique, not as some rigid belief in proper frameworks and rules, but as a partial and growing understanding of an enormous array of verbal effects and opportunities, some of them traditional and some of them more nearly unprecedented, then it becomes harder to entertain the idea that Stafford cares much less about it than Richard Wilbur does.

Henry Taylor. *Compulsory Figures: Essays on Recent American Poets* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1992), pp. 145, 148

Growing up in Kansas, [William] Stafford wanted to be an explorer. ''But once I had to think about earning a living, I thought that writing would be a fun way to do it,'' he says. ''I took courses in writing specialized articles in college. I could see myself taking a notebook and traveling all over.''. . .

Although it may seem a leap for the kid who wanted to travel the world writing articles for a living to have gained his reputation as a poet, Stafford points out that he has written more nonfiction than most readers realize. His first book, *Down in My Heart*, . . . was nonfiction, written about his experiences as a conscientious objector in World War II. ''It's still in print,'' he says. ''Every time there's a war, they reissue it. I wish it would go out of print, become obsolete.''

Besides books and articles on writing, Stafford has also written a book on teaching, his second vocation, *Friends to This Ground*. . . . He came to teaching after working a variety of jobs to support his wife and four children. ''Oh. I worked oil refinery and Forest Service jobs, worked in the sugar beet fields, too,'' he remembers. ''Then I tried teaching and found that I liked to teach, and I might even get good at it someday. I think I finally did get to be pretty good, learned effective ways to present things and all, right before I retired.''

Writing poetry came directly from Stafford's struggle to support his family. ''Long before I began teaching, I began to write poetry,'' he says. ''I would get up in the morning before going to whatever job I was working, and I would write. The poetry came from getting up in the morning and writing in my journal. I developed short pieces from that early-morning journal work, and sometimes I could convince some editor that they were poems and he would publish them.''

Stafford's early poetry met with success, and he published individual poems in many journals, but he was in his forties before he published his first book of poetry. . . .

Stafford's lifelong involvement in the peace movement through more than fifty years of membership in The Fellowship of Reconciliation, shared with his wife, and in his major involvement in founding American Writers against the Vietnam War emerges as a major theme in his work. He has even published a book, *A Scripture of Leaves*, with the publishing house of the Church of the Brethren, one of the three ''peace churches'' in America.

''I guess there is a kind of peace and violence concern that's a recurrent flavor in my writing,'' he says. ''It's hard for me to say, though. It always feels like something new. I try for some kind of balance, playfulness, irony, some way to make a poem an experience for a reader. I don't believe it's my place to force-feed information to people or preach or anything. I care, and that shows through. I guess I'd like to have a serenity or acceptance about me. I wish I did have that, and wisdom. Know the things you can do something about and what you can't, and accept it.''

Linda Rodriguez. *Potpourri*. April, 1993, p. 3

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STEELE, Wilbur Daniel (1886–1970)

His men and women part for a day only to find the world changed upon their return. But the drama of a day arises naturally out of a long past of slowly accumulating experience, and this background of a suddenly recalled past is most often the moving force of his situation.

Few writers show such economy in the use of their material. You feel that all of Mr. Steele's stories develop from a single picture intensely realized by the artist, and that it is his spirit of inquiry brooding over the implications of this picture which has eventually constituted his story. He is a master of color, and in a few careful strokes presents the same natural background for the passion of his characters that many novelists require several chapters to reveal. . . .

It is always hazardous to prophesy the future course of an admirable writer, but it is safe to say that the rich, human embodiment of the stories collected in this volume *Land's End and Other Stories* assure them a permanence in our literature for their imaginative reality, their warm color, and their finality of artistic execution. Almost without exception they represent the best that is being accomplished in America today by a literary artist. But Mr. Steele will never be elected to an Academy. Such is the fate of all pioneers.

> Edward J. O'Brien. Introduction to *Land's End and Other Stories* by Wilbur Daniel Steele (Harper). 1918. pp. xii–xiii

He might be a great writer, but he did not take himself seriously. He might be critically appraised as the master technician in America of the short story form, but he, Wilbur Daniel Steele, would say nothing whatever concerning it. Nor would he speak of literature or in terms of literature. Which would make him a very literary person indeed.

An authentic literary person, as I understand it, is one who writes of life in terms of life and, having done that, sits down and says humbly, ''I thank Thee, Lord, and may it happen once again!''

Wilbur Steele has been writing for sixteen years, and that, he says, is the only formula he knows.

Many of his stories are grim, but he himself is not grim at all. He is neither melancholy nor self centred. He reads little. When he is through with work—and four or five hours is an average day's stint—he likes to be outdoors.

> Frank B. Elser. *Bookman*. Feb., 1926. pp. 691–2

Should one desire to observe a writer apparently breaking every law of the machine and actually, with a really marvelous ingenuity, availing himself of every one of them, there is Mr. Wilbur Daniel Steele. The basis of Mr. Steele's art is melodrama—but melodrama so subtly stylized and refined, so outwardly unconventional, as to be hardly recognizable. Mr. Steele has been everywhere and has picked up so many bits of color, so much realistic detail that he is capable of conveying almost any effect, be it tragedy, horror, or passion. Yet, when one thinks it over one realizes that this is exactly what he has done: given us the effect and nothing more. . . . Of the actuality, the terrifying closeness of a Katherine Mansfield he is quite incapable.

> Clifton Fadiman. *The Nation*. Dec. 28, 1927. p. 738

Wilbur Daniel Steele, after much successful short-story writing, has produced in *Meat* a remarkably vigorous moral tract dressed as a novel. As a tract it is so absorbing and so exciting that this reviewer, having read it through last night, has not the slightest idea if it is or is not ''art''. Steele's method of writing is well suited to such an exposition. His style is pruned as bare of blurring green and lacy twigs as a spring vine, and is as full of strong sap.

> Frances Lamont Robbins. *Outlook*. March 14, 1928. p. 433

If I were asked to indicate the single quality by which Mr. Steele's stories rightly claim their place in American literature, I should say that it was by virtue of his sensitive fidelity to the more abiding romance of ordinary life. While it is true that his pictorial sense of atmospheric values serves to define the terms on which he is willing to render human character in conflict, the essential merit of his findings is due to the impartial view which he takes of circumstance, an impartiality as unconscious and as real as that of a child before daily happenings. It is, perhaps, this very joy in apprehending spiritual values without self-consciousness, as a child apprehends them, which has often led him to set down what he has seen in the words of a boy, to whom wonder reveals more of the truth than self-analysis, and to whom delight in a story is a sufficient preoccupation, without premature analysis of his own human relation to what he sees.

> Edward J. O'Brien. *The Advance of the American Short Story* (Dodd). 1931. pp. 232–3

With *That Girl From Memphis* . . . Mr. Steele emerges as a novelist deeply serious about his material and his method of presenting it. One suspects that he has worked longer and harder on this book than on any other he has published. The result is an absorbing story

that deserves to be read seriously by thoughtful people, and perhaps the most important contribution that a reviewer can make is to insist on this point—for it is a novel likely to be misunderstood. First because of the title: it is not the story of the notorious ''Girl From Memphis'' but of ''Beulah City'' in Arizona and of a man's struggle to understand himself and his life. Garnett Cannon might be called an American Parzival. . . . *That Girl From Memphis*, far from being a story of vicarious thrills, is actually a social study, an attack on the forces which have vulgarized American life.

Gay Wilson Allen. *New York Times Book Section*. June 10, 1945. p. 5

Apparently Mr. Steele spends his time these days as a beachcomber operating out of Old Lyme, Connecticut, but a Coloradan he remains. No one else could have written *Diamond Wedding*.

In short, although this book is some distance this side of the best novel that will be written this year, may be even of the best historical novel, a book more thoroughly characteristic of the people, the history, and the habits of mind which make the Coloradan a separate species in the genus Westerner is not likely to make its appearance in some years. Even in the manner of its telling *Diamond Wedding* bespeaks the country out of which it comes, the story set forth with almost maddening deliberation, all crossgrained in its structure, with a prose so knotty and gnarled that one must occasionally back away to grease the teeth of one's understanding before the meaning can be sawed out.

Dale L. Morgan. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 5, 1950. p. 15

At their best, his stories miss genuine significance primarily because of the rigidity with which he held the concept of the short story as primarily an adventure, much in the manner of Jack London, but without London's unconventionality or his vigorous social attitudes. Reading his stories today, one is still impressed by the brilliant surface glitter of them but struck, too, by what seems finally a false manipulation of material for its dramatic effect. His craftsmanship is sure—almost too predictable. And it is utilized too much for its own sake. Life gives way before it. As with O. Henry and other masters of this type of writing, once the trick is seen, too little remains to satisfy the demanding reader.

Ray B. West. *The Short Story in America, 1900–1950* (Henry Regnery). 1952. p. 81

That a short story can be a poem is revealed in ''How Beautiful with Shoes.'' Mad as the ravings of the lunatic are, they open ''magic casements'' for a girl who has seen little of loveliness in her life and sees even less in the life that is awaiting her.

In 1886 Wilbur Daniel Steele was born in Greensboro, North Carolina. He is a graduate of the University of Denver and has studied art in Paris, New York and Boston. He is an author whose work should be much better known today. Unlike many famous writers who appeared in the earlier volumes of *The Best American Short Stories*, the high quality of his work has not fluctuated.

Martha Foley. *Fifty Best American Short Stories 1915–1965* (Houghton). 1965. p. 118

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STEFFENS, Lincoln (1866–1936)

Mr. Steffens describes himself as a journalist, and no doubt he is perfectly within his rights in choosing what label he will; his readers will be perfectly within their rights in wishing that all other journalists possessed Mr. Steffens's gifts for rummaging until he has found the facts, for seeing the facts as they are, and for setting them down without exaggeration. When Mr. Steffens calls himself a journalist in the composition of this book [*The Shame of the Cities*], he must mean that he has employed methods, not the manner, of journalism. He has gone to prominent men in politics and finance in each of the cities in which he was interested—St. Louis, Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Chicago, New York; he has asked them questions about their most intimate financial and personal affairs with the tranquil effrontery of an *enfant terrible* escaped from his nursery; and like the *enfant terrible* he seems to have found amongst all manner of men slaves to the direct question. They have answered him to the limits of indiscretion, and their answers are recorded in these articles.

Alfred Hodder. *Bookman*. May, 1904. p. 302

I marvel when I reflect that he could see so clearly what most had not even the sensitiveness to feel. He went at his task quite in the scientific spirit, isolating first that elementary germ or microbe, the partizan, the man who always voted the straight ticket in municipal elections, the most virulent organism that ever infested the body politic and as unconscious of its toxic power as the bacillus of yellow fever. Then he discovered the foul culture this organism blindly breeds—the political machine, with its boss. But he went on and his quest led him to the public service corporation, the street railway company, the gas company, the electricity company, and then his trail led him out into the state, and he produced a series of studies of politics in the American cities which has never been equaled, and so had a noble and splendid part in the great awakening of our time.

Brand Whitlock. *Forty Years of It* (Appleton). 1925. p. 163. [1914]

Mr. Steffen's autobiography, to be specific, is the obituary of American reformism, progressivism, liberalism; it is at once the

story of and the verdict upon the whole first phase of the movement in this country against privilege, inequality, individualism—the phase that found its characteristic expression in middle-class ''social work,'' in muckraking, in trustbusting, and in reform legislation. . . .

But he has been more than a reporter, just as he has been more than a reformer: if the word did not have too many portentous connotations for so genial a man, one would say that he has been a kind of prophet. At any rate, if to be a prophet is to have a true humility of mind and spirit, to grasp imaginatively the conflicts of one's time, to apprehend the relation between men and events, to be capable of disenchantment without bitterness or negation, then Lincoln Steffens has been something of a prophet, and this book has something of the stateliness of prophecy. I do not mean that it embraces the sum of social and personal wisdom, but I do mean that it is full of invaluable hints and intimations. It suggests how the transition can be made from a plastic liberalism to a resourceful and humane radicalism. It suggests how social movements can be given a personal and psychological as well as a collective aspect. It demonstrates, indirectly, the shabbiness of our fashionable cynicism. It is a source book for the critic, for the radical, for the man of action. But it is certainly not merely an ''autobiography.''

Newton Arvin. *The Nation*. April 15, 1931. p. 416

Sure, Steffens was a dangerous radical, and this book [*Lincoln Steffens Speaking*] is a dangerous book. It destroys the boundaries of hatred we build about ourselves, and, worst of all, it introduces a method of thought which will keep those boundaries down. Steffens was dangerous because he didn't tell people things, but he did make them arrive at reasonably thoughtful conclusions. I have known people to leave his house aghast at what they had said and yet unable to refute themselves with their usual axioms. I expect people will leave this book aghast at themselves for agreeing with things they have been taught to believe they hated.

John Steinbeck. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Nov. 29, 1936. p. 6

Some of us began reading Lincoln Steffens at the time when he first reached an immense American public with his series of magazine articles on *The Shame of Cities*. We began to read him then, some of us, and we followed him on through the *Autobiography* and its postscript volume, *Lincoln Steffens Speaking*. He never once lost us as readers. Whether we said yes or no or maybe to what he was writing, we went on reading him these thirty years and more. Always he had something on the ball. You could never be sure what he was going to throw till it came. He carried an assortment of curves and a wicked straight ball. His style most often was so distinctly his own that what he put forth didn't need his signature. . . . About a million miles from being a Narcissus was Steffens. Yet how he did study himself, how he did try to fathom mankind by searching and cross-examining and spying on and carrying out counter-espionage on the single specimen piece of humanity nearest and most available, the solitary and brooding Lincoln Steffens himself.

Carl Sandburg. Memorandum to *The Letters of Lincoln Steffens*, edited by Ella Winter and Granville Hicks, I (Harcourt). 1938. pp. vii–viii

So little was he the reformer that when others were condemning and ousting corrupt politicians, Steffens was pleading for understanding of crooks, criminals, grafters; he was interested in the bosses as characters, in how they did what they did, and why; by what codes of ethics or morals they justified their behavior. He made personal friends of many of them. He turned topsy-turvy the distinction between good and bad men; ''there is so much good in bad people, there must be some good in good people,'' ran his chuckling argument. Steffens came to disbelieve utterly in mere, piecemeal, reform. And more and more, as it became less possible to tell people what they did not know, Steffens expressed himself in paradox, irony or allegory. He wrote fables. ''Only a known fool could explain [the collapse of our economic system] and be allowed to live,'' he said in the last paragraph he wrote. ''I did it gingerly and—well, I lived.'' It was partly because Steffens himself was a paradox that he was allowed to live. The price he paid was that he was not well understood.

Ella Winter. Introduction to *The Letters of Lincoln Steffens*, edited by Ella Winter and Granville Hicks, I (Harcourt). 1938. p. xv

Always he sought to understand life, to see what went on behind the facades, to find the causes for the impending or the arrived collapse. Undoubtedly that weakened him so far as making the impression upon his time it was once thought he would make. He was baffled—again and again. He was always seeking some general principles to portray on a great canvas, and when he failed to find them or to picture what he did see he blamed among other things his college education. He was not one to scourge the money-changers out of the temple. His forte, and these letters prove it, was in dissecting and reporting the actions of the human beings about him. There may be bitter words in these letters; I don't seem to find them. Critical ones, yes, but not bitter. The older he grew the kindlier he became, the more forgiving, probably the more understanding. Yet it is a fact that men missed in him the clear-cut objectives which probably the reasonableness and the analytical character of his mind rendered impossible. It is perhaps true that his wit and his paradoxes, his worries and—at times—his reticences deprived him of exercising to the full the power which nature intended should be his.

Oswald Garrison Villard. *The Nation*. Oct. 22, 1938. p. 426

Steffens was not likely to give his energies to a party. He had too much interest in individuals; he had too much appreciation of the human virtues as well as failings that were to be found in any man, capitalist or proletarian. Yet he knew that there must be some principle, some motive, that would induce men in the mass to work for common and progressive goals. Had Steffens been a European, his cynicism and clear view of reality might have made him a revolutionist; it all but did so years later, when he was old. But as an American he valued democracy and knew that, to have a future, democracy must be able to provide a solution for class troubles.

Louis Filler. *Crusaders for American Liberalism* (Harcourt). 1939. p. 350

Steffens in those days was not interested in sociological or political things; the reforming or revolutionary instinct had not taken possession of him. He had been one of the best police reporters in the city, on the *Evening Post*, before going over to the *Commercial Advertiser*. His interest when he became city editor was distinctly that of the artist. He felt keenly and in great detail the picturesque and amusing side of the life of the city. He liked articles so written that the reader could see, while getting the news, the background of men behind the news. A character sketch of a Tammany official, a teamster maliciously bumping into another teamster but so gently that nothing could be done about it, was an important event in Steffens's imagination, and he would take anything of this sort—what would be called by the other editors an eccentric story—and put it on the first page.

Hutchins Hapgood. *A Victorian in the Modern World* (Harcourt). 1939. pp. 138–9

For all his prestige and power, and for all his eagerness to improve our democratic form of government, he remained the questioner and the critic. He was not made of the stuff of a popular leader or of a social crusader. The urge to right a wrong seldom impelled him to act overtly. His indignation was too often tempered by an effervescent humor: the ironist's view of the foibles of humanity. He was more frequently impressed by the inherent decency of the unscrupulous boss than by the pinchbeck righteousness of a civic leader. It took him years to realize that what mattered was not so much the crook as the conditions that made his crime possible. He was equally long in learning that the key to corruption was privilege. ''It is privilege that causes evil in the world, not wickedness and not men.'' Yet his attacks on corruption were written to arouse as well as to deprecate, and few readers saw the significance of his basic conclusions. He was satisfied to let others unsheathe their swords against the monster.

Charles A. Madison. *Critics and Crusaders* (Holt). 1947. p. 405

Steffens sought in the imperfect social world for a method by which he could improve its morals as practiced. This led him first to an inquiry into pure ethics, both in American and European universities. The tentative conclusion at which he arrived as a result of these investigations was that nothing decisive was known in the academic world with respect to ethics. His marriage and return to America in search of work by means of which he could support his family coincided with his resolution to abandon the abstract field of academic ethics and with his attempt to discover in the hurly-burly of the social world itself just what was responsible for its limitations. He decided, in other words, to abandon his first method of empirical inquiry into pure ethics which could be applied, and to follow instead the mistaken empirical method which has proved so common (but also so fruitless) in the field of the social sciences: to study the social field itself, empirically, in an effort to get it to yield its own hypothesis.

James K. Feibleman. *Aesthetics* (Duell). 1949. p. 393

The bent of Steffens' interests and the nature of his opportunities leads him inevitably to investigate the political and economic structure of society, and he becomes an actor in one exciting episode after another. As sheer story, the document rushes on with magnificent audacity, ripping apart the veils of hypocrisy and laying bare the secret sources of corruption. And in our travels from city to city we are led through a gallery of portraits unique and varied—portraits etched with humor and charity, to be sure, but also with unflinching fidelity. . . . He is always lucid, fluent, and utterly unaffected. The tone is conversational, and the sentences flow with a tang and vigor that make the reading both pleasant and easy even for the unsophisticated. At times, especially in the account of certain boyhood experiences, the writer's deep feeling infuses into the composition an almost poetic tenderness. His practice, moreover, of dramatizing his scenes and anecdotes, of allowing his characters to express themselves in actual speech—this method of narration imparts to the *Autobiography* the vivacity and spiritedness of a lively novel.

William H. Cunningham. Introduction to *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* (Abridged) (Harcourt). 1958. pp. iv–v

Steffens prided himself upon being a scientific reformer rather than a moralist; yet the structure of his *Autobiography* depends fundamentally upon the archetypal patterns of the American myth of Eden. It follows the initiation ritual, marking Steffens' progress from innocence to a knowledge of the fruit of good and evil (Steffens first acquires a sense of guilt in adolescent sexual experience). As regards society, it builds upon the traditional polarities of America and Europe, East and West, country and city as being roughly equivalent, symbolically, to the moral conditions of Paradise and Hell. Steffens' spiritual journey takes him from the American West, which infuses him with instinctive moral character and visions of the promised land, to the corrupt eastern seaboard and thus to Europe, which becomes for him, finally, a school of worldly experience. He is as much concerned with the ''sins upon the land'' as the Puritan convenanter, Michael Wigglesworth, and his muckraking contributions constitute one prolonged jeremiad as he traces, in his words, ''the trail of the serpent'' from city to state to nation, from West to East to Europe.

Charles L. Sanford. *The Quest for Paradise* (Illinois). 1961. p. 191

What Steffens gives is a hard ground lit by a cool, clear light: the seeing of things as things in fact *are*. This seeing is always hard to come by. It is dimmed by the fear that things are too dreadful to be seen. But when you have got it—and to the extent that you have got it—then for the first time you are truly secure. The seen reality may indeed be dangerous, as in our time a great many realities are. But all the comforts of illusion are as nothing compared to the solace of apprehended fact.

Many men, from many epochs, have taught me this; but Steffens' voice is the one I have oftenest in my ear. He is saying, perhaps, ''I don't mean to keep the boys from succeeding in their professions. All I want to do is to make it impossible for them to be crooks and not know it. Intelligence is what I am aiming at, not honesty. We have, we Americans, quite enough honesty now. What we need is integrity, intellectual honesty.'' These words were in

fact addressed to President Eliot of Harvard, who thereupon bowed politely and walked away.

Barrows Dunham. Introduction to *The World of Lincoln Steffens*, edited by Ella Winter and Herbert Shapiro (Hill and Wang). 1962. p. xiv

Although Steffens would not espouse any doctrine—other than his own of applied Christianity—he found that certain institutional changes were necessary. Since privilege was a temptation to corruption, it had to be removed. The standard remedies of law enforcement and the regulation of business were not sufficient. The necessary instruments of government were not sufficiently honest and unprejudiced, and the basic evil of selfishness would still be untouched. In 1908 Steffens favored governmental ownership of public utilities. By 1914 he was talking in vague terms of taxing away unearned increment, primarily of land, and giving each man the full extent of the value that he produced. How it was to be done he did not specify.

David Mark Chalmers. *The Social and Political Ideas of the Muckrakers* (Citadel). 1964. p. 79

Steffens . . . believed that the younger generation could see things that eluded his own. This confidence in youth became the dominant note of his later writings. However sentimental, however misplaced his confidence, it accounted for much of the serenity and charm of the last phase of his life. It rescued Steffens from the bitterness that afflicted so many of the disappointed liberals of his time. Above all, it saved him from intolerance and dogmatism, to which so many of them eventually succumbed. Even in the act of embracing a dogmatic and intolerant ideology—if he can be said to have ''embraced'' it—he himself came more and more to embody the liberal virtues of tolerance and intellectual modesty which some of the later defenders of liberalism so conspicuously lacked.

Christopher Lasch. *The New Radicalism in America* (Knopf). 1965. pp. 280–1

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STEGNER, Wallace (1909–1993)

Mr. Stegner, who has not published any long fiction before this novelette (*Remembering Laughter*), has built a narrative which comes startlingly close to perfection. In many ways it will remind everyone who reads it of *Ethan Frome*. It has the same quiet strength and simplicity in structure and style. The characterizations are not as mature or subtle as those in Mrs. Wharton's novelette, but they are well-realized, and this story has dramatic relief from the tragic mood in Alec's tall tales and the opulence of the farm life.

There is no use to mention the assurance and calm competence that Mr. Stegner brings to his first book—it has to be read to be believed.

Phil Stong. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 25, 1937. p. 5

The passing generation of writers examined man with a minifying glass, made him smaller, baser, more miserable than life-size. Inevitably, the characters became too small to be seen; and new writers are returning to their only possible tool, the magnifying lens, and establishing man once more above the ground. In this tradition Mr. Stegner has written a rich and moving study (*On a Darkling Plain*). Perhaps it is in spite of himself that he is romantic, mystical, compassionate, and warm. The interbellum generation has been taught by the war generation to distrust these qualities; but in Mr. Stegner—as in Steinbeck, Wolfe, and Saroyan—they are what we value most.

Milton G. Lehman. *New Republic*. Feb. 26, 1940. p. 284

Stegner is prepared to give an inside view of the great Northwest as it was passing from the pioneer to the settled agricultural stage. In numerous tales he has faithfully worked this mine, without really striking pay dirt until the present moment. . . . With *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* the author takes a real hold on his subject. . . . Mr. Stegner has felt the spell of mountain and prairie, of drought, flood and blizzard; he can write of moving accidents and hairbreadth escapes which give us the feel of frontier life better than phrases about the stars and seasons.

Joseph Warren Beach. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 26, 1943. p. 4

The Big Rock Candy Mountain is not a conscious rediscovery of American values. Mr. Stegner is as amused at small-town cussedness as was Sinclair Lewis, but he knows that satire accomplishes nothing. In a larger sense, however, his book is an extraordinary study in American folkways. The language, the psychology, the customs of his characters are essential and characteristic, largely because, knowing them, he takes them for granted and does not dissect and analyze. His, to be sure, is a masculine world, just as, despite the tenderness with which the wife is treated, this is a masculine book.

Howard Mumford Jones. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 2, 1943. p. 11

Mr. Stegner is a regional writer in the usual sense that a certain geographical area engages him. Three subjects particularly intrigue him: memories of a prairie boyhood; a sudden and often belated revelation to one character of the incubi that haunt another; and what might be called the He-man pastoral, a highly American form found at its purest in the work of Sherwood Anderson and in such stories as Hemingway's ''Big Two-Hearted River,'' and Faulkner's ''The Bear.''

Harry Sylvester. *New York Times Book Section*. Jan. 1, 1950. p. 15

Mr. Stegner writes beautifully about almost any kind of rural landscape, whether it be a birch-and-maple forest in Vermont, an apricot ranch in California, or the ''endless oceanic land'' of Saskatchewan. . . . At their most effective, his landscapes leap at you with a vividness that reminds you of the first time the eye doctor dropped the right lens in your test frame.

In his quiet way, Wallace Stegner is one of the most talented writers in our midst.

Richard Match. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Jan. 1, 1950. p. 4

Stegner is always the quiet, sure workman, slipping in almost unnoticed bits of poetry and little ironies and sage observations as the story moves along, but, though almost unnoticed, the little touches dig in, take hold, do their work on the subconscious mind of the reader. But he is at his best, when he is aroused, when he gets his waters to rolling and rolling, for then he gets up on that high plateau that most of his *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* represents.

Feike Feikema. *Chicago Sun Book Week*. Jan. 9, 1950

Wallace Stegner is a thoroughly skilled writer who belongs to a tradition which takes the short story seriously, but not too seriously. Even his least successful stories are characterized by a well-disciplined, essentially conservative craftsmanship. Neither an entertainer nor an artist *per se*, he seldom fails to respect either his characters or his readers. In short, serious as his approach to short fiction may be, he does not allow his story to be submerged by message or overshadowed by technique.

William Peden. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 21, 1950. p. 17

The psychological or regional not-at-homeness of Stegner's main characters makes the stories dominantly reflective in tone. The chances are mostly inner. What begins as condemnation of others becomes self-criticism. A deepened sense of what others are and need results in a deepened and chastened sense of self. Such detachment and reflectiveness are not likely to go with passionate commitment, and the stories do not usually drive dramatically to some final outer resolution. They are wise and humane as well as observant, however, and teach what must happen in ourselves before we can love and understand others, and by what steps we can move toward effective sympathy with those who, most needing love, are most unlovable.

Robert Gorham Davis. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 26, 1956. p. 6

His gifts are of a distinguished, though completely unspectacular kind. They include a cool steadiness of insight into the complexities of the human condition and an extraordinary flexibility in making the idiom of the moment bespeak many subtleties of judgement. . . . Stegner always turns away from the shattering climax. When his point is made he breaks off, sometimes abruptly. This is as it must be with a writer to whom nothing is more offensive than the second-hand affirmative unless it is the garish, improbably bloody tragic resolution.

James Gray. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Nov. 4, 1956. p. 4

Here [in *The City of the Living*] is the commitment to life of *Remembering Laughter*, but now shaded by the sombre recognition that the affirmation must draw its strength from the tangled depths of human experience from whence it wells up. Here too is the search for understanding and identity, but now conducted with a more mature tolerance than in the earlier work. . . .

The unanswered questions at the heart of Stegner's work are: who is man and what can he affirm when he lives at dead center? It is toward this dead center that American society has been moving—the spot where the other-directed citizens practice ''togetherness'' and huddle in mutual anonymity. In their hands the polarities of American life are disappearing. Stegner, in refusing to make choices, speaks in the idiom of his indecisive time. Standing in the midst of his society, he has not so much seen it as experienced from it. He has tried to record the life of man and society from within the given framework. But consistent vision and true perspective, I believe, come to the artist who is outside.

Chester E. Eisinger. *College English*. Dec., 1958. p. 116

Wallace Stegner is not a major literary figure, and he can no longer be regarded as a young man of promise; but he is one of the writers, and fortunately there are many of them, who have to be reckoned with. He has written one novel of remarkable power, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, and if his other books are not so impressive, none of them is negligible. He looks at America with a sharp eye, and he writes with precision and sometimes with beauty. . . .

As I read the novel [*A Shooting Star*], I felt that it was loosely organized, and I still think that the story of Sabrina could have been told more directly. We don't need to know as much about her ancestors as Stegner tells us, and several episodes seem to be dispensable. On the other hand, I can see why Stegner wanted to give his book breadth as well as depth, and in particular I am glad that he did so much with the MacDonalds. They are exemplary characters for our times without being in the least implausible. . . .

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. May 20, 1961. p. 17

Wallace Stegner spent his young years in southwestern Saskatchewan near the Montana border in the Cypress Hills country, so named out of confusion of cypress with jack pine. Here was big country, too, then and now thinly populated. Here was a boy, like me, who got a place in his system and as a man can't get it out, no matter that he's long since moved away. He knew the distances, the animals, the Indians, the poor striving people, the smell of wolf willow, the feel of swimming-hole water, the great loneliness that is loneliness only in retrospect.

He revisited the place, in preparation presumably for his book [*Wolf Willow*], after an absence so lengthy that his connections largely were with places and memories, not men or boys he had known; and he has brought to bear on recollection the perception and confessed acknowledgment of origin of a wise and probing mind.

I have read his book twice and gone over paragraphs time after time, always with increased admiration, and I have asked myself whether others will respond as I have, no matter where their home towns. My answer is yes, for there is too much here for frontier environment alone.

A. B. Guthrie. *The Reporter*. Nov. 22, 1962. p. 52

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STEIN, Gertrude (1874–1946)

We find . . . that Miss Stein's method is one of subtraction. She has deliberately limited her equipment. . . .Obviously, any literary artist who sets out to begin his work in a primary search for music or rhythm, and attempts to get this at the expense of (the) ''inherent property of words,'' obviously this artist is not going to exploit the full potentialities of his medium. He is getting an art by subtraction; he is violating his *genre*. . . .Miss Stein continually utilizes this violation of the *genre*. Theoretically at least, the result has its studio value. . . . By approaching art-work from these exorbitant angles one is suddenly able to rediscover organically those eternal principles of art which are, painful as it may be to admit it, preserved in all the standard textbooks.

Kenneth Burke. *Dial*. April, 1923. pp. 409–10

In her detachment, her asceticism, and her eclecticism, Miss Stein can only remind us of another American author who lived in Europe and devoted himself more and more exclusively to the abstract. The principal difference between Henry James (whom Miss Stein reads more and more these days) and Gertrude Stein is that the former still kept within the human realm by treating moral problems. . . . Moreover, what Miss Stein has in common with James she has in common with Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, and several other important and characteristic American writers: an orientation from experience toward the abstract, an orientation that has been so continuous as to constitute a tradition, if not actually the American tradition. Of this tradition it is possible to see in Miss Stein's writing not only a development but the pure culmination.

William Troy. *The Nation*. Sept. 6, 1933. pp. 274–5

I was delighted to see that Miss Stein never mentioned her style, never said that she had a philosophy, and that her point of view was merely the natural way she had of walking and speaking English; even in her boldest creations she acted spontaneously and enjoyed the fun of amusing herself. I was surprised first because our French wits rather liked wondering at themselves and even being shocked at themselves but certainly explained to everybody how marvelous and queer they were. On the contrary this woman whose mind was so rich and so new seemed never to have time to stop, look and listen at herself. All her actions and all her attention she kept in herself. All her personality she carried inside herself, inside this space and this time which was herself.

Bernard Fay. Preface to Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* (Harcourt). 1934. pp. xii–xiii

I have never heard talk come more naturally and casually. It had none of the tautness or deadly care that is in the speech of most American intellectuals when they talk from the mind out. If sometime you will listen to workingmen talking when they are concentrating upon the physical job at hand, and one of them will go on without cease while he is sawing and measuring and nailing, not always audible, but keeping on in an easy rhythm and almost without awareness of words—then you will get some idea of her conversation.

John Hyde Preston. *Atlantic Monthly*. Aug., 1935. p. 192

It is little surprising that the ideas of William James have influenced his pupil. It is remarkable, however, to realize that Stein has, from her first work forward, created in an aesthetics which did not have its formal doctrination until as late as two decades after her first experiments with it. It is to be understood literally that the rudiments of a pragmatic aesthetic appeared in her work before contemporary philosophers, including William James, had expounded such an aesthetic. It was, then, with the voice of annunciation that she said, in 1926, ''naturally no one thinks, that is no one formulates until what is to be formulated has been made.''

Robert Bartlett Haas. Foreword to Gertrude Stein's *What Are Masterpieces* (Conference). 1940. p. 21

Her writing is harder than traditional prose, as a foreign tongue is harder than a native tongue; at first glance we catch a word here and there, or a phrase or two, but the over-all meaning must be figured out arduously. Yet a tension is created, a question asked and in Miss Stein at her best, dramatic context mounts to a climax and then a conclusion. It's pure creative activity, an exudation of personality, a discharge, and it can't be defined more exactly. The mysterious

surge of energy which impels a boy who is idling on a corner to race madly down the street is part and parcel of the same thing. When people call it elementary, they mean elemental.

W.G. Rogers. *When This You See Remember Me* (Rinehart). 1948. pp. 69–70

I recall having a tormented feeling when first hearing the musicians of India playing for the dancing of Shankar. The music went on and on, like the babbling of a brook, always going on, always slightly, but ever so slightly, different, but mostly always the same. One waited almost nervously for a crescendo, a period, a climax, but one waited in vain; and gradually as the expectation was thwarted, as one gave up expecting, it was a soothing music as the babbling of a brook may be soothing, and then gradually as one listened more intently it was an intensely interesting, even a revealing music. There was no blare of horns, but it was none the less interesting. Miss Stein's prose is like that.

George Haines IV. *Sewanee Review*. Summer, 1949. p. 413

''In writing a word must be for me really an existing thing.'' Her efforts to get at the roots of existing life, to create fresh life from them, give her words a dark liquid flowingness, like the murmur of blood. She does not strain words or invent them. Many words have retained their original meaning for her, she uses them simply. Good means good and bad means bad—next to the Jews the Americans are the most moralistic people, and Gertrude Stein is an American Jew, a combination which by no means lessens the like quality in both. Good and bad are attributes to her, strength and weakness are real things that live inside people, she looks for these things, notes them in their likenesses and differences. She loves the difficult virtues, she is tender toward good people, she has faith in them.

Katherine Anne Porter. *The Days Before* (Harcourt). 1952. p. 39

In almost all literature until Gertrude Stein, the act of composition has been used to recall, recreate, analyze, and celebrate an Object Time, the time in which the ''thing seen'' is happening. This is true whether this Object Time is in the historical past . . . or the historical present. . . .In Gertrude Stein, just the reverse is true. In almost everything she wrote, it is the Subject Time, the time in which she is happening as she sees and writes, which is realized. . . . When she says ''The time of the composition is the time of the composition,'' she means exactly that. The time that goes on in her writing is *not* the time in which her ''thing seen'' is going on. Her complete works might very aptly be called, ''A la recherche du temps présent.''

Robert Phelps. *The Yale Review*. Summer, 1956. p. 601

She never relinquishes the strictest, most intimate relationship between her words and her though. . . . The aphoristic style and the conciseness of the formulas express the energy of this writer's consciousness, which appears almost excessive. Her language is affirmed in slow tempo, with a marked degree of solemnity, as it seeks to acquire a certain weight of one-syllable words. It represents finally a summation of things felt, lived with, possessed. It is common language and yet it relates an experience of intimacy which is the least communicable of all experiences. A word used by Gertrude Stein does not designate a thing as much as it designates the way in which the thing is possessed, or the way whereby the poet has learned to live with it.

Wallace Fowlie. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 22, 1956. p. 21

If these works are highly complex and, for some, unreadable, it is not only because of the complicatedness of life, the subject, but also because they actually imitate its rhythm, its way of happening, in an attempt to draw our attention to another aspect of its true nature. Just as life is being constantly altered by each breath one draws, just as each second of life seems to alter the whole of what has gone before, so the endless process of elaboration which gives the work of these two writers (Stein and Henry James) a texture of bewildering luxuriance—that of a tropical rain-forest of ideas—seems to obey some rhythmic impulse at the heart of all happening.

In addition, the almost physical pain with which we strive to accompany the evolving thought of one of James's or Gertrude Stein's characters is perhaps a counterpart of the painful continual projection of the individual into life.

John Ashbery. *Poetry*. July, 1957. p. 252

Her ''art'' is one of subtraction and narrowing throughout. In her art she does not reflect, for reflection entails consciousness of identity and audience, an awareness fatal to the creative vision. She rules out the imagination because it is the hunting ground of secondary talent. She rules out logical, cause-effect relations: ''Question and answer make you know time is existing.'' She rules out distinctions of right and wrong: ''Write and right. Of course they have nothing to do with one another.'' She will have no distinctions of true and false: ''The human mind is not concerned with being or not being true.'' She abjures beauty, emotion, association, analogy, illustration, metaphor. Art by subtraction finally subtracts art itself. What remains as the manner and matter of the specifically ''creative'' works of Gertrude Stein is the artist and an object vis-à-vis. This is not art; this is science. Miss Stein would turn the artist into a recording mechanism, a camera that somehow utters words rather than pictures.

B.L. Reid. *Art by Subtraction: A Dissenting Opinion of Gertrude Stein* (Oklahoma). 1958. pp. 171–2

As a scientific demonstration of Gertrude Stein's belief in the final absolutism of human character, *The Making of Americans* carries the weight of its conviction and the conviction of its enormous weight. As a work of literature, it is all but swept bare of the felicities of detail, color and anecdote that beguile the attention in great books as well as minor ones. But Gertrude Stein had had enough of the picaresque trappings and sentimental diffusions that recommend novels to the insatiable reader. She wanted to come to essentials—to ideas in action rather than ideas comfortably couched in formulation, and to character as an entity alive rather than character as an identity pinned to the wall like a butterfly. Her

conception would test the power of the intellect to usurp the power of the emotions in communicating living experience, yet she was ready to face the challenge. . . . The pages of *The Making of Americans* are as full of rolling and repeated cadences as the Bible, but its more prevalent sound, like that of Oriental ritual, is the music of the continuous present, always going on and always, almost always, but not quite, the same. . . . Gertrude Stein had come early to a notion that was to dominate her creative life—the notion that the ''continuous present and using everything and beginning again'' was the final reality in fact and thus the final reality that words could communicate. Escaping from the conventions of beginning, middle, and ending, she simply laid out a space—a space of time as big in its proportions as a canvas of Jackson Pollock—and proceeded to make sure that it would be ''always filled with moving.''

John Malcolm Brinnin. *The Third Rose* (Little). 1959. pp. 94–5

She never had her tongue in her cheek; she genuinely believed in her own uniqueness and incomparable genius; she devoted to the prosecution of her ''experiments'' the single-mindedness and sense of dedication of the greatest of writers and thinkers. She was her own first victim. If her confidence was misplaced and her experiments ridiculous, she is at least to be commended for determination. . . . It also explains why she obtained a genuine *succés d'estime* denied to the glibbest of pure charlatans, and why the Forsters, Hemingways, and Eliots, though they could not possibly have brought themselves actually to read her work, still less to enjoy it, nevertheless felt constrained to praise it. . . . Nor indeed were her experimentations with language wholly without value, if only as a set of awful warnings; a wiser woman would have perceived that by their very nature they could only lead to abortions; a quicker woman would have perceived their uselessness after the first instead of the five hundredth page; a more modest, or a poorer, woman would not have published, or have been able to publish, them. The *Stanzas in Meditation* is perhaps the dreariest long poem in the world, offering the absolute minimum in reward or pleasure against somewhere near the maximum in obstruction. Let it stand as a perpetual witness against the myth of an inherent value in ''experiment.''

Hilary Corke. *Kenyon Review*. Summer, 1961. pp. 387–8

In serious literary circles, as distinguished from the large public, Gertrude Stein's real accomplishments were always known. There, her influence was at one time considerable, though it worked in very different ways and degrees on different individuals. It was known that her writing had influenced, in certain respects, Sherwood Anderson and, later, Hemingway. It was supposed that Steinese had found echoes in Don Marquis' *archy and mehitabel* as well as in the difficult poetry of Wallace Stevens, who once wrote ''Twenty men crossing a bridge,/Into a village,/Are/Twenty men crossing a bridge/Into a village.'' Her insistence on the primacy of phenomena over ideas, of the sheer magnificence of unmediated reality, found a rapturous response in Stevens, a quiet one in Marianne Moore.

F.W. Dupee. *Commentary*. June, 1962. p. 522

More extreme than Thoreau, Stein has an ideal of what we may call seeing without remembering, without associating, without thinking. She wants the eye to open to the reality of the material world as though it had never opened before: for then we catch reality at its 'realest' unfiltered through the schemata of the sophisticated eye which is dimmed from too long domestication in the world. And even though she does not develop or push the comparison she clearly cites the child's way of looking as exemplary: naivety must be cultivated in order that we may see reality as it is and not as we remember it to be. This takes us back to the problem of how a child does in fact perceive reality. More basically, whether one can in fact see anything clearly at all without the aid of memory, the subtle reawakening of innumerable past visual experiences, is open to doubt. Certainly, words are full of memories—are perhaps pure memory—and the impressions gained by the unremembering eye could never be transmitted by the unremembering voice. For without memory there is no metaphor; and without metaphor we would never have had language. Stein avoids live metaphors but to communicate at all she has to use those dead ones we all use continually in our daily speech. Her ideal properly carried out, if it did not lead to a visual confusion akin to blindness, would certainly lead to silence.

To draw these inferences is perhaps unfair. In fact what Stein wants is to purify the eye, to break old visual habits, to initiate a more vivid commerce between the senses and the real world.

Tony Tanner. *The Reign of Wonder*. (Cambridge). 1965. p. 191

In ''Melanctha'' she simplified her diction in order to stress the developing patterns of repeated words. There too she began to stretch given moments in time to abnormal length. With *The Making of Americans*, she eliminated action, yet by using extended repetition broken by slight changes in phrasing that allowed slow conceptual accretion, she managed to conserve a dynamic subject matter. Finally in *Tender Buttons*, conventional subject matter disappeared except insofar as some single thing stimulated Gertrude Stein's mind into action. Words were arranged as objects sufficient in themselves upon the page; and both alone and in series they made their effects by the associations roused through their composition. The stylistic process was one of gradual loss of story (movement) and of subject (thing) until, at her most obscure, Gertrude Stein offered arrangements quite as abstract as those painted by her friends, Braque, Picasso, Gris, and Picabia. In so doing she emphasized the underlying structures of colloquial speech, even as the Cubists isolated and stylized the geometrical components of the human figure.

Richard Bridgman. *The Colloquial Style in America* (Oxford). 1966. pp. 193–4

Regarding the famous aria [in *Four Saints in Three Acts*] ''Pigeons on the grass alas,'' in [Richard] Bridgman's view ''anti-supernatural,'' he is quite wrong, for this is one of the few moments in the opera that Gertrude really explained to me. It is St. Ignatius's vision of the Holy Ghost and it represents a true vision. It begins with ''ordinary pigeons'' which are ''on the grass alas,'' not doves against the sky as they maybe could be wished to be. But it goes on to a ''magpie in the sky on the sky,'' exactly as one sees these birds

in Spain, hanging there trembling, exactly as in many a primitive Spanish painting too, where the magpie, flat and seeming almost to vibrate, does represent the Holy Ghost. And the succeeding declaration, ''Let Lucy Lily Lily Lucy Lucy,'' may indeed, as Bridgman suggests, be ''an authorial statement stimulated by the religious context''; but when I treated it as a proof of true vision, as a heavenly chorus heard chanting in some heavenly lingo, Gertrude was ever so pleased.

Virgil Thomson. *New York Review of Books*. April 8, 1971. p. 6

[Stein's] is a vision, paradoxically, of the ''literally true.'' The phrase is used as the title for one of her works, and it might be the title of all of them. It compares with the vision of certain mystics who lived with the compelling sense of total illumination, with all the parts of everything seen plainly, in unbroken and simple and easily perceived harmonies, the highest and the lowest together. Stein's vision had that clarity, that intensity, and that ease. She saw the reality of relations—at first, relations of people, then of objects in space, and then of events in time—with as much force and clarity as though they were tangible. The substance of what she saw—or to put it more accurately, the summary of it—was more or less profound or trivial or remarkable as different occasions for observation can be for anyone. But the tangibility of relations, for her, did not blur. There was nothing for her to say *about* them but that they were there; they were so, literally and tangibly true.

Leon Katz. Introduction to *Fernhurst, Q.E.D., and Other Early Writings* by Gertrude Stein (Liveright). 1971. pp. xxxii–xxxiii

What, finally, is our view of Gertrude Stein? A dominating figure, a *femme intrigante*, and a problematic writer. The importance of her language experiments to poets and writers is indisputable. . . .

This pioneering destruction of associative emotion bears its finest fruit in the enigmatic plays and droll librettos, which have the charm of a friendly sphinx. . . . But in the novels, and most notably in *The Making of Americans*, which she stubbornly insisted was her masterpiece, her zeal for classification and repetition asks language to bear too heavy a burden. Unlike Joyce and Proust, the only novelists she'd admit as her equal, her solipsism does not take us into ''the secret grottoes of the self'' ([William Carlos] Williams's phrase). Compared to Joyce's Dublin and Proust's Paris, her universe is a defoliated landscape.

Herbert Leibowitz. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 3, 1974. p. 2

[Stein] had an extravagant affection not only for words and grammar but for the world at large and almost anything that turned up in it. It was part of her strong personal attraction, that complete attention and welcome to anything in front of her. Combined with her courage and liking for a fight and a determination not to be bored, it made her life a full one, with endless adventures, large and small, and not a few mistakes. But as she said, foolish mistakes are not a bore. Perhaps that life, which she led so actively, is after all her greatest and most interesting creation, though she did not like to think so.

When her work turns out beautiful, the beauty can no doubt have a ''solemnity'' as she calls it, but as often as not it has an elation, even a gaiety, which comes from the same passion for the world that went into her life.

Donald Sutherland. *New York Review of Books*. May 30, 1974. p. 29

What distinguishes Gertrude Stein (b. 1874) from nearly all of her chronological contemporaries in American literature (e.g., Dreiser, Stephen Crane, Vachel Lindsay, *et al*.) is that, even a century after her birth, most of her works remain misunderstood. The principal reason for such widespread incomprehension is that her experiments in writing were conducted apart from the major developments in modern literature. Neither a naturalist nor a surrealist, she had no interest in either the representation of social reality or the weaving of symbols, no interest at all in myth, metaphor, allegory, literary allusions, uncommon vocabulary, synoptic cultural critiques, shifts in point of view or much else that preoccupied writers such as James Joyce, Thomas Mann and Marcel Proust. Unlike them, she was an empiricist who preferred to write about observable realities and personally familiar subjects; the titles of her books were typically declarative and descriptive, rather than symbolic or allusive. Like other modern writers, she was influenced by developments in the non-literary arts; yet Stein feasted upon a fertile esthetic idea that the others neglected—to emphasize properties peculiar to one's chosen medium and it alone. As her art was writing, rather than painting, Stein's primary interest was language—more specifically, American English and how else its words might be used. Indicatively, the same esthetic idea that seems so acceptable in modernist painting and music was heretical, if not unthinkable, in literature.

From nearly the beginning of her creative career, Stein experimented with language in several ways. Starting from scratch, she neglects the arsenal of devices that authors had traditionally used to vary their prose. Though she was personally literate, her language is kept intentionally unliterary and unconnotative. Her diction is mundane, though her sentence structure is not, for it was her particular achievement to build a complex style out of purposely limited vocabulary.

Richard Kostelanetz. *Hollins Critic*. June, 1975, p. 2

There is probably no other writer who would be less comprehensible without reference to the time (the ''composition'') in which she wrote. While it may be a tautology to say that writers reflect their time and milieu, there are still certain periods of the past in which cultural upheaval seems, in retrospect, so apparent and inescapable that the works of art created during that time become functions of that revolution. During such epochs, certain writers emerge who can be best appreciated only within the context of that release of cultural energy, just as there are others who, in following these pioneers, become writers for all ages. . . .

It does not seem outlandish to suggest that Stein occupies a similar position in Modernist literature. Like ''an event in chemistry,'' she seems in retrospect to have been an inevitable product of cultural energy. Heir to a century of Romanticism and its implications for authorial subjectivity and experimentation, and versed also in modern psychology, Stein had the good fortune to be drawn

to an environment, Paris, where innovators in the other arts were attempting experiments similar to hers that ultimately changed the way all civilized peoples were to see and create the world. Her relationship with Picasso was crucial in this regard; for beginning with *Melanctha*, Stein's writings quite often went through the same stages of experimentation as the paintings of her Spanish friend. . . .

[Stein is the] first writer in English that I know of who came to see writing as *purely* a problem in composition; and her explorations of the limits of the English language made it possible for a number of important writers to go to school to her. . . .

To reject Stein any longer is to reject Modernism. While this rejection may be a luxury that some people will continue to permit themselves, it is one that no serious reader can afford to indulge. To deal properly with modern letters, we must face the work of Gertrude Stein head on, in both its intrinsic and its cultural significance. She is too large a fact to be ignored any longer.

Michael J. Hoffman. *Gertrude Stein* (Twayne, 1976). pp. 132–35

Gertrude Stein's erotic works are demonstrations of disguised autobiography. For many of the lyrical and revealing pieces in her early oeuvre, *Painted Lace* (1914); *Pink Melon Joy, Possessive Case*, and *No* (1915); *Lifting Belly* (1917); and *Not a Hole* and *A Sonatina Followed by Another* (1921), Stein invented a witty code that played upon the details of her sexual and domestic self. In such a private autobiographical style she can tell everything—and she does. The works also have inherent literary qualities which would make them worthy of notice, even if they did not show so much of the author's personality and habits. They speak in her private but authentic voice—warm, teasing, with exaggerated flights of fancy and whimsy that point to the more radical developments of her later years. The subject and style are, then, both testing grounds; in a sense, her life-style would become her art. Erotic, subconscious elements are allowed to interact with conscious craft to produce documents of the interior life. . . .

In her repetitions, mimicking, role playing as ''author,'' Stein has always tried on attitudes like hats in front of the bedroom mirror. She creates a magic theater, in which she plays actor and audience at once. Her attitudes surface and change, coalesce and fragment. If at first she seems to affirm her passion, later she questions and mocks, even denies the worth and quality of her relationship. Autobiographical themes of identity, self-justification, narcissism, and pride occupy her as well as moral questions of guilt, innocence, sin, security, risk, and certainty, and all of these are juxtaposed against frank homosexual statements and naive, totally positive images of her relationship. She finally seasons her text lightly with a straight-faced romantic vocabulary that might in other contexts pass for heterosexual. . . .

Since Stein is never far from humor in any of her pieces, her frankest are no exception. The joyfulness and humor of her treatment of sexual themes breaks down social and linguistic barriers. The shock of juxtaposition of her unusual style forces Stein, as an observer and participant, into new and unexpected perspectives. Pushed by her own temperament to solve certain technical problems of rhyme and diction, to make up new words, to join others together, to treat her lines as a virtuoso singer might, Stein charms by the sweetness of her melodies, her sophisticated naturalness, her complex simplicity, her careful cheerfulness, her precarious self-acceptance. These private writings constitute her interior theater; she is the hero of an appreciative audience and the villain when the boos begin; and she is finally the audience itself, alternately caught up in the hisses and applause.

Elizabeth Fifer. *Signs*. Spring, 1979, pp. 472–73, 483

[Gertrude Stein] . . . claimed that she wanted to do what she was doing so completely in *The Making of Americans* that she would lose it—lose, in other words, both the scientific and literary practices of the nineteenth century which relied and thrived upon a belief in reason, progress, and patriarchy. As with her characters in *The Making of Americans*, this loss was an important awakening. This release from the nineteenth century, from patriarchy and rationality, was a vital source of energy for her, to which her voluminous output over the extent of her career attests. Having lost the nineteenth century, she never expressed any regrets or nostalgia for it; instead she became an ardent advocate for the twentieth century. ''So then the twentieth century is a splendid period, not a reasonable one in the scientific sense, but splendid.''

For after all, the ''great author's'' task, as Stein saw it, was to completely live in and express the present. But just as this present is constantly changing, so too was Stein's way of rendering it. Having struggled so hard to release herself from the principle of identity, Stein continued to create difference, to create meaning and compose herself and others in new ways, to begin again and again. There is perhaps no other writer who was so thoroughly experimental, who created as many different styles over the course of his or her career, as Stein.

Thus, the ''continuous present'' is not simply her way of rendering it by means of duration and the present participle in *The Making of Americans*. This style emerged out of her difficulties and objections to narrative teleology, just as her use of the word ''being'' borrows from the vocabulary of classical philosophy, even if Stein finally disagreed with its classical definition as a transcendental and unchanging essence. It may be impossible, moreover, to render being without thinking of origin and death. Since one of the major functions of language, of normal syntax, is to predicate, the notion of origin and death may be built into the language. Stein, however, never gave up challenging that function of language, or challenging our need for, or use of, normal syntax. Thus, after completing *The Making of Americans* and her portraits, she creates her ''continuous present'' in *Tender Buttons* by taking in an origin in a poem in the ''Food'' section entitled ''Orange In'' and proceeding to ''ex-create'' (to excrete and create out of it) ''a no, a no since, a no since when, a no since when since, a no since. . . .'' A ''no since'' is not precisely nonsense, though it is obviously meant to sound like it.

By producing much more no since, no since when (no cause and effect, no originating event) Stein continued to analyze and challenge our old ways of thinking and to suggest different connections, to produce meaning in new ways. If the impetus for this analysis and challenge was initiated by her objection to both silence and to her position as a woman in patriarchy, in a way it continued by exploiting that very position. *Tender Buttons* for example, not only exploits and celebrates the realm of domesticity, but her title could suggest not only new and vulnerable connections, but parts of the woman's body as well—the nipples, the clitoris. More extensively, Stein's writing relies upon exploiting the very nature of woman's traditional position—her ''silence,'' her seeming

''nonsense.'' Stein's writing, despite her voluminous output produced by years of concentrated and careful talking and listening, was not seriously listened to very often, and remained incomprehensible to even some of her most ardent admirers. Her reputation grew as a sort of spectacle, as friend and patron of famous artists and subject of their portraits, as ''Mother Goose'' and the ''Sybil of Montparnasse.'' This, however, is changing, and with good reason. For what is at stake in learning how to attend to these silences, in learning how they function, is access to a shrewd analysis of the authority of patriarchal discourse, and an alternative to it.

> Janice L. Doane. *Silence and Narrative: The Early Novels of Gertrude Stein* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Pr., 1986), pp. 142–44

We usually think of Gertrude Stein's writings as falling into two broad categories: on the one hand, the public, accessible, ''transparent,'' and more or less straightforward mode of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* or of such well-known essays as ''Portraits and Repetition''; on the other, the opaque, private, experimental, ''difficult'' mode that ranges from *Tender Buttons* (1914) to *Mrs. Reynolds* (1941–42), and beyond. Whether we take the distinction to be diachronic (see Marianne DeKoven) or synchronic (see Ulla Dydo) is less important than that the ''experimental'' and the ''straight'' are placed in binary opposition. Obvious as this basic distinction may be, it doesn't get us very far. For is the device of repetition in, say Stein's portrait of Matisse, in fact duplicated in a work like ''Patriarchal Poetry''? And is the so-called plain style of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* equivalent to the plain style of *Wars I Have Seen?* What, moreover, about chronology: does Stein's work chart some sort of progress from an early experimentalism to a mature directness or is it the other way around? Or neither, given the fact that *Stanzas in Meditation*, one of Stein's most difficult and obscure works, dates precisely from the period in which she wrote ''Alice's'' autobiography?

My own view is that there are at least six basic variations on the famous Stein signature, which is to say, at least half a dozen permutations of the familiar model, ''Very fine is my valentine. Very fine and very mine,'' or ''Toasted susie is my ice-cream.'' To examine the larger spectrum of Stein's styles may help us to dispel two still popular myths about her work. First, that her fabled ''difficulty,'' like her rarer clarity, is all of a piece. And second, that her ''easy'' works avoid the stylization of her difficult ones and hence do not demand the same reading strategies. I want to suggest that, on the contrary, Stein's texts, whatever their date of composition or their hypothetical genre, must be read strenuously in keeping with her own notion that, whatever else a literary text may be, its central unit is always the sentence, that verbal unit which encompasses what Stein calls ''Resemble assemble reply.''. . .

[As noted,] Stein's oeuvre gives evidence of at least six different styles: (1) seemingly ''straight'' reportage (*Paris, France*); (2) autobiographical narrative as ironized by presenting a fictional narrator who tells the story, as in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*; (3) narrative-as-permutation of phrasal repetitions, each reappearance of the word or phrase giving us a new view, as in ''Miss Furr and Miss Skeene''; (4) ''abstract'' repetition of words and phonemes, as in *Before the Flowers of Friendship Faded Friendship Faded*, where the ''action'' is less a matter of incident than of verbal event; (5) the synecdochic riddling poetry of *Tender Buttons*, where a given title is the impetus for the creation of its cubist equivalent; and (6) sound poetry, as in ''Jean Cocteau.''

> Marjorie Perloff. ''Six Stein Styles in Search of a Reader.'' In Bruce Kellner, ed. *A Gertrude Stein Companion: Content with the Example* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Pr., 1988), pp. 96, 108

Stein's dramatic scripts anticipate the deconstructive terminology and methods of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, because she set out intentionally to disrupt all structures or systems that presuppose the existence of a stable, inherent, and infallible meaning (patriarchal structures particularly), including her own writing. The operas and plays exemplify writing that is conscious of its own provisional authority; that is, aware of its own contingency, of its being *sous rature* (under erasure), in Derrida's words. Stein and her practice in her operas and plays, therefore, come into the discussion as both illustrating (although antedating) [Julia] Kristeva's points and moving the discussion toward a consideration of the relation of the woman-writer-exile to feminism, the avant-garde, deconstruction, and signification. I propose that the capacity to interrogate the signifying practices of theater and other types of discourse establishes an analogy between feminism and the avant-garde in art as well as in science. Moreover, this capacity collapses categories central to the historiography of American drama and theater, such as ''the play of social relevance.''. . .

Stein's operas and plays reveal representation to be provisional, bereft of any stable axiological center. Like Foucault's analyses, they reveal that the objections raised by feminist critics against the myopic and distorting practice of male-centered critical theory apply to a universal characteristic of discourse. This truth, however, is perceptible only by the exiles, including the innovative thinkers and artists. Consequently, I concur with Catharine Stimpson, who does not subscribe wholeheartedly to feminist critical attempts to classify Stein's experimental writing from a point of view that ''profoundly genderizes the world,'' emphasizing dualism even in the process of rejecting male assumptions. The mainspring of experimental writing in general, and Stein's in particular, is the repudiation of more than just ''patriarchal, conventional speech.'' It questions all so-called ''stable and traditional dichotomies on which the mainstream constructs its norms and values, including gender dichotomy. Therefore, it embodies the recognition that it is time to provide another model for the depiction of reality.''

> Dinah Pladott. ''Gertrude Stein: Exile Feminism Avant-Garde in the American Theater.'' In June Schlueter, ed. *Modern American Drama: The Female Canon* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Farleigh Dickinson Univ. Pr., 1990), pp. 13, 124

Stein took pride in the orderliness of her work and paid attention to how it was typed, but she never regularized mechanically, for she did not value consistency for itself. *More Grammar for a Sentence* opens without indentation, breaking the rule we are taught about beginning a piece. Why? Because her opening is merely a sentence, not a paragraph. A reading of the manuscript of *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* shows Stein marking character transformation by a change in name from Doctor Faustus to Faust, depending on the dramatic action. She was interested in more than consistent nomenclature. . . .

Manuscripts sometimes show what print wipes out. The title *Five Words in a Line* simply describes itself. Stein must have noticed that about five of her handwritten words filled a line in her French notebooks. Print cannot reproduce this fact except in the title, and a title is not a line. Knowing the nature of a line, consider the variant, ''Four words in a line.'' The manuscript still *shows* five words in the line but says ''four words in a line.'' The tension between the two originates in a tiny visual observation, as a headnote can explain. . . .

The [Stein] plays raise innumerable questions, for ambiguities constantly appear in their formats. Stein plays do not look like regular plays. Even her titles do not follow a standard form but inconsistently add details in subtitles or parentheses. How is a director to come to conclusions about lists of characters, characterization, spoken words, and stage directions that are all parts of a continuous text? We know from *Four Saints in Three Acts* that stage directions are a part of the text of that play and can become spoken or sung lines, but exactly how this is to be done is not always clear. In *A The Listener*, names are grouped and given lines, but are they to be spoken in unison, singly, broken up, or is a director meant to be free? Stein described *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* accurately as a ''dramatic narrative.'' What is to be done with the narrative sections in performance? Contrary to the original plans of 1938, the libretto was not set to music. A contemporary score, which would carry a degree of authority, might show her intentions, but without it, we do not know whether Stein meant narrative sections to be set to music. *The Geographical History of America* includes subsections that are plays. It is perfectly possible to include plays in a narrative. But are such plays meant for performance? *Identify a Poem* is made of plays culled from the *Geographical History*; is it one play or several, and how do they relate? Is the line ''I wish to be a school'' in *Reread Another* a part of the performance? Experimenting with formatting plays, Stein never used the same method twice, perhaps because she was not sure about the conventions but perhaps also because she was exploring the play form. Clear setting of text on a page becomes a crucial way of opening it for reader or performer.

Ulla E. Dydo. Introduction. ''A Note on the Texts.'' *A Stein Reader* (Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Pr., 1993), pp. 7–8, 16

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STEINBECK, John (1902–1968)

He is primarily a masculine writer. . . . He has proved himself an original and highly individualistic force. His books provoke the masculine mind because of his fearless grappling with ideas and human passions as well as sacred taboos. The dry rot of gentility has never touched him and neither sex nor a woman's honor nor romantic love loom large as a man's serious problems in his view.

Edmund C. Richards. *North American Review*. June, 1937. p. 409

Steinbeck abhors and abjures the tag ''mystic'' which some critics have used in describing him. He is deeply concerned with the problem of Good and Evil, not in any conventional, moral, or philosophical sense but as phenomena in life and as animating principles in life. I have heard him use no word indicating the nature of his beliefs and intimations; but I should vaguely describe them as comprising a curious, very modern Manicheanism, derived perhaps in part from the Indians of the West Coast he has known since boyhood, from acute observation of cause and effect operating among primitive or untutored men, and from a frank facing of the evidences of his own hidden resources of mind and will.

Burton Rascoe. *English Journal*. March, 1938. pp. 213–4

Surely no one writes lovelier stories, yielding a purer pleasure. Here are tragedy and suffering and violence, to be sure, but with all that is sharp and harsh distilled to a golden honey, ripe and mellow. Even cruelty and murder grow somehow pastoral, idyllic, seen through this amber light, as one might watch the struggles of fish and water snakes in the depths of a mountain pool. Beyond question, Steinbeck has a magic to take the sting out of reality and yet leave it all there except the sting. Perhaps it is partly the carefulness of his art, with endless pains devising and arranging every detail until all fits perfectly and smooth and suave as polished

ivory. But probably it is more the enchantment of his style, of that liquid melody which flows on and on.

T.K. Whipple. *New Republic*. Oct. 12, 1938. p. 274

The variability of the form itself is probably an indication that Mr. Steinbeck has never yet found the right artistic medium for what he wants to say. But there is in his fiction a whole substratum which does remain constant and which gives it a certain basic seriousness that that of the mere performer does not have. What is constant in Mr. Steinbeck is his preoccupation with biology. He is a biologist in the literal sense that he interests himself in biological research. . . . Mr. Steinbeck almost always in his fiction is dealing either with the lower animals or with human beings so rudimentary that they are almost on the animal level; and the close relationship of the people with the animals equals even the zoophilia of D. H. Lawrence and David Garnett. . . . The chief subject of Mr. Steinbeck's fiction has been thus not those aspects of humanity in which it is most thoughtful, imaginative, constructive, but rather the processes of life itself.

Edmund Wilson. *New Republic*. Dec. 9, 1940. pp. 785–6

Handling complex material rather too easily, he has been marked by the popularizing gift—this indigenous American blessing which has, however, in the case of so many literary figures (a William Lyons Phelps, a Woollcott, a Louis Bromfield, as well as Steinbeck himself) become a blessing not altogether unmixed. In Steinbeck's work the false starts and turns, the thwarting problems of material and of the artist in the process of penetrating it, which usually mark the effort to portray truth, these are singularly lacking. If Steinbeck has reminded us of a Thomas Wolfe rejoicing in the mournful questioning of youth which wants no answers, he has never, like Wolfe, found himself disturbed by the final enigma of existence itself. For Steinbeck, Wolfe's famous stone is a stone, a leaf a leaf, and the door is sure to be found.

Maxwell Geismar. *Writers in The Crisis* (Houghton). 1942. p. 260

Much of Steinbeck's basic position is essentially religious, though not in any orthodox sense of the word. In his very love of nature he assumes an attitude characteristic of mystics. He is religious in that he contemplates man's relation to the cosmos and attempts, although perhaps fumblingly, to understand it. He is religious in that he attempts to transcend scientific explanations based upon sense experience. He is religious in that from time to time he explicitly attests the holiness of nature. . . . Nineteenth century fears that the development of naturalism meant the end of reverence, of worship, and of ''august sentiments'' are not warranted in the case of Steinbeck. . . . Steinbeck is, I think, the first significant novelist to begin to build a mystical religion upon a naturalistic basis.

Woodburn O. Ross. *College English*. May, 1949. pp. 436–7

Steinbeck illustrates vividly the kind of moral impasse to which the idea of relativity applied to the field of cultural investigation has brought us while at the same time widening the grounds of tolerance in a way we can only approve. Since what is good in terms of our culture may be a positive bad in another, we can safely apply the term ''good'' only to those motives which appear in common at the most primitive level. This is precisely what Steinbeck does. His paisanos in *Tortilla Flat*, Mack and the boys in *Cannery Row* and most of the characters in *The Wayward Bus* gain a certain vitality (which his less earthly characters do not have) as a result of their uninhibited response to organic drives; but this involves their almost complete emancipation from social responsibility and a disregard of everything which culture has added to human life.

Blake Nevius. *Pacific Spectator*. Summer, 1949. pp. 307–8

We have been right all along in suspecting that there are nearly two Steinbecks. There is the Steinbeck of *Grapes of Wrath*, of *In Dubious Battle*, and of a number of short stories, an angry man whose anger has put a real tension in his work; and there is also the Steinbeck who seems at times to be only a distant relative of the first one, the warm-hearted and amused author of *Tortilla Flat*, *Cannery Row*, *The Wayward Bus*, *The Pearl*, capable of short stretches of some really dazzling stuff but, over the length of the book, increasingly soft and often downright mushy. In other words, Steinbeck has achieved his success by working within the limitations which are perhaps self-imposed on him by his temperament. They tie him down to an exclusive preference for one type of character, which recurs with surprising consistency throughout his work, and to a maximum of two emotional attitudes, one compounded of some delight and much compassion toward the people he writes about, the other of compassion and wrath.

W.M. Frohock. *The Novel of Violence in America* (Southern Methodist). 1950. p. 147

Those who have written about Steinbeck have disagreed far more widely—and deeply—than they have about any other important writer of our time. . . . There is at least one notable characteristic of Steinbeck's writing on which otherwise conflicting critics agree: he is a man in whom the faculty of pity is strong and close to the surface. . . . It may turn out. . . that the essence of Steinbeck-man and Steinbeck-writer lies in these two quite uncomplicated truths: he earnestly wishes to make people understand one another and he is able, like Blake, to ''seek love in the pity of others' woe.''

Joseph Henry Jackson. Introduction to *The Short Novels of John Steinbeck* (Viking). 1953. pp. vii–viii

I think we have been wrong about Steinbeck. We have let his social indignation, his verisimilitude of language, his interest in marine biology lead us to judge him as a naturalist. Judged by the standards of logical consistency which naturalism demands, his best books are weak and his poorer books are hopeless. Steinbeck is more nearly a twentieth-century Dickens of California, a social critic with more sentiment than science or system, warm, human, inconsistent, occasionally angry but more often delighted with the joys that life on its lowest levels presents.

Hugh Holman. *New Republic*. June 7, 1954. p. 20

If Steinbeck's characters seldom achieve true novelistic reality, it is precisely because they are so little individualized, so little individuals and finally so little human. Their emotions always remain obscure and somewhat opaque, situated, it seems, under the diaphragm or around the solar plexus; it is hard to picture them, even in a distant time, reading a clear consciousness of themselves. . . . We may say that there is something false and suspicious, at any rate monstrous, in the very innocence of Steinbeck's heroes. . . . Because of this very amputation, Steinbeck's universe and the artistic domain in which he can succeed will be perforce very limited. . . . One cannot help wondering whether there are very great possibilities open to a ''novelist of animality,'' however perfect his art may be and however deep the bond of sympathy between his subject and himself.

Claude-Edmonde Magny in *Steinbeck and His Critics*, ed. F. W. Tedlock and C. V. Wicker (New Mexico). 1957. pp. 225–7

If, as Faulkner has rather perversely contended, a writer is to be measured these days by the extent and quality of his failure, Steinbeck must inevitably be reckoned among our most sizeable novelists. Steinbeck's failure is great, and it is incomparably more interesting and valuable than the successes of nine-tenths of his contemporaries. For where Steinbeck has failed is in an effort to engage, with the resources of fiction, the complex realities, the evolving motifs, the outlines and images of things, the very sense of life which make up the matter truly, if deeply and almost invisibly, available to an American novelist of his generation. I am not cheaply hinting that Steinbeck deserves, as the schoolboy saying goes, 'E' for effort. I am saying that because of his effort and even because of its failure he has made more visible for the rest of us the existence, indeed the precise character, of the realities and themes and images he has not finally succeeded in engaging. This is the kind of failure which is, in the end, almost indistinguishable from success, though we may not be sure where to catalogue it; whether, for example, under the heading of literature or of criticism, of art or of history.

R. W. B. Lewis in *The Young Rebel in American Literature*, ed. Carl Bode (Heinemann). 1959. p. 122

In spite of their philosophic shortcomings, the earlier novels are great novels. There is much that is good in them: accurate observation, clear and forceful writing, human sympathy, splendid insight. I am not sure that I would except *Cup of Gold* and *To a God Unknown* (the latter is really a remarkable book); I would certainly recommend them above anything that Steinbeck has written since *East of Eden* (and perhaps since *Cannery Row*). For in spite of beginner's faults they show a novelist on the way up. In all Steinbeck's novels written before 1940 myth has a dynamic function. Thoroughly integrated with the narrative theme, it serves to interpret reality and to explode romantic illusion; in later novels the myth is externally imposed on the material in an attempt to achieve the same results.

John Fontenrose. *John Steinbeck: An Introduction and Interpretation* (Barnes and Noble). 1963. p. 141

A few years ago it was popular to speculate on ''what had happened'' to Steinbeck, and some interesting answers were proposed: Steinbeck had lost touch with the country and with California, and the new urban and urbane life of New York was insufficient to fill his well; the death of Edward Ricketts (his close friend) had been such a personal blow to Steinbeck that his creative powers were affected; Steinbeck's ideology had changed, and the new Steinbeck had nothing to say; success had ''spoiled'' Steinbeck. However, even though some of these answers are still being given, an increasing number of critics seem to be turning to an answer given long ago by Steinbeck's detractors: that no decline in fact exists, that Steinbeck's talents, in his earlier period, were simply overrated by those who believed in the causes Steinbeck championed. . . . Once, much of the early work—certainly *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men*, and possibly *In Dubious Battle* and several short pieces—seemed certain of a place in American fiction; now, it seems necessary to restate their claim to attention. Some of these pieces—especially the ''worker'' novels—are still taught in the college classroom, but already (despite the work of such critics as Peter Lisca and Warren French) there is danger of their becoming known as period pieces; again (as when it first appeared) Steinbeck's work needs to be defended as art rather than sociology.

J. P. Hunter in *Essays in Modern American Literature*, ed. Richard E. Langford (Stetson). 1963. pp. 76–7

Steinbeck, to state the matter simply, is another writer who is a victim of his own success. Tragedy is not the word for it because Steinbeck still is a sensitive, skilful writer, and in his sixties he may yet surpass himself. What seems apparent in summing up the last decade of his career is that for some time there have been two Steinbecks. A comparison of his last two books, *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961) and *Travels with Charley in Search of America* (1962), makes this clear. One Steinbeck is the older version of the artist-social critic who wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*, and the other is the pot-boiling journalist who writes for the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Holiday*. Twenty-five years ago there was only Steinbeck the writer. This was a man so determined to have his books speak for themselves that he refused to supply publicity material for Alexander Woollcott's radio program. In the recent years of Steinbeck's decline the journalist-hostage-to-royalty-statements has produced most of the books issued over the Steinbeck signature.

James Woodress. *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Summer, 1964. p. 386

Looking over Steinbeck's career, one is forced to accept a paradox. His earlier novels, although based on an image of man almost purely biological and naturalistic, succeed in exploring and giving new significance to those aspects which in the hands of earlier naturalistic writers had resulted only in the degrading of man. Furthermore, this biological image of man created for itself techniques and aspects of form capable of conveying this image of man with esthetic power and conviction. On the other hand, when Steinbeck abandons his earlier viewpoint and attempts to project an image of man based on such more conventional notions as Christian morality and ethical integrity he cannot seem to say anything significant. And, deprived of pervasive naturalistic metaphor, the

formal qualities of that fiction become no better, and in some ways inferior, to those of many writers whose endowments are not nearly so formidable as his own.

Peter Lisca. *Modern Fiction Studies*. Spring, 1965. p. 10

As far as the central narrative about the education of the Joads is concerned, *The Grapes of Wrath* is not even truly what I have defined as a social novel. It stresses the achievement of individualism as much as the works of Thomas Wolfe and depicts the necessity of each individual's educating and reforming himself, rather than the causes of a national disaster. If the Joads had not been caught up in the events of a particular time and place that had profoundly affected Steinbeck and troubled his public, we might more easily recognize that their story belongs with Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and other masterpieces of the travail and triumph of the human spirit.

Warren G. French. *The Social Novel at the End of an Era* (Southern Illinois). 1966. p. 44

Yet even by the early 40s, certain recurring elements in his fiction had been identified and explored. A concern for common, human values, for warmth, love, and understanding, led to a view of Steinbeck the sentimentalist. The social relevance of some of his writing revealed him as a reformer. His tender evocation of the land itself, his celebration of its fertility and of his characters' concern for the bringing forth of life, implied an interest first called ''primitive'' and then seen as ''mythic.'' His capacity to make both his characters and his country come alive was traced to his increasing mastery of vernacular as a counter-weight to the sonorous, almost mystical, rhythms of his frequently incantatory language. Finally, his explicit discussion, in *The Sea of Cortez*, of what he called ''non-teleological thinking'' confirmed what for many had been the primary motif of his fictional writing, his conception of man as a biological mechanism, purposeless as well as animal-like.

Pascal Covici, Jr. in *The Thirties*, ed. Warren French (Everett Edwards). 1967. p. 48

The fiction of John Steinbeck has had a special appeal to the scientist, for of all the major American writers of fiction in this century, Steinbeck alone has had an abiding interest in natural science and brought that interest to his writing. The marine scientist, in particular, has claimed Steinbeck for his own because of the writer's life-long attachment to the seashore and its animals. He was, according to several professional scientists who knew him, ''a very good amateur biologist.'' Furthermore, if Steinbeck does have a claim on the attention of future generations of readers, much of that claim will be based on his concern with science, since he alone, among American novelists of his time, saw man as part of an ecological whole.

At the same time, however, Steinbeck's scientific outlook created many problems for him as an artist and contributed significantly to a generally negative response to much of his work by literary critics. His use of science put him in a position of isolation—often the critics did not understand what he was doing. Further, his use of ideas associated with science brought him into conflict with the novel form and its traditions, leading him into difficulties with characterization, plot, and point of view which he was only partially able to overcome. While the modern novel as a whole has tended to drift back toward the poetic and mythic, Steinbeck's fiction, particularly during those years when he was most heavily influenced by his marine biologist friend, Edward F. Ricketts, was often infused with large doses of naturalistic philosophy. Thus, his example not only provides some interest as an exception to the general flow of modern American fiction, it throws into sharp relief the central scientific-poetic duality of the novel form itself. . . .

Steinbeck's greatest successes—*In Dubious Battle, Tortilla Flat, Of Mice and Men, The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Cannery Row*—are all triumphs of perception, so that his adoption of the non-teleological approach must be said to have had its advantages as well as its disadvantages. It provided that edge of differentness that every writer must have if his work is to make its mark and be remembered.

John Steinbeck's exact place in the history of the American novel and his contribution to the evolution of the novel form are yet to be determined. Too much prejudice is still attached to his life and too much confusion still surrounds his goals and methods for any kind of objective assessment to be made at this time. Nevertheless, when that assessment is made, I think those who make it will be bound to acknowledge that frequent use of scientific attitudes and methods in his fiction which took him beyond the tradition of Naturalism-Realism into an achievement purely his own. Perhaps no such thing as a novelist who is also a scientist is possible—a writer who consistently brings a thoroughgoing scientific philosophy and methodology to the writing of fiction. But John Steinbeck went further in this direction than any other modern American writer of distinction has, and as far, perhaps, as any writer can. His attempts led to some failures and some rather extraordinary successes. His work, in its own way, was often as experimental and daring as that of any number of other modern writers whom we honor for having extended the presumed limits of artistic expression.

Jackson J. Benson. *Novel*. Spring, 1977, pp. 248, 264

Instrumental in shaping [Steinbeck's] fiction . . . is [his] moral vision, which has been variously described, interpreted, praised, and questioned through the years. Steinbeck's pervasive compassion for human beings appears most characteristically in portrayals of the most vulnerable: the naive, handicapped, and disenfranchised . . . who rarely find the promised land, at least not as they dream of it. . . .

The fundamentally affirmative quality of the vision, however, tends on the one hand to minimize complexities and shadings of modern life, particularly in ethical values or choices, and on the other hand, to reveal more of group characteristics and ideas than of an individual's heart and mind. This is in keeping with the strong idealistic and intuitive elements in the vision.

The literary craftsmanship and skill with which the themes, symbols, and moral vision are expressed would seem to identify most definitely Steinbeck's fiction and ensure his place with the best writers of his generation. With them he shared a ceaseless dedication to mastering the art of fiction. . . .

No less effectively at times than Fitzgerald and Hemingway, Steinbeck experimented with nuances of dialogue and prose style and with varieties of point of view; and in diversity of works if not

in richness he may have equalled Faulkner, creating not only stories and novels but also parables, plays, novel-plays, and nonfiction. . . .

Steinbeck's best works brilliantly expose mankind's ''grievous faults and failures,'' alert us to social and economic dangers, and remind us of our forgotten commitments and dreams. Steinbeck's strongest convictions and passions appear in his fundamental belief in humanity, in his expectation that man will endure, and that the creative forces of the human spirit will prevail.

Paul McCarthy. *John Steinbeck* (Ungar, 1980), pp. 141–43

California in the work of John Steinbeck looms large as the final barrier to the Great Migration, the archetypal American quest which began beyond the Atlantic and ended only at the edge of the Pacific. In Steinbeck's fiction, the American myth, with its Old Testament reverberations, and the Quest of the Arthurian legends with which he had a lifelong fascination become one impulse pushing toward the Garden of the West. Poised on the edge of the continent, at the end of what had for centuries seemed an endless unraveling of new world, Steinbeck undertakes a careful, painstaking examination of the land that constitutes this supposed Eden, of the land's effects on those who inhabit it, and of the myth that Americans have pursued across a continent. Involved in this examination is the most scrupulous study offered in American literature of the values imparted by the quest for an illusory Promised Land—what Annette Kolodny has aptly termed the ''stylized sequences of recurrent movements westward once the initial idyll has been . . . disrupted''—and of the religious impulses underlying that quest. Beginning with *To a God Unknown* in 1933, Steinbeck rejects the Eden myth and the formal religion upon which it is based, offering in its place an ideal of commitment to ''the whole thing,'' to ''all reality, known and unknowable'' (*The Log from the Sea of Cortez*). His study of man's religious impulses takes him, in *To a God Unknown*, to the very beginnings of Western religion as they are outlined in Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, and it leads him to reject repeatedly the American vision of California as Promised Land. . . .

Richard Slotkin has pointed out that ''within the body of European myths about America were two antagonistic pre-Columbian conceptions of the West: the primitive belief in the West as the land of sea, the sunset, death, darkness, passion, and dreams: and the counterbelief in the West as the Blessed Isles, the land of life's renewal, of rebirth, or reason and a higher reality.'' Within Steinbeck's fiction these two conceptions, or myths, find their embodiment in the western mountains and sea, realms of death, the unknown, the unconscious, and in the valleys—the lodging place of the American Eden. At the same time, this opposition within Steinbeck's symbolic topography evokes another, closely related, tension deeply embedded in the American heritage: what [Annette] Kolodny has recognized as the unresolvable conflict between America's yearning for a pastoral New World paradise and the increasing awareness throughout American history that violation and despoliation are an ''inevitable consequence of human inhabitation.'' Kolodny's perception of the opposed metaphorical male/female principles in this pastoral paradox (the land as mother/virgin, man as sheltered son and violator) casts valuable light on the opposition within Steinbeck's fiction of the intensely feminine and fecund eastern hills with the monolithic and masculine ''stone mountains'' of the West. In keeping with his rejection of the desired directionality of the American Dream, Steinbeck's landscape reverses the directionality of this metaphor: in his fiction, West represents not unending pastoral possibilities of land as mother/virgin-bride, but rather terminus and death. It is to the East that we must turn in Steinbeck's writing, to the feminine and sensual eastern hills, in order to discover a strong life force and the promise of life. In the tension between these opposed realms, Steinbeck's California fiction encapsulates the central historical tension within the American psyche, recognizes the irreconcilable quality of this tension, and offers a solution, a way out. Though he did not always achieve the artistic craftsmanship of *The Grapes of Wrath* or the clarity of the shorter novels (*In Dubious Battle*, *Tortilla Flat*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Cannery Row*), Steinbeck's entire body of fiction nonetheless represents a single-minded attempt to come to grips with the idea of America, an attempt comparable in its intensity and scope to that of such great predecessors as Melville, Hawthorne, and James.

Louis Owens. *John Steinbeck's Revision of America* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Pr., 1985), pp. 5, 7–8

Explanations vary, but the general consensus is that Steinbeck's best work was written before 1945.

In this respect Steinbeck does not differ from a number of his illustrious colleagues. Like Steinbeck in his early works, most of the significant writers of Steinbeck's generation wrote about object, fact, and person, and rejected abstractions of all kinds. They were wary of statements of theme, relying on the reader to abstract the meaning from the language and sequence of events. However, as they grew older and achieved recognition, their work changed. . . .

Mimi Reisel Gladstein. ''Straining for Profundity: Steinbeck's *Burning Bright* and *Sweet Thursday*.'' In Jackson J. Benson, ed. *The Short Novels of John Steinbeck* (Durham: Duke Univ. Pr., 1990), pp. 236–37

The inferiority of such works as *Burning Bright* and *Sweet Thursday* compared to their predecessors is in large part due to this movement from flesh to word, from objectivity to subjectivity. It is that movement and what I will call straining for profundity, that damage the later works. By ''straining for profundity'' I mean that in works such as *Burning Bright* and *Sweet Thursday* Steinbeck had either lost faith in himself or in the reader to the extent that, rather than allowing profundity to accrue from the particulars of situation and character, he was impelled to *tell* us what it all means.

The centrality of women to the action of *The Grapes of Wrath* is clear from the beginning. . . . For one thing, not only among the Joads, the main characters in this novel, but in all the families in crisis, the children look to the women for answers to their immediate survival: ''What are we going to do, Ma? Where are we going to go?'' the anonymous children ask. In male-dominated sex-gender systems, children depend on their mothers for parenting, and their stability rests mainly on the consistency and reliability with which women meet their needs. There is no question that in this model the woman/wife/mother makes the most important contributions to family stability. This chapter does not challenge Steinbeck's understanding of the value of women's roles in the existing social order. I attempt, however, to place his vision of those roles within the framework of an American consciousness that has long been

nourished by gender myths that associated women with nature, and thus primarily with the biological and cultural functions of motherhood and mothering, whereas men occupy a separate masculine space that affords them independence and autonomy. By adopting Robert Briffault's theory that matriarchy is a cohesive, nonsexually dominating system, Steinbeck assures us that the family can survive by returning to an earlier stage of collective, nonauthoritarian security while the larger society moves toward a socialistic economy. As he sees it, in times of grave familial or community need, a strong, wise woman like Ma Joad has the opportunity (or perhaps the duty) to assert herself and still maintain her role as selfless nurturer of the group. In this respect, she is leader and followers, wise and ignorant, and simple and complex, simultaneously. In short, she is the woman for all seasons, the nonintrusive, indestructible ''citadel'' on whom everyone else can depend.

Nellie Y. McKay. ''Happy[?]-Wife-and-Motherdom: The Portrayal of Ma Joad in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.'' In David Wyatt, ed. *New Essays on ''The Grapes of Wrath''* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1990), pp. 50–51

An interest in science sets [John Steinbeck] apart from other novelists of his generation. His fiction is rooted in a profound physical sense of the world, and he was attentive to its minutest operations. Under the influence of [the marine biologist] Ed Ricketts, he spent a great deal of time reading about and discussing scientific subjects and doing field research along the Monterey coastline. He believed passionately that humankind had to fit within the larger community of living things, conscious of its ''organismal'' place in the scheme of creation. Like Ricketts, he was careful not to assume that man was the measure of all things. On the other hand, he well understood the need to make a distinction between ''man'' and other creatures, an aspect of his world view which owed much to the traditions of humanism to which he was heir.

Steinbeck's work anticipates many current developments in thinking about the natural world, including bioregionalism and the ecology movement. He was in some ways a founding father of modern ecological thinking, viewing all parts of nature as a united whole and recognizing that the existence of any single part is intricately dependent upon all other parts. He did not want to study man outside his natural setting, understanding that even the smallest of human interactions are, on some level, governed by the individual's place within his or her physical context. The underlying drive in all of Steinbeck's fiction (and much of the nonfiction) was to locate patterns, or *Gestalten*, within apparently random circumstances.

Jay Parini. *John Steinbeck: A Biography* (London: Heinemann, 1994), pp. 1, 4–5, 7

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STEVENS, Wallace (1879–1955)

Stevens is precise among the shyest, most elusive of movements and shadings. He sees distinctly by way of delicacy the undulations of the pigeon sinking downward, the darkening of a calm under water-lights, the variations of the deep-blue tones in dusky landscapes. Quite as regularly as the colors themselves, it is their shades of difference that are registered by him. . . . Yet this fastidious, aristocratic nature possesses a blunt power of utterance, a concentrated violence, that is almost naturalistic. . . . But sensation alone is liberated to new intensity by Stevens's forms. Emotion, on the contrary, is curiously constrained by them within a small range of experience and small volume of expression. . . . Stevens's rhythms are chiefly secondary rhythms. Scarcely ever is his attack a direct and simple one. Generally, it is oblique, patronizing and twisted with self-intended mockery.

Paul Rosenfeld. *Men Seen* (Dial). 1925. pp. 152–5

Stevens is more than a dandy, a designer, and esthete. Each of these persons is a phase of a central person, each a mask in a masquerade at the heart of which philosophy and tragi-comedy view the world with serenity. If the earth is a tawdry sphere, America a tawdry land, the relation of human to human the most tawdry of all, Stevens refuses to despair. . . . Behind the veils there is always a meaning, though the poet employs supersubtlety for veiling the meaning as well. No one hates the obvious more. No one knows better than he that all these things have been felt and thought and known before. One can only improvise on material used over and over again and improvise for oneself alone.

Alfred Kreymborg. *Our Singing Strength* (Coward-McCann). 1929. pp. 501–2

(Stevens) give us, I believe, the most perfect laboratory of hedonism to be found in literature. He is not like those occasional poets of the Renaissance who appear in some measure to be influenced by a pagan philosophy, but who in reality take it up as a literary diversion at the same time that they are beneath the surface immovably Christian. Stevens is released from all the restraints of Christianity, and is encouraged by all the modern orthodoxy of

Romanticism: his hedonism is so fused with Romanticism as to be merely an elegant variation of that somewhat inelegant System of Thoughtlessness. His ideas have remained essentially unchanged for more than a quarter of a century, and on the whole they have been very clearly expressed, so that there is no real occasion to be in doubt as to their nature; and he began as a great poet, so that when we examine the effect of those ideas upon his work, we are examining something of very great importance.

Yvor Winters. *The Anatomy of Nonsense* (Alan Swallow). 1943. p. 119

Wallace Stevens lives in a world from which the elemental, the super-natural, and the mythical have been drained, and in which the deeper instincts of the human race are consequently starving. Somehow, by his own mind and senses, man must find sustenance, must make terms with air and earth, must establish some relation between himself and the world about him. . . . Whether expressed in the splendor and gaudiness of *Harmonium*, or in the more restrained, more abstract verse of his latest volume, the answer is the same. It lies in the cultivation of sensibility and in the affirmation of that sensibility through works of the human imagination. . . . He is not merely the poetic dandy that he has been called. His interest in the precisions of poetic technique arises from what we might call his dedication to the mission of the poet in the modern world.

Louis L. Martz in *Modern American Poetry*, ed. B. Rajan (Harcourt). 1952. pp. 94–6, 108

The liveliness of his interest, the depth of his concern, the intensity and subtlety of his connoisseurship are alike directed to what the imagination can make of our physical, factual pluriverse. ''Piece the world together, boys, but not with your hands,'' he enjoins us. And proceeds to show us the how of it. He considers a snow man, a mountain, two pears on a dish, a man reading, a woman looking at a vase of flowers, particulars peculiar to a certain occasion in Hartford, in Florida. Speaking of these, delighting in their suggestiveness, communicating his own private exhilaration, he presents the quality of a given hour, the genius of a place, the scene and its habitants, the climates and weathers of the soul. As a result, the reader enjoys the liberating experience of a traveler: he is allowed to make the exotic to some extent his own; he learns to clothe with becoming strangeness what is native and intimate. . . . It is all a matter of words. Occasionally it is a matter of non-words. Some of Stevens's most celebrated poems are composed in traditional metrics or in free cadences to which we have long been accustomed. They are saved from monotony by his fine ear and by the fact that his vocabulary is singularly personal. It moves between colloquial speech and what he calls the ''poet's gibberish,'' this last a dazzling medley of allusive, witty, half-foreign resonances and purely aural titillations.

Babette Deutsch. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Oct. 3, 1954. p. 3

In a sense . . . Wallace Stevens has spent a lifetime writing a single poem. What gives his best work its astonishing power and vitality is the way in which a fixed point of view, maturing naturally, eventually takes in more than a constantly shifting view could get at.

The point of view is romantic, ''almost the color of comedy''; but ''the strength at the center is serious.''

Samuel French Morse. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 3, 1954. p. 3

Opulence—it is the quality which most of us, I expect, ascribe before all others to the poetry of Wallace Stevens: profusion, exotic abundance, and luxuriance. We carry in our minds an image of poems which teem with rich, strange, somehow forbidden delights, omnifarious and prodigious. . . . Stevens is Elizabethan in his attitude towards language, high-handed in the extreme. . . . Stevens is the delighted craftsman whose delight is, in part, the access of gratification which comes upon the exercise of mastery. His pleasure is endless because it is part of his work, past and present; it is transmissable because we too, in reading his poems, share that mastery.

Hayden Carruth. *Poetry*. Feb., 1955. pp. 288–92

It is clearly too soon to estimate the value of Stevens's poems with justice, and nothing short of a detailed essay would make plausible what will surely seem personal and an over-estimation, my own conviction that the more than 500 pages of Stevens's *Collected Poems* makes a book as important as *Leaves of Grass*. The very charm and beauty of Stevens's language mislead the reader often: delighted with the tick and tock, the heigh ho of Hoon and Jocundus, ''jubilating,'' ''in the presto of the morning,'' the reader often missed the basic substance, the joy that for the moment at least the poet has grasped ''the veritable *ding an sich* at last'': for Stevens was essentially a philosophical poet, the rarest of all kinds, seeking always ''in a good light for those who know the ultimate Plato,'' to see and possess ''the nothing that is not there, and the nothing that is.''

The primary philosophical motive leads to a major limitation—the meditative mode is a solitude which excludes the dramatic and narrative poet's human character and personality. But it also leads to a great access: Stevens, studying Picasso and Matisse, made the art of poetry visual in a way it had never been before, and made him the first poet to be influenced, very often in the same poem, by Shakespeare, Cubism, the Symbolist movement, and modern philosophy since Kant.

Delmore Schwartz. *New Republic*. Aug. 22, 1955. pp. 21–2

Technically Stevens was not, as were many of his contemporaries, an experimentalist. He did not write staid classroom lines that can be regularly scanned, but they lie, for all that, in regular units of 2s and 3s and 4s quite according to custom. There is an intrinsic order which they follow with a satisfying fidelity which makes them indefinably musical, often strongly stressed by Stevens, his signature.

His is not strictly speaking a colloquial diction, but there are especially in his later works no inversions of phase, ''for poetic effect,'' no deformities of the normal syntax.

William Carlos Williams. *Poetry*. Jan., 1956. pp. 235–6

One of the fascinating questions about the life and work of Wallace Stevens concerns the connection between his successful business career, as vice-president of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, and his poems. At first glance it seems incredible that these particular poems . . . so full of references to painting and sculpture and music, to faraway places and figures of fantasy, should have been written by a man who spent his days dealing with the intricacies of insurance law. But a closer reading of his work suggests that there is no essential paradox after all. Stevens is a man completely at home in his environment; he lives in modern city society without any impulse to overturn or to escape. He is, indeed, the singer of suburban life.

Partly because some of his well-known early poems picture the tropical luxuriance of Cuba or Florida or Mexico, relatively little attention has been paid to the fact that he habitually refers to the New England landscape in writing about the nature of reality. Still less noticed is the fact that he describes the kind of natural world enjoyed by the man who lives in a town or suburb—who has a lawn on which crickets sing and rabbits sit at dusk, a hedge of lilac and dogwood, a park nearby where he can watch the swans on the lake, and a summer vacation when he can go abroad or get to the New Hampshire hills or the coast of Maine.

Elizabeth Green. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 11, 1956. p. 11

In *Harmonium*, published in the Scott Fitzgerald decade, Stevens moves in a highly sensuous atmosphere of fine pictures, good food, exquisite taste and luxury cruises. In the later poems, though the writing is as studiously oblique as ever, the sensuousness has largely disappeared, and the reader accustomed only to *Harmonium* may feel that Stevens' inspiration has failed him, or that he is attracted by themes outside his capacity, or that the impact of war and other ironies of the autumnal vision has shut him up in an uncommunicative didacticism. Such a view of Stevens is of course superficial, but the critical issue it raises is a genuine one. . . . When we meet a poet who has so much rhetorical skill, and yet lays so much emphasis on novelty and freshness of approach, the skill acquires a quality of courage: a courage that is without compromise in a world full of cheap rhetoric, yet uses none of the ready-made mixes of rhetoric in a world full of compromise. . . . It was persistence that transformed the tropical lushness of *Harmonium* into the austere clairvoyance of *The Rock*, the luxurious demon into the necessary angel, and so rounded out a vision of major scope and intensity.

Northrop Frye. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1957. pp. 368–70

The predominant quality of Stevens' verse—with its extensive vocabulary, metrical dexterity, and relationship of sense and sound—is eloquence. He is the master of two styles, one epigrammatic, eccentric, teasing; the other exalted and rhetorical in the manner of Wordsworth, in which his words have the ring of authority and command. His language is written partly for its own sake, although his rhetoric always suits the mood in which it is spoken. Besides the wide variety of sound effects and his use of colors as symbols, color and sound are used also in a more general way to evoke a mood or provide a sensual background for the flights of thought. . . . Stevens' acute sense of color and sound becomes part of a larger awareness of the sensual as a principle, a force, and of physical life as the setting in which thought and imagination thrive.

Robert Pack. *Wallace Stevens: An Approach to His Poetry and Thought* (Rutgers). 1958. pp. 4–5

. . . Stevens' quest for an ultimate humanism (for that surely is what it is) leads him toward a curious dehumanization. It urges (or forces) him in the end to purify his poems until they are hardly the poems of a man who lives, loves, hates, creates, dies. Rather, they are the poems of a man who does nothing but make poems; who ''abstracts'' living, loving, hating, creating, dying from his poems, in the hope that what will be left will be not so much poetry but the possibility of poetry. What saves the poems for humanity is the fact that such dehumanization develops in the process of searching for the ground of the very things of which they must be bereft if the search is to be carried on—their humanity. Thus the poems are incomplete, not finished but finishing, not perfected but perfecting.

Roy Harvey Pearce. *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton). 1961, 1965. p. 413

Accepting the condition of uncertainty and solitariness as unavoidable once man has freed himself from the gods, Stevens poses as his ultimate question not, what shall we do about the crisis of belief, but rather, how shall we live with and perhaps beyond it? And one reason for thinking of Stevens as a comic poet is that he makes this choice of questions.

How shall we live with and then perhaps beyond the crisis of belief?—it is to confront this question that Stevens keeps returning to the theme of reality and imagination. Not merely because he is interested in epistemological forays as such—though he is; nor because he is fascinated with the creative process—though that too; but because his main concern is with discovering and, through his poetry, *enacting* the possibilities for human self-renewal in an impersonal and recalcitrant age.

Irving Howe. *A World More Attractive* (Horizon). 1963. p. 163

One way of putting it is that Stevens, who ceased to believe in the God of Christianity and found that there was nothing left to believe, filled the void with his own inventions. Another way of putting it is that when Stevens ceased to be a Christian he lost all the valid terminologies of action and knew that he could recover them—if at all—only by playing a part in a fictive drama of his own devising. Sometimes this was a comic part, as in ''A High-Toned Old Christian Woman,'' sometimes it was the philosopher-king, sometimes Prospero—he had a large repertoire. The greatest role he would devise for himself would be God; the most splendid drama, a new creation; and he would play all the parts himself. His play would be called ''The Supreme Fiction.''

Denis Donoghue. *Connoisseurs of Chaos* (Macmillan). 1965. pp. 200–1

I take it as the common experience in reading Stevens that one first finds a surface incredibly bizarre and seemingly impenetrable. Later, in the wish for simple coherence, the critic is tempted to look

at Stevens' figures as an assemblage of counters in a rather abstract, doctrinal scheme. However, when the serious critic examines these figures more closely, he is aware of aspects of them which consistently undercut, in a conscious, ironic fashion, the doctrinal substance which other aspects of them are intended to bear. . . . [Stevens] passionately believed in the power of the imagination to make at least a momentary order out of chaos by means of metaphor, but he saw clearly that such an irrational order can have only transitory value. The imagination is seen as both God and fake. Thus his vital figures, almost by reflex action, have two aspects—one of value, one of nothingness.

Eugene Paul Nassar. *Wallace Stevens: An Anatomy of Figuration* (Pennsylvania). 1965. pp. 13, 19

Stevens' later mode begins in the thirties in long poems like ''Owl's Clover'' and ''The Man with the Blue Guitar,'' seeking to establish poetry at the center of experience and man at the center of reality; continues in the forties with ambitious examinations of the supreme possibilities of poetry in realizing the human aspiration to know beyond his world and yet to live within its vulgarity and violence; and concludes in the quiet eloquence of an almost purely contemplative poetry that illustrates how introspective exiles not only exist in the mind but create themselves there. . . . From the poems in the late thirties, which aspired to express the ''idea of man'' as creator of reality, to the very last ones, which seek not the surface but the very ''rock'' of reality, the direction of Stevens' poetry is inward.

Joseph N. Riddel. *The Clairvoyant Eye* (Louisiana State). 1965. p. 48

No one reads Stevens daily for a decade, as I have, without remarking upon the constant irony of diction and syntax as well as the more obvious irony of Stevens' personae and of his imagery. But a qualified assertion remains an assertion. . . . There are passages in ''An Ordinary Evening in New Haven'' that are the purest Shelley, and Stevens is at his most Romantic when he appears to be most wintry, when he qualifies and hastens the most. . . . We need to thrust aside utterly, once and for all, the critical absurdities of the Age of Eliot, before we can see again how complex the Romantics were in their passionate ironies, and see fully how overwhelmingly Stevens and [Hart] Crane are their inheritors and continuators, as they are of Emerson and Whitman as well.

Harold Bloom. *Massachusetts Review*. Winter, 1966. p. 37

I am not suggesting that Stevens' poems exist as poems because he dabbled, tongue in cheek, with philosophical ideas. He does often toy, but that is a manner of expression, a method, and not the heart of expression itself. And he does start with philosophical ideas, but that is his donnée, the discursive matter he uses as the vehicle for the expression of his lyric impulses. For Stevens was not the kind of poet who could directly pour out his emotions; he needed doctrinal counters to which he could anchor the fundamental anguish and hopes of the self that could not be satisfied by its own theory of poetry. . . .

The philosophical perspective is often the poem's perspective; irony is the poet's dominant tonality. But the two together do not add up to the poem, to the ''gaiety of language'' which is a linguistic rendering of the turmoil within the poetic mind that contemplates its own uncertain place in a century in which it has said ''no'' to the aesthetics and philosophy of romanticism. . . .

When Stevens was writing well, when he was able to get into his poems all the poetry of his subject as well as the bare doctrinal bones of that subject, his work issues not in statement but in uneasiness of tone and the ambiguity of attitude of a man who had deeply irresolvable feelings about himself, the imagination, and the world he had to live in. And, I might add, his poems truly become poems as they are vitalized by his skepticism and irony.

Frank Lentricchia. *The Gaiety of Language* (California). 1968. pp. 149–50

Though Wallace Stevens' idiosyncratic vocabulary and imagery have been blamed and praised ever since his first poems appeared in print, his equally odd syntax has been less noticed. It shares nevertheless in his act of the mind, and differentiates him noticeably from other poets, whether the Romantic poets whose dependent heir he is, or his contemporaries in England and America. Abstractly considered, Stevens' ''themes'' are familiar, not to say banal, ones, but his poetry reproduces them in a new form, chiefly in an elaborately mannered movement of thought, which changes very little in the course of the *Collected Poems*. It is, needless to say, expressive of several moods, but three large manners can be distinguished, all of them present in Stevens' long poems. The first, in an ecstatic idiom, proclaims, sometimes defiantly, the pure good of being, the worth of vigorous life, the earthy marriages, the secular joys of ploughing on Sunday. The second, despairingly and in tones of apathy, anatomizes a stale and withered life. The third and most characteristic form is a tentative, diffident, and reluctant search for a middle route between ecstasy and apathy, a sensible ecstasy of pauvred color, to use Stevens' own phrase.

Helen Vendler. *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* (Harvard). 1969. p. 13

Stevens's later poems both affirm and realize the belief that to the extent that we as men participate in genuine poetry of exploration and discovery, to the extent that we overcome the limits of time and space and sensations and organisms, we rise to a oneness with the supreme fiction of creativity and knowledge. Then, and only then, may we say, ''God and the imagination are one. . . .'' Then and only then can we sense the joy of the line ''How high that highest candle lights the dark.'' One surmounts his life as a finite ego, as an object in space and time, only at rare, unpredictable moments. But then at least his life is truly poetic and he is at one with the poetic act of making. Poetry based upon such an awareness cannot be described as egocentric.

Merle E. Brown. *Wallace Stevens: The Poem as Act* (Wayne State). 1970. p. 34

The affinities between Stevens and the symbolists are so large and pervasive that it is altogether understandable why some have considered him a symbolist poet. Clearly, the convergences of

Stevens and the symbolists in their poetic theories are very great. Stevens declares in his ''Adagia,'' ''The poet is the priest of the invisible.'' Baudelaire would not have put it differently. On the other hand, just as there are important differences in poetic art between all of the principal French symbolist poets, so are there striking differences between them and Stevens. The isolated juxtaposition of the poetics and poetry of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, of Valéry with that of Stevens is not nearly as revealing as the examination of Stevens' mind and art against the background of the whole symbolist tradition. His embodiment of that tradition heightens rather than diminishes his originality. In our consideration of Stevens against the background of French symbolism, we must not lose sight of the fact that he was an intensely American poet.

Haskell M. Block in *The Shaken Realist*, ed. Melvin J. Friedman and John B. Vickery (Louisiana State). 1970. pp. 212–3

I think the most immediate phrase is that which [Stevens] quotes from his poem called ''Asides on the Oboe''—''Thou art not August, unless I make thee so.'' For at the root of this, as we see at once, is the typically Stevensian notion that nature—the seasons, summer, August—is not real without human intervention, without the poetic power of giving to nature names and significant associations. But having said that, one must go on and make it absolutely clear that Stevens never ceased to be aware of nature's other reality—the brute, alien reality which is essentially inimical or at least indifferent to man. I know of no other poet who in his work was so constantly alive to what I would characterize as poetry's supreme task—to delineate the life of man in relation to nature unconsoled by any supernatural idea. So that if ''poetry'' can be said to be the subject matter of all Stevens's poems, that subject matter is in fact all that makes a mysterious nature meaningful—or unmeaningful—to humankind.

Roy Fuller. *Owls and Artificers* (Deutsch). 1971. p. 72

[Stevens'] language of the abstract was not discovered late in life but was an essential counterpart to the more celebrated sights and sounds of *Harmonium*. Stevens was always both an ascetic and a hedonist.

The modern distrust of abstract ideas in poetry has caused a number of critics (Randall Jarrell, for example) to feel that Stevens' poems become less effective as his intellect becomes dominant, but I tend to agree with I. A. Richards that ''too much importance has always been attached to the sensory qualities of images.'' Many of Stevens' abstractions, such as ''nothingness,'' are charged with emotion and truly grounded in the particulars of the world, and a late poem like ''The Course of a Particular'' is filled with images, and articulates an emotional problem that possibly could not be dealt with using images of an acutely sensory nature. Rather than moving away from emotions, the poems may enlarge the range and quality of emotions, as well as our means of expressing them.

Edward Kessler. *Images of Wallace Stevens* (Rutgers). 1972. p. 7

The style of the middle and later periods is a subtle modification of the early manner. The change becomes apparent when a poem or a passage from *Harmonium* is compared to a passage of similar import from one of the later books. Although the later poems retain much of ''the gaiety of language'' and ''the quirks of imagery'' of the poems of his first book, the change of style for a reader fresh from *Harmonium* is apparent in both rhetoric and feeling. The later style has an air of explicit theorizing, even though theory is tentative and undeveloped. Undoubtedly the element of thought is brought more to the fore, and the tone is somewhat deepened, perhaps because it is the tone of a man intent on his illusions, aware that no matter where he looks he is looking inward, and yet considering how far outward the mind seems to reach, ''outsensing distances.''

Frank Doggett. *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*. Jan., 1973. p. 124

For Stevens, the romantic meant the new, the vital, and above all the imaginative, and he looked to the British romantics for both illustration and sanction of his own values, even while jealously distancing himself from them to guard his own independence. He confronted romantic problems like the dualism between subject and object or the contradiction between life and art, and accepted key aspects of their aesthetic like the importance of imagination and the kind of defense of poetry to which imagination led. Yet in his drive to develop his own art and personality Stevens saw the necessity of renewing romanticism and adapting it to modern times. He forswore mere repetition. Joyously welcoming the creative violence which Eliot feared, he redefined imagination to emphasize its ferocity while reformulating the cyclic quality of romantic experience. His poetry incorporated new strategies of image, syntax, and presentation of consciousness designed to create provisional rather than final fictions. In the process, he both extended romantic literary theory and reshaped romantic mental action into the poems of our climate. His profound relation to romanticism has been mentioned so much and systematically explored so little that its extensive investigation can open central approaches to both his aesthetic and his poetry. . . .

His startling appearance as a romantic in midst of the warring schools of Marxism or New Criticism in the thirties identifies the mature Stevens as his own man, able on occasion sharply to dissociate himself from his romantic forebears even while fighting through to a modernist art that continued and transformed their own.

George Bornstein. *Transformations of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens* (Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1976), pp. 163–64

Forged in the crucible of Stevens' discontent with language is the solution to the linguistic dilemma: the ''supreme fiction.'' To understand this important and persistent notion, we must first erase from our personal notions of ''reality'' anything but what we can point to or stomp on; we must, for example, try to think of the word ''table'', if spoken in a room which contains no table, as a *symbol*, because the word ''table'' has elicited something in our *minds*. As long as a word does not point to an actual object, we are in the realm of the mind: memory, imagination, anticipation, abstraction. And these are traits that set us apart from even the most intelligent animals; we are set apart by virtue of our preoccupation with

symbols, ''with images and names that *mean* things, rather than with things themselves,'' as Suzanne Langer says. . . .

For us, poetry is the closest approximation to Stevens' ''supreme fiction.'' For Stevens, I think it was an imagined poet, a potential figure that he sketches again and again: ''The Noble Rider'' and ''The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet.'' Stevens' definitions of poetry are often bound up with delineations of this potential poet whose imagination Stevens thinks of as a kind of total faculty: imagination informed by reason. And as a merely ''potential'' figure, he seems to be a *collective* potential: less Stevens' than ours. Stevens is clear about his role: he helps people ''to live their lives.'' This is, of course, all ''make believe''—a supreme fiction. But, as I.A. Richards has wonderfully said, the poet's job is more than make-believe; it is making people believe. And what we find in Stevens' poetry, unique in the age of Eliot and Pound, is that make-believe in ourselves; we read Stevens to find the world robed in imagination's sequined harmonies, and to find ourselves, robing and disrobing the world around us.

Susan B. Weston. *Wallace Stevens: An Introduction to His Poetry* (Columbia Univ. Pr., 1977), pp. 5–6

To understand how diversity of diction in Stevens is dramatically motivated, we need to think of it in terms not of static patterns of contrast but of temporal unfolding. From this point of view, diversity is change, perceived as we read a number of poems or a single long poem—as we pass, say, from ''The Idea of Order at Key West'' to ''The American Sublime'' in the *Collected Poems*, or from ''Chocorua to Its Neighbor'' to ''So-and-So Reclining on Her Couch'' in *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, or from section IV to section V of ''The Bouquet,'' or from section III to section IV of ''Esthetique du Mal.'' Within such lines as ''addicts/To blotches, angular anonymids/Gulping for shape'' or ''alive with an enigma's flittering,'' change is kaleidoscopic, the hand of the poet all but deceiving the eye. We may be aware of a pleasant strangeness in the proportion, without knowing exactly wherein that strangeness consists. . . .

Just as we see the Stevens of the *Collected Poems* turning from one metaphor, one analogy, one symbolic setting, person, or event to another, so also we see him turning from one expressive means to another, trying out now this kind of language, now that, now this kind of word, now that, in the incessant attempt to express what remains perpetually ''beyond the rhetorician's touch.'' And in this same restlessness of mind, these same rejections not only of the past but also of the present which has already become the past, we can see a motive for his ransacking of the lexicon, his borrowings from foreign languages, his creation of new metaphorical meanings, the coinages and innovative formations that mark his diction. ''It is never the thing but the version of the thing''; Stevens's poetic language is diverse, versatile, full of *divertissements*, in the root sense of all those words, knowing that ''what it has is what is not'' and turning from it ''as morning throws off stale moonlight and shabby sleep.'' These turnings or shiftings at the verbal level are analogous to the changes with which the poems are concerned in their subject matter and descriptive detail. . . .

Marie Borroff. *Language and the Poet: Verbal Artistry in Frost, Stevens, and Moore* (Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1979), pp. 72–73

In the centennial year of Wallace Stevens' birth, Stevens' art still seems fresh and elusive, but less precious and less eccentrically modern than it did more than fifty years ago when his first book appeared. Since then, the rich and memorable language of *Harmonium* has been augmented by the equally memorable, if more abstract, phrases in the later books. It is now assumed that the imagery derives from eternal or universal human situations and reverberates with echoes of philosophic implications. The poetry still imparts its special quality of withheld thoughtfulness. The effect of its subtly qualified, seemingly abstruse statements is to suggest that the poet may be amused, even skeptical of their never quite formulated profundities. Along with this implicit questioning, each poem's discourse contemplates in exacting language the shadings of its idea. ''Words are thoughts,'' Stevens says, and with this concept of language his poetry, as so many critics have noted, involves a movement of thought, an activity of mind. This activity is stimulated by intimations beyond the plain statements in poems. The poems exert the fascination of what may be recognized as theory and what may be realized at the same time as the poet's intuition of a person in a time, a season, and a place, a setting.

Stevens has taken his place among the other cherished figures of our literature as part of an inheritance rather than as the isolated phenomenon he seemed to be in earlier days. Many critics now regard him as one of the major figures in the romantic tradition, and his relationship to Wordsworth and Keats . . . will be easily accepted by most of his readers. Yet he has not receded into a general background of romantic poetry. He is still the individualist, the master of his own style. Stevens' individuality attracts and overcomes parody. And because he is inimitable, his influence has been minimal for a poet of his monumental reputation.

Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel. Preface to *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, ed. Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel (Princeton Univ. Pr., 1980), pp. x–xii

Unlike Eliot, Pound, or Williams, Stevens was never passionately concerned with the quest for community. In the *Pisan Cantos*, the union of the weakest—the social bond forged by imprisonment—does foster wisdom. But for Pound, wisdom entails affection and humility, personal virtues, ultimately social virtues, which Stevens never believed essential to the hero. Of the four Moderns considered here, Stevens was the only one who never thought in terms of an ideal society or a utopia, but only in terms of *a* hero, *the* hero, the solitary mind. Only the Stevens hero stands alone and apart. Stevens posed questions of culture, certainly, but in epistemological, not political or social, terms. And it is perhaps as a result of this that we find his work, so elegant, so perfect, so deeply satisfying, yet so often chilly and curiously removed from the problems of twentieth century industrial society. . . . But until *The Rock*, Stevens refused to accept an image of a man in the world as hero. In mixing the proportions between reality and the imagination, Stevens continually erred on the side of the imagination. Over and over he repeated the mistake he had cautioned against in ''Examination of the Hero in a Time of War''—that the hero ''be not conceived, being real.''

His images of the hero were fabrications, projections, extrapolations, abstractions beyond man, preposterous shimmers or muscular giants, bare constructions in language that we certainly (to use Stevens' terms) do not recognize, much less realize, respond to, or accept. His art was conceptual; the idea, and the problem it

reflected, often had more interest than the thing itself; the illustration of the definition was often less convincing than the formulation of the definition. For the irresistible transcendental pull was there. But this is not an Emersonian transcendentalism. It is the courage, hubris, and naivete of a radical humanism. . . .

What is the meditative mode for Stevens? The act of the mind? The act of the imagination? Speaking generally, it would seem reasonable to call all of Stevens' poems meditative, for it was Stevens' temperament to revolve an idea in his mind, to pursue it, muse on it. But . . . we must distinguish between *imagination* and *meditation*.

Kathleen Woodward. ''*At Last, the Real Distinguished Thing'': The Late Poems of Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Williams* (Ohio State Univ. Pr., 1980), pp. 100–101, 118

If [Wallace] Stevens is sometimes a difficult poet, it is not because his allusions are irretrievably obscure or his thought ineffably complex. The primary cause of difficulty in Stevens is his habit of continual, often unconscious, self-reference. His poetry appears hermetic because it does not fully recognize and because it does not make sufficient allowance for the simple fact that the reader is not likely to be as automatically familiar with the poet's themes and procedures as the poet himself. The reader has to find access into an ongoing process which is self-aware and self-reflexive. . . .

Congruences provide one kind of insight; differences another. Individual texts which ''resist the intelligence'' yield meaning in a process of retrieval. If one grants an obvious and fundamental premise: ''that the aim of criticism is . . . to understand, or to grasp the meaning of a work of art,'' then ''Where meaning is thought of as something to be discovered, criticism is retrieval: and criticism is revision where meaning is thought of as something to be constructed and imposed.'' In the present study I attempt to create a context of awareness of ''The Whole of Harmonium'' as a ''cognitive stock that permits the critic to perceive the meaning of the work.'' To perceive meanings in this manner is, to a degree, to construct meanings. But the process of construction claims validity for itself in being grounded in the activity of retrieval. The retrieval of meaning seeks to remove difficulties, not conjure them away. Whenever Stevens's poems appear difficult, with patience, discrimination, and rigor of analysis and collation, the difficulties can be resolved. No apology should be expected if the interpretations require as much pertinacity from the reader as do the poems themselves.

Rajeev S. Patke. *The Long Poems of Wallace Stevens: An Interpretative Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1985), pp. 1, 5–7

As a meditative poet, Stevens wrote three types of poems: lyrics of nothingness, lyrics of meditative perception (suchness), and long poems of endlessly elaborating cloud transformations of change, within and without. In addition, his detachment colored all his work and provided a context for his celebrations of imagination and metaphor. It is remarkable how seldom he was ironic (rather than witty, dry, detached, sardonic), how seldom he was bitter or sarcastic. The long poems reveal most clearly his sensibility; the mediations seem to be the finest examples of a form that through fragmentation expresses neither despair, nor nihilism, nor black humor, but a genuinely comic approach to consciousness. This comic spirit is generated by one's ability to commit oneself wholeheartedly to a phrase, a moment of perception, an idea—to live in that moment—without becoming ''attached'' to it in a Buddhist sense. This is accomplished by immersing oneself in experience while maintaining detachment.

This comic spirit demands an emphasis on transition, on the act of arriving rather than on what one arrives at, and these formal properties demand, in turn, a different kind of listening on the part of the audience: future listening, a moment by moment expectation of change. By such listening, which highlights the unpredictability of the piece, we realize the author's intended effect: we take delight in the variety and transience of thought and feeling, we participate in being as a verb, not a noun. ''The feeling of Liadoff was changed. It is / The instant of the change that was the poem.''

The meditative experiences and points of view of which Stevens wrote did not harm anyone; certainly they did not annihilate him, and they provide us with a model of artistic perception quite different from imaginative models. A moral reaction to the meditative Stevens would best be based on one's view of solipsism; that is, meditative experience occurs outside of historical time and social space. The object and the perceiving consciousness are united as it were, to the exclusion of all else. That in itself is not an immoral condition, but it is fair to ask the relation of that experience to social consciousness and historical time. One answer has already been suggested: the long poems, by taking the Buddhist view that our ordinary life has always been composed of meaningless fragments, and by taking a comic view of that fragmentation, offer an alternative to angst or despair in a modern world. Such poems do not, of course, offer the slightest political or social solutions to our problems—only the advice that solutions are illusory, and that one can know this without going mad; indeed, one can know this and be quite civilized. The beauty with which that position is held in Stevens's poetry constitutes an argument by itself. . . .

William W. Bevis. *Mind of Winter: Wallace Stevens, Meditation, and Literature* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Pr., 1988), pp. 297–99

Stevens seems to have recognized within himself an inherent solitariness, a detachment from other human beings, and longed to overcome this with a true marriage. Perhaps he realized that his mystical yearnings were too intense to be ''normal,'' and poetry became a dialectical struggle to reattain centrality. But full centrality was beyond him, the idea of marriage was only a symbolic one, a marriage of self and the world, not a literal relationship with any human being. In ''The World as Meditation,'' he attempts to leap over the gap between subject and object and achieve by identification love what he failed to achieve by object love. (In a sense his mysticism was too literal, his marriage, and his idea of marriage, too symbolic.) In the guise of Penelope he could wait indefinitely for a consummation devoutly to be avoided, resigning himself to incompleteness, and ''Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near.'' Certainly there is a delicate sense of intimacy there but it is all inside the mind.

This is a poet *inherently* lonely, not lonely because of specific and later losses or rejections imposed by the ''undulations'' of time. (''Let the place of the solitaires / Be a place of perpetual undulation.'') The loneliness is intrinsic to Stevens's identity: a

sense of separateness that goes back to the roots of life, to the original separation (''apart from''?) the maternal wellspring. Only one sort of marriage can correct, or seem to correct, that fundamental ''solitude of the self'': the marriage of the self with the source of its being. And that is not really marriage at all but symbiosis, a blotting out of all distinct identity, a return to a time when ''differences lost / Difference and were one . . ./ A zone of time without the ticking of clocks.''. . .

Like the Romantic he still remained, Stevens's quest for the ultimate object is so powerful that it often refuses to remain in touch with the specific set of compromises that we term the poem. Whatever may be the favorable or unfavorable balance of forces in each work, the totality of Stevens's output does not add up to the sought-for reality. It does not in fact add up to a real world. It is precisely *un*true that Stevens's corpus, as [Milton] Bates concludes. ''explores all ramifications of the self, ranging freely between the sphere of the *paysan* and that of the visionary.'' It is only the sphere of the visionary that Stevens explores. Contemplation is his subject and only those aspects of reality that feed a narrowly focused if tough-minded contemplation. Family, social (whether narrowly or widely conceived), and political realities are mainly excluded, and even when these are represented in the poetry, it need hardly be emphasized, they are generally denuded of their actuality and abundance.

Stevens's spirituality is not the by-product of a rich and complex life, the crown of human existence, but rather its narrow, single purpose, to the exclusion of all else. His greatness lies in his ability to make us believe that he has encompassed everything that matters in the moment of vision, and that the moment of vision is the moment of truth. But the contradictory and obscure hints of the poetry and prose make it likely that we have been misled. We have been persuaded by the same fantasy, the same need for fusion with the ideal object, and by the poet's mastery of language.

C. Roland Wagner. ''Wallace Stevens: The Concealed Self.'' *Wall Street Journal*. Fall, 1988, pp. 94–97

Stevens's poetry largely tries to ignore or deny all aspects of life that center on or are inseparable from interpersonal relations. I doubt that this can be said of any great poet before Stevens. Certainly some poets have implied that the interpersonal is not the realm of ultimate value, but this is not the same as trying to ignore or deny interpersonal life altogether. . . .

The Stevens—I speak here and throughout this study not of the biographer's man but of the poet-in-the-poems, the man figured by the poetry—who emerges in the following chapters is a man with a profound concern for the intactness of his self, in conjunction with a profound aversion to the demands of interpersonal relations, demands which in his view threaten to puncture that intactness. Especially pressing appeals from other persons—for example, from persons in pain or from attractive women—provoke especially elaborate defenses, ranging from apparent obliviousness to explicit denial to sublimation. Stevens earnestly seeks to imply and believe that the solitary self has an ample, good life within reach, and that the absence of distinct other persons is not only undetrimental to this good life but essentially unimportant, if not indeed, beneficial.

Fortunately, he is troubled enough by the reality of interpersonal needs and obligations to permit tantalizing glimpses of this reality in his poetry, and these glimpses are crucial in making us realize what he *doesn't* show us most of the time. This is what saves my study from being only a prosecution of omissions and evasions. Each of the first three chapters establishes Stevens's failure to deal with something—the suffering of others, the humanity of desirable women, the sheer presence of others—and then highlights the exceptional places where he does try to deal with the interpersonal, or at least to acknowledge the problem of dealing with it.

Meanwhile, there is a spirit of benevolence toward, and concern for, the reader in Stevens's poetry, and this spirit may be felt as the transformed expression of displaced energies which would, in a less solitary poet, have produced meditations on the failures and successes and mysteries of interpersonal relations. This proposition is the subject of my long final chapter. It is true, I sadly suppose, that the act of writing a poem is inherently a displacement of concern away from actual present persons in the writer's life; but I will argue that to say this does not relieve Stevens of his very lonely specialness.

Mark Halliday. *Stevens and the Interpersonal* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Pr., 1991), pp. 3, 5–7

Stevens seldom wavered in his will to create a sublime worthy of the American idealist climate which had nourished Whitman and Emerson, which had elevated himself and his family. If the sublime lingers on as a '''cash-value' idea'' or *supreme fiction* like ''wealth,'' Christian ''truth,'' ''power,'' and ''health,'' it worked for Stevens as overbelief generating its own consequences: the production of an American sublime that is *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, the *grand poem* willing no less than grandeur on a representative scale.

Stevens's lifelong question, ''How does one stand to behold the [American] sublime?'' suggests the deeper uncertainty of any decreative stance. His is a disenchanted modernist viewpoint which recognizes that the sublime has existed in the past but realizes that American society is fast rendering the natural sublime unavailable to ordinary experience, except as a poetic diction infused with nostalgia. We confront this in the pious ''ideality'' of Santayana, who still spoke—on his deathbed amid the fading Catholic grandeur of Rome—''loftiest syllables among loftiest things'' (*[The] Palm [at the End of the Mind]*, 373). (A summary vision, the poem seems to be a prerecognition of Stevens's deathbed conversion in 1955 from postnuclear nothingness to the sublimity of God and Rome.). . .

However strong was Stevens's will to purify poetry of its illusions or hyperboles of autonomy, ''He could neither live with the sublime,'' as Harold Bloom has remarked, ''nor live without it and remain a poet.'' Beyond negative dialectics or rhetorical deconstruction, the American sublime was installed as ''empty spirit/In vacant space.'' Stevens had to evacuate prior claims to grandeur, even if the ''nothingness'' that emerged was the poem itself rising up from the ''void'' or ''bunk'' of history as icon of the self's grandeur.

If the sublime took on ''cash-value'' as an American idea with self-empowering consequences, Wallace Stevens had realized both the grandeur and risks of these language-claims. However fitfully, he had renewed Emerson's native conviction that ''we are all of us very near to sublimity.'' The ''nothingness'' his austere, late poems like ''The Rock'' evoke is more than a neo-Nietzschean trope of semiotic emptiness or nature's fleetingness: it is the ground

of American nature poetry after the infinitude of Hiroshima has threatened claims of ''the supreme fiction'' and the modernist poet (like Santayana) has turned back from Cold War agonistics to the Church of Rome for postnihilist direction.

> Rob Wilson. *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Pr., 1991), pp. 171, 194–95

The distinction I am making between sexism *in* Stevens and sexism *and* Stevens is not meant to deny the fact that there are sexist innuendoes in Stevens's poetry. Certain sexist assumptions, including the one that denigrating women is humorous, account for a number of his poems, including ''To a High-Toned Old Christian Woman.'' It is not merely institutionalized religion Stevens is mocking there. ''To a High-Toned Old Christian Man'' does not seem nearly as funny, and I speculate that trying to make ''*widowers* wince'' would not be perceived as being especially witty either. Similar attitudes also inform ''Lulu Gay'' and ''Lulu Morose,'' although the first of these, in which Lulu tells the eunuchs what the barbarians have done to her, is immediately more problematic. It is probably right to the point that the males who have been castrated have lost their ''voice'' as well—they cannot talk (but only ululate). Certainly, we find an archetypal expression of sexism in that poem with the wonderful title, ''Good Man. Bad Woman.'' In fact, such basic sexist attitudes—even if we are charitable and conclude that Stevens intends to poke fun at such attitudes—govern a number of his poems. For example, there is no character in all of Stevens's poetry with quite the same sense of grotesque humor as the woman of ''The Emperor of Ice-Cream''—dead, lying on a deal dresser with her ''horny feet'' protruding.

When we find instances of such blatant sexism *in* Stevens, it is useful to remember the cultural context within which he produced his work. When Stevens began publishing in earnest, the women's suffrage movement was well under way and frequently was the subject of essays in the magazines in which Stevens was publishing (and which he was presumably reading himself). Many of these essays are surprisingly sophisticated. . . . Yet even in such magazines as the *Trend*, which seems far more sympathetic to the women's movement than most because it kept a running tally on which states were supporting women's suffrage, we find some rather appallingly sexist essays, among them ''The Land of the Hen-Pecked'' or ''Rule the Women or They'll Rule You.'' The title of this last one sounds much like Stevens in ''Good Man. Bad Woman'' when he says, ''She can corrode your world, if never you.''. . .

Nevertheless, when we do find sexist assumptions or innuendoes in Stevens's work, we face a. . .dilemma in frequently being unable to determine precisely how much Stevens is reflecting cultural biases or just how much he is revising such biases through ironic reflections. Yet despite this very complicated context, it is possible to see the ways in which Stevens's perhaps conscious, perhaps unconscious ''phallocentric'' perspective manifests itself in the dynamics, even the problematics of his poetry. That problematic may not be the conflict between imagination and reality (as has been traditionally assumed), nor even the battle between competing theories of language, but rather a problematic between feminine and masculine expression—between the male authorial voice that strives to achieve significance and the culturally delineated suppression or silencing of feminine voice that struggles, nonetheless, precisely for expression in Stevens's works. Put differently, in Stevens's work we can see the ways in which our culturally inscribed notions of male/author/authority and our culturally inscribed repression of the rest of our human voice (even within ourselves, and within Stevens as well) frustrate the attempt at poetic expression itself, while informing what expressions are achieved in the individual poems.

> Jacqueline Vaught Brogan. '''Sister of the Minotaur': Sexism and Stevens.'' In Melita Schaum, ed. *Wallace Stevens and the Feminine* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Pr., 1993), pp. 4–7, 10

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STICKNEY, Trumbull (1874–1904)

Promise rather than fulfillment is the mark of this work as a whole, for it reveals Stickney as still groping for a distinctive manner rather than as having reached a definitive expression of his powers. Reviewing his first volume, we were compelled to speak of its ''jarring staccato,'' its ''far-fetched epithets,'' and ''its endeavor to be impressive at the cost of clear thinking and verbal restraint.'' The ''Later Lyrics'' now first printed show us the process of fermentation still at work, but serve also to deepen our sense of the poet's possibilities.

> William M. Payne. *Dial*. Feb. 16, 1906. p. 125

He hovered—not only in the last year of his life, but always in the twelve years of writing of which we have record—constantly on the perilous balance where it is determined whether a man write sound verse or dilute his emotions in words. It is a question, often, of unconscious interest or purpose. Should he lose his emotions in words which express them adequately only because they are conventionally accepted as expressive, or should he use words to create emotions?. . . He wanted to do difficult things in the establishment of precise feelings and the presentation of sharp images. Often—and this is the search that makes long reading worth the labor—he succeeded in single lines and phrases. Even in the worst

poems, the most lavishly tenuous and repetitious, the most poetic and most licensed, where *his* becomes '*s*, and *kissed*, is *kisséd*, there are sudden, desperately illuminating phrases.

R.P. Blackmur. *Poetry*. June, 1933. pp. 159, 162

This son [George Cabot Lodge] of Senator Lodge had studied in Berlin and Paris, where he met Trumbull Stickney, who, born in Switzerland and brought up largely in Europe, later returned to Harvard as instructor in Greek. Both felt that they were Greeks born out of time. Stickney, whom Henry Adams knew in Paris, and who studied six years at the Sorbonne, was the first Anglo-Saxon who was ever awarded a doctorate in literature there. He wrote a Greek play, *Prometheus Pyrphoros*, and most of his work was distinguished, although it resounded, like Lodge's, with Victorian echoes. What, in the eighteen-nineties, could odes to Greek liberty mean except that one knew Walter Savage Landor? . . . [T]here was something autumnal and sad in Lodge's note and Trumbull Stickney's, too little native hue, too much pale thought.

Van Wyck Brooks. *New England: Indian Summer* (Dutton). 1950. pp. 457–8. [1940]

A scholar of the utmost brilliance, he took the first *doctorat ès letters* ever given to an American or Englishman by the University of Paris; and he was described after his death by a Harvard friend as ''the most cultivated man I have ever known.'' Stickney's *Dramatic Verses* was published in 1902. A posthumous volume, *Poems* (1905), edited by George Cabot Lodge, Moody, and others shows a poetic quality firmly his own. The melancholy of ''Mnemosyne,'' with its subtle variation of refrain, is unforgettable; other stanzas, single lines, and complete poems must remain in the memory of the sensitive reader. Stickney broke with no traditions; but his quality is impressively pure, and, both as a man and an artist, he is the one American of his day who belongs to the world of finely tempered human beings with which, in the same period, Henry James in his last great phase was occupying himself.

Louise Bogan. *Achievement in American Poetry, 1900–1950* (Henry Regnery). 1951. pp. 31–2

This spareness and accuracy of language that carries a charge of meaning is quite unlike the decadent romanticism which reigned at the end of the century. . . . And this was what Stickney could do that was really authentic and impressive. You find often, as with Walter Savage Landor, that he will end a blurred or feeble poem with a clear minting of syllables. . . . What is behind the best poetry of Stickney is a conflict between the desired and the possible which is felt in a more serious way than the usual wistfulness of the nineties. It is evidently one of those New England conflicts such as we get in the heroes of Henry James: the struggle of the appetite to live in resistance to cramped habits and a dead tradition. . . . And thus many of Stickney's most effective images—the soldered eyelids, the slanted door, the girl who closes her window, the desolated country of childhood—represent the poet as excluded from some source of vitality or beauty.

Edmund Wilson. *The Bit between My Teeth* (Farrar). 1965. pp. 111–13. [NR. Oct. 14, 1940]

Joseph Trumbull Stickney came from an expatriate New England family. Born in Geneva, he grew up, like someone in a Henry James story, in London, Italy and Switzerland. He studied classics (and perhaps became romantically involved with an older woman) at Harvard (graduating six years before Wallace Stevens) and returned to France to study at the Sorbonne, where in 1903 he took the first D. ès L., in Greek, ever awarded an American. The final year of his life was spent teaching Greek at Harvard and in suffering the physical pain of a brain tumor, from which he died the following spring. His Harvard was that of Santayana; his émigré Europe that of his friends Henry Adams and Bernard Berenson. His poems, all sonnets and strophic lyrics full of a romantic Hellenism and a formal sense sometimes stronger than their rhetoric, needed half-apologizing-for under the strictures of modernism. With the current rediscovery of American romantic-verse tradition, his work appears more central than ever. . . . The interest is not in style, but in the grasp of the visionary moment.

John Hollander. *New York Times Book Section*. July 16, 1972. p. 5

[Stickney] intended to be no meek sacrifice on the altars of Art and Learning, but managed to deal straightforwardly and memorably with his dilemma in about a dozen poems that show him to be at least as ''black'' a poet as Robinson and Frost. . . .

Stickney's powers of expression are so fine, so robust and versatile, that one feels immediate pleasure in his technique. Such long landscape poems as ''Lakeward,'' ''In Ampezzo,'' and ''At Sainte-Marguerite'' are charming virtuoso performances. His dramatic pieces on the Emperor Julian and Cellini are far from negligible. Much of [*The Poems of Trumbull Stickney*] is as disembodiedly vigorous, or energetically angelic, as one could well imagine—wonderful in its way. It seems an American talent of any age, this use of the most elegantly particularized language to create an agreeable roseate haze of ineffable unmeaning—the tenuous and diffident made as tangible as roast beef. Whitman could achieve the same effect by rhapsodizing ten pages of an almanac. Stickney's excuse for this kind of thing is the presence of large quantities of original or reworked juvenilia. Only during his last few years did he write the poems that easily dominate the rest.

R.W. Flint. *Parnassus*. Fall–Winter, 1973. pp. 37–8

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STONE, Robert (1937–)

SCHROEDER: A question that comes to my mind involves the role of journalism in Vietnam as well as the role of fiction. You went over as a journalist, and you ended up really contributing more significantly by your fiction. What do you see as the benefits of journalism as compared to fiction and vice versa?

ROBERT STONE: I myself prefer fiction. The best fiction usually endures better than even the best journalism or even

historiography. (It is true, for example, that what we know of the Napoleonic wars is what we know from Tolstoy.) I think that the function which fiction performs is that it refines reality and refracts it into something like a dream. It serves to mythologize in a positive way a series of facts which of themselves have no particular meaning. It is a deliberate, shameless, and open effort to make events mean something. When you use the mode of fiction, you are manipulating events deliberately in order to impose a meaning. Reality as a phenomenology, as a primary process, does not have any meaning. So you create a kind of artificial phenomenology. You create artificial events. You make up things that didn't happen about people that never were in order to render in a way more truly events that did happen to people who really did exist. Fiction performs the same function for history or for life that dreaming performs for the mind.

Eric James Schroeder. *Modern Fiction Studies*. Spring, 1984, pp. 154–55

With its unrelieved philosophical naturalism and its straight forward narrative conventions, *Dog Soldiers* demonstrates that social realism can still be as powerfully engaging as in the works of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, to which Stone's text frequently alludes.

Its images are particularly striking: American helicopters gunning down elephants from the air over Vietnam; a John Waynelike antihero toting an M16 and a bag of heroin across a stark California desert landscape; a weak, failed writer caught in a bombing raid in Cambodia, lured into drug trafficking, and burned over an electric stove by two thugs in San Francisco. Stone's descriptions frequently match the vividness of [Stephen] Crane, [Frank] Norris, Dreiser, and Mailer. Although the war in Vietnam is present mainly as a backdrop for action which takes place mostly in an American setting, the war serves as a cause, symbol, and expression of the failed idealism and utopianism transformed into pessimism, despair, and self-destructive violence, and drug addiction—the American dream become nightmare.

Dog Soldiers evokes this American historical context as a force that determines the fate of the characters. The three protagonists symbolize different ethical approaches to life that are linked through imagery to idealism on the one hand and to rugged individualism, or pragmatism, on the other.

Emory Elliott. *Arizona Quarterly*. Autumn, 1987, p. 201

No novel of Robert Stone's is without its figure of evil, and the rake in *Outerbridge Reach* is a documentary filmmaker, Ron Strickland. Strickland leads us back into familiar Stone territory: a cynic without a shred of conscience or moral vitality, vaguely left wing but fundamentally contemptuous of everything including politics. A ruthless womanizer, he seduces Browne's [Owen Browne of *Dog Soldiers*] wife Anne after her husband sails away. . . . And it's not long before she's sunk to his amoral level. . . .

It is a terrifying story, studded with literary allusions to Shakespeare, Melville, Hart Crane, even [William Ernest] Henley's ''Invictus,'' all of which Stone knits with seamless dexterity into his text. The metaphoric intensity of Stone's descriptions of the sea is at times almost unbearable, though at other moments the symbol-devising hand of the author lies too heavily and obtrusively on the page: the Outerbridge Reach of the title, for instance, a derelict salvage yard off Staten Island, filled with rotting tugboats and marine debris, which Browne comes upon early in the story. When the rats start scurrying all too predictably at the edge of this ''phantom disaster,'' it's hard not to feel at such moments that Stone is parodying himself. . . .

Stone has nonetheless defined the limits of his expectations. As he confided in a recent interview, ''I see this enormous empty space from which God has absented himself. I see this enormous mystery that I can't penetrate, a mystery before which I'm silent and uncomprehending. This. . .is where I find myself in my sixth decade.''

Pearl K. Bell. *Partisan Review*. Spring, 1992, pp. 294–95

It is hard to see the story [*Outerbridge Reach*] except—begging Mr. Stone's pardon—as a form of allegory. Owen Browne is a straight-arrow, boy-scout type graduated to junior executive. As seen through Robert Stone's contemptuous disillusioned eyes, he is soft yet pretends to be macho; he is the victim of his own commercial rhetoric; he is righteously patriotic; he is sentimentally neuter, and he is just aware enough of his own weakness to be dissatisfied with it. . . . Through the story of Owen Browne the disgrace and disintegration of the Vietnam War toll like funeral bells. . . .

The story is well paced, the dialogue crisp and forceful, the interweaving of illusions with maritime reveries deftly managed. On a couple of occasions—when Strickland in an early chapter either fascinates or rapes a girl named Rachel just after he meets her, and in later passages when Browne first starts to hallucinate—one isn't altogether sure how far to take the implications. This reader took it that Strickland was a straight sadist and Browne was an ill-assembled and weak-sinewed man. As for mythical or comic overtones, like those attached to the Ancient Mariner and the White Whale, this reader didn't recognize, or feel the need of, any. *Outerbridge Reach* is a fine book without transcendental overtones. It's a strong, unhappy novel about a stage in the life of our times—nearly a quarter century ago—that ought to have something less sullen and despairing to say for itself, but apparently isn't going to.

Robert M. Adams. *New York Review of Books*. March 26, 1992, pp. 29–32

One way of placing Robert Stone's fiction among the larger continuities of American literature is to position him in a line with those American authors like Crane, Hemingway, Dos Passos, and Mailer who believe that, at bottom, life is war. In a contribution to a 1985 conference on the relationship between the writer and American society, Stone—using the phrase from the Civil War—wrote of the first time that he went ''to see the elephant'': when he saw combat. This occurred about fourteen months into his three-year hitch in the navy, in October 1956, when he was a radioman on the *U.S.S. Chilton*.

One can only begin to understand how it was that this nineteen-year-old had arrived at both this appraisal of humankind's murderous quotient and the strategy he might employ to deal with it by confronting the relatively sensational facts of Stone's early years: a wholly absent father; a schizophrenic mother; and a three-and-a-half-year residency, between his sixth and tenth years, at St. Ann's in Manhattan, a school that the only character Stone ever created

whose experience closely followed his own recalled as ''a physical and moral chaos of all against all.'' . . .

The violent injustice that Stone suffered as a child shaped his writing only inasmuch as it was supported by a great deal else that he saw or read or heard about as an adult. . . . In 1981 Stone approvingly quoted a character in a V.S. Naipaul novel who said, ''It isn't that there isn't any right and wrong, it's that there isn't any right.'' Then he continued: ''It is extremely difficult to discover where right is. It keeps disappearing—You think you see it and you've got it in your hands, and then you don't—that old ambivalence comes down and you're compromised. It's just that the ambiguities of life are infinite.''

Robert Solotaroff. *Robert Stone* (New York: Twayne, 1994), pp. ix–xi

Rage is the wind that blows bitterly through the seven powerful short stories written by Robert Stone from 1969 to the present and collected here in a volume named for the longest piece, ''Bear and His Daughter.''. . .

In each of these stories—except for the slightly too surreal paranoid ''*Porque No Tiene, Porque la Falta*,'' about a wild visit to a Mexican volcano—Mr. Stone sustains a consistent level of tension more successfully than he has in any of his novels. . . . On the evidence of *Bear and His Daughters*, one would have to say that his dark vision is better suited to short fiction [than to his five novels].

Christopher Lehmann-Haupt. *New York Times Book Section*. April 3, 1997, p. C19

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STRAND, Mark (1934–)

In Mark Strand's best poems [in *Sleeping with One Eye Open*] a fuzzy, peripheral, half-realized terror seems about to take shape. The tension is that if the terror materializes, becomes specific, the poet will be run out of the house of himself. Mr. Strand's poems are, therefore, new houses to dwell safely in. He builds them methodically, so they have strong textural walls with no loose joints or cracks. The tone is often flat and prosy, as if to diminish and control threatening feeling. The effect though is the opposite, to release feeling. Many of these poems are admirable houses.

A.R. Ammons. *Poetry*. June, 1966, pp. 196–97

Mark Strand's *Reasons for Moving* is a marvelously haunted book. It is not clear whether the speaker of these poems is haunted by what he is, what he is not, or the obscurity of events. But this uncertainty is precisely the dramatic effect the poet seeks, and in most of the poems he achieves it. The theme that pervades the book (which throughout is unified in tone) is given in an introductory quotation from Jorge Luis Borges: '' . . . while we sleep here, we are awake elsewhere and . . . in this way every man is two men.'' But Strand does not work this theme in the romantic vein. He neither longs nostalgically for past experience, wishing to recapture a lost pastoral self, nor imagines an amorous and adventurous ideal to dote upon in reverie or dream. Rather, his *Doppelgänger*, his other self, shares his own fate: neither one of them is complete, neither is sure of his own identity. From this ghostly confrontation a beautiful pathos arises. For example, in ''The Accident'' the victim and the train engineer are, in effect, the same character. . . .

If what a man does and what happens to him are, in some hidden sense, the same, then compassion and pity are also the same, and so too are responsibility and innocence. Thus the speaker and his other self are as much the victims of what they do as they are victims of what happens to them, and their identities have no fixed center. If anything is certain, it is merely the sense of ''being swept away.'' . . .

Any poetic success runs the danger of becoming mannered, and occasionally the spookiness of these poems, their mysteriousness, seems perfunctory. At those times (as in ''The Man in the Tree'' or ''The Whole Story'') I would like to shake Strand by the lapels and say, ''But experience is not that uncertain; events are more definable than you say; tell us who you are, where you have come from.'' Nevertheless, at its best Strand's art is sure. He has found his own voice and, for this book, his own theme: the elusiveness of the self and of reality. There are over a dozen poems in this small collection that are deeply moving.

Robert Pack. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 24, 1968, pp. 39–40

His fourth and finest book [*The Story of Our Lives*]—finest because the focus is so clear, the resonance of an already ''placed'' voice so unmixed and yet so unforced—begins with a sustained lament for the poet's father, for his father's life rather than for his death. Death is not to be mourned in Strand's thematics, of course, it is only to be identified. . . .

Strand insists, or broods, which is his brand of insistence, on the importance, for individual survival . . . , of rejecting that extremity of consciousness which process, which historical existence, cannot endure or transcend. . . .

Which is why Strand writes his lament not in verse but in the very dialect of negation, in prose, the one linguistic medium out to eliminate itself, to use itself up in the irrecoverable rhythms of speech rather than in the angelic (or ecstatic) measures of repetition and return. No recurrence, no refrain here, but the horror of knowing too much, of suffering more than is to be borne. . . .

What the book ends with . . . is that beginning: three long poems about utterance as enema, ''The Story of Our Lives,'' ''Inside the Story,'' and—crucially—''The Untelling.'' Evident in the titles alone is that concern with process, movement and trajectory which in even the most fragmentary lyric is felt to underlie the impulse to speak at all; even the wildest cry has a cause, even the weirdest lament has an effect. . . .

''The Untelling'' is as vivid and unforgettable as a Bergman film, a Hopper landscape, with all the despairing notification those

great names imply—but that is not what is new in Strand's book. What is new is his recovery of what might have seemed, to the merely finger-tapping critic, a lost art: the prosody of erasure. These astonishing poems remind us that originally the word *verse* and the word *prose* come from the same old Latin word, *provertere*, which in its prose past-participle means to *have moved on*, but which in its poetic infinitive means to *roll around again*.

Richard Howard. *Ohio Review*. Spring, 1974, pp. 104, 106–7

Mark Strand is an outstanding poet. He *stands out* because, falling as he does between that generation of major American poets alive today (Ammons, Ashbery, Howard, Kinnell, Merrill, Merwin, Rich, Wright) and the younger poets who are just now gaining public recognition (Gluck, Hass, and Simic, to name three), he is both a transitional figure and a representative one. He is representative in his poetic influences (Stevens, Roethke and Bishop) and his translation of Latin American poets like Alberti; yet his first four books set him apart from the previous generation by their ''plain-style'' manner and from the following generation by their unmistakable authority of voice.

Strand, then, is unique in the context of contemporary American poetry. More importantly, the gradual development of his work, both in style and scope, signifies a major talent. In this age of abundance, if not over-abundance, when many poets seem to publish anything and everything they put down on paper, Strand is publishing ''books of poems,'' not collections. . . .

The Story of Our Lives is not only one of the most original books of poetry to appear in years, but one of the most important, that is to say potentially influential ones as well. Out of all the pseudo-narrative and neo-surrealist poetry of the past few years, which Strand's work superficially resembles, only *The Story of Our Lives* is radical enough to make a significant contribution to a new American poetics, radical because radically simple in its use of syntax and metaphor, those two fundamental principles of American verse. . . . Although there is not the subtle lyricism of the earlier work, work influenced by the elegant lines of Richard Wilbur, nonetheless *The Story of Our Lives* is highly musical verse. . . .

Strand's real poetic debt . . . is to neither Whitman nor Eliot. The austerity of music and image, together with the mastery of tone, reminds one finally of the Stevens of ''The Snowman''. . . .

Robert Miklitsch. *Literary Review*. Spring, 1978, pp. 357–59

The deep underlying motive of Mark Strand's poetry is the solipsism or loneliness of the individual imagination, isolated from the world of memory, objects, the body, other people. This seems to me to be true even though his most poignant poems include ''The Marriage,'' which fulfills its title, and ''The Prediction,'' which in a courtly, painful way extends itself toward the young womanhood of someone long dead.

And though *The Late Hour*, Strand's new book, ends with a naming of people dear to the poet, they are hailed, characteristically, across a darkness that is not only intervening, but an infusing, negative quality. . . .

When Strand's striking imagination and compact, atmospheric style first came to notice ten or twelve years ago, the work gave a marvelous sense of freshness: discovery by the writer, and discovery by the reader. The poems also seemed enigmatic, in a way that was partly attractive, but also raised questions by leaving the shape and provenance of a poem uncertain, or merely vague. And somehow the style that was austere and tense in ''Keeping Things Whole'' and ''My Life by Somebody Else'' could turn—seemingly with only a little variation—into something too aureate and easy.

But in the best poems, the sense of freshness holds up: re-reading (in *Darker* and *Reasons for Moving*) poems first encountered in magazines, their virtues appear again. The poet has ideas, not merely sensations, and the ideas are animated by emotional conviction. The dreamlike natural landscape and the sense of the human body are distinctive. And all of this is held together by what can be called Strand's remarkable sense of the poetic: the voice is alone, and what it is alone with is poetry itself. Strand's accomplishment can be described by saying that his work exemplifies a central contemporary idea of poetry—or rather, of the poetic. And the limits of his accomplishment may be suggested by saying that his work is not of the kind that surprises the reader, by forcing us to revise our idea of what poetry is.

Certainly, that Strand's work depends upon a specific poetic diction is an understatement. (Does Mickey Cohen speaks Yiddish?) But the rhythms and syntax, too—litany, parallelism, the expert play of line-length and grammar—remind us that in its isolation, the imagination does not only speak to the world across the void: what it speaks is a poem. Other kinds of poem, even if conservative in form—Frost's '''Out, Out—''' might be an example—bring some sense of surprise that their materials, kind of word, rhythm, unity, can be poetic. Strand is an original writer, but not of the kind who challenges our idea of poetry. He confirms that idea, rather than enlarging it.

Robert Pinsky. *Poetry*. Aug., 1978, pp. 298, 300–301

Strand, too, conceives of the recognition of the Other as an elementary step for the emergence of the self: ''consider how often we are given to invent ourselves; maybe once, but even so we say we are another, another entirely similar.'' *The Monument* locates the dialectic between self and Other in the complex relationship between the ''author'' and his hypothetical translator. If the author recognizes the Other as he constructs the text, so too the verbal text, as it emerges from the Imaginary, is founded, in [Jacques] Lacan's words, upon the ''discourse of the Other.'' The author exclaims: ''This word has allowed you to exist, yet this work exists because you are translating it.'' By extension, of course, we are all ''translators'' of the text, and the author initiates an endless chain of relationships; moreover, he himself seems to emerge from the diverse texts, sometimes two or three of them together, that act as epigraphs to many of the fifty-two sections, often rivaling the length of the ''prime'' text. So, for example, a citation from Unamuno seems to prefigure the ''author'' of *The Monument* by making him an Other projected by a precursor—''the desire to be someone else without ceasing to be myself, and continue being myself at the same time I am someone else.'' And so by analogy, it is the author of *The Monument* who makes the text of Unamuno or any other writer exist by ''translating'' it into his own work. *The Monument* thus establishes what [Michel] Foucault calls the endless referentiality, the infinite contextualism of texts that transcends and subverts the priority of any particular Other, and any particular ''author.''. . .

For Strand, *The Late Hour* is informed by an absence and otherness which creates the sense of a world and language so large and alien that their ''presence'' can be enunciated only through an indefinite, intersubjective mood. Somebody seems always to be saying something somewhere that seems to be somewhat significant. . . . In this context, the Other before which the self becomes anonymous can be seen as a principle upon which the self can, to use Heidegger's phrase, ''throw itself upon the world'' and reside in its possibilities. . . . The poet here is located at a point in time where the events described have already begun to occur, and as the past subjunctive implies, continue into the present. This mode of vision constitutes the basis for what Heidegger calls the ''retrieve,'' a movement into the past to recover lost possibilities. Thus in ''My Son'' Strand reaches back towards a hypothetical son who seems to call ''from a place/beyond,/where nothing/everything,/ wants to be born.'' The poet of the retrieve attempts to locate those images from the storehouse of the Imaginary that suggest possible symbolic identifications. That is precisely the motive in ''For Jessica, My Daughter''—''I imagine a light/that would not let us stray far apart,/a secret moon or mirror, a sheet of paper.''

Richard Jackson. *Contemporary Literature*. Winter, 1980, pp. 139, 142–43

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STYRON, William (1925–)

The brilliant lyric power of William Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness* derives from the richest resources of the Southern traditions. Although ostensibly a story of psychological and moral breakdown, it is primarily a novel of place and must be judged in terms of its successful evocation of place. Like his best older contemporaries, Faulkner and Warren, Styron possesses a poetic sensibility of the very highest order. Through it he is able to respond to and project back into language those intricate relationships between natural setting and human agony which, at least since Hardy's heath and Conrad's sea, have formed the heart of our greatest fiction.

In fact, so completely does Styron dramatize these relationships that one feels justified in saying that the Southern landscape against which the action is portrayed is the most successfully realized character in the novel.

John W. Aldridge. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 8, 1951. p. 5

Despite its echoes of familiar authors, *Lie Down in Darkness* is satisfying work. It is planned with mature intelligence, it is written in a style everywhere competent and sometimes superb, and its slow and powerful stream is fed by insights into human beings beyond the capacity of better-known novelists. . . . Mr. Styron has fertility of imagination, he knows how to manage a long novel, and in the economy of his tale he proves himself a craftsman of the first water. . . . And though no system of morality can be explicitly drawn from these pages, Mr. Styron believes there is a moral law. Few recent writers have had the courage of this affirmation, and few have had the capacity to mingle beauty, wisdom and narrative art as he has done.

Howard Mumford Jones. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Sept. 9, 1951. p. 3

I should say at once that *Lie Down in Darkness* is a remarkable and fascinating novel—the best novel of the year by my standards—and one of the few completely human and mature novels published since the Second World War. . . . The story itself moves on several levels at once, as all good novels do; the characters, like images seen through a prism, are reflected from every side until the distortions of their personality are finally resolved in not their own view of themselves but the novelist's central and sympathetic view of them. But Mr. Styron is particularly good on the visual level of his craft; we are *at* all these ghastly parties, ceremonials, the festivals of a middle-class business society that has inherited the trappings of the planter aristocracy. . . . The writing itself, graceful and delicate, is rigorously controlled as the medium through which the story is revealed—not as a medium for its author's personality.

Maxwell Geismar. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 15, 1951. pp. 12–13

Many of the new writers have been learning their craft from William Faulkner; that is among the leading tendencies of the day; but I can't think of any other novel that applies the lessons so faithfully, or, for that matter, with so much natural authority and talent. . . . It is a general rule that novels which stay close to their literary models have no great value of their own, but *Lie Down in Darkness* is an exception; in this case the example of Faulkner seems to have had a liberating effect on Styron's imagination. One might even say that his book is best and most personal when it is most Faulknerian.

Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*. Oct. 8, 1951. pp. 19–20

Mr. Styron is twenty-six, a year or so younger than Mann was when he published *Buddenbrooks*. His first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness*, is a book of astonishing stature, as mature in conception as the work which now seems in the perspective of fifty years to have been so clear a harbinger of Mann's future achievement.

This is naturally not to say that Styron is, or will become, a great novelist—fifty years being about the shortest period in which such judgments can be hazarded. But *Lie Down in Darkness* suggests that his talents are equal to it, if he has luck and energy and capacity for growth to match. It ranks him at once as a member, and by no means the least considerable member, of that distinguished group of Southern writers whose names are generally headed by Faulkner and Wolfe.

Margaret Wallace. *Independent Woman*. Nov., 1951. p. 325

One would . . . welcome some insight into the expanding area. . .of comfort and complacency. . . . Is it possible to say *No* without ignoring the comfortable reality? One way is indicated by William Styron's fine story ''Long March'' which appeared in *discovery No. 1*. Styron focuses on the experience of several reserve officers recalled to duty during the Korean emergency, and so he manages to place our flannel-suited careers in some historical perspective. He provides only one or two quick glimpses of domestic contentment, but since they are set against a panorama of remorseless military idiocy, they take on a wonderfully delicate power. To these men suddenly back in combat dress our lives between wars seem but a childish revery—placid, mindless, comfortably unreal.

Leo Marx. *New Republic*. Oct. 31, 1955. p. 20

Hailed in the press, *Lie Down In Darkness* was all but ignored by the quarterly reviews, when it was the quarterly reviews, not the Sunday book supplements, that *should* have recognized its worth. For William Styron was not and is not a ''middlebrow'' novelist; his work is in no way flashy and meretricious, but quite original. So that now, perhaps, the bad press he is getting in the dailies and weeklies will serve to emphasize this fact.

I had better admit my bias openly and at the start: to my mind Mr. Styron is the most impressive writer of fiction of his generation. *Lie Down In Darkness* was a remarkable novel, and *Set This House On Fire* is an even better novel. Indeed, so far as I am concerned it is like nothing else that has been written in the past decade, and deserves the respectful attention of anyone seriously interested in fiction—this despite a grievous structural flaw which in the hands of a less gifted author might have sufficed to spoil it entirely.

Louis D. Rubin. *Sewanee Review*. Winter, 1961. p. 175

Styron's characters who are destroyed or who destroy have, like the children of the Garden, fallen away from the golden age. What Styron calls the ''miseries of our century'' result from that ''knowledge of the mechanicall arts,'' which is equated with civilized technology, urban areas like New York, the atom bomb and other instruments of war, and American materialism. We must endure these miseries of our time if our lives are to be anything more than meaningless vibrations lost in eternity. The children of modernity lack the strength necessary to endure because they have lost their simplicity. Endurance comes from a stoicism based upon innocence, faith, simplicity, which allows men. . .to bear their burdens. The paradox of the modern condition is apparent. The means whereby we might endure have disappeared during man's long flight into civilization, away from the bliss of the Garden of Eden or the reign of Saturn where innocent simplicity prevailed. The three novels which I shall discuss dramatize the despair of lost innocence and the hope which rises from the power to endure.

Jerry H. Bryant. *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Autumn, 1963. pp. 540–1

Styron is, it may be concluded, no great moralist. *Set This House on Fire* is a safe and unctuous movie spectacular in the guise of a serious novel. It leaps nimbly from sensation to sensation—a bloody auto accident, a rape, a horrible disfiguring murder, a ghastly natural death in thrilling color, to mention a few—for all of which there will of course be an accounting, but oh what fun while they last, till over everything Styron can pour his shiny final lacquer of regeneration. The novel even has a part for an unutterably beautiful and virtuous Italian peasant girl, who must die so that the hero, having dallied with her (innocently!), can return to his imbecile spouse for the happy ending. It is an ignoble book.

Marvin Mudrick. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1964. p. 361

[*The Confessions of Nat Turner*] is the most profound fictional treatment of slavery in our literature. It is, of course, the work of a skilled and experienced novelist with other achievements to attest his qualifications. It is doubtful, however, if the rare combination of talents essential to this formidable undertaking, a flawless command of dialect, a native instinct for the subtleties and ambivalences of race in the South, and a profound and unerring sense of place—Styron's native place as it was Nat Turner's—could well have been found anywhere else.

C. Vann Woodward. *New Republic*. Oct. 7, 1967. p. 28

In literature, violence is still the sign of tragedy—of what is too much for us. This, I suspect, is why William Styron was drawn to make an imaginative narrative of his own out of Nat Turner's leadership of the 1831 slave revolt in Southampton County, Virginia; for Styron is preeminent among the ''younger'' American novelists in his instinct for tragedy and in his respect for the sheer force of human feeling. His first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness*, has remained with me for the expressiveness it brought to the theme of love's defeat. Although *Set This House on Fire* was too tense, and sputtered off in exasperating flights of rhetoric, it was clearly the work of a strong, serious Southern talent who had educated himself, as Southerners are still not afraid to do, to write in the language of human feeling. The Southern genius, in our time, has been to describe real defeats in a society made superficial by unreal success. . . . Othello would always have been strange to the Venetians, but what some of us want, what a Southern writer of Styron's moral urgency especially wants, is to dispel the strangeness, to show that Negro and white are kin. . . . But the real achievement of this beautiful, curious, essentially dreamlike narrative is something else. For Styron has fully imagined, he has been able to create with his honest sense of the tragic, a man whom the locked-up force of daily, hourly, constant suppression has turned into a Stranger—someone who remains single, separate, wholly other from ourselves and our notions.

Alfred Kazin. *Book World*. Oct. 8, 1967. pp. 1, 22

The message [of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*] seems to be that the Negro has every right to kill the white man, but cannot escape pollution in the process. The ending is covertly sentimental, one of those chins-up sad endings, and part of its effectiveness will be determined, as I say, by your view of the race question and the other and smaller part by whether the novel has worked with you as a novel.

And here we run into difficulties. There is no doubt that Turner is still worth writing and speculating about; but whether he can be successfully written about fictionally is another question. The historical novel is traditionally so clumsy a method of investigation that the reader usually winds up doubting whether the characters ever existed at all, in any form. And Styron has only exaggerated the difficulties by telling his story in the first person. . . .

To enrich the cramped psyche of his narrator, Styron has simply inserted endless chunks of his own nature writing—some of the best nature writing going, but largely irrelevant to the narrative and to Nat's focus at the particular moment. Important dramatic scenes are interrupted time and again for the sake of long weather and crop reports, almost as if the author's own attention had wandered. Worse, the weather is always just right for the scene: sultry for tension, cold for failure, etc. We even have clouds passing over the sun on cue. . . .

But if the book fails by default, as a novel, it does succeed in many places as a kind of historical tone poem.

Wilfred Sheed. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 8, 1967. pp. 2–3

Like the famed *deus ex machina* of Greek mythology, Nat Turner was thrust upon the national consciousness to remind white Americans that, historically, all black revolutionaries have had Achilles heels. What they desire in actuality is not the master's life, but his daughter, and they are so confused about their relationship vis-à-vis white society that any determined assault upon white America, if it comes at all, is many years distant. Therefore these modern-day Nat Turners pose no real threat, for not only are they half-men, but they are sexually disturbed as well, seeking to wage war not in the streets or behind the barricades, but in the bedrooms of white women.

Nat Turner in the hands of Richard Wright, LeRoi Jones or John Williams would have been altogether different. And those who condemn Styron for his portrait, who demand that he portray Nat Turner with any semblance of reality, demand the impossible. To demand a realistic portrayal of blacks by whites is to demand the impossible, for whites are neither mentally nor culturally equipped for the task.

Addison Gayle, Jr., in *Amistad 1*, ed. John A. Williams and Charles F. Harris (Random). 1970. pp. 21–2

A Virginian by birth, William Styron begins his literary career writing in the Southern manner; soon thereafter, he shows an independent sensibility. His work, brilliant in parts, shifting from rhetoric to sudden poetry, dramatically rich, seeks between violence and ambiguity some definition of personal integrity. The search often fails because Styron seems to lack a felt attitude toward life, a distinctive power of evaluation.

The influence of Faulkner and Fitzgerald appears in Styron's first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951). Yet the book also harks back to the baroque tradition of John Donne and Sir Thomas Browne; invokes Freud; and still remains Styron's most vivid, most personal, expression. The novel presents a Southern family locked in a domestic tragedy; love wears the face of guilt or incest, and the search for childhood innocence leads only to self-destruction. Through Peyton, doomed, lovely daughter of the Loftis family, the author makes his symbolic statement on the decay of the South—manners with few morals, dissolving community, fake religiosity—and on the larger trials of the modern world.

Ihab Hassan. *Contemporary American Literature* (Ungar). 1973. pp. 54–5

Since the time he started writing, it seems to have been his conscious aim to perpetuate the great tradition in Southern literature, and to assume the throne left vacant by William Faulkner by producing something that, in terms of both its themes and its historical scope, could merit comparison with *The Sound and the Fury*, *Look Homeward*, *Angel*, and *All the King's Men*. Small wonder, then, that Norman Mailer, that supreme egotist and self-publicist, should see Styron as a kind of twin, and rival. Styron, it appears, wants to write the great novel of our time just as much as Mailer does; and this has necessarily led to a great deal of jealously, and some back-biting, between the two of them. Small wonder, either, that Styron's first published book, *Lie Down in Darkness*, should have been treated with almost universal respect and had epithets like ''brilliant,'' ''major,'' and ''tragic'' showered upon it. *Lie Down in Darkness*, as befitted its author, had ambition written over its every page—it represented a deliberate stab at greatness—and the fact that Styron could back his ambitions up with an extraordinarily seductive style (by turns descriptive, lyrical, and elegiac) more or less guaranteed its initial success. It was almost too easy, thanks to the prodigious brilliance of its language and the intricacy of its narrative structure, to read more into the book than was actually there. . . .

The two books that Styron wrote during the next nine years register no significant advance on *Lie Down in Darkness*, at least as far as this problem of liberation from the past is concerned. His novella *The Long March*, for example, published in 1956, merely describes the same predicament as his first novel does, only this time in simpler terms, using the army as the institutional frame that tends to fix the movement of life and inhibit choice. And his second full-length novel, *Set This House on Fire*, does not so much find a solution as impose one. Cass Kinsolving, its hero, suffers up until the last pages just as Milton Loftis does, then assures us in the last pages, and several years later, that through his suffering he finally found a way out. . . .

Which brings us to *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Styron's fourth book and the one, I think, in which he has begun to find the answers he needs—both to his own problems as a Southern writer of the second, post-''renaissance'' generation, and to the larger questions facing anyone who inherits, however unconsciously, a particular way of organizing and figuring experience. Its subject is that ultimate victim of the past, and the roles and mythologies the past bequeaths, the American Negro slave. Its method, as Styron puts it, is that of ''a meditation on history''; since the story is based on an actual slave revolt that occurred in Virginia in 1831 and the supposed ''confessions'' made by its leader, Nat Turner, after his defeat and eventual capture. In this way, Styron places himself squarely at the center of the Southern tradition—and not, as in *Lie Down in Darkness*, merely to commemorate that tradition but so as to develop it, carry it a stage further. History—the relationship of past to present in the writer's own experience and in the lives of his characters—is as much the motivating force in this book as it is in

Faulkner's work, say, in Ransom's or in Warren's. The only difference is that it is now what James Baldwin has called the ''common history'' of white and black that comes under scrutiny; and this change, far from being a superficial one, signals other changes of approach and interpretation that enable Styron to achieve a radically fresh understanding of familiar material. In a sense the *Confessions* represents the most significant attempt made over the last twenty years to fashion something new out of the creative inheritance of the region. . . .

Richard Gray. *The Literature of Memory: Modern Writers of the American South* (Johns Hopkins Univ. Pr., 1978), pp. 285, 290–91

Although William Styron's fiction develops themes basic to all twentieth-century writing, a broad pattern of meaning in Styron's work is defined by his use of southern characters, settings, and themes, and by his relation to the southern literary tradition. Just as Faulkner found in his ''little postage-stamp of native soil'' universal meaning, Styron uses southern materials to construct his great drama of rebellion, despair, and the search for order. It is a developing vision. As one novel follows another, after Peyton's suicide in *Lie Down in Darkness*, Styron's protagonists seem to confront their adversaries and themselves with increasing dignity and power. Each work presents with growing effectiveness the traditional southern themes: the curse of racism, the influence of the past, the power of the social environment over individual will. In each novel there is greater understanding of the intimate relation between the black and white experience in southern history: A closer look at these themes as they are advanced in Styron's three long works of fiction—*Lie Down in Darkness* (1951), *Set This House on Fire* (1960), and *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967)—suggests that over the years Styron has been moving toward a coherent view of southern history, a kind of ''myth.''. . .

Nat Turner is the culmination of Styron's developing southern myth, and overall his three major works of fiction point to a tentative but growing optimism. *Lie Down in Darkness* reflects the young Styron's shame and despair for his own class and people; in *Set This House on Fire*, a different kind of hero—while nearly engulfed by the trials which test him—discovers the moral consistency and courage to survive in a chaotic world. *The Confessions of Nat Turner* presents a slave-hero's rebellion, defeat, and despair; yet it ends with spiritual resolution. Styron acknowledges the martyrdom which drove Nat Turner to violence; but in attributing to him a transfiguring final vision which qualifies all he had done, Styron affirms the resiliency of the oppressed spirit and his hope for the reconciliation of peoples whose separation has blighted southern history.

Jane Flanders. In *The Achievement of William Styron*, rev. ed., ed. Robert K. Morris and Irving Malin (Univ. of Georgia Pr., 1981), pp. 106–7. 121–22

Styron is not Elie Wiesel and could not have written an eye-witness memoir of what actually took place at Auschwitz as did Wiesel. Styron is a Southern Protestant who has written a *Bildungsroman*, a novel describing the hero's journey from innocence to experience. Styron did not experience the Holocaust at first hand and he chose not to write about it as if he had. His hero, who in many respects is his younger self, came to know and become involved with a survivor of Auschwitz. In the journey from innocence to experience the hero's encounter with a woman is often a decisive element in the process, but few heroines in literature have ever been responsible for so complex and multifaceted an introduction of the hero to the world of experience as is Sophie. Stingo's encounter with Sophie is absolutely crucial to his journey. Moreover, Stingo's sexual struggles are inseparable from the other components of the journey. Styron neither vulgarizes nor trivializes his subject by weaving together Stingo's sexual story with Sophie's account of what happened to her, the older narrator's reflections on Auschwitz, his younger self, and the many other elements—experiential, historical and ideological—of mature identity that he has been able to grasp as a result of his encounter with Sophie. . . .

Sophie's Choice can be seen as less a novel about the Holocaust than a novel about how the Holocaust affected a highly gifted young Southern writer. The Holocaust could not have affected Styron the way it did a Jewish writer. This does not mean that Styron's story is necessarily more or less significant than that of any other writer on the subject. Of necessity, Styron's story is different. Nor has Styron invaded anybody else's literary turf because his own literary tradition is ''played out'' and no longer offers a viable subject, as Alvin Rosenfeld has ungraciously argued. Styron came by his theme honestly and handles it with great artistry.

Richard L. Rubenstein. *Michigan Quarterly Review*. Fall, 1981, pp. 440–41

Sophie's Choice is a courageous, in some ways masterly book, a book very hard to review for the simple reason that the plot—even the double entendre in the title—cannot be given away. . . .

The novel's courage lies partly in this: After all the attacks on Styron, especially after *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, which some blacks and liberals (including myself) found offensive here and there, we get in *Sophie's Choice* the same old Styron, boldly and unmercifully setting down his occasional lapses (or his narrator's) into anti-Semitism, anti-feminism and so forth, baring his chest to whatever knives it may possibly deserve, even begging for it. Those who wish to can easily prove him anti-black, anti-white, anti-Southern, anti-Yankee, anti-Polish, anti-Semitic, anti-Christian, anti-German, anti-American, anti-Irish—the list could go on and on. No bigotry escapes him; the worst that can be said of humanity Styron claims for himself, wringing his hands, tearing his hair, wailing to all the congregation, *Mea culpa!* (Only in their taste in music are he and his favored characters faultless.)

Such all-inclusive, self-confessed sinfulness should absolve a man, and in a way, of course, it does; no reader of *Sophie's Choice* can doubt that Styron has put immense energy into trying to understand and deal justly with the evils in American history and the European holocaust, to say nothing of the evil (as well as the good) in his characters. Yet for all the civilized and, in the best sense, Christian decency of Styron's emotions when he's watching himself, the rabid streak is always ready to leap out and take command. . . .

As I said at the outset, Styron is very conscious of being one of the last to work a dying literary tradition—in effect, the Southern

Gothic, the vein mined by, among many others, Walker Percy, Robert Penn Warren and, possibly, William Faulkner. (In my opinion, Faulkner has too much humor, even joy, to belong.) Styron makes a point, in *Sophie's Choice*, of naming his influences—Thomas Wolfe, Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, etc.—and claims, in Nathan Laudau's voice, that he has surmounted them. In *Sophie's Choice* he does far more than that: He transfers, down to the last detail, the conventions and implicit metaphysic of the Southern Gothic—especially as it was handled by Robert Penn Warren—to the world at large. It is no longer just the South that is grandly decayed, morally tortured, ridden with madmen, idiots and weaklings, socially enfeebled by incest and other perversions: it is the world. . . .

In short, though I am profoundly moved by *Sophie's Choice* and consider the novel an immensely important work, I am not persuaded by it. Styron's vision may have humor in it—he tells us about Nathan's hilarious jokes, none of which turn out to be funny on the page—but if so, not an ounce of that humor is in the novel. Perhaps it may be argued that, in a book about American guilt and the holocaust, humor would be out of place. But it seems to me that humor is central to our decency. It cannot be replaced, as it is in *Sophie's Choice*, by great classical music or (a major concern in the novel) sex. If anything, classical music leads in exactly the wrong direction: it points to that ideal Edenic world that those master musicians, the Poles and Germans, thought in their insanity they might create here on earth by getting rid of a few million ''defectives.'' I'm not, God knows, against Bach and Beethoven; but they need to be taken with a grain of salt, expressing, as they do, a set of standards unobtainable (except in music) for poor silly, grotesque humanity; they point our hearts toward an inevitable failure that may lead us to murder, suicide or the helpless groaning and self-flagellation of the Southern Gothic novel. [Originally published in *New York Times Book Section*, May 27, 1979.]

[*The following is an excerpt from a note appended to the reprint of the above review*.]

Styron succeeded where many failed, and, more than that, that among the few who succeed he stands alone—if one does not count personal diaries or memoirs—as a writer who could fully dramatize the horror, the complexity, and something at least approaching the full historical and emotional meaning of the thing. He found the connections between the vast historical horror and the psychological equivalents in ordinary life, not to mention the eerie connection between what happened in Germany and what happens in these divided United States. But as I was saying, it is not just this subject matter that makes *Sophie's Choice* memorable. His descriptions of Brooklyn life and scenery have a vividness just as uncanny, and his analysis of the young writer's anxieties . . . to say nothing of his psychologically original and convincing analysis of Nathan and Sophie, make one look at people—and oneself—in a new way.

I'm not sorry to have pointed out that *Sophie's Choice* transmutes the old ''Southern Gothic'' to a new, universal gothic, and I'm not sorry to have claimed that the Southern Gothic is an inherently inferior form. But I would like to take this opportunity to say that the general implication of my remarks was ill-considered. What I suggested, I'm sure, was that, in following the gothic formula, *Sophie's Choice* was a castle built on sand. What is wrong with the gothics is not wrong with *Sophie's Choice*. When Dostoievsky published *Crime and Punishment* (I think it was), somebody important—I forget who—made a long trip to him (I think) to tell him, ''You are the savior of all Russia!'' After *Sophie's Choice*, I wish I had said, instead of what I did say, or at least in addition to what I did say, ''You are the savior of all America.''

John Gardner. In *Critical Essays on William Styron*, ed. Arthur Casciato and James L. W. West III (G. K. Hall, 1982), pp. 247–49, 251–52, 245–47

My brief foray through [William] Styron's fiction brings us finally to Styron's best-known work after *The Confessions of Nat Turner*: *Sophie's Choice*. A fascinating sidelight on Styron's lifelong fictional use of Jews is found in some unaccessioned materials housed at Duke University, three holograph pages that were probably intended for inclusion in *Sophie's Choice* and later rejected by the author as ''inappropriate'' and ''far-fetched'' for that novel. In them, a first-person narrator attributes his feeling of rootlessness and lack of identification as a Southerner to the fact that, although raised as a Presbyterian, he is really a Jew. He discovers in his father's papers, after the old man's death, a family tree that identifies one of his remote ancestors as an eighteenth-century rabbi, one Baruch Levi, who established a synagogue in South Carolina. To the narrator, this discovery means that he is ''at least half a Jew.'' That the narrator claims half-Jewishness on the basis of blood so thinned by the passage of centuries, and that the force of this blood is great enough in his mind to account for his sense of not belonging, are surely significant facts. Indeed, the narrator states that adjustment to his newfound Jewishness is not difficult: ''I went through a phase of sneaky, truculent anti-Semitism, which lasted until I was almost full-grown, and which was followed by a period in which I made a complete reversal, when all the devilish happenings in the world seemed to be the work of Christians.'' The manuscript ends here, leaving a tantalizing glimpse of Styron fantasizing himself as a Jew.

Sophie's Choice is, finally, Styron's one full-fledged Jewish book. The reason lies not in its Holocaust subject (again, not all victims of the concentration camps were Jews) or its Jewish characters (one modeled on the Jewish girls Styron knew at Duke) in their Jewish setting (Yetta's Brooklyn pink palace, similar to the establishment Styron occupied in the 1940s and has called ''a sort of Saul Bellow type boarding house''). Rather, I think of *Sophie's Choice* as Jewish in flavor because of its characteristically Jewish style. Nathan Landau—that Jewish version of Mason Flagg, that madder version of Al Mannix—predicts the rise of the Jewish-American novel, and Styron has in fact woven the fabric of his own novel under instruction by those premier Jewish haberdashers, the Hart, Schaffner, and Marx of the Jewish novel: that is, Bellow, Malamud, and Roth. . . . But the great similarity between Styron's *Sophie's Choice* and the works of the three major Jewish-American authors is not, to me, in its concentration on the Jew as suffering victim or rebel, and certainly not as moral touchstone; rather, it is in the use of a certain tone passed down from Sholem Aleichem's Teyve to Bellow's Herzog. Self-deprecating and wry, alternatingly inflating and deflating, it is a comic mode adopted as a defense against tragedy.

In an interview of the early 1970s, Styron characterized the Jewish sensibility as ''that comic awareness so exquisitely poised between hilarity and anguish.'' He would soon adopt that sensibility as a perfect means of expressing not only the incomprehensible

events at Auschwitz but also the passage made by Stingo from innocence to experience, on several levels; this sensibility is also a strategy for coping with all of those happenings. . . .

Such a wry or ironic comic mode may come readily to a Southerner, regardless of his immersion in New York Jewish society or marriage to a Jew; for the Southerner like the Jew is often conscious of the burden of a tragic past. Walker Percy—whom Styron admires, by the way—has stated his debt to Jewish humor, not merely because the phrase ''Jewish comedian'' is almost a tautology in modern American society but also because the Jews and a man of Percy's (and Styron's) temperament need a way to acknowledge the oppressiveness of life while affirming its possibilities. With its comedy tinged with despair, its tragedy lightened by laughter, *Sophie's Choice* reveals Styron's kinship with the Jews in a more pronounced way than ever before. The Presbyterian from Newport News, Virginia, has indeed come to roost in the kingdom of the Jews.

Judith Ruderman. *William Styron* (New York: Ungar, 1987), pp. 136–39

The majority of artists and philosophers have chosen silence in the face of the enormity of the horror [of the Holocaust], and many of Styron's critics have chided him for not remaining silent. Styron, however, would agree with Emil Fackenheim, Canadian theologian, philosopher, and religious existentialist: ''The truth . . . is that to grasp the Holocaust whole-of-horror is not to comprehend or transcend it, but rather to say *no* to it, or resist it.'' The real question to ask is not ''Why did it happen?'' but ''Having seen what happened, what do we do now?''. . .

Clearly, Styron has become engagé, marrying art to politics, which is not to say that he is a polemical writer. . . . His novels resemble the work of Mann, Malraux, and Camus more than they do contemporary American writers. . . .

In *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and *Sophie's Choice*, Styron has meditated on history, has recreated it by way of his personal conception of it. In the process, he offers the survivors of the Holocaust and other atrocities a kind of redemption through art. . . . Thanks to the honesty of *Sophie's Choice*, its bravery, and its good humor, it is a book that repairs the very loss it laments. Literature, then, can do more than simply bear witness to pain; it can help transcend the pain.

Rhoda Sirlin. *William Styron's ''Sophie's Choice'': Crime and Self-Punishment* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Pr., 1990), pp. 97–98

It is quite possible, however, that *Inheritance of Night* might stimulate some renewed interest in [William] Styron's first novel. In recent years *Lie Down in Darkness* has not received great critical attention; . . . Perhaps the publication of these drafts will inspire some critics (especially those with a formalist bent) to take a fresh look at Styron's struggles to complete his first novel. Psychoanalytic readers, on the other hand, might wish, with these drafts in hand, to reevaluate Styron's struggles with the novel in light of things we now know about his personal conflicts during the 1940s; these conflicts are evident in the autobiographical musings of *Sophie's Choice* and in Styron's revealing account of his protracted grief, recorded in the 1990 memoir *Darkness Visible*.

Daniel Ross. *Papers on Language and Literature*. Winter, 1994, p. 105

[*A Tidewater Morning: Three Tales from Youth*] Styron's perennial themes of love, death, race, and war inform these three stories of Paul Whitehurst. Styron, in a brief author's note, tells the reader the stories are an ''imaginative reshaping'' of the author's experiences at ''the ages of twenty, ten, and thirteen.'' In the first story, the author as a young Marine lieutenant off the coast of Okinawa tells about his disappointment at being part of a decoy operation, yet is proud to be associated with Lieutenant Colonel Timothy Halloran, a colorful career soldier who takes the long view on any Marine order. . . . The second story is essentially Faulknerian; it tells of a ninety-nine-year-old former slave named Shadrach, who walks from Alabama to Virginia to die on the plantation where he was born. . . . In the final story, Paul must face his mother's death from cancer and his father's anger over the pain she has endured and his refuge in atheist writers (Nietzsche, etc.). At the same time Paul struggles with a paper route under the direction of a petty adult whose racist acts he witnesses. Styron tells these stories with a raw truth unsoftened by memory.

Jon Saari. *Antioch Review*. Winter, 1994, p. 181

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SWADOS, Harvey (1920–)

So well is his story [*Out Went the Candle*] told, so perceptively, that is, has Mr. Swados imagined this man and devised means to place him fully before us, that we put the book down with something like a sense of knowledge. In his simplicity and complexity Herman Felton comes through to us, not just as one more character in one more novel, but as a human being, admirable, pitiable, and above all, understood.

Patrick F. Quinn. *Commonweal*. Jan. 14, 1955. p. 412

Swados is fair, honest and gifted with insight, also he is a man of taste. This taste is apparent in his refusal to melodramatize and over-write.

His book [*On the Line*] is full of small details which reveal how much the union has accomplished positively in easing the lives of

the men, men who do hard work. But his objectivity is unmarred and unbroken, and he conveys a sense of fate—the fate of those who work at de-sensitizing and psychologically-hurtful work in order that our prosperous society can maintain itself. His picture is disturbing. But what is disturbing is not a peculiarly American phenomenon: it is a disturbing feature of what we call progress. The machine has freed man from back-breaking labor. But the machine has also imposed a discipline of the clock on man which disturbs, distorts and even embitters his nature. This was one of the major insights of Thorstein Veblen in *The Instinct of Workmanship*. By artistic recreation, Swados has made emotionally comprehensible some of the best of Veblen's insights.

James T. Farrell. *New Republic*. Oct. 14, 1957. p. 17

Unlike many of today's able novelists, Swados does not deal with marginal figures [in *False Coin*] but introduces us to some of the giants of the age: to a philanthropist who speaks with pathos of his inherited millions; to a self-made expert on transportation, government affairs, and Vivaldi; to a manufacturer of items of feminine hygiene who is also a propagandist for women's rights; to a woman who rules a journalistic empire. The book is not, I think, *a roman a clef*, but we are reminded of people in the news, as, for the sake of verisimilitude, we should be. . . . The novel affirms not only that integrity is important but also that the artist cannot be free in our society, no matter what the beneficence of our rulers.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 9, 1960. p. 12

Mr. Swados knows that powerful businessmen are often extremely intelligent, sociologists often impressive people, artists often weak and foolish, and up to a point [in *False Coin*] he makes his so. But at bottom he is committed to a belief in the supreme importance of artistic talent and to a conviction that the preservation of the artist's freedom is one of society's primary duties. He allows some of his characters to argue quite effectively against this view, but in the end we are to feel them wholly wrong, just as we are to feel the hero wholly right when he sacrifices his career to preserve the integrity of a work whose composer has already agreed to modify it for practical reasons. ''I am buoyed,'' he observes when the battle is lost,'' ''by the conviction that, although I wait in silence, I am not alone.'' Thus Mr. Swados' sense of life is complex only on the surface; underneath it is simple black and white. Nevertheless it is complex where a book of this kind most needs to be, and that is a considerable achievement, however much writers who fancy themselves above trying for it may scorn it.

Arthur Mizener. *Sewanee Review*. Winter, 1961. p. 156

Mr. Swados's style . . . is resolutely pedestrian. It has the metallic authority of a tape-recorder. This is how post-war men and women feel and converse during *Nights in the Gardens of Brooklyn*. Mr. Swados is an acute, scrupulous reporter of the crises of adjustment and solitude of those who came out of war to begin life and marriage in the big city. His stories deal with the moments of truth between human beings who did not quite realize when they started on love that diapers smell or that jobs can get scarce. Sometimes, the gray rectitude of Swados's vision ends in cliche: we *know* on page one of ''Year of Grace'' that the uneducated wife will ripen to humaneness while her Fulbright-scholar husband will wilt in the French sun. But in at least one instance, sheer directness of imagination yields a superb story. ''The Letters'' is a variation on the theme of Conrad's ''Secret Sharer.'' With characteristic honesty, Swados even refers to Conrad. But his story has its own splendor and the climax leaves one numb.

George Steiner. *The Yale Review*. Spring, 1961. p. 425

A Radical's America is, as the title indicates, primarily a political and sociological book. In his Introduction, Mr. Swados mentions ''the most important matters in the world, peace and racial integration,'' describes himself as an anti-liberal and anti-Stalinist socialist, and, preparing to denounce the first months of the Kennedy Administration, anathematizes ''the professors and liberals who utilize the perversions of socialism as an excuse to capitulate to the bottomless hypocrisy of American capitalism.'' Fair enough (though we wince at the rhetoric): he lets us know his exposed position, and holds it with angry consistency throughout the book. . . . Yet nobody appears in all these essays. They are written by a politician, not a novelist; they shout and grow indignant, or approve and are glad, at types, straw-men, cowardly academics, wicked critics and publishers, bad bosses, good workers.

Marvin Mudrick. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1962. p. 441

A professed socialist, he is not very good as a defender of Marxist theory. The essays [in *A Radical's America*] written from a dogmatic angle for the party press are stunningly innocent of any serious doubts as to the potential rationality of human society. On most other subjects Mr. Swados is persuasive. He is good when he is contending against the complacent economics of affluence. His proofs that an authentic working class still exists and suffers are definitive. So are his studies in the malaise consequent upon non-working. As a critic of the intellectual life of America today he manages to be impressively monitory without sounding like a common scold. He doesn't cry ''No in Thunder'' like Leslie Fiedler and Jove. He is especially good in pointing to the historical roots of ''anger,'' ''guilt,'' ''sex,'' and ''self-advertisement'' considered as literary staples.

F.W. Dupee. *Commentary*. Dec., 1962. p. 551

As a sensitive novelist, Swados must begin with concern for his characters; for, as he realizes, if we are to become interested in what society does to them, they, in turn, must be worth our caring. His central figure, Herman Felton, schemer, war profiteer, family man, uses the energies left over from his wheeling-dealing to shape the lives of his children. His girl, Betsy, his son, Morrow, both love and reject their father, and in their fury they seem bent on self-destruction. Joe Burley, the observer of the frightening family tensions, moves into their lives and becomes, in a positive sense, a third child of Herman's and Felton thus becomes a shabby, contemporary King Lear who must learn, too late, what he should always have known.

Out Went The Candle is Swados' best novel, and Felton is certainly his finest creation. We see him as explained by his children, as he might appear to casual observers, and, most interestingly of all, in his revealing letters to his daughter, strange cries of pain, love, arrogance, and confusion.

Charles Shapiro in *Contemporary American Novelists*, edited by Harry T. Moore (Southern Illinois). 1964. p. 186

No one, reading Harvey Swados's latest novel, is likely to cry out, ''Wild, man!'' Sick wisdom, strange-loving burlesque, comic nihilism, hellerish fantasy, high-spirited nausea, southern jokes, olde-Yiddish vaudeville—these elements of recent fiction, taken in some quarters to be the last word in literary rebellion, are not to be found in *The Will*. Swados is an unfashionable writer, committed to the tradition of realism, in which it is assumed, as George Eliot remarks in *Felix Holt*, that, ''There is no private life that has not been determined by a larger public life,'' and in which the novelist, by providing a faithful rendering of the social world, can also arrive at the elements of moral valuation. . . .

Traditional realism, to be sure, brings with it—especially at a time when the commonly shared sense of what our society is and does tends to be fuzzy—the risks of banal enumeration, passive recording, dispirited portraiture. But in *The Will* Swados has managed to show that if only the novelist is serious and human enough, if only he is entirely committed to the terms of his enterprise, he can create versions of human existence that are binding and persuasive. Just as in Swados's journalism—he is one of the best labor reporters in the country—there is a fine gift for reaching to the human ache behind the ''social problem,'' so in his better fiction he manages to affirm and validate the life *out there*, the experience which accumulates in perplexing and promiscuous abundance, even if intellectuals choose to ignore or dismiss it.

Irving Howe. *Commentary*. April, 1964. pp. 80–2

The stories [*A Story for Teddy and Others*] are in good part commemorations of youth. The one most frequent theme in them is the necessity of compassion, and the conscience of the growing boy is on every page. But not the cry of conscience grappled and possessed.

And this—this exhaustion, it must be called—is ironic because Harvey Swados manifestly is a writer who has all the honorable virtues. He is hard-working, thoughtful, sensitive, committed, and entirely serious. More than that, he is one of a very few serious novelists of the past decade who have dared even to conceive that fiction has a large moral function, that it might change society. In instances—*Out Went the Candle*, his first novel; the short stories of *On the Line*; his much-underestimated novel *False Coin*—he has all-but-uniquely discovered the mutual involvement in these times of private lives and public issues.

But you can't have a big self-sustaining issue every time out, and lacking one, Swados has obvious difficulties.

Marcus Klein. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Aug. 22, 1965. p. 9

The best stories in this collection [*A Story for Teddy*] concern the visions of youth as viewed from the vantage point of middle age. Whether describing his Coney Island Uncle or the hack writer who haunted his college days, Mr. Swados seems primarily concerned with his experience as recollected in some tranquility. The point, as in the rather touching title story, lies not in the events themselves but in the narrator's later understanding of them. . . . Unfortunately, the stories themselves *are* slight and they are saved only occasionally by our faith in the honesty and sensitivity of the author. Since the process of transformation is often left out of the stories the reader is sometimes left with the peculiar predicament of believing in Mr. Swados but not in his tales.

Paul Levine. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1965–66. p. 588

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SWENSON, May (1913–1989)

May Swenson, in her second book, *A Cage of Spines* . . . is lively, ingenious, and fanciful. She enters the world of things, animate and inanimate, without self-consciousness and with a rare sense of play. She tells riddles, observes the weather, and turns her mind toward pebbles, birds, and small animals as readily as toward people. Her faults, by no means extensive, are perhaps too continuous a sparkle and an occasional lapse in the sense of scale, for some things *are* larger than others. She is an accurate naturalist, however, and an imaginative one.

Louise Bogan. *New Yorker*. April 27, 1958, pp. 237–38

May Swenson . . . is a poet who sees singly, and she is, to my personal taste, one of the most ingenious and delightful younger poets writing today (*To Mix with Time: New and Selected Poems*). She has, at any rate, probably the best eye for nature. . . .

Her attention to nature gives May Swenson's poems a directness of gaze that is sometimes lacking when she turns to other, apparently broader subjects. She needs, perhaps, the concreteness of things close at hand in order to see deeply; it is as though language, in her hands, responded naturally only to the actual and palpable. She has a staggering poetic equipment: visual acuity, a sense of form, a fine ear for rhythm and the colloquial. Among her recent poems there are too many with high pretensions, in the shapes of arrows or zigzags or earthquakes, dealing with the Scheme of Things. A series of travel poems—with the exception of one about a bullfight—strikes me as terribly self-conscious, as though someone had been Taking Notes. But even if, in her straining for fresh ways of saying things, this poet's sureness sometimes deserts her, she just cannot go wrong with her nature poems. They are *seen*; the husks and kernels of nature are *there*. And sometimes, at moments of great simplicity, her poems go almost as far in eloquence as poems can—as in a favorite of mine called ''Question''. . . . A poem like this, in its simple lyricism,

makes us forget all questions about the direction of poetry, about schools and generations. It is, after all, a song; and songs hold their own secrets. This one may hold the secret of long life.

Peter Davison. *Atlantic Monthly*. Dec., 1963, pp. 84–85

No one today is more deft and lucky in discovering a poem than May Swenson. Her work often appears to be proceeding calmly, just descriptive and accurate; but then suddenly it opens into something that looms beyond the material, something that impends and implies. You get to feeling that if the world were different she would have to lie in order to make her point, but that fortunately the world is so various and fortuitous that she can be truthful and also marvelously effective.

So graceful is the progression in her poems that they launch confidently into any form, carrying through it to easy, apt variations. Often her way is to define things, but the definitions have a stealthy trend: what she chooses and the way she progresses heap upon the reader a consistent, incremental effect.

An example poem is ''The Little Rapids.'' The words nimbly leap, at their best; they know what they are about. And the reader finds that they are about the heart, ''its zest constant/even in sleep,/ its padded roar/ bounding in the grotto of the breast.'' The words, vivid and apt as they are, are not enough to account for their success; the reader finds himself encountering adventures that converge into the one steady vision of the whole poem.

In the continuing work of Miss Swenson the question becomes: will her luck provide worthy encounters? Will she become distracted by this poking so interestedly in a dilettantish way into stray things? Sometimes, as in ''The Secret in the Cat,'' you think that she is just clever, apt with diction, able to maintain a chosen topic and to rev it up. But that same cleverness often leads into wider and more interesting regions, as in ''A Bird's Life.'' Some of the cleverest poems, just through their intense unity, succeed in becoming greater things, as in the heart poem mentioned earlier, or in ''Sleeping Overnight on the Shore,'' or in a wonderful poem about ''The Watch.'' Partly, the most successful poems succeed through the ambition, the scope of the curiosity, of the writer; she pursues remote things, how the universe started, what will happen when . . . if. . . .

William Stafford. *Poetry*. Dec., 1967, pp. 184–85

May Swenson is the poet of the perceptible. No writer employs with greater care the organs of sense to apprehend and record the surfaces of the world. She is the exemplar of that first canon of the poet—*Behold!*

From the time her poetry began appearing in the early 1950s in such places as *New Directions in Prose and Poetry, Discovery*, the *New Yorker*, *and Poetry*, Miss Swenson's work in its concentration on the sensible has been very much her own. The preoccupation with perception dominates the poetry of her successive volumes—*Another Animal* (1954), *A Cage of Spines* (1958), *To Mix with Time: New and Selected Poems* (1963), *Poems to Solve* (1966), and *Half Sun Half Sleep* (1967). One can name, however, if not influences, at any rate some poets whose work runs parallel to hers. Her development of visual detail has some relationship to the accurate reporting of Marianne Moore. It is sometimes close to that other remarkable declarer of what is there, Elizabeth Bishop. Her interest in nature, its small creatures and their large implications, is reminiscent of Emily Dickinson. In form, her work may have had some relationship to the experiments of E.E. Cummings, though it has always been a distant one, her experiments having gone farther into the visual and less into the verbal than his. . . .

It is as an observer that May Swenson has become best known. Such a comment as Robert Lowell's ''Miss Swenson's quick-eyed poems should be hung with permanent fresh paint signs'' represents a common reaction. Miss Swenson achieves this freshness by a good eye enlivened by imagination. But however imaginative, her poetry is continually tied to accuracy of sight, to truth to the literal and concrete. This is so even when the truth is conveyed by metaphor or in a spirit of aesthetic play. From the beginning, Miss Swenson has demonstrated an unusual ability to set down accurate and detailed observations. . . .

Miss Swenson's involvement with the perceptibly solid is further seen in her placement of the poem on the page. Lines and spaces are carefully arranged in patterns appropriate to the subject. Some words are given typographical emphasis by being set off and repeated. Even punctuation and capitalization—or the lack of them—are arranged for visual effect. . . .

This linking of the parts of the poem, the care in its visual physical arrangement, is not related to form alone. It reflects the careful observation, the respect for the whole range of the senses, that goes into the language and concepts that Miss Swenson presents. Her poems are not limited to linear time; they are patterns in space as well. The shaped poem represents the poet's response to the aesthetic need for structure, a need met in other poets by the formal stanza or the syllabic or metric line. The enclosing of the poem within spatial boundaries rather than auditory-rhythmic limits is especially appropriate to the perceptual qualities of Miss Swenson's art.

Ann Stanford. *Southern Review*. Winter, 1969, pp. 58–59, 68–69, 71

She is known as a nature poet, ''one of the few good poets who write good poems about nature . . . not just comparing it to states of mind or society,'' as Elizabeth Bishop has remarked. You can easily cull a bestiary from her work, which would include geese, turtles, an owl and its prey, a bee and a rose, frogs, fireflies, cats and caterpillars, landscapes and cityscapes, and always with a wondering, curious eye, an intense concern about the structure and texture of her subject, an extraordinary tactility. ''The pines, aggressive as erect tails of cats,'' begins a poem on ''The Forest.'' A poem called ''Spring Uncovered'' begins, ''Gone the scab of ice that kept it snug,/the lake is naked,'' and ends where ''a grackle, fat as burgundy,/gurgles on a limb'' with ''bottle-glossy feathers.'' She watches things over long periods, and tracks her metaphors through itineraries of implications, with pleasure.

But beyond the naturalist's patient observation lies something else. What critics have called Swenson's ''calculated naïveté'' or her ability to become ''a child, but a highly sophisticated child,'' is actually that childlike ability to envision something freshly, to ask incessant questions and always be prepared for unexpected answers—required of the creative scientist. ''What things really are

we would like to know,'' she murmurs, and what else is the motive of the speculative intellect? Swenson's poetry asks as many questions as a four-year-old, and she wants to know not only how things are made and what they resemble, but where they are going and how we fit in. . . .

While Swenson does not write on feminist themes most of the time, she does so occasionally, with electrifying results. . . . Most often, she blends, she balances. Science, technology, the mental life of observation, speculation: she has invaded these traditionally ''masculine'' territories. Yet her consistent intimacy with her world, which contains no trace of the archetypal ''masculine'' will to conquer or control it, seems archetypally ''feminine.'' So does the way she lets herself be precise yet tentative and vulnerable about her observations where a comparable male poet, perhaps driven by the need to overcome alienation, might be pretentious (Snyder?), pedantic (Olson?), nervous (Ammons? James Wright?) or agonized (Kinnell?); and her affinity for the small-scale object, like Emily Dickinson's, also reads like a feminine characteristic. . . .

Swenson has always had an individual style, though bearing traces here and there of Cummings, Marianne Moore, and especially Emily Dickinson. She has always been committed to formal experimentation, and she has often played with the shapes of poems. . . .

Swenson does not theorize on the subject, but her work shows some ways to express our relation to the natural world as we comprehend it. The shapes in *Iconographs* are shapes of speculation, balanced between the patterned and the random—for so we presently guess Nature to be—and attempting to capture both the ways we fit into the world and the ways we cannot fit. They are playful, quirky, eccentric, and imply that these are qualities intrinsic to the world as well as ourselves. But Swenson is modest as well as mentally fearless, and will not let us pretend that our model-building is more than that.

Alicia Ostriker. *American Poetry Review*. March/April, 1978, pp. 35–36, 38

These poems [in *New and Selected Things Taking Place*] mutter in the passive voice: ''it is observed''; ''it happens.'' The event, the text, stands out even as our guide to it steps back so as not to block the view. May Swenson indeed camouflages herself marvelously, and her protective coloration conveys respect. So we see ''The World'' clarified but glean only hints of ''her world.'' For the poetry has no heroine and no heroics. In this she differs a great deal from so many modern women poets who attempt to find themselves—or at least such fragments of self as are retrievable—in their work. May Swenson, on the contrary, effaces herself, blends into the landscape. . . .

Swenson searches heaven and earth for a vantage point. The problem is, none exists. The meanings of God's spangled heavens have long since split out into the Einsteinian universe. Matter is motion. Fixed view-points swirl away and Swenson so much needs a firm footing and a clear view at first hand of things taking place. The sun, moon, and earth spinning in space are for her, and nearly everybody else, news—acceptable hearsay—third-hand reports. Remote. . . .

May Swenson derives her prime inspiration not from Mother Nature but from nature; she is too empirical to be classified as a ''nature-poet.'' Her close, first-hand observation of the external world, coupled with scrupulous attention to the particular, labels her, wittingly or unwittingly, as a ''naturalist.'' She is also a poet and may lay claim as such to a literary tradition and to her own particular forebears (e.e. cummings and Emily Dickinson for sure, probably Blake and Herbert, Apollinaire perhaps), but she covers her trail well. The book contains, I believe, no direct references to literature and in her particular field of inquiry, the outside or the outdoors, she blithely slips away from the formal, well worn path of the pastoral (there are a few exceptions; ''Green Red Brown and White'' is one) in order to plunge into new territory. She follows odd byways, stalking to catch the local fauna unawares. . . .

May Swenson can fairly be described as gun-shy. *Homo sapiens* makes her nervous. If she cannot declass man a notch or two, fur and feather him as it were, objectify him, she nerves herself and resorts to anthropomorphizing, as she does in the brilliant pot-calling-the-kettle-black, male-female dialogue of ''Bleeding,'' with its text slashed diagonally by a white ribbon of alienation. Generally May Swenson fumbles whenever she has human preoccupations—sporting, social, whatever—on her mind. The voiced-interaction poems drum along, their cross-cutting repetition of words monotonous and mind-numbing, like a mantra. . . .

May Swenson lives on the Eastern seaboard, writes with a Western accent, and sees with a certain amused, clear-sighted naiveté. One has the impression most poetry written by women still is an interior matter and is set within four walls. Although she is not oblivious to the problems of being female. May Swenson is not indoors enough, let alone enough in her own skin, to accommodate herself to the woman poet's present persona. She does not want to ''make waves'' in the sense of stirring up trouble. She leaves the problem of gender pretty much alone, if only because it could be messy (cf. ''Bleeding''). She edges away from the subjective, yet she holds with Romanticism, by which I mean an interest in the particular over the general, the single over the recurring. In selecting events, animals, men, scenery, topics, she is drawn to the non-nondescript, the unique occasion: a moon-landing, the strange animal (bison not cow), the odd man out (a blind man), the picturesque canyons, lakes, or into the gothic and the magical.

But when she is put on her mettle and forced to catch the meaning of the antithetically banal or the flux and flurry of water and snow, wind and weather, then she gives us poems such as ''Working on Wall Street'' and ''Looking Uptown'' and her *Iconographs*. Then she shines.

Rosemary Johnson. *Parnassus*. Fall/Winter, 1978, pp. 47–50, 52, 59

May Swenson's *New and Selected Things Taking Place* collects nearly thirty years of her remarkable poetry. At sixty, she may well be the fiercest, most inquisitive poet of her generation; certainly few are more brilliant or more independent of mien. Her poems . . . are characterized by an extreme reticence of personality, an abundant energy, and an extraordinary intercourse between the natural and intellectual worlds. She has always been as formal as poets come, demonstrating early and late a skilled employment of traditional verse as well as a passion for invented patterns. There are two central obsessions in her work: the search for a proper perspective and the celebration of life's embattled rage to continue.

Her poems ask teleological questions and answer them, insofar as answers are ever possible, in every conceivable poetic strategy: she writes narrative, catalog, image, concrete, interrogatory, and sequence poems (often mixing these in a single work). Her language is generally sonorous, remarkable for its Anglo-Saxon stress, alliteration, extensive word fusions, and a devotion (now declining, it appears) to rhyme. She has made language an instrument for pursuit of ideas, but always ideas discoverable only in things of the experiential world. She believes, apparently, that the world functions according to some hidden final purpose, and furthermore, that a right apprehension ultimately reveals a Coleridgean interconnectedness of all parts. . . .

Nothing so excites Swenson's imagination or reveals her poetic investigation as that image of flight. In poems about airplanes, birds, insects, and especially space exploration, she celebrates the joy of flight. Motion is both her subject and her image, being life itself. Flight, however, rarely means escape; it is her means for exploration, penetration, for travel to and through the world; it is what humans cannot naturally do but . . . what becomes the passage toward and into vision. . . .

Vision, seeing, looking, recording are so pervasive in her poems that one almost forgets how active she makes all the senses in the service of penetrating surfaces. Flight is not only the revelation of human bondage, it is also the vehicle of imaginative and intellectual possibilities. . . .

Never a poet of ennui or cynicism, though often a poet of elegiac grief, she believes that all is beautiful if seen properly. . . .

Dedicated as they are to angles of vision, avoiding autobiography and personality, Swenson's poems necessarily emphasize structure—sometimes to the point of mannerism. Often enough they possess a wonderful lyricism that celebrates; but primarily they nominate, and this occasionally leads to an annoyingly indiscriminate series of similes; a thing looks like this. Or this, or this. This mannerism reveals a kind of ''scientific'' attitude in her work, an attitude also marked by often esoteric and technical terminology—not in itself a problem though it helps create the impression of a dispassionate stance when there is passion present and the need to show it. Swenson's reticence may sometimes mean the difference between a powerful experience and no experience, as in riddles or dry humor. Indeed, one of Swenson's characteristics is a wry wit which sometimes trails off into whimsy, into the glib and clever. . . .

If Swenson sometimes generates consternation and dismay, that fault is born of a poetry urgently trying to tell us that everything matters, a poetry so affirmative that we cannot escape knowing we matter. Even random reading here produces surprise, delight, love, wisdom, joy, and grief. May Swenson transforms the ordinary little-scrutinized world to a teeming, flying first creation.

Dave Smith. *Poetry*. Feb., 1980, pp. 291–95

May Swenson, who died in 1989 at the age of seventy-six, was a lover of riddles. She liked to write them as well as to solve them—the harder the better. Like the riddle poems she assembled in two books for young readers, all her poems have the capacity to tease and delight. ''A poem is a thing,'' Swenson tells us in her introduction to one of these collections, *More Poems to Solve* (1972). Often based on intricate mechanisms that are not easily replicated, Swenson's poems seem more to have been constructed than composed. Excerpting them is an extreme disservice, as it limits the reader's perspective of the overall design. The poems often take up space in every direction on the page, asserting their identity quite literally at every turn. Individual poems have the kinetic ability to spill over diagonally into stanzaic receptacles, embody the shape and spirit of paintings by De Chirico, and spin like a top around a still center. Although Swenson was clearly engaged in the experimental enterprise to a degree that would charm any scientist, her poetic experimentation was more a means than an end. A language poet before the phrase was coined, she surely would have disdained the label, for her poems are clearly ''about'' more than the words themselves.

If, like Dickinson, Swenson ''tells it slant,'' that slantwise logic is as much a part of her identity as any political or aesthetic affiliation. Riddling, like role playing, is made up of art and craft, and the critic or biographer must rise to the challenge. The poem, ''Her Early Work,'' with its overt reference to Elizabeth Bishop's 1933 poem, ''A Word with You,'' anticipates the biographer's task. . . . Bishop had a formative impact on Swenson's poetry, as the two met at Yaddo when Swenson was producing her own ''early work.'' That literary kinship implies a verbal give-and-take which stretches the boundaries of time and corporeality. ''A Word with You'' is, in fact, a very early poem for Bishop. Its completion date of 1933 places it long before the publication of Bishop's first book, *North and South*, in 1946. ''Her Early Work'' is from the last book published in Swenson's lifetime, In *Other Words* (1987). These ''early and late'' historical markers are bookends for a literary era. Swenson's book title suggests an act of interpretation which translates the whispered ''word with you'' into her own terms. The fact that Swenson would choose to look back at this particular Bishop poem implies a personal connection, since the poem is seldom mentioned in other critical or biographical sources on Bishop. . . .

The poem ''Her Early Work'' thus presupposes the sorting and filing of a poetic enterprise that generally happens after death, or that can feel, to the living writer, like death in life. It has the cumulative effect of drawing us back to the body of Swenson's work and to the work of others by whom she was influenced. In addition, the poem anticipates the possibility of Swenson's own literary influence to poets of future generations. Since Bishop is included in this gesture, the circle of influence would also extend to Bishop's own poetic mentor, Marianne Moore. . . .

All three poets shared a lifelong fascination with animals and their habits. Each in her own way used observations of animals in natural or man-made environments to suggest elements of the human drama. The zoo setting generates mental images of the famous photograph of Marianne Moore in front of the elephant cage or of a young Bishop and an older Moore on their first public outing to the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus in 1934.

Sue Russell. ''A Mysterious and Lavish Power.'' *Kenyon Review*. Summer, 1994, pp. 128–30

''In black sleep brightness keep,'' wrote May Swenson . . . in ''Incantation,'' the last poem in *Nature*, her posthumous collection. This volume of exuberant poems is the materialization of that

wish. Even the book's cover is bright—red overlaid with leaf drawings and a painting of Apollo and Daphne in a wreath of flowers. We've read most of these poems before, but just as the appearance of colors changes when put on a new field, each poem takes on a different aspect grouped (as they are) in categories such as ''Feather,'' comprising bird and angel poems, and ''Visions,'' works about what the poet sees, the oddities of vision itself, and, of course, the broader meaning of visions.

Cynthia Ozick has said, ''May Swenson sees more minutely than anyone, and with nearly a holy exactitude.'' Swenson commands us to ''look closer.'' In the poem by that name, we sense her kneeling down, scrutinizing plants with the wonderment of a child and the precision of a scientist. Reference to eyes and, by extension, sight, are constant in her poems. . . .

This volume, *Nature: Poems Old & New*, negates the notion that art doesn't replicate itself. These poems, harvested from her life's work and arranged in this delightful format, promotes a lasting vision of Swenson's valuable contribution to American poetry.

Rochelle Natt. *American Book Review*. September–October, 1995, p. 14

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TAN, Amy (1952–)

Snappy as a fortune cookie and much more nutritious, *The Joy Luck Club* is a jolly treatment of familiar conflicts (between mothers and daughters, immigrants and natives) in a new guise. The club's four mah-jongg-playing ladies are Chinese, but their daughters (three of whom have Chinese fathers) are American. Or so *they* say. Even after forty years in San Francisco, certain behavior patterns do not unravel. When a girlfriend advises Waverly Place Jong to tell her mother ''to stop ruining your life. Tell her to shut up,'' she replies, ''Well, I don't know if it's explicitly stated in the law, but you can't *ever* tell a Chinese mother to shut up. You could be charged as an accessory to your own murder.''

The Joy Luck Club is lively and bright but not terribly deep. The stories resolve themselves too neatly and cozily, and are often burdened with symbols (a spindly-legged table or a weed-choked garden for an unhappy marriage) that flatten them out. One cannot help being charmed, however, by the sharpness of observation, the mixture of familiarity and strangeness, and, finally, the universality of Tan's themes: I was amused by how Jewish the Chinese mothers sound, with their honey-voiced, dragon-hearted competitiveness over children and food, their insistence that they are not criticizing, merely remarking. . . . *The Joy Luck Club* becomes a happy illustration of its own subject, a combination of Chinese subtlety and American ingenuity.

Rhoda Koenig. *New York*. March 20, 1989, p. 82

The Joy Luck Club is a segmented novel eloquently blending the voices of four Chinese immigrants and their daughters. The mothers become friends, meeting regularly in what they call ''the Joy Luck Club'' to play mah-jongg, buy stocks and gossip. The novel is narrated horizontally as well as vertically; friendships and rivalries develop among the daughters as well as among the mothers. . . .

Tan's book is organized into four chapters—the first relating the separate lives of the mothers; the next two focusing on the daughters' stories; the last returning to the mothers. Tan is a deft, vivacious conductor, evoking spirited individuality as well as harmony. . . .

Throughout *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan tests the distance between expectation and reality. Jing-mei Woo explains, ''America was where all my mother's hopes lay. She had come here in 1949 after losing everything in China: her mother and father, her family home, her first husband, and two daughters, twin baby girls. But she never looked back with regret. There were so many ways for things to get better.'' But she goes on:

> In the years that followed, I failed her so many times, each time asserting my own will, my right to fall short of expectations. I didn't get straight A's. I didn't become class president. I didn't get into Stanford. I dropped out of college. . . . For unlike my mother, I did not believe I could be anything I wanted to be. I could only be me.

Each of these first-generation daughters is a guardian angel, helping her mother negotiate the baffling San Francisco culture. And the mothers remain loyal to their often-disappointing daughters. The women in each family are held together by pride, embarrassment and longing. They are, indeed, the loves of one another's lives.

Tan has a remarkable ear for dialogue and dialect, representing the choppy English of the mothers and the sloppy California vernacular of the daughters with sensitive authenticity. These stories are intricately seamed with the provocative questions about language that emerge from bilingual and trilingual homes. In families where verbal exchanges can prove problematic, one sometimes turns to other kinds of oral communication: Tan's cooking scenes are drawn with subtle intensity. ''My father hadn't eaten well since my mother died. So I am here, in the kitchen, to cook him dinner. I'm slicing tofu. I've decided to make him a spicy bean-curd dish. My mother used to tell me how hot things restore the spirit and health. But I'm making this mostly because I know my father loves the dish and I know how to cook it. I like the smell of it: ginger, scallions and a red chili sauce that tickles my nose the minute I open the jar.''

The segmented structure of *The Joy Luck Club* encourages readers to think simultaneously in different directions. There are some flaws. Several characters, particularly Rose Hsu Jordan and Ying-ying St. Clair, could be more fully developed. Occasionally a device used for narrative effect—such as when Jing-mei Woo asks in the last chapter, at age thirty-six, what her Chinese name means—defies credibility. Generally, however, *The Joy Luck Club* is a stunningly auspicious debut. Tan is a gifted storyteller who reaches across cultures and generations:

Valerie Miner. *The Nation*. April 24, 1989, pp. 566–67

The Joy Luck Club is a huge hit in America: number two on the *New York Times* bestseller list (after *The Satanic Verses*); U.S. paperback rights sold for one and a quarter million dollars. It's good, but not *that* good: what it is is ethnic, and about mothers and daughters. I can just see the jubilation when this perfect combination of flavors-of-the-American-month arrived on the publishers' desk. By contrast the English reaction to ideological correctness has always been deep suspicion. If *The Joy Luck Club* is successful here I hope it will be for its intrinsic qualities, and in proportion to them.

It has many. The oriental artist starts with an advantage: a culture of indirection and artifice; the knowledge that successful stories (all successful communication) must be cunningly crafted. *The Joy Luck Club* is *very* cunningly crafted—thus disproving one of its own themes, that American children lose Chinese values. It has four mother-daughter pairs, four parts of four chapters each, four corners of the mah-jong table at which the women of the Joy Luck Club tell their stories. In part one the Chinese mothers begin their stories; in parts two and three the daughters tell theirs; finally in part four the mothers' stories are resolved.

This is very clever. The Chinese stories can't help but be fascinating, and so we are caught and held to the end. They're also cleverly planned to cover every sort of Chinese woman's character and experience: strong and weak, rich and poor, wife and concubine. . . .

In parts two and three we see what happens to these women in America, through the eyes and fates of their daughters. Some of this is realistic and amusing: the daughters' embarrassment over the mothers' unAmerican ways, the mothers' fierce competition. . . .

But some of it, I feel, Amy Tan's teacher, writers' group and editors should have cautioned her against. *The Joy Luck Club* is *over*-schematic. We move too often from one corner of the table to another to remember or care enough about each. And at the same time it is over-significant. In the end it gives you indigestion, as if you've eaten too many Chinese fortune cookies, or read too many American Mother's Day cards. Each part begins with a Chinese parable; each chapter title is deeply meaningful; each story, event and name is packed with messages about life, love, dependence, memory.

Finally, in all this craft and care there is a central imbalance. Most of the stories come out of Amy Tan's own family; out of her life, her mother's and grandmother's. Suyuan Woo's Joy Luck Club is real; so are her twin daughters left by the roadside in 1949. Even if I hadn't learned this from the publicity handout I would have felt it from Jing-Mei Woo's role as our central story-teller, and from the special drive and passion of Suyuan's story. But Amy Tan gives half her mother's story to An-Mei, so that we learn less of Suyuan's story than of the other mothers'; and she tells us less of Jing-Mei's grown-up life than of the other daughters'.

That is (I think after reading this novel) very Chinese. But it left a gap in a book otherwise as strictly balanced as an equation. Who said that all writers should burn their first, autobiographical novels? That's nonsense. Of course, all autobiographical first novels aren't good but all good first novels are autobiographical. Amy Tan's first novel would have been better if it had been about her mother and grandmother; then she could have left the others for her second and third. And they would have been better still. As it is, I hope her too early and too easy—her too American—success won't have spoilt her altogether. I bet her mother has a Chinese proverb about *that*.

Carole Angier. *New Statesman and Society*. June 30, 1989, p. 35

Her first [novel,] *The Joy Luck Club*, took the U.S. by storm two years ago with a central mother-daughter relationship so powerful that it pulled the book away from any literary or ethnic ghetto. Tan has done it again with a big, bold story [*The Kitchen God's Wife*] set in pre-revolutionary Shanghai and framed by a contemporary family drama whose near-misses of communication, secret trade-offs, and emotional culs-de-sac brilliantly describe its own culture while refusing its limitations.

Chinese-American Pearl cannot tell her mother that she has multiple sclerosis. Winnie, in turn, has never told Pearl the truth about her life before she arrived in the States in 1949. Thanks to the dislocation of emigration and the chaos of revolution, it has been easy to reinvent the past, to change, names, places and people. Only the threat of Winnie's friend Helen (real name Hulan) to tell Pearl what really happened galvanizes Winnie (real name Veili) into setting the record straight.

Winnie's story of her life in Shanghai in the 1930s and 1940s is stuffed with documentary detail. We learn about tea, hairdressing, dowries and going to the lavatory in pre-revolutionary China. We catch the decadence, the sweet-sour smell of an over-ripe culture on the turn. Teenage girls from genteel business families gossip about Ginger Rogers, kept in line by a phalanx of formidable aunts and mothers-in-law who nonetheless are powerless to protect them against the weakest and cruellest of men.

Reluctant to comment on the importance of its own project, *The Kitchen God's Wife* tells its story without a scrap of literary self-importance. Yet its very lack of pretension, its refusal to puff its own processes, draws attention to our own lack of stories by women from immigrant cultures: in Britain we have, as yet, no female equivalent of Mo or Rushdie.

Kathryn Hughes. *New Statesman and Society*. July 12, 1991, p. 38

In her new book, *The Kitchen God's Wife* . . . Tan juxtaposes the Chinaborn mother's inner turmoil with the U.S.-born daughter's trepidation. The cultural distance between mother and daughter contributes to the fears they have for (and the secrets they keep from) each other. As daughter Pearl tells it, ''To this day it drives me crazy, listening to her various hypotheses, the way religion, medicine, and superstition all merge with her own beliefs. She's like a Chinese version of Freud, or worse.''

But the mother, Winnie, bears the weight of a tragic past that she cannot share with her daughter. Abandoned by *her* mother—one of five wives—at age six, she is raised by uncaring relatives. To escape, she marries a charming actor who turns out to be an unscrupulous brute; he tortures her through beatings, public humiliation, and rape. She endures the hardships of war-torn China with him, bearing three children, eventually burying each. Her planned escape to the U.S. to join her new love is nearly botched when her estranged ex-husband tracks her down, beats and rapes her. Nine months later, Pearl is born. ''I have tried to think how I would tell my daughter,'' Winnie muses. ''But every time I begin, I can hear her voice, so much hurt.''

When a family friend tricks mother and daughter into disclosing their secrets. Winnie's tale of her life in China is a gift to Pearl—a large but missing piece of her own identity.

Helen Zia. *Ms*. November-December, 1991, p. 76

Here's cause for celebration: a handsome new storybook by Amy Tan. . . .

Ms. Tan makes details from her Chinese-American background totally accessible. Indeed, many of the finest moments in her adult novels are when she evokes the particular and peculiar texture of a childhood world most of her readers will never experience.

The Moon Lady is an invitation to young children to attend a long-ago moon festival in China. The reader travels along with seven-year-old Ying-ying, spending a wide-eyed day of pleasure, waiting to encounter Lady Chang-o, who lives on the moon and who once a year fulfills the secret, unspoken wishes of the heart. This is a story with deep, satisfying meanings, a tale of a lost child who for a prolonged and terrifying moment risks losing even her sense of self. . . .

I may seem greedy to want more, but there are structural flaws in the first and last pages, which are also marred by stilted dialogue and spurious morals. These bookends aren't needed. *The Moon Lady* can stand alone without the extra baggage of flashback and update. There is no need to place Ying-ying's adventures within the long and honorable tradition of the ''grandmother's tale.'' Perhaps

Ms. Tan overestimates the need of her audience for reassurance that Ying-ying lived to tell her tale or underestimates children's capacity to grasp character through action rather than announcement. There is no need for *this* grandmother to insist she once fidgeted; any reader who spends five minutes with Ying-ying easily discovers this first-hand.

Ellen Schecter. *The New York Times*. November 8, 1992, p. 31

The multivalent structure of *The Joy Luck Club* resists reduction to simple geometric designs; nevertheless, two figures—the rectangle and the circle—help to chart Tan's play on the theme of maternality. As the novel begins, June takes her place with three Joy Luck aunties around the mah-jong table. Her position at one of the table's cardinal points determines the direction of her journey east which ends in China. At the end point of June's story, the trope of the rectangle merges with that of the circle: June's arrival in China brings her full circle to the place where her mother's story began, and her meeting with her half-sisters sets into motion a circulation of mirrored relationships blurring identities, generations, and languages. Because it repudiates linearity and symmetry, the circle is a privileged motif in feminist writings, one that suggests the possibility of reconfiguring traditional familial dynamics and dismantling the hierarchical arrangements of the Oedipal triangle and the patriarchal family. For instance, in her book on the reclamation of the pre-Oedipal in women's novels, Jean Wyatt envisions ''the possibility . . .of imagining alternative family relations based on preoedipal patterns—family circles whose fluidity of interchange challenges the rigid gender and generational hierarchies of the patriarchal family.'' In Wyatt's analysis, there persists, in women's writings, the fantasy of a nurturant family where ''family members come forward to share the work of fostering others' development [so that] the responsibility for nurturing [is extended] to a whole circle of 'mothering' people''

In *The Joy Luck Club*, the discrete identities of familial members are woven into a collectivized interchangeability through the novel's parataxis—its use of contiguous juxtapositions of voices, narratives, and motifs. Through the novel's interweaving of time frames and voices, three generations of women are included within a relational network linking grandmothers, mothers, daughters, aunts, and sisters. For these women, however, mutual nurturance does not arise from biological or generational connections alone; rather, it is an act affirming consciously chosen allegiances. As Wyatt suggests, mothering as a ''reciprocal activity'' generally presupposes ''a strong mother figure who has a central position in the family,'' but even ''when the mother is not there, the circle remains, its diffuse bonds extend a circle of equals who take turns nurturing each other.'' In *The Joy Luck Club*, the death of June's mother, Suyuan, invites the Joy Luck aunties to step into the circle of ''mothering reciprocity''; indeed, it is Suyuan's absence that inaugurates the meeting between June and her half-sisters, when they confirm their mutual identification as each other's sisters *and* mothers.

As we have seen, the maternal voices in *The Joy Luck Club* begin to shift from ''I'' to ''you'' to engage the discrete subjectivities of mother and daughter in a tentative exchange of recognitions and identifications. In the same way, the novel's resonant structure and its use of parataxis effectively write the reader into the text as a crucial participant in the making of meaning. The reader of *The Joy Luck Club* is a weaver of intricate interconnections who must, like Suyuan's unraveling of an old sweater, randomly ''pull out a kinky thread of yarn, anchoring it to a piece of cardboard, [roll] with a sweeping rhythm, [and] start [a] story.'' This way of engaging the reader as an active constructor of meaning allows the feminist novel to project a community of sisterly readers. In tracing a family history that blurs the demarcations between the roles of mothers, daughters, and sisters, *The Joy Luck Club* breaks down the boundary between text and reader in order to proffer the notions of sisterhood as a literary construction and as a community constituted through the act of reading. At once disintegrative and constructive in its operations, the novel holds its dual impulses in unresolved suspension and fulfills its fundamentally transformative project—a mutation from daughter-text to mother-text to sister-text.

Marina Heung.*Feminist Studies*. 19, 1993, pp. 612–13

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TARKINGTON, Booth (1869–1946)

The Conquest of Canaan is distinctively the drama of situation, of environment on the one hand and of plot on the other; not primarily the drama of character. This is not to say that there is not real character—that there are not real characters—in the book. Admirable draughtsman that he is, Mr. Tarkington has never done more telling work than in the sketches he has given us of the group of old war-horses of town gossip who assembled daily at the ''National House'' in Canaan, Indiana . . . As for the judge, when he was bad, he was very, very bad, and when he was good he was horrid. You can fairly hear hisses from the gallery when he taunts the virtuous heroine with the loss of her gold. The scene in which hero Joe confronts him with his villainies is enough to send shivers of delight down the back of any reader whose wholesome tastes have not been vitiated by your decadent Ibsens and Henry Jameses.

Edward Clark Marsh. *Bookman*. Jan., 1906. p. 518

But if Penrod be a worthy cousin of Tom Sawyer, he is much more a worthy younger brother of Hedrick Madison, that diabolical and delightful boy of Mr. Tarkington's *The Flirt*. He lacks two years of Hedrick's age, and four or five years in the matter of literary precocity, but he has more sentiment, and every bit of Hedrick's riotous imagination. Hedrick, in his fourteenth year, aspired to *Henry Esmond*, and interspersed his conversation with fragments of French derisively intended. Penrod, at eleven, is himself a practitioner of the noble art of fiction, and his Harold Ramorez is a hero of truly epic proportions. The book would be worth while if it contained nothing but the chapter entitled ''Romance.''

Blair West Witherspoon. *Bookman*. May, 1914. p. 336

The enjoyment of good fiction is like the enjoyment of good friendship: it is a thing easy to feel, but in the last analysis hard to

explain. And in the case of such a novel as Booth Tarkington's *The Turmoil* it is the ''last analysis'' that counts. Ultimately the charm of this tale is as real and as elusive as is the personality of a friend. One would prefer, then, to take it for granted that Mr. Tarkington is in all respects a capable story-teller—that he understands fully the kind of American life he is writing about; that he knows how to draw character convincingly; that he may be trusted to invent along the lines of probability, and to dovetail his plot with skill. And, on the other hand, one would like to bring out as forcibly as possible the fact that there is in Mr. Tarkington's novels—and especially in this latest one, *The Turmoil*—a freshness and reality of interest such as it is within the power of few writers to produce. . . . To write a novel of contemporary life with its scene in an unbeautiful American manufacturing city; to portray with adequate realism, and in full daylight, the smoke, the dirt, and the people; to refrain from romanticizing scene or psychology; to deal with elemental, vital motives, such as love and jealousy and the driving power of modern business ambition; and through it all never to be commonplace or depressing, but always to preserve a sense of the joy and interest of life, even enhancing the reader's sense of life's richness, livableness, worthwhileness—this would seem to be a task unmistakably requiring fertility of mind, buoyancy of temperament, that healthy and highly developed imagination that works wonders in fiction and in life.

North American Review. March, 1916. pp. 452–3

The scene of the story [*The Magnificent Ambersons*] is clearly the Middle West, and the atmosphere is that of a newly arrived city, Indianapolis, or Cleveland, or Omaha; but the spiritual values are no less current in Boston, or Atlanta, or San Francisco—in short they are American. The limitation that it is a class novel is balanced by the fact that it is the typically American class which is presented—the class which incarnates the American ideal and to which all good Americans aspire. . . . How total is Mr. Tarkington's recall of the American Biedermeyer period is evident in the pages of his mise en scene. . . .

. . . Readers of the *Education of Henry Adams* will remember his question—''The woman had once been supreme—why was she unknown in America?'' Mr. Tarkington's novel gives one answer. Sex in one form is prepotent in America. ''An American Virgin would never dare command,'' says Adams. True, but an American mother in her subjection is stronger than the Virgin on her throne. It is to Mr. Tarkington's credit as an artist that he fits this theme perfectly into the American setting and handles it with reserve and proportion, in good faith and without cynicism. His method is disarmingly simple and his touch gentle, with the good nature that in America takes the place of urbanity. Above all, he gives us spiritual values according to American standards, and professes his own artistic belief in them.

Robert Morss Lovett. *Dial*. Jan. 25, 1919. pp. 86–7

The study of Alice [Adams] herself is masterly in its insight and the picture of her father is just as good. Ironically enough, it has been said that Booth Tarkington did not like *Main Street* and planned *Alice Adams* as an answer. To be sure he has bettered the contentions of Sinclair Lewis but nothing has been offered in rebuttal. The dinner on the hot night completes one of the most devastating pictures of American life which has ever been drawn. And incidentally no living writer can do more with temperature than Tarkington. F. Scott Fitzgerald in a short story called ''The Ice Palace'' made us feel almost as cold as we ever feared to be, but Tarkington cannot be matched for bringing home humidity. *Alice Adams* is a book to move the heart and wilt the collar.

Heywood Broun. *Bookman*. Dec., 1921. p. 395

Little reflective as he has allowed himself to be, he has by shrewd observation alone succeeded in writing not a few chapters which have texture, substance, ''thickness.'' He has movement, he has energy, he has invention, he has good temper, he has the leisure to write as well as he can if he wishes to. . . . Why does he drift with the sentimental tide and make propaganda for provincial complacency? He must know better. He can do better. *February 1921*

POSTSCRIPT.—He has done better. Almost as if to prove a somewhat somber critic in the wrong and to show that newer novelists have no monopoly of the new style of seriousness, Mr. Tarkington has in *Alice Adams* held himself veracious to the end and has produced a genuinely significant book. . . . Mr. Tarkington might have gone further than he has behind the bourgeois assumptions which his story takes for granted, but he has probably been wiser not to. Sticking to familar territory, he writes with the confident touch of a man unconfused by speculation. His style is still swift, still easy, still flexible, still accurate in its conformity to the vernacular. He attempts no sentimental detours and permits himself no popular superfluities. He has retained all his tried qualities of observation and dexterity while admitting to his work the element of a sterner conscience than it has heretofore betrayed.

Carl Van Doren. *Contemporary American Novelists, 1900–1928* (Macmillan). 1928. pp. 92–4

The novel in which Tarkington's varying excellences come nearest to a complete mingling is *Alice Adams* (1921). It is a comedy, gay but penetrating, of a small-town girl who would like to impress the world that she is the petted darling of an indulgent good-mannered family. . . . At the end matters in the Adams family are much as they were at the beginning, except that Alice instead of practicing coquetry before her mirror is in a business college learning to be a stenographer. Tarkington captured the individuality of each person in the action. The story gave him the right opportunities—for good American family humor, for scalpel satire, for a little of American big business but not too much, for keenly contested struggle, and for constantly running geniality. Tarkington loved all the characters, including even the dishonest brother. The reader likewise loves them. *Alice Adams* has all the fun of *Penrod* and *Seventeen*. It has also the touch of seriousness and significance which they lack. It is fast coming to be recognized as Tarkington's masterpiece.

Vernon Loggins. *I Hear America* (Crowell). 1937. pp. 342–3

Presented now in book form they [*Three Selected Novels*] are interesting as examples of the unfailing skill of their author as a story-teller and his genius as a reporter of the upper middle classes of the mid-West during the first third of the twentieth century. Tarkington was a gentle satirist; he realized fully the dual nature of

all people, and was inclined to consider evil a temporary aberration rather than a full-time occupation of the soul. . . .

There is no denying the thinness of the material here, but it makes no difference. Tarkington could describe the inside of a vacuum cleaner and make it fascinating; reading him is like gulping ice cream on a hot night—cool and easy. He was a historian of the manners and morals of his time; he was also an entertainer. In the present volume he demonstrates a literary version of the Indian rope trick—stories which stand up without apparent foundation. No writer in his time could do half so well.

Thomas Sugrue. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 10, 1947. p. 12

While vacationing at French Lick Springs in March and April, Tarkington began the literary exploitation of his legislative experience. Although he modestly doubted his ability to write a political novel based on his recent term of office, he set to work immediately on two of the short stories that eventually grew into the collection *In the Arena* (1905). One was ''The Aliens,'' which he called a ''story of politics in a tough precinct.'' This tale makes only indirect use of the legislative session, but it is a political story with a vengeance, an unrelieved little tragedy that deserves to be better known. Tarkington's observation of ward politics at their slimiest produced in this story a work of naturalistic fiction. The other story written at French Lick is identifiable only as a tale that one of Tarkington's political friends told him, but the early magazine publication date of ''Boss Gorgett,'' a tale of machine politics in municipal government, suggests that it was one of the first stories written in *In the Arena*.

James L. Woodress. *American Literature*. May, 1954. p. 221

For once in his career he was guaranteed a clinical detachment. Here he felt no need for apologetics. His focus, so generally softened by fondness for the ''better people,'' in *Alice Adams* flicked on sharply to dissect the ''little people.'' Fortunately, Tarkington also had the gifts of humor and compassion. The Adamses are seen in the round as only an artist could have seen them and made them live with significance. By an accident of economics in real life, the Adamses represent a special American era of ambition and disaster. They are the creation of a novelist whose characteristic commercial success and literary failure arise from his conformity to the very world against which the young expatriates of Paris and Greenwich Village were rebelling. The ironic triumph in the writing of *Alice Adams* is that of conformity with a difference. The Adamses' meaning and their pathos are not limited to a calendar date; but no other novelist made quite the same contribution to the record of the 1920's.

Winfield Townley Scott. *American Scholar*. Spring, 1957. p. 194

Although the literal mind of childhood encounters the adventures of Huckleberry Finn with an empathy never to be recaptured, it is only with maturity that one can appreciate the fine-edged irony sheathed in Huck's point of view, can become aware of the artist—the man behind the boy. ''To read it young,'' Lionel Trilling has written, ''is like planting a tree young—each year adds a new growth ring of meaning.'' It would be a wonderful compensation for adulthood if all the literary companions of our youth could grow as we grow, like their flesh-and-blood counterparts, gathering moral stature as we gain moral insight, but unfortunately, this is not the case. For another classic of American boyhood, Booth Tarkington's *Penrod*, has withstood the test of time, but not the demands of maturity. It remains a book for boys, and if the adult reader retreats into its pages in the afternoon hope of a delightful moral discovery, he is foredoomed to failure. Not that such an excursion is a waste of time—far from it. Discoveries are to be made in *Penrod*, as in *Huckleberry Finn*, and if they are not wonderful, at least they are fascinating.

John D. Seelye. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Autumn, 1961. p. 591

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TATE, Allen (1899–1979)

Tate . . . is a Catholic by intellectual conviction (though not by communion), he is Southern Agrarian by social background, he is a man of letters trained in the Late Romantic or Symbolist tradition—and these are three positions that cannot be reconciled anywhere short of Nirvana. The South, for example, was not in its great days hospitable either to Romantic poetry or to any other forms of creative literature . . . it was and remains hostile to Rome. Today if Tate carried his praise of traditional religion to the logical point of joining the Church, he would be alienating himself from his own people. . . . He would be forcing himself to reject many poets whom he still admires, with a divided mind. It almost seems that his essays are being written by three persons, not in collaboration but in rivalry (and we are given occasional hints of a fourth, a disciple of Schopenhauer rich in Yogi wisdom and prepared to reject the whole world as a realm of unmitigated evil).

Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*. April 29, 1936. p. 348

Let us return to certainties and pieties which can enlist our allegiance; let us revive the magic power inherent in tradition; let us rebuild the foundations of our ruined faith. This is substantially Tate's credo, and it is, what he intended it to be, ''reactionary.'' . . . Whether or not Allen Tate is entitled to speak for the South, he does not represent the advanced thought of his time. He is a sectional prophet, a provincial thinker. . . . Because his call to tradition is no more than a repudiation of the present and a nostalgic flight to the past . . . and because he has lent himself to the service of economic obscurantism, he is guilty of that treason to the intellectuals which is so alarming a symptom of contemporary thought.

Charles Glicksberg. *Sewanee Review*. Summer, 1937. pp. 294–5

It is a curious story which Allen Tate unfolds (in *The Fathers*), subtly and delicately, all the notes muted. It is a story which lends itself readily enough to the allegorical suggestion, and the rhythm of the prose reminds us that a poet wrote it. It is concerned with imponderables, with the meanings behind the formal speeches and codes, with clashing philosophies of life symbolized by people who would never use the term. It is a psychological horror story, but it is the psychology of Henry James rather than of William Faulkner; despite the catastrophe that overwhelms all the characters it is concerned with life rather than death, with significance rather than with futility.

Henry Steele Commager. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Sept. 25, 1938. p. 5

The prose is straightforward and, sentence by sentence, of the utmost simplicity. Yet the air of the narrative is charged, and behind the words, behind the imaginary narrator, who is rather a simple fellow—we are aware of a mind sharp and intense, clear as to its own situation, yet so caught in difficulties that it seems devious; secure in its own courage and yet in the midst of combat never ignorant of the imminence of defeat. . . . Mr. Tate is not unaware of the conflict in which he is involved. Because he is a poet and because it is as clear in his mind as it is confused in his emotions, he has created out of it, first in his poetry, and now in his prose, a dramatic irony, which for intensity is scarcely to be surpassed among his contemporaries.

John Peale Bishop. *New Republic*. Nov. 9, 1938. pp. 25–6

Allen Tate is a poet who seldom achieves Frost's perfection of style, but he has other qualities. He is too intelligent and cosmopolitan to find in his region, the South, the absolute satisfaction that Frost discovers in his attachment to New England. Indeed, he remains unreconciled to pretty much everything: our literature, our civilization, our wars. . . . If, then, Tate lacks Frost's repose, he also lacks his complacency. If his work is a perpetual experiment, a poetry labored out of intractable material by the naked will, it is invariably *interesting*. . . . And it is Tate, not Frost, who influences the younger poets.

F.W. Dupee. *The Nation*. April 21, 1945. p. 466

Allen Tate's poems are beautiful examples of what a hard, select intelligence can press out of rather deadly insights—but insights that are self-consistent and profound. . . . In his poetry, Tate traverses a hall of metaphysical fears and memorial pieties, at one end of which is The South and at the other The Abyss. . . . Tate's finest poems . . . are fruitless lyrics, and they impose astringent judgments upon the world and time we inhabit. Our nature as Americans is a divided nature, and if we listen carefully we may learn from this Tennessean accurate symbols of the guilt that returns and returns to us.

Robert Fitzgerald. *New Republic*. April 26, 1948. pp. 31–2

There are no trivia in Tate's *Collected Poems*. Every line seems to have found its inevitable final form, even if this took years of tinkering by the master workman. . . . Hart Crane once urged Tate to be true to ''your language'' in ''so pure a way that it will be noticeable, and you will do well enough.'' Today Crane's prophecy has been more than fulfilled by Tate's long aesthetic asceticism, his uncompromising devotion to language.

Peter Viereck. *Atlantic Monthly*. Nov., 1948. pp. 96–8

Mr. Tate is an earnest and subtle critic who turns his inquiring eye on past and present literature with the pure intention of perceiving it and its problems with clarity—of noting necessary distinctions, eliminating confusion and misapprehensions, and illuminating the distinctive qualities of artistic literary expression. He is often rather like a man with a powerful pair of field-glasses reporting to his friends (who lack such aids) what he sees: his friends, not being able to see through the glasses, cannot always quite make out from his description of what he sees exactly what he is describing; but they do know that he is giving an honest and careful report of what is visible to him.

David Daiches. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 25, 1948. p. 10

I do not see how to avoid saying that Allen Tate is our finest literary intelligence, though remarks like this have about them what Mr. Tate himself calls ''an edifying generality'': they make their subject sound remote and inhuman. . . . All we ought to mean by this ''edifying generality'' is that the demonstrated variety and order of Mr. Tate's awareness are greater than those of any other literary man in America. . . . Nothing could, however, be less fair to him than to make him sound remote and awful, for no one sees more clearly than him the danger of the kind of abstraction which, existing in isolation from nature, operates like a honoric hyperbole, a device for creating false gods and imaginary ghosts.

Arthur Mizener. *New Republic*. April 13, 1953. p. 18

His poems, all of them, even the slightest, are terribly personal. Out of splutter and shambling comes a killing eloquence. Perhaps, this is the resonance of desperation, or rather the formal resonance of desperation. I say ''formal'' because no one has so given us the impression that poetry must be burly, must be courteous, must be tinkered with and recast until one's eyes pop out of one's head. How often something smashes through the tortured joy of composition to strike the impossible bull's-eye! The pre-Armageddon twenties and thirties with all their peculiar fears and enthusiasms throb in Tate's poetry; imitated ad infinitum, it has never been reproduced by another hand.

Robert Lowell. *Sewanee Review*. Autumn, 1959. p. 559

The central tension of *The Fathers*, like that of its design, is a tension between the public and the private life, between the order of civilization, always artificial, imposed by discipline, and at the mercy of its own imperfections, and the disorder of the private life, always sincere, imposed upon by circumstances, and at the mercy of its own impulses. We see, on the one hand, the static condition a society reaches when, by slow degrees, it has disciplined all personal feeling to custom so that the individual no longer exists apart from the ritual of society and the ritual of society expresses all the feelings the individual knows. We see, on the other hand, the forces that exist—because time does not stand still—both within and without the people who constitute a society, that will destroy the discipline of its civilization and leave the individual naked and alone.

Arthur Mizener. *Sewanee Review*. Autumn, 1959. p. 606

Whatever else may be said, this much is sure: Allen Tate's accomplishments have earned him a place as one of the seminal poets of the twentieth century. His impact on the verse of his time has been far-reaching. The sources upon which he has drawn—the English metaphysicals, the classical poets—have through his example become a vitalizing force in poetry today. Reinforced by a rigorous critical foundation put forth with vigor and brilliance in a number of influential essays, his work has been example and model for the best younger poets of his day. If the best poetry of this century is firm and unified, composed in verse both texturally rich and structurally coherent, standing of its own self and making its own case, then the credit must go to Allen Tate as much as to any poet alive.

Louis D. Rubin and Robert D. Jacobs in *South: Modern Southern Literature in Its Cultural Setting*, ed. Louis D. Rubin and Robert D. Jacobs (Doubleday). 1961. p. 247

The ideal, or at least the superior, conditions of the past, the South, the Feudal Age, as Mr. Tate describes them, are significant pastoral images by which to measure the insufficiencies and confusions of our own time; they are dreams of a life in which it was possible to experience things more concretely, more spontaneously, less abstractly and mechanically than perhaps we do now. They are instruments by which Mr. Tate has measured much of what our life might have been and much of what it is, and they are therefore extremely valuable. But I do think I am right in saying that the tone is valedictory and that these pastoral images therefore tell us only what we might have been, not what we ought to be. *The Collected Essays*, that is to say, are a beautiful poem about catastrophe rather than a statement of the dangers and possibilities of life. And as with any such pastoral images, there comes a moment when we ask questions about what is left out.

David Ferry. *Minnesota Review*, Spring, 1961. p. 360

Tate's style presents a specific problem; it is not mysterious and there is no need to speak of ''melody'' or ''lyricism'' or ''intellectuality'' in dealing with it. Let us take two words, both of which describe an aspect of Tate's poetry: ''Latinity'' and ''Vision.'' Then, to avoid inventing more catch words, let us make these terms specific: ''Latinity'' is the formal and indeed abstract aspect of Tate's language; ''Vision'' is his effort to make these abstractions visible through the use of concrete adjectives, the imagery of sight, and related means. I believe we may go one step further, and make ''Latinity'' and ''Vision'' into formal images, that is, stylistic representations of an ideal classical order and a religious imagination. . . . I believe, then, that Tate's style is best seen as the method by which he brings to poetic actuality his polarized vision of the world. The tension between ''Latinity'' and ''Vision'' is an image of the dilemmas we have seen in Tate's criticism: permanent contradictions within human experience of which he is acutely aware.

R.K. Meiners. *The Last Alternatives* (Alan Swallow). 1963. p. 115

He often makes specific representations concerning, say, graduate schools or literary quarterlies. And certainly on these occasions he is mindful of a deeper and more personal issue—his defense of the contemplative against the methodical. But neither these pieces, effective as they have been, nor others which owe their permanent interest to their radical relation with the author's practice as poet, are the really great ones. In that class one thinks of ''The Hovering Fly'' with its urbane *progression d'effet*, the remote passion of its Fordian climax, and of the pieces in *The Forlorn Demon*, where contemplation is not a topic but a mode, and most of the rest of us (whether or no we would write like that if we had the talent) must feel like the political poets whom Tate consigns to childish voyages in Percy Shelley's paper boats. In this volume may be found the

famous distinction between the symbolic and the angelic imaginations, the second characterizing an extreme humanist presumption, the hubris accompanying a desire to liberate poetry from its human limitations; I have wondered whether Tate here silently recalled the greatest of all Stevens' poetry, the passage on the angel in the last section of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*. Certainly to read the two together is to effect a sublime modern confrontation. In these beautiful and difficult essays Tate finds his full critical voice.

Frank Kermode. *Sewanee Review*. Winter, 1964. p. 125

By now the reader must be more and more aware that in Tate's tragic vision all problems are one vast problem. Life in modern society is hell, but hell has a variety of tortures and increasing depths of misery. Tate, like Dante, would lead us by descending circles to the very core of hell. He will not mislead ''the banker and the statesman into the illusion that they have no hell, because as secularists, they have lacked the language to report it.'' Nor will he spare himself; he too is trapped in the modern dilemma, ''his hell has not been for those other people: he has reported his own.''

Part of this hell is modern man's horrible inner fragmentation. With no inner principle of unity, he is like an idiot with no values, with nothing but timeless, unrelated (because there is nothing to relate to) sense experience.

Richard J. O'Dea in *Nine Essays in Modern Literature*, ed. Donald E. Stanford (Louisiana State). 1965. p. 154

When he writes that Nature is pure, inchoate Quality that threatens to overwhelm man and obliterate his identity and humanity, he is speaking obliquely of the inner disorder of sensations, impulses, tensions, random images, and abrupt and dismaying associations. (It is, as we shall see, highly significant that so many of his poems are set in the confused hours of twilight and deal with the reveries of a dazed and ill-controlled mind.) Nature, he tells us, is evil, by which he partly means that evil is centered in man, in the flux and flow of instinctual and sensual energies. . . . Good, for Tate, is the security and serenity that comes of escape from the self—the vortex of Quality—through community with others, a community so desperately needed that it cannot be taken for granted. . . . Knowledge of the universe is self-knowledge and right conduct is self-control made possible by that knowledge and by a nearly total commitment of the individual to the group which furnishes him with sustaining beliefs and guides to behavior. The danger in a society as disorderly and unstructured as that of modern America, Tate believes, is that the social forms may be insufficient; the individual cannot escape from himself and community—society—does not really exist.

John L. Stewart. *The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians* (Princeton). 1965. pp. 312–13

While Tate is not often considered among the major American poets of our century, his best poetry represents a high order of accomplishment. In its variety of styles, Tate's work mingles Latin poetry, Dante, the metaphysicals, Poe, and the symbolists—to name only some of the more obvious formative elements. Much of Tate's art is perhaps unduly cerebral; his poetry may not always adequately combine intellect and emotion, and it may occasionally seem unduly parochial in its expression of the burden of southern history. Yet, at its best, Tate's poetry can be profoundly moving, particularly in those poems which fuse the poet's act of historical location, through the invocation of an ancestral past, with themes and circumstances common to all men regardless of their historical and geographical affiliations.

Haskell M. Block in *The Shaken Realist*, ed. Melvin J. Friedman and John B. Vickery (Louisiana State). 1970. p. 193

In Tate's verse, even more obviously than in Eliot's there are powerful forces of order to create a fruitful tension against the forces of disorder. Thus most of Tate's poems are in regular and traditional meters: sonnets, blank verse, quatrains, and various intricate stanza forms strictly followed; epodes, odes modeled on ''Lycidas'' and on Drayton's ''Ode to the Virginian Voyagers.'' There is no shying away from the conventional iambic pentameter, though much of Tate's best work is done in trimeter (e.g. ''Seasons of the Soul'') or tetrameter—his use of both these latter forms clearly owing much to Yeats's example. The long poem on which he has been at work for the past two decades, and of which three parts have been published so far, is in terza rima, the strictest and most demanding of all forms in English.

Against this ordered formal background there plays the audacious and elliptical language of the poems, passionate, violent, sometimes obscure.

Monroe K. Spears. *Dionysus and the City* (Oxford—N.Y.). 1970. p. 173

Like William Butler Yeats, Tate finds in history, not only the ground for his discourse, but the central excitement of his poetry. With the possible exception of Yeats, no poet of our time has possessed a more penetrating discernment of the predicament of modern man with reference to nature and history. In the old Christian synthesis, nature and history were related in a special way. With the break-up of that synthesis, man finds himself caught between a meaningless cycle on the one hand, and on the other, the more extravagant notions of progress—between a nature that is oblivious of man and a man-made ''unnatural'' Utopia.

In Tate's poetry nature comes in for a great deal of attention—''The Seasons of the Soul'' is a typical instance—but Tate rarely exhibits nature for its own sake and never as a kind of innocently pastoral backdrop for man's activities. Since man, who had once thought his journey had a destination, the return to the meaningless round of the seasons is not comforting but terrifying.

Because of his preoccupation with history and human society, one does not often think of Tate as a nature poet, and yet in no poet of our time does the detail of nature make itself felt with more poignance and dramatic power.

Cleanth Brooks. *Michigan Quarterly Review*. Fall, 1971. p. 227

The initial impression which any selection of Tate's poems enforces is one of formal rigor, especially striking in an age in which poets have thought of traditional form as a thing either to be avoided or rendered with the lowest possible visibility. Tate's

formal structures are insistently visible: the *terza rima* of ''The Swimmers,'' the suspended quatrains of ''The Traveller,'' the extraordinary ten-line trimeter stanzas of ''Seasons of the Soul.'' Form is a compelling ritual to which the reader must submit in order to approach this poet's meaning. One never sees in Tate the effortless dexterity of an Auden; stress is always present between style and substance, as though the formal structures were dykes holding back high seas. The conscious constriction of these poems, their sense of being about to burst at the seams, reflects their main burden: the plight of modern man, exiled from the stability of tradition and holding chaos in check with forms which every day are witness to their own fragility.

Robert B. Shaw. *Poetry*. Jan., 1972. p. 222

Most readers have long known that Tate has produced some of the finest poetry of his generation. This is true even of unsympathetic readers inclined to complain that the corpus is uneven in quality (as it is) and unfulfilled in promise (as it is not). Most consider the single novel a distinguished achievement, though few have recognized that it constitutes the great watershed in Tate's life as an artist, bringing into significant conjunction the insights, tendencies, and techniques of his early work and anticipating the masterworks that began to appear after 1940. As for criticism, no one—at least no one since the appearance of *Essays of Four Decades* in 1969—has doubted that in an age of critics Tate stands with the half dozen best and most influential. Now it is possible to regard the whole as a series of forays into the knowledge essential to our self-awareness as latter-day heirs of western civilization. Tate, we see, was never more than incidentally Fugitive, Agrarian, or even southern but was from first to last the colonial European, incidentally sired in Clark County, Kentucky, and doomed to live with the frustration of somehow having been born a legitimate spiritual child of Aristotle in a world dominated by children of Plato and Descartes.

Nevertheless the fact of Tate's southernness has often raised unwarranted expectations about his work, even in the minds of some who ought to have known better. This is especially true of *The Fathers*, a major novel. Arthur Mizener attributes its initial success to the possibility that readers thought it might be another *Gone With the Wind* and adds ''whereas it is in fact the novel *Gone With the Wind* ought to have been.'' His ''ought'' is likely to be misunderstood. In one sense ''the novel *Gone With the Wind* ought to have been'' was Stark Young's masterful romance *So Red the Rose*, published in 1934; but Mizener is calling attention to the universality of Tate's work. He characterizes the action of *The Fathers* in the phrase ''a terrible conflict between two fundamental and irreconcilable modes of existence,'' which, apt though it is, has had the unfortunate effect of inviting some readers to see the novel in Manichaean terms. The two modes probably are irreconcilable, but only as the parts of any paradox are irreconcilable; and together they constitute a paradox that characterizes all societies, American as well as those from which American society sprang, and will undoubtedly characterize the new societies into which America must dissolve long after our present body politic has vanished from the earth. To put it briefly, the world which Allen Tate describes is the perennial world of humankind, characterized by order and the appearance of stability on the one hand and by a restless dynamism on the other, both of which aspects seek to prevail as well as to exist in the face of a vast uncharacterized abyss which John Milton in another context called ''the womb of nature and perhaps her grave.''

J. O. Bryant, Jr. *Sewanee Review*. Spring, 1978, pp. 274–75

The body of Allen's poetry . . . is slim—as slim as Eliot's and Ransom's. He published one novel, *The Fathers* (1938). A remarkable work, it was never widely popular; but like Allen's best poetry, it remains in print, and I think it is destined to last.

Why did one so greatly and variously gifted write and publish so little? What he said of his friend John Ransom was not, I think, true of him: that he set out deliberately to be a Minor Poet. . . . My observation is that as an imaginative writer Allen had a gift that was highly and intricately autobiographical. This may seem odd, in that his poetics placed a premium upon achieved anonymity, classical restraint, the primacy of craftsmanship over subject—the antithesis of the romantic subjective artist whose work is the fervent unmediated outpouring of his own sensibilities. ''As a poet I have no experience,'' he once remarked. Yet—and perhaps the paradox is the key—almost all that Allen wrote is drawn either directly from his own situation or from that of his immediate forebears. He used to speak of himself as having conducted his education in public, and if by that statement he meant that his writings consisted of his openly enunciated response to his own experience, it is quite appropriate.

As poet and critic Allen had impeccable taste. His literary coat-of-arms might well have borne the motto *nil admirari*—to be astonished at and by nothing. So fastidious was his literary sensibility that he could not tolerate blemish or imperfection, and this habit of mind no doubt served to lessen, or at any rate to restrict, his response to much work that was flawed but powerful. But whatever he admired was well worth the admiring, and he was almost never wrong in his enthusiasms. I believe that this fastidiousness was what inhibited him from publishing or even continuing to work for very long on anything of his own that did not seem absolutely right to him. His sensibility and his taste were whole and unified; had it been otherwise, he might have written more. Again, though, he would not have been Allen Tate. What he did write is not merely distinguished: it is unique in its distinction.

Louis D. Rubin, Jr. *Sewanee Review*. Spring, 1979, p. 270

The poetry of Allen Tate constitutes a body of work formidable not so much for its size, although ample enough, as for its demands on the intellectual tenacity of readers. These demands have been partially met by a small body of essays of considerable merit, informative and rewarding to the patient searcher for a full comprehension of Tate. The task of explication is never complete, of course, and the finest of commentaries will always display lacunae. Thus certain poems, crucial for an interpretation of Tate's achievement but almost totally neglected, have never received adequate elucidation. These unexplored texts, seemingly intransigent for the critic, constitute a serious barrier to the complete understanding of his poetry. Nevertheless, the principal gap in our knowledge of Tate lies elsewhere. The unity of his work, his poetry and prose together, has escaped the critical net. Despite some laudable attempts to demonstrate the integrity of Tate's career, its basis has remained obscure for most readers. As a result, few have grasped the magnitude of his achievement. . . .

Tate's skill as a craftsman of verse, his unusual style, his astonishing imagery, and his energetic syntax have been frequently noted and delineated. However, for all the dramatic intimacy and personal vigor that characterize it, Tate's is primarily a poetry of ideas. What keeps it from lapsing simply into an intellectual exercise in verse is his insistence that ideas are effective in poetry only when embodied in human actions and feelings. In Tate's work, then, personal intensity is inseparable from a commitment to intellectual integrity. His rejection of what he calls ''romanticism'' is a refusal to segregate the truth of the heart from that of the mind.

Thus Tate's work should be given the kind of consideration accorded other twentieth-century poets—such as Yeats, Eliot, or Pound—who combine an intimate focus on personal experience with an extensive grasp of the Western intellectual tradition. Though the play of ideas in Tate's writings is often limited to a small core of closely related themes, the range of his awareness is broad indeed. He can speak of Carneades, Proclus, or Iamblichus in one breath and of Mistral, Madame de La Fayette, or St.-John Perse in the next. He brings a well-informed mind to his criticism of Civil War histories and to his judgment of philosophies of history. He is a truly cosmopolitan author whose principal concern is European rather than American culture, even when the American South plays a central role in his meditations.

Robert S. Dupree. *Allen Tate and the Augustinian Imagination: A Study of the Poetry* (Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1983), pp. xiii–xiv

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TAYLOR, Peter (1917–1994)

All but two of these stories (*The Long Fourth*) concern the mores of family life in Nashville, Tennessee, but they also, except when making a tangent with the ethos of their special social and political landscape, concern all United States family mores. The tensions, affections, longings, the ''shoddiness, stupidity and even cruelty'' are equally true for any family confronted with the attack of modern industrial forces on inherited standards. . . . Occasionally one has the feeling that the stories are rather attenuated, perhaps because their action is not violent but quiet—almost quotidian. . . . It is a tribute to Mr. Taylor's talent that by his rendering of atmosphere, nuances of character and barely perceptible conflicts he is able to keep such episodes from rebuffing the reader.

Hubert Creekmore. *New York Times Book Section*. March 21, 1948. p. 6

What Mr. Taylor is really doing, with honesty and sureness and beauty, is to experiment, both technically and psychologically, with very different approaches to extremely difficult definitions. For all its deceptively unstartling appearance, his method is quite as odd and daring as that in any of Picasso's paintings of double-headed women or seemingly capricious groupings of objects.

Mr. Taylor is inquiring into those relations through which things take on their meaning, and he makes his inquiry, not in unfamiliar language, but through connections so unfamiliar that he shakes the reader into emotional insecurity.

Marjorie Brace. *Saturday Review*. March 27, 1948. p. 18

If Taylor even remembers, he refuses to tell a story the way it was told before. He refuses, moreover, to exploit his material to the limit, to manufacture characters, drama, suspense—in short, he won't traffic in what is known as a ''strong story line.'' He refuses to be electric. He knows that life itself has a very weak story line. To render it truly he distils it, though again not as you might think: his work is not remarkable for its form and conciseness. He likes to take a while to get a story underway. He has a feeling for naming his characters. He has the poet's gift for finding the clichés of a nation and getting his characters to say them so that they almost sound like something else (as when one uses them oneself).

J.F. Powers. *Commonweal*. June 25, 1948. p. 262

No description of the mere materials or events of *A Woman of Means* can indicate the particular kind of excitement it possesses. The kind of excitement is the excitement of being constantly on the verge of deep perceptions and deep interpretations. Mr. Taylor follows closely the contour and texture of event, and sometimes for a considerable space the reader feels that he is engaged with an ordinary realistic, objective narrative. However, Mr. Taylor's method is to intersperse tantalizing flashes, to break the ordinary texture of things and then quickly close the rent before the eye has caught the full significance of what lies beyond the curtain.

Robert Penn Warren. *New York Times Book Section*. June 11, 1950. p. 8

What right has Mr. Taylor, one asks oneself, to be so good at drawing people, and at probing deep into the secrets of their relationships, without doing more with them? Why aren't these small kindly anecdotes, so delightfully told, collected more carefully into a mounting tension? They lie like pins spilled out of a box

on to the floor, and one waits for the small but subtle magnet, which must surely be at work, to draw them together. But something has gone wrong. Either the magnet is not powerful enough or else it is being held too far away.

Robert Kee. *New Statesman and Nation*. Dec. 2, 1950. p. 566

Peter Taylor . . . is possibly the most interesting and accomplished new writer to have come out of the South in the last ten years. . . . Mr. Taylor's comedy is quiet, his drama subtle and generally muted. Passion, violence and the more extreme aberrations are absent from his fiction. . . . And yet he fascinates, entertains and enlightens us as only a first-rate writer could. Immersed in his wonderfully lucid pages, we come to feel that this is not realism, but reality itself.

Dan Wickenden. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. May 2, 1954. p. 4

Most of (the stories) treat family problems, the emotional relationships that make for happiness or unhappiness in domestic life, or the mutual obligations of married couples, relatives, servants and friends both to the quick and the dead. Mr. Taylor is particularly skillful in showing how the beauty of family life vanishes in the absence of free interchange in sympathy and affection among people destined to live under the same roof. . . . Mr. Taylor never preaches, but he has a message and a valuable one: If the sanctity of the home is preserved, all will be well with mankind.

Frank H. Lyell. *New York Times Book Section*. May 2, 1954. p. 5

The Widows of Thornton. . . is as free of ugliness as . . . lingering nutmeg and as unpretentious as coldwater cornbread. . . . Mr. Taylor, Tennessee-born, has created a wistful, clinging but utterly non-depraved image of the Deep South that some of us, his regional contemporaries, have kept trying to recall from our childhood but were beginning, after Capote and Tennessee Williams, to doubt ever existed. . . . He has suggested that his stories may explain why a Southerner of the blood never entirely leaves home. But they are more than that, a tender and perceptive treatment of clanspeople of the same name but different pigment, drawn so close together from their beginnings that their real beauty is in each other and not in themselves.

Mack Morris. *Saturday Review*. May 8, 1954. p. 14

Peter Taylor writes of a Southern world everywhere present and tangible, but subtly, the center of his fiction is displaced in time: the mind, solaced by the wit, the elegiac temper and tender sensibility of these histories of fine consciences, is yet compelled to view them with an astonishing spaciousness of perspective. For what Mr. Taylor has achieved is the portrait of a complex society held in the most fastidious dramatic suspension; the past impinging upon and molding the present, the present rebelling against the tyranny of the past, the noisy warring of both in the abused heart.

Richard Hayes. *Commonweal*. Dec. 17, 1954. p. 317

Mr. Taylor works efficiently and perceptively within a literary tradition which has its origins in the stories of Henry James. He examines his characters' lives and assesses their meaning in terms of the conflicts imposed by heredity and environment, by the conflicting values of past and present, by agrarian as opposed to urban values, or by the warfare between intellect and emotion. His stories succeed because his characters and their worlds are real, moving, and convincing. In each story there is always at least one character who becomes ''finely aware'' (the phrase is Henry James's) of the situations in which they find themselves. It is this fine awareness that gives the ''maximum of sense'' to what befalls them, which makes these quietly effective stories so meaningful to the reader.

William Peden. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 28, 1959. p. 33

In recent years there has been, I think, a lack of interest in Peter Taylor's fiction. At least one seldom sees his name included among those currently thought to be ''our best younger writers.'' This decline of Mr. Taylor's literary stock may be explained in part by the thinness of his out-put (one novel, two short story collections and one play in thirteen years) and by the fact that many new young writers have appeared on the scene since 1948. But after reading *Happy Families Are All Alike*, I am inclined to think it may also be because Mr. Taylor's later stories are not as interesting nor as successful as his earliest work. . . .

But if these stories have a serious limitation—and I believe they do—it is their lack of intensity. I am not sure why this is, but even the best stories seem a trifle dull. The reason may be partly the kind of unintense people and situations Mr. Taylor usually writes about and, perhaps also, his leisurely manner of spinning a story out—both ''The Other Times'' and ''Heads of Houses,'' though rather interesting, are much too long for what they *do*. Also, after reading several of these stories at one sitting, I began to tire of the smooth, unemotional style and to wish for a striking image now and then or a spark of emotion. Anything to break through the tight-lipped, reasonable flow of language and engage the reader's feelings and imagination directly.

William Stuckey. *Minnesota Review*. Fall, 1960. p. 116

By neglecting some things, he has been able to do others supremely well. If he does not give us magnificent action scenes, he is one of the few writers to approach Tolstoy's talents in two other significant respects: (1) the ability to see in every act a man or woman performs some expression of that being's total history; (2) the ability to create real families and extremely moving scenes of family life. More than this, Mr. Taylor has achieved a third thing that we have no right to expect of a work as wide-ranging and inclusive as *War and Peace*: he has produced short stories that are perspicuous and unified gems.

Beyond this, Mr. Taylor has his own truth to tell. By showing us its roots in the small Southern town and its consequent dislocations, he has been one of the few writers of recent years who could make the everyday life of everyday members of the urban upper classes interesting, sympathetic, sometimes, indeed, dramatic. Above all, he makes it various: we know how the migration has touched the migrants—the husbands and wives, and even the maiden ladies who have sometimes gone along. But we know also the maiden

ladies and the mamma's boys who have stayed behind in the dying small towns. . . .

Morgan Blum. *Sewanee Review*. Autumn, 1962. pp. 576–7

Each of his characters is solidly a person, troubled and not completely prepared for the life he must live; his past or his family or his relationship to what the present requires of him is a burden which he carries without conspicuous complaint, even when he wishes that he wishes that he didn't have to. There is something of stubborn strength in almost all of them, and something queer also. The word ''grotesque'' inevitably comes to mind in thinking about them, more, I suspect because it is a popular word than because it describes the effect Mr. Taylor creates. If ''vignette'' were not old-fashioned and somehow girlish, it might do better. . . .

The principal reason for Mr. Taylor's superiority, however, is simply that he writes with such unobtrusive artistry. His is the kind of style that readers may not even notice, unless they pause to examine how he has done what he does. His mastery of gesture is subtle and delightful. . . .

Lewis Leary. *Saturday Review*. May 16, 1964. p. 45

All of Peter Taylor's stories in *Miss Leonora When Last Seen, and Fifteen Other Stories* have appeared in magazines, and ten were reprinted earlier in collections now out of print. The present collection may then be taken to represent the flower of Taylor's art, for with few exceptions . . . they show a masterful achievement. The title story, and one of the best, treats a major, recurrent theme: the passing of an old order before the onslaught of the new, and the way that people—especially older people, like Miss Leonora—deal with this change. . . . An adaptation is made—Taylor's characters are remarkably adaptable in this way—but this is, after all, the surest sign of their defeat. And what is lost is something quite irretrievable, as these old people know and perhaps more than anyone else correctly value. But they do not whine about it: of their store of human dignity and courage they retain this much to the last, as do the best of Faulkner's characters—the other Southern writer with whom Taylor, despite important differences, is best compared.

Jay L. Halio. *Southern Review*. Winter, 1968. pp. 242–3

The world has passed Taylor by. The small towns and cities in the hinterland between the Atlantic and the Mississippi that are his métier have now been spoken for by Spiro Agnew and his boss; the comfortable, stable, and unhappy people he writes about seem almost never to have lived; the style that never calls attention to itself could seem impressive mostly to those surfeited with Faulkner and Warren. But he still is with us, beautifully unchanged; it would be hard to put these stories [in the *Collected Stories*], written over a thirty-year period, in chronological order. His characters are now more absorbed in the past than they used to be . . . but the world is, throughout, small college campuses and roadhouses and front porches and country clubs. What animates a Taylor story is such a slight event, such a small quirk of self, that the landscape must be solid and easily seen for the key, minute point not to be lost. But this very stability of setting, not just of landscape but of social structure and attitude, finally has the effect of rendering the event very close to irrelevant. This is of course not what Taylor wanted, and it would be nice to think that his imperviousness to change is the mark of one in tune with more eternal verities. But no—in small doses Taylor is good, but even then he never escapes seeming precious.

Roger Sale. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1969–70. p. 710

[His] stories center on character and for this reason Taylor has been called the ''American Chekhov.'' Actually, Taylor is, if anything, even more delicate in the way he proceeds by indirection and by irony to reveal the most heartrending apprehensions about humanity. His razor is so keen that the deepest cuts may go unnoticed; one can imagine a grandmother gently smiling over a story which would terrify her grand-daughter. And here is the greatness of these stories. They offer something to every reader without descending to a mediocre level of technique or interest. The reader must win his own reward.

The Virginia Quarterly Review. Winter, 1971. p. xiv

Superficially, Peter Taylor's short stories may seem radically different from Flannery O'Connor's. They are unusually quiet tales of domestic life, the confrontations of common bourgeois Americans of the mid-South with common elements of fate, carefully documented with social observations and oddities of a kind sometimes found in sentimental fiction. But here and there the grotesque shows through: Taylor's restraint sometimes gives way to his sense of tragedy and disorder; the comic and the violent rush together, to give us unforgettable stories. This handsome book, *The Collected Short Stories of Peter Taylor*, is one of the major books of our literature.

Taylor's stories are like dreams: events are brought sharply into focus, magically and dramatically limited, a sequence of sensations and speech passes as if in no important relationship to the rest of the world. And then a mysterious ''point'' is reached, a point of surrender or relaxation, and the story is complete, completed. Taylor has always been admired by critics to whom the craft of art is extremely important. But he writes stories that are far more than neatly crafted; they are both hallucinatory and articulate, the violence of Taylor's vision being bracketed by, even tamed by, the intelligent and gracious voice of his typical narrators.

Joyce Carol Oates. *Southern Review*. Winter, 1971. p. 299

Who, then, are Taylor's people—characters—individuals—the blood and flesh of the stories? It has frequently been noted that he writes only about upper middle-class Southerners who are not involved in acts of bloodshed, lust, or violence. Taylor's characters, therefore, put the author in a class apart from most contemporary Southern authors. His characters live in the city, function as a family unit in spite of a great many urban tensions, and display good manners at home and in the social circles to which they belong. . . .

What they possess and hold on to and practice is a set of formal country manners reminiscent of Jane Austen and eighteenth century England. It is as though the country house in Miss Austen's rural society had packed up and moved (servants and all) to the West End section of Nashville and settled in Elliston Place or Acklen Park or the suburbs and gone right on with established rituals. As a class

these people may appear an isolated group in the modern Southern city and seem foreigners to its main currents. The truth is that they have not lost their close connections with the country. They have not cut themselves off from their background. That means that they retain an interest in an outlying county and keep in touch with cousins, friends, and older family servants in a small town somewhere beyond the periphery of the Nashville Basin. In other words Taylor's urban dwellers still cling, however futilely, to agrarian and feudal concepts of land and place. The Episcopal Church is so much taken for granted that it is seldom mentioned. . . .

What strikes us about Taylor on first reading is the almost casual understatement he gives to a theme as momentous as [the conflict resulting from the Southern shift from country life to city life]. The changes from a rural to an urban South are slow and quietly modulated in the stories, but they are indeed there to be acknowledged, dealt with, and somehow accommodated. . . .

Taylor's characters do not look ahead to a later, more complex time or consciously try to come to grips with what may be in store for them and their descendants in the Super-City. His people are simply not given to town-and-social planning, predicting the future, or intellectualizing on man's fate as a city-dweller. They may be concerned with Time Past and Time Present, but they are not ruffled by the omens of Time Future. They accept loneliness and separation and the loss of ''Happy Valley.'' But they complain very little. Even while looking back, they do not howl over their losses; they present a fairly genial, good-natured face to a changing world and to each other. As a class they have not as yet been totally fragmented or assimilated into the ways of the city.

Unlike some of the people John Updike, Philip Roth, and Walker Percy write about, Taylor's Nashvillians are human beings who elicit compassion from us but do not strike us with terror. There is always the chance, however, that given another twenty years they will be just as terrible as the others. Perhaps Taylor is saying, finally, that by another generation these people will have outlived their Nashville period and come to the end of their uneasy period of Grace. As is the usual way of artists, Taylor has recorded a fragile company just in the nick of time.

Herschel Gower. *Shenandoah*. Winter, 1977, pp. 38–40, 47

Mr. Taylor's single-mindedness must be accounted for. His work has always been concerned with the conflict between affectionate, civil society and chaos, regardless of whether the disorder is sexual, drunken, or natural. . . .

In the Miro District . . . invites us to look back. Tonally, particularly in the experimental prose poems, the book evokes the author's earliest stories when he wrote out of oneness with the domestic context he so lovingly described. . . .

The sources of tension in these stories are slowly transformed in a way which often emphasizes the futility of their having been distinguished in the first place. Mr. Taylor repeatedly raises moral dilemmas only to show they can't be solved because there are no black and white moral categories. Yet when we come to ''In the Miro District,'' the equivalence of grandfather and grandson is ultimately what makes the story one of renewal. . . .

Human social life has always seemed precarious to Mr. Taylor, but at first its greatest threat was human violence. Gradually, his allegiance to a specific social order has yielded to his growing insight into the total insecurity in which custom must survive. In his most recent story, ''In the Miro District,'' custom itself is questioned as a stable vessel, or rather our need for it to be fixed is questioned. ''In the Miro District'' is about the revolution in custom between the grandfather's day and his grandson's. Both live according to entirely different conventions, but the difference is one of detail. For both men, custom has not changed in its essential reference to love. The woman who once had all value vested in her honor still represents all that's important. Once her importance was expressed by not acknowledging her passionateness, now the opposite is true. . . . Where Mr. Taylor once seemed to fear chaos, he now seems to trust the order inherent in experience: an order that does not depend on social restraint for its existence. Through his career, he has altered and refined his questions, viewing the problem of order and disorder from different, even opposing, perspectives, testing the sanity of reason and the vitality of the irrational, mixing them until his questions have given way—not so much to answers as to moral sureness.

Jane Barnes Casey. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Spring, 1978, pp. 213–14, 227, 229–30

As an author, Peter Taylor is more often praised than understood. The respect his work inspires frequently seems taken in by appearances, by the fact that in a formal sense, his material *seems* fixed. His stories usually take place in Tennessee—in Memphis or Nashville or Chatham; the characters are drawn from the upper middle class or from the Negro servant class; people are seen in terms of the family, rarely as isolated individuals or divorced ones or even single ones; the stories occur before 1960, and some take place around the turn of the century, while others are governed by the events and history of the 19th century, particularly, of course, the Civil War.

Yet the limitations Mr. Taylor sets on his work barely contain the shifting, probing attitude he constantly turns on his material. He is a great craftsman, but of a foxy sort, intent on working as much complexity as possible into the world behind his simple surfaces. In his best stories, his masterpieces, every detail is present in all its vital controversy; every part hums with its own inner fullness, as well as in its relation to every other part. He is a master of contradiction, though we have only to mention this quality when

The South has traditionally been one of America's more gothic literary land-scapes: suffering and violence grow in abundance there, at least in writers' imaginations, and Southern prose is usually as luxuriant as the foliage. For more than forty years, however, Peter Taylor has cast a cool, classical eye on his native territory, delineating changes in its socioeconomic structure and dissecting its inhabitants' passions in elegant, measured language more reminiscent of Henry James than William Faulkner.

Yet Taylor's work is as distinctively Southern as he is. *The Old Forest and Other Stories* . . . collects twelve previously published and two recently written short stories delving into the lives of the people among whom Taylor grew up: wealthy, aristocratic Southerners whose families picked themselves up after the debacle of the Civil War, left the plantations, and moved into the South's growing cities to become lawyers, doctors, cotton brokers—a new professional class whose code of behavior was still firmly rooted in antebellum moral values.

It's the effect of this external reality on the private concerns of his characters that interests Taylor, whose own life has been at once

deeply rooted in the South and also detached from it by the exigencies of first his father's and then his own career. . . .

In Taylor's own stories, the characters' personal preoccupations and behavior do indeed reflect the larger nature of the South, but in a subtle, unmythical way that may account for his curious lack of fame: America seems to prefer its Southern writers to be more flamboyant. ''It's partly temperament,'' says Taylor of his restrained approach. ''Also, although I admire all these mythical writers about the South tremendously—I'm just a slave to Faulkner; I think he's wonderful, and Eudora Welty and Katherine Anne Porter—I thought it was time to try something else.'' As for his admirers' loudly expressed belief that he deserves to be better known—''I don't write for that,'' he says simply. ''I've always had a lot of appreciative literary friends, and maybe that meant more to me than it should have, but it's all chance whether or not you become well known in your generation. My concern is with how good what I write is and with the opinion of my peers.''

Wendy Smith. *Publisher's Weekly*. Jan. 18, 1985, pp. 77, 78

I think it likely that the readers and critics who have thought to compare [Peter] Taylor to Chekhov have done so mainly as a measure of Taylor's importance, a not unreasonable strategy. And there is one very significant point of resemblance between these two writers, who are almost altogether different otherwise—although it comes about through an accident of history, really. Chekhov's vision and art range freely all through the Russian society of his day, so that his contemporary audience would presumably have been about as familiar with his milieu as he was himself. But for modern readers such is no longer the case, and the background of Chekhov's fiction now is as foreign to us as . . . the delicately nuanced and elaborately mannered social patterns of Taylor's Nashville and Memphis as they were some forty or fifty years ago. For Taylor, of course, that has always been so; he would have known from the beginning that only a tiny and dwindling number of people could understand from personal experience exactly what he was talking about. That is one reason that Taylor's stories carry an infinitely heavier load of exposition than Chekhov's do. And yet somehow the total effect is very much the same, in reading Chekhov or in reading Taylor: the distance seems to drop away, and we perceive that they who inhabit the foreign and remote place and time are men and women much like us, and that their behavior can do much to educate us about our own. Through intense and accurate concentration on the precise details and circumstances of life in his own time, both of these writers succeed in bringing something of universal human nature to the page. This quality of permanent relevance is a large element of Peter Taylor's mastery. . . .

The whole point of the social order in Taylor's stories is its extreme fragility. Thus his subject is utterly different from James's rendering of the ancient social traditions of Europe. It's true that James's Americans threaten to destabilize these traditions, but because they are so much older and stronger it is a very different order of threat. James's Europe is centuries old and his is in so many ways a European sensibility. Taylor by contrast is all American. A century before the time of his stories, his cities had barely ceased to be frontier towns. Two centuries before, they were wilderness. The people in them form their community by joining hands and wishing it into existence. Were any one of them to break out of the circle, the whole bubble would burst.

That is why apostasy, the very possibility of social apostasy, is so important in Taylor's stories, why indeed it is his central subject. . . .

Peter Taylor has handled this subject masterfully, and in ways that are uniquely his own. Whatever may remain to be said about his education, his influences, he stands sufficiently alone now; he resembles no one but himself.

Madison Smartt Bell. ''The Mastery of Peter Taylor.'' In Hubert H. McAlexander, ed. *Critical Essays on Peter Taylor* (New York: G. K. Hall, 1993), pp. 255, 259, 261

Although Taylor's Tennessee has been compared to Faulkner's Mississippi, the two writers could not be more dissimilar. Faulkner wrote from a fevered consciousness, sometimes he rang the magic bell, and quite often he made no sense at all. Peter Taylor, on the other hand, makes nothing but sense. His writing is at all times orderly and clear; his South is a land of inherited privilege, controlled passion, heady artistic impulses played out over generations. There is pleasure in seeing an elegant design so smartly worked out to plunge headlong through pages of gracefully sculpted memory, but this novel [*In the Tennessee Country*] is easier to admire than to love.

Mark Childress. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. Sept. 9, 1993, p. 21

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THEROUX, Paul (1941–)

That Paul Theroux's *Waldo*, for instance, is less than a stunning success may be the result of the twenty-five-year-old's desire to flap his literary wings too soon and fly too far. Perhaps he is impatient with the cloister, having left it, and yearns to explore the World at Large. In any event, Mr. Theroux forsakes his original reform school setting, follows his central character to Rugg College on a sexual fellowship of sorts, and turns him into a newly famous writer typing in a glass cage over the heads of enraptured nightclub audiences. Waldo is a disturbed gadfly who darts from crag to silhouetted crag, precluding the author's opportunity to dig beneath the complex surface he surveys. . . .

On the other end of the shelf, I wonder why Houghton Mifflin published *Waldo*. This is not to deny that Mr. Theroux has a book in him, it is simply to opine that this, like many a first novel, isn't the book because the author has not learned to control his chosen form, material, scope and style simultaneously. There are interesting moments and some of the comic images glance off truths like

stones from a chisel—but the pieces don't fit together and the final sculpture doesn't fit the pedestal. . . . Mr. Theroux has not created a moving odyssey and the best elements of the book are the little sojourns of passing images, phrases and moments. . . .

I submit that the fault is not really the author's; he has an itch to write, literary ambition and some obvious talents that can grow with experience—but they need to be focused and distilled. The fault lies with the publisher who does a disservice to himself, the reading public and the author by publishing him too early. Some people ask why nobody reads fiction any more; one reason is that readers are put off by books that are not good enough.

Philip Kopper. *American Scholar*. Autumn. 1967, pp. 698. 700

Narrative verve, the brightly sketched collection of urban desperadoes, and the extraordinary vividness of physical London will make *The Family Arsenal* a deservedly popular novel. For an American, Theroux has a remarkable ear for the rhythms and elisions of English underworld slang, and he even manages at this late date to make obscenity expressive. No foreign writer I've read has so skillfully caught the blend of coarseness, provincialism and bigotry that is one distinctive (and usually unexportable) brand of popular British humor.

In all these respects, *The Family Arsenal* is an assured success, like Theroux's fine travel book of last year, *The Great Railway Bazaar*, but Theroux has ambitions that go beyond the expert construction of a timely thriller. Opening with an epigraph from *The Princess Casamassima* and alluding a dozen times to *The Secret Agent*, he wants much of what happens in *The Family Arsenal* to play off against the two famous novels by James and Conrad that have shaped the way many people think about the anarchist impulse. . . .

Theroux's efforts to provide by implication an analysis of a historical situation and an ample sense of personal motivation are finally less successful than his handling of narrative excitement, satiric portraiture and the evocation of urban violence and distress. To ask for more power and analysis from an intelligent, absorbing thriller is not to debunk Theroux's achievement (or to grumble that he doesn't stack up against Conrad and James), but to suggest some of the critical issues raised by his work and the promises it holds out.

Lawrence Graver. *New York Times Book Section*. July 11, 1976, pp. 1–2

Paul Theroux is simply a wonder, and this his eighth novel [*Picture Palace*] a remarkable piece of work. In reviewing his last one, *The Family Arsenal*, two years ago I spoke of how it (and its very fine predecessor, *The Black House*) each featured a desperate man endowed with great sensitivity, irony, and visionary or novelistic powers of forecast and apprehension. I also noted that both novels were consistently entertaining—I had not been so entertained since discovering Anthony Burgess in the middle 1960's. *Picture Palace* is even bolder and more daring than the last two, partly because its narrator (a first-person narrative Theroux hasn't used since *Saint Jack*) is a tough seventy-year-old photographer named Maude Coffin Pratt who is both desperately wrong about things—as we see from the tale of her life she unfolds, and which provides the course of the novel—and righter about them than anybody else can be, the way artists are ''right'' about things. In other words, Theroux has worked the metaphor of ''visionary powers''—all those nineteenth-century heroines who saw so much—into a shutter-snapping wise-cracking ugly duckling of a narrator whose (hopeless?) passion for her brother Orlando is the determining fact of her life, and the reason she becomes a photographer in the first place. The book undertakes a very complicated and satisfyingly dialectical exploration of blindness, sight, insight, vision and revision—which exploration is the equivalent to the moral and political argument of *The Family Arsenal*, or the anthropological and mystical one of *The Black House*.

An exploration, but not an argument, for one never feels after reading Theroux that one has learned something about the Nature of . . . of whatever. An even better word for it is ''entertainment,'' and some of the most entertaining things about *Picture Palace* are the set-pieces in which Maude encounters famous modern artists—like D.H. Lawrence or T.S. Eliot or Frost or Raymond Chandler—and ''does them'' (play is made with the sexual force of this expression) into art, storing them in an old windmill on Cape Cod, but more truly in the picture palace of her mind put on display by this novel. . . . It's all just a story, dazzlingly and intensely told, with the great modern fictional classics—James and Conrad and Ford and Faulkner, and Graham Greene too—giving Theroux ballast for the idea that the telling is enough. I think it is, because he never lets up, never writes a paragraph of filler or ''transition'' which has less than his full presence as a writer behind it. *Picture Palace* is another impressive testimony that as a steadily producing writer of long and short fiction, travel books, essays and reviews—of ''letters'' generally—no American writer matters more than this gifted and possessed word-man.

William H. Pritchard. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1978, pp. 527–29

[*The Old Patagonian Express: By Train through the Americas*] is a sequel to the author's superbly entertaining *The Great Railway Bazaar: By Train through Asia*. Longer than its predecessor, and a good deal grimmer, it has fewer comic moments to divert us from the poverty Mr. Theroux everywhere encounters and which, since he speaks Spanish, is not so forgettably anonymous as the Asian distress that figured as little more than dusky scenery in the *Railway Bazaar*. I suspect that this book was also harder to write, since here Theroux was not inventing a form for a novel experience but uninspiredly following his old literary tracks. It is certainly harder to read. Theroux's prose is as sheerly enjoyable as ever and his insights into individual and social character are as fresh and penetrating, but the vagaries of rail travel in Latin America repeatedly tempt him to ramble from the main line of his narrative, and the book is a bit bloated in consequence. Theroux's padding, however, is always lively and intelligent, so it seems ungrateful to complain. What is it, then, that makes this book difficult, at once less entertaining and more interesting than the *Railway Bazaar*? It is, I think, the morally ironic contrast between the human misery Theroux observes and his will to make art and money out of rendering it, an irony that is echoed in our will to enjoy ourselves as much as we did on his earlier trip, and damn the disquieting disparity between us and the direly poor peasants we glimpse on every page.

Jack Beatty. *New Republic*. Sept. 22, 1979, p. 54

Drastic change indeed stalks the world of his fiction, that precisely rendered realm where cultures clash and characters encounter each other as society's pawns in a larger pattern. In a post-colonial world, in which Third World countries are struggling to exist in their own right (Africa provides the setting for five of the books, Malaysia for three), the only certainty is that such colonialist regimes ''would be supplanted by an equal viciousness and that the Congo . . . would know more pitiless regimes.'' . . .

The encounters between East and West, between different cultures, and between the temperaments of different characters provide the formal antitheses of Theroux's fiction: ''I often find that an alien landscape comes to me in sharper focus, and I like contrast: of character or situation.'' Nowhere is this more apparent than in the opening scene of *Girls at Play* (1969), in which the order of a hockey field at a girls' school is contrasted with the surrounding jungle. . . .

In one sense Theroux's novels and stories can be seen as fictions of manners. The characters often exist as products of a particular social and cultural milieu who are thrust into some alien landscape and must either come to some accommodation with it or muster a complete rejection of it. Theroux seems intent on exploring the essence of ''American-ness'' in many of his books and in debunking the older, colonial myths perpetuated by Graham Greene and Somerset Maugham in earlier novels. The anonymous Consul in the stories of *The Consul's File* (1977) wishes to disassociate himself entirely from the typically romantic image of the Consul as ''drinker, a womanizer, reckless, embittered, a man with a past, an extravagant failure of some sort with a certain raffish charm. . . . I was pretty ordinary, in a place that saw little of the ordinary.'' It is the Maugham myth of colonial outposts the Consul wishes to eradicate. . . .

Theroux's fictional techniques are precisely those of the literary realist. His remarkably lucid and emblematic style is based on careful and precise observation, the seizing of sharp and clear images, and the documentary urge to record exactly what happens during the conflicts that ensue. . . . Exact impressions are caught like the moment in a photograph. In them the reader can drown, be swallowed up in the hard and clear reality of the image. . . . Theroux's precision in his style matches his eye for manners and customs—and the two reflect one another.

Along with the precise style—the almost documentary sureness and piling up of image and perception in a lucid sequence—must be included Theroux's plots. All his novels are meticulously plotted, embodying the same formal antitheses and structures as his themes. The novels are mechanical marvels of aesthetic balance and proportion, seeking out well-rounded patterns in all things. When these plots falter or seem less self-assured—as in the often tedious abstractions of *Picture Palace*, the somewhat fuzzy letdown at the end of *The Black House*, the almost too pat conclusion of *Jungle Lovers*—the novels seem to collapse: they lose that carefully ''boxed'' quality, that marvelous crafting of novelists like Kipling, Stevenson, Conrad, and Greene, whom Theroux has suggested inspired his own writing. . . . Many of Theroux's ''willful and indpendent'' characters may share his sense of a charmed life. They may also feel themselves possessed and mesmerized by an alien landscape which threatens to overwhelm them. In the middle of a long journey as yet incomplete but full of artistic promise and accomplishment, the writer may clutch his images and his observations to him as if holding on to his own evanescent consciousness and transforming it into palpable, recognizable shape. The tight precision of Theroux's literary realism—his style, his plots, his carefully balanced characters and customs, his searingly accurate perception of decay, the contemporary wasteland of much of the Third World and the American's ambiguous place in it—reveals a dedicated and thorough artist, perhaps like Henry James or, one of his own favorites, Joyce Cary. . . .

His awareness of the emptiness at the center of things seems to elicit not so much an ultimate vision but a sense of exhaustion and depletion, not a fullness of some existential dread but a lack of something, a black hole at the heart of the matter.

Samuel Coale. *Critique*. 22, 3, 1981, pp. 5–8, 13–15

One needs energy to keep up with the extraordinary, productive restlessness of Paul Theroux. He is alarmingly like the perpetual motion machine described in his new novel (''natural magnets . . . a thousand of them on a pair of wheels . . . you could light a city with something like that''), except that Theroux doesn't go in circles and has never moved in a predictable direction.

He is as busy as a jackdaw in the way he scavenges for forms and styles. In earlier novels he has taken conventional popular molds, like the ghost story (*The Black House*), the thriller (*The Family Arsenal*), the celebrity memoir (*Picture Palace*), and made them over for his own thoroughly original purposes. The geographic locations of his tales now make an almost unbroken ring around the globe. His train journeys (*The Great Railway Bazaar, The Old Patagonian Express*) are best read as freewheeling, impromptu fictions—the adventures of a picaresque hero who happens to bear the same name as his author and who shares his author's chronic cabin fever.

Theroux is 40 now—the most gifted, most prodigal writer of his generation. That statement begs a significant question. When, say, Malamud, Mailer, Updike, or Roth were 40, one could have spotted a stray paragraph from any of their books as ''typically'' Malamud, Mailer, Updike, or Roth. Can one do the same with Theroux? I couldn't. He has moved in skips and bounds, never staying long enough in one place for the moss of a mannered style to grow on his writing. . . .

Yet with *The Mosquito Coast* he has arrived at a temporary summation. This is not just his finest novel so far. It is—in a characteristically hooded way—a novelist's act of self-definition, a midterm appraisal of his own resources. It is a wonderful book, with so many levels to it that it feels bottomless.

In Allie Fox, Theroux has created his first epic hero. If one can imagine an American tradition that takes in Benjamin Franklin, Captain Ahab, Huey Long, and the Reverend Jim Jones, then Allie Fox is its latest, most complete incarnation. He is the King of Yankee know-how and know-all, an inventor of inspired gizmos—from a self-propelled, self-wringing mop to a machine that makes ice out of fire. He is a genius, clown, and monster, a commander of words, an angry demagogue. Listening to no one but himself, he leads his family out of the wilderness of modern America—its junk foods, imported plastics, and ''hideola''—to create a new world in the bug-infested jungle of Honduras. . . .

Even in the barest outline, *The Mosquito Coast* sets up a whole series of suggestive ripples. Jonestown is there, of course: the foul clearing, the loudspeakers in the trees, the piled cadavers, the spools of recording tape. Beyond that, there is *the* original American story: the stale Old World, the sea crossing, the Indians, the

''first Thanksgiving'' as Allie Fox himself names it. Then there is a universal fable about the nature of god-head and belief. Finally, and much the most important, there is a tale here about the limits and possibilities of the creative imagination. Allie Fox is very like a novelist. He is an inventor. He makes and populates a world with an artist's totalitarian joy in his creation, bending everything and everyone in it to the requirements of his aesthetic design. At the end, it turns on him and he is literally consumed by it, as vultures tear out the very brains that set the world in motion. Fox's great imaginative enterprise both mirrors and mocks the creations of Theroux the novelist: The over-reaching hero and the writer are one and the same man.

I mustn't mislead here. These big themes (and one could hardly imagine bigger ones) are never proclaimed in the novel. They run deep, like subterranean rivers, nourishing the life of the book's surface. For, reading *The Mosquito Coast*, one is engrossed in a marvelously told realistic story. . . .

That is part of Theroux's secret. He has rooted his story deep in the reasonable—in sense impressions that we can all share, in knowledge we can ascertain. All the nuts and bolts are secure. And from that stable platform, the novel is able to take off like a rocket into the empyrean. From the dingy familiarity of a hardware store in Northampton, Massachusetts, to a grotesque and tragic climax in the jungle, Theroux leads the reader cunningly on, step by reasonable step, reaching the exotic by means of the ordinary.

Jonathan Raban. *Saturday Review*. Feb., 1982, pp. 55–56

Paul Theroux dedicates his book [*Kingdom by the Sea*] to ''those friends of mine in Britain who, giving me a welcome I must ever gratefully and proudly remember, left my judgment free; and who, loving their country, can bear the truth, when it is told good-humoredly and in a kind spirit.'' At first, the dedication seems a sort of hubris; with the substitution of ''Britain'' for ''America,'' and the deletion of a comma, it is Charles Dickens's dedication to his *American Notes*, and with it, Theroux announces that he's aiming for the company of the great. This is risky business, but not necessarily as foolish as it might seem; with his fondness for outrageously overstated humor, ghastly melodrama, and wickedly delineated backgrounds, Theroux is the most Dickensian of American novelists. ''London Snow,'' a Christmas story so plum-puddingy it skates quite near the edge of parody, would not have been out of place had it appeared in *Master Humphrey's Clock*. . . .

Theroux is a conscious craftsman. In allowing England's present—its crushed and dispirited economy, its racism and classism, and especially the then-pervasive jingoism occasioned by the Falklands ''war''—to work on him, to turn his spirit of adventure pinched and niggardly, he becomes the man of Britain's future, and perhaps our own. . . .

Kingdom by the Sea stretches the boundaries of the travel genre. Paul Fussell notwithstanding, when Robert Byron's *Road to Oxiana*—the long-forgotten ''masterpiece''—was finally republished, its unquestionable charm rather undermined Fussell's claims for the grandeur of travel literature.

Theroux has done something else, and in doing so has surpassed *American Notes*. That smooth, righteous, and more than passingly naïve travelogue isn't the source of Dickens's reputation; had he written only *American Notes*, he would be as little remembered as Robert Byron. Theroux's situation is almost precisely reversed. For now, at least, the death-haunted *Kingdom by the Sea* stands as his best book. I'm not convinced that I've seen the future, but I have indeed seen some of Britain—and of Theroux. I hope the English repay the faith of his dedication, and treat him more kindly than we did Dickens.

Geoffrey Stokes. *The Village Voice*. Nov. 15, 1983, pp. 39, 41

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THOMAS, Augustus (1857–1934)

None knows better than he how to use theatrical material, how to make the most of minor stage-business in order to hold and entertain his audience—a bug in a water-pipe, a little red notebook, an artist's dummy, a telegram, a bunch of violets. These are made to serve and serve well as far as they go. And in the handling of bigger situations, in getting climaxes, he is not less skillful from the stage point of view.

But his brilliance and skill are shown in a better way than by his appreciation of theatrical devices. As a careful and shrewd observer of men and manners he has given the stage more than one strong character, he has drawn more than one striking and sympathetic portrait, he has painted many true little pictures of real life. . . .

A third virtue is that Mr. Thomas writes trenchant and natural dialogue. He uses always a man's pen. Sentences full of wit, humor and a sane outlook on life, make one sit up frequently.

These are the counts we find to his credit. We quarrel with him because, knowing how to do so many things so well, he so continually overdoes them. His robustuous sense of humor, his leaning toward the theatric, lead him unconsciously or deliberately to sacrifice truth of characterization, dramatic integrity, often good taste, to gain a laugh, make a situation or complicate a plot.

Frederick M. Smith. *Sewanee Review*. April, 1907. pp. 193–4

Mr. Thomas always exhibits in his work qualities that place him far in advance of the ordinary playwright. He has individuality, virility, spiritual insight, independence of thought, humor, sincerity, a charming facility of apt and incisive expression, and an artistic infallibility in the writing of scenes. *The Witching Hour* is fascinatingly interesting in many of its details, but on the whole the play proves nothing and is without substance and truth.

Theatre Magazine. Jan., 1908. p. 2

Mr. Augustus Thomas's unusually successful farce entitled *Mrs. Leffingwell's Boots* was considered a failure by its producing managers until the very last rehearsals, because it depended for its finished effect on many intricate and rapid intermovements of the actors, which until the last moment were understood and realised only in the mind of the playwright. The same author's best and most successful play, *The Witching Hour*, was declined by several managers before it was ultimately accepted for production; and the reason was, presumably, that its extraordinary merits were not manifest from a mere reading of the lines.

Clayton Hamilton. *The Theory of the Theatre* (Holt). 1910. p. 16

The so-called technique of this playwright is so perfect that it completely obscures his drama. Every exit and entrance, every *pince-nez* that is to be broken at a critical moment, every bandage that is to be found germinfected and bring about a character's death, is planted with a so thorough assiduity that, once the first half of the preparation is done with, nothing remains but to hang around and watch the plants work. True, pastime may be found the while in giving ear to such of the playwright's tony Broadwayisms as ''the chemistry of motivation,'' ''the chemistry of things spiritual,'' and the like, and to his seriously intended love scenes wherein the hero informs the heroine, in voice a-thrill with fervour, that she is ''an angelic, delectable baby'' (the quotation—from *Rio Grande*—is literal!), yet in the main the evening reveals itself as a mere lecture by Thomas on ''How To Write A Play,'' a laboratorical evening proving to the further satisfaction of the students of Professor George Pierce Baker that, with protracted schooling and practice, one may become sufficiently proficient in what is termed dramatic technique to write anything for the stage but drama.

George Jean Nathan. *Comedians All* (Knopf). 1919. pp. 143–4

The very heaviness of hand of Augustus Thomas is in his early plays a mark in his favor, for it is a quality of his sincerity. No man of his time had less of the theater in his works, more of native observation of life. He was always held back from the utmost of the theatrical by a native genuineness and forth-rightness.

Thomas H. Dickinson. *Playwrights of the New American Theater* (Macmillan). 1925. p. 149

Mr. Thomas has technique at his finger's end; he is a man of the world, with a reporter's instinct for timely interests. As all dramatists should be, he is thoroughly familiar with American life, and, since his broad comedy period, his observation and his thought have deepened. . . . A play cannot live alone by ideas: it has an organism which must fit in with the organism of the theatre. That is something Henry James never could understand. It is a thing Mr. Thomas understood about as well as any of his contemporaries. He met these conditions with gusto; he even tried to show that the play of this character could carry idea without detracting from its workableness as a stage vehicle.

Montrose J. Moses. *The American Dramatist* (Benjamin Blom). 1964. pp. 361, 366 [1925]

This play [*The Witching Hour*] is, in many respects, thoroughly American. The dialogue (or most of it) resembles the speech of everyday life; the characters, what we see of them, remind us of the men and women we see in the street, the office, and the home. The playwright is not especially interested in their philosophy of love, their sex instincts, or their ideas about God and the universe. That is his business; it is not ours to quarrel with him for not looking at life the way Hauptmann looks at it, or D'Annunzio. He was concerned chiefly with a group of persons and with ''visualizing'' an idea.

Barrett H. Clark. *A Study of the Modern Drama* (Appleton). 1930. pp. 373–4

He stands in our drama for literary craftsmanship combined with practical knowledge of the stage and for a serious interest in the furtherance of dramatic progress. His work is not the result of accidental inspiration, but he has proceeded on a basis of logical deduction from observed facts to an establishment of fundamental principles in dramatic construction.

Arthur Hobson Quinn. *Representative American Plays* (Appleton-Century). 1938. p. 731

An astute showman, intelligent and of high integrity, [Charles] Frohman did much to raise the producing standards in America, but within the commercial limitations of giving the public what it wanted. Or what he thought it wanted. The public takes time, sometimes, to make up its mind.

Unhappily this tardy acceptance of ''the new theatre'' had a crippling influence on two of the most promising talents of Frohman's day—Augustus Thomas and Clyde Fitch.

Both had admirable abilities, and in differing directions, both were capable of shrewd observation. They revealed a common interest in American locales, but Thomas had a much stronger sense of it than Fitch, whose characters and point of view, regardless of the scene of his drama, remained definitely of New York.

Neither was able to avoid altogether the lingering influences of the old melodramas, though both of them were sufficiently caught up in the movement towards realism to free their dialogue, for the most part, from the rigidities of the past. Their dialogue is less strained than any American dialogue before it, less awkward, and more to the point.

Their trouble, as both of them realized, was the star system, and its demand for the tailor-made play. With a good deal of amused urbanity, in fact, Mr. Thomas described how he cut the pattern and fitted the cloth of one of his plays to the personality of Nat

Goodwin, and explained why, given such a star, the play had to take on a certain tone, and followed a certain routine.

John Anderson. *The American Theatre* (Dial). 1938. pp. 62–3

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THURBER, James (1894–1961)

Mr. Thurber's pets are, as the town knows, priceless, both pictures and prose. Here are super-beasts. Animals plus. I can stare at them over and over, acquiring new edification every minute. They are springboards to the infinite, or something like that. They run the gamut, too. For starkly sinister qualities, the bedridden cat which ''follows every move I make'' is almost too terrific to contemplate. . . . And surely Ibsen at his worst never thought of anything half so horribly symbolic as Mr. Thurber's night prowling horse.

Will Cuppy. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Feb. 8, 1931. p. 6

He has a style combining accuracy, liveliness, and quiet—qualities which do not often go together. He has a sense of the wildly incredible things that happen to human beings who think all the time that they are acting with the greatest prudence and common sense. It is this sense that his people imagine themselves to be moving steadily and reasonably under their own motivations when they are really being as near lunatic as you can be, unconfined, that makes Mr. Thurber an exceptionally interesting writer. . . . I think this is the reason that no matter how the extravagant situations pile up, you always have the feeling that Mr. Thurber is telling the literal truth.

Gilbert Seldes. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 18, 1933. p. 269

Many of Thurber's characters spend their lively existence in a state of mania. Haunted by hallucinations, they bound distractedly between the monstrous and the absurd. . . . Noting these manifestations, people who have absorbed psycho-analytic patter (by conversational osmosis rather than by study) are always sure to do a certain amount of eyebrow-raising over Mr. Thurber's themes. Obviously aware of that popular preoccupation he continues to exploit it with amiable ruthlessness. A Joyce in falseface, he strews hilarious pages with characters who take their subconscious out on a bender. . . . There's beautiful method in his madness.

C.G. Poore. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 24, 1935. p. 3

Mr. Thurber's score on honesty and originality is high. In prose, he speaks his mind with a complete lack of pose not often encountered. A good many humorists get into a formula—he never has. . . . His style of drawing is completely his own. Even an unsigned Thurber is as unmistakable as an unsigned kangaroo. . . . Mr. Thurber's brand of humor lays him open to . . . ingenuous assaults. Because it has a fine cuckoo quality that is part of humor itself, it is often described as crazy. Many reviewers use words like ''haywire humor,'' ''zany'' and ''daffy'' to describe what is a definite—and conscious—distortion of reality.

Stephen and Rosemary Benét. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Dec. 29, 1940. p. 6

In a few sentences the bold labels and solid outlines of one's fellow human beings have sagged alarmingly and nothing remains except an amoebalike form with a startled eye in which one sees, only too plainly, one's own reflections. A sinking feeling accompanies the laughter of anyone engaged in reading Thurber; the jokes have all been salvaged from dreams. Bump!—it is oneself that has slipped on the banana skin. Whether the word for this suffering and awareness of catastrophe is humour, I don't know. Thurber does make me laugh, but I become engulfed, I am less and less sure of myself as I read on.

G.W. Stonier. *New Statesman and Nation*. Dec. 19, 1942. p. 414

When we view Thurber's prose as a whole, our first impression may be of rout, of frightened people, dogs and rabbits running . . . away from whatever faces them when they get up in the morning—old lettuce leaves, empty ration books, their own faces in the shaving mirror, anything familiar that haunts them. Their first impression, however, is deceptive. Man, Thurber thinks, is standing his ground, perhaps because he sees no better place to run to. . . . He tries to observe and report the fundamental disorder in the universe. Other interpreters of the modern scene attempt to suggest the truth through exaggeration, but Thurber sees that no amount of understatement can conceal the oddness of what happens.

Dan S. Norton. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 4, 1945. pp. 1, 18

There is not much wit in Thurber's writing, although there is plenty of it in his conversation. Occasionally in a story he permits himself

a relatively brilliant or sparkling metaphor . . . , but for the most part he confines himself to the almost businesslike description of incongruous situations that are often blended with pathos. . . . He writes so naturally and conversationally that it is hard to realize how much work goes into his stories. His art is in fact extremely conscious, and it is based on a wide knowledge of contemporary writing. . . . Besides learning to write with an easy flow and coherence that very few authors achieve, he also learned to omit everything inessential, including the winks, the rib-nudgings and the philosophical remarks of older American humorists. He achieves a sort of costly simplicity, like that of well tailored clothes or good conversation.

Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*. March 12, 1945. p. 362

A large part of his comedy is the slow exfoliation of dilemma. It deals with people who live in a world of mist, as if they were seeing objects through a rainy windshield. Thurber's comedy not only depends on this obfuscation both of sense and value. It is part of our own obfuscation. His comedy is disturbing, therefore, because whatever else it does it identifies his people with ourselves. No one living, surely, comes so close as he does to making the personally comic shake hands with the tragic. Because this bifocal vision is our own, Thurber is able to make the stumbling of his people the stumbling of ourselves.

Francis Downing. *Commonweal*. March 9, 1946. pp. 518–9

Thurber might be called a sprite, if sprites have sophistication. He has been repeatedly classified as a humorist. He clearly is one, though clearly also one who does not think life, even ordinary life, is a joke, nor does he find the absurdities for which he has an unfailing eye, unfailingly delicious. These essays . . . may be called roughly the prose poetry of humorous exasperation. Mr. Thurber's writing displays exasperation at once amiable and savage with all sorts of things, for instance—and repeatedly—with the pompous inefficiency of bureaucrats, both public and private. . . . We are all, Mr. Thurber seems to be saying, involved in the maddening silliness of a foolishly complicated world.

Irwin Edman. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Nov. 1, 1953. pp. 1, 8

Thurber's relationship to politics has never been an overt one, yet a political climate informs all his later work, either directly or by implication. . . . The early fables contained a few stories . . . which were direct attacks on the indifference with which the democratic nations faced the spreading power to the Nazis. These old fables sound just as topical today, although at the moment the foxes and the wolves . . . will sound more like the Russians than the Germans, for it is any dealers in oppression who mask their ruthlessness in fine phrases that are the target of Thurber's anger.

Gerald Weales. *Commonweal*. Jan. 18, 1957. p. 410

When he is anatomizing the English language, or engaging in the rueful self-mockery that makes neurosis respectable and almost attractive, or reminiscing with wistful charm about his family and friends in Columbus, Ohio—then Thurber is in a class by himself, and criticism by his inferiors becomes presumptuous. . . . Thurber's great talent lies in his intuitive grasp of the unconscious (always, of course, carefully controlled by his craft); and when he deals with facts, with objective reality, he is generally reducing his powers, not expanding them.

Sydney J. Harris. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 30, 1957. p. 26

For more than a generation James Thurber has been writing stories, an impressive number of them as well shaped as the most finely wrought pieces of Henry James, James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway, as sensitively worded as the most discriminatingly written prose of H.L. Mencken, Westbrook Pegler and J.D. Salinger, and as penetrating—especially during what we can call his ''major phase''—as the most pointed insights of those two large poets of our century, E.A. Robinson and Robert Frost. . . . [A]mong our living writers he is virtually our only creator of serious comedy and one of the few humanists who can make an affirmation without either a chip or a Christ symbol on his shoulder. Indeed, in Thurber's prose the individual is best off when freed of all the paraphernalia of systems, whether mechanical, social, literary or just plain transcendental.

Robert H. Elias. *American Scholar*. Summer, 1958. p. 355

Thurber's range was extraordinarily wide. He was an admirable parodist—remember ''What Cocktail Party'' and the wicked lampooning of the Raymond Chandler school of penny dreadful in ''The White Rabbit Caper''? He was a perceptive, if oblique, critic of literature, refracting rainbow intimations through the prism of his many essays—yes, he was a first-rate familiar essayist, too, as good a one as we have yet produced. . . . He wrote an in-between kind of essay, too—half formal, half familiar—which permitted him to work out as social historian, amateur of American murder, and definitive analyst of the curious Anglo-American cultural phenomenon, the soap opera. And all these different things got set down in a precisely elegant plain style, . . . for Thurber carried on a lifelong love affair with the English language.

Charles A. Brady. *Commonweal*. Dec. 8, 1961. p. 275

. . . some of Thurber's ideas about sex and personality are not necessarily in conflict with those of Freud. Thurber feels that the male animal is unduly repressed by his environment, an environment which includes another animal, his wife, who both abets and conceals her ruthlessness by means of more resolution, solicitude for her mate, and competence in the small matters of everyday living than he shows. Part of his environment is also a society going mad through a misapplication of technology; so-called neurosis is often merely ''a natural caution in a world made up of gadgets that whir and whine and whiz and shriek and sometimes explode.'' Thurber differs from Freud in ignoring the Oedipus complex, whereas Freud regarded this as the major component of sex. He also differs in feeling that it is futile for man to expect to throw off his repressions or even to sublimate them satisfactorily. The civilized (or repressing and repressed) elements in the Little Man's character and environment often have the same cosmic finality as the natural traits. Thurber's people rarely succeed in changing any

aspect of either their surroundings or themselves, and such ''adjustment'' as the male achieves usually comes only through complete withdrawal, as in the cases of Mitty, and of Grandfather in *My Life and Hard Times*.

Norris W. Yates. *The American Humorist* (Iowa State). 1964. pp. 288–9

Although it will not do to claim Thurber for the cult of the Absurd in modern literature (Thurber having formed his view of life independently and long before the Absurd became a literary movement), the world of his later work is nonetheless close to the world as we find it in Ionesco—the apocalyptic vision, the fascination with the breakdown of communication as the primary symptom of a cosmic sickness, and the comic virtuosity are present in both.

But such parallels should not be pushed too far. The sense of modern life as too bizarre and outrageous to be presented as anything other than a grotesque comedy is, in fact, a striking characteristic of much postwar writing, and Thurber's brilliant expression of this sense is not a matter of literary fashion, but an independent response to a common cultural and philosophical situation. In any case, the world of Thurber is larger than that of Ionesco. The dark fantasies and the melancholy strain in his work are balanced by a basic sanity and a positive relish of the whole human scene. The essential quality of Thurber's imagination is the tension between a strong sense of fact (throughout his life he considered himself primarily a journalist) and a strong bias toward fantasy.

Charles S. Holmes. *The Yale Review*. Autumn, 1965. pp. 32–3

The organization of these stories [*My Life and Hard Times*] typically reflects this education; at first it may seem that there is no order—one of the narrator's recollections leads to another with little apparent method. But eventually we realize that the narration really involves a double imposture, and from this a pattern emerges. At one moment the narrator is a child, reliving the incident; at another, he is a man, looking backwards and attempting to reconcile his youthful memories and impressions with mature knowledge and judgment. In the best of these stories the isolation and alienation which seem to pervade American literature are overcome.

Stephen A. Black. *University Review*. Summer, 1966. p. 258

If there is a figure in the American literary past [James] Thurber most resembles it is not so much Henry James as Mark Twain. He writes at times in Twain's cadences and with something of his clarity and vigor; and like Twain he is a natural raconteur. Twain's prose, which lends itself to being read aloud, is particularly effective in its transitions from standard English to dialect and vernacular speech; and Thurber, too, is a keen listener to American speech and can switch suddenly and with striking effect to the parlance of ordinary or vulgar people. Thurber is like Twain, too, in his volatility, in his mood swings from innocence to wrath, from idealism to excoriating pessimism. Gregarious and outgoing in some ways, they were also introverts and skeptical moralists. Both espouse freedom and the individual, yet write at times with such a grimly deterministic outlook that it undermines the individual's importance. Both learned the craft of humor as reporters for newspapers and contributors to magazines, becoming celebrated writers whose American quality was savored abroad. Each was a renowned humorist and at the same time a serious literary artist with a deep strain of melancholy. Each suffered from highly strung nerves and from an early wounding—in Hannibal, Missouri and Columbus, Ohio—from which they never recovered. In *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*, Van Wyck Brooks ascribed ''Twain's wound,'' his unappeasable anger, to a lifelong protest against his small-town frontier origins, with its Puritan ethic and stark cultural impoverishment that stood in opposition to creative expression and imagination. Columbus was less forbidding than Hannibal, but it was here, clearly, that Thurber endured the trauma of being a half-blind misfit, a crisis in his inner life that did not subside even with vast success and international fame.

Significant differences, at the same time, exist between them. Twain does not have Thurber's sense of fantasy, and the spaciousness of Twain's America is absent in Thurber. Instead of mythic raft journeys down the Mississippi, one finds white-collar men who are seized by a sense of terror in the constriction of their anonymous lives. Fear invades their small, routine existences, and hallucination creeps up on them. In this respect, Thurber is a father figure to a line of modern writers, including John Cheever, who are absorbed by the thin line between reality and fantastic estrangement in the experience of representative middle-class Americans. Eponymous middle-class couples appear again and again in Cheever's short stores just as they do in Thurber's; and they are also likely in their isolation to experience hallucination—to see, as in a dream, a nude young woman in the window of a swiftly passing commuter train, or to swim through a series of neighbors' swimming pools to discover truths about their lives so horrendous that they have been unable to face them. Not only in the short stories but increasingly in Cheever's novels fantasy becomes a means of apprehending reality.

Thurber produced no works of great length to ensure his reputation. He was limited to minor forms, and even in these briefer modes leaves out much of human experience. There is, for example, very little love in Thurber's work, or perhaps none at all. Robert Morsberger has enumerated other absences in the writing—no proletarian or working conditions, nor political life, nor treatment (except in parables) of death, war, or religion. Yet despite these limitations, Thurber remains one of the essential writers of his period, particularly in the field of humor. His great contribution was in transforming humor into a form of moral awareness that by destroying a strict rationalism restores the sense of certain nineteenth-century writers of the unfathomable mystery beneath the floor of individual consciousness. . . .

Thurber began his career in an age when American humor writing flourished, and rose to be its chief practitioner. Although afflicted in many ways in his personal life, his achievement was impressive. He wrote some of the finest and most haunting stories of the century, and excelled all of his contemporaries as a satirist and parodist. A poet of anxious psychological states and a fantasist of genius, he was, quite simply, inimitable.

Robert Emmet Long. *James Thurber* (New York: Continuum, 1988), pp. 206–7, 208–9

Although Thurber had always viewed life as a constant state of confusion bordering on chaos, his finest works contain what

[Catherine McGehee] Kenney calls a ''coupling of savage disillusionment and realistic hope that gives enduring value and richness to Thurber's best treatments of the human predicament.'' In his later work, hope seems to have fled. Thurber was dismayed by what he considered the decline in practically everything, and his annoyance was ''so inclusive as to be pointless,'' Updike wrote. ''The writer who had produced 'Fables for Our Time' and 'The Last Flower' out of the thirties had become, by the end of the fifties, one more indignant senior citizen penning complaints about the universal decay of virtue.''

Yet while much of Thurber's later writing seems unrelievedly grumpy and misanthropic, it also has moments of prescience, as did his earlier work. Some of the symptoms of cultural decline that he diagnosed more than thirty years ago are pervasive now. In 1961, he grumbled that ''it is becoming harder and harder, in our time, to tell government from show business''; a few years earlier, he complained about the ''craving of television audiences for blood and brutality,'' and ''the crumbling of precision and sense'' in English usage.

There is irony in the fact that many of Thurber's later works—the ones written closer to our own time—age less well than those he wrote in the 1920s and 1930s about a period even more remote than that, the years before World War I. Thurber's earlier pieces deal with timeless characters and situations. In the later pieces, employing his incredible memory of the literary chestnuts of his youth—and, indeed, cleverly paraphrasing and parodying them—he unwittingly dated the humor. The allusions to Longfellow, Tennyson, Browning, Wordsworth, Shelley, Emerson, and others whose works are obscure to many modern readers, unfortunate though that may be, render these pieces labored and unfunny. The best humor, Thurber had told Max Eastman, ''lies closest to the familiar.'' By ignoring that rule and basing his later humor on sources that since have become unfamiliar, he dulled the edge of his wit.

Thurber's memory and literary sensibility were used to far better advantage in the warm, perceptive tributes and memorials he wrote praising friends and colleagues. He was masterful at capturing the essence of a personality in succinct, telling anecdotes, and at balancing analysis with eulogy. Given the dismal tone in much of the later Thurber pieces reprinted in *Credos and Curios*, which was published in 1962, it is easy to share the regret Helen Thurber expressed, in her introduction to the book, about the stories she knew her husband meant to write but never managed to compose: ''An Evening with Hemingway.'' ''Shake Hands with Sinclair Lewis,'' and ''Cocktails with Thomas Wolfe.''

> Neil A. Grauer. *Remember Laughter: A Life of James Thurber* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Pr., 1994), pp. 164–65, 166

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TOLSON, Melvin (1898–1966)

The consideration of Melvin Tolson's evolving style concerns the maturation of his thought. Here I concentrate on his epic form and his developing perspective. I shall first generalize about his worldview and then trace the development of the hero figure, for both processes set into relief the stylistic growth. The examination includes less the discussion of metrics and figurative language than the concern for poetics in the deepest sense.

Tolson writes: ''A great preacher is a great artist. Words are his tubes of paint. Verse, his brush.'' These sentences go far to explain the poetics of the speaker. He does not belong to that stream of Anglo-American poetry which is purely lyric, expressing directly and mellifluously the poet's own emotions. He concerns himself, on the contrary, with social issues as the barebones of life. His style comes closer to oratorical rhetoric than to song, and his poem is generally public rather than confessional.

The son of a ''fighting preacher''—''I used to watch my Dad in the pulpit and feel proud. . .''—Tolson was himself a great speaker and debate coach as well as a director of theater. Concerned with the underdog in general and with the Black underdog in particular, he saw words as weapons in the war against social ills. Closely linked to the Afro-American oral tradition and the personal commitment to fighting injustice, he shaped a Christo-Marxist worldview. As in the poetry of others during the thirties, his lyric encompassed a social, metaphysical, and communal burden.

Over the years he had four books of poetry published. The first, written about 1934, was brought out posthumously. *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits*, as it was called, contained verses about Harlemites. His next book was *Rendezvous with America*, a collection somewhat influenced by World War II; his third volume, *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, was written after he had been chosen the poet-laureate of the country so named. In ''academic'' style the booklength ode celebrates the African nation. His final volume, *Harlem Gallery*, was another booklength ode, intended as the beginning of an epic about the American Black.

Before undertaking any discussion of the first book, it would be helpful to outline Tolson's cultural theory. His poetry begins with his life experience, which he mulls over, talks over, and subsumes into his phenomenally eclectic reading. Then he transmutes the whole into verse. For the talented and intellectually probing college professor in the Southwest and West from 1923 to 1965, racial discrimination and prejudice were abiding concerns. A Jim Crow existence provoked direct protest and probing into human nature. The Marxist interpretation became a focal point of his thought.

Tolson's epic intention persists in varying forms. In a world that is class-divided and economically determined, the exploited masses become crucial. The underdog, the despised, the poor appear heroic now and foreshadow even greater heroism after the establishment of a new society. Tolson, sometimes ironically, celebrates the human potential embodied in the voiceless majority of the underprivileged.

The masses, in their human potential, become an abstract ideal, a generic hero. But Tolson finds individual nations such as America and Liberia heroic in the present promise and in the future apocalypse. Individual characters who are heroic include persons like Crispus Attucks and Paul Bunyan as well as the poet-prophet, the ''ape of God.'' In one way or another, such various heroes inform his epics.

But Tolson is not merely an epic poet looking for an epic hero. His perspective encourages the epic search, since he proposes the great man theory of history. In his newspaper columns he asserts that geniuses improve humanity's lot. He cites poets, prophets, and scholars as specific types through whose efforts humankind comes to understand and ultimately reform its condition. His early books portray many political and social reformers as well as folk heroes as appropriate instruments. In the last book, he shifts to the poetprophet, the true artist in any mode, as the necessary means to social equality.

Mariann B. Russell. *Black American Poets Between Worlds, 1940–1960*, ed. R. Baxter Miller (University of Tennessee Press, 1986), pp. 1–18.

Harlem Gallery has been alternately celebrated and castigated for its formal difficulty—when, that is, it has been read at all. Yet although the poem is as formidable as any hypertextual text produced by the throes of modernism—saving *Finnegans Wake*—there seems something amiss in the idea that its difficulty should be a significant issue in itself; surely, by now, allusive, elliptical poetry should not be grounds for controversy. Still, even if the grounds are questionable, they are by no means powerless. Readers have apparently found the poem so generally inaccessible that publishers have followed suit and rendered it literally inaccessible, for even in the midst of the current revolution in African American letters, *Harlem Gallery* has quietly gone out of print. . . .

In *Harlem Gallery*, the African American dilemma is not over whether to be a Negro; it is not even over whether to be a black separatist—for, as we find, even a good separatist-balladeer like Hideho Heights, when he gets into the privacy of his apartment, becomes a modernist despite himself. But although I want to make clear the ground on which the poem leaves us with a false dilemma, I want also to recall here that the poem contains within it a *real* dilemma—one that, as I argue in the context of the poem's narrative and historical ''time,'' it remains unwilling or unable to acknowledge. This ''real'' dilemma is, unsurprisingly, a function of the poem's real conflict: whether the African American artist should attempt to create his or her own audience or play to the audiences that already exist. This is the conflict ''resolved'' by *Harlem Gallery*, both through Heights's fall and (equally) through the poem's refusal to contemplate the cultural question consequent on its adoption of the ideology of assimilation—the question of the avant-garde's position when it is no longer (for whatever reason) *avant* of the *garde*. We may also see the poem's conclusion as a symptom of this refusal, insofar as the Curator's epilogue in ''Psi'' follows Heights's unmasking in ''Chi,'' not with a discussion of what it means for a member of a truly marginal group (such as an African American poet) to adopt the aesthetics and ideologies of an already institutionalized modernist ''avant-garde,'' but instead with an eleven-page discussion of ''race'' that declares ''race'' a fiction perpetrated by whites for the oppression of nonwhites. The Curator's answer in ''Psi'' (''Just as the Chinese lack/an ideogram for 'to be,' /our lexicon has no definition / for an ethnic amalgam like Black Boy and me'') may be a good answer—but only because the Curator has deliberately asked the wrong question.

In other words, to uphold the cultural ideal of cultural amalgamation (in Nkomo's phrase, the ''homogenized milk of multiculture'') embodied in the person and function of the Curator, *Harlem Gallery*, needs not only to avoid confronting explicitly its own contemporary cultural position, and its own possible present or future audience, but also to delegitimize the separatist cultural position of Hideho Heights. But beyond its will to assimilation, into a postmodern conception either of the irreducibility of ''marginality'' or of the political conditions for an acceptable embrace of pluralism, the poem cannot and will not go, trusting instead, in the terms of John Ciardi at his vaguest, that its ideal projection of itself will become a shape that impresses itself upon time.

Michael Bérubé. *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*. January, 1990, pp. 57–69.

On the basis of his first volume of poetry, *Rendezvous with America,* it would hardly have been possible to predict the kind of poet Melvin Tolson was to be a decade later. A poet who writes ''I gaze upon her silken loveliness / She is a passionflower of joy and pain / On the golden bed I came back to possess'' does not show particular promise. Likewise the lines ''America is the Black Man's country / The Red Man's, the Yellow Man's / The Brown Man's, the White Man's'' are not suggestive of the great lines yet to come.

There are, however, certain characteristics of the earlier poetry that were to develop and become hallmarks of the later poetry, more its essence than ornament. The second stanza, for example, of ''An Ex-Judge at the Bar'' is in style and content very much like a good deal of the later poetry and untypical of the rather commonplace character of much of the first volume. That stanza, ''I know, Bartender, yes. I know when the Law / Should wag its tail or rip with fang and claw. / When Pilate washed his hands, that neat event / Set for us judges a Caesarean precedent,'' is in tone typically Tolsonian. The juxtaposition of the formal and the informal, the classical and the contemporary, the familiar and the unusual accounts in large measure for the unique character of Tolson's best poetry.

Such juxtapositions are more pronounced in *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia,* where, in addition, the ''gift for language'' noted in Allen Tate's introduction to the volume becomes apparent. The effect of the juxtaposition of the learned encyclopedia references and the most abstruse vocabulary with commonplace references, vocabulary, and rhyme, all managed within a highly traditional form, is pyrotechnic. The occurrence in the same context of French, German, Latin, Hebrew, Swahili, Arabic, Spanish, and Sanskrit references with everyday activities, occupations, and events created a system of tensions not unlike the dynamic of forces holding an atom or a galaxy together. Each element threatens to go off on its own; yet as long as the balance of forces remains constant, the system functions. Tolson, by virtue of an extraordinary mind

and intelligence, keeps a vast array of disparate elements in constant relationship. His poetry is, therefore, coherent, and its primary effect is of the containment and control of vast reserves of energy.

This bears on Karl Shapiro's controversial statement in his introduction to *Harlem Gallery,* Tolson's final volume, that ''Tolson writes in Negro.'' It is not at bottom the language that prompted Shapiro's observation. Rather, it is the intellectual disposition of the tension between two worlds that finds its manifestation in the language. Tolson belongs (and this distinguishes him from Eliot, Pound, and Hart Crane, whom he read avidly) to an Afro-American world and an American-European world, and he knows these worlds in intricate detail. The balance he sustains between them is the source of his power. Few understand him because few know both worlds as well, and few are as totally committed as he to such a high universal standard of values.

Donald B. Gibson. In *Reference Guide to American Literature, 3rd edition*, ed. Jim Kamp (St. James Press, 1994).

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TOOMER, Jean (1894–1967)

Reading [*Cane*], I had the vision of a land, heretofore sunk in the mists of muteness, suddenly rising up into the eminence of song. Innumerable books have been written about the South; some good books have been written in the South. This book is the South. I do not mean that Cane covers the South or is the South's full voice. Merely this: a poet has arisen among our American youth who has known how to turn the essences and materials of his Southland into the essences and materials of literature. A poet has arisen in that land who writes, not as a Southerner, not as a rebel against Southerners, not as a Negro, not as apologist or priest or critic: who writes as a *poet*. The fashioning of beauty is ever foremost in his inspiration: not forcedly but simply, and because these ultimate aspects of his world are to him more real than all its specific problems. He has made songs and lovely stories of his land . . . not of its yesterday, but of its immediate life. And that has been enough.

Waldo Frank. Foreword to *Cane*, by Jean Toomer (Boni and Liveright). 1923. p. vii

Cane does not remotely resemble any of the familiar, superficial views of the South on which we have been brought up. On the contrary, Mr. Toomer's view is unfamiliar and bafflingly subterranean, the vision of a poet far more than the account of things seen by a novelist—lyric, symbolic, oblique, seldom actual. . . .

Cane is sharply divided into two parts. The first is a series of sketches, almost poetic in form and feeling, revolving about a character which emerges with very different degrees of clarity. The second half is a longish short story, ''Kabnis,'' quite distinct from the sketches, and peculiarly interesting. In this Mr. Toomer shows a genuine gift for character portrayal and dialogue. In the sketches, the poet is uppermost. Many of them begin with three or four lines of verse, and end with the same lines, slightly changed. The construction here is musical, too often a little artificially so. . . .

''Kabnis,'' the longest piece in the book is far the most direct and most living, perhaps because it seems to have grown so much more than been consciously made. There is no pattern in it, and very little effort at poetry. And Mr. Toomer makes his Negroes talk like very real people, almost, in spots, as if he had taken down their words as they came. A strange contrast to the lyric expressionism of the shorter pieces. A real peek into the mind of the South, which, like nearly all such genuinely intimate glimpses, leaves one puzzled, and—fortunately—unable to generalize.

Robert Littell. *New Republic*. Dec. 26, 1923. p. 126

The world of black folk will some day arise and point to Jean Toomer as a writer who first dared to emancipate the colored world from the conventions of sex. It is quite impossible for most Americans to realize how straight-laced and conventional thought is within the Negro World, despite the very unconventional acts of the group. Yet this contradiction is true. And Jean Toomer is the first of our writers to hurl his pen across the very face of our sex conventionality. In *Cane*, one has only to take his women characters *seriatim* to realize this: Here is Karintha, an innocent prostitute: Becky, a fallen white woman; Carma, a tender Amazon of unbridled desire; Fern, an unconscious wanton; Esther, a woman who looks age and bastardy in the face and flees in despair; Louise, with a white and a black lover; Avey, unfeeling and unmoral; and Doris, the cheap chorus girl. These are his women, painted with a frankness that is going to make his black readers shrink and criticize; and yet they are done with a certain splendid, careless truth. . . .

Toomer strikes me as a man who has written a powerful book but who is still watching for the fullness of his strength and for that calm certainty of his art which will undoubtedly come with years.

W. E. B. Du Bois. *The Crisis*. Feb., 1924, pp. 161–2

There can be no question of Jean Toomer's skill as a literary craftsman. . . . Toomer has found his own speech, now swift and clipped for violent narrative action, now languorous and dragging for specific characterizing purposes, and now lean and sinuous for the exposition of ideas, but always cadenced to accord with an unusually sensitive ear.

It is interesting to know that Toomer, before he began to write, thought of becoming a composer. One might have guessed it from the fact that the early sketches in *Cane* depend fully as much upon a musical unity as upon a literary unity. ''Karintha,'' for example, opens with a song, presents a theme, breaks into song, develops the theme, sings again, drops back into prose, and dies away in a song. But in it certain narrative functions . . . are left undeveloped. Were it not for the songs, the piece could scarcely exist.

Gorham B. Munson. *Opportunity*. Sept., 1925. p. 262

Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) is an important American novel. By far the most impressive product of the Negro Renaissance, it ranks

with Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as a measure of the Negro novelist's highest achievement. Jean Toomer belongs to that first rank of writers who use words almost as a plastic medium, shaping new meanings from an original and highly personal style. Since stylistic innovation requires great technical dexterity. Toomer displays a concern for technique which is fully two decades in advance of the period. While his contemporaries of the Harlem School were still experimenting with a crude literary realism, Toomer had progressed beyond the naturalistic novel to ''the higher realism of the emotions,'' to symbol, and to myth. . . .

A critical analysis of *Cane* is a frustrating task, for Toomer's art, in which ''outlines are reduced to essences,'' is largely destroyed in the process of restoration. No paraphrase can properly convey the aesthetic pleasure derived from a sensitive reading of *Cane*.

Robert A. Bone. *The Negro Novel in America* (Yale). 1958. pp. 81, 88

Now that the Jean Toomer papers have found a home at the Fisk University library it is no longer necessary to speculate as to why Toomer ceased to write after he published *Cane* in 1923. In fact, he did not cease to write. He continued to write, and write voluminously; but to no avail—he could find no publisher. The story of Toomer's literary efforts after 1923 is a story of frustration, despair and failure—this after what was surely one of the most promising beginnings in the history of American literature. Toomer's story is one of a young man caught up in the tangled skein of race relations in America. But it goes beyond even that. For a time, at least, it was the story of modern man; the story of a search for identity—for an absolute in a world that had dissolved into flux. It is a story of success—at the age of thirty-one his search for an identity-giving absolute was over. It is a story of tragedy. As long as he was searching he was a fine creative artist; when the search ended, so did his creative powers. So long as he was searching, his work was the cry of one caught in the modern human condition; it expressed modern man's lostness, his isolation. Once Toomer found an identity-giving absolute, his voice ceased to be the cry of modern man and became the voice of the schoolmaster complacently pointing out the way—his way.

S.P. Fullinwider. *Phylon*. Winter, 1966. p. 396

Cane is most important to its readers because of its place in Afro-American literary tradition. The point can be made simply by observation of the relationship between *Cane* and that classic of black literature, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Du Bois' book is also a collection of independent pieces recording a Northern observer's understanding of Southern black life. In anticipation of the techniques of *Cane*, Du Bois the social scientist humanized his research findings by a use of narrative style that invites the reader to tour the rural areas, the linking of essays with songs as epigraphs, and animation of the entire book with repeated use of a thematic metaphor—the veil. For his part, Toomer could not have failed to realize that his book repeated the symbolic return to ancestral scenes that grounded *The Souls of Black Folk*, developed Du Bois' theme of a reconciliation between the ''Talented Tenth'' and the black masses, and imaginatively extended the meanings latent in the image of black folks' souls.

In its own decade *Cane* epitomized the desire among black artists to deal with folk experience in sophisticated literature. Today, when the problem of its form no longer seems so baffling, the relevance of *Cane* has, if anything, been increased, because in its exploration of identity as a process of liberating the spontaneous self in an often oppressive environment we can see how *Cane* established the major terms of the twentieth century black writer's chief theme—the redemption of personality.

John M. Reilly. *Studies in the Novel*. Fall, 1970. pp. 323–4

Although allowance must be made for the characteristic enthusiasm with which Toomer embraced every new interest, whether sociology or the black field hand, much of this feeling was genuine. It is also true, however, that consciously or subconsciously Toomer knew that he, like Lewis [in *Cane*], was visiting in the South. Thus, he could write sympathetically as one who feels kinship yet maintains artistic detachment. He desired merely to observe, to sense, and to reflect the milieu, not to change it.

When he wrote of Washington and Chicago, however, he lost his detachment. He wanted to reform the people to rid them of their indolence or their anxieties or their inhibitions. Consequently his tone became sharper, sardonic, satirical.

Darwin T. Turner. *In a Minor Chord: Three Afro-American Writers and Their Search for Identity* (Southern Illinois). 1971. pp. 28–9

The fact that Jean Toomer wrote plays is a little known fact, but a very important one, for it points out a central problem in the man—the need to find different ways of communicating his ideas and beliefs to the general public. Therefore in his plays he was experimenting with forms long before anyone else. In 1922 when Toomer wrote his first play, the sound of the revolution that was to begin in the American theater was a faint whisper. O'Neill had written *The Emperor Jones* in 1920 and *The Hairy Ape* in 1922, but the plays of George Kaufman, Marc Connelly, E. E. Cummings, and John Dos Passos were still a few years in the future. Toomer was the first American playwright who was trying to do some experimentation with, as Darwin Turner says, ''dramatic form and technique in order to blend social satire with lyric expression of modern man's quest for spiritual self-realization.''

This can be seen clearly in Toomer's first play, *Natalie Mann*. In this play he argues passionately for the sexual and spiritual release of the middle-class black woman and by symbolic representation the sexual and spiritual freedom of all women. The core of the play is built around Nathan Merilh, a modern-day Jesus Christ, who to my mind turns out to be a voodoo priest, and his attempt to save the soul of Natalie from the confines of middle-class values. She lives with him in New York, defying convention. She finally reaches total self-realization when he sacrifices himself and does a ritual voodoo dance which separates ''individual identity from national or social origins,'' saving her soul.

Larry E. Thompson in *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered*, ed. Arna Bontemps (Dodd, Mead). 1972. pp. 55–6

Cane is an unusually interesting book not only because of its subject matter but also because of the kind of writing it is. A most distinctive feature of the work is its emphasis on the realistic portrayal of characters rather than on action. In some instances, however, the characters are delineated mainly in simple recountings of their actions and their reactions to others and situations, as is true of Fern and Avey. In other instances the method of character revelation employed is a blending of associationism and the stream of consciousness. . . .

Another unusually interesting feature of the work is its gracious plenty of figurative language, much of which is spontaneous and natural and some of which is strained and artificial. All of it serves, nevertheless, to arrest the reader's attention and to keep his interest from flagging, as Toomer presumably intended for it to serve in addition to vivifying and clarifying his ideas. Uniquely interesting work of genius that *Cane* is, it was an auspicious beginning for Toomer's success as a writer of imaginative literature. Unfortunately it also marked the end of that success, for it was his last as well as his first book of creative writing to be published.

W. Edward Farrison. *CLA Journal*. March, 1972. pp. 301–2

[Jean] Toomer, born into a family of mixed-bloods, embodied indeterminacy. He sojourned among blacks and whites, and prided himself on the ambiguity of his racial ancestry until he finally repudiated his blackness. ''I am of no field,'' he wrote later in *Essentials*, a privately printed book of aphorisms, ''I am of the field of being.'' He lived for a short time in the South and felt the powerful sway of its culture. As he revealed in a letter to Claude McKay, then one of the editors of *The Liberator*, Toomer felt drawn ''into the Negro group'' and loved it: ''A visit to Georgia last fall was the starting point of almost everything of worth that I have done. I heard folk songs come from the lips of Negro peasants. I saw the rich dusk beauty that I had heard many false accents about, and of which till then, I was somewhat skeptical. And a deep part of my nature, a part that I had repressed, sprang suddenly to life and responded to them. Now, I cannot conceive of myself as aloof and separated'' (*The Wayward and the Seeking*, 18).

Yet, Toomer did not remain long within the race nor champion its cause. Instead, he found in nature an objective correlative for his ambivalence and titled his book accordingly. Natural sugarcane is delicious for the first chews, but once the sweetness has been extracted, it becomes fibrous, bitter.

As slave singers knew, nature could be a help or a hindrance to securing deliverance, to reaching campground, or to riding out the wilderness. The South, the land of cane and ancestral territory for most American blacks, is both a hostile political field and an abundantly fertile cultural terrain. These tensions in nature and in geography match the ''warring ideals'' of being black and American, which Du Bois called double consciousness. This condition plagued Toomer throughout his life. Writing *Cane* was Toomer's attempt to contain, if not to reconcile, the profound ambivalence attending his racial ambiguity and to emerge like Kabnis from the subsoil or cellar of racial awareness into a bright new day. Kabnis, however, was carrying a bucket of dead coals.

Critical interpretations of the book's ending have engendered two schools of thought: some scholars have viewed Kabnis's descent into and rise from the underground as a positive assertion of himself as a black artist; others have viewed the bucket of dead coals as a signal of Kabnis's ultimate failure. Houston Baker, Jr., Nellie McKay, and others have argued for the first interpretation; Darwin Turner for the latter. Neither perspective is fully correct. Toomer works against too easy a resolution. He forces us to accept the fundamental duality in sugarcane, or in nature; just as he has left us with the uncomfortable duality of his troubled racial identity. The key gesture of performance in *Cane* is Kabnis's emergence from the underground as two images fix in the reader's mind: the dead coals and the new day he faces. The drawing of the two arcs as conflicting halves of an incomplete circle become warring ideals in Toomer's literary double consciousness, charging the book's every scene with electricity.

Melvin Dixon. *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Pr., 1987), pp. 34–35

Cane led the way in a return to the black folk spirit, which Eugenia Collier has seen as one of the most vital developments of the Harlem Renaissance, and it did so in a form and style that have scarcely been surpassed by subsequent American authors. Toomer knew—and did not attempt to sublimate—the pains and restrictions of a black southern heritage. This angst is astutely criticized in *Cane* and magnificently portrayed as the somber result of white America's exploitation and oppression, black America's too willing acceptance, and the inherent duality in the nature of man—the Manichaeanism of the universe, emblematized by the southern past—which both marvels at and seeks to destroy beauty. Opposed to ''the burden of southern history''—indeed, to the darker side of human history, with its inhibitions, omnipresent violence, and moral ineptitude—however, are the pristine loveliness and indomitable spirit of the folk, to be discovered and extolled by the sensitive observer. A folk culture containing its own resonant harmonies, communal values and assumptions, and fruitful proximity to the ancestral soil offers a starting point for the journey toward black art. The artist, however, cannot simply observe the surface beauties of this culture; he must comprehend the self-knowledge and nobility of spirit that made its creation possible in the midst of an inhuman servitude. Toomer repeatedly asserts this in *Cane*, and at times the book reads like a tragic allegory, posing good against evil, suffering against redemption, hope against despair. As the reader struggles to fit the details together, he becomes increasingly involved in the complexities of the black situation. He moves, in short, toward that freedom that always accompanies deeper self-knowledge and a genuine understanding of one's condition in the universe. In this sense, *Cane* is not only a journey toward liberating black American art but also what philosophy calls the *Ding an sich*—the thing in itself.

Houston A. Baker, Jr. *Afro-American Poetics: Revisions of Harlem and the Black Aesthetic* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Pr., 1988), pp. 14–15, 44

Toomer would seem to be more prophetic than mentally defeated. In the early 1920s in other words, he foresaw a new plasticity of language that would emerge only later in the 1950s and 1960s. In

the late 1920s and early 1930s, he had looked forward to the humanistic psychologists of mid-century America. In his quest to reconcile the exterior and the interior of the self, he strikes a tone that is today new-age.

But what he needed for lasting greatness was a powerfully synthetic voice. What he refused to see was that difference must be faced before it can be dissolved or that delighting in cultural diversity could in the long run facilitate a human family on more honest grounds. Only momentarily in *Cane* does he ever represent the artist's profound tension in dramatic fiction, his narrative encounter with himself.

R. Baxter Miller. *Langston Hughes Review*. Spring, 1992, p. 37

Cane is not a straightforward work of social protest that wears its politics on its sleeve; Toomer couched his satiric commentary in a densely symbolistic and psychologistic idiom that requires considerable decoding. Toomer's mimetic impulses were disciplined within the regime that we have come to associate with high modernism; as he wrote to Gorham Munson, ''Mystery cannot hope but accompany a deep, clear-cut image. . . . I desire the profound image saturated in its own lyricism.'' No doubt Toomer agreed with his soulmate Waldo Frank, who, in praising an early draft of *Cane*, remarked that ''the vile current realistic novel has spoiled all minds for the essential and pure lines of aesthetic form.'' Moreover, the sly manner in which Toomer slips in many of his historical allusions suggests that the writer was reluctant to undertake a frontal critique of Sparta's white and black ruling elites. About the full reasons for this reluctance we can only speculate.

What I hope to have demonstrated here is that the common critical supposition that a modernist preoccupation with psychological interiority and symbolistic discourse entails mythic ahistoricity has led *Cane* scholars to ignore a number of the text's buried but by no means inaccessible references to contemporaneous Georgia history and social institutions. The Toomer who went South in 1921 and rediscovered his roots looked upon himself as not just a poet but also a radical. Writing to Boni and Liveright right after the completion of *Cane*, he remarked that his next major work would be about ''this whole black and brown world heaving upward against, here and there mixing with the white. The mixture, however, is insufficient to absorb the heaving, hence it but accelerates and fires it. This upward heaving is to be symbolic of the proletariat or world upheaval. And it is likewise to be symbolic of the subconscious penetration of the conscious mind.'' While Toomer wrote to Munson in praise of saturated imagery, he also stipulated, ''I still demand extra-artistic consciousness in works of art.'' Toomer has been done a disservice by critics who, reading his subsequent commitment to Gurdjieffian mysticism and psychotherapy back into his earlier literary efforts, have minimized, even excluded, his quite progressive social and political views.

Barbara Foley. ''Jean Toomer's Sparta.'' *American Literature*. Dec., 1995, pp. 767–78

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TORRENCE, Ridgely (1875–1950)

Dedicated to Edmund Clarence Stedman, with reverence and love, and decorated by Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, with particular felicity of invention, comes this dainty, wise, witty, malicious little book of verse [*The House of a Hundred Lights*]. The hundred lights may look out of a house in oriental style, but they look out those fivescore windows on the modern world of Western thought. The sun is center of the solar system, and life has been continuous. Man is not a finished thing. The common sense of the philosopher is put now in ironic epigram, now in fanciful fable of easy application. The homeliness and honesty of the ingredients—obtained at some moral purefood store, which by culinary sortilege have been given a delicious pungent aroma—first require praise. Why should a man writing prose have to know whereof he discourses, but the versemaker be held unaccountable in the courts of reason? Surely it is the delightful directness of Mr. Torrence's verse, his sweet temper of statement, his gay indifference to his reader's conviction or conversion, that lend the chief charm to the third or fourth reading.

W.N. Guthrie. *Sewanee Review*. Oct., 1900. p. 495

Torrence and [Edwin Arlington] Robinson have the dramatic fever acutely. Torrence has just finished a three-acter which he is to read to me tonight. It is called *The Madstone*—certainly a striking title, is it not? It seems the 'mad-stone' exists among the folklore properties of his native Xenia, Ohio. It is a small porous stone supposed to possess the property of extracting poison from the human body, when placed upon an envenomed wound. He uses it as a symbol of woman. Robinson thinks the play is a big thing. He (R.) has also one in first draught, called *Ferguson's Ivory Tower*, the ivory tower, I believe, being Art. It would be wonderfully good luck if they both pulled it off. One could begin to think the American drama, long awaited and devoutly prayed-for babe, really about to be born.

William Vaughn Moody. *Letters to Harriet* (Houghton). 1935. pp. 319–20. [Letter of Jan. 12, 1907]

Mr. Torrence is an Ohio poet who, looking at the Negro beyond the miasma that surrounds him, has seen something so utterly different that his tenderness has occasionally got the better of him, and he has poured out his heart to the colored people like a hospitable wine. So different are the men and women and children whom Mr. Torrence has perceived for himself, it is scarcely strange that his impulse should be excessively generous, but one rejoices that this impulse enabled him to share the self-consciousness of a particular

group of American citizens as it has seldom been shared before. There are three plays in the program of the Garden Theatre, the first a comedy, the second a tragedy, the third a ''Passion interlude''—the incident of Simon the Cyrenian on the way of the cross. . . . One undiscovered country in emotional America is Negro country, and these productions have disclosed it in a fresh and vigorous and lovely way.

Francis Hackett. *New Republic*. April 14, 1917. p. 325

Poems by Torrence attracted immediate notice on their infrequent appearance in magazines; . . . his ''Eye-Witness,'' ''The Bird and the Tree,'' and ''The Son,'' continually quoted, became contemporary classics. But Torrence remained in the peculiar position of one whose poetry was known only through anthologies, his own volume being not unprocurable but unprinted.

This strange and almost absurd circumstance has been remedied. A full quarter of a century after his advent, Torrence has published, without preamble or apology, his second collection of poems, *Hesperides*. Physically, it is not a large book—Torrence is not a voluminous writer—but in these one hundred pages is contained some of the most definite and distinguished poetry of the day. . . .

An entire article might be written concerning Torrence's firm clarity of thought and phrase. Practically every anthology of the period contains ''The Son''—and yet I wonder how many of the readers of its sixteen lines are aware of the great artistry which has crowded the tragedy of a lifetime into so brilliant a condensation. Every casual line makes the revelation greater; every word is as starkly dramatic as it is inevitable.

Louis Untermeyer. *Saturday Review*. May 16, 1925. p. 756

As early as 1900, he issued *The House Of A Hundred Lights*, and then waited twenty-five years before bringing out *Hesperides*. Twelve years ago, he published a volume of negro plays, realistic and poetic, plays which ushered in the negro movement in the theatre. And, for many years past, Torrence has been the poetry editor of *The New Republic*, a position he has conducted with anonymous liberality and distinction. Despite his restraints, he is probably the most reliable of poetry editors. More important as a poet, it is a pity Torrence has devoted so little time to creative writing. He has none of the faults of the average conservative; he is too well endowed with self-criticism. Possibly the critic ultimately defeated the poet. In any event, he has written several poems distinguished for a reality of utterance and refinement of form.

Alfred Kreymborg. *Our Singing Strength* (Coward-McCann). 1929. p. 403

Torrence had been captivated by ''The Children of the Night'' and, in the hospitality of his gay and expansive personality, was ready to take its author to his heart. Robinson was unprepared for this sprightly, mischievous being, this incarnation of youth, so individual, yet so free of pose, so fluid, so witty, so imaginative, yet so honest, and so loyal. He was outwardly almost the complete antithesis to Robinson, a social being to his fingertips, picking adventure from every bush; a fountain of gracefully rising and falling entertainment, giving himself with careless generosity, yet, like Robinson, wholly self-sustaining; unpossessed and unpossessable. There was a touch of St. Francis in him and of Johnny Appleseed and of Till Eulenspiegel; of Venetian color and richness and of Florentine efflorescence; and he was not wholly at home in his time.

Herman Hagedorn. *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (Macmillan). 1939. pp. 164–5

Reading the poems in this book [*Poems*], one must admire the poet's serenity, candor, trueness, devotion. His line is always clear and musical, the tone sure, the accent right. This clarity gives Mr. Torrence's work a satisfactory timelessness; he can be modern without being modish; neither is he unaware of the bardic tradition. This tradition imputes no reproach to the poet if he is called, at times, ''inspirational,'' at others, ''visionary,'' or ''dreamer.'' It is a tradition in which the general may prevail over the particular; it permits occasional vagueness, along with largeness, of mood or image; it skirts, at its lower levels, oratory or rhetoric; at its higher reaches, it approaches prophecy. It draws the poet on to raptness, exaltation.

Rolfe Humphries. *New Republic*. Oct. 27, 1941. p. 565

There has been more space given to *Three Plays for a Negro Theatre* in this record than will be given to anything else. Not because the plays themselves were as important dramatically as a great many things that came later, but for other reasons. They marked, it was agreed, a turning point in Negro theatre history. They broke completely with all the theatre stereotypes of Negro character. They gave Negro actors a first fine opportunity. They made Negroes welcome in the audience. They showed that Negroes could appreciate a white man's contribution to the literature of their life, if it were written in truth and beauty. They showed how a healthy criticism responds to a healthy stimulus. Above all, they showed that the *Three Plays* were not a happy accident. They were the distillation of a lyric poet's long thinking and experience of life; they were the end product of faithful training by certain actors and musicians. All of this, plus the considered intention of a producer with courage and imagination and a designer-director of unusual talent. Such things do not, in the theatre, ''just happen''; but they can happen at any time when men and the stars will it so.

Edith J.R. Isaacs. *The Negro in the American Theatre* (Theatre Arts). 1947. p. 60

''Heaven gives its glimpses only to those/In no position to look too close . . .'' is the tribute Robert Frost paid to the genius of Ridgely Torrence a quarter of a century ago. Torrence, who took a passing glimpse at the mirror of mortality and caught its radiance in his own poetry, was slightly disconcerted by the two-edged meaning of the couplet. Did the brilliance of earth contain only in itself the brilliance of paradise? No, he never gave the imp in Frost the chance to hold an irreverent whiplash over him. He accepted the praise with the same modesty he accepted encomia from Houseman and Hodgson, his peers. Like them, he produced one book of poetry, *Poems*, a masterpiece, for posterity to judge.

A true American mystic, heir to the Transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau, Ridgely Torrence was of his time. Not oracular, he was a see-er, who endured the political distemper of the age, its violent world wars, its social outrages. To these themes he brought the incandescence of his rare intelligence and vision.

I.L. Salomon. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 27, 1952. p. 21

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TRILLING, Lionel (1905–1975)

Mr. Trilling has. . . , if I am not mistaken, written one of the first critical studies (*Matthew Arnold*) of any solidarity and scope by an American of his generation. And he has escaped the great vice of that generation: the addiction to obfuscatory terminology. Dealing in a thoroughgoing fashion with the esthetic, the philosophical and the socio-political aspects of his subject, he is almost entirely free from the jargons of any of these fields. I believe he has been influenced by the fashion in a little neglecting the literary aspect of Arnold as well as the biographical. . . . But if Mr. Trilling has followed the fashion, it is evidently not due to lack of competence. His observations on Arnold's style are admirably phrased as well as just.

Edmund Wilson. *New Republic*. March 22, 1939. p. 200

The Middle of the Journey is not a *tendenz* novel; yet it defines the tendency of our lives, and can be most easily discussed in its moral rather than its dramatic terms.

This temptation is to be resisted, for the dramatic terms are always in the fore, and sometimes almost as brightly as in a comedy of manners. Certainly it is a book of great wit, and it is difficult to think of any recent novels which are at all like it. From older writers one detects, perhaps predictably, the influence of E.M. Forster, especially in the effective combination of wit and gravity, and in the somewhat frosty detachment of style.

Mark Schorer. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 12, 1947. p. 40

What Mr. Trilling has written is, quite overtly, a dialectical novel. . . . His language is analytical, his structure polemic, his sequence of scenes and confrontations among characters virtually syllogistic. Yet it is a remarkable testimony to his skill and sincerity and to the tenacious probity of his thinking, that he has been able to keep his plotting sharply dramatic; that as we read we lose our sense of lacking familiar fictional ingredients; and that we become profoundly absorbed in his story, not only as a brilliantly sustained argument but as the record of an essential experience and milieu of our age. . . . It is a book that brings the best critical intelligence now discernible in America into play with an absolutely honest creative talent.

Morton Dauwen Zabel. *The Nation*. Oct. 18, 1947. pp. 414–5

Because the level on which perception takes place in the novel is immeasurably higher than what is seen in most popular fiction, the writing will make considerable demands upon the reader. The reviewer for *Time*, who found the style rather too ''gray,'' simply did not notice that Mr. Trilling's material forces him to a line of greater length and more complex contour than one finds, say, in John O'Hara or James Cain. Mr. Trilling's writing is well up to the high intelligence and peculiar tact which direct it, and in some places . . . it is literally perfect. . . . Mr. Trilling's novel stands as the testament of a real human being, struggling with the complexities of human thoughts and human feelings and moving in a journey which has meaning and purpose only as long as it remains human.

Henry Rago. *Commonweal*. Nov. 14, 1947. pp. 121–2

As a conscious liberal Mr. Trilling is reluctant to commit himself to any single critical attitude. He cherishes a freedom to experiment, to use a combination of methods and a diversity of standards as tools at his disposal. . . . If there is one angle of insight which appeals to Mr. Trilling more than another, however, it is the Freudian. He even goes to the length—surely hyperbolic—of asserting that his pleasure in responding to a short treatise by Freud is difficult to discriminate from the pleasure afforded by a couplet from Yeats. Yet he also keeps his admiration this side of idolatry and on several occasions indicates his clear awareness of the limitations of Freudian concepts when applied to the interpretation of literary masterpieces.

George F. Whicher. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. April 9, 1950. p. 5

Within his frames of knowledge and conviction his thinking is active, straightforward, and seldom clouded. Best of all, perhaps, he does not despise common sense as an instrument too common for an intellectual use. He does not employ jargon. He recognizes ''the dangers which lie in our most generous wishes.''. . . My respect for Mr. Trilling is so great that I can take no pleasure in hunting out his possible faults, but he exhibits, to my mind, one defect that should not be ignored—parochialism. He is parochial, I think, when he declares that ''it is the plain fact that there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation.'' . . . What he is really saying here is that he cannot believe in the genuineness of any political ideas save those to which he can himself subscribe. . . . However . . . his political bias does not corrupt his literary judgments.

Ben Ray Redman. *Saturday Review*. April 15, 1950. pp. 44–5

Mr. Trilling is outstanding, in the higher ranks of criticism, for his freedom from pedantry and his alertness to the intimate connection

between the world of literature and life itself. Working with the insights of a flexible, undoctrinaire modernism, he has shown himself to be a resolute and perceptive researcher into the problems of modern life. . . . To the fatuous optimism of the doctrinaire progressive, Trilling opposes the deep truth of James's moral imagination, with its awareness of disaster, and the tough psychology of Freud, which invites a more complex estimate of human motives than liberalism has made.

Charles J. Rolo. *Atlantic Monthly*. June, 1950. pp. 82–4

Lionel Trilling is not only an accomplished interpreter of the nineteenth century; he is, in his own right, a thoughtful mind of the mid-twentieth. The distance between this position and the mentality of the early twentieth century may be gauged by the very breadth of sympathy with which Mr. Trilling, Professor of English at Columbia, treats the commitments and sanctions of mid-Victorianism.

Not that his mood is nostalgia for the past; rather it is a pathos of the present, an urgent awareness of ''our modern fate'' well calculated to impress contemporary readers. . . . Something can be gained by revaluation—which, in these cases, means higher evaluation—of writers whose sense of individuality struggled against the encroachments of conformity.

Harry Levin. *New York Times Book Section*. Feb. 13, 1955. p. 3

Mr. Trilling dares to bring scholarship into criticism; and therefore he is one of the few critics in this country who can write limpidly, humanely, undogmatically about any and every book that interests him, and who can be interested in any and every kind. While he takes care not to confuse the effects of a book upon himself with the book itself, he is not afraid to entertain relativity; he boldly sets forth a writer's intention, unperturbed by the cry of ''fallacy!'' So he is constantly instructive, eminently readable, always refreshing.

Perry Miller. *The Nation*. March 5, 1955. p. 203

Mr. Trilling likes to move out and consider the implications, the relevance for culture, for civilization, for the thinking man today, of each particular literary phenomenon which he contemplates, and this expansion of the context gives him both his moments of greatest perception and his moments of disconcerting generalization. . . . It is civilization, we feel, that he really wants to talk about, and though, of course, all discourse about literature is and should be ultimately discourse about civilization, we sometimes feel that Mr. Trilling is stretching and forcing his literary material to allow himself to move over quickly to the larger issues.

David Daiches. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. April 3, 1955. p. 4

This is, in fact, real criticism, which can only be addressed to those who are directly on a level with the critic himself; they need not have read exactly the same books, but he has to assume that they have the same quality of interest in the subject as he has. Professor Trilling is a master of this procedure, for all that his tone is not conversational or intimate, but rather Arnoldian, without sharing Arnold's tendency to nag or preach. And, far more than Arnold, he has the true critic's gift of describing *exactly* the thing he is talking about. . . . His criticism, at bottom, is not technical, nor aesthetic, but moral. What makes a great book great, for him, is the spiritual and moral health it embodies.

John Wain. *Spectator*. July 29, 1955. pp. 171–2

Trilling's mind will play luminously with what he knows, and what he knows is what has a *literature*. It seems hardly an exaggeration to say that it was the writings of David Riesman which led him to see American society as a *subject*. He knows London and Paris and New England and the American Frontier as they have been rendered, interpreted, discussed, projected, evoked, in innumerable books. He is at home in the world of Western culture in a positively enviable way. And yet in a sense that world of Western culture exists only in the mind of a few highly cultivated American intellectuals. In fact, it is more fragmentary, more impure, more confused, and perhaps even sometimes more exciting than the civilized and sensitive American metropolitan mind conceives it to be. Perhaps it can be said that men like Trilling (and there are all too few of them) have created Western culture, for only in their minds it lies as an ordered whole. But at least in looking on it as an ordered whole he is not looking *back* on it in Alexandrian fashion to classify and entomb: it all lives for him, vibrant with both moral and aesthetic reality; it is part of a present, or perhaps of a timeless, order, an order that is always relevant, however much one needs a sense of the past to understand it. It is this conviction of the present reality of all literature that makes Trilling such a lively and compelling critic.

David Daiches. *Commentary*. July, 1957. p. 69

The truth is, I think, that the unity of Trilling's work, if one knows where to look for it, is far more imposing than he wants to admit. It does not lie in the subjects he has dealt with. I would prefer to call it, rather, a unity of concern. About the most scattered and disparate subjects he is forever asking the same questions: about the moral implications of the arts, about the ideational substructure of politics, about the position or predicament of an intellectual class in an anti-intellectual world, about the impact of our discoveries about the irrational and subrational, about the relation of fiction to the structure of society, about the nature of culture itself. These questions come up no matter what Trilling is scrutinizing, and to such an extent that sometimes the work he criticizes seems to become only a pretext for the further elaboration of one of his favorite preoccupations. . . . Trilling's one novel, *The Middle of the Journey* (1947), treats the same matters he has worried constantly in his critical writing.

W.M. Frohock. *Southwest Review*. Summer, 1960. p. 225

Trilling's great contribution lies in his attempt to redefine within a democratic framework the relationship between literature and politics so that we ''force into our definition of politics every human activity and every subtlety of every human activity.'' . . .

Despite the sensitivity of his critical analysis, the mellow Arnoldian flavor of his prose, and the deep sincerity of his feelings, Trilling is ultimately a limited observer of the American scene. His

inability to read the novel in any but realistic terms and his myopic sympathy for Freud's but not Calvin's image of man's limitations deprives him of any real *engagement* with American literature and culture. A striking example of the cosmopolitan provincial, he cannot conceive of an America extending beyond the confines of New York City.

Paul Levine. *Hudson Review*. Spring, 1962. pp. 93–5

He is our one literary critic who, in a philosophical manner, unceasingly questions the categories and values of our culture. His originality resides in the way he has allied his close study of Freud with the Arnoldian dictum that literature is a criticism of life. His essays possess an air of civilized converse, a measured tone of reflection, and a tension that seems to arise from uneasiness as to where to place his critical self-assertion. The dust-jacket speaks of Trilling's critical ''stance,'' and it is this stance—half aggressive, half cautious—that has given him the authority he enjoys here and in England.

Leon Edel. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 6, 1965. p. 37

If Trilling has devoted much of his life to writing about literature when he is also very concerned with politics and sociology, it must be precisely because, as he claimed, ''literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty.'' The lazy or frightened mind seeks the refuge of ideology (''ideology is not the product of thought''): those capable of ''the energy of the encompassing mind'' will persist in uncertainty, if only out of respect for everything that cannot be finally known about ourselves and out world. . . .

In his new collection of essays, *Beyond Culture*, Trilling returns again and again to the same preoccupations and problems. The same patient penetration and consideration are at work, though just occasionally it sounds as though the ability to live strenuously among uncertainties has slackened into a habit. There are detectable vaguenesses, and some paragraphs and essays break off or fade away just at the point one would have liked a fiercer effort at clarification. . . . He seems to feel almost imprisoned within the problems and paradoxes inherent in his rather select and oft-repeated vocabulary. There is something in the tone—between disenchantment and pessimism—which gives some of the essays an almost elegiac note.

Tony Tanner. *Encounter*. August, 1966. pp. 72–4

Laskell [the hero of the novel] would, in every instance, employ to the best of his ability the ''humanistic, critical intelligence'' in endeavoring to cope with the world. This means acting ''in modulation''—*but* acting. It is not acquiescence, not passivity, but it *is* moderation. Thus, as John Laskell reaches ''the middle of the journey,'' he assumes a ''middle of the road'' stance, one that may, unhappily, cause alienation from his friends, but one that represents the most tenable kind of liberalism, Laskell and author Trilling agree.

In and around this ideological discussion, which serves as the core of the book. Trilling weaves various speculations about the large subjects of death and love, relating these to his political topic by virtue of the belief that undergirds his remarks in every instance, the need for human beings to adopt a responsible attitude.

Gordon Milne. *The American Political Novel* (Oklahoma). 1966. p. 144

To celebrate Lionel Trilling's work is not to advance any cause narrower than that of the cultivated literary and social intelligence addressed to the most generous conception of individual and social ends. Responsive as he was to the work of Freud, that fact no more defines him than does his allegiance to liberal democracy or his devotion to Wordsworth and Keats. If there is a characteristic mode of inquiry in his writing, it might be phrased: What, given the cultural situation with all its stresses, gaps, unarticulated oppositions, current shibboleths, are the appropriate objects of our attention at this moment? Among the foci he found revealing were the cultural fate of certain words, the shifts and permutations within a particular period of the significance attributed to certain books, poems, writers, social causes, human qualities, and—as in the notable essay, ''The Fate of Pleasure,'' or his last book, *Sincerity and Authenticity*—the ways in which philosophy, history, and the arts recorded deeprunning transformations in the culture in the course of the last two centuries.

When Trilling writes, he appears on each occasion to enter into the historical process as he conceives it, and by exposing the subject he has chosen for what it is and what it has become—for its contemporary resonance—asserts in the same breath our responsibility to facts and values of persisting importance and our responsibility to ourselves—readers who are tacitly urged to assume the implied burden of discrimination, judgment and action.

Quentin Anderson, Stephen Donadio, and Steven Marcus. In *Art, Politics, and Will: Essays in Honor of Lionel Trilling*, ed. Quentin Anderson, Stephen Donadio, and Steven Marcus (Basic Books, 1977), pp. vii–viii

Lionel Trilling has been variously described as a liberal, a conservative, a patriarch, an aesthete, a moralist, and so on. Though in his writings he consistently expressed a profound aversion to ideological thinking and was scrupulously fair and responsive to rival points of view, he came especially in his later years to be derided for various kinds of inflexibility and for downright obtuseness. Why so many literary people should have thought him vulnerable to their probings—malicious and otherwise—we cannot confidently say, but there is no doubt that a critic of his eminence was hurt in the eyes of many detractors by his seeming to operate so blithely, without benefit of theory or system. Though Trilling contradicted himself on occasion, and was of two minds on almost everything he touched, he knew what he was doing, or thought he knew. The pleasure we take in his enduring work is a pleasure in confronting a unified sensibility whose general absence our culture has persistently bemoaned through all the years of this century. . . .

There is a certain discomfort we must feel, confronted with Trilling's version of wisdom, with all it says of our collective diminution and of the ironic ''knowing'' gestures that are all we have in the way of legitimate response to the charge of inertia. Many of us may wish to resist Trilling, to insist that more is possible to us than he imagined, and that we need not be willfully deceived to take arms against what we feel ourselves encouraged to

become. Some of us may even continue to feel that a politics is conceivable and legitimate at a time when every idea is converted to a cause and to be adversary is to be instantly authenticated even by one's ideological opponents. . . .

If we still find in his writings one of the consistent pleasures of literary experience, we must direct at his work that quality of aggressive engagement he honored in his own transactions with the writers he loved. Perhaps there is more of the ''triumphal arch'' and of the commemorative icon in Trilling's work than he would have liked to think; and perhaps, therefore, one cannot afford to be quite so aggressive in ''attacking'' his version of wisdom as he would have wished. Perhaps. What we can do, in thinking of Trilling's work, is to grant to it—in Trilling's words—''the complex fullness of its appropriate life.''

Robert Boyers. *Lionel Trilling: Negative Capability and the Wisdom of Avoidance* (Univ. of Missouri Pr., 1977), pp. 1–2, 73–74

Trilling was unwilling, even in a grim time, to find the poetic experience in dissociation from the texture of society and . . . he insisted upon attaching even to an imperfect society an aura of inherited value. But if nearly every social institution harbors corruption, where is a scrupulous image of society to be found? He can hardly say, with Plato's disputant in *The Republic*, ''Not here, O Ademantus, but in another world.'' And yet there is a sense in which, given such desperate conditions in practice, Trilling points beyond them not to any particular society but to the idea of a society, an idea sustained only by his need of such a thing. He can also point in another direction, toward Language: or, rather, toward a certain kind of language, a certain style, *eloquentia*. This is ''the mind of the old European society'' to which Blackmur referred, ''taken as corrective and as prophecy.'' It is a corrective by virtue of the tradition it embodies, at once a rhetoric, a poetic, and a politics: it is a prophecy by virtue of its persistence as a working possibility. But of course it is beautiful only in its potentiality.

Normally we do not think of Lionel Trilling as a critic of language in the sense in which we apply that description to R.P. Blackmur, Leo Spitzer, or Erich Auerbach. Close intensive reading of a text is never the substance of Trilling's work, though it may have occupied his preparatory hours: he disposes of a poem's language before he deals with it in any explicit way. The poetic experience reaches him of course in language, but he does not settle upon it professionally until the language has ventured into the public world in the form of ideas. Indeed it may be one of the limitations of his criticism that its author is content with a strictly instrumental theory of language and that he has circumvented the questions raised by modern linguistics and hermeneutics. But the explanation is probably simple enough. Trilling values in language chiefly its self-forgetful character, the nonchalance with which it sometimes takes its nature for granted and turns toward something more interesting, the ideas and attitudes which make for life and death. He suspects any manifestations of language which call attention to themselves as constituents rather than as instruments, or which appeal to a particular class of reader rather than to readers in general. What Trilling values in language corresponds to what he values in society: reasonable energies at work, fair purposes and consequences, more nonchalance than self-consciousness, and just enough tension to foster and maintain vitality. For the same reason Trilling distrusted every version of formalism: the forms he valued were transparent rather than opaque, functional rather than problematical. A form offers itself as a problem when its motives are not sustained by forces in the world at large and the available analogies are deemed useless. In both language and form Trilling values those procedures which can be construed as corresponding to a certain way of life, reasonable, cultivated, urbane. The rhetorical function of criticism is to maintain the correspondence.

Denis Donoghue. *Sewanee Review*. Spring, 1978, pp. 185–86

Rather than historian, philosopher, or theorist, Lionel Trilling was a sensibility who patiently cultivated thinking in order to subsume it to the rhythms of his search for wisdom. His worth, and his rare distinction, will outlive his individual essays. And his identity as a critic will, in time, be disentangled from the provinciality of his milieu. He is more than the narrow term ''New York critic'' can suggest. Like Edmund Wilson, he will be seen as a writer who sought always to rise above the conventions and shibboleths of his immediate surroundings. Both Trilling and Wilson, the two most important American literary critics of the mid-century, refused to let the art of criticism rest in the confines of academic specialization. Wilson, a decade Trilling's senior, represents a broader and more various achievement; his curiosity was greater, his learning more far-ranging. But Trilling went more deeply than did Wilson into the problems he took as his own. This difference noted, another similarity should be mentioned: both saw how attractive, and yet how delusory, organized political behavior could be.

Wilson surveyed more from his vantage point of dispossessed old-fashioned American cantankerousness and probity than did Trilling from his position as deracinated, aloof, and inquiring university teacher. But Trilling pursued more energetically than did Wilson the ways in which he could employ the terms of literary criticism to understand the struggle for self-knowledge his reading evoked in him. He will be seen in the future as a critic who, by examining certain aspects of literature, helped to enlarge his readers' sense of moral complexity. For that good and valuable reason, he will, I believe, outlive in importance other critics now deemed more fashionable. He reminds us all, and has reminded me for many months in writing this book about him, of something we can never wholly forget: literature is important by virtue not of its textuality but of its entry into our moral lives. That is an ''old-fashioned'' truth; Trilling, like Wilson, was old-fashioned.

Literature was, in Trilling's apprehension of it, the criticism of life in being the criticism of a life. That life, his own, never averted its attention from two extraordinary realities: the power of death and the corruption of doctrinaire politics. He was both eschatological and of his time and place. He judged present conditions, and the art and persons such conditions had placed in prominence, in the light afforded by the inevitability of death and the distinctly unforgettable barbarisms of Stalin. In being such a judge, Trilling worked always to define the mutable self within him, to recognize its enormous complexities and contrary imperatives. By his example, he helped to make more clear the same struggle of definition and recognition in his readers. His self demonstrated, in his prose, its affinities with those other selves. Literary criticism is a quiet, always imperfect, collective enterprise. It unites critic and reader. It

was sustained, for years, by the drama of Trilling's self-critical examinations. His excellence is found in that drama.

William M. Chace. *Lionel Trilling: Criticism and Politics* (Stanford Univ. Pr., 1980), pp. 187–89

Reacting to Lionel Trilling's insistent examination of all aspects of an issue, to his characteristic acknowledgment of the merits of quite contrary cases, Richard Sennett once accused him, ''You have no position; you are always in between.'' Trilling's reply poignantly illustrates his fundamental critical stance. ''Between,'' he said, ''is the only honest place to be.''

Trilling fashioned ''between,'' the honest place within which he conducted his quiet but intensely dramatic dialectic, from two basic materials. One was his deep and enduring sense of human existence as a continuous struggle, of culture itself as ''not a free creation but a continuous bargaining with life.'' The other was his conviction that the quality of personal experience results less from the outcomes of that struggle than from the comprehensiveness, the subtlety, and the energies of mind and imagination with which it is managed. These persuasions gave the distinctive color to his work as critic and as writer of fiction.

Because he invested the utmost seriousness in Matthew Arnold's conception of literature as a criticism of life, and because his consistent focus was on the destiny of the individual self in its often painful relationship to civilization, Trilling's consistent effort revolved around two poles: One was the honest, open exploration of the ''variousness and possibilities'' with which the inevitable and conflict-filled encounter between person and culture can be conceived. The other was an examination of the criteria by which the forms of variousness and possibility may appropriately be judged. Although a man of finely honed tastes with a disposition toward elegance, his aesthetic concerns always remained secondary. His fundamental interests were moral and therefore psychological and sociopolitical. Like the Arnold that he so richly understood and admired, he disliked and mistrusted systematic theories of literature as overly rarefied and as essentially irrelevant to the complexly related and central problems of how personal integrity may be achieved and how corporate life can be humanely arranged. More than that, he regarded these issues as inevitably recurrent. They cannot be resolved; they reject systemization. They can only be dealt with—*struggled* with—in the mind and imagination and then in the political marketplace, where individual wills contend with one another under social rules.

Edward Joseph Shoben, Jr. *Lionel Trilling: Mind and Character* (Ungar, 1981), pp. 191–92

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TWAIN, Mark (1835–1910)

We who remember Mark Twain when his light first rose above the horizon cannot help thinking of him as a humorist above everything else, for it was as such he rose, and as such his radiance increased. We soon came to know that he was also a philosopher and after a while that he was a story-teller, but for all that and despite our added knowledge of him, we still think first of his brightness, and often forget that his surface may be inhabited or that he has an influence upon our tides.

Frank R. Stockton. *Forum*. Aug., 1893. p. 677

In his books Mark Twain has set forth, and in himself he embodies, the traits, the humors, the virtues, of a distinct people. So regarded, he has in our literature no equal, and in life he has had but one superior, Abraham Lincoln. This is the explanation of Mark Twain's fame. There are few things as interesting, as attractive, as instructive, as the man who, without sacrificing a jot of his own individuality, stands out as the type of his country.

Henry Dwight Sedgwick. *The New American Type* (Houghton). 1908. pp. 293–4

To accept him is almost equivalent to accepting the American flag. . . . Not by his subtlety, . . . nor his depth, nor his elevation, but by his understanding and unflinching assertion of the ordinary self of the ordinary American did Mark Twain become our ''foremost man of letters.'' . . . When Mark Twain, robust, big-hearted, gifted with the divine power to use words, makes us all laugh together, builds true romance with prairie fire and Western clay, and shows us that we are at one on all the main points, we feel that he has been appointed by Providence to see to it that the precious ordinary self of the Republic shall suffer no harm.

Stuart P. Sherman. *The Nation*. May 12, 1910. pp. 478–80

Mark Twain was great in many ways and especially in four—as a humorist, as a story-teller, as a stylist and as a moralist. Now and again his humor was fantastic and arbitrary, perhaps even mechanical; but at its richest it was irresistible, rooted in truth, sustained by sincerity and supported by a manly melancholy—which became more plainly visible as he broadened his outlook on life. His native gift of story-telling, the compelling power of his narrative, was cultivated by conscious art, until one could not choose but hear. . . .As a master of English prose he has not received the appreciation he deserved. . . . And his sturdy morality, inspired by a detestation of sham and of affectation as ingrained as Molière's, ought to be evident. . . to all who have meditated upon ''The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg.''

Brander Matthews. *North American Review*. June, 1910. pp. 834–5

Mark Twain is not all of Samuel Clemens. He was much more than humorous. He was a great fictionist and a rough-hewn stylist uttering himself in his own way, which was a large, direct and forceful way. No amount of Old World contact could destroy his

quaint drawl, and not all his reading nor his acquired personal knowledge of other writers could conventionalize his method. He remained the mid-Western American and literary democrat to the last. . . . Every letter of his speech was vital with the breath of his personality.

Hamlin Garland. *North American Review*. June, 1910. p. 833

So far as I know, Mr. Clemens is the first writer to use in extended writing the fashion we all use in thinking, and to set down the thing that comes into his mind without fear or favor of the thing that may be about to follow. . . . He would take whatever offered itself to his hand out of the mystical chaos, that divine ragbag, which we call the mind, and leave the reader to look after the relevancies and sequences for himself. . . . He has not attempted to trace the threads of association between the things that have followed one another. . . . An instinct for something chaotic, ironic, empiric in the order of experience seems to have been the inspiration of our humorist's art.

William Dean Howells. *My Mark Twain* (Harper). 1910. pp. 166–8

One of Mark Twain's best attributes as a commentator on style, on man, on religious beliefs and on the ways of nations is his capacity for profound admiration. He has no poor provincial grudges against the souls and gifts of other peoples. He could praise well. . . . He had besides a certain essentially masculine faculty, in which no author has equaled him in many hundreds of years. . . . He could curse well. . . . To curse in a fine, forthright style and spirit seems to require at once more intensive and more extensive moral information—more knowledge of the states of Heaven and Hell and of excellence and splendor and miserableness and meanness in mortal character than has ever been acknowledged. Mark Twain will long gratify his country as a magnificent, an immortal execrator.

Edith Wyatt. *North American Review*. April, 1917. pp. 614–5

There was a reason for Mark Twain's pessimism, a reason for that chagrin, that fear of solitude, that tortured conscience, those fantastic self accusations, that indubitable self-contempt. . . . It is as old as Milton that there are talents which are ''death to hide,'' and I suggest that Mark Twain's ''talent'' was just so hidden. That bitterness of his was the effect of a certain miscarriage in his creative life, a balked personality, an arrested development of which he was himself almost unaware, but which for him destroyed the meaning of life.

Van Wyck Brooks. *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* (Dutton). 1920. p. 14

My suspicion is that it was the secondary social and conventional forces enveloping him after his early success and marriage and playing on this sympathetic, and, at times, seemingly weak humanist, succeeded for a time in diverting him almost completely from a serious, realistic, and I might say Dostoevskian, presentation of the anachronisms, the cruelties, as well as the sufferings, of the individual and the world which, at bottom, seem most genuinely to have concerned him. For, to a study of these he would have turned, had it not been, I think, for the noisy and quite vacuous applause accorded him as Genius Jester to the American booboisie. And by that I mean almost the entire American world of his time.

Theodore Dreiser. *English Journal*. Oct., 1935. p. 621

Mark had only one discipline to which he had rigorously and successfully submitted himself—language. Mark's English is superb, his taste in diction impeccable. He boasted of it and was right. His terse, simple, effective style, his words chosen with a lively sense of values, his accuracy and his force, never fail except in an occasional purple passage when he strains after an artificial beauty which was not his forte. He writes . . . better English than Henry James, both by word and by rhythm, though with far less assistance from a flowing vocabulary.

Henry Seidel Canby. *Turn West, Turn East* (Houghton). 1951. p. 191

It might be said that a humorist by temperament, for example Benjamin Franklin, is a man serenely adjusted to his environment, while a wit like Jonathan Swift is not. Clemens himself—''Mark the Double Twain,'' as Dreiser called him, all his engaging self-contradictions making him a ''human philopena'' like his extraordinary twins, Luigi and Angelo—partook of both natures. And so, while one side of his creative nature lived and moved upon the level of his boyhood, in almost perfect control of his materials, the other battled with clumsy valor upon the darkling plain of his maturity. By instinct he knew what a boy was like, from having been one himself in a river town in the golden age before the War; but to the question, What is Man? his self-taught philosophy yielded no better answers than that Man is either a knave or an illusion, ''wandering forlorn among the empty eternities.''

Dixon Wecter. *Sam Clemens of Hannibal* (Houghton), 1952. p. 265

All that the surrealists were later to yearn for and in their learned way simulate, Twain had stumbled on without quite knowing it. . . . In the chamber of horrors of our recent fiction, the deformed and dwarfed and dumb have come to stand as symbols of our common plight, the failure of everyone to attain a purely fictional norm. Toward this insight, Twain was fumbling almost without awareness, believing all along that he was merely trying to take the curse off of a bitterness he could not utterly repress by being what he liked to think was ''funny.''

Leslie A. Fiedler. *New Republic*. Aug. 15, 1955. p. 17

If Mark Twain lacked art in Arnold Bennett's sense (as Arnold Bennett pointed out), that only shows how little art in Arnold Bennett's sense matters, in comparison with art that is the answer of creative genius to the pressure of profoundly felt and complex experience. If *Huckleberry Finn* has its examples of unintelligence that may accompany the absence of sustained critical consciousness in an artist, even a great one, nevertheless the essential intelligence that prevails, and from the poetic depths informs the work, compels our recognition—the intelligence of the whole

engaged psyche; the intelligence that represents the integrity of this, and brings to bear the wholeness.

F.R. Leavis. *Commentary*. Feb., 1956. pp. 128–9

We can justly apply to Mark Twain's achievement what Eric Auerbach says of Dante: ''. . . this man used his language to discover the world anew.'' Yet it would be misleading to imply that Mark Twain's break with literary tradition was all clear gain. The official culture (which we perhaps too easily dismiss by calling it the Genteel Tradition) had indeed lost its power to nourish vigorous literature; an act of repudiation was necessary. But if Mark Twain rejected the affirmations proposed by the cultural tradition, what positive value was left to sustain his work as an artist? The answer proposed by *Huckleberry Finn* is: innate, natural human goodness, which would flower into brotherhood if it could only be protected against the taint of society. The vision of innocence and happiness on the raft was exhilarating, as the book itself shows, but the affirmation of natural goodness was unsatisfactory in the long run because it was contradicted by Mark Twain's own observation of human character. There was no refuge from society, even on the River.

Henry Nash Smith. Introduction to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain (Houghton). 1958. p. xxvi

The hero who emerges in Twain's major fictions of the late '80s and early '90s is a lonesome stranger, wandering in search of a lost Paradise. Like Twain's earlier heroes, he is an ''innocent,'' in that the ways of society are not his ways; but instead of being alienated from the group by his boyish inexperience, he is an adult who is set apart by his extraordinary knowledge. There is a familiar generosity and compassion in his spirit—and a new harshness as well; somewhere, somehow, iron has entered his soul. If he would be a liberator, he is also a destroyer, ready to tell the facts that will ruin a man's life, or even to kill him, if need be. . . .

His appearances are by no means entirely confined to fiction. Wherever one looks in Twain's later essays and correspondence, one soon comes across this man, usually standing apart from the crowd in an attitude of defiance which scarcely conceals his longing to be its leader. . . . That Twain's descriptions of this hero were projections of the crowd-defying genius whom he himself wished to be is suggested by his rueful admission in ''Purchasing Civic Virtue'' that he lacked the ''necessary moral courage'' to stand up before an audience and denounce it. The metaphorical description of the ''stranger'' in *Life on the Mississippi*, who brings the crowd to its feet with the volcanic fury of his invective, reveals even more about the later Twain's ambitions. For in the last quarter century of his life, Mark Twain habitually talked about himself as a volcano.

Kenneth S. Lynn. *Mark Twain and Southwest Humor* (Little). 1959. pp. 246–7

From the start of the novel he had been of two minds about civilization and escape from it. Now his feelings were ambivalent about the things for which the shore and the raft stood: determinism on the one hand, freedom of choice on the other. Fierce though his attacks on shore folk were, his inability to condemn them brought mitigations. And his admiration for Jim and Huck was tempered by his envy of them and his skepticism about their state of grace. Both sinners and saints attracted and at the same time repelled him, and he was neither as rancorous toward the former nor as reverent toward the latter as he would have been if he were fully committed. He could make both groups comic. So the humor which makes *Huck* the funniest of all American books was vital to nuances of its meaning.

Walter Blair. *Mark Twain & Huck Finn* (California). 1960. p. 346

From the beginning of his career, Twain strove for an alternation between comic and serious material in the arrangement of the episodes, relying to a large extent upon burlesque to furnish the comedy. Gradually he refined his use of the burlesque material to the point where it not only furnished an alternation with the serious material but in conjunction with it furnished foreshadowing and, as a consequence, thematic unity. Thus in *Roughing It* burlesques constitute the tenderfoot's prevision of the West and a foreshadowing of the disillusioning experiences which are to follow. A similar pattern is visible in *Huckleberry Finn*. Twain's readiness to use burlesque was a source not only of strength but also of weakness, for, accustomed to seek in burlesque answers to structural problems, he produced, for example, the incongruous Evasion to end his greatest novel.

Franklin R. Rogers. *Mark Twain's Burlesque Patterns* (Southern Methodist). 1960. p. 156

Mr. Elliot and Mr. Trilling agree in their readings that the River is a god, presiding over the action, its divinity everywhere implied though nowhere stated outright. But hater is a more explicit supernaturalism in this book. Or, more properly, there is an exemplification and a testing of three attitudes toward the imaginative fulfillment of life, and these are largely indicated in supernatural terms. Each typifies the moral nature of those who profess it. Two of these imaginary supernatural worlds prove morally inadequate; the third—which pays homage to the river god—gives dignity to human life.

These attitudes, so compellingly dramatized by Mark Twain, are the conventional piety of the villagers; the irrelevant escape of the romantic imagination (as played by Tom Sawyer and an assorted adult cast of rapscallions and Southern gentlemen); and the world of supernatural omens which Jim, the runaway slave, best understands. Huck Finn is the sorcerer's apprentice. The superstitious imagination recognizes evil as a dynamic force; it acknowledges death. It is truer to the moral demands of life than is either the smug piety of Christian conformity or the avoidance of choice by escaping to fantasy and romance.

Daniel G. Hoffman. *Form and Fable in American Fiction* (Oxford). 1961. p. 320

By 1900, in short, Twain could no longer embrace all the implications of the ''growth of knowledge.'' He dreamed again the American dream of a society liberal without being complex, politically sophisticated yet socially austere and simple—a society

whose passing he had described as a young writer in *The Gilded Age*—and his dreaming heightened an already fierce nostalgia.

Roger B. Salomon. *Twain and the Image of History* (Yale). 1961. p. 40

Huck is given back to us at the very end in his declaration of independence, but it is significant that he is re-created primarily in the image of flight, of ''lighting out for the Territory ahead of the rest.'' He is a character who can exist at all only outside the society that the novel allows us to imagine, who can exist in our imagination, finally only outside the novel itself. Huckleberry Finn became for Mark Twain a kind of obsession, appearing during the years that follow in various sketches for stories and sequels to the novel. His career in this novel asks a question that Mark Twain must have urgently wanted to answer. If he must destroy Huckleberry Finn in his insistence that society cannot accommodate anything better than Tom Sawyer, then is he not in effect destroying society as a place in which the literary imagination may operate . . . This book does in fact abandon everything it creates or depends on. And nothing is put in their place but a vague sense that—to remember Emerson one more—''patience, then is for us, is it not? Patience, and still patience.'' *Huckleberry Finn* seems to me a totally revolutionary book that should not make us surprised at the later, bitterly unmodified and not very patient view of the ''mysterious stranger''—that the universe is itself only ''the silly creations of an imagination that is not conscious of its freaks.''

Richard Poirier in *In Defense of Reading*, ed. Reuben A. Brower and Richard Poirier (Dutton). 1963. pp. 308–9

Clemens escaped from a dead sophisticated way of writing by evolving an alive, naive way of talking, the very virtue of which was that it never seemed to know what it was going to say next. Yet such a style cannot be detached from a certain kind of speaker: Clemens throughout his early work can be detected searching for the right mouth. Mark Twain himself is of course a life-long persona used on stage, in books and to a curious extent in Clemens's private life; but as we have seen the mere mask of Mark Twain was not enough to solve Clemens's language problem. Something, or rather some figure, more extreme, more clearly defined in his opposition to official standards, was required if Clemens was to make a clean break with the values of the official culture of his day. And since ways of speaking are inextricably involved with ways of living, it is not surprising that in searching for an anti-conventional, anti-formal mode of speech, Clemens started making use of characters whose manner of life had no respect for the conventions and forms of society. More or less anti-social figures appear in his work from the start and just as important as their freedom of action is their freedom of speech.

Tony Tanner. *The Reign of Wonder* (Cambridge). 1965. pp. 129–30

Mark Twain especially was sensitive to particulars since, jointed one by one, they formed his world. He had no very strong sense of the grand design. As Edgar Branch put it, Twain's ''genius was for the particular, not for the abstract or the organizational. Like Walt Whitman he was a caresser of discrete experience.'' His care for the individual detail made him seek the right word for the specific occasion. . . . Honesty in words was a lifelong obsession with Mark Twain. In his last years he was convinced that he was dictating such shrivelling truths into his autobiography that it could only be published posthumously. His ideal was say it out without artifice, and we can trace a common line from Mark Twain to Gertrude Stein and her preoccupation with ''things as they are,'' to Hemingway and his search to recreate ''the way it was.'' Although he delivers it amiably enough, there is a sharp edge to Huck's observation in *Tom Sawyer Abroad* that ''the finer a person talks the certainter it is so make you sleep.'' He is referring to Tom, who is notably glib and fanciful, and given to putting on ''style.''

Richard Bridgman. *The Colloquial Style in America* (Oxford). 1966. pp. 106–9

He was, at the very least, already a double creature. He wanted to belong, but he also wanted to laugh from the outside. The Hartford literary gentleman lived inside the sagebrush bohemian. But even outwardly Sam Clemens was far different from any conventional Western journalist and rough. He had been a sickly infant, born two months prematurely, and had barely survived his first two years. He grew up sparely built, small-boned, with narrow sloping shoulders, five feet eight inches tall, a contrast with the brawny miners he knew in Nevada; all his life he liked to elaborate fantasies about small men with unsuspected gigantic strength who were always surprising people with it. His head, like a child's seemed too large for his body. He had delicate hands, which quivered when he was stirred, and tapering fingers with pink nails. His mouth, Kipling said, was ''as delicate as a woman's.'' . . .He was excitable, easily hurt, desperately hungry for affection and tenderness, often depressed, capable of great rage and greater remorse. He remained, in many ways, a child demanding attention in a nursery which was as large as the world; his wife was to call him ''Youth'' and ''Little Man,'' and to Howells he had the heart of a willful boy.

Justin Kaplan. *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain* (Simon). 1966. p. 18

Twain's one attempt at combining the tradition of his great earlier work with his newly deepened bitterness about the way in which the age-old evils of human nature were destroying all the promises made by nineteenth-century America was *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894). Here the masterful hand is evident in flashes, but on the whole there is an unresolved discrepancy between the basically pessimistic view of human nature which seems to inform the book, and the plot, which develops in contradiction to it. The oft-quoted epigraphs from Pudd'nhead's Calendar reveal an attitude which finally has not much connection with what goes on in the story. Twain in the nineties was a divided artist, humorous in familiar ways or censorious in tones of deepest pessimism, but unable to combine the two into one satisfactory work.

Larzer Ziff. *The American 1890s* (Viking). 1966. pp. 70–1

A Connecticut Yankee is the first of Clemens's novels which does not follow an important work of non-fiction. It is chiefly for this

reason, I believe, that it possesses a great amount of energy: in invention, in the sped of delivery of its humor, in the multiplicity of themes, in the venom and sweep of its social criticism, in the acreage of corpses, in the ebullience of language, in the free and easy characterizations. It seems to me that this is one of the most successful of Clemens's creations, with fewer flaws than is usual in his books, and that it is one of his most important works for several reasons: the degree of success of its fancy, its coherence as a work of the imagination, the essential seriousness of its themes, and its purity and ease of language, despite the fact that the language is not the wonderful vernacular of *Huckleberry Finn.* With *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* it completes the trio of Mark Twain's major novels. None of the others comes near these three in scope, in style, in characterization, in imagination and in truthful rendering of subject and scene.

Charles Neider. *Marker Twain* (Horizon). 1967. pp. 20–1

[Twain's] books were less planned than allowed to grow. When his tank had run dry, as he said, he would lay a manuscript aside waiting for his tank to fill up again. Once he said he allowed a work to ripen before continuing with it. In this kind of improvising or extemporizing, his fiction often took radical turns during composition, with new characters or episodes or themes introduced abruptly. As a rule, moreover, the turns involved not only new materials but also new attitudes. The evolving narrative in such an instance forced upon his attention issues he had not intended to consider, perhaps in a new light or in new connections, with the result that a farce or a wild burlesque grew, finally, into a serious treatment of human and social problems. During the growth, the farcical elements were likely to be reduced or eliminated. For example, the autobiographical, contemporary, and historical materials which made their way into *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* during its composition, supplemented by identifiable influences from outside the work, led the author, or provoked him, into comment on social customs and institutions, literary fads and foibles, human nature, and at least by implication the universe and its creator.

Arlin Turner. *Southern Review*. Spring, 1968. p. 500

Clemens of course was old and he had reasons in plenty for his sorrow and his bitterness; in a literary sense, his anger was the best thing left to him, when it was real and lyrically explosive, as the anger of a later, also aging, Ezra Pound was explosive and often lyric. What charm was left was a learned charm, carefully maintained, with an entrepreneur's canny skill. The wastage of his powers of which [Van Wyck] Brooks was to speak came, I would think, now—not in those early years, or as a result of traumata from those early years, of growing up in midland America or searching wealth in the Pacific west, and certainly not during those years in the seventies and the eighties when he did his best work, but in the almost twenty years which followed when he found himself controlled by, and loyally liking, a new set of counsellors . . . men of wealth (malefactors was not a word which Clemens would use in describing them) who made it profitable for him to be their private jester and public companion.

Lewis Leary in *Sense and Sensibility in Twentieth-Century Writing*, ed. Brom Weber (Southern Illinois). 1970. pp. 116–7

Are we to judge the vulnerability of the raft [in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*], the necessity of a concluding ''Evasion'' (necessary to have any conclusion at all), to mean that by *its nature* the difficult freedom of owning oneself is impossible? Are we too hard with this book to blame it for failing to sustain the self-consciousness and process of self-discovery implicit in several scenes? Or more to the point, is that failure part of Mark Twain's design, or a result of technical limitations? Does the book project a fully realized vision, or is the vision blocked by the author's inability to sustain a novelistic development? These questions characterize the critic's dilemma in assessing the book.

Of course a vision and the verbal means of its realization and execution are virtually inseparable. Mark Twain saw the world the best he was able to, given his special verbal resources. My argument has meant to say that the formal problems which proceed from the initial conception of a book-length narrative in a mainly deadpan vernacular voice themselves enforce a certain vision. Mark Twain's work as a whole suggests that he seriously doubted the possibilities of personal freedom within a social setting. He seems to have taken freedom as true only when absolute and abstract, outside time. The imagery of drift in this novel is invested with such longing perhaps because it represents a condition already lost and insubstantial the moment it is imagined. The other side of the image reveals the fully invulnerable trickster, whose cynicism releases him from the control of any conscience. The dream voyages and mysterious strangers which obsessed Mark Twain's later years are anticipated in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Alan Trachtenberg. *Southern Review*. Fall, 1970. pp. 970–1

There are, indeed, incoherences in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. But the book survives everything. It survives not merely because it is a seminal invention of a language for American fiction, nor because Huck's search for a freedom of ''consciousness'' dramatizes the new philosophical spirit which was to find formulation with William James; nor because it is a veracious and compelling picture of life in a time and place, or because Huck is vividly alive as of that time and place; nor because, in the shadow of the Civil War and the bitter aftermath, it embodies a deep skepticism about the millennial dream of America, or because it hymns youthful hope and gallantry in the face of the old desperate odds of the world. All these things, and more, are there, but the book survives ultimately because all is absorbed into a powerful, mythic image.

That mythic image, like all great myths, is full of internal tensions and paradoxes, and it involves various dimensions—the relation of the real and the ideal, the nature of maturity, the fate of the lone individual in society. In its fullness, the myth is not absorbed formally into the novel. It bursts out of the novel, stands behind the novel, overshadows the novel, undercuts the novel. Perhaps what coherence we can expect is not to be sought in the novel itself, in formal structure, plot, theme, and so on. Perhaps it resides in the attitude of the author who, as novelist facing the myth he has evoked, finally throws up his hands and takes refuge, cynically if you will, in the tradition of backwoods humor, repudiating all sophisticated demands and norms.

Robert Penn Warren. *Southern Review*. Summer, 1972. p. 484

As Tom Sawyer, Mark Twain slipped easily into the rapidly mechanizing post-War United States. As Huck Finn he turned into the wry observer of his own disenchantment and a dissembling rebel. He came to see the War, which he sometimes publicly celebrated and which occasionally tempted him into sentimentality, as the nursery for pension-grabbing GAR veterans and as a prelude to the scandals of the Gilded Age.

One of the hallmarks of his humor is disenchantment, the disparity between expectation and reality; no wonder the words ''fraud'' and ''fraudulent'' appeared so often in his pages. Like Adams, James, and Howells, his response to the War was personal. The great and ennobling struggle ended for him in ''the moral rot'' of Jay Gould, whose fraudulence exposed the fraudulence of Mark Twain's idyllic pre-War hopes.

No single work of Mark Twain's deals exclusively with his blasted dream, but one—*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889)—may very well have sprung from the War and its aftermath. . . . The ferocious burlesque concludes with a vast slaughter and reflects his ambivalent response to the new America that emerged after the murderous battles of 1864–65.

Daniel Aaron. *The Unwritten War* (Knopf). 1973. pp. 140–1

Between the knowledge and experience of Samuel Clemens and the humor of Mark Twain there is a gap, a vacuum, across which the very current of humor leaps. That vacuum has to do with desolation, nihilism, and the ultimate recognition that behind morals and religion there is nothing in the universe. The glory of humor is to convert that awareness into overt pleasure—to excite God's creatures, as Mark Twain said in an early letter to his brother (already betraying full skepticism that the creatures were God's), to laughter. From that experience and that vacuum, Mark Twain, the very genius of Samuel Clemens began, during the era of Reconstruction following upon the Civil War, his own reconstruction, not of the present but of the past.

James M. Cox in *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (Rutgers). 1973. pp. 142–3

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TYLER, Anne (1941–)

One of the better things about *If Morning Ever Comes* is its title. It accurately suggests the unpretentious, mildly questioning quality, and the tentative little moral of Anne Tyler's first novel. . . .

The trouble with this competently put-together book is that the hero is hardly better defined at the end than he is at the beginning. Writing about a dull and totally humorless character, Miss Tyler has inevitably produced a totally humorless and mainly dull novel. That it isn't entirely dull is a tribute to Miss Tyler's restrained, unshowy style, a very pleasing niceness of observation (although

an absolutely feminine one; what mind Ben Joe has is only vestigially masculine), and an excellent but unobtrusive use of symbols. Anne Tyler is only twenty-two and in the light of this her knowledge of what she is doing, her avoidance of obvious pitfalls and her refusal to take risks are a bit puzzling. I'd like to see what she could do if she stopped narrowing her own eyes and let herself go. It might be very good.

Julian Gloag. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 26, 1964, pp. 37–38

The fact that 24-year-old Anne Tyler, who was born in Minneapolis and now lives in Toronto, grew up in Raleigh, N.C., must seem to her significant enough to make her publishers note on the jacket of this book that she ''considers herself a Southerner.'' And this novel, in so far as it goes in for regional subject matter, does report upon life in still another rural Southern pocket. Her characters [in *The Tin Can Tree*] are the eight inhabitants of a three-family house on the edge of backwater tobacco fields—two bachelor brothers, two spinster sisters and the Pike family, whose small daughter has just been killed in a tractor accident when the book opens.

There are, indeed, some fine scenes and sounds of a regional sort, especially in one chapter in which a group of women talk over the Pike tragedy while tying tobacco. Here, as elsewhere in the book, she makes use of a nice specificity of local detail and neatly captures the casual and yet complex movement of Southern rural speech with its indirections and interruptions, its reticences and awkwardnesses which manage to express emotion.

Yet, rurality and Southernism are not really Miss Tyler's chief interest. Despite some obvious debts to the tradition of the Southern novel, she has none of the Faulknerian anguish over a present rooted in past wrongs. Nor does she share the late Flannery O'Connor's sense of a religious soil out of which characters are thrust forth into the withering present, taking grotesque and tragic shape—though Miss O'Connor's style, with its austere notation of scene and dialogue, may have taught her to make an eloquence of spareness. If she reminds me of anyone, it may be the Carson McCullers of 25 years ago—who, then as young as Miss Tyler, also wrote of human disconnection and the need for love in a stagnant community. . . .

Like [Sherwood Anderson's] Winesburg stories, *The Tin Can Tree* shows us human beings frozen into fixed postures. . . . Life, this young writer seems to be saying, achieves its once-and-for-all shape and then the camera clicks. This view, which brings her characters back on the last page to where they started, does not make for that sense of development which is the true novel's motive force. Because of it, I think, her book remains a sketch, a description, a snapshot. But as such, it still has a certain dry clarity. And the hand that has clicked its shutter has selected a moment of truth.

Millicent Bell. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 21, 1965, p. 77

It's hard to classify Anne Tyler's novels. They are Southern in their sure sense of family and place but lack the taste for violence and the Gothic that often characterizes self-consciously Southern literature. They are modern in their fictional techniques, yet utterly unconcerned with the contemporary moment as a subject, so that with only minor dislocations, her stories could just as well have taken place in the twenties or thirties. The current school of feminist-influenced novels seems to have passed her by completely; her women are strong, often stronger than the men in their lives, but solidly grounded in traditional roles. Among our better contemporary novelists, Tyler occupies a somewhat lonely place, polishing brighter and brighter a craft many novelists no longer deem essential to their purpose: the unfolding of character through brilliantly imagined and absolutely accurate detail. . . .

Less perfectly realized than *Celestial Navigation*, her extraordinarily moving and beautiful last novel, *Searching for Caleb* is Tyler's sunniest, most expansive book. While etching with a fine, sharp wit the narrow-mindedness and pettishness of the Pecks, she lavishes on them a tenderness that lifts them above satire. Consider Daniel Peck. A cold and unoriginal man, aging gracefully but without wisdom, he is yet allowed moments in which we glimpse his bewilderment at a life that has been in the end disappointing. . . .

Reading *Searching for Caleb* one is constantly being startled by such moments: gestures, words, wrinkles of thought and feeling that are at once revelatory and exactly right. But at the center of Tyler's characters is a private, mysterious core which is left, wisely, inviolate. Ultimately this wisdom is what makes Tyler more than a fine craftsman of realistic novels. Her complex, crotchety inventions surprise us, but one senses they surprise her too.

Katha Pollitt. *New York Times Book Section*. Jan. 18, 1976, p. 22

Anne Tyler's standards are high; she works both hard and fast. Of her earlier novels, this seems most similar to *A Slipping-Down Life*—the antagonists and circumstance and action are equivalent—but *Earthly Possessions* is far better done. If not precisely a sequel to her previous works, it's nonetheless a companion-text; the narrative is supple and the world a pleasant place. Violence and lust are rare, or offstage; the characteristic emotions are abstracted ones—anger comes to us as vexation, bliss as a kind of contended release.

Yet I do not feel this novel represents advance. The wheels are a touch too audibly clicking, and inspiration seems second-hand. It's as if her sense of continuity overruled the chance of change; the book is programmatic and the program feels over-rehearsed. Still, anyone who wrote the splendid *Celestial Navigation* and *Searching for Caleb* should be allowed to take a breather—and Anne Tyler's average work is more than good enough. *Earthly Possessions* is deft, good-humored and never less than engaging; one hopes its author, next time through, will once more be fully engaged.

Nicholas Delbanco. *New Republic*. May 28, 1977, p. 36

A marvel of a book deserving full critical recognition, *Morgan's Passing* covers twelve years in the life of its middle-aged hero, Morgan Gower, tracing the history and disintegration of his first marriage as well as his acquisition of a new wife and a new identity. As in Anne Tyler's other novels, the center of human interaction is family life with all of its perils, limitations, and rewards. . . . A man with and for whom life is difficult yet never boring, Morgan is a genuine eccentric in an urban setting, a comic anti-hero ''acting out some elaborate inner vision'' of himself.

In *Morgan's Passing* as in several of her previous novels, Anne Tyler shows her genius at creating such a figure. Morgan at once reminds us of other mild, at times tragicomic, eccentrics in *Celestial Navigation* (1974), *Searching for Caleb* (1976) and *Earthly Possessions* (1977); of Jeremy Pauling and Charlotte Emory and of Duncan, Justine, and the elusive Caleb Peck. Yet, like these other Tyler characters, Morgan is also unique, a highly individualized figure in a contemporary American landscape. . . .

On the surface, *Morgan's Passing* is primarily the story of one man's handling of change and aging, although clearly the growth and change of Emily Meredith, the young puppeteer Morgan eventually marries, is also central to the plot. It is an elusive novel, however, at times zany, at times sad, a book preeminently concerned with marital mistakes and marked by Miss Tyler's characteristic sense of distance. . . .

It may be that. . . . Tyler is holding back something of her narrative skill, but if there is a key to this distance in Tyler's work, it lies in the central metaphor of *Morgan's Passing*: puppetry. In many ways, Morgan Gower is a deliberate, conscious mask for the novelist. Like her, he is a small-scale impostor who laments having one identity, one life. . . .

It is precisely this sense of distance and respect for character and the privacy and inviolability of even fictional lives which Tyler invites her readers to share. She is, I think, remarkably successful. *Morgan's Passing* is a testament to that success.

Stella Nesanovich. *Southern Review*. Summer, 1981. pp. 619–21

New work by a young writer who's both greatly gifted and prolific often points readers' minds toward the future. You finish the book and immediately begin speculating about works to come—achievements down the road that will cross the borders defined by the work at hand. Anne Tyler's books have been having this effect on me for nearly a decade. Repeatedly they've been brilliant—''wickedly good,'' as John Updike recently described one of them. *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* is Anne Tyler's ninth novel; her career began in 1964 with a fully realized first novel (the title was *If Morning Ever Comes*, and there are piquant links between it and her latest book); everything I've read of hers since then—stories, novels and criticism (Anne Tyler is a first-rate critic, shrewd and self-effacing)—has been, at a minimum, interesting and well made. But in recent years her narratives have grown bolder and her characters more striking, and that's increased the temptation to brood about her direction and destination, her probable ultimate achievement.

The time for such brooding is over now, though—at least for a while. *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* is a book to be settled into fully, tomorrow be damned. Funny, heart-hammering, wise, it edges deep into truth that's simultaneously (and interdependently) psychological, moral and formal—deeper than many living novelists of serious reputation have penetrated, deeper than Miss Tyler herself has gone before. It is a border crossing. . . .

Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant is, from start to finish, superb entertainment. . . . Much as I've admired Miss Tyler's earlier books, I've found flaws in a few—something excessively static in the situation developed in *Morgan's Passing*, for instance, something arbitrary in the plotting of *Earthly Possessions*. But in the work at hand Miss Tyler is a genius plotter, effortlessly redefining her story questions from page to page, never slackening the lines of suspense. There are, furthermore, numberless explosions of hilarity, not one of which (I discover) can be sliced out of its context for quotation—so tightly fashioned is this tale—without giving away, as they say, a narrative climax. There are scenes that strike me as likely to prove unforgettable. . . .

Seriousness does insist, in the end, that explicit note be taken of the facts of this career. Anne Tyler turned 40 just last year. She's worked with a variety of materials, established her mastery of grave as well as comic tones. Her command of her art is sure, and her right to trust her feeling for the complications both of our nature and of our nurturing arrangements stands beyond question. Speculating about this artist's future is, in short, a perfectly natural movement of mind. But, as I said before, I'm reluctant to speculate and I expect other readers, in quantity, will share my reluctance. What one wants to do on finishing such a work as *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* is maintain balance, keep things intact for a stretch, stay under the spell as long as feasible. The before and after are immaterial; nothing counts except the knowledge, solid and serene, that's all at once breathing in the room. We're speaking, obviously, about an extremely beautiful book.

Benjamin DeMott. *New York Times Book Section*. March 14, 1982, pp. 1, 14

To be frank, black characters do not loom large in the twelve novels of contemporary Baltimore novelist Anne Tyler. Most of them function as domestics, such as the housekeeper Clotelia of *A Slipping-Down Life* (1970) or Richard the gardener in *The Clock Winder* (1972); others are barely delineated background figures, like the superstitious clients of the fortune-teller Madame Olita in *Searching for Caleb* (1976) or the silent, shifty-eyed gamblers frequenting the No Jive Cafe in *Morgan's Passing* (1980). But even as one makes these sweeping observations, one must encounter them. For if there is one insistent quality about Tyler's fictional vision, it is her humanity—a humanity that prevents her from resorting to stereotypes or sentimentality, from using black characters either as comic ''stage darkies'' or as their late twentieth-century counterparts in the white popular imagination: ne'er-do-wells whose lives revolve around drugs and sex and numbers and welfare checks. For from the dawn of her career, Anne Tyler chose to go against the grain, not only to depict blacks more positively than American society has been wont to do, but, more importantly, to empower them to articulate her most salient themes. Often the most clear-eyed and admirable characters in her novels, they do more than ''endure'' like Faulkner's Disney Gibson. They live; they thrive; they derive happiness from the very fact of existence. Though there are some exceptions, for the most part Anne Tyler's black characters are splashes of brightness in novels striated with the ''grayness'' (308) that drove Beck Tull to abandon his family in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982).

The special status of blacks is evident in Tyler's first novel, *If Morning Ever Comes* (1964). . . .

To be sure, various critics have noted that Tyler . . . skates handily around anything that smacks of racism. Edward Hoagland, in a 1988 review of *Breathing Lessons*, for example, remarks that Tyler ''is not unblinking. Her books contain scarcely a hint of the abcesses of racial friction that eat at the very neighborhoods she is devoting her working life to picturing. Her people are eerily

virtuous, Quakerishly tolerant of all strangers, all races.'' Similarly, [Joseph C.] Voelker points to those fading letters on the waiting-room wall as an emblem of ''the persistence of racism''—but notes further that the novel ''moves swiftly inward, toward domestic matters, and never addresses the intriguing questions it raises.'' But even as one acknowledges that Tyler avoids facing the complexities of Southern racism, it cannot be gainsaid that she has come a long way from her earliest attitude toward blacks. . . . As her career has progressed—and as she herself has matured—Tyler has evinced increasingly less interest in such ''picturesque'' aspects of black life as colorful dialect, and increasingly more concern with the capacity of blacks to survive and thrive in a hostile world. . . . Thanks to the wisdom and dignity of her black characters, Anne Tyler's novels—striated though they are with sudden death, dysfunctional families, and disappointment—are indeed ultimately bright books of life.

Alice Hall Petry. ''Black Norm in Tyler's Novels.'' *Southern Quarterly*. Fall, 1992, pp. 7, 12

Thoreau's idea that the path to wholeness lies in simplification would strike a number of Anne Tyler's characters as wrong-headed. It is the complex life that Tyler presents as the more rewarding. Simplified lives, on the other hand, veer dangerously close to a kind of living death. For Tyler, selfhood comes not in isolation but in connectedness. Her admired characters are, like the women Carol Gilligan speaks of, ''embedded in lives of relationship, their orientation to interdependence'' [in *A Different Voice*, p. [71].

Even though Tyler does not limit this complex life to women, it reflects a traditionally feminine rather than a traditionally masculine system of values. . . .

Although most of Tyler's novels touch on the theme of the complicated life as the morally and psychologically superior, *Earthly Possessions*, *The Accidental Tourist*, and *Breathing Lessons* focus on it with particular directness. Time and again in these novels, Tyler associates the idea of complexity with characters she wants us to admire or with the movement of a character to a more complete involvement in reality. . . .

Tyler's linking of complexity with the miraculous, *living* human condition is also made clear in *Breathing Lessons* when the young Maggie sees Ira (who she thought was dead) walk into choir practice: ''He was real as the gummy varnished pews, not so flawlessly assembled as she had pictured but more intricately textured—more physical, somehow, more complicated'' (p. 100). And years later, the depth—and agony—of Maggie's love for the grandchild she has seldom seen is indicated with a return to the same word ''complicated.'' . . . Conversely, the special demands of the complex vision of life are indicated when Tyler tells us that Dorrie, Ira's mentally handicapped sister, ''was not capable of anything complicated'' (p. 159). . . .

For Tyler, the complex, nondualistic vision of life also involves the capacity to see that even self and other are not absolutely distinct categories. This is, indeed, probably the heart of Tyler's rejection of the ideal of radical independence. Certainly it is in the treatment of this motif that Tyler most vividly hints of the feminine quality of the capacity to weave a self out of relatedness rather than carving it out of independence. She does this by associating the rich, multiple connections of the complex life with imagery of webs, tangles, interlacing threads—umbilical imagery, in effect. . . .

Tyler has redefined the terms of self-fulfillment and heroism. Instead of the nobility of simplification, Tyler celebrates the painfully joyous enrichment that can come from establishing and cherishing the networks that string us together and from accepting rather than fleeing the ''whole messy kit and caboodle'' that always characterizes ''a real life'' (*Breathing Lessons*, p. 278).

Barbara Harrell Carson. ''Complicate, Complicate: Anne Tyler's Moral Imperative.'' *Southern Quarterly*. Fall, 1992, pp. 24–25, 31, 33

The comic spirit of [Anne] Tyler's work endures but does not overshadow the suffering and grief that is the lot of her characters. If her fictional milieu is confined to the domestic and to the everyday life of characters, it is well to remember that Jane Austen also mined that subject matter. . . . If Tyler's retirement dream is to live in a small town where all of her characters dwell in houses on Main Street, the reader might consider moving there too. You at least know that the neighbors will be people to care about.

Elizabeth Evans. *Anne Tyler* (New York: Twayne, 1993), pp. 9, 150

In *Ladder of Years*, Tyler's thirteenth novel, the story that appears to unfold of its own accord is a fairy tale of sorts, a fairy tale with echoes of both the tragedy of *King Lear* and the absurdity of the modern romance novel. . . .

The novel examines marriage—there are all sorts of marriages; Delia [the protagonist] comes across in her adventures, good and bad—as well as aging and independence, but finally it is a book about choice. All those years ago, Sam chose Delia, the youngest sister, the one on the right. But whom did Delia choose? Pulled yet repelled by her past, by her complicated and idiosyncratic family, and lured by a new town with a new complicated and idiosyncratic family, what will Delia choose now?

Like the cats Ms. Tyler describes through the novel, Delia Grinstead circles and sidles. . . . It is this dance, subtle, passionate, and oddly passive, which Anne Tyler creates with such ease and grace.

Cathleen Schine. *New York Times Book Review*. May 7, 1995, p. 12

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UPDIKE, John (1932–)

John Updike is a poet; his prose is lean and lapidary—in some cases almost engineered, like a fine, jeweled watch. Its unfragile delicacy is exactly what is needed to convey his insights whole, as in a picture or a poem. The abused word ''artistry'' may be here correctly applied. . . . It is a world seen neither with the brain nor the heart—or the guts—but with the understanding eye of the caring nonparticipant. It is characterized by a perceptive delicacy in which emotion is implied—as sound is implicit in a taut but unplucked string. The prime operative factor is, perhaps, a kind of genteel—almost stylish—super-awareness, with elegantly conveyed insights taking the place of events.

A.C. Spectorsky. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 22, 1959 pp. 15, 31

Updike frequently gives the impression that he has six or seven senses, all of them operating at full strength, and his writing is an attempt to register as precisely and originally as possible all the intelligence these senses send him. Struggling for a kind of hyperexpression, he mints an unceasing flow of almost invariably surprising images, which he then molds into uncluttered phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and pages that move with a sense of rhythm, timing, timbre, and volume that is impeccable. An irresistible tension is set up—a verbal rather than a narrative tension—and the reader immediately becomes a part of it, a trick dog who willingly sees, hears, smells, and feels exactly what Updike commands him to.

Whitney Balliett. *New Yorker*. Nov. 5, 1960. p. 222

Updike is not merely talented; he is bold, resourceful, and intensely serious.

His seriousness is not immediately apparent because he so often chooses to work with materials that seem slight and commonplace. . . . He is a most redoubtable explorer of the mysteries of the commonplace. . . . One of Updike's characters asks, ''What is the past, after all, but a vast sheet of darkness in which a few moments, pricked apparently at random, shine?''

Updike's aim is to preserve certain of these moments, not out of nostalgia but because they give meaning to life. His Jamesian eagerness to let no experience be wasted is heightened by his sense of impermanence.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. March 17, 1962. p. 21

There is in John Updike's writing the kind of visceral understanding that can whiten a world to being in the flicker of a phrase or in a sudden crackle of speech. . . . He understands—better than foundries of sociological discourse can ever understand—the arcane folk rituals of adolescence. . . . And because John Updike writes of a more representative American experience, he tells us something other than what that fellow chronicler of the young, J.D. Salinger, tells us. For if Salinger reflects what the young would like to be, Updike tells us what they are.

Richard W. Murphy. *Horizon*. March, 1962. p. 84

Updike shares with Agee a prickly, almost painful sensitivity to objects and relationships and a gift for precise and vivid prose. . . . With prose as sharp as music and jagged as rocks, Mr. Updike writes about the first furtive sexual explorations and drugstore obscenities of the adolescent. The ground is familiar enough, but the familiar is constantly undergoing transformation by his extraordinary perception. Events like a high-school basketball game or the manipulation of a pin-ball machine by a delinquent ''with an absolute purity of ambitionlessness'' become, somehow, occasions of significance and even of beauty.

Updike brings to fiction unusual powers of vision and style and accommodates these powers to a wide range of effects. Sometimes he writes in a vein of intense fantasy reminiscent of Dylan Thomas's unfinished *Adventures in the Skin Trade*, at others with the comic hypertension that is found in Kingsley Amis's novels at their best.

Peter Buitenhuis. *New York Times Book Section*. April 7, 1963. p. 4

Now . . . it should begin to be clear how Updike is commenting not only beautifully but also meaningfully on our times. The baroque grandeur of Faulkner's world and the chivalric simplicity of Hemingway's seem far removed from the mainstream of American life as the second half of the twentieth century churns along; so indeed, do the rarefied ruminations of J.D. Salinger's fragile Glasses. Updike, by contrast, is writing about something rather more pertinent—how most of us really live in this depressing sort of a world.

Does it follow, as *Time* and Updike's other detractors suggest, that small people necessarily have small problems?

The people Updike has written about . . . are enmeshed in the desperate facts of their condition. Their problems are just that—the desperation of their condition from which there is no ready escape. By weight of numbers alone, these problems take on a towering dimension, and one measure of Updike's achievement, it seems to me, is the quantity of joy and dignity he is able to detect in these drab existences without denying that very drabness.

Richard Kluger. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. April 7, 1963. p. 8

In *The Centaur*, his latest novel, he gives promise of becoming a writer of considerable stature. He appears to be very knowledgeable, and it is hard to know, in reading *The Centaur*, how much he is

concerned with guiding the tale or in showing us the tale as it *found* him. Mr. Updike, of course, is not the first novelist to reach out knowingly to the Greek myths for analogies, for characters, and stories. . . . Presumably Updike's *The Centaur* is an effort to get away from Shillington, Penn., or, better, to stay there and yet be able to view it from a distant time and place.

By and large, *The Centaur* is successful. *Rabbit, Run* presents a humanity that is pitiful, yet hardly pitiable; it is the foreground of a Breughel scene—with no redemptive lights in the distant valley or on a nearby river; there is no effort to justify or to redeem. *The Centaur* is a series of Breughel scenes, more heightened.

William Van O'Connor in *Contemporary American Novelists*, ed. Harry T. Moore (Southern Illinois). 1964. p. 212

Updike has chosen to give us insights into the modern world through the commonplace; he reveals to us the drama of the common man, a representative twentieth-century type who is often either dead-beat or slob, but whose significance, Updike urges, must not be slighted. His major creative problem is to encourage the reader to see this significance without resorting to the sentimental, the sensational or the sordid. It is here that his technical adroitness serves him in good stead. The refinements and subtleties of language ask us to pause over characters who would ordinarily seem undeserving of our attention, to see drama in conventional middle-class situations which would otherwise seem singularly undramatic.

David D. Galloway. *Modern Fiction Studies*. Summer, 1964. p. 127

His latest novel, *Of the Farm*. . . , is very brief and unpretentious, but it is still a book by a deliberate stylist, and the style sometimes subsists on its own, unrelated to the simple events it is intended to serve. . . . Sometimes the preciosity is unbearable—''sere and painterly ochre,'' for example—but on the whole the thing works. It is the sort of thing that brings poetry back to the novel—not the poetry of action or casual close description but the poetry of digression, the only kind really admissable.

Touches like this give *Of the Farm* an intensity, as well as a relaxed quality of genuine ''pastoral,'' very rare in contemporary letters. It does not dare as much as *The Centaur* but, in the sense that it knows almost perfectly how to encompass a foreknown and limited success, it is far more mature. What we expect from John Updike now is a book which essays margins of consciousness which will justify linguistic extravagance and a further exploitation of myth.

Anthony Burgess. *Commonweal*. Feb. 11, 1966. pp. 558–9

Even the earliest stories illustrate Updike's feeling for form and style, and the stories written in the 1960's have revealed a philosophical depth which *The Same Door* did not have. The best stories are the most recent; they are remarkable achievements in form, and their richness of meaning matches that of *The Centaur*. The themes of the recent stories echo those of the novels: the imminence of death and the threat of oblivion, yet the infinity of meaning which radiates from every human experience, and the richness of our human legacy.

Howard M. Harper. *Desperate Faith* (North Carolina). 1967. pp. 188–9

Not surprisingly there is a good deal of post-coital sadness in this novel [*Couples*]. Updike busies himself with tidying up things or working out his burning of the Tarbox church and the breakup of the couples' society, but there is more feeling to dispose of than can be managed through attention to plot or symbol. For all his attention toward the anyman-hero, Updike has no final right way to feel or think about him, nor is there any suggestion of an alternative life to the ones lived in the novel. Piet and Foxy divorce and marry; we are told, in a *Tender Is the Night* ending, that the Hanemas now live in Lexington, an American town evidently not far from Hornell, N.Y. and Dr. Diver. As I see it there are no consequences to be drawn, lessons to be reaped from these adventures, except that life is very strange and people don't seem satisfied with what they have. With the exception of Saul Bellow, no American novelist says this as strongly as Updike, and adding Mailer to the company we have our three major novelists. Fiction is still human.

William H. Pritchard. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1968. p. 376

Updike's *Rabbit* novels—*Rabbit, Run* (1960) and its sequel *Rabbit Redux* (just published)—are his best books. The thesis novels failed because his will and intelligence took the place of emotional force. The autobiographical family novels were full of emotional force yet in the effort to keep it under esthetic control *The Centaur* sometimes became a shade too big and *Of the Farm* a shade too small. But in the *Rabbit* novels the use of the present tense and the choice of a character who stands at one remove from Updike's personal experience shield him from the overpowering rushes of feeling that result in ornate prose, willful intricacies or problems of scale in his other novels.

Richard Locke. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 14, 1971. p. 20

The convincing rebirths in Updike's fiction occur not by changing jobs but by being changed within one's offices. Meaningful changes occur when a person is able to accept the death to his self-interest and the awakening of new life effected in him by the law and grace of vocation. . . .

Many of Updike's characters . . . are called on to spend themselves in offices and jobs which they are tempted to resist. These people struggle between the alternatives of, on the one hand, accepting their places in life with consequent humiliation and even death, and, on the other, rejecting their positions and striving to secure, by their own spiritual effort or fantasy, some sense of escape or salvation. Only some of his characters . . . can accept the dying that comes with their positions in life. But more subtly, several of the young parents in Updike's stories are people who are dying to their own interests and resurrected to new joys. . . .

What Updike seems to take from Luther, then, is a sacramental understanding of work. Work is deadening; work has no direct

relation to the religion of grace. But in, through, and under work a man can receive the presence of God first in judgment but then also in grace.

Wesley A. Kort. *Shriven Selves* (Fortress). 1972. pp. 80, 83–4

Although it is a comic book, *Bech* is not a very hopeful book. Serious or tragic literature is invariably more hopeful than comic. It is partly Updike's wry estimate of himself and as such may contain a subtle defense of the persistently serious mode of most of his work. Bech is safe, but he is also unproductive artistically; his comic vision may be unable to coexist with the structured, representative, symbolic, coherent, and sincere vision necessary to produce a work of art. . . . Ultimately it is impossible for Bech to think big; he can only think small. It is to the compromised world of *Couples* and *Rabbit Redux* that Updike must return, for it is only within their complicated dialectic of serious and comic that his life-givers have a meaningful role and a plausible identity; and it is only within their intricate logic that his artistic impulse can be both circumspect and viable.

Joyce B. Markle. *Fighters and Lovers: Theme in the Novels of John Updike* (New York Univ. Pr.). 1973. pp. 189–90

If Updike's play [*Buchanan Dying*] held one's attention, its unhistorical features would matter less. But the story must bewilder any reader unacquainted with the details of [President James] Buchanan's life. The scene is the dying man's bedroom. As his now disorderly mind produces events or illusions, they are acted out. Real people come to see him, interrupt the reveries, and are absorbed into them. The sequence of episodes is not chronological but dreamlike.

For this poetic blending of internal idea and external reality there are precedents in Updike's novels, where he often dwells on the ghostliness of his people. The structure of the novels is rarely a line of probable actions, each producing the next. The arrangement of the incidents is more often arbitrary, associative, poetic. The motives and affections of the characters change unpredictably. Even scenes of high drama, like the burning of the church in *Couples*, are undercut by Updike's taste for parody and ventriloquism. The expanding use of recent public events in *Couples, Bech*, and *Rabbit Redux* might have prepared us for the poetic use of history in *Buchanan Dying*.

Irvin Ehrenpreis. *New York Review of Books*. Aug. 8, 1974. p. 8

John Updike is best known for his twin themes of adultery and aging exathletes. But this prolific chronicler of American anxiety has also enjoyed setting human affairs in a subtle religious perspective. Updike's description of Harry Angstrom's soaring golf drive in *Rabbit, Run* was an ecstatic explanation of human union with God. In ''The Deacon,'' published in *Museums and Women*, he played masterfully on the two meanings of ''church,'' using the edifice as a metaphor for the ecclesia. Now with *A Month of Sundays*, Updike's neo-orthodox Christianity comes full-blown out of his literary closet. . . .

Though not every one of Updike's carefully-turned phrases scores a poetic coup, *A Month of Sundays* is a theological tour de force and a pleasurable, enriching book. As a compendium of Protestant faith, this work fits the Biblical definition; it is Updike's substance of things hoped for, his evidence of things unseen.

Daniel Morrissey. *Commonweal*. June 6, 1975. pp. 187–8

Like Flannery O'Connor, who also studied art before she concentrated upon prose fiction, Updike pays homage to the visual artist's ''submission'' to the physical stimuli of his world far more than most writers. He transcribes the world for us, and at the same time transcribes the experience of doing so, from the inside. His world, like O'Connor's, is ''incarnational''—vividly, lovingly, at times meanly recorded—perhaps because, in Updike, such a synthesis of fidelity and inventiveness allows an escape of sorts from the tyrannical, unimaginative cosmology of Calvinism. O'Connor was affirming her faith through allegorical art; Updike usually affirms it in words, but the act of writing itself, the free lovely spontaneous play of the imagination, *is* salvation of a kind. Does the artist require anything further? Updike's prose style resembles Nabokov's, of course, and yet it seems to me that in Updike the activity of art is never for Nabokovian purposes—never to deceive, to conceal, to mock, to reduce Nature to an egoistic and mechanical arrangement of words. On the contrary, Updike seems at times too generous, too revealing. His energies are American in their prolific and reverential honoring of a multitude of objects, as ''Nature'' is scaled down, compressed, at times hardly more than a series of forms of The Female. . . .

Out of contradictory forces that, taken very seriously, have annihilated other writers or reduced them to fruitless angry quarrels in the guise of literary works, Updike has fashioned a body of writing that is as rich, mysterious, and infinitely rewarding as life itself—which, in fact, it *is*, finally claiming no intellectual or moral excuse for its own being. It is uniquely Updike's, and uniquely American. Updike exiled from America is unthinkable, and America without Updike to record it—unthinkable as well. His special value for us is his willingness to be disarmed of perspective, to allow his intensely realized worlds to flower with something of the mysterious effortlessness of nature itself, and to attempt to spiritualize the flesh since, for many in our time, the ''flesh'' may be all that remains of religious experience. The charge that Updike is too fascinated with the near-infinitesimal at the cost of having failed to create massive, angry works of art that more accurately record a violent time is unfair, because it is far more difficult to do what Updike does. Like Chiron/Caldwell [in *The Centaur*], he accepts the comic ironies and inadequacies of ordinary life.

Joyce Carol Oates. *Modern Fiction Studies*. Autumn, 1975, pp. 460, 472

He's a master of symbolic complexity, but one can't tell his women apart in a book like *Couples*; his characters' sexual preoccupations, mostly perverse, are too generously indulged; and the disparity between the surface and sub-surface of his novels is treacherous: to the naive reader . . . a novel like *A Month of Sundays* seems a merry, bourgeois-pornographic book about a minister who likes copulation, while to the subtler reader, the novel may be wearily if not ambivalently satirical, a sophisticated attack on false religion. . . .

Certainly he appeals, intentionally or not, to the two chief heart-warmers of the mindless in America, religion and sex. Protestant Christianity has always contained one great risk, a risk against which the best Christians always keep guard: like Marxism, it has a tendency to make light of reason and individual tragedy. . . .

The novels, properly understood, may be too much like sermons. No man can serve two masters, the artistic ideal, which makes its premise an essential and radical openness to persuasion, and the religious ideal, which, like Nietzsche's superman, is ''deaf to even the best counter-arguments.''

John Gardner. *On Moral Fiction* (Basic Books, 1978), pp. 98–99

John Updike flits among the various literary modes the way other people change dress: He has published four volumes of poetry and a play; when he is not writing novels he is turning out short stories; when he is not doing any of these you can catch him reviewing books in the *New Yorker*. He appears to aspire, indeed, to be every kind of writer—a man for all readers.

Yet while Updike is gifted at everything he puts his hand to, he is not equally gifted. Thus, although he is a first-rate miniaturist (his short stories are usually flawless, and his criticism can be truly remarkable—witness *Picked-Up Pieces*), he has failed to attain major status as a novelist. Perhaps his is a case of talent spread too thin to sustain the rigors of full-length fiction. Or perhaps something less tangible and more complicated is involved—a subtle clash between artistic ability and artistic inclination, between what John Updike is best equipped to write about and what he wants to write about. More specifically, he seeks to abandon his natural subjects—disgruntled marriages (*Couples, Marry Me*) and crumbling Wasp traditions (*A Month of Sundays*)—for darker, archetypal matters—alien accounts of wandering Jews (*Bech: A Book*) and militant blacks (*Rabbit Redux*). And these books of larger vision, despite not always being persuasive, are in fact the author's most interesting works.

With his latest novel, *The Coup*, Updike has heroically reincarnated himself in the form of one Colonel Elleloû, a crazed, anti-Western leader of the mythical African substate of Noire, now renamed Kush. . . .

The Coup is a very witty book about the merchandising of ideology. It is inventive in a Nabokovian way: nothing is too big—or small—to be poked fun at. The American scenes (Elleloû has conveniently spent some time at a small college in Franchise) have about them the pungency that last wafted through *Lolita*. It is almost as though Updike had to figuratively leave home—by impersonating the foreigner—in order to see most clearly into the frailties of home: ''Everything in America, through that middle bulge of the Fifties, seemed to this interloper fat, abundant, and bubblelike, from the fenders of the cars to the cranium of the President. Franchise was a middle-sized city of 35,000. . . . The lake had been left, with that romantic *douceur* the Americans trail in the wake of their rapacities, its Indian name, Timmebago. . . .'' Flecked with sobriety and whimsy, *The Coup* counters a concern for *temps perdu* with a muscular sense of presentness. More important, here John Updike comes closer than he has ever come before to matching the intention to the act.

Daphne Merkin. *New Leader*. Dec. 4, 1978, pp. 21–22

Two worlds, the natural and the supernatural, are present explicitly or implied in all of Updike's work, and they are basic to an understanding of it. In his writing there is always the physical, natural world, apprehended by the body through its senses and appetites. But there is also another, supernatural world (whether Christian, classical, or Islamic), apprehended by the soul, through faith.

Thus Updike sees man as a dichotomous creature, split between his physical desires on the one hand and his spiritual yearnings on the other. In Updike's fiction the protagonist's spirit cries out for expression. But because faith is so difficult in a contemporary world that is indifferent to spiritual values, the protagonist often loses his vision and devotes himself to the natural rather than the supernatural, the carnal rather than the spiritual. At moments of epiphany he may temporarily be transported by his body's physical action, to a sense of religious meaning. But these moments are rare and transient, and more often the Updike protagonist, in his desperate search for significance, finds that his spirit is suffocated by the material world. For in all the novels except *A Month of Sundays* the natural and the supernatural, the physical and the spiritual dimensions of man, stay stubbornly apart. They fail to integrate.

According to Updike, sex is the closest to a religious experience that the physical world provides, so the protagonist often searches for spiritual satisfaction in sexual encounters. He seeks the ideal lover who will provide for him the transcendent experience. But Updike is always aware that sex is, finally, a natural rather than a supernatural experience. The protagonist's search for spiritual satisfaction becomes futile and promiscuous, often resulting in his recognition of this futility and his acceptance of one sexual partner. Such an acceptance signifies the resignation of the protagonist's spirit.

While this acceptance of one woman, one job, and family responsibilities may seem ethically admirable to many, Updike is always suspicious of ethical action, believing that it hides an impoverished spirit. Thus his novels are often peopled by altruistic Christians who substitute ethical, social, action for religious faith. While these characters might be heroes for other writers, Updike consistently undermines their stature in his own novels. Updike's novels suggest that involvement in ethical action is a barrier to faith rather than a means to its fulfillment. . . .

For Updike the literary experience imitates the wished-for theological experience, in which the image exists as an incarnation of the author's intention. In other words, by his repeated use of metaphorical language, Updike is voicing the hope that the connection between the physical and spiritual worlds can be made.

Suzanne Henning Uphaus. *John Updike* (Ungar, 1980), pp. 5–7, 133–34

Gifted with a pictorial imagination and poet's sensitivity to language, Updike has taken as his subject the American middle class—with all the sweetness and pain attendant upon its rituals of marriage and divorce and child-raising—and defined, perhaps more persuasively than any other American author, the emotional territory of memory and desire. At his best, he invests the mundane with meaning and captures in the glimpse of a moment the crises of contemporary life. . . .

It is not a pleasant book, this third Rabbit novel. Updike has always been fascinated by the dark underside of American domestic life, and in *Rabbit Is Rich* his scrutiny focuses on the guilt and

resentments shared between husbands and wives, fathers and their children. Both the sex Harry engages in and the language he employs are considerably cruder than before, and this change in his metabolism attests to a certain change in the society around him. As documented by Updike's keen sociological eye, America has become an ugly, materialistic place—defined by disco music, television shows, and cheap hamburger joints—the controlling metaphors of which are shortages of gas and runaway inflation.

Taken together, in fact, Updike's three Rabbit books constitute something of an epic: They chronicle not only the maturation of one aging athlete, but the evolution of an America through three remarkable decades as well. And, in a sense, they also define Updike's own philosophy and art, for while Harry bears little immediate resemblance to his decorous creator, the two do share, as the author puts it, certain qualities of ''Rabbitness.''. . . Updike's characters are all afflicted by existential intimations of their own mortality. That fear is at once terrifying and restorative: It threatens to make everything they do meaningless and futile, but it also sends them running back to God. This theme, like so many others in his work, is rooted in Updike's own life.

Michiko Kakutani. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 1981, pp. 14–15, 20

Henry Bech is John Updike's artistic demon made flesh. In his first appearance, in the 1970 *Bech: A Book*, we were introduced to a ''graying and furtively stylish rat'' of a New York-based Jewish writer in deep creative *tsuris*. Bech, ''the last of the Joe Louis liberals,'' has a block after producing some well-received but poorly selling novels. So he fritters away his time lecturing at obscure colleges, wandering the world on State Department tours, and screwing everything in sight. . . .

The Bech saga is a more interesting in-joke than it seems at first glance. What we have here is a quintessentially Wasp writer, Updike, who has always suffered from a kind of emotional constipation, relieving himself by conjuring up, out of his darkest anti- and philo-Semitic fantasies, a hairy, bearlike Jewish writer of approximately his age and travel-weariness who is productively constipated, pure and simple. Like most remakes and sequels, *Bech Is Back* is thinner stuff, with far too much padding for such a small book, but also with a more revealing subtext than the original, in which the writer just kept running from the dreaded prospect of commitment to one of the well-read but uninteresting women who chased him. . . .

In a 195-page book, only pages 104 to 179—''Bech Wed''—are worth reading. There's some pretty stale stuff at the front, involving Bech's ''Third Worlding'' it in Ghana, Kenya, and Korea. Dutifully, Updike sends Bech and Bea to Israel and Scotland, but he isn't too interested. As usual, his finest antennae rub together only when the lovers get trapped in the big house with each other's wayward, dueling sexual and money fantasies. Marriage turns on Updike like a certain kind of pornography.

Updike finds it hard to forgive women their existence, especially those who have given him/Bech any happiness. Bea, whom I actually liked, makes ''gentle yipping noises when she f---ed.'' In Updike's moral universe, that puts her down among the beasts. It's an old trick, this, portraying your male hero warts and all but essentially with a self-satisfied pat on the back in order to have a license for mayhem on women. Updike is a better writer than this. Let him find a way to gently bury Bech and have another, more gracious look at the ladies.

Clancy Sigal. *New York Magazine*. Nov. 1, 1982, p. 70

True to form, [John] Updike's depiction of women in *The Witches of Eastwick* has indeed been problematical, seemingly designed . . . merely to get away with something. Yet to a sympathetic reader the novel yields a good deal more than sheer prejudice; and if it mocks the clichés of liberalism, it does not oppose them with the equally simplistic catchwords of conservatism. Nor does it reveal the author to be at a moral standstill. Instead, we find Updike at least tentatively willing to consider new attitudes, to sort out and reassess the dualistic polarization of the sexes heretofore so prominent in his fiction, where until now the fundamental directions of male and female consciousness have been hopelessly opposed. In ''Ode to Rot,'' published in Updike's latest collection of poetry (which, significantly, is titled *Facing Nature* [1985]), the horrors of natural process pale into a dimly sensed benevolence: ''give thanks for gradual ceaseless rot / gnawing gross Creation fine while we sleep'' (p. 78). Similarly, in this latest of Updike's novels, the sexes begin hesitantly to reach toward each other, not this time only in lust, but as companions in a fallen and bewildering human condition—and in a common desire to find, in the great words of Hawthorne, ''wherefore I was born, and how to do my task on earth, and what is death.''

Kathleen Verduin. *Modern Language Quarterly*. September, 1985, pp. 314–15

In *The Witches of Eastwick*, plot, imagery, and narrative structure are designed to explore the relationship between technology, sexual relations, nature, and religious beliefs. Updike sets three neopaganistic witches and a comic buffoon of a devil against a background of expanding technological and military activity. The novel is set in the last year of the Vietnam War to which a series of allusions is made. Structurally, the novel continually opposes inner subjective experience to the public activities of the outer world, with imagery of cleanliness, order, and control. Although Updike's own Christian faith is a matter of record and not of debate, the novel actively reassesses the contribution of religious belief to technological expansion.

Judie Newman. *Modern Novelists: John Updike* (New York: St. Martin's, 1988), p. 130

For *sheer output* and versatility, few writers can touch John Updike. Since his 1958 debut he has given us a play, four children's books, five collections of poetry, another five of essays—and, of course, the twenty-four volumes of superior fiction that have established his reputation as a major American author.

Updike's latest novel [*Rabbit at Rest*] completes a tetralogy about ex-basketball star Harry ''Rabbit'' Angstrom, sometimes described as the Harvard-educated author's proletarian alter ego. Each of the books portrays Harry at a different stage of his troubled, unfulfilled life. . . .

It has often been suggested that Harry's thwarted strivings are on one level simply metaphors for the larger social problems of his

era. The new work leaves no doubt. Even more so than the previous installments, *Rabbit at Rest* is a virtual directory of actual catastrophes: the AIDS epidemic, the Pan Am Flight 103 explosion, and the Challenger disaster, to name only a few. No wonder Harry Angstrom and his family are experiencing difficulties, Updike seems to be saying, things are tough all over. . . .

Everywhere one turns in this book promises are broken, contracts violated, relationships betrayed.

As if to emphasize the dishonesty of his characters' interactions, Updike relentlessly evokes the tacky, cheesy quality of American reality in the Reagan-Bush years. . . .

But Updike's primary purpose is not to make a political statement. He remains centrally concerned with Harry Angstrom as a person. ''The private events are the main thing,'' he stressed in a recent *New York Times Book Review* article about the new novel. His real interest is the mystery of the human consciousness, that swarming riot of impressions, recollections, and impulses.

The narrating voice in *Rabbit at Rest* is a mix of Harry's and Updike's, speaking always in the historical present. Technically, the story is told from the author's all-knowing point of view. But whole sentences and paragraphs must be read as Harry's, despite the purposeful omission of quotation marks and attributing phrases. Updike's subtle blending of voices enables him to maintain a strong sense of immediacy and realism without sacrificing the advantages of authorial omniscience.

George J. Searles. *New Leader*. Oct. 1–15, 1990, p. 21

In Updike's view, it is still religion that caters to the need for ''Being a Self Forever,'' as his essay bearing that title affirms, only religion ''construed, of course, broadly,'' not just as organized faith, ''but in the form of any private system . . . that submerges in a transcendent concern the grimly finite facts of our individual case,'' be it ''adoration of Elvis Presley or hatred of nuclear weapons,'' ''a fetishism of politics or popular culture'' (*Self-Consciousness 226*). As it turns out, the closest that Harry comes to the immortality that celebrity inscribes combines both a fetishism of politics and a fetishism of popular culture. . . . Harry, too, is rerun as Rabbit, ''a legend, a walking cloud,'' who, as national symbol, is further ''lifted up to survey all human history'' (*Rabbit at Rest* 368–71). . . .

He may feel relieved at America's not having to see ''the big cheese'' anymore and he may sign off on his own saga with a weary ''Enough'' (*Rest* 358, 512), but his own renunciation does not convey him to that other beyond ''where most shrivel and shrink the Brewer ''Standard'' (*Rest* 483)—unless four volumes bearing his name are equivalent to a standard obituary. It may not be Graceland, but it is still a form of grace all the same.

Stacey Olster. *Modern Fiction Studies*. Spring, 1991, pp. 57–58

John Updike's latest novel [*Brazil*] has attracted a considerable quantity of disdain. I enjoy as much as anyone seeing my literary betters skewered. But the greater interest is in the art. Could Updike have gone so far off his narrative rocker as these critics say? For a few pages, you think perhaps he has. The style is ''high,'' more than usually logy with adjectives and similes. . . . As for the dialogue, it is also ''high,'' a form of translationese, the sort that Hemingway made notorious. . . .

After a few pages, however, one accommodates to the style. The narrative moves teasingly in short chapters, ones that skim much of Brazil's social and topographic landscape. . . .

Fifteen years ago, in *The Coup*, Updike used the voice of an African colonel to vent—or to elicit—satiric fury that his ''ordinary'' American characters couldn't mouth. Now in *Brazil*, Updikensian impulses that in his realistic fiction become extravagant, operatic or hysterical (like the revolutionary rant and melodrama of the last two-thirds of *Rabbit Redux*) are controlled by his version of a Brazilian version of the Belloc-Bedier version of various medieval versions of the Tristan and Iseult romance. Updike's bi-focal, or bivocal, or multi-vocal and -focal, ''commentary'' has the ''several layers in different colors'' that—as he wrote in 1980 in a preface to *Rabbit at Rest*—make his ''trickier novels'' more interesting to him. ''Plain realism has never seemed to me to be enough. . . . A page of printed prose should bring to its mimesis something extra . . . a fine excess that corresponds with the intricacy and opacity of the real world.'' The ''real world,'' where we, compendia of other people's minds and bodies, occasionally enlarge our small uniqueness with the help of beautiful little books like *Brazil*.

Richard Stern. *New Republic*. March 21, 1994, p. 41

[John] Updike's latest book [*Brazil*] is, strictly speaking, a *romance*, an updated version of *Tristan and Iseult* energized by the rhythms of the samba and the bossa nova. The lovers are an interracial pair: Tristao Raposo, a black youth from a wretched Rio *favela*, and Isabel Leme, the white and pampered daughter of a powerful government official. . . .

Updike's book is rich in this kind of irony, of the new significances bestowed on traditional words and images by a ''weightless'' youth culture. . . .

Brazil is, most compellingly, a fictive meditation on race as an arbitrary and unnatural category. The novel's opening sentence avers that *all* skin is merely a variation on brown. . . . Updike suggests that nature, through the agency of sexual desire, upsets and overturns culturally constructed strictures on race, most especially in Brazil, the most palpably multiracial society in the world. . . .

The polemical subtext of *Brazil* would appear to argue that racial admixture is the ultimate solution for the dilemmas of racially conflicted societies.

Lewis A. Turlish. *America*. Aug. 12, 1994, p. 20

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V

VAN DOREN, Mark (1894–1972)

The poetry of Mark Van Doren, an Illinois metaphysician transplanted to Connecticut, affords additional relief to readers sated with the vertigo of bookish poets. A few vital factors have saved Van Doren from growing dull: he lives on a farm and knows nature intimately; his principal masters are such commonsense Yankees as Emerson and Frost; and he has an eye and ear of his own and a style deleted of the ''high-falutin,'' and devoted to an Anglo-Saxon rendering of concrete images. He may sound rather dry at first, but as one grows accustomed to his precision, one is moved by his passion and the wisdom of his deductions—deductions often left to the imagination.

Alfred Kreymborg. *Our Singing Strength* (Coward). 1924. p. 599

We have only a few poets who have the inclination or the courage to be simple. Mr. Van Doren is one of them—his poems have that much maligned and refreshing quality of wholesomeness. They are like a lake breeze, cool milk, fresh bread and honey; though there is nothing remarkable about any of them either in subject matter or in content, almost all of them give genuine delight. . . . And though the poems have not enough individuality to win ardent admires or vituperative assailants, they will undoubtedly and deservedly please the many who look to poetry for delicacy of feeling and charm of expression.

Marion Strobel. *Poetry*. Feb., 1925. pp. 279–80

If an equivalent of these poems could be found in another medium, it would be in the art of etching. There is no music, or at most an abstract music. The tones are delicate grays and austere blacks and whites. Only a few strokes meticulously and economically drawn, are needed to suggest the bleakness of a landscape or the angularity of a person. The suasion is of the mind and not of the senses, yet the poet is concerned less to develop an idea than to suggest an evaluation. . . . If there is such a thing as a main stream of letters, they are doubtless not at its center. Yet subtlety and justness of psychological insight, precision of language, and neatness of forms are qualities that are not too abundant at any time; they are particularly rare today.

Philip Blair Rice. *The Nation*. Nov. 13, 1937. pp. 537–8

In his first five books of poetry, Mark Van Doren proved himself a careful craftsman with a sharp eye for the homely and a mind aware of the profound implications of the casual. . . . Yet for all the solid writing, the formal excellence, there are disturbing imperfections: monotonous verbal patterns, stanzas weakened by mannered feminine rhymes, themes overwritten. . . . But the chief defect results from an ear no longer sufficiently naive: lack of resonance. . . . However, it is easy to pick flaws in the work of a truly prolific artist. Although Mark Van Doren has written no single lyric to be compared with, let us say, Louise Bogan's ''The Mark'' . . . the level of his achievement has been remarkably high.

Theodore Roethke. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 17, 1937. p. 52

He is in the English tradition; his master, we can hardly doubt it, Dryden. He has the ease of Dryden, as he has the sanity; though he has always clarity, he does not have a comparable radiance. He has his own grace, but does not give that sense of inexhaustible strength which, more than anything else in Dryden, contributes to the impression of manly nobility. Mr. Van Doren is more easily resigned. He has come late to the English tradition, as he is rather belated in coming to his particular New English material. The style he has made for it is properly autumnal and dry.

John Peale Bishop. *The Nation*. Dec. 23, 1939. p. 714

To understand the difference between these essays (in *The Private Reader*) and the run of criticism today is to discriminate not between methods but between persons, not between intentions but talents. Trying to become a science, criticism today has failed to be even a human communication. But the work in this volume is a communication, for Mr. Van Doren has the nobility that comes from discovering it in others and the wit that can define failure and pass beyond it. . . . Among good critics Mr. Van Doren has always stood out as The Great Neutral, and that neutrality is the secret and condition of his quality. For if his is an ardent mind, it is also a very tidy one; and if it is never aloof, it always lives on its own track; a mind exact and generous and often piercing in its intuitions, but very careful never to overreach, to say too much; ambitious only to stop on the necessary point made, the observation perfectly seen.

Alfred Kazin. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. March 29, 1942. p. 2

Mr. Van Doren is a good critic in any sense of the word, for he has the ability to say interesting and illuminating things about books. He has also read deeply, so that he can fit any new book he reads into the framework of literature. And one would want to say more of all this were not one more impressed with how Mr. Van Doren can fit what he reads into the framework of life. One always gets the feeling that a man is writing . . . , as well as a critic. . . . His opinions, like his prose, are cool and dry; he is masculine in his tastes, with no foolish or neurotic sensibilities.

Louis Kronenberger. *The Nation*. May 16, 1942. p. 576

One of the few pieces of definitive literary criticism during the present century (is) Mark Van Doren's *John Dryden*. . . . Mr. Van Doren has explored the bases of Dryden's power with an industry steadily illuminated by good sense. His book is packed with ordered information, none of which is superfluous to his intention. . . . On the first appearance of this assured masterpiece of criticism T. S. Eliot declared: ''It is a book which every practitioner

of English verse should study.'' The poetry of the last quarter-century has been the poorer in that his advice has not been taken.

George F. Whicher. *The Nation*. March 2, 1946. p. 266

Mr. Van Doren thinks best through small objects seen as symbols and writes best in the short line and lyric vein.

His philosophy, also, is more attuned to the interval than the aeon. His cosmology would seem to be influenced by a conception of the universe that reduces Man to a passing and time-bound phenomenon among the slackening suns, thus increasing the importance, from the human point of view, of the small portion of life allotted him. A melancholy more delicate than pessimism evokes lost opportunities for joy and all the carnage of our years; a happiness less robust than optimism remembers the sensitiveness of childhood and takes comfortable refuge in the homely intimacies of earth.

Robert Hillyer. *New York Times Book Section*. March 14, 1948. p. 6

Nathaniel Hawthorne is quite as largely critical as it is narrative; indeed, in the end, it is essentially a criticism of Hawthorne's work to which a good deal of biography has been made to contribute. Criticism of the sort it is could hardly be less perfunctory, more alert, awake, and attentive than Mr. Van Doren's: nothing is taken for granted, and no piece of Hawthorne's work, not even the slightest sketch, slips past Mr. Van Doren's eye in careless companionship with some other piece to which it may bear an apparent resemblance but which in fact is of an unequal quality. . . . Criticism of this writer's beautiful—if undeniably wavering and variable—work will as time goes on, be more laborious and more intensive than Mr. Van Doren's; it seems unlikely ever to be juster.

Newton Arvin. *Saturday Review*. April 30, 1949. pp. 11–2

Mr. Van Doren has somehow managed to remain undisturbed by technical revolutions, and, like Robert Frost, presents in his poetry the lively record of an individual sensibility without seeming to feel the need for any severe wrestling with language. His technical equipment is, on the whole (or at least on the surface), traditional, as far as verse forms and figures of speech go; but style and tone are often wholly original, and Mr. Van Doren is frequently able to achieve a strangely impressive significance with what seems at first sight an excessively conventional means of expression. At his best, the conventionality is superficial, and the freshness and originality of vision, which continually give new twists to traditional kinds of expression, come across most convincingly.

David Daiches. *The Yale Review*. Summer, 1953. p. 629

Mr. Van Doren, hemmed in by the American world of business technology, chooses what is perhaps the most difficult strategy of all: to write poetry that employs rhyme and metre but keeps mainly within the rhetorical limits of informal prose. In this he follows Robinson and Frost, but relies less than Robinson on a strong rhythmic movement, less than Frost on colloquial effects (using no contractions, for instance, except in dialogue). He has so perfected his method that he is able to develop a highly subjective train of thought, sometimes at length, sustaining elusive figures and conceits, while keeping the alert tone and perfectly even temper of conversation.

George Dillon. *Poetry*. Aug., 1955. p. 289

Mr. Van Doren [in his *Autobiography*] writes gravely, yet with a kind of pale, heat-lightning humor playing around the horizon of his reminiscences. He excels at some kinds of portraiture—country people, for example. He conveys an atmosphere of goodness from the academic world. His utmost malice is a reserved portrait of Whittaker Chambers, who was once a student of his; his utmost condemnation of anything is that ''my own opinions were called in question, though mildly as such things went'' when the Jersey City Library took his books off its shelves because he was supposed to be a radical. And herein lies the weakness of this narrative.

For, however admirable it is in an ethical point of view to see some good in every thing, keeping a steady eye on the Good inevitably makes for monotony. We need salt and malice, we need some evidence that a good man is a good hater, we need to be reminded of the vast misunderstandings possible in personal relationships, particularly in an academic community, particularly among those kittle cattle, poets and writing men. And here the book plainly fails.

Howard Mumford Jones. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 1, 1958. p. 33

His incandescent character, kindly and courageous, is as well known as his varied work of forty years' standing. It is therefore difficult to have to report that his latest book, *Morning Worship and Other Poems* . . . , disappoints by its slackness. A number of the poems first appeared in Mr. Van Doren's justly celebrated *Autobiography* and may have been included in *Morning Worship* for that reason alone. In any case, a younger poet might have omitted many of the 112 poems in this collection out of fear that the reader would not find the poet at his best. Less anxious, more tolerant, Mr. Van Doren has included them all, as one who is willing to let the reader choose for himself. His candor is admirable, but I wish he had pruned harder.

Peter Davison. *Atlantic Monthly*. Sept., 1960. p. 94

It must be plain, to the reader who has given him the attention every first-rate poet deserves, that, far from being a simple bucolic poet in the line of Crabbe or John Clare, he is an immensely learned and ''literary'' poet. He is not simple; he is that more difficult thing which can be pointed to with the one word *lucidity*. I am not evading what is generally supposed to be the critical task when I say he has no ''method'' but nevertheless is a highly conscious artist. He knows what he is doing, and if he seems to do it too often, or to publish too much of what he has done, we must remember once more what kind of poet he is. He is a formalist who is not trying in every poem to write a masterpiece; he is day by day the whole man who submits the whole range of his awareness to the forms that he has elected to use. He understands the relation of Art and Chance. If the moment of perception does not get completely

into the form, that is too bad for the perception; it will have to try again. The Form is the thing.

Allen Tate. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Sept. 29, 1963. p. 4

Van Doren has not received, nor will he evoke, applause from the avant garde; he is solidly entrenched in the tradition of definite purpose framed in strict patterns. There is nothing spectacular about his style; he relies confidently on direct communication framed in conventional forms, although he varies his rhyme-schemes with occasional assonances and even dissonances. He avoids either extreme of the obsessively confessional and the unemotionally unaffected. Instead of a preoccupation with the lonely ego, Van Doren extends himself in various personae; yet he maintains himself in all of them with ease and penetration. Like Robert Graves and Edwin Muir he writes with clarity and force; also like these poets, Van Doren has never been slave to a vogue, and never having been in fashion will never be out of it.

Louis Untermeyer. *Poetry*. March, 1964. p. 383

Mark Van Doren, whose gift for the quiet conventional lyric has surely been under-praised so far, has reduced his collected poetry by nearly ninety per cent to give us *100 Poems*, a delightful book. And inexpensive, which is no small virtue either. In general I have no quarrel with his selection, though a few poems that I had remembered are lacking. Like most poets who write a lot, Van Doren scores a low percentage of direct hits; but this is neither surprising nor regrettable. He has several dozen poems that are among the best of their kind produced in this century, poems like ''High August,'' ''Only for Me,'' ''Civil War,'' ''Time Was when Death,'' ''And So It Was,'' and some of those about birds and animals. Younger poets, conscious of the mind-breaking formal problems of their own work, may find Van Doren's poems too easy to read; yet other readers, just as sensitive but not professionally engaged, attend them with pleasure; which means, I think, that formally speaking the poems are not only satisfactory but transcendently satisfactory. And most of the best of them are in this little book.

Hayden Carruth. *Poetry*. Sept., 1968. pp. 424–5

Every new poem was, for Mark Van Doren, the ''first poem.'' [Richard] Howard notes that Van Doren is in that central position that causes difficulty in our modernist insistence on ''placing'' poets. Having never been in fashion, Mark Van Doren will never, as another astute critic has observed, go out of fashion. Called the one poet ''most representative of his country and his times'' by Howard Baker, Van Doren was totally devoid of any French influence, unusual for a 20th-century poet. His later poems suggest a country intelligence almost exclusively; there is just one poem in *Good Morning* with an urban theme, ''Rain Beautifies the City.''

The fact that Mark Van Doren was there ''with words when the heartbeat happened'' is a matter of importance to the continuity of English-American tradition in poetry, a long line from Dryden through Frost.

William F. Claire. *New Republic*. Nov. 3, 1973. p. 30

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VAN DRUTEN, John (1901–1957)

If *Young Woodley* is neither a great nor a powerfully imagined play . . . it is at least a delightful and gentle thing, one of the happiest of late seasons in our theatre, one of the most lovable and memorable. Its sensitive observation, its simplicity and directness are admirable. Its picture is not so much that of youth rebellious, jazzy, ruthless, which we have been treated to so abundantly of late, but, what is more universal and poignant by far, of youth with all its passionate urgency, its surprised solitude, its brutality and confusion and rank, wild growth.

Stark Young. *New Republic*. Dec. 23, 1925. p. 134

After All, by John Van Druten, of *Young Woodley* renown, is a fine comedy in the proper sense of that much misused word. . . . There is nothing farcical or even melodramatic about *After All*; it is simply a keenly observant and delicately ironical study of the conflict between the generations in an upper middle-class English family. Whether you will like it or not depends on whether you believe there is a place for that sort of thing on the stage. . . . *After*

All, is really what in painting is known as *genre*. It depicts, or should depict, a small portion of a portion of life.

Otis Chatfield-Taylor. *Outlook*. Dec. 16, 1931. p. 502

If you can imagine a combination of the charm of Sir James Barrie, the realistic directness of George Kelly and the whimsical touch of Philip Barry, you will have a fairly good idea of what Mr. Van Druten achieves in *There's Always Juliet*. Like Philip Barry, he appreciates the importance of unspoken words, and also the significance of sheer nonsense and banter covering up much deeper emotions. He has George Kelly's particular facility for making his characters utterly natural and familiar both in speech and action. But above all he has the James Barrie trait of endowing his characters with a quite intangible and yet insistent charm.

Richard Dana Skinner. *Commonweal*. Mar. 2, 1932. p. 495

When sex now triumphs in the theatre, it wears the trappings of romance, as did *There's Always Juliet*, in one sense the most daring production of the season. Think of the audacity required to present supposedly ultrasophisticated Broadway with three acts of unmitigated love-making, object matrimony! Such effrontery is almost unbelievable. But the very novelty of what really wasn't play at all, but only a duologue, resulted in a success more than justifying the iconoclasm. . . . *There's Always Juliet* was a pronounced hit, possibly because Everywoman saw in it something of her own romance, either as it was or as she wished it might have been. And romance has survived every change the world has seen.

Louise Maunsell Field. *North American Review*. Aug., 1932. pp. 174–5

Mr. Van Druten is a prolific playwright who has managed to achieve a considerable success both here and in London. . . . Nice people in their nicer—and quieter—moments he understands very well. When nothing more is required than a pleasant picture of pleasant domesticity he has a style of his own, and no one can make the tea table more genuinely agreeable than he. But he is not really at home anywhere except in the drawing room, and even there he is lost if the drawing-room atmosphere is disturbed by so much as a gentle draft from anywhere outside the walls which were built to inclose quiet affection and polite self-control. Resigned regret on the one hand, a mild determination on the other, make the limits over which his characters can move without losing all verisimilitude.

Joseph Wood Krutch. *The Nation*. April 24, 1935. p. 490

Mr. John Van Druten is one of the few men now writing for the stage who knows how to write high comedy. His touch is at once delicate and sure; his sense of comedy, particularly on the distaff side, keen and subtle; his dialogue witty, often distinguished. Perhaps the war will end this type of writing; a general leveling process will certainly end it; but if end it does, the world will be the poorer. It presupposes a certain amount of leisure, a willingness in the audience to forget for the moment social questions and to interest itself in the interplay of human character. High comedy may not be, in the critical jargon of the day, important, but it is one of the marks of a civilized society.

Grenville Vernon. *Commonweal*. Jan. 10, 1941. p. 303

Mr. Van Druten is a playwright who pulls no punches in exposing the shoddier aspects of his characters, but his sympathies run deep. Within the narrow confines of his play (*Old Acquaintance*) . . . he does a remarkable job of steering a group of civilized people through situations which bring out their pettiness and jealousies, without stripping them of their essential kindliness and decency. For all the smartness of the writing and sophistication of the plot, such as it is, Mr. Van Druten's play conveys a peculiarly warm conviction that humanity, even on its less rarefied levels is capable of a modest sort of nobility.

Robert Bendiner. *The Nation*. Feb. 1, 1941. p. 137

The Voice of the Turtle (has) three actors, one entirely realistic set, no plot to speak of, almost no action, certainly no music and dance. And this . . . is theatre. . . . A gem of purest ray—and serene, too—set neatly, with an expert's touch, in the circlet that is to hold it; a light, deft play as winningly acted as it is wisely directed, making no greater claim than what is so amply accomplished—that of being a good example of good theatre. *The Voice of the Turtle* . . . is a pleasant study of pleasant people. Like Mr. Van Druten's earlier *There's Always Juliet*, it concerns love at first sight and has about as much or as little plot as that former excursion into the same subject. It is chiefly engaging for its amiable conversation, (and) for the discernment with which its characters are revealed.

Rosamond Gilder. *Theatre Arts*. Feb., 1944. p. 73

The Voice of the Turtle, in short, is an apotheosis of the sex life and irresistible in its implications. . . .It is convincing, infinitely appealing, and beautifully indifferent to the morality held sacred by the blue-noses. Yet the latter seem to have not the slightest suspicion of the fact and not a voice has been lifted against it. That is Van Druten's triumph. For he has written it so very skillfully; he has, without the least chicanery or subterfuge, gone about his business with such deceptive immaculateness and simplicity; and he has so astutely avoided any slightest sense of smirk or vulgarity that he has managed to make the moralists themselves not only eat his play but digest it and like it.

George Jean Nathan. *American Mercury*. April, 1944. p. 465

Mr. Van Druten is a dramatist who cannot write a play without some merits. In an age that has proved itself tragically uncivilized, he continues to be a highly civilized talent. He is a craftsman who enjoys the challenges of his medium. He is at his best when working as a miniaturist. His perceptions are charming. He understands the human significance of the smallest values. . . . He wears his sophistication lightly. His wit is gentle. His audacities have a way of remaining respectable. He talks of passion in crumpet tones. He remains somewhat Victorian in tone even when in word he is the champion of the unlost weekend.

John Mason Brown. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 15, 1945. pp. 15–6

Van Druten is a kind of Katherine Mansfield among playwrights. Genteel, polished, mannerly, he illuminates tiny corners of middle-class life, recites a small, simple story in hushed library tones, tells us very little directly, and sends us out of the theater with disquieting reverberations echoing softly in ours ears.

Irwin Shaw. *New Republic*. Nov. 3, 1947. p. 36

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VAN DUYN, Mona (1921–)

What Mona Van Duyn writes about strikes one at first as ordinary and on its face rather dull. Tone is everything; and the poet shifts easily from the ominous, the portentous, to wry humor and self-deprecation. At times one is perhaps too conscious of influences—Ransom, Marianne Moore, to both of whom she pays a witty compliment in a poem. But she is really under the influence of James Dickey, particularly prosodically, if that's the word. The basic ''beat'' is the thumping anapest looped over long lines; I think this beat or cadence has a tendency to coarsen the line as well as the texture of language. Certainly it encourages the tendency toward a kind of garrulousness, of elaborate wind-up before the pitch. Metaphor is so extended that it finally trails off into not much of anything. The poet seems unwilling to quit while she's ahead and goes on telling us past the point of interest or charm.

Yet charm is in many ways the key to her success: one's not in [*Merciful Disguises*] for a lot of poems nor a series of made objects but for a written-out diary of the poet as one of us: humorous, observant and lively—as we'd all like to think we are. Mona Van Duyn, if she never tries us very much, never really falls flat. The poems, nearly all of them, are interesting to read because of her company, her persona summed up in the last line and a half of the first poem: '' . . . that serious recreation/where anything is still possible—or almost anything.'' The poet as actor or character is her chief strategy. The poet as woman and vice versa comes before us as the occasion and subject of most of the poems. But the strategy is not offensive or tedious as we might expect; both poet and woman are worth knowing. Together they tell the story of the days and occasions of their lives together, a narrative full of incident. She is at her best in poems such as ''The Fear of Flying'' and ''A View'' where she talks rather than addresses. The loose line, the casual air and colloquial tone seem suitable, and the poems build to a climax that is also anti-climax, as in life.

Louis Coxe. *The New Republic*. October 6, 1973, pp. 26–8.

In its wisdom, its humor, its plainness, *Letters from a Father* is moving the way Van Duyn's *Bedtime Stories* is moving. Like that sequence, which transcribed and distilled the poet's grandmother's speech, it remains staunchly unliterary. Harnessed in coarse and grainy slant-rhymes, the vernacular carries everything: the dignity and reality of common life, the sufferings of someone loved and the claustrophobia of love itself. Through the tender, common-sensical gift of the bird feeder—not through art—the poet has gambled on renewal and won. But renewal is by no means a sure bet. In ''Photographs,'' Van Duyn watches in helpless sadness as her parents discard old photos of themselves, abandoning all that is left of their private selves. She is, as she says, ''one witnessing heart,'' who cannot keep oblivion away.

The recognition of this helplessness is nowhere more apparent than in ''The Stream.'' Using slant-rhyming couplets and ordinary speech, she describes her last visit with her mother, now a widow and confined to a nursing home:

> On the last night I helped you undress. Flat dugs
> like antimacassars lay on your chest, your legs
> and arms beetle-thin swung from the swollen belly
> (the body no more misshapen, no stranger to see,
> after all, at the end than at the beloved beginning).
> You chose your flowered nightgown as most becoming.

The lines sum up a life with words Whitman might have used, although their intimacy, their focus upon one individual human being, would have been unbearable for him. But why love makes courage possible, or just what love is, the poet does not pretend to know.

The poems in the second section, which are mostly about places, are disappointing. In the past, Van Duyn has made distinguished contributions to the observation-and-description poem, that line perfected by Elizabeth Bishop in which a kind of *National Geographic* curiosity and detachment yield detailed celebrations of the external world. In ''Postcards From Cape Split,'', for instance (in *To See, To Take*), Van Duyn anchors a place so securely in its facts that its completeness of being, its *thereness*, stands as proof of the world's reassuring thereness too:

> Everything looks like the sea but the sea.
> The sea looks like a lake
> except when fucus is dumped on its low-tide border
> like heaps of khaki laundry left out to rot—
> this seems a capacity for waste that is worthy of an ocean.
> But the diningroom floor looks like the sea,
> wide old boards, painted dark green,
> that heave and ripple in waves.
> Light hits the crest of each board and gives it a whitecap.

The new poems about places lack movement and definition. The sharp, crisp language of ''In the Missouri Ozarks'' remains merely well tooled, while the details fail to tell us anything new about its by-now standard subject, the American highway. Usually rigorous, Van Duyn lapses into cuteness at the end of ''Moose in the

Morning'', ''Northern Maine''describing a row of finches on a telephone wire as ''little golden bells'' and rejoicing ''as that compulsive old scribbler, the universe / jots down another day''. ''Madrid, 1974'', is labored and discursive, while ''Madrid, May, 1977,'', about Spain on the eve of its first post-Franco election, is spoiled by flat, lifeless language. A man dickers over a litter of puppies with three possible customers,

> each of whom has for a moment forgotten
> that, in a few weeks, having placed
> a slip of paper in a plastic urn,
> into his empty right hand will fall
> responsibility for his own life
> and a share of responsibility for the world.

This is sincerely felt, no doubt, but it sounds pompous and didactic. Wit and tough-mindedness return, along with lively colloquial speech, in ''At Père Lachaise,'' an account of a cold and rainy excursion through the great Parisian cemetery—a ''spooky pilgrimage'' indeed— that becomes hallucinatory when a friend cries out at the sight of

> two of the great dun tombs
> . . .dappled with color, with cats,
> more cats than I can believe . . .
> Grimalkins, grandpas,
> lithe rakes, plump dowagers,
> princes, peasants, old warriors, hoydens,
> gray, white, black, cream, orange,
> spotted, striped and plain—

One of Van Duyn's powers as a poet is just this capacity for finding live cats on marble tombs. . . .

Van Duyn's light verse is comely and unfailingly generous, yet she is not, I think, essentially a light poet. She writes in a bleak oracular style, in ''The Learners,'' of what happens to young artists when they put their apprenticeship behind them and enter the world. She exposes outright philistine stupidity and cruelty in ''The Vision Test'', a complex rhyming fable about one of those *nice* ladies who administer driver's-license vision tests and call everyone ''Honey'' and ''Dear.'' In this instance, having asked Van Duyn's profession, she breaks into mocking laughter when the poet answers that she is, in fact, just that—a poet. Of course it is Van Duyn who has failed the ''vision test'' by allowing herself to believe in the bureaucrat's benevolence.

My own favorite poem in the new book, ''Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey'', is simple in structure and statement. Watching a circus aerialist spinning fifty death-defying times, Van Duyn overhears a child sneering, ''That's easy, / I could do that.'' The poem illuminates large subjects—art and the enemies of art, as well as life and death—without ever straying from its immediate circus setting. It is a more compressed poem than Van Duyn usually writes, as well as an unambiguous and defiant *No* from a poet who usually tries harder than many of her contemporaries to coax affirmation out of the waste and exhaustion of modern life.

> Elizabeth Frank. *The Nation*, New York. November 27, 1982, pp. 563, 565.

In *Near Changes,* a title that brings to mind *Merciful Disguises,* the title of [Van Duyn's] collected poems published in 1972, certain self-restraints have been loosed, and there is no doubt about the security of her own crown. Changes—and Van Duyn's are Ovidian—go a step further toward the truth than even the most artful disguises.

In [*Near Changes*], there are poems that seem to partner her early work, as if a second skater—one who not only made the intricate figures but saw in those figures a pattern—had joined the younger one on the ice. The poems I am thinking of have mainly to do with Van Duyn's view of a particular child, who may or may not be herself. . . .

In the central section of [''Three Valentines to the Wide World'' in Van Duyn's debut volume], this disorganized child asks her mother whether love ''is God's hobby.'' . . . Discovering ''a fit instrument'' for that question has been one of the forces at play in Van Duyn's strict husbanding of her verse, and the child whom the speaker describes can be read, I think, not only as lost time but as a correlative to her perception of the generation and possibilities of poetry. . . .

But then here is the child again, decades later, in the middle of the poem, ''First Trip Through the Automatic Car Wash,'' in *Near Changes:*

> . . . dark leaves wrap her in a wild
> and waving threat, a typhoon that is all hers,
> swabbing to get in, as the storms of a child
> threaten the very skin of the child, its frail
> shell of self-regard.

This stage of the car wash, a ''snail-spin, in neutral,'' seems ''To destroy the customary in order to let in / something unwitnessed yet.'' The poem continues:

> Something refuses to be withstood.
> Its untamed, zigzag, dark rubbing will break through.
> You *will* change, it squeaks, I replace old selfhood.

The word ''selfhood'' clunks here—Van Duyn sometimes slips into an over-literalness, a colloquialism that mirrors the banality, rather than the poetry, encased in contemporary language—but the rest is marvelous, and the squeaky voice echoes that first child's squeak, in ''Three Valentines to the Wide World,'' as she asks her innocent, piercing question about God. But the truth of that child is that even she is not inviolate. . . . She has already been intruded upon and hurt. Change is after all a kind of death. But a kind of insistence on change from within, as when the body out of its own self makes new skin over a wound, transforming the flesh, runs through this book.

A slight millennial streak runs through it too—a new sense of the unknown beyond the bend, terrible but beautiful. The eon at its close is for Van Duyn a personal one: the end of her role as a daughter and, with that, an urgent sense of her own mortality. This streak can be traced back, I think, to a wonderful, enduring poem called ''The Stream,'' from Van Duyn's transitional book, *Letters From a Father.* It is about the death of the poet's mother, the difficult, overweaning figure who proffered glass emeralds. In the poem, something subterranean—a foreshadowing of the thing trying to break loose, and the fear of it, that surface in *Near Changes*— takes place in Van Duyn's work, and a less sure, questioning voice appears. . . . [In ''The Stream''], yoked couplets carry the speaker forward. Trying to find the answer to the question, ''what is love?'' (she's now moved beyond wondering whether it is ''God's hobby''), she becomes a dowser, in search of the wellspring, which by the end she has discovered:

Here at my feet I see, after sixty years,
the welling water—to which I add these tears.

Cynthia Zarin. *The New Republic*. December 31, 1990, pp. 36–40.

The awarding of the Bollingen prize in 1971 to Mona Van Duyn and her receipt of the National Book award in poetry that same year brought long overdue general recognition to this fine poet, whose insight, humor, and technical skill had seemed for a long time to be appreciated largely only in her native Midwest. Many national awards followed, and in June 1992 she was appointed poet laureate and consultant in poetry at the Library of Congress.

The appeal of her poems comes from the double sense of their adherence to the formal tradition of poetry while at the same time they get ''down to the bone'' of human experience. ''The wintry work of living, our flawed art'' is a basic theme. Her poetic craft emanates from, in fact is identical with, the conscious intelligence which everyone has and uses to shape everyday happenstance into meaningful experience: ''The world blooms and we all bend and bring/from ground and sea and mind its handsome harvests.'' Poetry making thus becomes a metaphor for activities of living minds. ''Join us with charity,'' she says in ''To My Godson, On His Christening,'' ''whose deeds, like the little poet's metaphors,/ are good only in brave approximations,/who design, in walled-up workrooms, beautiful doors.'' In ''Three Valentines to the Wide World'' she calls the beauty of the world ''merciless and intemperate'' and suggests that against ''that rage'' we must ''pit love and art, which are compassionate.'' The tension in Van Duyn's poems rises from two dualisms: the world seen as cruel but lovely, a ''brilliant wasting''; and the tension between strict forms (often long-lined, slant-rhymed quatrains) and proselike statements varying from Yeatsian elegance to Midwestern colloquialism.

Love and art pitted against the merciless world is a theme which enables Van Duyn to range wide and deep. She can be philosophical, ironic, elegiac, or penetratingly personal as she explores the tensions in this intermingling, which appear notably in poems on marriage. In one section of ''Toward a Definition of Marriage'' the marital relationship is described in literary terms:

It is closest to picaresque, but essentially artless . . .
How could its structure be more than improvising,
when it never ends, but line after line plod on . . .
But it's known by heart now; it rounded the steeliest shape
to shapeliness, it was so loving an exercise.

The expanded parallelism between life and poetry is brilliantly developed in ''An Essay on Criticism,'' in which the poet adapts Pope's eighteenth-century title and heroic couplet form to meditate philosophically while opening a package of dried onion soup in her kitchen. No tears fall from chopping real onions, and poetic words, abstract on the page, can wait for centuries till water is added from a later reader's tears to enliven them. But the poet's tears fall now, caused by life—a friend's confession of a secret love—not by poetry, and these tears, reminders of mortality, command her to command us that ''. . . we must care right away!''

Caring deeply for her own childhood pain and for that of her ill and dying parents, she records family history in the persona poems of *Bedtime Stories* (1972) and in the elegies of *Letters from a Father* (1982), of which ''The Stream,'' on her mother's death, poignantly expresses primal loss. In this volume concentration on family life is counterbalanced, as all along in her work, by poems based on travel, rendering a sense of wide-ranging life through observations of Spain, France, the Missouri Ozarks, and Maine, where she and her husband spent many summers. In the collection *Firefall* (1993) the elegiac mode predominates as friends die and old age comes on. But sure of her always supple craft, she also enjoys playing with poetic tradition by creating ''minimalist sonnets'' of fourteen very short lines broken into quatrains with a final two- or six-line stanza. These are terse, sometimes witty, sometimes reminiscent of Emily Dickinson.

The final elegiac poems are the strongest among the strong poems here. In ''The Delivery'' a cruel incident of childhood is seen as delivering her own self to her, a kind of birth. ''Falls'' invokes memories of the firefall in Yosemite Park and at Niagara Falls, with both fire and water symbolizing her own creative livingness even as it implicitly falls toward death. The poem ends with lovely lines epitomizing her poetic triumph yet in depth of spirit almost suggesting an epitaph: ''May one who comes upon a final book/and hunts in husks for kernel hints of me/find Niagara's roar still sacred to dim ears,/Firefall still blazing bright in memory.'' Let it be so.

Jane Augustine. In *Contemporary Poets, 6th edition*, ed. Thomas Riggs (St. James Press, 1996).

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VEBLEN, Thorstein (1857–1929)

The author's theory of why fashions change is ingenious, and must be largely true. The ugliness caused by their superfluous cost renders them intolerable to behold for any great length of time, so that a change is demanded by the aesthetic sense even of the leisure class; but the new ones can be no better, because they, too, must have these marks of ''reputable futility'' and ''conspicuous waste'', that are necessarily offensive to taste, which is based on the instinct of workmanship. They must therefore also soon give way to others no better than they, and so on indefinitely. It is a perpetual conflict between pecuniary beauty and rational beauty, which are incompatible, but in which the former always prevails, and all the latter can do is to condemn the product and compel the victor to bring on another.

Lester F. Ward. *American Journal of Sociology*. May, 1900. p. 835

The social prophet, like the poor, is with us always, and possibly the most striking Jeremiad of the year comes in the guise of an

estimate of our industrial system. The *Theory of Business Enterprise*, by Professor Veblen, is a singular instance of how economic philosophy is sometimes infected by tendencies rife in widely separated fields of thought. Through the transparent veil of this sociological essay one gets many a glimpse of the cosmic irony of Ibsen and the nihilistic doctrine of Nietzsche. A very readable quality is thus imparted to the speculation by the author, but at the cost of a most unenviable frame of mind. Professor Veblen has a preternaturally vivid insight into the pathological side of business and society; and he follows remorselessly the poisoned tract which his critical scalpel has discovered.

Winthrop More Daniels. *Atlantic Monthly*. April, 1905. p. 558

Though born, I believe, in These States, and resident here all his life, he achieves the effect, perhaps without employing the means, of thinking in some unearthly foreign language—say Swahili, Sumerian or Old Bulgarian—and then painfully clawing his thoughts into a copious but uncertain and book-learned English. The result is a style that affects the higher cerebral centers like a constant roll of subway expresses. The second result is a sort of bewildered numbness of the sense, as before some fabulous and unearthly marvel. And the third result, if I make no mistake, is the celebrity of the professor as a Great Thinker. In brief, he states his hollow nothings in such high, astounding terms that they must inevitably arrest and blister the right-thinking mind.

H. L. Mencken. *Prejudices: First Series* (Knopf). 1919. pp. 66–7

But, if a conscious effort is required fully to appreciate the outline and implications of Veblen's thought, the reader must be even more conscientious if he would discover the meanings concealed by Veblen's literary style. Veblen was inclined to use language in peculiar ways, and to be very arbitrary in the meanings which he ascribed to words. It might be possible to become habituated to his practice were he not so frequently an innovator in the use of words. In reading Veblen, the impression which remains uppermost is that he had consciously learned of the existence of a surprising range of words and saw no reason for not employing them all; but that, unfortunately for his readers, he did not heed the rule of common acceptation in determining *where* they should be used.

Yet it would be false to deny that Veblen's style has proved to be a distinct attraction to many of his readers, especially among those making up his non-academic following. The insistent redundancy of his expressions, his pungent and telling phraseology, the scope of his terminological usage, all have contributed to inspire in the minds of such readers a conviction of the erudite authenticity of his thought.

Richard Victor Teggart. *Thorstein Veblen, A Chapter in American Economic Thought* (California). 1932. pp. 39–40

From a literary standpoint the book is doubtless worthy of Ph.D. dissertations in English literature. Its extensive use of literary devices, including etymological precision, foggy language, and sharp comparisons and contrasts ever changing in form has seldom been equaled in a study of an economic and social order. Phenomena which generally appear trivial to the ordinary intelligence are exaggerated to bring out the meaning or consequences of the dominant forces constituting the existing system. Even academic economics becomes a part of Veblen's arsenal.

The book reads as if it were a saga, as if, in accordance with saga traditions, the underlying motif constantly before the listener were the inevitable doom of the industrially advanced, democratic community, through the functioning of the heroic character who are thrown up as an effective leisure class by conditions supposed to make for peace, and who go also to their destruction.

Joseph Dorfman. *Thorstein Veblen and His America* (Viking). 1934. pp. 174–5

Veblen repudiates preaching. As an evolutionist his office is to understand; not to praise, or blame, or lead us into righteousness. From his point of view, any notions he may entertain concerning what is right and wrong are vestiges of the cultural environment to which he has been exposed. They have no authority, and it would be a futile impertinence to try to impose them upon others. There is much of the satirist in him; but it is satire of an unfamiliar and a disconcerting kind. Professedly, he seeks merely to describe and to explain our cultural traits in plain terms. But he likes to put his explanations in a form that will make the commonplaces of our daily lives startling and ridiculous to us. It is this histrionic foible which gives his writing its peculiar flavour.

Wesley C. Mitchell. Introduction to *What Veblen Taught* (Viking). 1936. p. xix

His *Theory of the Leisure Class* gained many readers but probably suffered loss of serious intellectual attention because of a pervasive tone of irony conveyed in part by linguistic formalities. Though this was in a degree characteristic of most, though by no means all, of his writings, its prominence in the earliest of his books served to give him a reputation for humour which, though in some ways protective, postponed and even damaged his legitimate reputation as the keenest social thinker of his time. He did not deliberately choose and cultivate this humorous attitude. It was inherent in the social situation as he saw it. His approach was through-out that of an interested onlooker, seeking to understand the spectacle of out that of an interested onlooker, seeking to understand the spectacle of American life. . . . When Veblen . . . showed how the interests of the economic master-class drew into its gainful course, by half-conscious or subconscious methods of attraction, the controls of politics, religion, culture, recreation, social prestige, that could give assistance and protection to its business methods, the unmasking of such a relation between presumably independent activities and institutions was essentially humorous.

J.A. Hobson. *Thorstein Veblen* (Wiley). 1937. pp. 220–1

To the unwary, Veblen has seemed to have created his system almost as a by-product of something which to him was important, reaching a new economics by way of the conspicuous consumption illustrated in women's dress, or by way of economists' neglect for their subject matter—which, he said, was business and the machine

process—in favor of taxonomic exercise. The studies in deliberate waste seemed to have been animated by a racial bitterness, and the undermining of economics by the need for intellectual revenge. Both have been ascribed to compensatory compulsion. Before he got through, however, it began to appear than he had done something more important than merely to exercise a complex. Those who put it all together could infer an intention to expose capitalism as an impossible mixture of mutually canceling elements, and the going economics as an inferior example of the artificial one-thing-at-a-time method. Certainly to the casual student the hypothesis was everything; to others the new institutional method had the value of release from orthodoxy and was therefore far more important.

R.G. Tugwell in *Books That Changed Our Minds*, edited by Malcolm Cowley and Bernard Smith (Kelmscott). 1939. p. 94

He talked a little about his own life. He had pride in his Norwegian back-ground. I think Joseph Dorfman is right in his belief that this background, which Veblen's parents clung to in their culturally isolated Norwegian community in Minnesota, accounted for much of Veblen's philosophical detachment from American life. He was like an enlightened savage in a civilized country, or an enlightened explorer in a savage country, viewing it critically, understanding it very well but not belonging to it.

Robert L. Duffus. *The Innocents at Cedro* (Macmillan). 1944. p. 58

Peerless in breadth of knowledge, Thorstein Veblen challenged the concept of normality as a qualified philosopher, a student of psychology, a trained and resourceful economist. In an important early article called ''Why Is Economics Not an Evolutionary Science'', the philosopher of science spoke. The concept of normality—and the kindred notions of an overruling Providence and a moral law of nature—were, to Veblen, carry-overs of a primitive animism. At best, they gave rise to systems of ''economic taxonomy'', that is, to logically consistent propositions unrelated to life. At worst, they justified a hands-off policy with respect to the price mechanism and the market.

May Brodbeck, James Gray, Walter Metzger. *American Non-fiction, 1900–1850* (Henry Regnery). 1952. p. 168

The Higher Learning in America, along with *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, seems to me Veblen's wittiest book, the one where his shafts of satire, based on the closest observation of every scabrous detail, penetrated furthest; as an effective caricature of academia it has not been equalled (unless, perhaps, by Mary McCarthy's novel, *The Groves of Academe*). . . .

It was, as we have seen, Veblen's habit of dramatic abstraction which led him to write the world-history of predation, seeing in each age a different group of men notably gifted in exploit, or in the selling of specious but respectable intangibles. He worked his scheme of succession both forward and backward, describing for instance a period of Viking history as ''An Early Experiment in Trusts'', or painting the modern minister as the lineal descendent of shamans or Egyptian hieratic practitioners. Often, such comparisons were more witty than revealing. But the idea that a William Rainey Harper is ''really'' a Dan Drew of education—that is a discovery of some moment in understanding the nature of entrepreneurial activity in American life.

David Riesman. *Thorstein Veblen, A Critical Interpretation* (Scribner). 1953. pp. 100–101

The career of Thorstein Veblen . . . demonstrates at least one fact: a man does not need to be born an Adams or to be descended from a line of Puritans in order to become a master of perversity, of the art of mystifying even while alluring his audience. Through his long life Veblen displayed such an independence of manner and morals as cost him his marriage, his friends, and a series of jobs, and such an independence of mind as leaves him a social theorist who defies classification and who, more than any figure of recent times, has deeply influenced a variety of followers, hardly one of whom agrees with any other. . . . To amputate portions of the *Leisure Class* (which is now available in several reprints) is to spoil a work of art. Its thesis, that in a capitalist society the creation of waste is an index of success, is in effect a standing of Herbert Spencer on his head. The mingling of serious and satiric tones make the book doubly effective, since no reader knows exactly when his leg is being pulled or whether the moral of the book should be moral indignation against an improvident society or a Pascalian compliance with folly. Veblen has inspired New Dealers and reassured reactionaries.

Perry Miller. Introduction to *American Thought: Civil War to World War I* (Rinehart). 1954. pp. xlvi–xlviii

Certainly Veblen took nothing for granted, questioned everything, and was merciless, though his mood was only indirectly characteristic of the new century. Inscrutable and sardonic, he stood aloof from most of the currents of thought that swirled about him. Repudiating the classical economists, he refused to associate himself with the pragmatic; at war with the conservatives, he was not an ally of the radicals but cherished through-out his life a position of independent belligerency. His rebellion went so deep that it confounded even dissenters; his heresies were so profane that they baffled orthodoxy and heterodoxy alike. He invoked not only a new philosophy but a new vocabulary. . . . For he brought to the study of economic institutions and conduct not only history and anthropology but *philosophy and psychology.* He realized how deeply rooted in habit and custom were the economic mores of any society, and his *Theory of the Leisure Class* was the most penetrating commentary on the psychological bases of economic institutions that had yet been made.

Henry Steele Commager. *The American Mind* (Yale). 1954. pp. 236–7, 242

. . .Veblen laughed so hard and so consistently at the servants and the dogs and the women and the sports of the elite that he failed to see that their military, economic, and political activity is not at all funny. In short, he did not succeed in relating a view of their power over armies and factories to what he believed, quite rightly, to be their funny business. He was, in my view, not quite serious enough about status because he did not see its full and intricate importance

to power. He saw 'the kept classes' and 'the underlying population,' but in his time, he could not really understand the prestige of the power elite.

The heart of Veblen's conception of prestige, and even some of its terms were set forth by John Adams in the late eighteenth century. But to know that John Adams anticipated much of Veblen's idea is in no way to deprecate Veblen, for is not his theory essentially an extended piece of worldly wisdom, long known and perhaps often stated, but stated by Veblen in magnificent form and at a time when it could take hold of a literate public?

C. Wright Mills. *The Power Elite* (Oxford). 1956. p. 89

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VIDAL, Gore (1925–)

Perhaps little more than a decade ago a novel dealing as frankly with male homosexuality as Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* would have been labeled ''freakish.''. . . Unlike the usual characterization of the male homosexual in current novels, Jim Willard is drawn, with deliberate strokes, to appear the opposite of abnormal. Sympathetic as Mr. Vidal is to homosexuals and their precarious status in society, he has Jim express distaste for those more flamboyant groups marked by their mincing gait, loose-jointed wrists, and blatantly feminine voices. Jim Willard is sharply contrasted against these more obvious homosexual types by his outward virility, clean-cut features, and fine physique. Nor is Jim Willard an introspective or very sensitive young man. At first it would appear that the author purposely has chosen a most unrepresentative homosexual for his protagonist. But closer scrutiny will reveal that Gore Vidal is writing about the Jim Willards in every community. . . .

Gore Vidal has written his problem novel in a singularly flat, naturalistic style. It has already been pointed out that Mr. Vidal is gifted with that deadly competence typical of those very young writers who come up with three or four novels to their credit before they reach twenty-five. This is not entirely fair criticism. Vidal's novels are extremely readable. They are the product of a facility for what we call slick writing as opposed to the more distinctive style of a craftsman mainly interested in his craft. But since he chooses to sacrifice, as he has done here, any possibility of his novel being hailed as a distinguished literary work in order to put over his message, perhaps it would be wiser to judge Mr. Vidal's novel mostly on its merits as a social tract. On this score Vidal is quite successful; but, here again, if we did not sense that there was a crusading spirit behind some of the challenging arguments put forth in the book, Mr. Vidal's blunt, dispassionate writing might easily send us off convinced that the Jim Willards can never expect anything of our times but hostility, or, at best, a tragic outcome to any attempt on their own part to solve their dilemma. And this is hardly the conclusion we believe the author intended to leave with us; not, certainly, in an age when we are taught that we can never be hurt by truths which help us to understand ourselves as well as our fellow men.

Richard McLaughlin. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 10, 1948, pp. 14–15

Gore Vidal, at twenty-five, occupies an enviable position in American letters. Not only is he the youngest of the group of new writers whose first books began attracting attention right after the war, but he has already produced as large and varied a body of work as many of his contemporaries may be expected to produce comfortably in a lifetime. Since 1946, when his first novel, *Williwaw*, was published, Vidal has written a novel a year—*In a Yellow Wood* in 1947, *The City and the Pillar* in 1948, *The Season of Comfort* in 1949, and now, in 1950, *A Search for the King*. He has a sixth novel, *Dark Green, Bright Red* completed and awaiting publication and a seventh already in progress.

Williwaw—written when Vidal was nineteen and still in the Army—was a slight and unpretentious book about the war. It was done in the clipped Hemingway manner; the sentences appeared to have been telegraphed and then pasted over the page. But there were no signs of Hemingway's purposeful understatement, his suggestion of hidden layers of immense unspoken meaning. The approach was literal and bald, the props had been carefully cut away rather than concealed, and the emotion was so rigidly controlled that one had the impression of reading a book which had only just managed to get written. Yet there was evidence of real, if premature, mastery in the handling of the central situation—the struggle of the men to bring their ship through the williwaw—and more than an intimation of potential insight in the brief characterizations. Vidal seemed to have learned early the trick of the narrow scope, the tight portrait. Where most young writers try to grapple with an outsized situation and too many characters and succeed only in revealing their youth, he apparently saw the advantage of leaving certain material alone until he grew up to it. His characters, consequently, were purposely unrealized, made up simply of a very few deft touches that gave the illusion of a total, although shadowy, outline. By concentrating on a single trait of a man, Vidal implied others. By yielding even scant information with reluctance, he forced the reader into a contest in which the winning of a single clue became—since it was won with such difficulty—more satisfying than complete revelation.

But the real power of *Williwaw* lay in the faithfulness of its intention to its impact, its tone to its material. In the williwaw—a violent storm common in the Aleutians—Vidal found the perfect instrument for making dramatic the emotion around which the novel was constructed and for which his terse style set the key. The truth of the war for the men who lived in its boredom but were denied its dangers was purposelessness. The contrast between the excitement and terror of the storm and the utter indifference of their reaction to it was thus the supreme, ironic example of that purposelessness. . . .

Right now Vidal is acutely aware of the need for values in both life and art. He is himself one of the best illustrations of the need,

and his frantic productivity as a writer testifies to its urgency. The work he has produced up to now clearly shows his sincerity and his restless determination to explore every possibility that might lead him to his goal. But it shows just as clearly the reason for his recurrent failure. The only order Vidal ever found he found in the war, in the terse emotions and simple negation of the men of *Williwaw*. The moment he tried to move into larger and more complex areas of experience he was lost. His writing after *Williwaw* is one long record of stylistic breakdown and spiritual exhaustion. It is confused and fragmentary, pulled in every direction by the shifting winds of impressionism. It is always reacting, always feeling and seeing; but it never signifies because it never believes.

In this sense, Vidal is typical of his generation. He has lived through some of the most crucial events of history. He has read all the books, listened to all the psychiatrists, and been thoroughly purged of dogma and prejudice. The experience has left him with the great virtue of an open mind. But it has taught him one thing which it is sheer suicide for a writer to learn too well—that all things are relative and that there are at least twenty sides to every question.

Vidal's dilemma is wholly inseparable from the dilemma of his characters. As they search for a center of life, so he searches for a center of art. If they move forward, so must he, and finally they must succeed or fail together. For the goal they seek can exist only if Vidal can make it exist by discovering a way of giving it the maximum significance in his art, and that depends, of course, on his discovering a value and a morality for them and for himself.

John W. Aldridge. *After the Lost Generation* (McGraw-Hill, 1951), pp. 170–71, 183

Gore Vidal will be recognized for speaking to his age in several voices. His voices have not always resounded clearly because he is still very actively a part of the age—an era that could do well to listen and then evaluate.

The first voice of Vidal is that of a former literary prince who has survived lionization and subsequent banishment. ''Eight novels in eight years and still only twenty-nine years old!'' Therein lie enough charges for banishment; but what of those eight novels, from *Williwaw* in 1946 through *Messiah* in 1954? Were they really worth any attention at all?

The heroes of these early novels, after the gray-gloomy soldiers of *Williwaw*, are young men who seem to be no more than mirrors to reflect what they see so clearly but understand so vaguely. In six novels, Vidal's protagonists are handsome, conventionally educated, taut-bellied but not muscle-bound fellows who move among stockbrokers (*In a Yellow Wood*), homosexuals (*The City and the Pillar*), Washington politicians (*The Season of Comfort*), medieval crusaders (*A Search for the King*), mercenary revolutionists (*Dark Green, Bright Red*), and tired European socialites (*The Judgment of Paris*). They are young men in search of life-centers, of worthwhile objects that promise final stabilization. Some among them settle on business, love, or power as temporary sustainers. The more unfortunate, who take these superficialities as absolutes, ironically are destroyed in their safe harbors; the wiser ones recognize that the quest is irrevocable once begun and that any safe haven is purely interim.

These heroes speak the author's rejection of absolute values or final judgments—of even the supposedly eternal verities of simple literary critics. They cannot find truths because an impersonal universe without even pretended justice has forced them toward merely human unabsolutes. But to Vidal the adventure of the human condition is fit motive for living and writing. *The judgment of Paris* and *Messiah* are strongly humanistic: Paris rejects worldly power and abstract knowledge for love, a recognizably brief but nevertheless valuable human love; and Eugene Luther knows, as he dies old, that life, not death, is meant to be the great adventure.

But a philosophy of relativity is not sufficiently rewarding materially to sustain life, and thereby sounds the second voice of Gore Vidal—the voice of the tradesman. Academics prefer to see their novelists pure and starved rather than tainted by getting and spending, especially if the getting has been munificent. Vidal chose a trade that bears grudging proximity to literature—that of mercenary dramatist. . . .

The third voice audible in Vidal's writing since *The City and the Pillar* appeared in 1948 speaks of a reasonable respect for homosexuality—a subject of national fascination but of critical cowardice. Jim Willard still moves in *The City and the Pillar* through the strata of our society: the small-town childhood, the athletic prowess, the sophisticated and the untutored pederasts whom he meets, his baffled search for love—all have made the protagonist into a small-scale folk hero. The point of *The City and the Pillar* and of those tender stories in *A Thirsty Evil* is that there should be no point, no pointed finger, and no fascination at all.

A fourth voice reflects another role which Vidal has played—that of the reasonable man in an unreasonable society. Just as the subject of homosexuality received a reasonable treatment in *The City and the Pillar*, so has he spoken on the emotional excesses of his nation. The essays collected in *Rocking the Boat* show a mind at work criticizing the national preoccupation with Love the Panacea, the right-wing political paranoia, the erosion of civil liberties, and the danger to writers in assuming that the cornucopia of mediocrity excuses mediocrity when guised as serious art. The civilized man must, as Vidal demonstrates, be mentor to his uncivilized brothers.

Finally, Vidal speaks as the voice of involvement to his age. A writer lives in his world of great unabsolutes and grubby human uncertainties; but he can, through the ''understanding'' that he so highly touts, be involved in shaping his nation, destined as it may be for cosmic nada.

Ray Lewis White. *Gore Vidal* (Twayne, 1968), pp. 130–32

The fact is that Vidal Novelist had an unusually long apprenticeship. The early books, the eight that preceded *Julian*, are workmanlike enough, but they are curiously flat and undefined, without any of the zest and bitchy vitality Vidal shows in even the most ordinary conversation. Perhaps the years of thralldom to the tube were not such a waste after all, because when he did return to the novel a decade later in *Julian*, he brought to it the flavor and the energy of his own person. He is still an overly intellectual novelist, but now his subjects are more in keeping with his particular novelistic shtik. *Julian* is one of the best historical novels since Robert Graves's I, *Claudius*; it is a vigorous, authoritative re-creation of fourth-century Rome seen through several first-person accounts. *Washington, D.C.* is much less successful, partly, I think, because Vidal has always been uncomfortable with the conventional third-person narrative. Though he knows the Washington power game better than any other novelist, the plot creaks, and the characters move

around awkwardly, self-consciously, and finally, unbelievably. He almost admits as much. ''I don't know why,'' he says, ''but the third person imposed a great strain on me, the constant maneuvering of so many consciousnesses through the various scenes while trying to keep the focus right.''

In *Myra Breckinridge*, however, Vidal created a comic masterpiece, and what were faults in the earlier novels—a coldness and a passionless analysis of love and sex—became major virtues. Comedy, after all, demands ''something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart,'' in Bergson's words. Its appeal is to intelligence, rather than feelings, and the intellect is where Vidal is most at home. American standards of sexual morality are turned inside out, and Vidal, with malicious glee, paints white black and black white. Not for nothing has he read and reread Evelyn Waugh, who laid down the rules of satire for Vidal's generation. Like Waugh, Vidal can create brilliant comic types, and he has an uncanny ear for absurd dialogue, which he reproduces with unfailing accuracy. In *Myra*, Vidal at last had found his voice as a novelist. . . .

It is not that Vidal's essays are better than his novels. It is rather that his essays are more consistently good and that the qualities that limit him as a novelist are precisely those that a good essayist needs: a forceful intelligence, a cool detachment, an unpretentious, graceful style, and a sense of perspective that distinguishes the big from the little. If most of his fictional characters seem unbelievable, his judgments on real people are both original and irrefutable.

Gerald Clarke. *Atlantic Monthly*. March, 1972, pp. 49–50

Despite its more or less foreclosed partisanship in favor of Burr, this latest and, with *Julian* and *Myra Breckinridge*, best of Vidal's 13 novels [*Burr*] is not designed merely to change the mind of anyone who has been brought up to venerate Jefferson and Hamilton at the expense of Burr. Because while the book is prejudiced against Jefferson, disdainful of Washington, and somewhat demonological about Hamilton, it nonetheless exhibits Vidal's characteristically 18th-century detachment about human follies, and this extends to the reader's presuppositions about the beginnings of our nation. . . . Necessarily the book is about treason; more significantly it is about the impossibility, when our society was small, dispersed, and yet interwoven in an extraordinarily complicated way, of deciding what specifically anyone could be treasonable about. . . .

If the novel is about treason . . . it is also about a much larger problem: to what does anything or anyone truly belong? The success and power of *Burr* derives from the ingenuity with which this question is probed, even to the point of making it a question about the legitimacy of writing such a book. . . .

Nonetheless, Burr, when taken with *Julian*, *Myra Breckinridge* and *Two Sisters*, suggests that Vidal is moving into fictional terrains more hazardous and more rewarding than ever before. He is working out ways by which characters from the past find versions of themselves in characters of later times and are then projected by Vidal as the manipulator of the material, in such a way as to make it all seem immediately contemporaneous and autobiographical. It doesn't matter if this effort isn't always wholly successful. What does matter is that Vidal, who now might lean on or merely transplant his laurels, is instead taking big and exciting chances. In *Burr* the chances have begun to pay off rather handsomely.

Richard Poirier. *Book World*. Oct. 28, 1973, p. 3

Any amount of biographical data cannot alter the fact that today *The City and the Pillar* is important as a mythic novel, not a homosexual one. . . . It is not entirely fair to say the changing times have given the book an antique veneer. *The City and the Pillar* was quaint in its day, although from some of the reviews that called it everything from ''a male counterpart to *The Well of Loneliness*'' to a ''book on perverse practices,'' one would never know it was essentially an inversion of the American wilderness novel.

Far from proving that ''all human beings are bisexual'' (Jim Willard clearly was not), *The City and the Pillar* did prove that anyone who could crack the surface of *Huck Finn* and *The Last of the Mohicans* would eventually discover original sin. Vidal concluded it came into being when a pair of rebellious lads secularized the sacred rites of boyhood by enacting the forbidden parts of the rubrics. Read in the light of *Love and Death in the American Novel*, *The City and the Pillar* contains many of the recurrent themes [Leslie] Fiedler detected in Melville, Cooper, and Twain—the boyhood idyll, the intrusive woman, the miraculous sea, Cooper's redskin brother-surrogate for the white male in the guise of the redhaired Bob Ford, the lost frontier friendship. *The City and the Pillar* is the American wilderness novel demythologized; or rather it exposes the awesome truth the myth concealed.

Bernard F. Dick *The Apostate Angel: A Critical Study of Gore Vidal* (Random House, 1974). pp. 38–39

Sex is the issue on which Vidal has built his political reputation, but the larger part of his writing has dealt with the political labors of others. The characters of his early novels, withdrawn from any concern with the affairs of men, stand as so many adolescents before the heroes of the books that have marked the last decade. The narcissism of youth, the love of the body, is transformed into the narcissism of maturity and the love of power and reputation. His blade sharpened by personal combat, Vidal cuts into history with sharper irony than any contemporary novelist. The once solitary canvases are now crowded with figures trying to work their will.

The four novels are *Julian* (1964) and the loose American trilogy, *Washington, D.C.* (1967), *Burr* (1973), and *1876* (1976). They were underscored by a handful of essays and together they represent Vidal's reach for a lasting reputation of his own. They display an increasing preoccupation with the needless twists of history, and the lies that have given them substance. After *Julian*, they track native grounds. The American preoccupation coincides with Vidal's physical withdrawal from the United States. . . .

Even *Julian*, with its classical setting and its account of the war between Christianity and paganism, is a deeply American book. It has always been necessary for our national artists to come to terms with the religious impulse. This is because religion has been the traditional enemy of art in America, where the Catholic cooperation of Europe never took hold. It is not surprising that the American artist is customarily an agnostic. If he is a Lowell, his creations document the collision between the common sense and the immortal soul. If he is a Mailer, he wails at the inconvenience of people regarding a God more knowing than himself. . . .

The American novels feature no man so admirable, though Aaron Burr is even more engaging. It was typically perverse of Vidal to choose the least admired early American celebrity and present him as the central figure of the Founding Fathers' world. . . . For all the clarity and eloquence of its presentation, Vidal's vision

of the past is little but a confused jumble of intuitions, postures, and crotchets. He has, in fact, no ideas about history at all, which is why he feels free to dress history in his plausible fictions. His theory of American empire turns out to be no more than an ill-tuned lament for innocence lost, without any accompanying statement to identify when innocence reigned, and of what it consisted. . . .

Vidal would like to tear down sex barriers, overrun the barricades of class, and refine the barbarous natives. I suggest that the accomplishment of the first two is unlikely to lead to the third. His liberal fustian is so badly out of key with his high-toned carping that his historical commentary, like his political commentary, is beyond redemption. It is clear that Vidal believes in iconoclasm, and after that it is very fuzzy. His heroes in history, Burr and Julian, were iconoclasts of a very superior sort. Beyond the fact that they were inharmoniously mated with their times, they are not all that alike—Julian, the ascetic philosopher turned general; Burr, the womanizer, the cutter of deals, the lawyer. History to them is a hurricane in whose eye they have landed.

Vidal is less a student of history than a student of human behavior. There is little to be learned, in his view, from the rise and fall of nations and empires, and much to be learned from the adaptation of individuals to life in the great world. In much the same way, Vidal the theater critic found it more interesting to watch audiences than to watch plays. Only by studying human reaction can we learn what are the true forces of a given time.

So Vidal, who emerged as the closest thing to a pure skeptic in contemporary America, has developed into the advocate of the self-conscious. His early novels hinted that this might be the direction he would take. Jim Willard, with his search for Bob Ford, and Blondel the troubadour, with his quest for a ''center'' in his life, represent the stirring of self-conscious feelings. Philip Warren refined them in *The Judgment of Paris* and Eugene Luther dramatized their apotheosis in *Messiah*. By the time he came around to writing the stories of Burr and Julian, Vidal was firmer than ever in his conviction. From describing the homosexual in the land of the heterosexual, he had grown to tell of the proud in the land of the timorous. Iconoclasm is the last refuge of the self-conscious man. . . .

Perhaps this is why Vidal has been ignored, for surely he is worthier of critical attention than the various serpents crawling in the grass today. Vidal the artist is a detoured politician, and this is upsetting to those who like their art neat. Even so, as politicians have programs, artists have themes. A literary politician requires a theme that is somewhat programmatic. Mailer promotes the unabashed self, but it does not get him very far; I sometimes suspect he will die a forgotten man. Lowell has carved out his niche as the man of conscience, and there seems to be a rugged durability to it. But Vidal, the rationalistic narcissist, the advocate of the self-conscious but never the self, is the purest politician of the bunch. A Roman consul would understand him; so would an American senator. They would be inclined to accept him as a bird whose plumage enhances their breed.

Mitchell S. Ross. *The Literary Politicians* (Doubleday, 1978), pp. 286–87, 289, 297–300

Few American writers can display the virtuosity of Gore Vidal; saline essays on popular arts and letters; our best political play, *The Best Man*; intimate analyses of politics, ranging from his observations chez Kennedy to the limitations of Ronald Reagan; futuristic visits to a small planet; revisionist appraisals of America's past imperfect in *Burr* and *1876*; and, of course, the sexual vaudeville of *Myra Breckinridge, Myron*, and, though he has shrewdly disowned it, the film *Caligula*, loosely based on his conceptions.

And yet . . . and yet, I know of no writer with comparable gifts who elicits so little critical response. . . .

A pity, in fact. Gore Vidal is a serious man and an almost solemn writer. No one who was not soberly concerned with values, morality, and history could have attempted *Creation*. . . .

Vidal has a purpose as lofty as the one in Thomas Mann's *Joseph* novels, no longer read and, in truth, not very much missed. . . .

In the remotest eras, Mann and Vidal suggest, the ancients had their own sense of history and prehistory, their own bewilderment about rival beliefs and impending catastrophe and the sense of God immanent in things and forever out of reach. . . .

Its central and grave flaw is typically Vidalian: if you wonder with Tolstoy how the poor die, or with Robert Coles, how they live, *Creation* offers not a clue. It does not, for that matter, tell how the middle class lived in the fifth century B.C. The book's style is panoramic and its populace notable—the sort whose names even then would have been worth an item in the evening papyrus.

Still, *Creation* is well worth the years of research and effort, and it rewards the hours of close attention it requires. In recent years there has been no historical novel remotely like it; nor has there been one which so effectively demolishes the author's carefully nurtured image of smiling mortician to the 20th century.

Stefan Kanfer. *New Republic*. April 25, 1981, pp. 34–36

The great charm of Vidal's writing is its auctorial audacity. The risqué, the demotic, and the left wing always threaten to bring down his elegant prose and mannered sophistication, and a devilish wit always counter-points his angelically lucid style. It is a bravura performance withal, and in a sense Vidal is less a storyteller than a performer. His fictions do not tend to establish self-contained worlds independent of his mediation; rather, they constitute a juggler's feats, with Vidal compounding the most extraordinary materials not for the art of jugglery alone but for the opportunity to wear an audacious face. We are always aware of that face in Vidal's mature fictions. A quip, an outrageously sentimental *glissade*, an autobiographical indiscretion—all turn his jugglery into a performance, a *celebration* of auctorial selfhood. As I observed at the beginning of this study, Vidal's publicly crafted selves may not correspond to his private selves, but what matter? Selfhood is connoisseur's play in the novels, as stylish and entertaining a fiction as one could wish. The Vidalian persona, *con brio*, is the ultimate achievement of Vidal's art.

Robert F. Kiernan. *Gore Vidal* (Ungar, 1982), p. 144

[Gore] Vidal prefers to rely on a more limited number of characters upon whom he lavishes attention. What is lost in scope is compensated for by giving the reader greater insight into the character of the central characters. This is especially true in *Burr* and *Lincoln*, in which the central characters are significant historical figures. Vidal seems determined to show how complex the circumstances surrounding these historical figures were and how critical their choices were in determining the outcome of not only their lives but the fortunes of others. . . .

Vidal's selection of Aaron Burr and Abraham Lincoln as subjects for historical novels reveals his more pessimistic perspective on human nature. Clearly, these are two of the more tragic figures in American history, especially Burr. Indeed, Burr is typically treated as a villain and a failure, and Lincoln, for all that he did to preserve the Union, is generally thought to have been melancholic and depressed. The choice of Burr as the focal point of a novel, foreshadowed in Vidal's earlier novel *Washington, D.C.* (1968) in which Peter Sanford (who is related to Burr, as it turns out) is described as doing research on Burr, reveals as much about Vidal and his view of American politics and history as do the contents of his novels. Burr is a paradigmatic case of the myth of the Fall, and Vidal is far more interested in calling our attention to the contradictory evidence that would undermine a naive faith in progress. Direction in history does not seem to exist for Vidal, nor evidence that progress has been achieved. Life is a struggle, but a different struggle than the one [James] Michener ties to the environment and the ''frontier.'' For Vidal, the struggle is largely an inner struggle, and the artist is especially able to portray that struggle. Thus, Vidal provides us with insight into ethical dilemmas and self-diagnosis. But he also offers us very powerful criticisms of American politics. . . .

In Vidal's work . . . the negative underside of American history in its real and mythical expressions are disclosed—thus, reopening the field of history and politics to the tensions and contradictions that our national myths were intended to reconcile.

> Samuel J. Hines, Jr. ''Political Change in America: Perspectives from the Popular Historical Novels of Michener and Vidal.'' In Ernest J. Yanarella and Lee Sigelman, eds. *Political Mythology and Popular Fiction* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Pr., 1988), pp. 92–93

If Vidal is often unreliable on the subjects he treats, and rather too pompous and self-assured to be taken for a moral thinker, is he in essence simply a comic writer? Do we admire mainly his ability to come up with punch lines and occasionally apt caricatures? In a piece on Norman Mailer, Vidal somewhat sententiously proclaimed that ''what matters finally is not the world's judgment of oneself but one's own judgment of the world. Any writer who lacks this final arrogance will not survive very long in America.'' In such terms one might be tempted to make a case for Vidal as the embodiment of an imperial and sometimes bracing arrogance. So too might he be said to rise occasionally to the genuine work of the critic, distinguishing the merely pertinent from the true, the literary virtues from literature. Reading his best pieces, usually the more modest reviews of midcult writers like John O'Hara or the relentless send-ups of frankly commercial fiction or shabby politicians, we are less inclined than elsewhere to complain about the weak analysis or the reluctance to provide ample evidence. The more disfiguring obsessions and insupportable generalizations are less frequent or, in any case, less recognizable than they are in the patently ambitious pieces where Vidal takes on issues much too large for the virtues or instincts of a light, occasional essayist. His career as an essayist reminds us that endowments like wit, polish, fluency, and arrogance are not easy to control.

It doesn't help much, in thinking about Vidal, to judge him simply as a wit or, for that matter, as a literary journalist. He certainly regards himself as a critic, and would wish to be associated with the virtues of [Edmund] Wilson and V.S. Pritchett. Wilson's merits in this vein were recently said by one writer to include ''the commitment to the language of the general, rather than the specialist, intelligence; the sophisticate curiosity that confronts the high and the popular, the new and the outré, with equal poise; most of all the ability . . .to give ideas the quality of actions.'' No doubt Vidal employs the language of the generalist, and shows to what a variety of expressive purposes it may be turned. But his curiosity is a very limited faculty which leads him neither to Wilson's scholarly commitments nor to the scrupulous examination of primary materials that we find in the best critics. He lacks patience as he lacks the courage to sit quietly, watching sympathetically the exertions of others neither so worldly nor so confident as he. His poise comes from his self-esteem and his refusal to be seduced away from his own settled attitudes and unwavering opinions. One never feels that Vidal will allow himself to learn much from his encounters, that his stance will in any way be affected, or that he will be moved to confess an important change of heart. His determination to look down on things guarantees that he will master what comes before him without ever submitting to it in a way that makes for genuine intimacy. His elegant, playful, always insouciant handling of ideas necessarily ensures that the ink will never come off on his fingers. By temperament mistrustful of ideas, he treats them as idle playthings or illusions before he has accorded them the provisional dignity of genuinely interesting or painfully tempting claimants. In no other writer of our day do we see so clear a gap between unimpeachable literary gifts and comparably drastic disabilities of mind, spirit, and purpose.

> Robert Boyers. ''On Gore Vidal: Wit and the Work of Criticism.'' In Jay Parini, ed. *Gore Vidal: Writer against the Grain* (New York: Columbia Univ. Pr., 1992), pp. 168–70

When the dust settles on this half of the twentieth century, Gore Vidal may well assume the place among his contemporaries denied to him throughout a long and various life of writing. His vast, almost Trollopian, productivity spans five decades and includes over twenty novels, collections of essays on literature and politics, a volume of short stories, successful Broadway plays, television plays, film scripts, even three mystery novels written under the pseudonym of Edgar Box. One has to wonder at the lack of serious critical response to this extraordinary body of work.

Vidal has in fact been written about a good deal. The problem is with the quality, not the quantity, of this attention. Much of the writing about him takes the form of light magazine profiles and ephemeral reviews, since Vidal has been a celebrity from the beginning. And the reviews of Vidal's work have been remarkably uneven, often presenting a reviewer's assumptions (usually secondhand) about the man instead of offering something like an objective viewpoint. Harold Bloom, among others, has noticed this; he observes in his essay-review on *Lincoln* . . .that Vidal's ''achievement is vastly underestimated by American academic criticism.''. . .

One of the curiosities in surveying the critical scene around Vidal is his relation to academe, which has been troubled from the outset. And one quickly sees the price Vidal has paid for this stubbornness. His contemporaries—Mailer, Updike, and Bellow, among others—have been the source of minor cottage industries in the academy, whereas Vidal has been pretty much ignored. . . .

Vidal is, most centrally, a writer. One of the premier essayists this nation has produced, he is also one of its most gifted novelists.

His best work, from *The City and the Pillar* through *Julian*, *Burr*, *Lincoln*, *Myra Breckenridge*, and *Duluth*, is steeped in an intimate acquaintance with American history and culture, with the twin capitals of Washington and Hollywood, with the ways that Americans have come to accept their lives. A satirist at heart, Vidal's work recalls that of Mencken as an immediate precursor and Swift as a long-distant ancestor. In a country not known for (or kind to) its satirists, Vidal stands out as something of a national treasure in this regard.

Jay Parini, ed. ''Gore Vidal: The Writer and His Critics.'' *Gore Vidal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 1–2, 5, 29–30

Since 1967, [Gore Vidal] has been writing a comprehensive fictional history of the United States which constitutes an importantly revisionist understanding of the relationship between American history and its literature. Vidal himself has called attention to the discrepancy between the historical ambition of his current project and his literary standing. . . .

As he sees it, exclusion from the academic [and critical] establishment frees him from its limitations, and he can claim for his project the capacity to gratify, as academic history cannot, the public's demand for historical understanding of ''who we are and what we did.'' He intends to educate the public as to the difference between the truth, which it really wants, and what the ruling academic narratives try to give it. . . .

By the time Vidal published the first of his chronicles, *Washington, D.C.* in 1967, the controversy surrounding the Vietnam War had already resulted in a widespread understanding of the difference between actual historical events and the official stories the nation told itself about them. Vidal's project exemplified a revisionist trend throughout the sixties that questioned any received understanding of the relationship between historical facts and the literary imagination. Other evidences of this included Norman Mailer's nonfiction novel *Armies of the Night* and the counterculture of young adults. While the counterculture was a relatively short-lived phenomenon on the streets and campuses, the questions it occasioned as to the historicity of literature would later contribute to the formation of an academic discipline called New Historicism. . . .

With the publication of *Washington, D.C.* . . . Vidal had constructed a possible historical context for the political consciousness of the antiwar culture. Because its members were unable to sustain a historical location for their politics, the counterculture passed out of American history with the Vietnam War. But when some of those active in the counterculture later became professors of literature and history, they recalled that earlier history lesson and refused to credit accounts of literary culture as a realm apart from history. Their literary criticism insisted on the importance of historical context to the study of literature. One academic result has been the emergence of an academic practice called the New Historicism. . . .

Unlike the literary critics who banished Gore Vidal, the New Historicists share his understanding of literature as a historical force. The difference between them involves the sites on which each would exert its force. Because Vidal's work has never been a presence within the academy, his fictional histories are addressed to a larger public constructed out of the controversies that accompany his books. But the New Historicists have conducted all their fieldwork within the academy. Like their precursors in the counterculture, they have returned political categories—race, class, gender—to the study of literature, and have tried to change this field of academic study as well as the literary curriculum. But without the American public's understanding of the historic significance of this change in literary understanding, the New Historicists remain a marginal political force.

As part of the historical consciousness for the 1960s counterculture, Vidal has been practicing his own version of New Historicism since 1967. His fictional histories constitute a research archive for this emergent field as well as a broad public for its political concerns. When construed as the historical consciousness missing from the counterculture, Vidal's chronicles can be understood to historicize the New Historicists' project; it instructs them in how not to confuse academic with national politics. In the arguments he has conducted with academic historians and literary critics, he has produced an accessible context for understanding the new literary field. Because of the assumptions about literature and history they share, Vidal's chronicles will become crucial to the development of this discipline. But their relationship will not be a reciprocal one until the New Historicists include Vidal's works within the literature courses from which they have been excluded for the last forty years.

Donald E. Pease. ''Citizen Vidal and Mailer's America.'' *Raritan*. Spring, 1992, pp. 72–74, 96–98

So long as historical novelists confined themselves to their proper spheres, professional historians welcomed them as valuable collaborators. Fiction, of course, could never be a substitute for genuine history, could at best only counterfeit it, but if not history, historical fiction was a stimulant for the historical imagination. After all, it sprang from history and in reshaping popular conceptions of the past might even revolutionize the study of history. . . .

But this mutually beneficial partnership appears to be breaking up. A number of novelists, some, it would seem, with mischievous intent, have begun to smudge the boundary line between history and fiction, to blend them, and to assert that fictional history might be ''truer'' than recorded history. Most historians are too preoccupied with their own work to be aware of—much less answer—this last claim, but as the following two episodes show, testy disagreements between historians and writers of historical fiction have already provoked some interesting questions.

Episode 1. Gore Vidal publishes *Lincoln: A Novel* in 1984, a work purportedly grounded on historical sources. It is assailed by a group of historians for its gross distortions and inaccuracies. Vidal, they say, depicts Lincoln as coarse-grained and devious, ignorant of economics, ''disregardful'' of the Constitution, fiercely ambitious, and a racist until the end. What is more, Vidal relies on outdated and discredited scraps of scholarship, and he oversimplifies complex issues. Had he declared at the outset that his novel was pure fiction, the characters inventions, no one could fault him. But to pretend ''to deal with real persons and events,'' and then to twist them in the process, to conflate history and fiction—this is insupportable.

Vidal counterattacks. These ''squirrel'' historians and ''hagiographers'' are fact collectors bent on advancing their careers. Of the art of the novel they haven't an inkling—that is to be expected—but neither are they up to the demands of their calling. Incapable of understanding a complex and earthy politician like

Lincoln they would transform a great but humanly fallible man into a plaster saint. Yes, he has embellished here and there, but primary sources and ''scholarly historians,'' if not the ''squirrels,'' substantiate his interpretation.

In sum, Vidal says, American history can't be left to the historians, most of whom are too narrow, unworldly and unlettered to grasp the mind and motives of a Lincoln or to move easily through political and diplomatic corridors. There is no such thing as pure history. It is always clouded, always fragmented. Hence truth is what is best imagined, and the novelist is obviously better qualified than the historian to locate and reattach invisible historical links. . . .[Vidal] is challenging the taken-for-granted assumption that history is history, fiction is fiction, and never the twain shall meet.

Daniel Aaron. *American Heritage*. Oct., 1992, p. 56

Like that of many contemporary writers, Vidal's catalogue of narrative possibilities is a tough-minded elegy for literary culture composed in a visual culture that reads little or nothing, that writes little or nothing except its autograph. The late twentieth century, Vidal realizes, is the post-Gutenberg age. Literary genius can never be wholly extinguished. The ability to provide narratives, stories, zooms across all media. Nevertheless, literary genres have withered. Poetry has given way to the novel, the novel to the visual media, literary criticism to book-chat (even *Myra* the novel briefly succumbed to a film adaptation that Vidal scorned and repudiated). Inseparable from the decline of writing is the decline of speaking, of verbal wit and eloquence. Language itself, the basis of literature and speech, is deteriorating—dissolving like classical and neoclassical architecture in the polluted air of modern cities. Plato's *Symposium* and Petronius's banquet scene are now fodder for Myra's conversations about gender and population control with Rusty and Mary-Ann in the Cock and Bull Restaurant on the Hollywood Strip. (On this street of dreams, Myra's linguistic force is as singular as her body.). . .

If we are to believe her creator, in a post-Gutenberg age our most popular gods and goddesses will be born and borne from celluloid, not paper. Our new interpreters of signs and symbols will huddle around television or movie screens. For those of us who still read, there yet remains the glow of pleasurable embers that Vidal throws on his pages—the occasional graffiti, the provocations of satire, and the risible comfort of the Myra/Myronic cult figures.

Catharine R. Stimpson. ''My O My O Myra.'' In Jay Parini, ed. *Gore Vidal* (New York: Columbia Univ. Pr., 1992), pp. 196–97, 198

Interviewing Vidal in *QW*, Larry Kramer, the playwright, says to him, ''I bet there is a big romantic streak in you. Perhaps that's why you are so angry.'' If Vidal is angry, he is not yet prepared to say he is so for any reason other than the very rational one of disappointment in a country for which he had great expectations and a sense of responsibility. One finds in all Vidal's work, from the historical novels like *Lincoln* and *Burr* to the comic *Myra Breckenridge* and *Duluth*, the outrage of disappointed political illusion—outrage the reader might have shared if he had been raised like Vidal with the same lively sense of noblesse oblige—the need not only to write about matters of serious public concern but a demand that his writings have an effect, too; with *Live from Golgotha* he says he wants to undermine the Judeo—Christian tradition.

One can understand Vidal's frustration with our country. But there is also a note, harder to sympathize with, of a rather unwarranted sense of having been ignored. Critics, like prophets, are always ignored and they ought to expect it; and anyway Vidal has not been ignored. He may have been too visible. All writers would be actors if they could, someone has said, and it goes without saying that some actors are stars. The evolution of writer into Personality follows from the bond between writer and reader that is established with every act of reading, independent of both the work and the narrator of the work. . . .

Though he has been the least autobiographical of writers, an exasperated Vidal figure, recognizable by its obsessions on certain subjects, is apt to come crashing into his texts like a burglar through a skylight. Add to this the likelihood that the reader will have seen him on television or in the movies (see him in *Bob Roberts* acting the part of a senator), handsome and funny, like a star, and it does not seem amazing that he more than most writers is the object of that peculiar form of celebrity desire that allows strangers to feel acquainted, involved, even entitled to their connection to the living man behind his books. This has not always furthered Vidal's literary reputation. The novelist John Calvin Batchelor, for instance, reviewing Vidal's latest novel, *Live from Golgotha*, remarks that the reader may be shocked ''that Gore Vidal, self-promoting charlatan and conscientiously strident bear-baiter, is in truth a sincere Pauline intelligence in the hard-minded tradition of Augustine, Calvin, Beecher, Niebuhr, and Martin Luther King.'' His ad hominem characterization of the author would seem to be based on Vidal's extraliterary performances. Nevertheless he places Vidal in a venerable religious tradition which may, as he notes, surprise.

Diane Johnson. ''Star.'' *New York Review of Books*. April 8, 1993, p. 25

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VIERECK, Peter (1916–)

With the energy, high spirits, and optimism of a young man, he has set out to conquer a space for the humane and reasonable wherever it can be found amid the encircling gloom, and he is often remarkably capable of doing it. . . . His pleasure in words occasionally leads him to dubious puns—neurosis-new roses—and neo-Swinburnian rhymes that overpower the poem. But for the most part, both in phrasing and form, the sense of craftsmanship is evident throughout the book.

Eugene Davidson. *The Yale Review*. Summer, 1949. p. 726

He is a linguist, widely read, a man of zest and wit with a beautiful control of language. . . . I enjoyed Viereck's lively historical sense, his love of fun, and the skill with which he restates the traditional and great poetic themes. Unlike most young poets, he is more impressive collected than when read in single poems. He seldom over-extends himself in the grand effect.

Edward Weeks. *Atlantic Monthly*. Aug., 1949. p. 83

Whatever Viereck touches takes on a freshness and excitement. He writes about the Dawn Horse and the function of the poet with an equal mixture of gravity and mockery. He puts the scrawled phrase ''Kilroy was here'' into rhyme with adventurous daring and epic spirit. He is amusing and arousing in the same breath. He is an experimenter who rarely yields to the speciously spectacular, a writer who respects tradition without being submerged in it, a genuine wit who is, at the same time, a poet of emotional power.

Louis Untermeyer. *Modern American Poetry* (Harcourt). 1950. pp. 686–7

In each essay Mr. Viereck arrives at the conclusion that neither of the two large opposing points of view under examination is sufficient, and he proposes a mean between them that will combine the best of both. Despite the impression of mechanical formula that such a procedure is bound to give, when Mr. Viereck speaks about specific works of poetry his taste is always good and his judgment disinterested. . . . Everywhere, in fact, his notions are sober and considered. Yet the language in which he states his moderation is neither moderate nor restrained, and sometimes not even intelligible.

Steven Marcus. *Commentary*. Aug., 1954. p. 175

It was partly Viereck's ingenuity in the use of conventional form that aroused so much interest. . . . His attack on the more arid and drooping kind of ''modernism'' has been frontal, and his admirers have cheered his championship of a new and rather reactionary poetic future wherein poetry, with Eliot and Pound finally vanquished in open combat, could once more ''communicate'' to a large and eager audience. . . . He still displays a strong belief in his own powers, both poetic and polemic, and he is still full of vigor and zest, but much of his originality seems to be stiffening into eccentricity. . . . Tricks come more and more into evidence.

Louise Bogan. *Selected Criticism*(Noonday). 1955. p. 395

From the beginning he had been hard to classify. There was much that was rollicking, wild, and sometimes raucous in his initial book of verse. But half-concealed by technical fireworks and plain vitality was a quieter, more tranquil Viereck, the lyricist gravely recording the eternal flow of life and experience.

It is the lyricist who is now coming into his own. . . . The latent lyricism of the poet has become incarnate in language which evokes from the reader an equal response of mind, heart, and the wistful senses.

Chad Walsh. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 28, 1956. p. 37

Viereck's star has somewhat declined since his Pulitzer Prize days, and it shouldn't have. If he isn't read, that is our loss, for he is far too volatile and perceptive to languish in old magazines. That he is a bit of a showoff and seems to some a bratty smart-aleck who knows only a little about a lot of things, and that he insists on demonstrating this to one and all, time after time, shouldn't be allowed to obscure his very real virtues, which are a perennially youthful go-for-broke recklessness, an unstudied abandon and fearlessness in the pursuit of ideas and their consequences, and a sheer bounce and linguistic *joie-de-vivre* which communicate more than a little of the ''personal warmth'' he posits as our salvation. He writes, in the end, a kind of poetry which, rather than seeing itself as potentially ''immortal'', is quite frankly ephemeral and topical, gladly (and this is a word one can hardly help applying to Viereck) sacrificing the hope of Parnassus to the more immediate one of instruction and usefulness.

James Dickey. *Sewanee Review*. Summer, 1962. p. 489

As historian, Peter Viereck has an enviable catalog of data at his command. As poet, he makes such surprising juxtapositions of ideas that you are sometimes startled into accepting his thought-images for their esthetic rather than for their logical value. Viereck can't browse through old ideas without putting them back on the shelf in new positions. After reading Viereck, you might not agree with his conclusions, but it is pretty hard to say why.

Goldwater's arguments have just the edge to make liberals more self-righteous than ever. Viereck's idea-associations have the discomfiting effect of making liberals realize how conservative they are.

Both socialism and conservatism, Viereck believes, work in America as a diffusion, not a movement. They do not have a social base, a party, or a class. When they do become a movement, they

become small, comical splinter groups. This diffusion will be jeopardized if the conservatives try to localize it into the apologetics for any one class. Viereck speaks of a ''diffusion'' because he thinks conservatism is essentially an ethical and cultural force. It may seem strange to ignore the obvious economic factors and think of both conservatism and socialism as ethical and cultural forces, but this is the way Viereck plays it.

Edward Cain. *They'd Rather Be Right* (Macmillan). 1963. pp. 111–12

Viereck is a well-known professor of history and a professional political theorist of repute. The spill-over of his metier as historian into his poetry is unfortunate. There is endless ranting, mostly in quaint iambic pentameter and other disqualified meters, nearly all on the socio-political plane. The satire is heavily quasi-American, wrecked by thinking and an overeducated prosody.

Nevertheless a reader can comb this volume [*New and Selected Poems*] with admiration. There are poems well worth searching out, dozens of them. This reviewer would call the attention of all anthologists to the 12-line lyric ''The Lyricism of the Weak'', a monologue in the great American patois and a kind of elegy on the death of the English language. It is probable that the poem is intended as an assault on Incorrectness (it is hard to say), but the present reviewer knows at least 10 poets and professors who have memorized it.

Karl Shapiro. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 6, 1967. p.8

Viereck's work has three qualities essential to that of any good poet. He has an individual, sustaining style. He has poetic convictions, flexible in approach but durable in essence. He has an affinity for themes of inherent scope and power. But in addition to these, he has something extremely rare in a mechanical and insulated age, something largely absent from contemporary poetry. To call it a cosmic sense sounds portentous. Yet this is what it is. Roethke had it, Tomlinson, and D.H. Lawrence. It is one poetic quality which is purely a gift, and there is absolutely nothing which can be done to simulate its possession.

Josephine Jacobsen. *Massachusetts Review*. Summer, 1968. p. 591

The career in poetry of Peter Viereck, perhaps more than that of any other writer of our time, can be viewed as an experiment in the symbiosis of poetry and politics. . . . His best satires are memorable events in the history of ideas, without loss of art.

Viereck's earliest poetry served him as an extension of political consciousness into a medium in which paramount ideas of our era could be abstracted from their worrisome contexts in international affairs and viewed freshly and intrinsically through the symbolic machinery of art. Poetry later became for Viereck a mind-style for escaping the risks of socio-political consciousness in playful, if ingenious, literary word-puzzles. But in his most recent work, in going still further beyond literal reality, Viereck returns to full human force and wholeness.

Laurence Lieberman. *Poetry*. Aug., 1968. p. 342

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VONNEGUT, Kurt (1922–)

Cat's Cradle is an irreverent and often highly entertaining fantasy concerning the playful irresponsibility of nuclear scientists. Like the best of contemporary satire, it is work of a far more engaging and meaningful order than the melodramatic tripe which most critics seem to consider serious.

Terry Southern. *New York Times Book Section*. June 2, 1963. p. 20

I am happy to announce that I am likely to become Mr., or Herr, Vonnegut's first convert in these Western isles. . . .

What remains really impressive [in *Cat's Cradle*] is the ingenuity and imagination used to make Bokononism convincing. Its founder's maxims and poems are quoted every two or three pages with startling effect. Bokonon, for instance, rejects the New Testament message ''Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's'' as any Manichaean must. He substitutes ''Pay no attention to Caesar. Caesar doesn't have the slightest idea what is really going on.'' Like many another great thinker, Bokonon finds his inspiration in the most banal sources. Vonnegut admits to scoffing at first at the phrase ''dynamic tension'' in the Books of Bokonon, recognising this as the slogan of the postal bodybuilder, Charles Atlas. Atlas's theory was that bodily strength could be acquired without any equipment by pitting one set of muscles against the other. Bokonon adapts this to society—strong society can be built by pitting good and evil against each other and keeping the tension between the two high at all times. Historically it is difficult to deny the accuracy of this observation. By the end of *Cat's Cradle*, it is hard to remember that Bokonon is a fictional character—religions have been built around far less improbable creators before.

Alan Brien. *Spectator*. Aug. 2, 1963. pp. 158–9

A joy to behold is Vonnegut's *Player Piano*, years ahead of its time in 1952, reissued in handsome hardback just as the times catch up. Blackly humorous, extraordinarily well-written, bitter, funny and sharp, this major first novel by a clique-making major writer will not now be forgotten.

Theodore Sturgeon. *National Review*. May 17, 1966. p. 478

Kurt Vonnegut's world ends not with a bang, not with a whimper, but with a wink, a shrug and a boop-boop-de-doop. His writing is uneven, his characters flat. . . . What he has he has in glorious abundance: a sense of how bizarre daily life is, a comic gift that uses reality itself as its focus, and now-you-see-it-now-you-don't he'll turn it inside out for laughs, and often, gasps. He is sometimes profound; he has a first-rate mind and an imagination that is staggering. His terrain is near the junction of George Orwell and Lewis Carroll.

Joanne Greenberg. *Denver Quarterly*. Summer, 1966. pp. 119–20

Although the machines of *Player Piano* suggest a bogus sense of order, the world of Vonnegut—a world without meaning—is one of disorder, ranging from the untidy to the chaotic. His books are not only about that world; they reflect it. From *Player Piano* to *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, his novels display an increasing fragmentation. He jumps from person to person, from place to place, time to time, often coming to rest for no more than a paragraph or a page. Conventional plot, which is necessary to *Player Piano*, has practically disappeared in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. Except for the lost and loveless central figures, usually the narrators, around whom the comic distress forms, the characters are mostly cartoon sketches, seen briefly but vividly, designed to make a simple satiric point.

The chapters, particularly in the later novels, are not necessarily units of action, and the brief scenes that are units are often divided for no reason. In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, every few paragraphs, often in the middle of a conversation, the page of type is broken by a decorative *R*, as though to remind us of the unlikelihood of a beginning or an end.

In *Cat's Cradle*, the same kind of arbitrary division is given a name and a number, so that there are 127 ''chapters'' in 191 pages in the paperback edition. It is as though the author were providing handholds for the weak to pull themselves from thought to thought, only to have the handholds turn into fences and the narrative into an obstacle course.

Gerald Weales. *The Reporter*. Dec. 1, 1966. pp. 54–5

Vonnegut's prose has the same virtues as his characterization and plotting. It is deceptively simple, suggestive of the ordinary, but capable of startling and illuminating twists and turns. He uses the rhetorical potential of the short sentence and short paragraph better than anyone now writing, often getting a rich comic or dramatic effect by isolating a single sentence in a separate paragraph or excerpting a phrase from context for a bizarre chapter-heading. The apparent simplicity and ordinariness of his writing mask its efficient power, so that we are often startled when Vonnegut pounces on a tired platitude or cliché like a benevolent mongoose and shakes new life into it.

Robert Scholes. *The Fabulators.* (Oxford—N.Y.). 1967. p. 51

Ilium, Titan, Tralfamadore, Nazi Germany, San Lorenzo, Rosewater County, Dresden at the time of the devastating Allied air-raid—these are some of the settings for Vonnegut's six novels to date, and the juxtaposition of the actual and the imaginary in that list gives a clue as to one of his main preoccupations. What is the relation between the facts we encounter and the fictions we invent? Given the terrible historical actuality of the Second World War, what are we to make of the ambiguous role of fantasy in men's lives? And how does all this affect the writer, who longs to communicate and does so by telling lies? It is a growing awareness of the seriousness of Vonnegut's inquiries which has made people realise that he is not simply the science fiction writer he first appeared to be.

His first novel, *Player Piano* (1952), was, to be sure, a fairly orthodox futuristic satire on the dire effects on human individuality of the fully mechanised society which technology could make possible. A piano player is a man consciously using a machine to produce aesthetically pleasing patterns of his own making. A player-piano is a machine which has been programmed to produce music on its own, thus making the human presence redundant. This undesirable inversion of the relationship between man and machine, suggested by the title, is at the heart of the novel.

Tony Tanner. *The Critical Quarterly*. Winter, 1969. p. 297

A Vonnegut book is not cute or precious. It is literally awful, for Vonnegut is one of the few writers able to lift the lid of the garbage can, and dispassionately examine the contents. . . .

The ultimate difficulty with Vonnegut is precisely this: that he refuses to say who is wrong. The simplest way . . . is to say that everybody is wrong but the author. Any number of writers have done it, with good success. But Vonnegut refuses. He ascribes no blame, sets no penalties. His commentary on the assassination of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King is the same as his comment on all other deaths: ''So it goes,'' he says, and nothing more.

One senses that underneath it all, Vonnegut is a nice man, who doesn't really like to say this, but . . . his description of one character might stand for all mankind in his view: ''She had been given the opportunity to participate in civilization, and she had muffed it.'' And of himself, a comment by another character, the author-Nazi-propagandist-pornographer-American spy Howard W. Campbell, Jr. ''I speak gibberish to the civilized world, and it replies in kind.''

So it goes.

J. Michael Crichton. *New Republic*. April 26, 1969. p. 35

[Kurt Vonnegut] has been a writer's writer, serious, technically accomplished, uninterested in accommodating himself to the book trade or the great thundering herd. He has not had, accordingly, one ''big book,'' though he is a better writer—more intelligent, more disciplined—than some people who have, Joseph Heller, for example, or Terry Southern. Mr. Vonnegut is what used to be called a banjo hitter. He has kept rapping out sharp singles while the sluggers lunged and panted and wrote army novels and drove home the Cadillacs. But there have been some signs latterly of a boom in Vonnegut stock, with his *Mother Night* particularly and *Cat's Cradle* being taken up a good deal by young people in the colleges. What appeals to them, I suspect, is the combination of Mr. Vonnegut's gentleness and his stylish sense of the ridiculous in these our times. He may be a growth issue.

Warren Coffey. *Commonweal*. June 6, 1969. pp. 347–8

Vonnegut's art forces us to reimagine horror, a neat trick. . . .

For all of this, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a very funny novel, as funny as *The Day of the Locust*, which uses humor as still another means of enlightenment. The possibilities of humor come from Vonnegut's double attitude: horror at the way things happen and acceptance that we can do little to change the way things happen. . . .

Because his art does much that others' have been unable to do, it sometimes does less. Characterizations are reduced in complexity, caught in Vonnegut's design, like bugs in amber. Similarly, climaxes are distributed throughout the novel, not set strategically for a final culmination of thematic currents. But these are far from faults, merely other ways to make his points: that all times converge in each climactic moment and each character is lost in cosmic space.

Shaun O'Connell. *American Scholar*. Autumn, 1969. pp. 720–1

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., is a much more obvious moralist than Barth. His novels have something of Swift in them—not merely in the canny pokes he takes at human weakness and the *status quo*, but a kind of fantasy that allows him, as it allowed Swift, to isolate the objects of his attack and praise. What Vonnegut praises, as we might expect in setting him against the background of the ''open decision,'' is the human being—at least the human being as Vonnegut defines the phrase. The human being is most human—and most praiseworthy—when he lives wholeheartedly in his natural condition, working in the open, doing joyfully and spontaneously for his own support, loving other life, and being loved. Human worth—and hence significance—resides in the *being* of the human. The self is its own reason for being; its being is its own guarantee of its value. The more conscious one is of his being, the more individual he is and the firmer is his guarantee.

Jerry H. Bryant. *The Open Decision: The Contemporary American Novel and Its Intellectual Background* (Free). 1970. p. 303

Happy Birthday, Wanda June . . . with which the novelist Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. makes his debut as a playwright, is an attempt at a satire on the return of Odysseus. Mr. Vonnegut's Odysseus is a paunchy, bearded fellow named Ryan who has been missing for eight years, held captive by Indians in South America. He is a bully and a braggart who calls his young wife ''Daughter,'' boasts of his heroism during the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War, and at the end goes offstage with a loaded rifle to shoot himself. In short, he is a caricature of Hemingway, drawn in pure venom. A dreadful, cheap idea, and certainly unworthy of the clever Mr. Vonnegut's considerable talent—talent for comedy, that is, which, while slighter than Hemingway's, for example, often pays off. No talent for abstract thought is discernible on the stage of the [Theatre] de Lys. Although I'd just as soon simply laugh at anyone as funny as Mr. Vonnegut and let it go at that, he demands to be taken seriously, and when he starts moralizing he becomes obvious and silly, almost sinking his play. Not quite, though; there are plenty of good, quirky jokes and funny scenes and there are enough good performances to save it.

Edith Oliver. *New Yorker*. Oct. 17, 1970. p. 143

Among contemporary writers, Kurt Vonnegut stands out as a gruff sentimentalist with a soft spot in his heart for science fiction. . . . Vonnegut . . . often wavers between the future and the past, the story in its slickest form and the vision of things to come, the bombings of Dresden and the destroying of the planet Tralfamadore. Furthermore, some of his science fiction—*Player Piano*, *Welcome to the Monkey House*—is in the old form of dystopia: an extension of the absurd or destructive tendencies of the present, a scientized homily, satire, or warning. This is understandable; Vonnegut is really a simple moralist, haunted by the reality of death. (The refrain, ''So it goes,'' follows each mortal event in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, like water drops in Chinese torture.) Typically, his own moral confession sounds a bit cute: ''And I realize now that the two main themes of my novels were stated by my siblings: 'Here I am cleaning shit off practically everything' and 'No pain.'''

Time warps, spaceships, and galactic materializations aside, Vonnegut, an earthling like all of us, can not push his vision past the ironic barrier of the mind. He bestows on his ideal creatures, the Tralfamadorians, the supreme privilege of blowing up the universe. They blow it up, of all things, experimenting with a new fuel for their flying saucers. So much, then, for Universal Time and Space, where vision and extinction finally become one.

Ihab Hassan in *Liberations*, ed. Ihab Hassan (Wesleyan). 1971. pp. 193–4

The main concern of Vonnegut's novels is the illusions men live by. These illusions fall into two categories. On the one hand, Vonnegut treats those illusions that make human existence more miserable than it need be. The significance man attaches to such artificial distinctions as race, nationality, even national dogma, forces him to overlook the common humanity that links all men. . . . Like the illusions caused by nationalism and racial prejudice, what might be called the Great-American-Success-Illusion also fosters invidious distinctions. . . .

The second kind of illusion Vonnegut examines lies beyond protest. Whereas the first contributes to human despair and should be discarded, the second helps prevent despair and seems essential to human contentment. This is the illusion of a purposeful universe. Those who embrace it believe the world contains plan, meaning and a moral order, and that in the end all things work for the best. . . . Vonnegut's belief in a purposeless universe constitutes his main theme. . . . Protest . . . implies hope for reform. Like most novelists of the absurd, however, Vonnegut entertains little hope for either social or individual reform. Comic absurdity informs all things, including man and his institutions. . . . In the face of such all-encompassing absurdity, what is the proper response for man? Vonnegut offers at least three possible answers to this question. Man may practice uncritical love, hoping through kindness and charity to lend some meaning to an otherwise meaningless human condition. Or he can manufacture new illusions to supplant the old—comforting lies that will shelter him from the icy winds of an absurd universe. Finally, he can simply accept the absurdity of his condition, neither affirming nor denying it and never asking the most meaningless of questions, Why?

Charles B. Harris. *Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd* (College and University). 1971. pp. 54, 56, 60–1, 64, 66–7

Vonnegut is always at home with characters who are not with it in our kind of world, people whose total helplessness and inability to explain *anything* have indeed made them unworldly, extraterrestrial, open to mischief from outer space. Vonnegut's use of space fiction is always too droll for my taste, a boy's fantasy of more rational creatures than ourselves. . . .

Vonnegut is at his best not in *Slaughterhouse-Five* but in such satires of the American scene as *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. In these his authentic bitterness at the souring of so many American hopes takes on the wildly comic quality natural to him. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* he seems, all too understandably, subdued by his material and plays it dumb. The book is short, loose, and somehow helpless. But Vonnegut's total horror of war has endeared him to the young, who find it hard to believe that even World War II had a purpose, and who see themselves as belonging to the universe at large rather than to the country that sends them to fight in Asia. Vonnegut's fixed social idea, especially in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, is a human vulnerability too innocent in the face of war to offer any political explanation or protest.

Alfred Kazin. *Saturday Review*. Feb. 6, 1971. p. 15

Like any writer who pleases a large audience, Vonnegut has his virtues: gimmicks that work, bright observations, some good jokes. But, as Gertrude Stein noted, remarks aren't literature; and they certainly don't produce major reputations. Vonnegut appeals because he has wed the styles of modern skepticism and later ''cool'' to a mitigating earnestness. That he is beloved by youngsters isn't difficult to understand. His own spiritual age is late adolescence: the time when a flip manner often disguises priggishness, when skepticism is just a hedge against vulnerability, when prejudice disdains the search for proof and inexperience limits one's power to imagine, when confidence in one's special distinction reveals itself in the very fervor with which it is denied and the herding instinct asserts a need for independence. That Vonnegut is beloved by critics (and presumably adult readers) is more disconcerting. For them, he provides an easy bridge from an age of skepticism and baffled hope to one of faith in any nostrum that bears the certifications of novelty and youth. Moreover, he provides this bridge without requiring his adult readers to change the style—the trappings of modernism—as well as the content of their belief. Vonnegut lets us have things both ways. He is important not in his effect but as a symptom. He can tell us nothing worth knowing except what his rise itself indicates: ours is an age in which adolescent ridicule can become a mode of upward mobility.

Charles Thomas Samuels. *New Republic*. June 12, 1971. p. 32

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., through six novels and more than fifty stories, has crafted for his readers an exceedingly mad world. Grouped perhaps rashly with the Black Humorists, Vonnegut holds his own, matching Yossarians with Howard Campbells, Guy Grands with Eliot Rosewaters, and Sebastian Dangerfields with Malachi Constants. But unlike Joseph Heller, Vonnegut is prolific, tracing his vision through many different human contexts. He surpasses Terry Southern by striking all limits from human absurdity: destruction by nuclear fission is for Vonnegut the most passé of apocalypses. Moreover, he teases us with a Mod Yoknapatawpha County; ''Frank Wirtanen'' and ''Bernard B. O'Hare'' (originally characters in his third novel, *Mother Night*) and others appear again and again, always (as befits the modern county) in a maddening metamorphosis of roles. Favorite cities such as ''Rosewater, Indiana'' and ''Ilium, New York'' are storehouses for the paraphernalia of middle class life which so delight Vonnegut, whose region is one of cultural value rather than geographical place. But unlike Southern and Bruce Jay Friedman, who mock such culture in the socio-satiric mode of Evelyn Waugh (Southern scripted *The Loved One* for the movies), Vonnegut uses his roots more like John Barth uses Maryland: interest lies beneath the surface and the surface itself is constantly changing. Vonnegut, in short, demands independent investigation. One finds at the end of Vonnegut's vision a ''fine madness'' indeed, but a madness at the same time more clinical and more comic than found elsewhere.

Jerome Klinkowitz. *Critique*. 12, 3, 1971. pp. 38–9

In attempting to account for Kurt Vonnegut's sudden and immense popularity with readers, especially college students, one is eventually forced to conclude that his brilliant technique has been largely responsible, this same technique which was dismissed as ''flashy'' by his early critics. Flashy it is, but no more so than Mark Twain's or Hart Crane's, two among the many writers who have suffered from modernity, and although no claim is made for Vonnegut being of comparable stature, the similarities in their treatment by the more conservative critics are too evident to overlook. Perhaps even more than the fantastic and science-fictional subjects of his novels, the apparent slickness with which he has written them has militated against early critical success, and, ironically, has produced his popular victory, which in turn caused critics to overpraise his most poorly written novel.

David H. Goldsmith. *Kurt Vonnegut: Fantasist of Fire and Ice* (Bowling Green). 1972. p. 30

No novelist in the sixties is more aware of the necessity of exorcising our dreams of death than Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., and no novelist is more avid in his use of the fable form as an exorcising comfort and a loving gentle prod. The dark, tough, apocalyptic quality of Vonnegut's vision results from his hard-minded recognition that we do commit sins against ourselves which need to be exorcised. . . .

The final dark implication, which Vonnegut shares with a great many other writers, is that we too are headed for cataclysm unless we find something to live by. Vonnegut does offer two possibilities—we can learn to love each other, or we can each create our own illusion, some mythology which will help us to learn to live together. Neither possibility makes life meaningful, but both do offer a way to stay alive, and maybe even have some fun.

The particular power of Vonnegut's work—especially in the four books which develop his distinctive voice, all published in the sixties—is in the deceptively simple way he deals with the extraordinary nature of contemporary fact. Vonnegut is a master of getting inside a cliché and tilting it enough off center to reveal both the

horror and the mystery that lies beneath the surface of the most placidly dull and ordinary human response.

Raymond M. Olderman. *Beyond the Wasteland* (Yale). 1972. pp. 189, 191

Vonnegut is the sort of writer whom you either like a lot or dislike a lot; if you like one of his books, you are likely to enjoy the others. If you read one or two and don't like them, you might as well stop and accept the fact he's not for you. But even if you like them all, you have favorites. One of my favorites turned out to be *The Sirens of Titan*, and that surprised me, because it was supposed to be the most ''science-fiction'' type of all his books, and I don't like science fiction. By that I mean I don't like books that have green monsters with five arms, and lost tribes that are ruled by electronic lizards.

But Vonnegut's ''science fiction'' wasn't like that at all. It was about people, doing things that people might do if things had just turned out a little differently; or maybe if we *knew* more of what was really going on.

Dan Wakefield in *The Vonnegut Statement*, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somer (Delacorte). 1973. p. 62

Vonnegut had latched on to a truly original American idiom, as American as TV or napalm or napalm-abhorrers, as fragmented and discontinuous as contemporary experience. A consideration of Vonnegut's idiom, I would say, should take into account everything from his great ear, his sense of the way Americans talk, his sense of timing (as active and keen as Paul McCartney's—a compliment one does not bestow lightly), to his formal idiosyncrasies, beginning with *Mother Night* in 1961; the short chapter form; the sharp image; the short, quick scene; the fragmented time sequence; the speed of narration generated by these formal characteristics. If one were to play Marshall McLuhan here, one might point out that Vonnegut's fiction is a clever formal approximation of, or at least shares many elements of, watching television. This might offer another explanation for Vonnegut's appeal to the TV generation, those who have *always* had television, not to mention those of us, more or less aged, who, according to McLuhan, have also had our sense ratios hopelessly rearranged by it.

Joe David Bellamy in *The Vonnegut Statement*, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somer (Delacorte). 1973. pp. 81–2

With the invention of his schizophrenic manner, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., created the technical perspective that he needed to exorcise the distracting and consuming cloud of Dresden, to resolve the aesthetic problems he discovered in *The Sirens of Titan*, and to re-invent himself and his universe in his ''lousy little book'' that sings like the crystal goblet of the schizophrenic planet Mercury. . . . Because his moral confrontation with Dresden was steady and persistent through his career, the affirmation of life, vibrating in this climactic novel [*Slaughterhouse-Five*] is based not on self-deception but upon the greatness of the human spirit confronted by great adversity. More important, though, the integrity of this affirmation signals the aesthetic strength and freedom of Vonnegut's vision, a vision that captures the essential spiritual dilemma of contemporary man and represents an enduring contribution to his literary heritage and to man's quest for ''wonderful *new* lies.''

John Somer in *The Vonnegut Statement*, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somer. (Delacorte). 1973. pp. 252–3

Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* is more provocative as a straw in the wind than a work of literature. It has almost no narrative interest, almost no ''solidity of specification,'' almost no moral complication, and almost none of the inside-dopesterism characteristic of books that sell very well; yet it has sold not merely well but best. What it does have is play, wit, structural unpredictability, some ingenious mimicry of American speech, and an absurdist vision continuous with Vonnegut's previous work, though here with a different tonal range. It seems to me possible that our literary sociology is changing in some ways that are not yet clear and that Vonnegut's rather unpretentious book, so astonishingly different from any previous bestseller, may mark the beginning of a different and wider public for new, unconventional fiction. . . .

Vonnegut's book is structured around the life and times of a Midland City Pontiac dealer named Dwayne Hoover, whose wife has committed suicide by drinking Drano, whose son is a homosexual cocktail pianist, who is himself mad throughout the book and berserk at its end. But the life of the book does not reside in the continuity of its central figures. The life of the book resides in its ''bits,'' its gags, its lines, its long succession of comic-apocalyptic events, even its drawings. So it is that it seems pointless to criticize the book for being self-indulgent and messy; of course it is. It does not, however, seem pointless to criticize the book for its triviality. For, touching again and again on the curious and desperate backwaters of American culture, the book nevertheless dissipates much of its force with schoolboy bathroom jokes, penis measurements, and a good portion of foolishness that seems neither buoyant enough nor clever enough to justify its existence.

Philip Stevick. *Partisan Review*. No. 2, 1974. pp. 302, 304

Two themes predominate in Vonnegut's work—time as nonsequential (all moments in time exist simultaneously), and the yearning to reestablish the lost family. To see how closely these themes are related—to see this concept of time as a means of recovering his lost parents—is to understand much of Vonnegut's work. . . .

In both emotional energy and aesthetic achievement, Vonnegut's work describes a parabola, reaching its apex with *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), after which there's a steep decline to *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), and an even more precipitous decline to *Slapstick*, far and away his weakest book, flaccid in imagination, listless in execution, and evasive in theme. What happened, I would argue, was that as Vonnegut came closer and closer to the primal emotional impulse of his imagination, he had more and more difficulty finding metaphors with which to express it. . . .

Superficially one of our most complex authors, he is actually one of our simplest—behind the mask of the faux naif is a true naif, a believer in high school civics, in Jesus (one of his recurring characters), in the nuclear family, in the most innocent values. . . .

Superficially one of our most anti-technological anti-American authors, he is actually one of our most futuristic, our most patriotic—behind the mask of savage satire is a romance with the

possibilities of science, with the American dream. No amount of scorn for either can obscure the fact that it's only scorn for the temporary deferral of the possibility, of the dream. . . . Vonnegut, in short, is perfectly in touch with the adolescent imagination: asking, as he himself admits, all the college sophomore questions. . . .

Ross Wetzsteon. *The Village Voice*. Sept. 27, 1976, pp. 77–78

''It is hard to adapt to chaos,'' Vonnegut writes in *Breakfast of Champions*, ''but it can be done. I am living proof of that: It can be done.'' In a major sense, Vonnegut's novels represent just such an adaptation. He moves steadily away from old-fashioned stories of the sort that lead readers to believe that life has leading characters and minor characters, important details and unimportant details, lessons to be learned in order to pass tests of physical, psychological, or spiritual strength, beginnings, middles, ends. By the time Vonnegut gets to *Breakfast of Champions*, he has resolved to avoid storytelling in favor of a kind of writing in which all persons are equally important and the only moral is to learn to adapt oneself to the requirements of chaos rather than to the requirements of an orderly universe (the most laughable and also the most fatal of illusions). Vonnegut accordingly chooses to utilize a fictional technique that relies upon radical juxtapositions of space-age gimmickry, schizophrenic religions, and a nonspatial time sense for purposes of social satire.

Such a technique is uniquely successful in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and its development certainly places Vonnegut in the center of postwar avant gardism. But to many, Vonnegut remains more of a phenomenon than a writer to be taken seriously, his success more of an accidental product of the 1960s than anything else. But even though there is some validity in this view, it is neither fair nor complete.

Vonnegut's popularity as a factor in his significance should be emphasized because it is one of the most important aspects of his achievement.

James Lundquist. *Kurt Vonnegut* (Ungar, 1977), pp. 101–2

The moral drama between right and wrong loses all meaning if men are not free to choose and competent to act, and Vonnegut sees man as neither competent nor free. In his fictional world, there are no villains and, as well, no heroes to oppose them; both good and evil are beyond man's grasp. When he writes in the introduction to *Slaughterhouse-Five* that he learned in college ''there was absolutely no difference between anybody,'' the ironic tone does not belie the accuracy of the words. Vonnegut does believe that all men are the same, and to read his fiction is to meet a cast of characters who are uniformly pathetic, helpless victims of a random, incoherent, meaningless existence, and whose suffering, unmitigated by any true higher purpose, is distinguished only by the self-delusions embraced to relieve it.

It is precisely this unrelievedly debased view of man that cripples Vonnegut's fiction and undermines his effectiveness as a moral critic. Caught in a conflict between what he wishes and what he believes, between what he wants for mankind and what he thinks mankind is fated to have, his fiction constantly exposes folly only to submit to inevitability. In Vonnegut's books, anger—which is, after all, a kind of hope—is always defeated by resignation, his criticism of society always emasculated by his final belief that man can do no better. . . .

Vonnegut's problem, you see, is that although he abhors our mechanized culture, he believes the world view upon which it is based; his vision of mankind—so many like individuals pushed by forces beyond their control—is really the same, nothing more than that same mechanistic metaphor misapplied again. And the result of that misapplication is always the same: pessimism, cynicism, resignation, despair. . . .

Vonnegut is, above all else, a compassionate man; he may not respect his characters, but he does care about them, is driven by an urge to ease their suffering. Given the pessimism of his outlook, however, all he can offer is the very solution he so often mocks: illusion, fantasy, the ''harmless untruths'' of Bokonism, of Tralfamadorian metaphysics, the soothing escapism of Billy Pilgrim's time-travel. As his recurring character, Eliot Rosewater, says to a psychiatrist in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, ''I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful *new* lies, or people just aren't going to want to go on living.'' And there it is again, the same basic conflict resurfacing—between thought and feeling, between the artist and the humanitarian. Vonnegut wants to tell us the truth and at the same time spare us from it; he wants to ease our pain and at the same time show us that only ''lies'' can achieve that end. To comfort, he must lie; to tell the truth, he must hurt; for in the world as Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., sees it, happiness is utterly incompatible with truth. What he believes is what he hates; the peonies are still there, but now they are fake, manufactured illusions to ease our pain—only the excrement real.

David Bosworth. *Antioch Review*. Winter, 1979, pp. 14–17

Kurt Vonnegut's position is very special. He has been not only a significant novelist in America, but an uncanny indicator of the way our spiritual heartaches were heading, an unexpected ''paperback writer'' (in the old Beatles tune) who magically rose from the supermarket stalls to something like secular sainthood for 10 years or so. That he is no longer quite so revered may be a relief. But the particular kind of fame that came his way—''She was a freak,'' he writes [in *Jailbird*] about the genius baglady, ''that many people would have liked to photograph or capture or torment in some way, or kill''—must have been as devastating as it was amazing. The mere fact that he's survived as an ingenious story-teller and not a down-and-out prophet (the brilliant Tim Leary) is a testament to his staying-power and, perhaps, wry amusement at what happened to him. . . .

It seems to me that Vonnegut now has to cope with his career as just a regular brave language-and-guts-ahead novelist, like every other. History has its own crescendos that are surely out of the hands of men and women. Vonnegut had a date with history that has been fulfilled, something that was denied to peers who persisted in the rich gloom like Stephen Crane, Nathanael West, and Malcolm Lowry, to name just three who never heard the roar of the crowd. Which leads one to think: Now and in the future is when Vonnegut's real stuff will be tried, much more than when he was a guaranteed best-seller and shaggy culture hero. *Jailbird* even turns a new corner, in its way. It's the best in some time. . . .

Seymour Krim. *The Village Voice*. Aug. 20, 1979, pp. 81–82

The narrator [in *Deadeye Dick*] is Rudolph Waltz, who tells the story of his life vaguely chronologically, in the short installments that are a hallmark of Vonnegut's style; he may strain your tolerance or credulity, but never your attention span. Rudy's voice is mild and confiding, and rarely wavers from the tone established in the opening pages, no matter how grim the details he narrates.

And they are grim. The focal points of Rudy's story are two disasters: at 12, he accidentally shoots a pregnant woman. When he is nearly 50 and living in Haiti, his hometown, Midland City, Ohio, is the site of an allegedly accidental neutron bomb explosion: Rudy and his brother Felix can actually walk through an intact city of the dead, swept clean of corpses by federal troops. It helps to know something about Vonnegut's past as a survivor of the bombing of Dresden and a publicist for General Electric, where ''progress is our most important product.'' Progress, Vonnegut intimates, is an ugly mid-American city left standing and corpse-free, a technological improvement over the charnelhouse that was Dresden.

In its orientation toward disaster, *Deadeye Dick* looks back to *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Cat's Cradle*. But the technical innovations that made Vonnegut an ''experimental'' writer in the '60s are gone: no Tralfamadorean narratives, no intercutting from the land of fact to the terrain of science fiction. What remains is a distilled sense of the doom always impending in a world dominated by technocrats and military men; it is palpable on every page, and permeates even events that have no direct relation to Midland City's bomb factories. Whether routine or catastrophic, events are narrated in the patented Vonnegut style: plain to the point of blandness, capable of large whimsy and small expressions of outrage that are almost immediately retracted with self-deprecating humor, punctuated with the little aphorisms that are his most recognizable trademark. It's a style that Vonnegut seems to think is both stoically moral and, with its jinglelike refrains, appropriate for a mass readership; he uses it to depict a world in which large mistakes, like neutron bombs, are the only thing apt to put an end to the small mistakes that form the grain and pattern of existence. His characters' lives are always shaped by what they neither expect nor plan for. ''It is too easy, when alive, to make perfectly horrible mistakes,'' Rudy says, remembering that his father helped keep young Hitler alive by buying a painting from him when he was a starving artist in Vienna. Variations of this sentiment are everywhere: small decisions balloon into large disasters, and Rudy responds by saying, ''this was quite a mistake''; then, because he is a cook, he gives us a recipe. The book is full of them, presumably on the theory that as formulas go, a recipe is less likely to result in something catastrophic than, say, Dr. Hoenikker's Ice-9 in *Cat's Cradle*.

Deadeye Dick is a much better book than *Slapstick* and *Jailbird*; in fact, it serves to reiterate Vonnegut's implied claim that he is a competitor (with Updike, Roth, and Mailer) for the right to dominate the large literary terrain between Sidney Sheldon and Thomas Pynchon. And yet it also demonstrates what's fatally constricting about his work. I don't see in it the squishy sentimentality attributed to him by most critics, maybe because I think the skillfully disguised coarseness of thought and loutishness of feeling in the work of someone like Bellow is more dangerous. Instead, what never stops being problematic in Vonnegut is the calculated naiveté and blandness of the style, coupled to the equally simplified view—what used to be called the ''absurd vision''—of the wrongness of the world.

Khachig Tölölyan. *The Village Voice*. Feb. 22, 1983, p. 50

Both roles—Shaman and canary bird—meet [Kurt] Vonnegut's major criterion for himself as artist—that writers are and biologically have to be agents of change, specialized cells in the social organism. Functioning as the projective imagination of the Life Force, Vonnegut shapes us a more benign and creative future—one in which human beings feel their common humanity at a deep and emotional level of being. Such a future community would have kindness, awareness, mercy, fairness, charity, and mutual respect at its core, symbolized by gentle people sharing a common bowl. It is on behalf of this saner world that Vonnegut directs his satirical missiles, warning us with visions of apocalyptic fury that we are a doomed species unless we learn to replace lunatic aggression and cruelty with gentleness and restraint. . . .

Part of Vonnegut's critical success is in fact the achievement of a story whose message of psychic and social trauma is perfectly fused. It is the bedlam of violence and social chaos that induces the personal dissolution and incipient madness of Vonnegut's dazed and pliant heroes. A legacy of endless destruction—brutality, injustice, lovelessness, indifference to suffering—leaves them feeling will-less and morbidly withdrawn, often with a desire to die. All arrive at that state of emotional desolation described by Howard Cambell in *Mother Night* as ''Nobody and nothing inside,'' a state of ''catalepsis'' likened to that of a ''friendly robot'' who must be told where and when to move next (185). In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965), Vonnegut describes the lobotomized condition of his prototypal war-damaged hero Eliot Rosewater as a state of indifference to anything and everything, signaled by the ''big click'' and a period of total blankness that lands him in an asylum.

Lawrence R. Broer. *Sanity Plea: Schizophrenia in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Pr., 1989), pp. 4–5

Among Vonnegut's four most recent novels *Galápagos* stands out as an anomaly. *Jailbird, Deadeye Dick*, and *Bluebeard* are realistic fictions, dealing with contemporary characters in familiar settings, with no intrusions of supernatural events; *Galápagos*, on the other hand, is narrated by a ghost and covers a span of a million years of highly fanciful human history. But it would be a mistake to view the novel as simply a return to the science fiction excesses of *Slapstick* or *The Sirens of Titan*. While those earlier books had much to do with fantasy but little to do with hard science, *Galápagos* reflects Vonnegut's knowledge of the work of scientists like Carl Sagan and Stephen Jay Gould and often reads like a textbook in evolutionary biology. Excepting its supernatural narrator, it clearly belongs at the scientific, realistic pole of science fiction. After the almost claustrophobic explorations of the mind of a guiltridden protagonist in *Jailbird* and *Deadeye Dick*, Vonnegut apparently was ready to open up his perspective in a bold new experiment—a cerebral, at times chillingly impersonal contemplation of the possibility that humans may evolve away from higher intelligence and revert to a simpler animal existence. . . .

Galápagos is a striking, somber book whose seeming flaws—sketchy characterization, emotional chilliness, and failure to deliver a second half that satisfies the expectations raised in its first half—actually contribute to its theme. Sounding like the literary critical advocates of deconstruction, Vonnegut uses the language of the novel to undermine its own ground, suggesting that the complexities of human self-consciousness have meaning only in

relation to each other, and little or no relation to events outside themselves. *Galápagos* uses intelligence to undercut intelligence, language to undercut language. Like *The Confidence Man*, it is an indictment of the superficial American optimism and the universal human tendency to anthropomorphize the universe. *Galápagos* is a hard novel to like, but an impossible one to dismiss.

> William Rodney Allen. *Understanding Kurt Vonnegut* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Pr., 1990), pp. 149–51, 158

[A] few writers function amphibiously—they produce postmodern fictions that somehow affirm meaning and value. One such author, Kurt Vonnegut, has made a career of balancing between nihilist despair and humanist affirmation. Recognizing the limits of stylistic self-indulgence, Vonnegut has devoted his artistic energies to defining the cultural malaise and attempting responses to it. Always a moralist, even at his most black-humorous, Vonnegut has come to sound at times like the later D.H. Lawrence, haranguing a sick civilization and devising myths of rebirth. . . .

Vonnegut's strength in his work since *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the acuteness with which he diagnoses the problem central to modern life, the breakdown of community and dissolution of culture. If one must critique his vision of the folk society—at the heart of so much that Vonnegut has written—one must admit that its specifics, notably the idea of large, artificial families, hardly provide realistic antidotes either to current despair or to imminent apocalypse, whether it come as fiery cataclysm or a slow wasting away. Nevertheless, the attempt to promote such a meliorist fiction reveals once again the humane sanity that has always distinguished Vonnegut and his work. It also reveals a principled resistance to the nihilistic seductions of postmodernism, which more and more contemporary novelists have instinctively or consciously recognized as a moral and aesthetic dead end.

> David Cowart. ''Culture and Anarchy: Vonnegut's Later Career.'' In Robert Merrill, ed. *Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1990), pp. 170, 186

Kurt Vonnegut has been producing fiction for some forty years now but has been receiving serious critical attention for less than half that time. And yet the sheer proliferation of these critical assessments since 1971, as evidenced by the fine bibliographic work of two prominent Vonnegut scholars, Jerome Klinkowitz and Asa Pieratt, has adequately made up for Vonnegut's twenty-odd years of scholarly obscurity. One of the most striking things about these scholarly and journalistic assessments is the fact that virtually every commentator, either directly or implicitly, tries to classify Vonnegut's remarkable style and subject matter. Indeed, he has probably been subjected to more critical name-calling than any other contemporary American writer. Vonnegut has been called a fabulist, a fantasist, an absurdist, a humorist, a black humorist, a broken humorist, a satirist, and, perhaps most often, a science fictionist—all of these designations justifiable and therefore valid.

Still another classification might be added to the above list, and that is *mythic writer*—a classification that a good many commentators have applied to Vonnegut's work, though few have significantly explored. Critics who have used the term *myth* in connection with Vonnegut's novels can be broadly divided into two camps so to speak: those who regard him as essentially a ''mythmaker''; and those who have noticed and analyzed his use of conventional myths, classical and biblical.

> Leonard Mustazza. *Forever Pursuing Genesis: The Myth of Eden in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut* (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Pr., 1990), pp. 15, 27

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W

WAKOSKI, Diane (1937–)

Still in her 20's. Diane Wakoski has already gained recognition as a poet of genuine talent. A Southern Californian with a Berkeley B.A., she now lives in New York, where she teaches in junior-high school. . . . [Her work] is youthful, spacious, sunny, exuberant, excited, and though filled with teaching, it is free from pedantry. Among the many virtues of her poetry, the rarest and most wonderful is its ease, its grace, its naturalness. This is not to say that her poetry is ''easy.'' Indeed, her surrealistic symbols are often extremely demanding, but her poems never demand exertions from the reader whom they do not repay with immediate and abiding joy.

Robert Regan. *Library Journal*. March 1, 1966. p. 1231

In her *George Washington Poems* [Diane Wakoski] has revived the figure of the Father of Our Country as a genuine living fictional personage, but in totally unexpected ways—at least to me. He becomes neither the historical figure, nor a mythological one; but instead a changeable person, variably George, the General, Mr. President, a father figure, an enlightened aristocrat, and ultimately a projection of the poet herself, slipping back and forth in time, with whom she converses, or to whom she declaims, in the cheerfullest terms imaginable, about her own life, her actual father and husband, her sense of relationship to her country, and many other themes. The ramifications are endless. Her body becomes a map, for instance; her personal being, the history of the nation. If Miss Wakoski's scheme has a flaw, it is the playfulness that pervades it, but perhaps this is essential, perhaps the scheme would collapse without it.

Readers who insist that poetry cannot be poetry which does not rise from and return to a sense of conviction, will be dissatisfied with *The George Washington Poems*, as will those who prefer a stronger, more complex language than the post-Beat idiom used by Miss Wakoski (as I generally do myself). But poetry or not, this book delights me. It is exactly the sort of book I should like to find, but never do, at my bedside when I go visiting in somebody else's house.

Hayden Carruth. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1968. p. 408

I have been following Miss Wakoski's career for several years, listening to her read in public and brooding over her poems in books and periodicals. I have been consistently impressed by her ability to convey the emotions of terror and desire, the experience of a vulnerable spirit in an environment of overwhelming verticals and horizontals. Bright, arresting images and perceptions leap from the pages of her poems, some of them whimsical and naïve, others profound and breathtakingly original. Yet, though her flights are imaginative, she permits a great deal of reality to enter her poems, often transmogrified, to be sure—as it inevitably would be under pressure of strong feelings of anger, alienation, or frustrated love.

It is the feeling of love that is particularly interesting. The speaker of her poems is forever reaching out for love and withdrawing in pain, as though she has touched atomic waste. In fact, many of the poems are addressed, rather reproachfully, to an unnamed male figure who is both lover and betrayer. This figure is sometimes a father and sometimes a husband and, occasionally, George Washington, who serves as a sort of paragon of virtue, a great generative and controlling force, in Miss Wakoski's private mythology.

Stephen Stepanchev. *New Leader*. Dec. 2, 1968. p. 18

Diane Wakoski's new book, *Inside the Blood Factory*, presents at first reading a bewildering array of talent. She can work in many different forms: prose paragraphs, the short, tight lines of Williams or H.D., the free surrealistic movement, the loping Whitmanesque line. In one poem, ''Sestina for the Home Gardener,'' she creates a witty variation on that ancient form, maintaining the precision of the mode, while lengthening the lines and pouring out the images in a profusion that threatens to break the pattern, but never quite does so. At the same time the volume shows a similar range of themes and materials: an elegy to the dead, a memorial of a father in the Navy, images of ancient Egypt, George Washington, Beethoven, a sequence to a man who drives a ''silver Ferrari,'' a sequence based upon the Tarot deck, or a poem about a scene where a mother slices oranges for her invalid son.

This list of subjects may suggest a little of the range of Miss Wakoski's vision, which touches with a generous affection the things of life and finds a home for them within the self. . . . All this variety of movement, whether in rhythm or in image, builds up to the total impact of a powerful poetic mind, continuously absorbing and recreating the current of experience, pooling it in sections that hold together by her deliberate technique of repetition. . . . Out of it all comes some of the most striking poetry produced in New York City during the past decade.

Louis L. Martz. *The Yale Review*. Summer, 1969. pp. 603–5

The dominant theme in this latest volume of poems [*The Motorcycle Betrayal Poems*], in case you haven't guessed, is *betrayal*. It's in the title, in the dedication, and in most of the poems. ''The only man who's never betrayed me is my accountant,'' she says, which tempts us to conclude, syllogistically, that he is, therefore, no man. The assumption throughout her work is that men are by nature as prone to betrayal as mortality. Just as she can not resist mentioning it in a poem, we find it hard to resist mentioning that her father left when she was two. But psychiatry and poetry are antipathetic; it's unnecessary to violate her psyche. In spite of the fact that she insists that her life is laid bare in her poems, we should force ourselves to act as though there is a gap between life and art, between Diane Wakoski the private person and Diane Wakoski the public artist. Let her deny it; it's still true. It is always true—of every writer. So any comments we make here must really be about the voice in the poems, not the author's personal voice. Everybody acts a little funny in front of a camera. . . .

That Diane Wakoski has talent few people can deny. Sometimes that talent produces a startling image, a great passage, or even a near-great poem. But at other times that talent is ruined by speed, ambition, and self-pity.

Robert DeMaria. *The Mediterranean Review*. Spring, 1972. p. 55

[Wakoski] cultivates the longer poem; although there are short poems in [*Greed*], she often requires considerable length to say what she wants to say . . . yet she says it, and that is what counts. The reader has the feeling of a strong, centrifugal force, rarely centripetal. . . .

Her facility is particularly apt for describing *desires*, pleasure, and wishful thinking. When she writes about pain she is less convincing; there is much violence in her book—blood, bruises, scars. . . .

Her desires are open, liberal, attractive, and spendthrift; she has a marvelous desire to encompass everything.

John R. Carpenter. *Poetry*. June, 1972. pp. 165–6

Diane Wakoski knows how to make words into poems. Her precise and straightforward style organizes not-quite-reality, and pushes it into the right contact. At all times in these two books [*The Motorcycle Betrayal Poems* and *Smudging*] Wakoski is in control, she is the craftsman. Although her poems are not traditional structures, she builds them solidly with words which feel chosen, with repetition of images throughout a poem . . . and with exact observation. . . .

These two books are remarkable because Diane Wakoski has successfully balanced the life of emotion against the life of intelligent reflection, through the medium of poetry. The poems sound true in your heart, true in your mind, and true in your ear.

Debra Hulbert. *Prairie Schooner*. Spring, 1973. pp. 81–3

Diane Wakoski has been unreadable for five years. Our good writers are liable to terrible slumps, though none has beaten Wordsworth's record. Personalists are always by definition in danger of substituting liking for principle. In *Greed, Parts 8, 9, 11* she's pulling out of it. As it was you had to tell students what books of hers not to read (everything after *Inside the Blood Factory*). The words are still too conceptual, moving at speech's rate without its weight, but that rate and the lumber-pile of line *become* weight (again) in this. You have to read her with love, though, to see it. She's *over* writing to audience expectations (or to a mythic self-image, as in the hideous Breadloaf lecture), by the brave device of parts 8 and 9, and begins to be clear what metaphor, for instance, won't do. She's never (or only once) *merely* cute. *Greed 11* really begins to be a way to write lines that are sense-units but not for that reason stupid. The book is anchored on her but no longer exploits her. She may write bad things again, but after this won't print them. Bet.

Gerald Burns. *Southwest Review*. Summer, 1973. p. 280

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WALKER, Alice (1944–)

Alice Walker's graphic first novel [*The Third Life of Grange Copeland*] delivers a powerful statement by letting the narrative, characters and episodes speak for themselves. In describing the lives of black sharecroppers from 1920 through the 1960s, the 26-year-old black novelist—author of a book of poems, *Once*, as well as a quartet of stories on insanity—could have taken the easy, tiresome way out by haranguing for militancy, revenge and separatism. Instead, she allows the reader to make his own assessment of Southern conditions and the desperate need for change. . . .

Miss Walker's novel—infused with poetic images that unfold visually as though performed on stage—is remarkably similar to Athol Fugard's excellent play, *Boesman and Lena*. In both works the black wives, constantly forced to move their few tattered possessions from one makeshift home to another, are tormented mainly by their husbands rather than the world. In both, the characters are castoffs lurking on the fringes of an oppressive white society, who see life as a perpetual cycle of hope and despair. . . .

Miss Walker deftly sculpts her people and delineates their relationships. Indeed, since they generally transcend the plot, the one episode involving civil rights workers seems an intrusion that neither advances the story nor enhances our understanding of the characters. Fortunately, it does not detract significantly from an otherwise compelling novel that emphasizes the humanity we share rather than the horrors of dehumanizing experiences.

Paula Meinetz Shapiro. *New Leader*. Jan. 25, 1971, pp. 19–20

In 1966 Langston Hughes commented on one of Alice Walker's short stories: ''Neither you nor I have ever read a story like 'To Hell with Dying' before. At least, I do not think you have.'' Hughes's early recognition of the uniqueness of Walker's artistic voice is equally applicable to the 12 other stories in Walker's new book, *In*

Love & Trouble: Stories of Black Women. This collection would be an extraordinary literary work, if its only virtue were the fact that the author sets out consciously to explore with honesty the textures and terrors of black women's lives. Attempts to penetrate the myths surrounding black women's experiences are so pitifully rare in black, feminist, or American writing that each shred of truth about these experiences constitutes a breakthrough. The fact that Walker's perceptions, style, and artistry are also consistently high makes her work a treasure, particularly for those of us whom her writing describes.

Blood and violence seem the everyday backdrop to her characters' lives—a violence all the more chilling because it is so understated. It affects the 10-year-old girl who discovers a lynched man's headless body just as surely and ruinously as it destroys the middle-aged wife trapped in a loveless marriage or the ancient black woman ousted from a white house of worship. . . .

I believe that the worst results of racism in this country have been to subvert the most basic human relationships among black men, women, and children and to destroy their individual psyches. It is on this level of interpersonal experience that Walker succeeds in illuminating black women's lives. Some of her characters are damaged by material poverty, but what they suffer from most often is emotional destitution. These portraits are not pretty. When the reality is prettier, as a result of the implementation of black *and* feminist goals and values, the stories will be prettier too.

Barbara Smith. *Ms*. Feb., 1974, pp. 42–43, 78

A close look at the fiction, especially the shorter pieces, of Alice Walker reveals that she employs folklore for purposes of defining characters and illustrating relationships between them as well as for plot development. By so doing, she comments on the racial situation in the United States and, in some instances, chastises her black characters for their attitudes toward themselves. The folklore materials Walker uses and the ways in which she uses them are especially evocative of Charles Waddell Chesnutt and Zora Neale Hurston. Therefore, interpretations of Walker's uses of folklore and folk culture place her in a tradition that goes back at least as far as the late nineteenth century. . . .

Alice Walker is assuredly in the literary and historical traditions of the recording and creative use of black folk materials. Like Chesnutt, she uses such material for social commentary. But her environment allows more freedom of usage than did Chesnutt's; where he had to embed his statements about slavery in an elaborate framing device and filtered them through the eyes of a white Northerner, Walker can be obvious, blatant, and direct about social injustices. Like Hurston, Walker reflects a keen insight into the folk mind. As Hurston, Walker reflected the nuances of relationships between men and women in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) through the use of the folk culture, so too does Walker use this culture to reflect relationships between the characters in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Like [Jean] Toomer, she feels that the folk culture is an inseparable part of the black folk at any level of existence—the college bred and the illiterate black are equal in their heritage. Although class and status may be allowed to distort how one views the culture, it can never be erased. Alice Walker does not attempt to erase it from her works.

Trudier Harris. *Black American Literature Forum*. Spring, 1977, pp. 3, 8

As a craftsman, Walker sorts out the throwaways, the seemingly insignificant and hidden pieces of the lives of Southerners, particularly black families, and stitches them into a tapestry of society. Who is to blame for the waste in our lives, she asks? Ourselves? The society that seems at every turn opposed to blossoming? The wrath of God? The question of responsibility for personal action and societal change is one recurrent motif in the complex quilts that Walker makes out of thrifty sentences, knotted questions, tight metaphors, terse sections. Her novels continually stitch a fabric of the everyday violence that is committed against her characters and that they commit upon one another in their search for regeneration, and regeneration is what they as black people desire.

The exploration, then, of the process of personal and social growth out of horror and waste is a motif that characterizes Walker's works. For her, the creativity of the black woman is essential to this process. . . . In searching for the means to her own artistic and political freedom, Walker investigates the legacy of the past. To deepen our understanding of the plight of her maternal ancestors, she not only calls upon her own personal history but upon Jean Toomer, who perhaps more than any other writer of the past had focused on the repressed creativity of black women. . . .

For this author, the black woman, as a result of her history and her experience, must be in struggle against these two distortions of life. Until she is free, her people cannot be free, and until her people are free, she cannot be free. Walker stresses the interrelatedness of these two obstacles to wholeness, for the struggle against them is not merely a question of replacing whoever is in power; rather it is a struggle to release the spirit that inhabits all life. Walker's quilts reiterate the basic concept that ''the greatest value a person can attain is full humanity which is a state of oneness with all things,'' and that until this is possible for all living beings, those of us who seek wholeness must be willing to struggle toward that end.

Barbara Christian. *Black Women Novelists* (Greenwood, 1980), pp. 180–81, 237–38

Alice Walker's unsparing vision of black women's victimization in sexual love—their isolation, degradation, or grotesque defeat by despairing or aspiring black men—has been a major element in her growing body of work. . . . Somewhat less prominent in defining her concerns has been Walker's active commitment to civil rights issues involving all black people. The commitment suggests a hope that societal change may help solve the type of private dilemma her fiction particularizes. The appearance of her second novel, *Meridian* (1976), did not so much negate this implied optimism as express a need to consider moral and philosophical issues raised by a political awakening.

At the same time, *Meridian* represents a shift from a preoccupation with commemorating black women's suffering to a concern with probing an individual black woman's situation for its roots and possibilities. Again Walker's optimism is less evident, however, than her need to explore questions of responsibility even, or particularly, among those with valid historic claims to having been victimized.

Martha J. McGowan. *Critique*. 23, 1, 1981, p. 25

It's true and important that a disproportionate number of people who seek out Alice Walker's sparsely distributed books are black

women. She comes at universality through the path of an American black woman's experience and is even brave enough to write about such delicate fictional themes as interracial sex and the oppression of women by many cultures in Africa. . . . But white women, and women of diverse ethnic backgrounds, also feel tied to Alice Walker. The struggle to have work and minds of our own, vulnerability, our debt to our mothers, the price of childbirth, friendships among women, the problem of loving men who regard us as less than themselves, sensuality, violence: all these are major themes of her fiction and poetry. . . .

The storytelling style of *The Color Purple* makes it irresistible to read. The words belong to Celie, the downest and outest of women. Because she must survive against impossible odds, because she has no one to talk to, she writes about her life in the guise of letters to God. When she discovers her much-loved lost sister is not dead after all but is living in Africa, she writes letters to Nettie instead. The point is, she must tell someone the truth and confirm her existence. . . .

The result is an inviting, dead-honest, surprising novel that is the successful culmination of Alice Walker's longer and longer trips outside the safety of Standard English narration, and into the words of her characters. Here, she takes the leap completely. There is no third person to distance the reader from events. We are inside Celie's head.

In the tradition of Gorky, Steinbeck, Dickens, Ernest Gaines, Hurston, Baldwin, Ousmane Sembene, Bessie Head, and many others, Alice Walker has written an empathetic novel about the poorest of the poor. (In fact, her first two novels meet that high standard, too.) But, unlike most novels that expose race or class, it doesn't treat male/female injustice as natural or secondary. (And unlike some supposedly feminist novels, it doesn't ignore any women because of race or class.) Just as unusual among books about the poor and powerless, it is not written *about* one group, *for* another. The people in this book could and would enjoy it, too.

Gloria Steinem. *Ms*. June, 1982, pp. 37, 89–90

The Color Purple is an American novel of permanent importance, that rare sort of book which (in Norman Mailer's felicitous phrase) amounts to ''a diversion in the fields of dread.'' Alice Walker excels at making difficulties for herself and then transcending them. . . .

Love redeems, meanness kills—that is *The Color Purple*'s principal theme, the theme of most of the world's great fiction. Nevertheless—and this is why this black woman's novel will survive a white man's embrace—the redemptive love that is celebrated here is selective, even prickly. White folk figure rarely in its pages and never to their advantage, and black men are recovered only to the extent that they buckle down to housework and let women attend to business. For Walker, redemptive love requires female bonding. The bond liberates women from men, who are predators at worst, idle at best.

Peter S. Prescott. *Newsweek*. June 21, 1982, pp. 67–68

[Alice] Walker offers [in *The Temple of My Familiar*] the changing patterns of ancient African tales and modern mythology: a world where questions of diet and exercise and massage are just as important, and revealing, as questions of reincarnation and the afterlife. Details are suffused with the health of the whole.

The whole is embodied in a series of women, moving back and forth through history at present in the shape of Lissie, the ancient black woman who appears as an entirely different person—tall and short, black and white, male and female, human and lion—according to which of her many lives she is leading.

What she gives to Suwelo, the uprooted young black man who comes to learn, replaces television, among other things: her ''conversations'' are, in fact, ''deliveries'' of grace and spirit. By contrast, television, and the white world, offers ''an erroneous and trivial point of view.'' When Lissie's stories start, the television is covered with a shawl. Her stories educate Suwelo, who has inherited a Baltimore row house and a curiosity about its past. . . .

It is Walker's optimism about what most male authorities claim as tragedies—the downfall of the traditional family—that reviewers have not been able to accept. Walker's feeling and flowing tone is subversive; she is no longer fighting the patriarchy. The fight has been won.

Sallie Bingham. *American Book Review*. May-June, 1990, p. 10

When [Henry Louis] Gates suggests [in ''Whose Canon Is It Anyway?''] that the current task of the Black (male) critic is ''learning to speak in the voice of the black other,'' he is seeking to move to the center of the African-American tradition what Black women writers and critics have been doing for some time. I use Alice Walker as my example of this process of the creation of a tradition and its structure here, because her writing in general—and her description of her own sense of a literary tradition in particular—have been so influential. Walker describes being aware of her need of Zora Neale Hurston's work before she knew Hurston existed; it is Hurston who can authenticate both Walker's own work as a writer and the tales her mother tells about Black folklore, underpinning a literary and a familial tradition at once. Walker specifies the mission of the artist as recovery of female forebears: ''We must fearlessly pull out of ourselves and look at and identify with our lives the living creativity some of our great-grandmothers were not allowed to know'' (''In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,'' p. 237). The authentic art of the Black woman, then, produces not only her own voice but also that of her matrilineal line. Both continuity and individuality are celebrated in this account of a tradition of Black women's creativity, a seamless continuum that flows on underground unheeded but which, when tapped by Walker and her fellows, comes to brilliant gushing life, confirming and legitimating the new by the sameness of the old.

Such a sense of oneself as positioned with the arms of an embracing, if invisible, history assumes an unproblematic relation to the community in which one finds one's identity. While Walker neither ignores nor is unaffected by those elements of her historical moment which seek to silence her, she essentially lays claim to a community that always recognizes her and in whom she recognizes herself. It is this tradition Michael Awkward articulates in his recent study of African-American women writers, *Inspiring Influences*. While Awkward agrees with Gates's suggestion of a ''signifying'' relation between African-American men's texts and their precursors (one, that is, of competitive revision), he finds that African-American women ''seem to form a more harmonious system'' (p. 4). . . .Less contentious than Black men, less embittered than white women, African-American women are constructing a

tradition in which bonding, a ''quest for unity and community,'' is the governing quality.

> Anna Wilson. ''Audre Lorde and the African-American Tradition: When the Family Is Not Enough.'' In Sally Munt, ed. *New Lesbian Criticism* (New York: Columbia Univ. Pr., 1992), pp. 78–79

Alice Walker dedicates *Possessing the Secret of Joy* ''with Tenderness and Respect to the Blameless Vulva.'' It is appropriate dedication because the novel is a poetic and powerful condemnation of the practice of female circumcision. Continuing a thread from *The Color Purple*, the story chronicles the life of Tashi Evelyn Johnson, the Olinkan woman who marries Celie's son, Adam. Tashi chose to undergo the female initiation rite as a retention of vanishing Olinkan tradition. However, this story demonstrates that Tashi's fateful decision consigns her to a life of psychological and physical pain.

Each brief chapter voices the introspective views of Tashi and the people who touch her life. From narratives by her husband to those of her psychologists, the psychic fragmentation and anger caused by genital mutilation emerges and overwhelms the reader. This singular focus gives the novel its power by indicting all who are responsible for the continuation of the brutal practice. But the focus also limits its characterization.

> Yakini Kemp. *Belles Lettres*. Fall, 1992, p. 57

Just as there are correspondences between Walker's conclusions and the integrative endings of womanist novels, so, too, are there correspondences between integration and interaction throughout *Meridian*. And this, too, is consistent with the African worldview. In fact, according to Innocent C. Onyewuenki, integration and interaction are key elements of African philosophy. In ''Is There an African Philosophy?'' Onyewuenki makes a distinction between African and Western philosophical thought. ''The metaphysics of Western philosophy,'' he writes, is based upon a static conception of being. In the African philosophical thought, on the other hand, being is dynamic. . . .

Thus, if we read Walker's *Meridian* as a womanist text, imbued by the principles of Afrocentric Womanism, it may seem more African centered in its structure than its isolated elements. . . .Afrocentric Womanism, for example, is clearly at war with itself in this novel. Walker positions Afrocentric womanism and Afrocentric motherhood as conflicting ideologies. In effect, she challenges Womanist theory as she developed it by presenting Meridian Hill as possessing characteristics Ogunyemi attributes to Womanism; at the same time, however, Meridian resists the most powerful Afrocentric ideology of motherhood and her own mother with a special vehemence.

For Meridian, her mother represented ''Black Motherhood personified, and of that great institution she was in terrible awe, comprehending as she did the horror, the narrowing of perspective, for mother and for child, it had invariably meant.'' Meridian rejects her own child; yet, as a community activist, she assumes the position of othermother for community children. . . .

Afrocentric Womanism and Afrocentric motherhood burden Meridian Hill with equal intensity but for different reasons. For Meridian, Afrocentric Womanism is not enabling; rather, it evinces a paralyzing guilt in her, holding her to some standard she can't reach. A major personal shortcoming is her inability to love her child and finally her decision to give this child up so that she can attend college. . . .

Walker's decision to present conflicting ideologies of motherhood and womanism as obstacles to Meridian Hill's self-realization is problematic only if we do not understand the importance of African humanism in her novel. Having established that the ideology of Afrocentric motherhood and womanism are ones against which Meridian Hill struggles, we can place both the character, and *Meridian*, the novel of the same name, in a larger Afrocentric context. Demonstrating how these elements are brought into conformity within the novel by using African Humanism as a dominant Afrocentric principle will indeed ''square the circle.''

> Frenzella E. Le Lance. ''Squaring the Afrocentric Circle: Womanism and Humanism in Alice Walker's *Meridian.''* *The Literary Griot*. Spring, 1993, pp. 9, 10, 13

Perhaps no text more dramatically demonstrates how differently diverse communities of readers construct literary meaning than does *The Color Purple*, the locus of ongoing debate about interlocking systems of oppression and their representation in literature. Even among generally appreciative critics, some have found a clear model for the organized struggle against oppression, and others have found a wish-fulfilling romance. Estimations of value trouble over the seemingly polarized distance between Celie's distinctive personal voice and Nettie's ''essay on the history of the Olinka tribe,'' . . .sometimes conceived as a problem of genre. Is the ending too utopian to address the difficult tensions between the material oppression that writes itself on actual women's bodies and the fictional oppression that either goes away or ennobles its victims somehow too easily? Where is resistance in a world replete with incest wiped away, abuse forgiven or transformed, and a propertied Celie surrounded by extended family? What relevance has a world where black women always get up again—no matter how beaten down—to real social worlds? Such questions have strong relevance to debates about resistance in literary texts and how such resistance hooks up—or does not—to the political world. In particular, *The Color Purple* may help clarify how resistance is never purely resistance nor simply *there* in a text but always ambivalently situated in relation to what it resists.

Significantly, different constructions of humor and the comic inform ongoing controversies about whether a postmodernism of resistance is a hopelessly conflicted idea and about whether women's writing can escape the exclusionary strategies of received Western genres. Theories of an extreme, parodic humor, prominent in both feminist and postmodern imagining, value the resisting laughter of a madman, a Medusa, or the *bricoleur* while absenting any ''normal other'' from playfulness. Concomitantly, Fredric Jameson links his critique of postmodernism to a practice ''devoid of laughter'', arguing that it replaces any healthy ''normality'' with ''empty'' or ''neutral'' parody and pastiche. And Judy Little and Clair Wills extend extant theory by fitting [Mikhail] Bakhtin's carnival to women writers, hypothesizing an unending saturnalia, a holiday of festive inversions that never ends. Defiant, aggressive laughter exists abundantly in Walker's fictional worlds, as do

festive comic inversions; and both assimilate easily into the dominant theories that identify humor as resistance with a focused attack on butts or targets.

> Carole Anne Taylor. ''Humor, Subjectivity, Resistance: The Case of Laughter in *The Color Purple*.'' *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. Winter, 1994, pp. 462–63

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WALKER, Margaret (1915–)

Straightforwardness, directness, reality are good things to find in a young poet. It is rarer to find them combined with a controlled intensity of emotion and a language that, at times, even when it is most modern, has something of the surge of biblical poetry. And it is obvious that Miss Walker uses that language because it comes naturally to her and is part of her inheritance. A contemporary writer, living in a contemporary world, when she speaks of and for her people older voices are mixed with hers—the voices of Methodist forebears and preachers who preached the Word, the anonymous voices of many who lived and were forgotten and yet out of bondage and hope made a lasting music. Miss Walker is not merely a sounding-board for these voices—I do not mean that. Nor do I mean that [*For My People*] is interesting and moving poetry because it was written by a Negro. It is too late in the day for that sort of meaningless patronage—and poetry must exist in its own right. These poems keep on talking to you after the book is shut because, out of deep feeling, Miss Walker has made living and passionate speech.

> Stephen Vincent Benét. Foreword to Margaret Walker. *For My People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942), pp. 5–6

Miss Walker's poems [in *For My People*], though they are songs and portraits of American Negroes of today, are suffused with the prayers and hopes of the sumberged and semi-submerged of all times. . . .

Miss Walker's poems for her people everywhere show that she has thought long and felt deeply about the sorrow laden past and present of the American Negro. Out of a rich experience in the lower Mississippi Valley and in Black Chicago at the head of that valley she has seen the substance of poetry in the blind struggle of her people. The Yale Series of Younger Poets, whose choice she is this year, has here launched a career indeed. Miss Walker's poems are not new to *Opportunity* readers, for several of them have appeared in these pages, but the intensity of her sustained effort may come as a surprise to those who know only her shorter pieces. Her symbols, the South, the ''L'', the delta, the white gods, cotton, 1619, are familiar, but her use of them is with new strength.

A full pride in the past and a healthy view of the present give her poems distinction. She is no mournful weeper wearing her pen out over the twin literary tragedies of lynching and color. Her sorrow and her pride find themselves in more tangible and commonplace symbols: the grandmothers who were strong and full of memories, the money-gods who take life away, the strange contradiction of beauty in the bitter low cotton country. Her hearty portraits of Molly Means, Stagolee, Kissie Lee. . . and of Gus the Lineman are not, fortunately, of the how-I-have-loved-thee school of feminine poets. Perhaps Miss Walker's volume marks the end of a school of Negro women poets; she is more struck by the fact that ''We with/our blood have watered these fields / and they belong to us'' than she is in the crenellated visions of archaic sorrow so freely indulged in by the ''lady poets'' in their small black and gold veined volumes. *For My People* contains some of our strongest recent verse. ''Sorrow Home'' is a dirge of real power.

> Ulysses Lee. *Opportunity*. December, 1942, pp. 379–80

To appreciate the extent of innovation *Jubilee* brings to a thoroughly quarried, frequently hackneyed genre of writing, it is only necessary to recall that the Civil War novel has been the source of some of the crudest stereotypes of Negro characters in American fiction. As Robert A. Lively pointed out in *Fiction Fights the Civil War:* ''the Negro is rarely a central figure in Civil War novels—he only hovers near the white heroes and heroines, to whom space and interest is given.'' Margaret Walker has reversed the picture completely. With a fidelity to fact and detail, she presents the little-known everyday life of the slaves, their modes of behavior, patterns and rhythms of speech, emotions, frustrations, and aspirations. Never done on such a scale before, this is the strength of her novel. As it unfolds one sees plantation life as it was seen by Negro slaves, feels the texture of American history as it was felt by Negro slaves: the Civil War with the hopes it aroused, its sordid and grim realities; the participation of the Negroes in the fight against slavery; the ugly and frustrating rise of the Ku Klux Klan; the postwar waves of terror in the South to keep the Negro down and prevent emancipation from becoming a reality.

The author is so intent on presenting her historical data as accurately as possible, on correcting the distortions which have crept into so many Civil War novels, that at times she fails to transform her raw material into accomplished literary form. There are passages of very pedestrian prose. Fortunately, the colorful and musical speech of the Negro characters in the novel transcends the stilted prose of the narrator. . . .

And there is Vyry, the heroine of the novel, who distills out of her life as a slave, and the trials of the Civil War, and the frustrated

hopes of the Reconstruction years, a hard realism, a fierce spiritual force and hope. . . .

Abraham Chapman. *Saturday Review of Literature*. September 24, 1966, pp. 43–44

[*Jubilee*] serves especially well as a response to white ''nostalgia'' fiction about the antebellum and Reconstruction South—especially Margaret Mitchell's poor but popular *Gone with the Wind*. One cannot read one of these novels without repeatedly contrasting it with the other. On dialect: Miss Walker's is thoroughly researched and linguistically accurate; Miss Mitchell's ranges from rather accurate to absurd. On the role of blacks: Miss Walker reveals the various levels of black mentality, as well as the devotion of some slaves to, and the intense hatred of others for, their masters; Miss Mitchell presents blacks before the Civil War as happy darkies completely devoted to ''missy'' and ''massa.'' On ''social controls'': Miss Walker portrays vividly the savagery of white vigilante repression; Miss Mitchell portrays the Ku Klux Klan as an organization of noble and dedicated men with the highest moral objectives. In short, the novels make for an interesting and enlightening companion study—a study of painful historical reality and romanticized self-deception.

Roger Whitlow. *Black American Literature* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1973), pp. 138–39

After a lapse of twenty-eight years Margaret Walker has brought out a new volume of verse. Entitled *Prophets for a New Day*, it was printed by the Broadside Press. Though a very thin volume (it contains only thirty-two pages), the work is impressive. It is the best poetical comment to come from the civil rights movement—the movement which came to a climax with the march on Washington and which began thereafter to change into a more militant type of liberation effort.

In *Prophets for a New Day* Miss Walker, with poems like ''Street Demonstration,'' ''Girl Held without Bail'', and ''Sit-Ins'', catches the spirit of the civil rights age, when young blacks gladly went to jail for the cause of freedom. ''The Ballad of the Free'', another liberation poem, treats as kindred souls Nat Turner, Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, Toussaint L'Ouverture, and John Brown. The inclusion of the last name shows that Miss Walker, though much ''blacker'' now in her thinking than she was in her early works, has not lost her respect for men of good will, whether black or white. Unlike most present-day Negro writers, she is willing to honor not only abolition heroes like John Brown but white martyrs of the civil rights movement as well.

Arthur P. Davis. *From the Dark Tower* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974), pp. 184–85

After this glorious and busy period [the Harlem Renaissance], the country and black literary activity went into a slump. What poetry exists is tinged with depression, socialism, and sometimes protest. Between 1930 and 1945 the major poet was Margaret Walker and the most important poetic event the appearance of her 1942 volume *For My People*, which was published as no. 41 of the Yale Series of Younger Poets, making her the first black to appear in that prestigious group. At the time Walker was a twenty-seven-year-old professor of English. . . .

The form of ''For My People'' is the most immediately striking thing about it. Drawing on free-verse techniques, on the Bible, and on the black sermon (her father was a preacher), Walker fairly overwhelms the reader with her rhetorical brilliance. She continues this same method and approach in the poems that follow—reciting her heritage of ''Dark Blood'', tracing black people's blind belief in gods from Africa to America, singing of her ''roots deep in southern life'', and in the simple poem ''Lineage'' decrying the fact that she is not as strong as her grandmothers were. . . .

Part II of *For My People* is made up of ballads about black folk heroes known and unknown, famous and infamous. Two of the best have heroines as their central figures—Molly Means, who was ''a hag and a witch; chile of the devil, the dark, and sitch,'' and Kissie Lee, a tough, bad gal. . . . In these tall-tale and ballad narratives, Walker adheres pretty closely to the traditional ballad stanza, varying it with four-beat couplets and spicing it up with dialect speech, which she is successful at orthographically representing.

The final section, composed of only six poems, is much shorter than the first two. These are freely handled sonnets in which Walker gazes back on her childhood, writes about experiences she has had since leaving the South (such as talking to an Iowa farmer), and expresses needs and struggles common to all human beings.

For My People was and remains significant for many reasons. First, its mood coincided with the depression and hard times of the 1930s, and also with the social consciousness and militant integrationism of that decade and the following. In style, it was different in a worthwhile way from what had been written during the Renaissance. Walker's attention to black heroes and heroines was also timely and helped to communicate the ''negritude'' of the volume and delving for roots which is one of its major themes.

Gloria Hull. In Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, eds. *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 174–76

Margaret Walker as a poet and as a writer was not dependent on the academy for her subject matter, for her style, for her authorial posture. Indeed, the rhetorical power of the poem, ''For My People''—the verbal arpeggios, the cascading adjectives, the rhythmic repetitions—has its roots in the ''preacher-man'' rhetoric of the Black South. Similarly, Vyry's eloquent prayer in *Jubilee* came from the Blacks' past and from the deep folk memories of a trouble-driven people. . . .

Not only does *For My People* have word power, but it is a poem filled with subtle juxtapositions of thought and idea. When the scene shifts from the rural South to the urban North—to ''thronging 47th Street in Chicago and Lenox Avenue in New York''—the poet describes her people as ''lost disinherited dispossessed and happy people.'' At another point, they are depicted as ''walking blindly spreading joy.'' This Donnesque yoking of opposites linking happiness with dispossession and blind purposelessness with joy reveals the depth of Margaret Walker's understanding of the complexities of the Black experience. In fact, the poet here is writing about the source of the Black peoples' blues, for out of their troubled past and turbulent present came the Black peoples' song—a music and a song that guarantee that happiness and joy will somehow always be found lurking behind the squalor of the ghetto or behind the misery of the quarters or in some sharecropper's

windowless cabin in the flood-drenched lowlands. For whenever there is trouble, a Bessie Smith or a Ma Rainey or a Bill Broonzy or a B.B. King or someone with the gift of song will step forward to sing it away. In fact, the song gets better when one is real lowdown and disinherited and even suicidal.

Richard K. Barksdale. In R. Baxter Miller, ed. *Black American Poets between Two Worlds, 1940–1960* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), pp. 105–7

The reader [of *For My People*] experiences initially the tension and potential of the Black South; then the folk tale of both tragic possibility and comic relief involving the curiosity, trickery, and deceit of men and women alike; finally, the significance of physical and spiritual love in reclaiming the Southern land. Walker writes careful antinomies into the visionary poem, the folk secular, and the Shakespearian and Petrarchan sonnets. She opposes quest to denial, historical circumstances to imaginative will, and earthly suffering to heavenly bliss. Her poetry purges the Southern ground of animosity and injustice that separate Black misery from Southern song. Her themes are time, infinite human potential, racial equality, vision, blindness, love, and escape, as well as worldly death, drunkenness, gambling, rottenness, and freedom. She pictures the motifs within the frames of toughness and abuse, of fright and gothic terror. Wild arrogance for her speakers often underlies heroism, which is often more imagined than real.

The myth of human immortality expressed in oral tale and in literary artifact transcends death. The imagination evokes atemporal memory, asserts the humanistic self against the fatalistic past, and illustrates, through physical love, the promise of both personal and racial reunification. The achievement is syntactic. Parallelism, elevated rhetoric, simile, and figure of speech abound, but more deeply the serenity of nature creates solemnity. Walker depicts sun, splashing brook, pond, duck, frog, and stream, as well as flock, seed, wood, bark, cotton field, and cane. Still, the knife and gun threaten the pastoral world as, by African conjure, the moral ''we'' attempts to reconcile the two. As both the participant and observer, Walker creates an ironic distance between history and eternity. The Southern experience in the first section and the reclamation in the second part frame the humanity of folk personae Stagolee, John Henry, Kissee Lee, Yallah Hammer, and Gus. The book becomes a literary artifact, a ''clean house'' that imaginatively restructures the Southland.

But if Dudley Randall has written ''The Ballad of Birmingham'' and Gwendolyn Brooks ''The Children of the Poor,'' Walker succeeds with the visionary poem. She does not portray the gray-haired old women who nod and sing out of despair and hope on Sunday morning, but she captures the depths of their suffering. . . .

Patient nobility becomes the poet who [in *Prophets For a New Day*] has re-created Martin Luther King, Jr., as Amos. She has kept the neatly turned phrase of Countee Cullen but replaced Tantalus and Sisyphus with Black students and sit-ins. For her literary fathers, she reaches back to the nineteenth-century prophets Blake, Byron, Shelley, and Tennyson. Her debt extends no less to Walt Whitman and to Langston Hughes, for her predecessor is any poet who forsees a new paradise and who portrays the coming. As with Hughes, Walker is a romantic. But Hughes had either to subordinate his perspective to history, or to ignore history almost completely, and to speak less about events than about personal and racial symbols. Walker, on the contrary, equally combines events and legends but reaffirms the faith of the spirituals. Although her plots sometimes concern murder, her narrators reveal an image of racial freedom and human peace. The best of her imagined South prefigures the future.

R. Baxter Miller. In *Black American Poets between Two Worlds, 1940–1960* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), pp. 119–20, 133–34

From this [early sample of her] published poems (*The The Crisis*, May 1934) to the benediction of ''A Poem for Farish Street Green'' (February 27, 1986), the penultimate poem of *This Is My Century: Black Synthesis of Time*, Margaret Walker Alexander mines the depth of heritage: music (*melos*), memory (*ethos*), and community (*epos*). And it should not surprise us that one of America's most distinguished and senior Afro-American poets, twelve years before the millennium, has delivered for posterity the poem of the century. For each of Margaret Walker's published volumes, beginning with the famous and award-winning *For My People* (1942), has signaled a major poetic event. It is true that twenty-eight years intervened before the poet published another volume after *For My People* sounded the second phase of modern poetry written in the United States. For while it interrupted the sound created in the earlier, modernist phase by poets, on one hand, like Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Amy Lowell, and Wallace Stevens, and, on another, like Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and the earlier Langston Hughes, the *For My People* collection stood as the sole book-length publication of Margaret Walker's poetic voice. But in 1970 when *Prophets for a New Day* entered publication through Dudley Randall's Broadside Press, we received our singular poetic memorial to the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-1950s through the 1960s. In 1973, *October Journey . . .* , a collection of autobiographical and occasional poems written over Margaret Walker's life-time, provided the link between the earlier two volumes and those poems written since and included in the present volume, *This Is My Century: Black Synthesis of Time*. Thus, what may appear to be a discontinuous record is, actually, the record of a poetic vocation consistently practiced for over fifty years. But those fifty years become immortal here, not only as the journey of a Self as it creates the features of its wonderful plentitude, but as the journey of a people and the voice of an age. *This Is My Century: Black Synthesis of Time* is a poetic biography of the twentieth century.

Eleanor W. Traylor. *Callaloo*. 10, 1987, p. 571

In radical opposition to notions of discontinuity, confronting us as a fictional world of consecrated time and space, *Jubilee* worries one of the traditional notions of realism—the stirring to life of the common people—to a modified definition. Walker completed her big novel in the mid-1960s at the University of Iowa Creative Writers' Workshop. She tells the story of the novel, twenty years in the making, in *How I Wrote Jubilee*. This novel of historical content has no immediate precedent in Afro-American literary tradition. To that extent, it bears little structural resemblance to Hurston's work before it, although both Hurston and Walker implement a search for roots, or to Morrison's work after it. *Jubilee*, therefore, assumes a special place in the canon.

From Walker's own point of view, the novel is historical, taking its models from the Russian writers of historical fiction, particularly Tolstoy. In its panoramic display, its massive configurations of characters and implied presences, its movement from a dense point of American history—the era of the Civil War—toward an inevitable, irreversible outcome—the emancipation of ten million African-Americans—*Jubilee* is certainly historical. Even though it is a tale whose end is written on the brain, in the heart, so that there is not even a chance that we will be mistaken about closure, the novel unfolds as if the issues were new. We are sufficiently excited to keep turning the page of a twice-told tale accurately reiterating what we have come to believe is the truth about the ''Peculiar Institution.'' But the high credibility of the text in this case leads us to wonder, eventually, what else is embedded in it that compels us to read our fate by its lights. My own interpretation of the novel is that it is not only historical, but also, and primarily, Historical. In other words, ''Historical,'' in this sense, is a metaphor for the unfolding of the Divine Will. This angle on reality is defined by Paul Tillich as a theonomy. Human history is shot through with Divine Presence so that its being and time are consistent with a plan that elaborates and completes the will of God. In this view of things, human doings are only illusions of a counterfeit autonomy; in Walker's novel agents (or characters) are moving and are moved under the aegis of a Higher and Hidden Authority.

For Vyry Ware, the heroine of *Jubilee*, and her family, honor, courage, endurance—in short, the heroic as transparent prophetic utterance—become the privileged center of human response. If Walker's characters are ultimately seen as one-dimensional, either good or bad, speaking in a public rhetoric that assumes the heroic or its opposite, then such portrayal is apt to a fiction whose value is subsumed in a theonomous frame of moral reference. From this angle of advocacy and preservation the writer does not penetrate the core of experience, but encircles it. The heroic intention has no interest in fluctuations or transformations or palpitations of conscience—these will pass away—but monumentality, or fixedness, becomes its striving. Destiny is disclosed to the hero or the heroine as an already-fixed and named event, and this steady reference point is the secret of permanence.

The blending of a material culture located in the nineteenth century with a theme which appears timeless and is decisively embedded in a Christian metaphysic reveals the biographical inspiration behind Walker's work. *Jubilee* is, in effect, the tale translated of the author's female ancestors. This is a story of the foremothers, a celebration of their stunning faith and intractable powers of endurance. In that sense, it is not so much a study of characters as it is an interrogation into the African-American character in its poignant national destiny and through its female line of spiritual descent. A long and protracted praise piece, a transformed and elaborated prayer, *Jubilee* is Walker's invocation to the guiding spirit and genius of her people. Such a novel is not ''experimental''. In short, it does not introduce ambiguity or irony or uncertainty or perhaps even ''individualism'' as potentially thematic material because it is a detailed sketch of a *collective* survival. The waywardness of a Sula Peace, or even a Janie Stark's movement toward an individualistic liberation—a separate peace—is a trait of character development engendered by a radically different Weltanschauung.

> Hortense J. Spillers. In Shari Benstock, ed. *Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 186–87, 101.

In these essays we are ever mindful of Walker's need to defend the often unspoken values that belie a common Afro-American consciousness and define the chaos and disruption that constantly threaten America. We are ever mindful of the poet in these essays who is constantly searching for ways of giving meaning to her culture through its own formal and structural devices. The essays create a literary landscape that encompasses the past, present, and future. The writing is noticeably passionate, yet thoroughly discriminating. For the reader who has become accustomed to Walker's poetry, the voice in these essays recalls a familiar style and orientation. Like the poetry, these essays are inextricably bound to Walker's own history. Like the poetry too, the essays show a single driving force: a dramatic tension between social activism and artistic imagination. Moreover, Walker, in ''The Humanistic Tradition of Afro-American Literature'' makes no pretense about assigning a profoundly revolutionary role to art. . . .

As for most of our best writers, for Walker socio-political criteria have always been as important as literary criteria. This is not, however, a pedestrian concern. Walker's preoccupation has led her to explore the internal and external dynamics of the Black experience: to see its manifold cultural products, its philosophical humanism, its militant activism. It is this broader perspective, which always challenges the literary imagination, that has given her critics such difficulty, perhaps, in finding for Walker a ''place'' in the literary canon.

One thing we might look to these essays to do for us is to help establish what it is that gives Black American literature its distinctive life and voice, why there is a persistence in its mode of expression. For Walker it is that ''feeling tone,'' the abstracted content of the Black experience ever seeking to express itself through the culture's reservoir of verbal landscapes, some spoken, some sung, some preached, some known only through their silence. For Margaret Walker, life and work, as these essays reveal, represent the kind of literary engagement with ideas that should mark its own place in the literary canon and in history.

> Maryemma Graham. Introduction to Margaret Walker. ''*How I Wrote Jubilee'' and Other Essays on Life and Literature* (New York: Feminist Press, 1990), pp. xix, xxi

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WALLANT, Edward Lewis (1926–1962)

This brief first novel is done in tones of gray, with occasional blood splotches. It is the story of the life and grief of Joe Berman,

plumber. The grief is the framework within which, starting with the death of Joe's wife, flashbacks intermittently fill in his European, Jewish childhood, his growing up, his marriage, his friends, his children, his simple and yet full life.

Yet the grief is more than the framework: it becomes the central theme, really. For Joe at fifty-nine is inconsolable for the loss of his wife. . . .

The trouble with *The Human Season* is that, having detailed Joe's misery, Mr. Wallant has nowhere to go except around and around again. Getting up, going to bed, eating or not eating, pacing the floor, watching TV; these repetitions, despite the author's development of new situations—despite even the interruption by flashbacks—become monotonous.

Winfield Townley Scott. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Dec. 25, 1960. p. 34

Like Bernard Malamud, Edward Lewis Wallant has made contemporary Jewish life the focus of his work. He was the author last year of *The Human Season*, a deeply compassionate study of a Jewish plumber grieving for his dead wife. Now, in *The Pawnbroker*, Mr. Wallant attempts a fuller, richer orchestration of human experience. His interest in Jewish life broadens out into the festering world of New York's Harlem, where Jewish businessman and ghetto Negro confront each other over a pawnshop counter. And framing the somber events of this novel is the dark apocalypse of Nazi Europe. Mr. Wallant has written an ambitious, unparochial novel that says something about man's responsibility to man.

David Boroff. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 26, 1961. p. 16

The Tenants of Moonbloom . . . is a remarkable tour de force in which this gifted writer takes the elements of several ''Street Scenes,'' and spins them faster and faster like a deranged merry-go-round. Norman Moonbloom, the pivot of Mr. Wallant's off-center carousel, is a perpetual student . . . who has finally matriculated as renting agent for his slum-lord brother Irwin. . . . His apotheosis, in a heroic burst of filth and renovation, is depicted by Mr. Wallant with great wit and style.

Martin Levin. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 18, 1963. p. 30

Far from being one of our best novelists, as a number of reviewers have belatedly claimed, Wallant did not have the time to become even a fully competent one. All four of his novels were clearly written under the spell of a deep view of life to which his developing powers as an artist were only beginning to be adequate. *The Children at the Gate* is alternately crude and sensitive, thin and dense, obvious and subtle; its chief significance, like that of Wallant's other novels, lies in the vision that he was struggling to clarify and expand. . . .

His perspective, largely a psychoanalytic one, came from his understanding of what a man goes through in the course of altering his character, of breaking down his defenses in order to live his life rather than to merely survive in it. Instead of writing about Madison Avenue analysands, though, Wallant chose to reach into the dark, marginal pockets of urban existence, usually in the ethnic slums, and to find his heroes among their lost souls, men living alone and unto themselves, whose habits of deprivation and repression are suddenly torn apart by the engagement of circumstances without and deeply within.

Theodore Solotaroff. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. April 5, 1964. p. 5

Wallant's themes are more or less constant. His central character is a Jew, who is sensitive to life's sufferings; he wants to hold himself back from the harshness, cruelty, senselessness and pain of life. But he cannot. Something always happens to bring him back. The plumber, after a sordid clutching after a slattern. is ashamed of himself but recognizes the welling up of lust as a return to life and its desires. The pawnbroker, after his assistant is murdered in a hold-up, finds himself mourning the death of the boy and, in weeping, discovers that life has new meaning for him, although he thought that after the concentration-camp experiences, he had been cut away from passion and emotion. Norman Moonbloom, afraid of life's realities, is liberated by a sexual experience, and discovers the high passion of doing something for his repressed, suffering and poverty-stricken charges.

Harold U. Ribalow. *Jewish Frontier*. June, 1964. p. 27

All of Wallant's novels have a similar, ritual structure: a man cut off from the source of himself, in a delicate truce with the nightmare of survival, slowly, terrifyingly, at the risk of everything, rediscovers the possibility of feeling. Whereas *The Human Season*, *The Pawnbroker*, and *The Children at the Gate*, are almost airlessly intense, *The Tenants of Moonbloom*, Wallant's next to last novel (actually, in fact, the last to be written), is an attempt at treating the same dark concerns, the same human dislocations, with something like comic perspective. Where the others are indebted in tenuous ways to the fiction of Malamud and Bellow (and Dostoevsky), *The Tenants of Moonbloom* is, in the only way the term is meaningful, an original achievement. And since it shows another aspect of the resources of Wallant's vision, I think it worth the attention of close analysis. *Moonbloom* is also the most beautifully written of the four novels, an uncannily funny and discomforting book.

Jonathan Baumbach. *The Landscape of Nightmare* (NYU). 1965. p. 146

One must wonder what film director Sidney Lumet's initial reaction was as he read, for the first time, Edward Lewis Wallant's novel, *The Pawnbroker*. Wallant had created a story about Sol Nazerman, a forty-five-year-old Jewish Pawnbroker conducting his underworld-financed trade in the Harlem slums. Nazerman, once a professor at the University of Cracow, lost his family, and his humanity, in the Nazi concentration camps. Now, twenty years after the war, he moves with zombie-like purpose between the relatives he supports in Mount Vernon, the hysterical wife of an exterminated friend, and his dingy shop. His is dedicated to isolating himself from any feelings of hope or compassion; of existing, one day after the other, in a carefully maintained vacuum which allows neither love, hatred, nor involvement of any kind. Yet every year, in August, the precarious equilibrium sustaining this vacuum is threatened by the anniversary of his family's death. As

the day approaches it evokes desperately suppressed memories of the camp, and of the wife and children who were butchered there. To expose the torment these memories inflict on Nazerman, Wallant employs vivid and merciless flashbacks, and Lumet, in plotting his translation of the novel into a film, must deal with this most unwieldly of cinematic techniques as the crucial expository and dramatic vehicle of the story. For while the plot may hold together if these memories were simply to be narrated, the dramatic impact of the horror that has driven this man to deny all his former values and aspirations would be lost, and the story, *in toto*, would abrogate its considerable power.

Joseph Lyons. *The Western Humanities Review*. Summer, 1966. p. 243

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WARREN, Robert Penn (1905–1989)

The poetry of Robert Penn Warren can best be studied as the esthetic expression of a mind in which tradition and the forces destroying tradition work in strong opposition to each other—ritual and indifference to ritual; self-knowledge and indifference to or inability to achieve self-knowledge; an inherited ''theological'' understanding of man and the newer psychological or social understanding, illustrated perhaps in the religious concept of evil and the liberal belief in man's ultimate power to control ''evil'' forces. There are two major pulls at work in shaping his idiom, the older belief in a morally integrated human being and the naturalist belief in a being formed by ill-understanding forces. The former pull expresses itself in a body of poems, and in some of his prose, as a provincial, homogeneous and consistent view that in another age might have achieved the epic proportions we associate with poetry as vision, the latter pull expresses itself in fictional characters of a low order and in a poetic idiom of a considerably less imaginative vitality.

William Van O'Connor in *A Southern Vanguard*, ed. Allen Tate (Prentice-Hall). 1947. p. 92

Trite as it is nowadays to stigmatize an author as a dual personality, I cannot help pointing to a duality in Warren that may well constitute his major problem: it is his combination of critical and creative power. I am far from suggesting that the critical and the creative are of their nature antipathetic and I am fully ready to grant that what makes Warren remarkable among American writers is his double endowment. The problem lies precisely in his being so two-sidedly gifted; he evidently finds it difficult to combine his two sorts of awareness. There is Warren, the critic, the cosmopolitan, the scholar, the philosopher; and there is Warren, the raconteur. the Kentuckian, the humorist, the ballad maker. . . . Warren is a faulty writer, but he is worth a dozen petty perfectionists. Though commonly associated with ''formalists'' and ''classicists'' in criticism, he is close to the type of romantic genius: robust, fluent, versatile, at his worst clever and clumsy, at his best brilliant and profound.

Eric Bentley. *Kenyon Review*. Summer, 1948. p. 424

Mr. Warren draws the themes for his books from historical incidents in the South. . . . His novels are crammed with blood and thunder in the tradition of historical fiction, but his stories take on the depth and universality of a parable, because the characters seek to learn the causes of their plight, the reasons for the rules of society, and the philosophical ideas which seem tenable in a morally, politically, and economically confused world.

Harry R. Warfel. *American Novelists of Today* (American). 1951. p. 442

The wide range of his subjects, the treatment of problems that touch upon the fundamentals of human existence, the vitality of his characters, the skill with which he creates suspense and atmosphere, and the richness of his language, are characteristics that one does not often find together in a modern writer. . . . Like Hemingway and Steinbeck, he believes in the principle of solidarity as an essential value, but different from them, he stresses its inevitable clash with other elements of human behavior, above all with those of ambition, love of power, physical desire. He stands for the fundamental honesty that is so vital an issue for the generation between the two wars, but he realizes that the process of arriving at some truth may have devastating effects on the seeker.

Heinrich Straumann. *American Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Hutchinson). 1951. pp. 114–5

I find all of the novels of Robert Penn Warren to be variations on a single theme, symbolized in the polarities of violence and order. He could not have chosen two concepts more arresting to the modern reader or more deeply imbedded in the history of his country and his region. . . . Robert Penn Warren has uncovered the historical sources of American violence and made them available for literary purposes, all four novels taking off from violent episodes in history that are used to illuminate modern meanings. But in writing tragedy, though the downward plunge into action takes up the most space and provides the greatest interest, violence alone is not enough. The tragic note cannot be struck without a positive world view. . . . For Warren murder, rape, and arson are simply the most effective dramatic means of developing one half of his theme: that *violence is life without principle*. Nor, to illustrate the other half, does he use orderliness for its own sake (there are no police chiefs or private detectives among his heroes); to him *order is living by principles*, even when the particular effort to do so falls far short of perfection.

Charles R. Anderson in *Southern Renascence*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., and Robert D. Jacobs (Johns Hopkins). 1953. pp. 207–9

Both the rhetoric and the ''smart-aleck'' commentary of *All the King's Men* have been roundly condemned by critics, usually

without reference to their functional significance. . . . The cynical smart-aleck pose is Jack's defense against an alien world, the ''fancy writer'' the smothered and hence exaggerated ideal of himself. The two continually warring elements are further overlaid by the retrospective reflections of the mature philosophic Jack of the book's end. . . . Warren's ear is uncommonly acute, but the most valuable faculty he possesses is human insight, a shrewd and at the same time sympathetic ability to penetrate imaginatively into the inner life of his characters. In the most caustic vignette offered through Jack Burden's squinted eyes, the pity of human wastage is never lost. Warren's sense of ''irreducible evil'' and of human frailty permits an extremely wide range to a natural sympathy that is completely devoid of sentimentalism—ironic in the Richards sense that it is immune to irony.

John M. Bradbury. *Accent* Spring, 1953. pp. 87–9

I think highly of Mr. Warren's poetry. There is a subtlety about it that is not readily apparent. I said earlier . . . that his rhythms resembled those of Mr. Ransom with the graciousness squeezed out of them. That is not literally true. The oftener one reads the poems—not all of them to be sure—the more aware he becomes of a new music. There is graciousness in the rhythms, but it is less obvious. The reader who has not freed himself from a subservience to the music of the iambic foot will find some of his rhythms strange. He, however, who joys in the fact that the English and American poetry is returning to the rhythms natural to English, before the leaden-eared nineteenth century critics uttered inanities about the dominance of the iambic line, particularly the iambic pentameter, will delight in the subtle music of Mr. Warren's verse.

James G. Southworth. *More Modern American Poets* (Blackford). 1954. pp. 118–9

What he has managed to create (in *All the King's Men*) is a work of literature that is a fully realized ''concrete universal,'' a work which presents particulars everywhere concretely imaged yet having together a kind of universal relevance or reference—a work of the order of *Crime and Punishment* or Pope's satires or the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. . . . Such creation always depends upon a unified, integral imaginative grasp which apprehends reality in many dimensions or on many levels simultaneously. A concrete-universal cannot be schemed into existence; it issues from a sensibility aware of the implication of the universal in the concrete and a narrative skill or felicity which is able to exhibit, not merely assert or weakly suggest, their fusion. It is Warren's particular distinction to have created such a work in these times of fragmented sensibility.

Neal Woodruff, Jr. *All the King's Men: A Symposium* (Carnegie Institute of Technology). 1957. p. 62

The need to accept the consequences of eternity's terrible intrusion on time has always been Warren's major theme, just as the place he has always seen it with the fullest particularity is the South, at some point where the contemporary life of football games and state cops, political manipulation and television exploitation tangles with the older life of the red-necks and the hunters, the Baptist ministers and the ballad singers. With this novel (*The Cave*) he has come back to the life of *Night Rider* and *All the King's Men*, where there is never world enough and time to love in but God's plenty of both to die in.

Arthur Mizener. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 23, 1959. p. 1

In reading Warren's fiction and poetry I often have the sense that this theme of ''the true life'' of the necessary contradiction between man's nature and man's values, offers an image of stoical struggle that is necessary to Warren. He refuses the sanctions of orthodox Christianity, which proclaim spiritual values as absolute truths, and the naturalistic interpretation of values as pragmatically necessary to man. For Warren values are something that man *insists* on heroically and arbitrarily in the face of everything. There is no *system* of values that he believes in; there is only the last-ditch faith in values themselves as they emerge through the activity of literature. At the heart of literature is the essential faculty of poetic imagination, which works through symbols that are recollections of our ancient connections with a spiritual world.

Alfred Kazin. *Partisan Review*. Spring, 1959. p. 315

Warren's right to be regarded as an intellectual is indisputable; he is a formidable and influential critic; he has won general recognition as a poet; he has taught at some of our best institutions. Moreover, from the point of view of either structure or style, his novels could serve as texts in writing courses. . . . Even the most skeptical of his critics, I suppose, would agree that Warren's fundamental intentions as a novelist are completely serious. He simply tries, as nineteenth-century novelists commonly tried and twentieth-century novelists commonly don't try, to entertain the reader who is looking merely for entertainment and at the same time to reward one who is willing to make some effort of intellect and imagination. . . . He tells a story and the story is fascinating in its own right, but it is not for the story's sake that he tells it. All his skill as a storyteller—his mastery of narrative form, his wonderfully racy style—serves his real purpose. He is concerned with the deepest realities of the human spirit.

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 22, 1959. p. 13

The poetry, the fiction, and even the critical essays of Robert Penn Warren form a highly unified and consistent body of work. But it would be impossible to reduce it, without distorting simplifications, to some thesis about human life. The work is not tailored to fit a thesis. In the best sense, it is inductive: it explores the human situation and tests against the fullness of human experience our various abstract statements about it. But Warren has his characteristic themes. He is constantly concerned with the meaning of the past and the need for one to accept the past if he is to live meaningfully in the present. In this concern there are resemblances to Faulkner, though Warren's treatment is his own. Again, there are resemblances to W. B. Yeats in Warren's almost obsessive concern to grasp the truth so that ''all is redeemed / In knowledge.'' Again, as with Yeats, there is a tough-minded insistence upon the facts, including the realistic and ugly facts—a fierce refusal to shield one's eyes from what is there.

Cleanth Brooks. *The Hidden God* (Yale). 1963. p. 98

There is no real development in a collection of Warren's critical essays, only expansion. The choice of terminology may shift a little. But we do no injustice in taking the body of Warren criticism as one extended discourse, from any part of which we may justly derive a hint or a word or a quotation to fill out the following exposition. Equally in treating fiction or poetry, Warren's end is to discover, to unfold, or to reconstruct the thematic center around which a work has unity and symbolic validity. He seeks to hold clearly before himself and his reader the operative symbol by means of which a story or a poem illuminates for the reader some vital awareness: not a set of abstractions or allegories, but an immediate intuition with massive and multiple implications—in other words, ''the value as a celebration of life.''

John Hicks. *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Autumn, 1963. p. 509

In novel after novel there is some public issue—the Civil War and Reconstruction, an effort of social reform, crime in a high place—in which the protagonist is directly or indirectly involved and which in some crucial way reflects or comments upon the protagonist's inner conflict. The availability of such an issue seems to be, in fact, one of the important conditions determining Warren's choice of subjects. The technical advantage derived from such a practice is evident: texture is enriched thereby. But, as always with matters of technique, it is more than that. Concern with the balance or relationship between private and public worlds, between self and other than self, is that which inspires the technical practice. Warren's view is the classic one, conceiving of the purely private self as incomplete, and of the community as analogue or projection of the individual. By this view, one illuminates the other.

Madison Jones. *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Autumn, 1963. p. 489

What I am groping for here is a statement adequate to describe Warren's work; all of it, the historical and critical commentary as well as the purely creative. Such a definition, very tentatively offered, would be something like this: Great art is dramatic, not didactic, and is humanly centered. Behind it is the insistent presence of a world, a cosmos, which is full and complete in its multiplicity, containing a simultaneous awareness of past history, the hopes of the future, and the incessant demands of the present moment—the *nowness* of God's will. Often a particular example of dramatic showing will employ a character in pursuit of some fanatic abstraction: power, personal purity, political ideals, or a specious self-created image of the self without which life is unthinkable. Such fragmentation is the particular disease of our time and must be documented, but always against a cosmos seen unfragmented and whole. The potentialities of such a creative strategy are extensive, and can be employed without risking a journalistic flattening of the conceptual vision.

John Lewis Longley. *Southern Review*. Autumn, 1965. p. 972

The fable has a place in Warren's writing comparable to the parable of the innocent abroad in Henry James's or the tale of the lonely egotist learning to survive in the destructive element in Conrad's. Like these two novelists, Warren returns again and again to certain types: whining older women who think they deserved better of the world, indulged and selfish girls, fathers whose awkward devotion annoys the beloved child, exuberant shouters and doers, monomaniacal idealists, sentimental cynics, and older men saddened by the weight of their wisdom. . . . [T]he people of Warren's fable reach adulthood ill prepared for its risks and responsibilities for they have not yet outgrown the dependencies and self-centered daydreams of childhood and adolescence. Wavering between thinking themselves too good for the world and too weak and unworthy to cope with it, they want to return to the pre-experiential innocence. . . . The climax of the fable comes when the protagonist prepares to act upon this knowledge and achieve his identity within the human communion. He may not make it, but, as Warren says in *Brother to Dragons*, there is a glory and meaning in the effort.

John L. Stewart. *The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians* (Princeton). 1965. pp. 487, 491, 494

What *Brothers to Dragons* does in relation to Warren's total body of poetry is to restate, with admirable power and eloquence, the main themes of Warren's earlier poetry. The black abyss without—the dark night of naturalism as seen in *Thirty-six Poems*—and the black abyss within—man's dark, innermost self as sought in *Eleven Poems*: both of these themes recur in *Brother to Dragons*, embodied in this poem's beast metaphor and in its winter setting. Moreover, the ideal of a united self, predicated on the hope of reestablishing the lines of communication between conscious and unconscious, is the recurrence of a theme (not widely understood) from ''The Balled of Billie Potts.'' In witnessing the reconciliation of conscious and unconscious, of Jefferson and Lilburn, the reader may well feel a sense of *déjà vu*, recalling a similar reunion between Billie (the conscious self, made desperate by emptiness and lack of identity) and his father (like Lilburn, a hatchet-wielder, ''evil and ignorant and old'').

Victor H. Strandberg. *A Colder Fire* (Kentucky). 1965. p. 168

[In *Who Speaks for the Negro*?] Warren assails segregationist myths: i.e., that the colored folks invariably just love the white folks, and that just a few ''bad niggers'' and ''Jew Communists'' are making all the trouble. He admonishes the Northern liberal to re-examine his attitude for its self-righteous irresponsibility; debunks the liberal notion of Negro ''betterness,'' as a form of the Noble Savage myth; would expunge of some of its morbidity the claim that the Negro is to redeem our society; warns Southerner and Northerner, alike, of condescension in their attitude toward the Negro. Indeed, Mr. Warren covers the categories of sentimentality over the race issue more fully and impartially than I have ever before found them considered. . . .

No other culture offers us a model, he says. We must go it alone, except for the non-white American: the Negro. ''But if the Negro is to redeem America, he will do so as a creative inheritor of the Judeo-Christian and American tradition.'' Mr. Warren would proclaim this redemptive Negro the '''existentialist' American'' whose ''role is to dramatize the most inward revelation of that culture.''

Brainard Cheney. *Sewanee Review*. Spring. 1966. p. 549

Even in the beautiful 1954–1956 poems from *Promises*, some of them set in Italy and addressed to the poet's son and daughter, though dazzlement is present, and blazing is often high, glimmer still modulates the tone down to itself and a kind of positive uncertainty. But in the first section of this volume [*Selected Poems*], the one which is taken from the most recent work and called *Tale of Time* (1960–1966), *glimmer*, which appears altogether more than a score of times throughout the three hundred pages of the book, now occurs in three instances only, and *dazzle* in six, while *blaze* goes on to ten. The latest poetry of Robert Penn Warren abounds in light. At highest intensity it becomes light. . . .

''What of the darkness, is it very fair?'' Sometimes not very. Besides being a poet, a novelist, a critic, a dramatist, a cultural recorder of North as well as South, Mr. Warren is a philosopher. He is a philosopher of the unfair darkness of the childhood out of which light will spring. He continually goes back to his own childhood even in his latest poems, trying to find the child that is father of the man who must become a child to be a father.

Elliott Coleman. *Poetry*. Sept., 1967. p. 417

Robert Penn Warren is a poet perhaps excessively conscious of the great themes of poetry: death as waiting horror; time—or rather the memory of events in time—as a source of disillusion giving special urgency to the task of abstracting moments of meaning from the meaningless flux; nature as background and scene of the human drama, and as alternately a threat to or escape from moral dilemmas; love as a dangerous ideal and yet, with luck, a blessed reality. I say too conscious because we are often made uncomfortable by the attitude Warren takes toward his people and the circumstances of their fate. He knows—or seems to know—their meanings too well. Adept as he is in the uses of irony, he seldom falls into the obvious traps of sentimentality, but he also rarely surprises us into new and unexpected insights about the moral meaning of experience. Once we become familiar with his scheme of things, we become conscious of prearranged conclusions. Warren is better at keeping his characters in suspense—usually confused or wrongheaded, they are always learning through suffering—than his readers. There is, of course, nothing wrong in the attempt to moralize experience; but the experience should seem large and unruly enough to resist encapsulation. Warren's ''rage for order'' is sometimes in excess of the felt life to be ordered.

John Rees Moore. *Southern Review*. Spring, 1968. pp. 320–1

It has now been fifteen years since Robert Penn Warren returned to lyric poetry in the writings of his volume *Promises: Poems 1954–1956*. His new volume, *Incarnations*, fulfills those promises. Warren has moved now into subtle and firm command of his own idiom, with an effect well-described by his chosen title. These poems incarnate, by movement of spoken words, by images of fruit and sea and city, a sense of spirit flowing through all existence, or as he puts it in one poem, a sense of ''the furious energies of nature.'' These are sequences with many settings: first, a Mediterranean island off the coast of France; next, the dismal setting of a Southern prison; then, in New York City, the scene of a pedestrian accident near old Penn Station; and lastly, a few poems set in the mysterious ''Enclaves'' of memory. What is most remarkable about these poems is their quiet deftness in weaving together a universe of sights and sounds within the mind of this sensitive speaker.

Louis L. Martz. *The Yale Review*. Summer, 1969. p. 596

[Warren] has long been known as a founding father of the New Criticism and an upholder of the impersonality of art, and yet, reading the *Selected Poems*, one sees him as an intensely personal writer of an almost Wordsworthian kind, constantly reverting to the experiences, scenes and legends of his boyhood. Certainly, in his most recent work, one has a sense of being given successive insights into the unfolding of a poet's mind rather than of being shown a series of icons. At times in his career Warren's attempted combination of native allegiance and Eliotesque literary sophistication rather noticeably failed him, as in his long poem, ''The Ballad of Billie Potts,'' where the folk-rock vigor of the central narrative is hardly matched by the lugubrious imitations of late Eliot in the interpolated reflective passages. . . . In contrast, his most recent work has remarkable ease and a striking intensity of language, both of them, it seems, the fruit of many years of application to the craft of poetry.

Bernard Bergonzi. *Southern Review*. Winter, 1970. p. 209

The ''vision'' of Robert Penn Warren's *Audubon* is of two kinds: one invokes that pictorial sense which allowed Audubon to observe and record the birds of America; the other, that sense of the dream which prompted his grand project in the wilderness. This doubleness, along with his uncertainty as to his origins and identity, gives a peculiarly American definition to the Audubon of Warren's poem. His fascination in the wilderness and his business enterprises in Europe; his immersion in the texture of natural things and the abstraction necessary to his great and public design; the precision of his rifle, which was the necessarily brutal instrument for getting the ''material'' for the precision of his art—this play of contradictory forces makes him seem a type of the American artist. Indeed, some of this same doubleness characterizes Warren's poetry: on the one hand, he sees events as part of a great fabric of gothic American history, as in *Brother to Dragons*, while on the other he offers modest and precise renderings of things seen and felt, near yet hard to explain, as in ''The Day Dr. Knox Did It.'' There is in his work an impulse toward final and epic conception, combined with the instinct for exact perception in the tentative forms of lyric and conversation. And it is perhaps for this reason that the figure of Audubon appeals to him: as an example of how vision and fact can be brought together. The achieved balance works to make this Robert Penn Warren's finest poem.

Norman Martien. *Partisan Review*. No. 1, 1971. p. 122

For me, reading a new book by Robert Penn Warren ([*Meet Me in the Green Glen*] is his ninth novel) is like encountering once again a stout-hearted father-figure as dependable (which is not to say predictable) as the day is long. I know ahead of time that the book—whether novel, poems, stories or essays—will be authentic, gritty with felt life. Approaching a new novel, I know, or think I know, it will have some of the virtues of the conventional popular novel—recognizable and accessible plot and shape, for instance. The setting will be rural, the action tangled and bloody, the

characters country people. The tone of the prose used to dramatize their lives might be in turn lyrical, elegiac, satirical. In that prose, that narrative, will float certain obsessive images, certain brooding abstractions which will, in the fullness of time, meld, pay off, sweep the table.

James Boatwright. *New York Times Book Section*. Nov. 7, 1971. p. 6

In Warren's cosmology, as in Heidegger's, man, confronting alternatives of world and idea, must choose neither. He must discover, through the awareness of limitation and the involvement of care, that these alternatives are false: that true being resolves these fragments into a new integrity. Is Warren an existentialist? The vagueness of the term makes the question fruitless. Hazel Barnes, striving to preserve the purity of the term, is forced to fall back upon such designations as ''legitimate existentialists'' to distinguish the true existentialists, like Sartre, who insists on the inevitable absurdity of man's condition, from the lapsed believers like Heidegger, who, in *Being and Time*, contends that absurdity is surmountable. Is Warren a disciple of Heidegger? Presumably not. Warren's metaphysic may in part reflect the work of any number of existential writers, or it may even be independently derived from a common source: that is, the Christian pattern of conversion. Heidegger's existentialism, after all, is an elaborate but unmistakable version of Christianity secularized, and Warren has called himself ''an agnostic Presbyterian.''

More important here than such pigeon-holing is the fact that Heidegger's philosophy helps us to define the quest for selfhood as it appears in all of Warren's fiction. Each novel takes its shape from the attempts of its major characters to cope with their own fragmentation. In *Night Rider* and *Atlantic Monthly Heaven's Gate*, Warren grapples with the problem of alienation and moves toward the solution which he articulates fully in *All the King's Men*; in the subsequent novels, he tests his vision with a variety of characters and situations.

Through all of the novels, the individual attains the true being of selfhood through self-awareness and the realization that, as Warren says in his essay ''Knowledge and the Image of Man,'' he is ''in the world with continual and intimate interpenetration, and inevitable osmosis of being, which in the end does not deny, but affirms, his identity. It affirms it, for out of a progressive understanding of this interpenetration, this texture of relations, man creates new perspectives, discovers new values—that is, a new self.'' The path to this new self begins, with *Night Rider*, in the darkness of Mr. Munn's broken world and ends, with *Meet Me in the Green Glen*, in the great awakening light of Cy Grinder's awareness as Cy discovers the unbroken web which is the world redeemed through knowledge.

Barnett Guttenberg. *Web of Being: The Novels of Robert Penn Warren* (Vanderbilt Univ. Pr., 1975), pp. xii–xiii

''Billie Potts'' is probably Warren's best poem, and almost certainly his most important. Its brilliant imagery, its wide-ranging command of sound texture, and its novel synthesis of Warren's three master themes—passage, the undiscovered self, and mysticism—render the ''Ballad'' analogous to *Tintern Abbey* as the crucial poem in its author's maturation as a poet. From this point on Warren would be a ''finished'' artist, capable of very substantial technical innovations in later decades, but having essentially completed his formation of a fully developed point of view. Perhaps it was this sense of poetic self-completion that lay behind the ten year lapse between the ''Ballad'' and Warren's next publication in verse, *Brother to Dragons*. . . .

If, over the half-century span of Warren's verse, there is one quality that most unmistakably lifts him to the first rank of American poets, then that quality would have to be the remarkable power, clarity, and originality of his imagery, flowing copiously into every part of his poetic canon from the first part of his career to the last. By imagery we refer to that verbal construct which, beginning with simple pictorial power, may ascend to metaphorical, symbolic, and even mythic significance as it implies larger dimensions of meaning. . . . [The] cumulative power of Warren's imagery in his eleven volumes is incalculable.

Victor H. Strandberg. *The Poetic Vision of Robert Penn Warren* (Univ. Pr. of Kentucky, 1977), pp. 163, 273

The source of Warren's stunning power is *angst*, a kind of radiant metaphysical terror, projected outward into the natural world, particularly into its waiting waste expanses: open field, ocean, desert, mountain range, or the constellations as they feed into the eye a misshapen, baffling, and yearning mythology bred on nothingness. He is direct, scathingly honest, and totally serious about what he feels, and in approach is as far as can be imagined from, say, Mallarmé, who urged poets to ''give the initiative to *words*.'' Warren gives the initiative to the experience, and renders himself wide open to it. He is not someone who ''puts a pineapple together,'' as Wallace Stevens does, constructing its existence by multiple perceptions, by possibility and caprice rather than by felt necessity; he is not interested in the ''ephemeras of the tangent,'' but in the unanswered sound of his heart, under the awesome winter presence of the hunter Orion. . . .

He is a poet of enormous courage, with a highly individual intelligence; he is fully aware of the Longinian pit that yawns for those who strive for Sublimity and fail to attain it. Precariously in balance, he walks straight out over the sink-hole of Bombast; his native element is risk, and his chief attribute, daring. . . .

If Wallace Stevens—to take Warren's most notable and obvious opposite—is ''pure,'' Warren is impure; if Stevens changes reality by changing the angle of his eye, Warren fixes himself into it in wonder, horror, loathing, joy, but above all with unflinching involvement; if Stevens plays with it, tames it, and ''understands'' it, Warren encounters it nakedly, and without pretense, dallying, or skillful frivolity.

James Dickey. *Saturday Review*. Aug., 1980, pp. 56–57

No other writer, not even the explorers of American Studies or material folklore, has made so much out of our cultural artifacts: portraits of Signers, rifles, electric chairs, campaign trucks, hunting shirts and broadcloth coats, country graveyards, WPA murals, big houses and shotgun bungalows, letters and broadsides. If there has always been a particular verve in Warren's explicit exploration of the human past—what Jack Burden calls ''the ash pile, the midden, the sublunary dung heap''—that verve is not noticeably lessened in the depiction of the human present. In both the past and present, warts and wens always seem to be plumper and brighter than those

seen by other writers; expectorated phlegm is always more glittering, pus is yellower and more concentrated, mental defectives slobber more profusely. . . .

Warren has admitted his abiding interest in that grandest American dialectic, the moral and psychological tension between what is roughly identified as ''Puritan dichotomies'' and ''Transcendentalism.'' Calling himself a ''little footnote'' in the long history of this intellectual tension, he suggests that the recurring theme of father and son in his own work expresses his urge to fuse the two halves of the dialectic—''the fact and idea,'' ''the Emersonian and the Hawthornian.'' But to assume that Emerson and Hawthorne represent only the poles of the dialectic—that they are not sufficiently engaged by the ongoing interplay between those poles—is clearly an inadequate reading of both writers.

James H. Justus. *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren* (Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1981), pp. 328–30

Because Warren's poetry emanates from a mind that is deeply speculative, one which never refuses but rather cultivates obsessively the immanent meaning of all it has ever encountered, Warren is a pronounced thinker among poets. But he has not been so obviously in poems a thinker about poetry, about form, as have the majority of this century's poets. Among those who seem always to write as if the poem were beyond all else the subject at hand, Warren has seemed implacably committed to the tale, the story, the narrative—with an interlineated commentary which ranged from stage direction to head-shaking amazement to homiletic moralizing. He has seemed, that is, to be Conrad's Marlow. Marlow thinks and speaks about almost everything known to man. Except, it might be argued, form. But if we argue that the essential definition of form is feeling then it is clear that both Marlow and Warren deal in nothing else so passionately as feeling. Feeling is the form by which we know and understand whatever the world gives us. . . .

For while Warren has become that most lucid of thinkers, the dramatic observer of feeling, what he thinks about feeling is never simple and never conclusive. Moreover his thinking and feeling exist in such a tenuous balance as *lyric*, a formal existence no historian or philosopher can be quite comfortable with, that he has constructed a larger, subsuming form whose shape—in outline—is the tale and whose character is philosophy's dialectic. His purpose is, through the poetic enactment of feeling and the self-referential examination of that feeling, to confront the nature of human existence. He has tried and continues to try to find, develop, and refine a form in which he could make those direct, comprehensive statements Allen Tate called for. But not, I think, statements about ''modern civilization'' alone; rather about the condition and circumstance of men in the world. Excluding *Audubon*, Warren's most entirely successful poem, he has found his highest achievement in *Or Else*.

Dave Smith. In *Homage to Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Frank Graziano (Logbridge-Rhodes, 1981), pp. 36–37

In the later fiction (beginning as early as *Wilderness* but with *Flood* the apparent turning point) Warren's chief concern is less with self-knowledge per se—the need for it is not discovered here, but assumed—than with the manner and mood of man's conscious pursuit of understanding and verification of the meaning of life. In the later fiction Warren's concern is with knowledge as exploratory tool and with conscious need, sometimes pathetic and sometimes defiant, as vital fact. Ignorance and impulsiveness, idealism, impatience, and the obsessions of youth are no longer the urgent forces and major flaws of his characters. Rather, these men and women clearly, vexingly, possess the maturity of lives lived more than understood, lives understood more than accepted. Warren's later protagonists engage in probing, fitful, but patient quest of understanding and acceptance (often self-acceptance) while burdened with the ironies of maturity—their experience and ''wisdom,'' their intelligence and habits of mind, the sardonic vision of lives suffered and endured (and sometimes inexplicably rewarded or blessed). At best they see themselves as survivors, their lives the curious legacies of others' passing; at worst they view their lives as existences merely muddled through. The urgency to *experience* has become in these people the commitment to *understand and embrace* that experience and to make it comprehensible and acceptable to others.

Neil Nakadate. In *Robert Penn Warren: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Neil Nakadate (Univ. Pr. of Kentucky, 1981), pp. 175–76

Robert Penn Warren is a major poet by any standard—perhaps even a prophet in some meanings of the word. He has had a sustained career as a poet for some sixty years. At an age when most are living and lecturing on the basis of their past creations, Warren continues to write profoundly, precisely, and beautifully. Since the *Selected Poems: 1973–1975* (published in 1976), he has published *Now and Then* (1978), *Being Here* (1980), and *Rumor Verified* (1981). Another volume is scheduled for 1982 and he has completed a longer poem on Chief Joseph. *Brother to Dragons* may be the best long unified single poem yet written in America. ''Mortmain,'' ''The Ballad of Billie Potts,'' and *Audubon* are significant and substantial. Warren is probably the most accomplished American narrative poet.

In the family and community poems considered in this volume, Warren has created a complex and extensive world. No American author seems to have started out with a design for the creation of his own literary community in several works, but many there are who have persistently developed works about their cultures and their places. Warren's people—even in this imaginary Kentucky community without a name—derive from and represent a world as recognizably Warren's as Yoknapatawpha is Faulkner's or Winesburg, Ohio, is Anderson's. The community exists in Warren's poetic works, although neither poet nor critic can pinpoint the time when he came to recognize its existence.

The poetic chronicle of Warren's family has a scope of more than a hundred years, not less than the time span of the Gant (or Webber) and Sartoris and Compson families or of the political and literary sagas of the Lowells and the Adamses. The joys and sorrows of the Penns and the Warrens are created with lyrical intensity and with national and historical implications. What Faulkner was perhaps groping for when he wrote *Flags in the Dust* is reflected in a different form in Warren's poems of the personal and community past.

The community past and the family past give the poems a texture different from that usually found in the fiction. The poems

about the past reveal that the deep feelings almost always concealed beneath the hard exteriors of the narrators in Warren's best novels are indeed related to the personal and lyrical feelings of the poet.

In the diverse poems, the dominant theme seems to be the desire to know. The effectiveness of this motif is due in part to its final failure. There are moments of joy and even of reconcilement, but one cannot achieve ultimate joy in the labor of the frontier, the relationships of the family, the completeness of knowledge, and the beauties of art, or in the knowledge of the amazing grace of personal or religious salvation.

Floyd C. Watkins. *Then & Now: The Personal Past in the Poetry of Robert Penn Warren* (Univ. Pr. of Kentucky, 1982), pp. 169–70

[*Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce*] Joseph (c. 1840–1904) was a remarkable man, possessed of great gifts, arguably deserving of a place with Jefferson among the National Fathers; the poem *Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce* is a meditation on one of the darker reaches of American history, concerned with the betrayal and decimation of the Nez Perce during the Grant administration; and [Robert Penn] Warren presides in person, employing in the narrative a number of familiar authenticating techniques. . . .

Warren's Joseph is a formidable man, one who recalls *pious* Aeneas, the literary-historical ancestor in so many Agrarian poems; he is a reverent, patriarchal traditionalist, eloquent in devotion to the land and his people, deprived of his home, of a place to come to. . . .

''The aesthetic problem,'' as Monroe Spears points out, ''is how to avoid making this situation (the flawless, suffering chief hopelessly fighting) overly simple and sentimental: when the Indians are all good and suffer wholly undeserved evil, the result is likely to be pathos.'' Spears concludes that the poem is saved from pathos by Warren's making Chief Joseph ''the noble Indian of legend realized in life'' and the whites good (Jefferson), bad (Sherman), and indifferent (Howard).

Allen Shepherd. *Mississippi Quarterly.* Winter, 1985–86, pp. 21–23

Appropriately for a poem with three strands—''reality,'' myth, and art—*Audubon* has three endings. . . .

The third and *really* final ending of the poem belongs to Warren and the reader directly. Warren enters the poem now as a first person presence. . . . Warren shows us the beginning of his own journey, his own struggle—different, on the surface, from Audubon's, and yet the same underneath. . . . He challenges the reader to undertake this struggle too: for the command ''Tell me a story'' is a command to know and to love the subject and the object of the story. To tell a story is first to *make* a story; and the story is the story of our lives, our selfhood. It is poem; it is myth; it is life. . . . But if the story is told well and truly, no matter how terrible it may be—like a life lived well, with full exercise of the ''human faculty''—no matter how tragic—it will be a ''story of deep delight.'' In the end, the responsibility is on us all to become ''Makers''—makers of our own selfhood, participating fully in the ''manly state.'' That is the responsibility—the moral responsibility—that Warren leaves us with at the end of the poem. . . .

In the figure of Audubon, Warren found a perfect medium to embody his aims, a figure able to bear both the human and the mythic (which are finally, at bottom, the same) aspects of the struggle.

T.R. Hummer. ''*Audubon* and the Moral Center.'' In Harold Bloom, ed. *Modern Critical Views: Robert Penn Warren* (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), pp. 180–82

When I think of Robert Penn Warren's life, I think of Publius Virgilius Maro. Both were deeply rooted yet removed from their agrarian childhoods; both were equally at home in the past and present; both were reluctant laureates; and both were lyricists who knew the value of a good story. . . . Robert Penn Warren did not end disappointed by his life, his work, or his purpose.

He published about forty books over a period of less than sixty years. In our age of specialists, it is difficult to imagine anyone working comfortably and prodigiously as novelist, poet, historian, social philosopher, critic, and educator. He wrote one play, and, in the thirties and forties he was also an author of short stories but abandoned the form because he felt it would ruin him for poetry. Because of this productivity (ten novels, sixteen collections of poems), some would argue whether he will be remembered as the greater novelist or poet. Then there are three Pulitzer Prizes (one in fiction, two in poetry); the character Willie Stark, whose name is better known than Huey Long's; an odd detail, ''Remember the Alamo,'' a children's book written for the Landmark Series; and *Understanding Poetry*, credited with Cleanth Brooks as ''an answer to a practical problem'' they faced while teaching undergraduates at Louisiana State University—a text which seems especially wise and modest in this current climate of reader response. But these are all externals. Read the work: the man was compassionate.

Stuart Dischell, *Agni*. 29–39, 1990, pp. 315–16

Nowhere was Warren's preference for the problematics of democracy over the specious promises of all utopianisms more manifest than in his insistence upon the importance of literature as an exploration and assertion of selfhood, and nowhere did he address this question with more eloquence and prophetic urgency than in *Democracy and Poetry*, the revised text of the Jefferson Lectures he delivered in 1974, and a book that bears a telling epigraph from St. John Perse: ''It is enough for the poet to be the guilty conscience of his time.''. . .

Imaginative literature had a vital, and twofold, role to play. It was, Warren insisted, a potentially powerful ally of the embattled democratic experiment by virtue of its ''diagnostic'' and ''therapeutic'' functions. . . . The creation of a work entails a ''plunge into the 'abyss of the self,''' and the engaged reader is induced to take a similar plunge, ''to explore the possibilities of his own 'abyss.''' It may, Warren proceeds to suggest, do more. It may trigger the energy necessary to effect a change, in ourselves and in the world in which we live. Poetry might thus serve to renew the democratic impulse, even in post-Vietnam, post-Watergate America.

William Bedford Clark. *The American Vision of Robert Penn Warren* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1991), pp. 125–26

In a general overview of Warren's oeuvre, an array of persistent themes clusters around the central, if not always declared, topic of race and slavery. Idealism, as I have observed, is everywhere regarded as a disease, though only rarely is it clear that Warren's views on the subject are rooted in his contempt for Emerson, Brown, and the abolitionist cause generally. The West, which saw dramatic expansion after the Civil War, is both the region Northerners fled to in betrayal of their promises to the freedmen and the place where the federal government, in decimating the Indians, revealed a cruelty much more than that of most slave owners. So much for Union pieties. In Warren's larger view, the direction of history is as surely beyond human control as its meaning is closed to our comprehension. The species is desperately fallen, that much is sure. ''There's no forgiveness for our being human,'' a chastened Thomas Jefferson declares. But then all are guilty, not just Southerners. It was Lincoln's great wisdom, in Warren's judgment, to recognize ''a community in guilt—a complicity that belongs to the general human lot.''. . .

''We must argue the necessity of virtue,'' Warren wrote. For from that illusion of human goodness we fall inevitably into experience, where we are brought painfully to the recognition of our helpless degradation. Only then are we prepared for ''fulfillment,'' which is achieved ''only in the degree of recognition / Of the common lot of our kind. And that is the death of vanity, / And that is the beginning of virtue.'' And so we come to accept our total but totally involuntary immersion in the tragedy of history. ''The recognition of complicity,'' Warren declared, ''is the beginning of innocence. / The recognition of necessity is the beginning of freedom.'' The crime is ours, but it is not ours alone, and it is not our fault. Warren arrived at this paradoxical position, I have argued, because he could neither fully deny nor fully accept the burden of his own Southern past. He made peace with that past, if peace it really was, by continually and variously accepting and denying responsibility for it. His stance was not unlike the one he ascribed to Jefferson Davis, who ''would accept no pardon'' for the crimes laid by Yankees at his door; ''for pardon could be construed to imply wrongdoing, and wrongdoing was what, in honor and principle, he denied.''

Forrest G. Robinson. ''A Combat with the Past: Robert Penn Warren on Race and Slavery.'' *American Literature*. September, 1995, pp. 528–29

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WASSERSTEIN, Wendy (1950–)

Wendy Wasserstein's 1977 comedy *Uncommon Women and Others* mirrors [Clare] Boothe's [1937 comedy *The Women*] in its all-female world and picaresque plot; and it borrows the earlier play's superstructure of five main characters playing out social roles against a backdrop of clearly typed characters. But the crucial difference is that Wasserstein shows how a comedy full of women no longer needs to be a bitter dead end.

As her subtitle documents, Wasserstein's text is ''A Play About Five Women Graduates of a Seven Sisters College Six Years Later.'' While it begins and ends ''Six Years Later'' with the five women gathered at a restaurant for lunch, most of the action is a replay of scenes during the characters' senior year at Mount Holyoke. There is no plot. Instead of events and suspense, Wasserstein gives her characters time and peer audiences. As they drift in and out of the play's seventeen episodes, the five main characters set their own paces and create a dramatic forum in which they can leisurely, continually mold, test, and retest their lives and those of their friends. Wasserstein may have discarded the comic plotting that confined Boothe, even in her loosely plotted play, but the later dramatist has not discarded comedy. In a new mode, she presents the same comic search for a resolution, for the comfort of a happy ending.

Wasserstein's expansive plot, her concentration on characters and roles, and her weaving of texture are not unique. Any number of comic playwrights (and many great ones) have preceded her with such mixtures, yet usually without her success in transforming comedy's women. Although in time Wasserstein's transformations will come to seem a matter of degree and not radical alterations, the still significant difference between Wasserstein and predecessors like Boothe is consciousness. Wasserstein *is aware* that comedy's built-in easy answers to women's problems are deceptive and dangerous; she *is aware* that comic conventions in and of themselves pressure characters into a limited number of roles. And for now, her ability to translate this awareness to a comic practice that focuses on characters (not roles) and allows these characters to create unified female communities must be viewed as significant. For in creating her community, Wasserstein diffuses comic prejudice against female friendship. Sifting through her treasure chest of Mount Holyoke scenes and characters, Wasserstein allows real female friendships to develop, friendships that have been rare in comedy. Freed from the requirement that they bond only with men (and produce the traditional happy ending), Wasserstein's women can choose to bond with each other.

Forming her characters as a social unit in a comedy of textures, Wasserstein demonstrates how the delicate relations of women to social roles may be best studied, may be *only* studied, in an altered comic form. Boothe's comedy about women generated bitterness, complaints, and brittle laughter; Wasserstein's comedy about women nurtures faith, concern, and warm, easy laughter. Community.

Susan L. Carlson. *Modern Drama*. December, 1984, pp. 564–73.

My second night in [New York] I was escorted by two close friends, women my age, both successful in their respective fields, to what, according to the media, is the only play in town, *The Heidi Chronicles.* For this play, Wendy Wasserstein, its playwright, considered a leading feminist voice, has been awarded the 1989 Tony Award (best play), the Pulitzer Prize, the New York drama critics' Circle Award, the Drama Desk Award, the outer critics Circle Award, the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, and the Dramatist Guild's Hull-Warriner Award.

Feminism seems to have found a voice in the city of death. Wasserstein uses her play to ask two questions: For the women who lived through and were instructed by the 1960s and 1970s feminist movements and debates, how is feminism and how are their lives defined by feminism in 1989? How are these women now dealing in this society with love and sexuality, especially with sexual love?

A timely subject in the society of Aids and of an anti-feminist turn which naturally grew out of Reaganite and post-Reaganite actions and righteousness.

Wasserstein portrays the life of a feminist art historian who is turning middle-age in the late 1980s. Almost only the personal side of this life is depicted: little information is given either about Heidi Holland's work, theoretical concerns, or working relationships. Perhaps these matters, for feminists such as Wasserstein, are of less concern than affairs of the heart and familial relations. In the play's first act, flashbacks to scenes of feminist groups in the sixties and seventies deal more with theory and praxis, and are written more ironically. Wasserstein has a technically fine and humorous ear. When this irony is used to depict the only lesbian in the play as a female Castro in fashion, mannerless and loud, one wonders about the correctness of certain usages of irony.

In the play's second half, irony and clever jokes give way to a slower, more serious depiction of Heidi Holland's loneliness. Feminism, Wasserstein seems to be saying through her portrayal of Holland, has receded in terms of community and left those women who did not settle for nuclear marriage isolated. At the end of the play, Holland moved from personal misery to happiness, the happiness of self-determination, not only because she adopts a baby.

According to Wasserstein, the values of our women's lives are still determined by our sexual organs, especially our wombs.

Here is feminism in New York City on the edge of 1990. And here is important art. At least according to the culture that has money, both those who can afford 40 dollars for a theatre ticket and those who fund, and therefore decide what is, art.

Until Mary Boone's opening of her gallery and the gentrification of art, New York City culturally and economically was divided into *uptown* and *downtown.* Rich people and high culture inhabited the upper stratosphere; the poor, underfunded or unfunded theatres, and the avant-garde (considered dead phenomenon) hid in the lower regions of what many think of as hell. Especially many non-New Yorkers. These divisions of uptown and downtown, though no longer viable, still pervade the perceptual processes of most New Yorkers. The audience for *The Heidi Chronicles* is uptown.

Kathy Acker. In *New Statesman and Society*. January 19, 1990, pp. 44, 46.

Sisterhood is powerful. Take Chekhov's *The Three Sisters.* Wendy Wasserstein did. The playwright transported a trio of siblings from imperial Russia to present-day England, gave their yearnings a feelgood spin, and diluted them with gags. Result: a demand for tickets so great that *The Sisters Rosensweig* recently moved from a modest space in Lincoln Center to the full-sized Ethel Barrymore Theater.

Happily, Jane Alexander is still in the role of Sara, a fast-track international banker. To celebrate her 54th birthday, Sara's two younger siblings arrive simultaneously at her sumptuous London house. Pfeni, nee Penny (Christine Estabrook), is a travel writer; Gorgeous (Madeline Kahn) is a tornado in the guise of a housewife, mother of four, and host of a Boston call-in radio program.

At first, all three women seem busy and fulfilled. But as the play develops, each turns out to be as needy as a poster child. Divorced twice, Sara has assumed a gloss of English hauteur. Men find her threatening, and stay away in herds. In reaction to the ice-cold Sara, her teenage daughter Tess (Julie Dretzin) has fallen passionately in love with an unkempt prole, Tom (Patrick Fitzgerald). The two spend their hours driving Sara up the rose-patterned walls, demonstrating for Lithuanian independence and dining exclusively on ''primary color food.'' Pfeni keeps on the move because she cannot set down physical or emotional roots. The one man in her life, Geoffrey (John Vickery), is a self-absorbed bisexual director. ''Love is love,'' he declares. ''Gender is merely spare parts.'' Gorgeous boasts about her multiplaned life, but in many ways she is the saddest of the siblings, stuck with an unresponsive—and unemployed—husband, deriving her satisfaction from nonstop chatter and constant changes of wardrobe.

Into this hothouse world comes Mervyn (Robert Klein), a middle-aged American merchant who stops by for a moment, and stays for dinner. Mervyn appears to be a Bronx Babbitt; then, as the evening progresses, he reveals an intellectual bent and a natural irony. (''My daughter teaches semiotics. That means she screens *Hiroshima Mon Amour* once a week.'') He is the first man in years to evince an interest in Sara. Will she succumb to his advances? Is Yitzchak Rabin Jewish? Of course she will. The more important question is: Are the Rosensweigs Jewish? That is not so certain.

Identity is Wasserstein's subtext, and from time to time she considers the price of assimilation as well as the many ways of being an expatriate from one's spiritual home. When Gorgeous insists on lighting Sabbath candles, Sara, who has been fleeing her origins since adolescence, takes it as a personal affront. When Pfeni becomes obsessed with the travails of the Kurds, she recovers the social conscience of her late mother—a conscience rekindled in Tess. At such moments *Sisters* edges toward a real theme. But 90 per cent of the evening is concerned with situation comedy. Some of it is sharply observed (''What a pleasure,'' says Sara, ''to live in a country where our feelings are openly repressed''). Much of it is as cheap as Gorgeous' junk jewelry. The New England yenta hears Mervyn talking about Metternich and the Concert of Europe. ''What concert?'' she yaps. ''I must have missed that one on the tour.'' Jackie Mason has turned down better material.

In the playwright's uncertain hands, events rarely happen organically; they occur because she wants them to occur. Vickery, for example, is a skilled and energetic performer, but all he offers here is a collage of eccentricities and oneliners. Nothing he says or does suggests that he would be attractive to any woman, and his farewell to Pfeni (''I miss men'') is as unsurprising as her reply ''So do I''). Similarly, young Tess ceaselessly tells her family how committed she is to the Cause; she and Tom plan to fly off to Vilnius. Toward the end of Act Two she announces that she isn't going after all. At a London rally, she suddenly felt like ''an outsider'' and decided to stay home. The real reason Tess didn't go is much simpler. Wasserstein needed her to make a very debatable point about Jews being on the periphery of world events.

Given this shallow, brittle work, several actors perform miracles. Alexander, under the bright direction of Daniel Sullivan, lends *Sisters* an intelligence and flair that are not in the script. Kahn and Klein, both experienced comedians, are alternately poignant and show- stopping hilarious. The rest of the cast varies between slick and competent, abetted by John Lee Beatty's sumptuous set and Jane Greenwood's witty costumes.

It may seem unfair to compare Wasserstein with Chekhov—who could stand against the Master? But she invites the comparison: One of the sisters even quotes Masha's famous line about yearning for Moscow. And in the *Playbill,* the American makes a point of bringing the Russian onstage: ''I've always been a big fan of Chekhov,'' recalls Wasserstein, ''so I thought the idea of three sisters would be a novel one for a play.'' It *was* novel, back in 1901. Today it requires something more. A big fan creates a lot of breeze, but very little fresh air.

Stefan Kanfer. *The New Leader.* April 5, 1993, pp. 22–23.

Identity is the theme in all of Wendy Wasserstein's plays, but is most fully integrated in her major works—*Uncommon Women and Others*, *Isn't It Romantic*, and *The Heidi Chronicles*. Wasserstein's commercial success with *The Heidi Chronicles*, which received both the Pulitzer prize and the Tony award for best play in 1989, has placed her in the slippery position of championing women's causes and feminist concerns. However, the playwright is more concerned with genetics than gender; and more likely to employ humor than humanism in creating her female characters. Her early works, which are not published, are precursory exercises exploring themes of sexuality, marriage, and relationships using episodic structure, music, and comic caricatures. Male characters are primarily used as foils and are rarely fully developed. Most of Wasserstein's female characters are not traditionally developed either, and are often representative of types. What unifies and sustains her dramaturgy is Wasserstein's coy sense of humor supported by keen observations of everyday life.

Wasserstein uses traditional American rituals as a means to exploit traditional roles. In two early plays, *When Dinah Shore Ruled the Earth* and *Any Woman Can't*, she uses a beauty pageant in the former and a dance audition in the latter to both exhort and extol the eclectic roles of ambitious females in a male-dominated society. In *Happy Birthday, Montpelier Pizz-zazz*, the college party scene is the backdrop for the exploitation of both stereotypical roles and stereotypical expectations of college students. The primary issues center around women's options but the play depends too much on caricature to be taken seriously. *Uncommon Women and Others*, Wasserstein's first major work, makes better use of college rituals as a means to explore both character and issue.

Uncommon Women and Others is not unique but it is risky in terms of subject matter. The reunion format of five women who meet in 1978 and then travel back six years to their final year at Mount Holyoke College provides the structure of the all-female play. What makes the play compelling are the concerns that each of the five women have regarding their role in society, in relation to each other, and to themselves. There is no real plot that unifies the play, and no real ending. A disembodied male voice is heard between each scene reciting extracts from a traditional graduation address. The technique serves to unify the play not only structurally but also thematically, since each excerpt raises issues that the women are trying to work through and choices that they are facing in the future.

Isn't It Romantic is similar to *Uncommon Women and Others* in terms of episodic structure, the use of music to create mood and exploit ritual, and in terms of the disembodied voice, which takes the form of telephone messages from various characters in the play and characters who are not physically present. *Isn't It Romantic* offers a better developed plot, characters with more dimension, and thematically the strongest philosophical bent of any Wasserstein work. The play, benefiting from some major rewrites after its initial New York première, contains the best linguistic foreplay of wit and wisdom stemming from Wasserstein's keen sense of irony and honest portrayal of the two major characters.

The central character, Janie Blumberg, is ''a little kooky, a little sweet, a little unconfident.'' By contrast, her best friend Harriet Cornwall could be ''the cover girl on the best working women's magazine.'' With Janie, her friends, and her parents along with Harriet and her mother, Wasserstein creates a Chekhovian *Cherry Orchard* where the plot is simple and the characters, each of whom is a bit eccentric and lives in his or her own world, discover that each must fulfill his or her own desires; that each must have his or her own dream. Janie grows by recognizing the discrepancies in everyone else's desires. The final tableau shows Janie as she begins to dance to ''Isn't It Romantic'' while the audience hears the voice of a friend leaving a desperate message on the telephone machine. Janie's dancing becomes more confident until she is ''dancing beautifully,'' symbolizing her growth and celebrating an optimistic future.

The final tableau in Wasserstein's most celebrated work, that of Heidi sitting in a rocker singing softly to her adopted child, is in stark contrast to that of Janie's ebullient face and dancing silhouette. Unfortunately, *The Heidi Chronicles* overshadows the merits of *Isn't It Romantic*. The plays are similar, both dealing with a single woman looking for her place in society and in life. However, Heidi more closely resembles Harriet or Kate from *Uncommon Women and Others*. All are successful in their careers, but all have paid a price for success.

Wasserstein's most prize-winning play is not without merit, but it does not live up to its potential as a well-documented play that promises a comparison of ''lost women painters'' from the 16th century to the ''lost feminists'' of the 20th century.

Heidi, an art historian, opens the play in mid-lecture in front of a slide screen of a Sofonisba Anguissola painting. The painting and the lecture serve as both a literal and symbolic framing device. Scenes move back in time from 1965 to 1977, and from 1980 to 1989. The play explores Heidi's disillusionment with the women's movement, dramatizing its history at the same time. It raises

serious and important issues only to undercut them with a loosely constructed plot and a contrived ending. Homosexuality, single parenting, politics, and art are all subjects that remain unexplored. As the heroine of the play, Heidi has an unusual role in that much of the time she is a spectator. And most of the action is that of encountering and re-encountering the various people in her life who have influenced her. The humor is closer to that of television sit-com and lacks the risqué verbiage of *Uncommon Women and Others* or the strong philosophical wit of *Isn't It Romantic*. Wasserstein's strengths lie in her ability to create characters who laugh at themselves while questioning others. She serves as a role model for women who wish to be successful in the New York theatre venue. All her plays are quirky and interesting and offer strong roles for women.

Judy Lee Oliva. In *Contemporary Dramatists,* 5th edition, ed. K. A. Berney (St. James Press, 1993).

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WELTY, Eudora (1909–)

Now I happen to think that to make a ballet of words is a perversion of their best function and I dislike—because it breeds exhibitionism and insincerity—the attitude toward narrative which allows an author to sacrifice the meaning of language to its rhythms and patterns. . . . Miss Welty constantly calls attention to herself and away from her object. . . . This is the sin of pride—this self-conscious contriving—endemic to a whole generation of writers since Katherine Mansfield and most especially to the women of that generation. . . . I have spoken of the ballet quality of Miss Welty's stories: in this connection I am reminded of the painter Dali and—via Dali—of the relationship between the chic modern department store and much of modern fiction.

Diana Trilling. *The Nation*. Oct. 2, 1943. pp. 386–7

It is her profound search of human consciousness and her illumination of the underlying causes of the compulsions and fears of modern man that would seem to comprise the principal value of Miss Welty's work. She, like other best writers of this century, implies that the confusion of our age tends to force individuals back upon conscience, as they have not been since the seventeenth century; for in the intervening centuries, values were more closely defined, behavior was more outwardly controlled. Miss Welty's prose fiction, like much of the poetry and fiction of this era that seeks to explore the possibilities of the imagination, is comparable to the rich prose of Sir Thomas Browne; and reminiscent of the poetry of the seventeenth century.

Eunice Glenn in *A Southern Vanguard*, ed. Allen Tate (Prentice-Hall). 1947. pp. 89–90

From her earliest stories, Miss Welty's writing has had a high degree of individuality. Her memory for colloquial speech is unbelievably accurate, and her antic imagination, coupled with her profound compassion and understanding, gives us people much realer than real, stranger, yet more believable than the living.

Herschel Brickell. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 27, 1949. p. 9

Let us admit a deep personal preference for this particular kind of story, where external act and the internal voiceless life of the human imagination almost meet and mingle on the mysterious threshold between dream and waking, one reality refusing to admit or confirm the existence of the other, yet both conspiring toward the same end. This is not easy to accomplish, but it is always worth trying, and Miss Welty is so successful at it, it would seem her most familiar territory. There is no blurring at the edges, but evidence of an active and disciplined imagination working firmly in a strong line of continuity, the waking faculty of daylight reason recollecting and recording the crazy logic of the dream.

Katherine Anne Porter. *The Days Before* (Harcourt). 1952. pp. 107–8

There is one young woman who is accepted as ''different'' and ''authentic'' even by the best celebrants of the black mass in Taos and Carmel and Greenwich Village and Norfolk: the Eudora Welty who, with her two recent volumes of short stories, *A Curtain of Green* and *The Wide Net*, has become possibly the most distinguished of the new story-tellers. Oh yes, she has heard of Symbolism, but her writing is as clear—and free of obscenity—as the Gettysburg Address.

Sinclair Lewis. *A Sinclair Lewis Reader* (Random). 1953. p. 212

Miss Welty revels in working in terms of conscious ambiguity; she leaves the last word unsaid, the ultimate action unconsummated. Writing with swift, sure, and often devastating understanding of her characters, and indulging a humor which is at times like the despairing cry of a child being swallowed up by quicksand, she has created out of artifice and artistry a world unmistakably her own and authentically real.

William Peden. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 16, 1954. p. 14

From her earliest published work to her latest collection of stories Miss Welty has drawn heavily upon the worlds of myth and folklore and, while handling many of the same motifs again and again, has consistently absorbed them more and more fully into her own meaning, so that in her most successful work it is impossible to say that here is Cassiopeia and here Andromeda. The reader can only be aware that these legendary figures, along with similar ones

from Germanic, Celtic, Sanskrit, and numerous other folk sources, are suggested by the characters that Miss Welty is drawing. . . . Quite consciously Miss Welty has taken the characters common to several mythological systems and translated them into present-day Mississippians. Although a faintly fantastic element remains in her stories, her characters and her atmosphere are too thoroughly Southern to be mistaken for those of Siegfried's Germany or Perseus's Greece. So typically Southern are they, in fact, that many critics damn her for her provincial approach to life.

By patterning her characters closely after folk heroes Miss Welty has avoided exactly such a strictly regional approach as that for which she has been blamed. Since her first published story she has been working toward a fusion of the universal mythic elements embodied in various culture-heroes with the regional world that she knows first-hand. The effect of this attempt on her work and her degree of success with it may be followed throughout her work.

William M. Jones. *Southern Folklore Quarterly*. Dec., 1958. pp. 173–4

Eudora Welty is an imaginative writer. With her, nothing comes out of stock, and it has been impossible for her to stand still. Her art is a matter of contemplation, susceptibility, and discovery: it has been necessary for her to evolve for herself a language, and to arrive, each time she writes, at a new form. . . .

[*The Golden Apples*] is great, tender, austere stuff, shot through from beginning to end with beauty. . . . In *The Golden Apples*, Miss Welty would seem to have found, for her art, the ideal form. But, for a writer of her stature, nothing is conclusive—what comes next? American, deliberately regional in her settings, she ''belongs,'' in the narrow sense, to no particular nation or continent, having found a communication which spans oceans.

Elizabeth Bowen. *Seven Winters & Afterthoughts* (Knopf). 1962. pp. 216–18

When Miss Welty says that she is ''touched off by place,'' she suggests a journey beyond the region of the touching off. And indeed her imagination molds her material into beautifully symmetrical essences and shapes. She participates in the life around her with such perception and fidelity that she catches it exact, and then she colors it and carves it into an entity beyond the realism of daily life, which is just what the people of her region have done with the often shallow and monotonous basic material of their lives. The result is an ironical tension between form and content, in which prosaic experience is enveloped in a mist of rhetoric, and irrational action is reported in the most attractive of verbal forms.

Robert B. Holland. *American Literature*. Nov., 1963. p. 357

With her wide range in style, point of view, subject matter, and fictional modes, Miss Welty has thoroughly investigated the possibilities inherent in the short story form, enriching and extending the potential of this demanding genre. Through her constant experimentation she has literally defied the genre's limitations and boundaries, and in exploring the mysteries of the inner life she has used dream and fantasy in a manner that has enabled her to produce a heightened realism. Her vision of relationship as a ''changing and pervading'' mystery is consistent throughout her fiction, and her characters are continually probing into these mysteries, trying to surmount the separateness existing between themselves and others, and undergoing experiences in which they are ''initiated'' or ''reborn'' into the world.

Alfred Appel. *A Season of Dreams: The Fiction of Eudora Welty* (Louisiana State). 1965. p. 256

In *Losing Battles* the traditional drama of Agrarian *versus* Industrial—appearing obliquely and yet in a completely significant way—takes on a complexity demanding an explication hardly even to be begun in a summary comment. In this story—which may well be Miss Welty's greatest achievement and one that assures her, if any further assurance is needed, of her place among the great American story tellers of this century—we are again in the domain of a fictional county. It is Boone County in the northeast hill country of Mississippi. . . .

[The conflict] sounds a little like Thomas Hardy, and it is to some extent. What finally comes from the clash between Miss Julia and the family tribe of the Banner community, however, is the result of Miss Welty's genius for seeing life not so much in the manner of Hardy as in that of her favorite novelist, Jane Austen. She transforms the drama of the dispossession of the country people in America into a highly ironic comedy of universal human motives.

Lewis P. Simpson. *Southern Review*. Summer, 1970. pp. xxii–xxiii

It is not craftsmanship which has been the most important factor in determining [Eudora Welty's] new place in American letters. One suspects that critics have finally begun to realize that, far from being narrow in scope, her work is prodigious in its diversity and reveals a mind and sensibility capable of almost anything. There is no typical Eudora Welty story in the sense that there is a typical Ernest Hemingway story. She may have stolen from herself on occasion, but she has never precisely re-created an earlier work, and most of her stories are unique in the way that true literature always is. There is nothing like ''The Wide Net'' anywhere else in fiction, and at least a dozen of her stories stand alone in the same way.

On the other hand, quite apart from these earlier works, *Losing Battles* is itself a novel on which to build a literary reputation. Like *Delta Wedding*, to which it bears some superficial resemblance, it is essentially a story about the family and its larger manifestation, the community. But *Losing Battles* has social, historical, and philosophical dimensions which are not to be found in the earlier work, and it is these dimensions which have undoubtedly convinced some of the more sociologically-minded critics that Miss Welty deserves a place in the first rank of contemporary novelists.

Thomas H. Landess. *Sewanee Review*. Autumn, 1971. pp. 626–7

Eudora Welty's novel, *The Optimist's Daughter*, which first appeared in *The New Yorker* of March 15, 1969, is miracle of compression, the kind of book, small in scope but profound in its

implications, that rewards a lifetime of work. Its style is at the service of a story that follows its nose with the instincts of a good hunting dog never losing the scent of its quarry. And its story has all those qualities peculiar to the finest short novels: a theme that vibrates with overtones, suspense and classical inevitability.

Known as a ''Southern regionalist,'' Miss Welty is too good for pigeon-holing labels. Though she has stayed close to home, two interlocking notions have been demonstrated in her fiction: how easily the ordinary turns into legend, and how firmly the exotic is grounded in the banal. They are subjects only partly dependent on locale. In *The Optimist's Daughter*, we are in the South once more, but a South where real distinctions are made between Texas and Mississippi, and Mississippi and West Virginia. And if place has been Miss Welty's touchstone, the pun implicit in the word ''place'' comes alive in her new novel; its colloquial meaning—caste, class, position—is as important as its geographical one.

Howard Moss. *New York Times Book Section*. May 21, 1972. p. 1

The Optimist's Daughter is an unlikely triumph, combining Chekhovian understatement with Faulknerian verve, displaying the author's powers at their best. She has lost nothing over the years: her unerring ear, the comic vitality of her characters, the authenticity of furniture and flowers and small-town mores remain compelling. And the profundity of her moral imagination has deepened. Little of obvious significance happens in this book. An old man dies, his daughter grieves, his young second wife feels an injustice has been done her (on her birthday!). There is a southern funeral, unexpectedly invaded by the wife's implausible relatives. The daughter, Laurel, returns to Chicago, where she works. She thinks about her own long-dead husband, and about what her marriage meant. What makes such events important is the penetration with which the characters are judged and the intensity with which they are loved.

Patricia Meyer Spacks. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1972. p. 509

Eudora Welty's fiction is the richest in human understanding and in power to shape and convey that understanding of any living writer known to me. In all of American fiction, she stands for me with her only peers—Melville, James, Hemingway, and Faulkner—and among them, she is in some crucial respects the deepest, the most spacious, the most lifegiving. . . .

Eudora Welty—in the wide centrality of her vision, in her fixed yet nimble scrutiny of what might tritely be called ''the normal world'' (the normal daily world of the vast country called the American South) and in the nearly infinite resourcefulness with which she has found means to convey the discoveries of that scrutiny—has opened to a whole generation of writers the simple but nearly unattainable possibility of *work*. We read her fiction, we recognized our world, we knew that our world was therefore the possible source of more good fiction. It had been done once; it could now be done again, and differently.

Reynolds Price. In *Eudora Welty: A Form of Thanks*, ed. Louis Dollarhide and Ann J. Abadie (Univ. Pr. of Mississippi, 1979), pp. 124–25

For Welty, as for most serious writers in English since James, the vision of the existence of man is not a simple relationship between stimulus and response. Behavior has its roots in history—not simply the history of the immediate past from which habits derive, but in an ancient, archetypal past. This dimension of history exerts a more basic, defining force on men, which over the course of human evolution has shaped the ways by which men have come to understand their relationships to nature, each other, and the universe. These shaping forces reside in the psyche but are more often than not unconscious. They are most clearly observed in outcroppings of myth and fantasy that to the artist's eye occur all around us. But the interest in myth and fantasy rests solidly in the present, real world. In ''Place in Fiction'' Welty writes that ''the novel from the start has been bound up in the local, the 'real,' the present, the ordinary day-to-day of human experience''. . . . It is significant, however, that the statements in which she seems to espouse allegiance to the photographic depiction of surfaces or appearances are quickly qualified. Place for Eudora Welty has a dimension of ''mystery'' because ''it has a more lasting identity than we have.'' The ''realism'' that she finds essential to the novel applies equally to any kind of successful fiction. . . .

The Golden Apples can be seen perhaps as a merger of Welty's realistic method with the allegorical, but the notion hardly seems to do justice to so fine a book. It is more helpful to think of Welty's use of myth and fantasy in terms of three methods defined from a structural perspective. The demands she makes on her readers' imaginations are great no matter which sort of structure may be found. Her narrators may use myth and fantasy to define character; or with fantasy she may imaginatively create the interior of a mind or an allegorical landscape to investigate ''the truth of the human heart''; or, finally, she may create characters who, like Virgie, are as aware of the dimension of myth and fantasy as the reader is asked to be.

Robert L. Phillips, Jr. In *Eudora Welty: Critical Essays*, ed. Peggy Whitman Prenshaw (Univ. Pr. of Mississippi, 1979), pp. 56–57, 67

Welty's constant theme is communication itself, the state of human existence in which individuals, because of some connection with each other in the natural world, become more than the simple integers they might seem. Every hero and heroine, from Mrs. Larkin to Laurel McKelva Hand, leaving the private, silent world of memory, grief, or dream, crosses a threshold into a real world that is enriched by that very entry, by that self so long withheld.

Also part of this passage is the reader of Welty's fiction. He must be attentive to the totally and artistically synthesized vision of the world that sustains her work. The moment of vision is built upon the particular world each fiction summons into existence. The climactic experience of each of Welty's fictions is not only the resolution of a plot but a denouement of the form, in which the world appears in its integrity before the reader, allowing him to realize how and when the parts become whole. . . .

Welty has given, and will continue to give (for these works are soundly made and will stand), a literature that reaches great stature in its theme of love. Few writers understand that the most complex

human emotion, love, is also the most simple, and that a true treatment of the theme is both discussible and not.

Michael Kreyling. *Eudora Welty's Achievement of Order* (Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1980), pp. 174–75

Placing Welty within the ''Republic of Letters'' is important in itself, but it has the greater advantage of focusing her final control of southern materials. Because of its vivid frontier settlement, its complicated plantation ethic entailing slavery, civil war, and the gradual decline of hereditary values, the South in general and Mississippi in particular present the modern literary imagination with unusually clamorous circumstances. As her fiction, essays, and interviews reveal, Welty's sense of a regional identity was deepened appreciably by the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and by the merging of distinctive American cultures which was accomplished in the following decade. Living continuously in Jackson, Welty observed closely this process of modernization, the small provincial capital of her birth transformed in the next seven decades into a metropolitan center with a diverse, highly mobile population approaching 300,000. But Welty's historicism has behaved admirably throughout. This ability to reconcile process and stasis, time and eternity, self and community, is, it seems clear, a reflection of Welty's citizenship in the modern ''Republic of Letters.'' Relieved of the extremes of belief and rationalism, Welty discovered in this realm a suppleness of mind which is essential to the reconciler's art. More specifically, she discovered the means of forming an *image* of the South, one stripped of its historic defensiveness, romance, and ready applicability. There is finally a coolness at the core of Welty's work, a reserve or restraint that Walter Sullivan quite accurately notes, but it does not preclude her fulfilling the role of the modern vocation of letters. ''The man of letters is primary in keeping open the possibility of man's apprehension of the truth of his destiny beyond time.'' Although etched in irony and pictured in displacement, Welty's preserved ''Southern character'' testifies to the strength of this moral ''possibility.'' Her Mississippi chronicle is finally the outward shape of a passionate interior drama that has preoccupied all serious writers of the modern South and, before that, all chroniclers of Western culture.

Albert J. Devlin. *Eudora Welty's Chronicle: A Story of Mississippi Life* (Univ. Pr. of Mississippi, 1983), p. 212

[Eudora] Welty's writing—unlike that of several Southern writers who published their first works between the ends of the two World Wars—has never been predicated primarily on an absorption in community and the past. Rather, her writing seems predicated on a delight in the art of storytelling and has been shaped by her broad interest in traditions of storytelling, and these influences have so far sustained her. Possessing the ''historical sense'' lauded by T.S. Eliot, Welty draws on narrative traditions from Homer to recent times, including those of her own country and region. In fact, her fiction demonstrates that the Southern Renaissance can itself be a valuable resource for today's writer, its myths, patterns, and themes having entered the contemporary consciousness. But the Southern community does provide Welty with substance. Indeed, rather than handicapping Welty's writing, the much-discussed decline in community and myth proves part of the inspiration for *The Optimist's Daughter*. Moreover, though *The Optimist's Daughter* shows Welty's awareness that the Southern community may have lost some of its strength and the oral culture some of its vitality, her autobiographical essays and interviews give evidence that the author herself, still living among lifelong friends in her hometown of Jackson, Mississippi, maintains a strong sense of community and a vigorous love of storytelling. Her most recent book, *One Writer's Beginnings*, testifies to the oral culture's continuing influence on her writing. In this book, not only does Welty describe her childhood fascination with hearing neighbors and family tell tales, and not only does she draw on the family tales her mother told her as she reconstructs her family's history, but also her long immersion in the oral culture is reflected in the method of the book itself. For although *One Writer's Beginnings* is an expansion of three lectures Welty delivered at Harvard University in 1983, her writing here (and, presumably, that of the papers she read at Harvard) does not belong to the genre of the academic lecture but to the genre of storytelling. Her purpose is to discuss influences on her development as a writer, yet her method is basically narrative rather than analytical. Preferring concrete example to abstractions about her development, she tells tales about her childhood, letting these suggest, or portray, various influences on her. Like her storytelling mother and her talkative neighbors, and like the Fairchilds of *Delta Wedding*, Welty ''[tells] happenings like narrations, chronological and careful.'' . . .

In reading Welty's fiction, Cleanth Brooks is reminded that ''Homer, the father of the poetry of Western civilization, was himself a poet of the oral tradition, even though he was to become the very cornerstone of the written tradition.'' Welty, Brooks observes, is another who achieves ''a true wedding'' of the oral and written traditions, successfully incorporating the oral into the written and thus ''giv[ing] it an enduring life.'' I would add that not only has Welty preserved the oral tradition; she has built much of her fiction on a recognition of connections between the oral and the written—and between Southern storytelling and other story or storytelling traditions. She reminds us that the oral and written traditions have been intertwined since the time of Homer and perhaps nowhere more so, in the twentieth century, than in the American South.

Carol S. Manning. *With Ears Opening Like Morning Glories: Eudora Welty and the Love of Storytelling* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Pr.), 1985, pp. 189–90, 198–99

In the culture Welty evokes, people talk constantly about one another, generating legends even of the present. Present and past often merge, for Welty as for Faulkner. Miss Katie Rainey, ''the old lady that watches the turn of the road'' until her death, figures in ''The Wanderers'' (1949) as one who not only sees but hears. The voices she hears come from her imagination. They tell contemporary truth, yet belong to the past; they speak of human recurrence. . . .

Like Welty's other stories, [''Asphodel''] this wonderful tale specifies and even glorifies the tattle of a small town, but it also recognizes (like ''The Whole World Knows,'' for example) the restrictive effect of such talk. The exclusionary myths of gossip explain the community to itself. As the tone of ''Asphodel'' emphasizes, they rapidly become legend. Yet they also limit possibilities of understanding; although they preserve happening and locate it in a rich human context, they barely acknowledge

interior event. Welty's stories, celebrating and criticizing small-town gossip, suggest both positive and negative reasons for taking gossip seriously.

> Patricia Meyer Spacks. ''Gossip and Community in Eudora Welty.'' In Harold Bloom, ed. *Eudora Welty* (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), pp. 155, 156, 162

In *One Writer's Beginnings* Welty states that her self-education began with listening—that is, mastering the oral characteristics of the language and the world around her. This statement holds true for many Southern writers whose distinguished oral quality is too often obscured by their openly literary means. The fictional world of Eudora Welty shows eloquently the multitude of consequences coming out of this orality. If the reader is a symbolic wanderer and the community is ambivalent about its values—and the world, too, possessing the quality of a fairy tale in all that is bitter and sweet—then it means we have to look deeper into these categories, redefining that which ''the whole world knows'': community values, immediate reality, the meaning of the self, the fairy tale and storytelling itself.

In Eudora Welty's fiction we indeed come across the making of a metaphor for the South, which is oral in quality.

> Alexandr Vaschenko. ''That Which the Whole World Knows: Functions of Folklore in Eudora Welty's Stories.'' *Southern Quarterly*. Fall, 1993, pp. 13, 14, 15

The term *chronotop* was coined by bringing together two Greek words, *chronos* (time) and *topos* (space), and was introduced into literary theory by Michael Bakhtin, who believed that each literary genre and form was characterized by a peculiar concept of time-space relationships, in other words, by a peculiar chronotop. Bakhtin described several big novelistic chronotops, changing each other in historical perspective (the chronotops of the ancient novel of adventures, of medieval romance and of Rabelaisian chronotop). He singled out several ''chronotopical motives'' permanently recurrent in literature, such as the chronotops of ''a road,'' of ''a castle,'' of ''a provincial town,'' of ''a threshold,'' etc, each of which he viewed as being symbolic and metaphorical and associated with a particular time—space relationship.

Bakhtin's theory of chronotop can give us a useful vocabulary and a new perspective from which to view Eudora Welty's works, especially because Welty, though not herself a literary theorizer, seems to be preoccupied in her own way with the same problem of time and space as presented in literature. Both Bakhtin and Welty firmly believe that literature depends for its life on reality and a writer ''must accurately choose, combine, superimpose upon, blot out, shake up, alter the outside world'' (*Eye*, 124–25) to create his or her own imaginative ''world.'' And the best way to approach the world of a writer is to describe the images of time and space it evokes, as Welty has shown in her wonderful essays on writers, especially Willa Cather and Jane Austen in *The Eye of the Story*. . . .

Many American critics, though not using Bakhtin's terms, demonstrate the same chronotopical approach to Welty's fiction. . . . Bakhtin's study was based on the principles of historical poetics. The same acceptance of time—space relationships in the study of a genre is made in a very interesting book by Jennifer Lynn Randisi, *A Tissue of Lies: Eudora Welty and the Southern Romance*. Defining the pattern of Southern romance, Randisi brings together three notions: Agrarianism, the South, and Romance. ''If Agrarianism is a point of view,'' she writes, ''then the idea of the South it presupposes is composed both of time seen through place and place viewed over time. . . . Perhaps more than anything else, the Southern Renaissance seeks to fuse time and place into significance'' (156). Bakhtin's theory can broaden our view of the phenomenon of the southern romance and the problem of genre identity in some of Welty's work.

> Natalia Yakimenko. ''Idyllic Chronotop in *Delta Wedding.*'' *Southern Quarterly*. Fall, 1993, pp. 21–22

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WESCOTT, Glenway (1901–1987)

(*The Apple of the Eye*) is a book almost exclusively of emotional propulsion. Indeed, it even becomes a drenching in emotions, those softer, readier emotions which we designate usually as ''feminine,'' an experience purely of ''delight and tears'' (to borrow one of his chapter heads) and is thus a kind of revival in letters, an atavism, albeit a revival which is done with such force, such conviction, that one is caught unawares and before he knows it is deeply involved in these partings (by death and locomotion), this girl like a wilted flower left to perish, these stutterings of love, the sleep-walking in the moonlight, the call, or lure, of the city over hills and plains. . . . In method, Mr. Wescott's chief contribution is the bringing of a greater and more sensitive vitality to a type of book in which the typical novelist would feel very much at home.

> Kenneth Burke. *Dial*. Dec., 1924. pp. 513–4

About *The Grandmothers* I feel it difficult to remain calm. Its appearance at this time is comparable to the occasions when *The Spoon River Anthology* and *Winesburg, Ohio* were first given to the public. Indeed, it bears some superficial likeness to both of those books. . . . *The Grandmothers* is a novel not only with its roots in the American soil, but it is a novel of those roots and of that soil. It is a novel that gives a new significance to American life. It should

inculcate a finer patriotism and a deeper sense of pride of country than all the Fourth of July orations ever delivered.

Burton Rascoe. *Bookman*. Sept., 1927. pp. 86–7

(*The Grandmothers* is) altogether a magnificent record of failure, a stately elegy on lives too fine for success, but in no real sense a novel. A scheme which gives to each life a chapter and to each chapter the import of the whole permits neither movement nor design. But as autobiography, the book provides a not unworthy complement to *The Education of Henry Adams*. The prose, though less spontaneous than in his first novel, is Mr. Wescott's principal accomplishment. He lavishes on the sad and wasted figures in his collection a sort of valedictory elegance, which more than anything else should compensate them for the many losses, the many humiliations.

William Troy. *New Republic*. Sept. 14, 1927. p. 105

Glenway Wescott opens a family album and out of its portraits he makes a book (*The Grandmothers*). From its stained pages ghosts emerge, each with a story. History repeats itself to him—the history of a group of people all bound by ties of blood or marriage, settlers in Wisconsin. The scene has the strong quality of those early days, there is that somber sense of the land, of the growth of the soil and of those who took root there.

Each ghost becomes in turn the shadow of an earlier wraith who left a heritage of energies and impulses. Each life yields its hidden drama; the past gives up its secret. Out of the cross threads of passion is woven the material of this novel. Out of it the author cuts the pattern of the race.

Halle Schaffner. *Survey*. Nov. 1, 1927. p. 161

His is a vision that may be at times extravagant and is certainly open to the charge of cloudy mysticism—but it is a vision, moving and troubling, of a wide, brooding land that (we are at last realizing it) calls not for a Dreiser but for a Dostoevsky. . . . More important than any individual story is the sense they all give of a beautiful and trained style, a style at times over-poetic and at times over-mannered, but which bears within itself many of the qualities of greatness. It is not too much (and certainly not much) to say that Mr. Wescott's prose is among the most beautiful being written in America today.

Clifton Fadiman. *Bookman*. Oct., 1928. pp. 220–1

The Wisconsin of Glenway Wescott is more than a geographical region with natural boundaries of hills and rivers, a landscape of highways and farms. He sees it also as a symbol of narrowness because the old pioneer spirit has dwindled to the restlessness of discontent. . . . Wescott seems to write while remembering, his mind filled with images of places and people seen but half-forgotten, stories heard long ago and recalled in tranquil recollection. . . . He saw the late twilight of the pioneering epoch and he has watched with moving, troubled gaze the effects of those factors that are transforming rural Wisconsin into an urban landscape. . . . He is always the observer, watching, remembering, attempting to explain the implications of a national birthright.

Dayton Kohler. *Bookman*. April, 1931. p. 143

The intimate routines of the family, love's power to survive its own abuses, to arrest the flux and establish continuity, filled the younger Wescott with frank wonder and curiosity. And he used to astonish the sophisticated twenties by exhibiting all this, the stuff of average human experience, as something very rare, almost a mystery. He was the poet of the family album; a repentant Ishmael, to whom his artist's exclusion from the tribe had become a burden. . . . But Wescott the emergent artist has become Wescott the mature spectator, coolly ironic where he used to be impassioned and devout. Clearly he has set out to transcend the nostalgic lyricism of his early work and to bring to bear upon his favorite themes a more complex experience and a more objective method. . . . One hopes . . . that he will not permit his newly acquired irony to dissipate the intensity and peculiar visionary idealism which have always been his strength.

F. W. Dupee. *New Republic*. Dec. 9, 1940. pp. 807–8

The Pilgrim Hawk, with which Glenway Wescott returns to fiction after a twelve-year absence, is less a story of love than a fable. . . . The dramatic substance of his scenes and characters does not manage to sustain the elaborate commentary he has imposed on it. The annotation becomes too elaborate, strained, ingenious, and self-conscious. A tendency toward a worrying preciosity of inference and analysis is never genuinely subdued to the natural volition of events and personalities, and the result becomes too patently contrived and at times almost desperately *voulu*. This is not to minimize the beauty of many of its pages, the great superiority of its style and feeling to the general ruck of fiction, and its always subtly considered, often brilliant observations.

Milton Dauwen Zabel. *The Nation*. Dec. 21, 1940. p. 636

In *Apartment in Athens* Glenway Wescott writes fiction transcendentally, aware that, whatever their ultimate reality, events are known only in individual consciousness, and that social and political developments can be fully understood, fully responded to, fully shared, only as they are related to archetypes, partly unconscious, within the individual. What Wescott is doing imaginatively is so important that we don't mind the failures in surface realism or in information about Greece. But on a higher level the lack of convincing Greekness is still a defect.

Robert Gorham Davis. *New Republic*. April 16, 1945. p. 526

We don't expect a writer of Mr. Wescott's caliber to use his talents in the service of propaganda, and I especially didn't expect him to propagate hatred. To the writer of real creative power there is usually something deeply antipathetic in the act of subordinating free creativity to indoctrination, and where there is as much critical awareness of style as in all of Mr. Wescott's work. I would have expected—though, I now see, mistakenly—to find enough critical

awareness of self to save an author from guilty gestures. We are told that Mr. Wescott calls *Apartment in Athens* his war work. It is the kind of war work we commonly look for, not at the head or heart of intellectual and artistic life, but at its fringes, where conscience seems to exist only to be uneasy.

Diana Trilling. *The Nation*. March 17, 1945. p. 312

In *Apartment in Athens* (1945), Wescott's latest book, Wisconsin is not mentioned at all, just as the world outside Wisconsin does not appear in his first novel. The characters are all European and the scene is Greece during the last world war. Here, then, Wescott has reached the extreme in his travel from West to East. At least as regards literal fictional material, his last work totally abandons the region from which he sprang. It completes a trend of his writing with all the regularity of a linear mathematical equation. Here, too, the respect accorded family and country are quite different from that shown in earlier works. The plot is a thorough fulfillment of the promise that character may be proved under duress, that the stress of invasion may turn marital life into rich understanding and produce both a true family spirit and a proper realization of national humanist ideals.

C.E. Schorer. *College English*. March, 1957. p. 324

For some years middlebrow critics have been pleading for literary criticism based on personal delight, outright enthusiasm, instead of cold, intellectual analyses of structures, symbols, images, textures, etc. Here [*Images of Truth*] are six literary studies (of Katherine Anne Porter, Somerset Maugham, Colette, Isak Dinesen, Thomas Mann, and Thornton Wilder) which are based on subjective experience and expressed with uninhibited candor. This ''old-fashioned'' critic not only uses biography where it can lead to appreciative understanding, but he also draws upon his personal knowledge and varying degrees of friendship (in descending intimacy: with Porter, Maugham, Wilder, Colette). . . .

Although Mr. Wescott is well aware that a novel must give pleasure if it is to have many readers, he does not regard entertainment as a worthy objective of the novelist. For his own part, when he reads for amusement he chooses a fairy story, ''Arabian Nights,'' or one of Isak Dinesen's stories. With Samuel Johnson he agrees that ''the only end of writing is to enable readers better to enjoy life, or better to endure it.''

Gay Wilson Allen. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 6, 1962. pp. 41–2

Bent on sharing his enthusiasm with his readers, Wescott manages now and then [in *Images of Truth*] to lift the veil, so to speak, on the mysteries of creative writing. He is also to be complimented on a highly perceptive and elaborately detailed analysis of the different texts under consideration.

. . . Furthermore, an old hand at story telling, Wescott has wisely livened his somewhat lengthy expository sections with chatty *memorabilia* and, perhaps best of all, ''informal portraiture.''. . . The volume contains little or no adverse comment. On the contrary, such negative matters are left to Wescott's harsher critics, who are apt to seize on the fact that he believes in playing safe, since there is not a loser in the group he backs. . . . Still, there is no law that says he cannot write testimonials to his fellows if he wishes to. Besides, is it not quite a rarity nowadays?

Richard McLaughlin. *Commonweal*. Oct. 12, 1962. pp. 78–9

To a really extraordinary degree, the positive values of the self have remained fixed for Wescott from 1940 on, but the search for a form has gone on. However, unlike many other writers, as the self became fixed in its values, it became less and less creative: from 1920 through 1940 (*The Pilgrim Hawk*) Wescott wrote nine books of varying lengths, a ballet libretto, plus numerous book reviews and essays; from 1941 through 1963 he has written three books, and the last of these (*Images of Truth*) is a collection of nearly everything he has published since 1945. Of equal importance is the fact that Wescott has published no fiction since 1945; this would suggest that, contrary to what almost everyone has said, the search for the self rather than the regional material was the motivating creative force. Fiction seems to have been an active and passive (retrospective) part of that search, something compulsive and necessary as long as the search continued. The basic movement in all of Wescott's fiction is toward knowledge of the principal character. . . .

William H. Rueckert. *Glenway Wescott* (Twayne). 1965. p. 151

A principal question for mankind, according to Glenway Wescott, is the way home, a theme recurring from Homer's *Odyssey* to contemporary novels. Wescott's own fiction can be seen as illustrating this theme; from his stories about Americans in his home state of Wisconsin, to one of an American's experience in Europe, to a story of Greece and its traditions of heroic manhood, his work reflects a journey home, a movement from the place of birth to the place of affinity. Although Wescott has been praised more for his style than for his substance (he once called himself a fussy stylist), in his theme of going home, he has written a kind of Odyssey of an American that deserves attention for itself as well as for its embodiment in his fine prose.

Patricia Kane. *Critique*. Winter, 1965–66. p. 5

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WEST, Nathanael (1903–1940)

Mr. West pierces beneath the surfaces of his material. The tragic lives of his characters impress us even more powerfully because

they are made to seem stupid and comic. We may laugh with the author at these people, but we recognize the essential seriousness which has given his writing its impetus. . . . Mr. Dreiser would have made a tragedy out of this material; Mr. West, in making a satiric comedy of it, has perhaps given a more adequate rendering of men whose warped lives do not offer any theme considerable enough for tragedy.

T.C. Wilson. *Saturday Review*. May 13, 1933. p. 589

His new novel, *The Day of the Locust*, deals with the nondescript characters on the fringe of Hollywood studios. . . . And these people have been painted as precisely and polished up as brightly as the figures in Persian miniatures. Their speech has been distilled with a sense of the flavorsome and the characteristic which makes John O'Hara pedestrian. Mr. West has footed a precarious way and has not slipped at any point into relying on the Hollywood values in describing the Hollywood people. . . . The doings of these people are bizarre, but they are also sordid and senseless. Mr. West has caught the emptiness of Hollywood; and he is, as far as I know, the first writer to make this emptiness horrible.

Edmund Wilson. *New Republic*. July 26, 1939. p. 339

West's contemporaries were realists; he was a kind of superrealist. He often used enormous incongruities to make his points, which gave him a kinship with French writers of the school of Rimbaud and with the later surréalistes; but instead of documenting his perceptions with magnifying-glass clarity, he preferred to distill them into images and situations painfully barren of minutiae. He was an extreme pessimist, which may have been the reason why he never reached a wide audience while he was alive.

Richard B. Gehman. *Atlantic Monthly*. Sept. 19, 1950. p. 69

Nathanael West's saving grace was that, as a man and as a writer, he practiced the fine art of detachment. Although he was as concerned as his colleagues with the ills of Depression America (once he was arrested for joining a picket line in front of a New York department store), he rarely permitted the period's numerous teapot tempests to intrude on his serious writing. As a writer, his preoccupation was with the moral bankruptcy that underlay the surface ills. Specifically, he wrote of the dreams by which man attempts to live and of the violence which perverts these dreams.

Roger H. Smith. *Saturday Review*. May 11, 1957. p. 13

He had the gift of a grotesquely accurate imagination, so much admired in the Nineteen Twenties, but the chief reason why his work is remembered is simply that he could write. He wrote as carefully as if he were chiselling each word in stone, with space around it. He wrote as if he were composing cablegrams to a distant country, with the words so expensive that he couldn't waste them, and yet with the need for making his message complete and clear. In rereading his works one is always surprised to find how short they are. The proof of their value is that they occupy more space in one's memory than they do on the printed page.

Malcolm Cowley. *New York Times Book Section*. May 12, 1957. p. 5

Although West's style and ideas are refined in his later novels, his outlook and method do not, in my opinion, undergo any fundamental changes. For West, the old gods are dead; no miraculous loves or births occur among men any more: at our slightly ridiculous births, ''instead of the Three Kings, the Dove, the Star of Bethlehem, there was only old Doctor Haasen-schweitz who wore rubber gloves and carried a towel over his arm like a waiter.'' Yet we destroy ourselves by holding up an idealized image of mankind that can never be. We indulge in a ''terrible competition'' that demands our ''being more than animals''. Our idealized notion of ourselves derives from our worshiping false gods, cultural as well as religious. West's antidote for this corrupting poison would seem to be his scoffing, humorous vernacular style and his hard, derisive, realistic look at the world without the illusive veil of religion, culture, or art.

Edward G. Schwartz. *Accent*. Autumn, 1957. pp. 255–6

West does not seem finally a really achieved writer; certainly, no one of his books is thoroughly satisfactory, though there are astonishing local successes in all of them. His greatness lies like a promise just beyond his last novel, and is frustrated by his early death; but he is the inventor of a peculiar kind of book, in which the most fruitful strain of American fiction is joined to the European tradition of avant-garde, anti-bourgeois art, native symbolism to imported *symbolisme*. The Westian or neo-gothic novel has opened up possibilities, unavailable to both the naturalistic semi-documentary and the over-refined novel of sensibility, possibilities of capturing the quality of experience in a mass society—rather than retreating to the meaningless retailing of fact or the pointless elaboration of private responses to irrelevant sensations. Putting down a book by West, a reader is not sure whether he has been presented with a nightmare endowed with the conviction of actuality or with actuality distorted into the semblance of a nightmare; but in either case, he has the sense that he has been presented with a view of a world in which, incredibly, he lives!

Leslie Fiedler. *Love and Death in the American Novel* (Criterion). 1960. p. 465

Such psychological tension—in which a man hates the thing he loves and loves the thing he hates—is at the center of every novel West wrote. In *Balso Snell* the repulsion-identification is associated with the entire world of Western mentality. In *Miss Lonelyhearts* it is associated with the modern Christ figure and also with the hordes that the modern—and futile—Christ would save through love. In *A Cool Million* the repulsion-identification is with the American dream and the mob of gullibles deluded by its falsities. In *The Day* the psychological tension is associated with the great unwashed beast—its culture and its political system. . . . Finally, one should note a basic result of this psychological tension: the need to resolve it. Thus at the very center of West's fiction there is the quest for

order—security—and the desperate knowledge that the search for order is doomed to failure.

James F. Light. *American Quarterly*. Spring, 1960. pp. 53–4

His books should, I think, be classified as Cautionary Tales, parables about a Kingdom of Hell whose ruler is not so much the Father of Lies as the Father of Wishes. Shakespeare gives a glimpse of this hell in *Hamlet*, and Dostoievsky has a lengthy description in *Notes from the Underground*, but they were interested in many hells and heavens. Compared with them, West has the advantages and disadvantages of the specialist who knows everything about one disease and nothing about any other. He was a sophisticated and highly skilled literary craftsman, but what gives all his books such a powerful and disturbing fascination, even *A Cool Million*, which must, I think, be judged a failure, owes nothing to calculation. West's descriptions of Inferno have the authenticity of first-hand experience: he has certainly been there, and the reader has the uncomfortable feeling that his was not a short visit.

All his main characters suffer from the same spiritual disease which, in honor of the man who devoted his life to studying it, we may call West's Disease. This is a disease of consciousness which renders it incapable of converting wishes into desires. A lie is false; what it asserts is not the case. A wish is fantastic; it knows what is the case but refuses to accept it. All wishes, whatever their apparent content, have the same and unvarying meaning: ''I refuse to be what I am.'' A wish, therefore, is either innocent and frivolous, a kind of play, or a serious expression of guilt and despair, a hatred of oneself and every being one holds responsible for oneself.

W.H. Auden. *The Dyer's Hand* (Random). 1962. p. 241

There is humor but little joy in West's novels, obsessive sexuality but few consummations (except for that sit-up-and-lie-down doll Betty Prail). The world West shows us is for the most part repulsive and terrifying. It is his genius to have found objective correlatives for our sickness and fears: our maimed and ambivalent sexuality, our terror of the idiot mass, our helpless empathy with suffering, our love perverted into sadism and masochism. West did this in convincing present-day forms of the great myths: the Quest, the Scapegoat, the Holy Fool, the Dance of Death. His strength lay in his vulgarity and bad taste, his pessimism, his nastiness. West could never have been the affirmative political writer he sometimes imagined, or written the novels that he told his publisher, just before his death, he had planned: ''simple, warm and kindly books.'' We must assume that if West had lived, he would have continued to write the sort of novels he had written before, perhaps even finer ones.

In his short tormented life, West achieved one authentically great novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and three others less successful as wholes but full of brilliant and wonderful things. He was a true pioneer and culture hero, making it possible for the younger symbolists and fantasists who came after him, and who include our best writers, to do with relative ease what he did in defiance of the temper of his time, for so little reward, in isolation and in pain.

Stanley Edgar Hyman. *Nathanael West* (Minnesota). 1962. pp. 45–6

So important and redeeming an aspect of West's characters is aspiration that one is tempted to say that it is only the lack of it in Shrike which makes him such an ugly character and which sets him apart from the rest of West's major characters. . . . Unfortunately, aspirations have a tendency to ennoble people—often unduly. West did not want such ennoblement; at least, he never permitted aspiration to have this effect. By selecting goals which are degrading or unattainable, and by making the pursuit of these goals absurd and comical, he has emphasized his characters'—and man's—insignificance; and he has largely done it by focusing on inadequacies of character as well as on defects in society. . . .

For West, entrapment was a fundamental issue: man is trapped, and any pretension at being otherwise leads to tragic frustration and destruction. Yet man's very nature seems to demand ideals, for in West's world, man seems to be unable to exist without dreams. When these dreams are thwarted, as they inevitably are, the result is the boredom of those who ''came to California to die''; the violence of Shrike, Miss Lonelyhearts, Homer, and the crowd in *The Day of the Locust*; or the insanity of Miss Lonelyhearts. For West, man's lot is a miserable one, and only ignorance of that fate can permit one to go on; West makes it clear, however, that he has no sympathy with such ignorance.

Victor Comerchero. *Nathanael West, The Ironic Prophet* (Syracuse). 1964. pp. 164–5

At his most authentic. West is the ''universal satirist.'' His humor is savage and sad, in contrast to [S. J.] Perelman's brash spoofing, and it springs, I think, from his tragi-comic view of the world, from his wry awareness of the disparity between secular facts and his suppressed religious ideals. His slapstick ends in a scream; the self-hatred of his characters, their efforts—sometimes grotesque and always painful—to find answers or relief, only curdles his pity. In *A Cool Million*, as in his other novels, the real culprit is not capitalism but humanity.

Daniel Aaron. *Massachusetts Review*. Winter-Spring, 1965. p. 316

West's satire reached to every aspect of society. Perhaps he may be most accurately called, in Kenneth Burke's phrase, ''a universal satirist'' who, unlike the ''satiric propagandist,'' refuses to make a ''clear alignment of friends and foes'' and condemns both. West adamantly opposed society's excesses and confusions, its muddy and absurd antics, its compromises and corruptions. But behind his irony lay a sense of the possibilities for good of man and society. This was a faith which his experience could neither support nor entirely destroy. He was as passionate about his hopes in private as he was vehement in depicting his horrors in his fiction. . . . Pope justified his satire of fools in *The Dunciad* by explaining that they became dunces by neglecting their ''lawful callings.'' West, similarly, does not satirize men themselves, only the masks men wear and the illusions they cherish: these are their unlawful callings. Though he lived in and wrote of a world riddled with delusion, he seems to have believed with Freud that the future of illusion could be its disappearance. His satire was designed to return man to himself, to his ''lawful callings.''

Jay Martin. *Nathanael West: The Art of His Life* (Farrar). 1970. p. 320

The special, ugly-poetic flavor of West's fiction—the sense of ''flowers that smelled of feet''—sprang from a contradiction in his response toward emotion in others. On the one hand, West was repelled by the ''secondhand'' dreams and feelings of the mass of Americans. On the other, he had—as a result of managing two hotels during the Depression—an acute and aching knowledge of their undeniable suffering. Steaming open letters in the hotels and later cultivating Hollywood grotesques, West was a voyeur of suffering and, guiltily, he knew he had nothing to offer the bored and cheated, except a compassion that they did not want and could not use. His brief books, volleys of scorn and pain, are acts of a generous despair. And yet, so little hopeful was West, so cynical was his generosity, that he ungenerously earned a living by tossing off cheap film scripts in Hollywood—betraying in one medium those whom he pitied in another.

All told, it is false to speak of West—as Jay Martin does—as a moralist in the great tradition of those who have had, in Yeats's words, dreams ''of an impossibly noble life.''

Calvin Bedient. *Partisan Review*. No. 3, 1971. p. 349

After Hemingway, the ''unmistakable'' as the point of style, his special clarity and grace, was to become a faint memory in the violently flashing images with which Nathanael West rendered the atomized emotions of *Miss Lonelyhearts* and the surrealistically overpainted Hollywood of *The Day of the Locust*. West was as prophetic of a new consciousness in fiction as Hemingway had been in his day; his instinct about the evergrowing disturbance around him was to survive him (he was killed speeding to Scott Fitzgerald's funeral in 1940), although even his best writing was impatient, unsteady, and composed by violently oscillating passages, like action painting twenty years later.

Alfred Kazin. *Bright Book of Life* (Little). 1973. pp. 17–8

It has become almost obligatory in any discussion of Nathanael West to mention his affinities with the current literary movement, ''black humor.'' John Hawkes and Flannery O'Connor have directly acknowledged their indebtedness to him, and certainly he is to some extent a forerunner of such other novelists as Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut and Thomas Pynchon. Yet his relationship to the theater of the absurd, which itself can be seen as closely connected to black humor, has not been explored, perhaps because West does not often work in the dramatic form. . . . Whether it has had any direct influence on the drama is uncertain; what is clear is that a close resemblance of motif exists. . . .

Not only are individuals lifeless or dehumanized in West's work, but even Nature, which in the romantic tradition has embodied life and vitality, is portrayed as dead or artificial as well. West emphasizes this particularly through imagery. On one occasion the sky is described as ''canvas-colored and ill-stretched''; at another time its ''luminous color seems to have been blown over the scene with an air brush.'' Yet at the same time that nature and humanity, which we normally think of as alive, are dead, inanimate things come ominously alive; so it seems that the inanimate and the animate have changed places. . . .

Showing the inanimate to be alive is a way for West to accomplish what several critics have pointed to as one of his primary goals—to emphasize the primacy of *things* in our lives, a primacy we have allowed and even encouraged at the expense of our humanity. Certainly West had an interest in presenting material objects of and for themselves, as his fantastic elaborations on the descriptions of the brothel interiors in *A Cool Million* suggest. . . .

It seems clear, then, that whether or not West exerted any direct influence on the dramatists of the absurd, a striking and not merely coincidental congruence of theme and technique can be traced in their works. They all use theatrical imagery in order to suggest the disjunction of appearance and reality, and perhaps even man's inability ever to *know* reality. They all imply the dehumanization of men by describing them as animals or things, and yet concurrently the inanimate comes alive. Of course, the absurdist dramatists have frequently gone a step beyond West in discarding completely any interest in plot or character development in the normally accepted sense. The circularity of the plays embodies the world view behind them—nothing really happens, no progress is made, no resolution is accomplished, either in the plays or in our lives. Yet it is also clear that, though West does not forgo plot resolution, which usually takes the form of violence, the fact that he employs caricature and not humanly recognizable people suggests that he, like the absurdists, believes it is impossible, given modern social and cultural conditions, for the individual to retain a whole, complete, integrated identity. Thus the fact that modern authors who write in different languages and genres have employed similar motifs in their works suggests a common response to features of modern life which make an impression on sensitive men everywhere.

Frank W. Shelton. *Southern Humanities Review*. Summer, 1976, pp. 225, 231–34

Words in the novel [*Miss Lonelyhearts*] fail to do the job West's characters assign them—to reveal a reality beyond themselves. But at the same time the words of the novel, West's words, manage quite successfully to do their job to reveal all they need to, the patterns their sound and sense make. . . . Words do not match reality, fit any empirical facts. Neither do they distort any facts or displace reality. They are not *about* something beyond themselves, an actual person's experience, a historical event. They constitute, rather, their own reality, and their only job is to be true to the structure of which they are a part, that is, to be right, self-consistent, aesthetically correct. . . .

West's novel does disturb us, threaten, because its form makes its theme intensely meaningful, utterly real. Here we witness words falling short of reality, and here, and here, and we watch their continual shortcomings compose an actual pattern of doom. We are unsettled because most of us are, like Dr. Johnson, rock-kickers—we ordinarily assume that our words signify something beyond themselves—and reading this story forces us to face the possibility that they do not. The story defines the issue that has become major in certain circles, ''the problem of language.'' But West simultaneously solves the problem *in* the form, every word of the way. For unlike his characters, malpracticing empiricists all, and unlike most of us, West was, as an artist, a practicing idealist. We know that he got the idea for his novel from seeing actual letters to an advice columnist. Had he been concerned with historical-empirical fidelity, he could have used them more-or-less intact. But we also know that he changed them radically, that he in truth wrote his own letters, to make them right, aesthetically correct. All artists, of

course, change things to suit their purposes, but their purposes have a single premise, that the work of art must be absolutely true to itself, self-integral, one. Then it can stand and unfold itself, an articulated body of ideas, an avatar of Being. . . .

We regard West loosely as a writer ahead of his time. I would say that it is specifically *Miss Lonelyhearts* that warrants this reputation, and that it anticipates in particular the work of Barth, Barthelme, Coover, Elkin, Gardner, Pynchon, of all those writers loosely bunched as comic whose humor, by trying its own limits, examines how language does and undoes us, what it gives and what it takes, what it may mean and what it may not, and if we are at last full of fear and wonder, we should be: Being is finally awful, no matter how we look at it.

J. L. Duncan. *Iowa Review*. Winter, 1977, pp. 124–25, 127

Only in *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust* did [Nathanael] West handle the projection of alter egos with any degree of consistency and maturity. Within these more polished novels, West arrived at the almost formulaic solution of dividing the human psyche into three parts and projecting them onto three kinds of figures: the artistic outsider, as portrayed by the journalist Miss Lonelyhearts and the set designer Tod Hackett; the cynic, as embodied by Shrike and Claude Estee; and the cripple, as seen in Peter Doyle with his lame leg and Homer Simpson with his uncontrollable hands. Taken together, these three character types depict a good measure of West's divided psyche, but they still stop short of complete portrayal. If the psychic incongruity with which West had to contend caused him to view himself as a ''Jew and a not-Jew at the same time'', the combination of these three types reflects only the latter part of that schism, the part of West's personality that aspired towards an identity he did not possess.

Stacey Olster. *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.*. Winter, 1988, p. 58

[*The Day of the Locust*'s] dystopian and nightmarish vision of Hollywood—combined with surreal, dreamlike sequences and black humor—has been profoundly influential for contemporary chroniclers of the L.A. experience (such as Joan Didion, John Gregory Dunne, and Thomas Pynchon), and has obviously influenced [Sam] Shepard's treatment of Hollywood. . . .

In West's noir vision, Hollywood represents not only a landscape of profound instability and entropy but, one in which the American dream has been betrayed. West's lower middle classes have migrated to California in pursuit of the ideal of sunshine and leisure, and then feel ''cheated and betrayed'' by images of glamour propagated in Hollywood film. They look ever hopefully westward. but are doomed to ''boredom and disappointment'': watching the waves off Venice they discover that ''after you've seen one wave you've seen them all'' (145).

Leonard Wilcox. *Modern Drama* 1993, pp. 61, 64

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WHARTON, Edith (1862–1937)

I take to her (Mrs. Wharton) very kindly as regards her diabolical little clevernesses, the quality of intention and intelligence in her style, and her sharp eye for an interesting *kind* of subject. . . . She *must* be tethered in native pastures, even if it reduces her to a backyard in New York.

Henry James. *Letters*, ed. Percy Lubbock (Scribner). 1920. v. 1, p. 396

One of Mrs. Wharton's greatest distinctions is that she is not sentimental; when she succeeds in awakening an emotion in the reader, it is a legitimate one; and she accomplishes it by her art, not through parade of her own feelings. . . . She is detached from her plot. She can stand over and away from her structure and let the story tell itself, absorbing all our attention with a few light touches, and giving finality to all of them. The tenseness of her style and the manner in which she combines eagerness with discipline, poise, and perfection of phrase with lack of mannerism, are the tangible bases of her talent. She plots her stories, sees in her mind's eye the persons who participate in them, how they look, dress, and act, what their background is. She seeks to tell the truth about them, impartially and unemotionally.

Joseph Collins. *Taking the Literary Pulse* (Doran). 1924. pp. 54–5

Despite her artistry. . . . Mrs. Wharton has failed as the eighteenth century failed, by her insistence upon definitions of life in terms of the artificial, in terms of civilization rather than in the fundamentals of Nature. Of the great, quivering, suffering, laboring human mass, she knows little. . . . Nature unadorned she views with all the horror of an Addison or a Pope.

Fred Lewis Pattee. *The New American Literature* (Century). 1930. p. 253

Mrs. Wharton . . . has been far too much the professional novelist to sustain the qualities which first and very justly brought her fame. These were . . . an unflagging distinction of manner and a very high and very penetrating wit. Nor was this all. Her people were very much alive and several of her earlier books at least have that virtue so immensely rare in our letters: architectonic beauty, beauty of inner structure. Yet her work is fading and crumbling and will probably be almost forgotten until a time so detached from the present arises that people can go back to a little of it as to something quaint and sweet and lavendered, wondering that at so late an age a woman as intelligent as Edith Wharton could have taken seriously the conventions of a small and unimportant social group, could have in ultimate judgement identified herself with these futile and fugitive notions and confronted the moral world with the standards of a silly and cruel game.

Ludwig Lewisohn. *Expression in America* (Harper). 1932. p. 466

Nothing was ever more unmistakable in Edith than the quality of the foundations of her culture. She was never delayed in trifling with the easy, the showy, the quickly and cheaply rewarding; she went straight for the best, and no time lost; and she set up her standards once for all, to serve her lifetime. She seemed to be excused the long labor of trying the wrong turnings, following the wrong leads, discarding misfits, such as most of us have to worry through with patience; and this was fortunate, for she had no patience at all or any time for second thoughts and anxious renewals, only an eagerness, never exhausted, for further exploration and acquisition. . . . She was all that was right and regular in her smooth clan-plumage, but the young hawk looked out of her eyes. . . . She actually grasped what she was about, this one, as she settled down to her work and stuck to it; and on fire as she was with her ambition, her head was cool, she knew her place, and her pride in it was as sound as her modesty. The sagest and sternest of the craftsmen must admit that she meets them on their ground.

Percy Lubbock *Portrait of Edith Wharton* (Appleton-Century). 1947. pp. 13, 244

In the stories of Mrs. Wharton, men are condemned for their paucity of understanding. The lament which sounds from Mrs. Wharton's fiction is not that women must inhabit a man's world, but that, because of man's unperceptiveness, each sex is consigned to a different world. . . . Men are the visitors who never arrive. Women wait for them their life long, women who demand neither the vote nor economic equality, women who seldom clamor for a single standard of sex morals. What the women of Edith Wharton's novels crave is an understanding presence, and that man is never able to accord. . . . For the man of Edith Wharton's conceiving, woman is always walled away, by his own blindness; so that she, unbeheld, finally ceases to behold.

Josephine Lurie Jessup. *The Faith of Our Feminists* (R.R. Smith). 1950. p. 80

Especially in her earlier work, Edith Wharton is chiefly concerned with the overpowering effect of social and tribal conventions on the individual. She adheres to the assumption that the reality of these conventions is stronger than Man, who, though he may not always perish in this conflict, will be fatally injured in his happiness. If, in addition to this conception, the role played by blind chance is taken into account, the criteria of a determinist attitude are obvious. It may, however, be necessary to point out that for those readers to whom the cruelty of social conventions is not a reality, a good deal of Edith Wharton's art will be lost.

Heinrich Straumann. *American Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Hutchinson). 1951. pp. 54–5

There was something odd in the resentment with which she seemed to exaggerate the vulgarity of the vulgar and the illiteracy of those whom she disliked. It was as if, in some way, she felt that she was menaced by them, as if she was in some fashion on the defensive, and certain it was that, as a writer, she was not at ease with American life when she left the small magic circle of her old New York. As a rule she could not yield herself to her native world as it actually was, she felt obliged to see it in terms of England, so that she constantly suffered lapses in which her people and scenes no longer corresponded with the reality they assumed to present.

Van Wyck Brooks. *The Confident Years* (Dutton). 1952. p. 278

It is interesting to see how Henry James's insistence on ''form'' in the novel was simplified by his friend and follower, Mrs. Wharton, into mere adherence to plot. The plot must proceed, through all its ramifications, even though characters be wrenched out of shape to serve it. Minor figures, put in purely to prop up the plan, soon are shuffled away, and are featureless from the beginning. The long arm of coincidence snaps up the roving actors and places them down neatly in surroundings cleverly arranged to suit their situation. . . . Mrs. Wharton's work formed a bridge from the nineteenth-century novel to the magazine fiction of the present where, in a superficially arranged scene, manners, clothes, food, and interior decoration are described carefully and at length; how she contained in herself, as it were, the whole transitional period of American fiction, beginning in the bibelot and imported-European-culture era of the late nineties, and ending in the woman's-magazine dream of suburban smartness.

Louise Bogan. *Selected Criticism* (Noonday). 1955. p. 84

To be haunted by George Eliot is a fine, but awesome experience. That great moralist (who was also a great artist) is a convenient ghost at anyone's writing desk, but a formidable presence at the dinner table. Moving as she did in both the literary and the social world, Mrs. Wharton may have felt (other writers have done so) that putting pen to paper was in itself a moral act. This may be one explanation for the unevenness of her writing. She could be sharp and she could be dull; this was true of her not just in her later years but throughout her career.

Wayne Andrews. Introduction to *The Best Short Stories of Edith Wharton* (Scribner). 1958. p. xiii

The technique for her major characterizations moves, as it were, in two directions, both inward and outward. The theory of morality helps her to get at the inner truth of personality, the unique quality which individualizes and sets apart. Convention supplements morality in two ways: first, by providing a basis for contrast, a standard or norm by which the divergences from the usual and typical may be underlined; second, by serving as a control or guide rope for keeping morality within the bounds of the familiar and away from mere eccentricity. Thus Mrs. Wharton's basic technique for creating her central figures is to endow them with certain qualities which fail to fit into the established social pattern but are yet related to it, in this way giving them a greater value and interest than the generality of persons possess. Often the most trivial details are sufficient indication of individuality.

Marilyn J. Lyde. *Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of a Novelist* (Oklahoma). 1959. p. 150

. . .Ethan Frome, when he plunges towards what he considers certain death, is a failure but not a mystery. His behavior is not unmotivated; the tragedy is not contrived. The very heart of the

novel is Frome's weakness of character, his negation of life. Behind that is his true, unfulfilled, relationship with Zeena. Wharton's economy of language in the novel is superb. There is hardly a word unnecessary to the total effect. Her final economy is the very brevity of the book. It fits the scene and character. There were depths to plumb; her people were not simple. To overcome the deficiencies of their natural reticence (and perhaps her own), to retain the strength of the severe and rugged setting, particularly the ''outcropping granite,'' she resorted to a brilliant pattern of interlocking imagery and symbolism. . . .

Kenneth Bernard. *College English*. Dec., 1961. p. 184

Within these traditional limits, and despite her coolness to modernist innovations, Mrs. Wharton was a restless writer, forever seeking new variations of tone and theme, and in her several important novels after *The House of Mirth* rarely troubling to repeat a success. In *The Reef* (1912) she composed a subtle though tenuous drama of personal relations, Jamesian in manner and diction, which deals largely with the price and advantage of moral scruple. In *The Custom of the Country* (1913) she turned to—I think it fair to say, she was largely the innovator of—a tough-spirited, fierce and abrasive satire of the barbaric philistinism she felt to be settling upon American society and the source of which she was inclined to locate, not with complete accuracy, in the new raw towns of the mid-West. Endless numbers of American novels would later be written on this theme, and Sinclair Lewis would commonly be mentioned as a writer particularly indebted to *The Custom of the Country*; but the truth is that no American novelist of our time, with the single exception of Nathanael West, has been so ruthless, so bitingly cold as Mrs. Wharton in assaulting the vulgarities and failures of our society.

Irving Howe. *Encounter*. July, 1962. p. 46

Because of reticence and the mark of scars on her own tissue, she kept on pretending that her imaginary life showed in it little if anything of herself. Yet her imaginary Vance [*Hudson River Bracketed*] could have told her that it was out of her tissue that, as an artist, she fed her visionary offspring. Her great excitement in fantasy was not unrelated to her joys and sorrows in real life, or the theory she devised to account for artistic creation would fall apart. The happiness she knew in watching shy, strange creatures emerge and speak was her happiness, and was shared by them, too. And the control visible in their comings and goings, as they took their journey through a tale, revealed only too vividly the nature of her own precise and judging temperament. The two worlds she would fain have believed isolated from each other were, in not so secret ways, one and the same.

Alexander M. Buchan. *New England Quarterly*. Sept., 1964. p. 362

Ethan Frome, I have no doubt, will always be read, but it is out of the main stream of her work. I believe that she will be remembered primarily for her two great novels of manners: *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*. In these she succeeded in re-creating an unadventurous and ceremonious society, appropriately sheltered behind New York brownstone, looking always to the east rather than to the west, and the impact upon it of the winds that blew from both directions. There were plenty of minor writers who attempted to delineate this society, but among those of the first rank Mrs. Wharton, at least in the first decade of our century, had it to herself. . . . The reason Mrs. Wharton succeeded where so many others have failed is that in addition to her gifts as an artist she had a firm grasp of what ''society,'' in the smaller sense of the word, was actually made up of. She understood that it was arbitrary, capricious, and inconsistent; she was aware that it did not hesitate to abolish its standards while most loudly proclaiming them. She knew when money could open doors and when it couldn't, when lineage would serve and when it would be merely sneered at. She knew that compromises could be counted on, but that they were rarely made while still considered compromises. She knew her men and women of property, recently or anciently acquired, how they decorated their houses and where they spent their summers. She realized that the social game was without rules, and this realization made her one of the few novelists before Proust who could describe it with any profundity.

Louis Auchincloss. *Pioneers and Caretakers* (Minnesota). 1965. pp. 53–4

Her inordinate shyness—what Mrs. Wharton often spoke of to her intimates as her ''long, cold agony of shyness''—grew a shell about the child. Within it already were the seeds of everything that makes up the woman. The shell was never quite dissolved. It lasted to the woman's last day. Mystification enters only because the shell changed its contours, its consistency and its coloration. For the child it was soft, vulnerable, amorphous, dull-hued. For the woman it was tenacious of its form, impervious, brilliantly glazed, iridescent. But it was the same shell. For the child it was symbolized by a deserted library, for the woman by a crowded drawing room. Dim library or salon bright with the rainbow lights of prismed chandeliers—they can be equally retreats.

Grace Kellogg. *The Two Lives of Edith Wharton* (Appleton-Century). 1965. p. 42

Mrs. Wharton writes two distinct versions of the naturalistic novel, corresponding to her double vision of the possibilities of human tragedy. In her first kind of novel, ''things'' encumber the individual, binding him to a permanently indifferent universe. Fundamentally a novel of self or psyche, this version delineates the tragedy of aspiration. Inevitably held and defeated by his alien surroundings, the protagonist nonetheless aspires, imaginatively and intellectually, to strike through the bondage of things into the personal freedom and fulfillment that he can only suppose might be his. . . .

In her second kind of novel not the natural, but the human ''things'' of a hollow society are so devoid of meaning that the individual drifts aimlessly among them. People are defined by their clothes or houses; they are spoken of, usually, in terms of the machine culture that they mentally exemplify, as ''a screw or a cog in the great machine.'' . . . In the midst of a society filled with human automata, Mrs. Wharton sets seekers after human fulfillment. Here she writes a picaresque novel of manners in which the individual seeks satisfaction in collectives as far apart as vulgar parvenu parties and ''republics of the spirit.'' Again and again,

however, he is alienated by the indifference or emptiness of society; he can find no satisfactory way of penetrating social things, and so wanders vaguely across the changing surface of society.

Jay Martin. *Harvests of Change* (Prentice). 1967. p. 266

Mrs. Wharton seems to be saying that, from a spiritual perspective, society, considered as the supreme lawgiver, is an illusion or a downright fiction. It is an arena of distraction, a kind of Vanity Fair. What *The House of Mirth* asserts is that no life possesses spiritual vitality until it is motivated by belief in its own significance. Obviously, the enigmatic and revelatory word that Lily does not achieve until the end of her life is ''faith.'' Only with it can a successful quest be pursued against all the equivocating counterclaims and inducements of society, against the ostensible absurdity of life itself. . . .

Faith, as Edith Wharton defines it, is no generalized and temperamental optimism; it is, instead, an almost mystical assurance that only moral action can save the ever-threatened continuity of human existence. Beset by dangers inherent in social arrangements, man clings to survival by the thread of his moral instincts; he is, at his best, motivated by what Mrs. Wharton calls, in *Sanctuary*, ''this passion of charity for the race.'' In other words, goodness is useful, and men and women must, under pain of extinction, bequeath it to their children.

James W. Gargano. *American Literature*. March, 1972. pp. 140–1

In her best, most representative works, Mrs. Wharton continually returned to the idea of tradition and the need of viable modes of cultural transmission as important factors affecting the character of man's social history. She continually argued the necessity of the individual's commitment to the cultural tradition; the danger of alienation from it; the catastrophe which ensues when social upheavals like revolution, anarchy, and war destroy the slowly and delicately spun web of that tradition; and the necessity of imaginatively preserving—if necessary even reconstructing—the precious values of the past. Her artistic treatment of the theme of tradition usually involved two methods. The first was to dramatize the importance for men of the web of culture, manners, and mores which enclose them and to warn of the disaster in store for those who become culturally deracinated or alienated and for those who destroy the delicate web in a radical obsession to reform it. And the other method, evident in the final years of her life, was an impulse to reconstruct—archeologically, as it were—the social world of her youth: the traditions which vitalized the culture of Old New York in the period from about 1840 to 1880. She hoped to revive the memory of a set of slowly evolved cultural values suddenly wiped out by a succession of destructive changes in American life beginning in the 1880's—including the rise of the industrial plutocracy (''the lords of Pittsburgh,'' as she called them); massive immigration which totally altered the ethnic character of New York City; the first World War, the depression, and the New Deal; and the nationalistic hatreds, at the close of her life in 1937, building toward the Second World War.

James W. Tuttleton. *The Yale Review*. Summer, 1972. pp. 564–5

The value of [Wharton's] work may have little to do with its hidden origins; but creative work, as a writer, gardener, and interior decorator, was clearly what rescued her. Without that she would have succumbed to the panics of her childhood, the breakdowns of her early married years, and the neurotic depressions and exhaustions of maturity. A woman of incredible energy and vitality, she kept her balance with the help of a relentless social round, but it was literary accomplishment that supplied the gyroscope of her selfhood.

From the abundance of her bleak frustrations Wharton wrung a view of human possibility that must touch any perceptive reader. She may seem to deal with the evolution of manners and the woes of marriage. But she really employs these materials to illustrate deep and persuasive moral insights. A story like ''Bunner Sisters,'' a novella like *Ethan Frome* or *Summer*, achieves its immense power by the victory of her imagination over the apparent straitness of her background. In these amazing works she deals with the most impoverished of American lives, always implying that in the lowest as in the highest strata of society the chance of sinking yet farther or of aspiring yet higher remains present. No class is exempt from the dangers of pride or the chastening rod of humiliation.

Irvin Ehrenpreis. *New York Review of Books*. Nov. 13, 1975. p. 6

In her major works Edith Wharton was able to evoke the metaphysical and symbolical implications of the situations which she was presenting. She knew how to maintain the single point of view while juxtaposing the narrator's varying depths of consciousness in order to achieve intense dramatic effects. She was also able to give moments of significant experience permanent form as viable works of art. She was adept at suggesting dimensions of experience that would ordinarily escape a literal transcription of it. As a result, she furnished the sensitive reader with fragmentary clues enabling him to divine implicitly her interpretation of her subject. . . .

Edith Wharton, seen in perspective, is a novelist who provides a link between the morally and psychologically oriented works of Hawthorne and James, who preceded her, and the later Realists like Sinclair Lewis or F. Scott Fitzgerald with their tendency toward the sardonic and iconoclastic. Edith Wharton may not have been capable of Hawthorne's moral inclusiveness, infinite perceptiveness, and imaginative reach which, as James said, made him ''a habitué of a region of mysteries and subtleties'' where he took as his province ''the whole deep mystery of man's soul and conscience . . . the deeper psychology.'' She may also have been incapable of James's firm but infinitely subtle probing of the human mind and of his dissecting of the various nuances of behavior, conscious or unconscious, in any given scene.

But, like both Hawthorne and James, Edith Wharton was sensitive to the ambiguities in inner experience, in human behavior, and in many generally accepted ethical and metaphysical formulations. More than they, she, of course, understood the intricacies involved in living as a woman in a world set up for the social, economic, and sexual advantage of men. Sensitive as she was to the complications inherent in human motives and values, she tended in her work, as James did in his, to illuminate rather than resolve the complex issues and situations that she subjected to her scrutiny. She drew few simple conclusions about class, society, or individuals. More than James, she had the ability to assimilate natural landscape and urban milieu into her art and to make consummate use of such settings as active factors in the unfolding psychic drama

in her work. In this respect she seems closer to Hawthorne than to James. . . .

She is a moralist as well as a mannerist. She transcends the realistic aspects of her world by striking intuitions into the psychic motivations of her characters. Though she did not herself use some of the later techniques of dream, association, distortion, and imagery that enable a writer to penetrate the innermost recesses of a character's psyche, she was, essentially and at her best, a psychologist in fiction. She continued the Jamesian propensity for disengaging ''crucial moments from the welter of existence'' to ascertain their true worth and significance and to determine how they affect the psyches and moral life of her characters.

Margaret B. McDowell. *Edith Wharton* (Twayne, 1976), pp. 142–44

The emotional problems that had dominated Wharton's earlier fictions—the sense of desolation, the need to place sexuality—had been problems that she knew at first hand. Now that is no longer the case. She may have felt driven to write repeatedly about the feelings of parents toward their children; however, she could only infer the nature of such feelings. She may have longed for family (the tone in fiction after fiction suggests as much), but she had none. In fact, although she made wholehearted efforts to get to know ''les jeunes,'' she was more and more alone, and she felt increasingly alienated from the manners and practices of the younger generation. The inability to marshal her energy efficiently in these works bespeaks her uncertainty, and the tone in many of them is mixed. When she is at her best, Wharton captures the poignancy of aging. At other times, her management of the fiction grows less felicitous: increasingly, her satire lapses into an uncharacteristic querulousness, and everything about the postwar world is dismissed as vulgar and cheap. . . .

In her last novels, for the first time, if we do not read carefully, we might be misled into accepting the stereotype of ''Edith Wharton: The Author'' that has prevailed since her death: a haughty woman, cold, faintly supercilious, with the imperious remove that only breeding and great wealth can confer. That persona is there sometimes, on the surface; yet below, there is someone quite different. Defensive and wary, with desperate (and hopeless) longings, loneliness, and apprehension. Wharton's own epoch had passed, and she had never truly lived in it; now, too late for reconciliations, it was gone forever.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff. *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (Oxford Univ. Pr., 1977), pp. 343–44

She moves beyond the subject of literal motherhood to meditation on the maternal principle itself and, combining literary, anthropological, and religious ideas, evokes the gods in which she believes the modern world stands in need. Those gods are female. They are the Mothers to whom Goethe had his Faust descend; they are the primordial maternal center of life whose loss to the Western world is recorded in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, from which Edith Wharton at an early age took the image of the Furies that was to stay with her throughout her imaginative life but only in old age acquire the power of gender. They are—the Mothers of Wharton's last finished work, which she needed two volumes to contain—her mystical solution to a lifetime of tough-minded analysis, argument and debate on the subject of woman. . . . So when Edith Wharton directed her thoughts on motherhood and cultural continuity (or renewal) toward the mythic, toward the concept of the Great Mother of prehistory, she was moving into modern but not uncharted or untrod territory. Other writers were simultaneously engaged in the intellectual adventure that anthropologists and a few imaginative classicists had, before them, begun to explore. . . .

Wharton took the image of the Mothers from Goethe and then developed it into her own mystical philosophy of maternal wisdom, which she applies in her last two novels [*Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*] both to the marital bond and to the artist's creative process. . . .

All of her life Edith Wharton saw men as weakly affairs. The most common criticism of her fiction has always been that her male characters do not compare with her women, and the charge is just. No man in Wharton's canon can come up to the mark of a Justine Brent or an Ellen Olenska or a Rose Sellars—to name only three out of many. In part the men do not measure up because Wharton's point, exactly, is that patriarchal society has made of men tyrants and fools. But lying even deeper, it must be admitted, has always been her gut-belief in the innate inferiority of men. Not until her last novel, however, in the figure of Halo Tarrant, who partakes of the strength and potency of the Mothers, did Wharton openly confront her own notion of inherent female superiority and develop it into an intellectually provocative, even if fundamentally conservative, concept. . . .

In her last two novels Wharton, it could be said, absorbed rather than feared the Furies. With them, so to speak, she tried to call America back to the ancient Mothers, the awesome matriarchs of Bachofen and then before him Goethe and then before either, so she seems to have believed, all human thought itself.

If this final, highly romantic vision of Wharton's is saddening—and in many ways it is: it conceives of women in totally maternal terms, it writes men off once and for all, it reverses rather than equalizes or eradicates the hierarchy of gender—it is also intriguing. . . .

It is tempting to imagine that she might have returned to the issues of power, creativity, and healing raised in her last two novels about modern Americans and found a way to harmonize her newly articulated mysticism about femaleness with her old concern for women's lives in the here-and-now. But that perhaps, given the vitality of her argument with America on the subject of women from *The House of Mirth* through *The Age of Innocence*, may be a little like wanting to modernize an old house. Maybe we don't need less than what we have.

Elizabeth Ammons. *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* (Univ. of Georgia Pr., 1980), pp. 189–91, 194–96

Wharton's greatest talent was the ability to recognize the secret gods of American society and to approach them with an air of irreverence, an attitude nearly sacrilegious, to expose them as the empty idols they are. She understood that what America worshiped more than anything else was wealth. She knew that her mother's dictum, ''Never talk about money, and think about it as little as possible,'' reflected not a disdain for wealth but an attempt to hide an obsession. She watched (and chronicled) the rise of the Beauforts, the Rosedales, and the Abner Spraggs of the world to the position of national heroes, and she showed the results of this overwhelming

materialism. Novel after novel depicts the consequences of regarding the world as a marketplace, describes the dehumanization of those frozen in materialism, especially of the women who become commodities. In old New York the most salable woman, Wharton perceived, was the virginal child bride, May Welland; later a taste developed for the more sophisticated but equally ornamental type of Lily Bart; in the twenties a more corrupted but equally decorative type, the flapper, Lita Wyant, prevailed. But each was the commodity demanded by a materialistic world—a woman without soul, without self, distorted and twisted from her true nature into a marketable product, one whose nightmare form was Undine Spragg.

Wharton knew it was not only women who suffered from this worship of wealth. If women lost their souls to become pretty things, men sold their souls—Ralph Marvell to attain his fantasy of egotistic escape, Selden and John Amherst to maintain secure positions in worlds they pretended to disdain. And the business of acquiring, protecting and increasing one's wealth, Wharton saw, kept one from the business of living. . . .

Money, that supreme American god, was Wharton's first target. This obsessive materialism degraded and destroyed many, and its power ruled in every period of American life that Wharton observed. But Wharton saw another American deity as almost equally dangerous, for she understood the consequences of the country's veneration of another false god—the idol of pleasure.

Pleasure is perhaps too strong a word to describe the secret god of old New York, for there the hidden idol was the milder goal of peace of mind, freedom from unpleasantness. Wharton knew that everyone seeks this peace, but she also perceived that what made old New York evil was its desire to achieve this peace at any cost. . . .

Conflict, tragedy, and pain were terrifying to Americans, and Wharton saw that their way of dealing with them was through belief in another god—the easy answer. Wharton knew that what America expected of life was ''a tragedy with a happy ending''. . . . America did not want to believe that ''things are not always and everywhere well with the world,'' and preferred to retreat to the formula, to the answer that avoided conflict and required no thought. In Newland Archer's world the easy answer was the resort to the dictates of good form; for every problem there was an immediate and accessible rule to follow. When these rules fell apart, revealed as the empty conventions they were, Wharton identified a new set of panaceas that came to be worshiped in the twenties. These were the gurus, masseurs, rejuvenators, and spiritual advisers of the time, the people who sustain Pauline Manford's existence in ''an atmosphere of universal simplification,'' who feed her need to believe that ''America really seemed to have an immediate answer for everything, from the treatment of the mentally deficient to the elucidation of the profoundest mysteries.'' Whether the time was 1870 or 1920, Wharton satirized the folly of this retreat from the complexity of life's conflicts.

> Carol Wershoven. *The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton* (Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Pr., 1982), pp. 164–67

In her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, Edith Wharton wrote that the publication of *The House of Mirth* in 1905 had transformed her at the age of forty-three from a ''drifting amateur into a professional'' author. Wharton's long and tortuous apprenticeship has been charted by her biographers as a narrative of personal growth and psychological integration, achieved in rebellion against the social confinement of women to passive domestic roles. Wharton, however, maps out a different route toward professionalism, one that does not treat the writing process as a diadic relation between the author's self and the object she creates, but instead emphasizes the mediating social context in which art is produced. . . .

The trajectory of Wharton's apprenticeship may help us reevaluate not only her developing conception of authorship but also the import of the social criticism that later emerges in her novels. Wharton has long been viewed as an antimodernist, a critic of the crass consumerism of the nouveau riche from the perspective of the stalwart traditionalist. This approach has relegated her to the margins of American literary history as a novelist of manners or an aloof aristocrat clinging to outmoded values. Such a view ignores the fact that the power of Wharton's social criticism stems not from the external perspective of a writer who resisted an incipient consumer culture, but from one whose identity as an author and whose narrative forms were shaped by her immersion in this very modern culture. Recent feminist criticism has recuperated a sense of Wharton's modernity by calling attention to her critique of the commodification and objectification of women at the turn of the century. This approach places her in a separate tradition of women's literature as ''one of our American precursors of a literary history of female mastery and growth.'' Yet Wharton's treatment of the status of women cannot be separated from her representation of that pervasive market system of exchange which transforms the production of literature and the nature of authorship as well as the meaning of gender at the turn of the century. Through her participation in the changing profession of authorship, Wharton's enmeshment in the consumer society she so ruthlessly portrays may have contributed to her often-overlooked influence on a younger generation of writers in the twenties, such as Sinclair Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald, who rejected their male precursors for practicing what they saw as a stifling Victorian realism. The task still remains to reassess Wharton's place in American literary history not as an antimodernist nor a woman writer alone, but as a professional author who wrote at the intersection of the mass market of popular fiction, the tradition of women's literature, and a realistic movement that developed in an uneasy dialogue with twentieth-century modernism.

> Amy Kaplan. ''Edith Wharton's Profession of Authorship.'' *English Literary History*, Summer, 1986, pp. 433–34, 453–54

What happens if we throw out the standard categories of periodization that we have all been accustomed to accept for the years running from the end of the nineteenth century through the third decade of the twentieth—''Naturalism,'' the ''Twenties,'' the ''Harlem Renaissance''—and follow instead for women writers the contours being established by women's historians and by the careers of women writers themselves, contours suggesting literary historical continuity and coherence (rather than rupture) from the nineties through the twenties?

It is significant, of course, that the inherited categories themselves by definition marginalize the work of women. Wharton, by almost any standard the major American fiction writer of the first two decades of the twentieth century, fits into the category neither of Naturalism nor of the Lost Generation. Likewise [Jessie Redmon] Fauset, though usually mentioned in discussions of the Harlem

Renaissance, shows up in most of those discussions as a misfit. She appears as a writer failing at the central task of the Harlem Renaissance—to rebelliously break through sexual and formal barriers. It is important to point out that this is what Naturalists and the twenties' triumvirate of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner are also said to be doing—and Wharton, like Fauset, is frequently said to be failing at. In short, white or black, one of the major women fiction writers of her generation—Wharton in the first two decades of the twentieth century, Fauset in the New Negro 1920s—is conveniently defined by existing literary historical categories as peripheral, anomalous, out-of-step. One possibility is to accept this definition of female literary productivity. Another is to reconceptualize the era by placing women at the center. . . .

What happens when women writers rather than men are taken as the starting point for literary history at the turn of the century?

For one thing, a rich contemporary context emerges for someone like Wharton. She is not an oddball. The contour of her career reverberates in that of Ellen Glasgow and Willa Cather and Mary Austin and Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Charlotte Perkins Gilman (as well as others). Originating in the 1890s and running through the 1920s, it emanates from a coherent even if complex time span not suggested by standard male history and literary history, governed as they are by the dividing line of the First World War, but clearly suggested by women's history: social, political, and literary. No longer an isolated genius stranded somewhere between the rotundity of [Henry] James (which is to say, the second half of the nineteenth century) and the skinny insecurity of [F. Scott] Fitzgerald (whose motorcar and ''shrink'' fiction predicted us), Edith Wharton seen through the lens of the new literary history, which takes seriously the work of women writers, including women of color, has a rich and complicated—as well as highly competitive (as she well knew)—context.

> Elizabeth Ammons. ''New Literary History: Edith Wharton and Jessie Redmon Fauset.'' *Contemporary Literature*. Fall, 1987, pp. 208–9

As her own memoirs and those of others make clear, Wharton was emphatically not a feminist in the ordinary sense of the word. On the contrary, she seems often to have gone out of her way to present herself as an old-fashioned ''man's woman'' who felt nothing but contempt for New Womanly strivings. In *A Backward Glance* (1937), for instance, the autobiography she published almost a decade after Virginia Woolf had celebrated women's colleges in *A Room of One's Own*, Wharton dismisses female learning and upholds traditional domestic virtues. It is deeply regrettable, she declares, that the ''ancient curriculum of housekeeping . . . at least in Anglo-Saxon countries, was . . . swept aside by the 'monstrous regiment' of the emancipated; young women taught by their elders to despise the kitchen, and the linen room, and to substitute the acquiring of university degrees for the more complex art of civilized living. . . . Cold storage, deplorable as it is,'' she adds sardonically, ''has done far less harm to the home than the Higher Education.'' More specifically, when Mary Berenson sent her a copy of *The Cause* (1928), her daughter Ray Strachey's history of the suffrage movement, Wharton thanked her but commented that in her view ''women were made for pleasure and procreation.''. . .

Nevertheless, despite all this evidence that Edith Wharton was neither in theory nor in practice a feminist, her major fictions, taken together, constitute perhaps the most searching—and searing—of the construction of ''femininity'' produced by any novelist in this century. For in fact there is little reason to suppose that Wharton misogynistically scorned woman per se. Rather, as recent critics from R. W. B. Lewis and Cynthia Griffin Wolff to Elizabeth Ammons have observed, what she loathed was what woman had been made to become. . . .

In fact, the two major kinds of feminist possibilities celebrated by so many of her precursors and contemporaries seemed to Wharton to be nonexistent or delusive. On the one hand, she repudiated the notion that bonds of sisterhood might be formed in what Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has called the ''female world of love and ritual'' that was woman's separate sphere, and on the other hand, she did not believe in the ''shoulder to shoulder'' feminist solidarity that supposedly marked the colonies of the New Woman.

> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the 20th Century. Vol. 2: Sexchanges* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Pr., 1989), pp. 126–29

[The] social conservatism in Mrs. Wharton makes her a doubtful ally of feminists who wish to substitute for the traditional form of man-woman relationships a new social order based on the views of Betty Friedan, Bella Abzug, and the editors of *Ms*. magazine. Theirs are of course not new ideas but have their origin in the radical socialist egalitarianism of the Enlightenment and in the Marxist extrapolation. (This much has been conceded by feminist theoreticians: Toril Moi, in *Sexual/Textual Politics*, openly concedes that ''the principal objective of feminist criticism has always been political''; Elaine Showalter confesses that the ''theoretical affiliations'' of feminism are with ''Marxist sociology and aesthetics.'') What would Mrs. Wharton have thought of the feminist appropriation of her fiction for the purpose of a sexual revolution?

It is worth remembering that Mrs. Wharton explored the utility of radical egalitarian ideas in *The Valley of Decision* (1902), a long historical novel devoted to the impact of the *philosophes* on the Duke of Pianura, in Italy, in the late eighteenth century. . . . Mrs. Wharton's portrait of the horrors created by the arbitrary imposition of the noble but abstract ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity on an actual society composed of complex interacting interests is ghastly; but it is no less so than the actual historical record of the Terror, on which her novel was based. In a sequel that she never finished, to be called *The New Day*, she described the counterrevolution that followed, in which the last case proved to be worse than the original conditions in Pianura.

For Mrs. Wharton, any needed social change had to come about by a gradual orderly process, based on recognition of the traditional rights of all of the classes involved, in the light of the conventional duties and responsibilities socially required of each sex; and it had to be based on a shrewd foresight of the consequences of any action taken to alter the balance of interests that constitutes a living society. . . .

I suspect she would have taken a similar stance in regard to the feminist ambition to make over our society in a female image. But I do not expect her fundamental conservatism to deter our feminist literary critics from making her fiction out to be an attack on the social order as it has come down to us, men and all.

> James W. Tuttleton. ''The Feminist Takeover of Edith Wharton.'' *The New Criterion*. March, 1989, pp. 13–14

Edith Wharton's conscious conviction that order underlay all that was best in society and art meant that, when it came to describing and formulating a theory of fiction, the classical principles of proportion, decorum, harmony, and form, achieved through conscious intention and selection, were inescapable. But her intellectual wish for rules and formulae to guide the writer could not override her intuitive knowledge of an inexplicable, subjective quality coming from an unknowable source within the individual artist. Artists, as she showed in her fiction, were born before they could be made, vital though their education was. Thus, in theorizing on the art of fiction, she tends to fall between the two stools of dogmatic assertion and vague speculation. But it was perhaps her dual and, in many ways, contradictory nature that gave Edith Wharton much of her strength as a writer of fiction and softened the didactic tone of her recollections of life and travel.

The romantic side of Edith Wharton is discernible in the themes of isolation and loneliness in her fiction, in the importance she places on the longing for freedom in her characters, in her language and images in fiction and nonfiction, in her idea of the dual nature of artist and in her interest in the artist as a hero. It is also manifested in her view of the creative process as being charged by unconscious forces and an imagination developed and fed by human experiences. But those unconscious activities were always under the control of a ''guiding rational intelligence.'' This view reflects a favorite simile of Goethe whom Edith Wharton greatly admired: that, like warp and weft, the interweaving of consciousness and unconsciousness formed the creative process. . . .

The tension between reason and imagination, between the objective and subjective powers, that was a positive creative force for Edith Wharton was understood by her as such: and yet her disposition for harmony and discipline led her to want to resolve that tension. Not only did she explore in her fiction about the artist the concept of inspiration and the problem of its expression more deeply than she did in her own voice, but the tension between the artist's internal and external life provided central themes and plots. Her view of the artist as a unique individual with potentially anarchic powers was uneasily fitted into a theory of fiction and a world view which saw order as the ideal, but such conflict was perfect material for fiction. In fiction she was able to present her precepts for life and art dramatically opposed to her romantic, intuitive view of the artist's internal life and yet reconcile them. By showing the artist as having an innate gift of which he is unable to make full use until he has sounded his own depths and accepted his humanity as well as his genius, on the one hand, and until he has absorbed traditional culture and forms and learned that he must make concessions to society, on the other hand, she harmonized freedom with discipline and order. (For whatever reason, because Edith Wharton's artists are all men—with two exceptions—I have referred to the artist as ''he'' throughout this book.) Conforming to traditional standards in art and in behavior, as she did herself, allowed the individual freedom of the imagination, and allowed, finally, ''the gods to arrive.''

Penelope Vita-Finzi. *Edith Wharton and the Art of Fiction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), pp. 2–3

I believe that Wharton criticism needs to move out of the house of feminist protest, where society is always male dominated and female suffering is mostly male inflicted, to those woods and witches, the world of the female that both sexes fear. I am suggesting risking entry into the wilderness, the wilderness within, that world of nature, our own deepest nature where men sense abandon and madness and women fear rejection and self-disgust.

Whatever the origin of the deprivations and repressions, the impoverished lives of Wharton's heroines have inflicted psychic damage and estrangement. I propose that we see Wharton's heroines as tormented and suffering individuals whose precarious self-esteem has erupted into narratives of flight and self-defeat. To quote a younger contemporary of Wharton, Virginia Woolf, ''It takes little skill in psychology to be sure that when [one] is thwarted and hindered by other people, tortured and pulled apart by [one's] own contrary instincts, that [one] may have lost [one's] health and sanity to a large degree.'' The necessary wholeness or ''health'' as Woolf asserts, must be lacking and Wharton's female protagonists must be disturbed. Such arrangements are still human conditions deserving compassion and expression.

Fortunately for sensitive readers, such women's sabotaging narratives have been re-created by women writers. I suggest we reclaim these forbidden selves, their buried texts, these alienated, tabooed, even most disagreeable desires and feelings and yield up through our critical writings full and complex portraits of the real women in Edith Wharton's *oeuvre*. . . .

I am urging that we see Wharton not merely as a literary proselytizer of feminist protest or more recently as a creator of female heroes, but as a psychological novelist whose fictional portraits capture fragile, wounded, and doomed women. Ironically, Wharton criticism has been moving in such directions for her male characters. Their reticences, their obtuseness, their callousness, even their self-entrapments and ''homosexual panics'' (of which ''All Souls'' may be the female version) are being thoroughly limned.

Annette Zilversmit. '''All Souls': Wharton's Last Haunted House and Future Directions for Criticism.'' In Alfred Bendixen and Annette Zilversmit, eds. *Edith Wharton: New Critical Essays* (New York: Garland, 1992), pp. 326–27

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WHEELOCK, John Hall (1886–1978)

He acknowledges the message of Whitman, even as every musician must feel the impress of Wagner, every sculptor the force of Rodin. . . . It is just because Mr. Wheelock is so much in touch with today that he seems so often to be speaking with the accents of Whitman. But, though he too insists on the glory of the commonplace . . . , he strikes out for a freedom of style and utterance entirely his own. . . . At its best Mr. Wheelock's poetry is clear, revealing and full of that high realism which is the color of life. He has something of the vision which uplifts sensuality, and enough of the realist's passion to save mysticism from itself, and humanize it.

Louis Untermeyer. *New York Times Book Section*. Dec. 29, 1912. p. 800

At its best the poetry of John Hall Wheelock has been notable for a gravity in feeling and reflection which has given it, at times, a sober romantic beauty quite its own in character. . . . Abstaining from experiment is his privilege, probably his advantage. . . . The grandiose, the ingenious, the clever and exciting elements of the art are not for him. With a firm lonely sobriety he now addresses a life sombrely shaded. . . . In his ripe unbaffled sincerity there is still a true, if uneventful, meditative beauty.

Morton Dauwen Zabel. *Poetry*. Feb., 1927. pp. 280–2

Mr. Wheelock knows how to be alone and how to make friends with humanity and the distant suns in the vast silence that is himself. . . . This poet can trace the line in the marks a mouse's feet make in the dust or in the rays of a star in outer space, and can see them as foliations of the same scroll. He can handle the mystic magnitudes, yet he can be private in his tenderness as well. Without the ancient theological designs, he can find deity.

Robert P. Tristram Coffin. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Dec. 13, 1936. p. 18

His eclecticism is enormously wide; but if ghosts as dissimilar as Wordsworth, Matthew Arnold, Tennyson, Blake, and even Sydney Lanier, sometimes rise from his pages, they are conjured before us by the magic of a genuine intuition; and their intrusion cannot dissipate the conviction we have of witnessing the impact upon a man of sensibility and surcharged feeling of a world physically real. . . . His most marked virtues are due to his amazing instinct for representing moods with appropriate cadences; and to capacities which have prolonged through years those excitements in physical living, that elan from tragedies, which, in most of us, escape after youth.

Evelyn Scott. *Poetry*. May, 1937. pp. 102–3

John Hall Wheelock shows himself a devoted and sincere disciple of the art, but more notable for the sense of exaltation with which he writes than for his actual performance on the page. . . . Mr. Wheelock's whole poetical stock seems to consist of rapturous but undifferentiated, unparticularized feeling; and as the emotion is undefined, so the expression is indistinct, putting up with all manner of phrases from the common sentimental store. . . . At times the genuineness of his emotion proves communicable, and then the reader comes on a passage in which a sense of exalted participation in the sum of things is truly given. This is Mr. Wheelock's poetry at its best; at its all too frequent worst it is a poetry of pink mist.

Theodore Morrison. *Atlantic Monthly*. June. 1937. Unpaged

He sings; his concept of poetry is ecstatic, vatic; even in his latest work the grand public manner of his youthful poems compels though less overtly, the gesture of composition.

Because the manner is grand, and because the purity of the emotion finds, at moments of greatest intensity, modes of declamation that are just and persuasive, we find from the very beginning poems and parts of poems that have the definitive rightness. These are the passages that establish Mr. Wheelock—not in the vatic tradition, where I suspect he would like to be, but in the soberer tradition of poets who enforce a more human response. The less oratory, the more conviction.

Dudley Fitts. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 9, 1956. p. 10

It is, of course, not simply his preference for accepted forms that makes Mr. Wheelock a traditionalist. He writes about the human condition not as it has been affected by such thinkers as Marx, Freud, and Einstein, by the dazzle that the hydrogen bomb and the IBM diversely provide, but in terms that would have been understood by men living in Jerusalem in the first century of our era or in Athens five centuries earlier. Recent ideological and technological revolutions have not been big enough, however, to silence the old questions about the half-known self and the great unknown Other. . . . Poems that speak feelingly of these matters, with candor and with the force bred of economy, have a durable value. Mr. Wheelock's most carefully wrought lyrics belong.

Babette Deutsch. *Poetry*. Feb., 1957. pp. 320–1

John Hall Wheelock's career as poet is a curious one. It is not exceptional for a lyric poet to be prolific in his youth—as Wheelock was—and then run thin and dry in his forties—as Wheelock

did. . . . But what is really curious, and all but unique, is the revival of his talent in the past ten years; better still, the improvement of it. . . . The effort is to bring the language into a simpler, more natural tone; and to make, one can say, better sense. It is this effort—to abandon rhetoric, to walk without the embroidered coat—which makes the . . . new poems . . . so much more meaningful reading, so much more *real*. One can say ''against'' some of the recent poems that the pulse is low and the language meandering, but on the whole their fresher vocabulary guarantees an immediacy and poignancy never achieved in the earlier work.

Winfield Townley Scott. *Saturday Review*. March 2, 1957. p. 20

Wheelock comes into his old age with exhilaration, a philosophical reach of perspective that has nothing to do with academies, and a craftsman's hand still firm enough to register exactly what he sees and feels. Acceptance—not to be confused with resignation—is his muted theme. . . . His late look at the world has the freshness of his earliest, to which have been added all the meanings of being intelligent and human. Yeats raged openly at the burden of his many years; Eliot carries his with a tired smile and a drooping wing. But Wheelock accepts his advanced age as a point of vantage from which he continually examines wonder and comes upon delight. He does not have the corrosive passion of the septuagenarian Yeats, nor the power of both Yeats and Eliot to isolate from the language a seam of expression that is in each case theirs alone. Wheelock's passion is less a passion for poetry as the art of difficult song than for poetry as a kind of metaphysical reportage. In his case, the report is a long account of joy, sophisticated, qualified—even, in some cases, alloyed with darker elements—and for these reasons thoroughly convincing.

John Malcolm Brinnin. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 4, 1961. p. 24

Like Wordsworth, Mr. Wheelock is a first-person poet. He offers us his interpretation of man's place in the scheme of things, and the interpretation seems, at least, to grow out of his private experience: his sense of the joy of consciousness, his celebration of the life-force, these balanced by a sense of the tragic absurdity in being conscious, the meaning death has for him, the sources of the creative spirit, his memories of family and influential occasions, the things he loves. In short, this book [*The Gardener*] is a sort of poetic biography—the biography of a sensitive and philosophical human being, who offers himself to us for whatever we may find of value.

Edwin S. Godsey. *Sewanee Review*. Spring, 1962. p. 254

Fortunately for Mr. Wheelock's book [*What Is Poetry?*], the personality that emerges is noble. He has written and read a great deal of poetry for poetry's sake, and has done more—especially through his publications in the Scribner's ''Poets of Today'' series—to encourage poetry in this country, than anyone else I can think of. His views of poetry are large and serious.

Louis Simpson. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Oct. 27, 1963. pp. 6, 25

Death and the thoughts suggested by its closeness are, as it were, one more string on the same board over which Wheelock has dwelled some twenty years—a string which he now chooses to pluck almost exclusively. His penchant has always been for the occasional poem; and more specifically, for the meditation on occasions. Even his short lyrics and sonnets (well represented here [in *Dear Men and Women*] are sustained by a bold detachment from their subjects, so that persons and places mentioned in them, against a backdrop of accomplished or imminent death, become real in the emblematic sense. . . . In all the summations of experience, the profits and losses, which these new poems attempt, Wheelock's way of telling a story, of positioning details, might be termed a graceful reticence.

David Galler. *Poetry*. May, 1967. p. 124

John Hall Wheelock has learned nothing from Pound or Williams, is not out to influence younger poets, and titles his latest book, unembarrassedly, *Dear Men and Women*. Without becoming J. Donald Adams and using him as a stick to beat other contemporaries, it should be said that Mr. Wheelock, at age 80, has looked back on his life and written some wholly affecting, totally genuine songs of experience.

William H. Pritchard. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1967. p. 312

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WHEELWRIGHT, John Brooks (1897–1940)

Despite their mathematical whiskers, Wheelwright's unconventional sonnets are patently integral, the forms of an experience. Long, in instances singing, in other instances staccato breaths or periods sustained by an individual, racy, infrequently exalted idiom harmoniously compose them; and these harmonies—in some cases somewhat cryptically but in others clearly and fully—convey a fresh grasp of life, particularly of the ways, fortunes, and tragedies of friendship.

Paul Rosenfeld. *The Nation*. Oct. 15, 1938. p. 386

He is called hag-ridden, exhibitionist, skillful, dignified like a Greek, a leader of a revolutionary school; it is further stated that he

has no ear and that his language is bald. Some make of him a mystic; others are satisfied that he comes from New England—and that almost as an accusation. . . . He seems a poet, for he infuses and infuriates. He is skillful for he is called a heretic. In brief, he claims attention for his Christian attitudes as well as for his Marxist politics; and both, fused into his poetry, easily run riot with the critical fanciers of the laissez-faire in verse. . . . It is to the accomplished Deed that Wheelwright gives his strange allegiance and his stranger art.

Harry Roskolenko. *Poetry*. August, 1940. pp. 278–81

Technically, Wheelwright . . . was a most versatile poet. He was equally adept at handling a metaphysical conceit and a dramatic monologue. In some of his shorter poems he even appears as the terrible man—there is no adequate, single word to describe him—who deliberately mixed his metaphors. . . . In all capacities, however, he was a precise writer, one who avoided unnecessarily expansive language and who achieved his effects by sharp contrasts, clever juxtapositions.

E. Reed Whittemore. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Aug. 17, 1941. p. 13

John Wheelwright was not able or not willing to practice the necessary insincerities of communication; this absolute honesty sanctioned the bewildering, misleading, and seemingly captious items that fill his poems, underneath which the reader will often look in vain for the directive logic, poetic or otherwise, that should organize and sustain them. . . . The short satirical and epigrammatical poems are particularly good of their kind. There the poet, being forced to revolve his poem around a single point, hasn't the pretext for divagation and must concentrate what he says into one small, but very sharp, bite. The gnomic flavor of Wheelwright's poetry makes the bite all the sharper—once it is felt.

Clement Greenberg. *The Nation*. Aug. 30, 1941. p. 186

On the technical side, John Wheelwright is a genuinely advanced poet; he has thoroughly explored the tradition, and the recent extensions of the tradition, and his final products are by and large richly original, formally ambitious, and modern in a mature and respectable sense. His themes and perceptions spring typically from the operation of a well-sharpened intellect upon the objective world, with the result that the poems never try to lift themselves by their own platitudes, nor do they ever open their hearts to the amateur of emotions of the good-old-fashioned kind. . . . Wheelwright is an intellectual poet, and by this I mean not merely that he is an intelligent poet, but that the themes of his poetry are quite often the propositions of philosophical argumentation.

E.S. Forgotson. *Poetry*. Oct., 1941. pp. 45–6

Wheelwright had sense, satire, sensibility and the salt of literature that made him one of the best of the recognizable minor poets. Had he lived, he would have perfected his New England acerbity, his tart sort of common sense that we badly need, but, as he writes in another context:

Then I departed as I came, tearing roses and trampling the gooseberries and the strawberries.

Peter Monro Jack. *New York Times Book Section*. Dec. 14, 1941. p. 5

Very nearly all of Wheelwright's verse lacked the presence and the unforced control of a ''melodic ear,'' and unlike Marianne Moore, he had yet to find a ''light rhyme'' or its equivalent with which to define his particular art of writing verse. Some of his effects were ''experimental'' and inventive, others seem to have been studiously premeditated, still others had an air of seeming accidental, and the great majority were dominated by a prose rhythm that had yet to achieve its maturity. But at the center of the verse where a number of Wheelwright's epigrams remained half-formed and half-concealed, a personality that had created its own speech emerged: the speech was often critical and it welcomed controversy, and it was persistent in its effort to write poetry with ideas and not with words.

Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska. *A History of American Poetry* (Harcourt). 1947. pp. 348–9

It is part of Wheelwright's integrity, of course, that he gave no palm to halfway measures. He hounded Truth. Therefore the didactic note in all his poetry, his effort to objectify and dramatize. The image is never for its own sake: sense must be made of it—a thing said. His obituary poems on Hart Crane, Crosby, and Miss Lowell say definitive things; like all his best poems, they survive with a remarkable solidarity. Where his thought attained the vigor of eloquence, neither matter nor manner damaged by the other, he wrote poems which repeatedly reward attention and which should give him a yet unsuspected importance in the history of American poetry.

Winfield Townley Scott. *New Mexico Quarterly*. Summer, 1954. p. 195

John Wheelwright, descended in all branches of his family tree from Boston Brahmins, and certainly in the thick of things, literary and political, in his day, was nonetheless, perhaps because of the sheer force of his personality, a singularly independent poet. He was more open to international influences and more engaged than most of his contemporaries. He was a Trotskyite, an Anglo-Catholic, and a most perceptive critic of architecture, and as poet, revolutionary, architect, and Catholic he was a totally committed activist. He was also one of the last of his kind in America, a great aristocratic eccentric.

His poetry is full of hidden references and echoes. It does not need notes, but if anyone chose to annotate it, it would require far more apparatus per line than Eliot's Pound's, but unlike theirs, this is not at all apparent. He was one of the best-read persons in every imaginable field that I have ever met, capable of carrying on a conversation about the snails of South America, the theoretical foundations of Russian anarchism, and the medieval English Rite of Sarum simultaneously. He was struck down late at night by a drunken driver on the bridge over the Charles River which his

father had built, and died at the age of forty-three. His early death was an immeasurable loss to American poetry.

Kenneth Rexroth. *American Poetry in the Twentieth Century* (Herder and Herder). 1971. pp. 116–7

In John Wheelwright we confront both a poet and a place, indissolubly mixed in every mode and mood—the old Yankee element at an especially grim moment. We hear the hanging judge and smile at the Hasty Pudding clown. We are whisked to the far Asiatic reaches of New England spirituality where rococo costume drama oddly consorts—as it does in the Bible—with the roaring beasts and lurid colors of the Apocalypse, the ''Apocalypse of Wheels.''

R.W. Flint. *Parnassus*. Fall-Winter, 1973. p. 47

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WHITE, E.B. (1899–1985)

Mr. White—known to the readers of the Conning Tower and the *New Yorker* as E.B.W.—in addition to being a skilful versifier with a rare sensitiveness for words, shows in this book [*The Lady Is Cold*] flashes of poetic distinction. He possesses much of the bite and sting of Dorothy Parker with none of her sardonic bitterness, and his lighter verses have all of the fantastic whimsicality and none of the mawkishness of A.A. Milne. He is a poet who will bear watching.

The Nation. Aug. 14, 1929. p. 177

The clever editorial paragraphs under ''Notes and Comment'' on *The New Yorker's* first page are written by one of the most brilliant men on its staff, one E. B. White, co-author with Jim Thurber of *Is Sex Necessary?* and author of much delightful verse, some of which you will find in *The Lady Is Cold. Every Day Is Saturday* is a selection from those same hebdomadal paragraphs.

Most of us have marvelled that one man could conduct the procession of those paragraphs every week with such sapience and humor as Mr. White has evinced. Now, in the ''Acknowledgement'' of his book, he modestly calls attention to how other people in some degree have constantly contributed to the ingredients of his columns. No contemporary commentator of the kind is methodical. He gathers his material ''from a thousand mysterious and unremembered sources.'' Quite true; but the force of Mr. White's comments has not depended so much upon his material as upon his way of using it. . . . It is his civil way of presenting some of the most astonishing phenomena of our time that has endeared Mr. White to his audience.

William Rose Benèt. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 27, 1934. p. 240

People discovered E. B. White for a thousand reasons, all good. The news got out, and E. B. White got out, too, out of New York. He is now in Maine. But he is the same, or better. His prose is still as pinched as ever, and its temper, bland insouciance itself, has echoes and overtones of hurt introspection and cosmic solicitude. He has still an unerring eye (a clichè of which he would never be guilty) for the minor madnesses of the age. He brings as the measure of madness his own genial but inexorable reason. By faint clues and indirections he gives us a moral philosophy, for he asks almost desperately, but always quietly, what the minor madnesses add up to.

Irwin Edman. *Saturday Review*. March 18, 1939. p. 7

. . . White's pieces take anything of interest for their subject matter, from the brooder stove on his saltwater farm in Maine to a personal plan for world peace, and distill it down to a moral conclusion. The touch is always light, but the punch can be heavy and full of conviction. . . .

White's style is the essence of what gets called ''New Yorker style.'' Its ingredients are a meticulous ear for sound (his chapter on Maine Speech is something to make a phoneticist's recording blush for shame) and a fresh use of words that always looks effortless and almost never is. An example is the much-discussed phrase, ''the unspeakably bright imploring look of the frustrated,'' in his great short story, ''The Door.'' Change the ''unspeakably'' to its uncle ''terribly'' and you have reduced a perfect and momentous expression to a merely good one.

Stanley Edgar Hyman. *New Republic*. July 20, 1942. p. 91

The record of his adventure [*One Man's Meat*] shows not the slightest trace of being directed against *you:* peculiar among literary farmers, Mr. White didn't leave the city in order to leave you behind, nor is it any part of his effort to outsmart you on new territory. He will respect you and leave you alone as long as you respect him and leave him alone; this would be his definition of democracy, and he is ready to die for democracy. Vulgarity is something Mr. White takes into account by the way; he helps fumigate it out of existence with his fine aseptic prose.

The kinship with Thoreau is explicit throughout this book but there is also Mr. White's implicit kinship with Montaigne. Obviously, compared to the great humanist, Mr. White's powers are on a minor scale; in the matter of style, real as his gifts are, we question whether his felicity has not sometimes been achieved by going around rather than over intellectual hurdles. But as we read the diary he kept in the First World War, we recognize how compellingly the humanistic tradition had already claimed him, even as a young man.

Diana Trilling. *The Nation*. Aug. 8, 1942. p. 118

These monthly reports of Mr. White's doings, collected [in *One Man's Meat*] from *Harper's* and other magazines, are in the office they perform like the intimate letters of the eighteenth century, say, of Cowper or Gray, and occasionally they resemble those of Lamb. When the reader closes the book, he feels that he knows the author exceedingly well; he has suffered summer catarrh with him, has lived in his house, has made a pilgrimage with him to the lake of his boyhood, has voted in town meetings, and has hunted coons with

him in the season of the year, has read farm papers, heard Maine speech, gone Jobstering, and whiled away Sundays. The reader is taken into the thick of things, and likes what he sees. All these things would be dull indeed in the journal of a dull man. Happily, Mr. White is not dull. He is a personality of a rare sort, and has the gift of engaging us in his practicalities, his generosities, his sympathies and prejudices, and in his contagious enthusiasm for individual liberty. The most engaging quality of all is his quick-turning humor which, though expected, always surprises.

William C. DeVane. *The Yale Review*. Autumn, 1942. p. 164

Little Stuart is a very engaging hero, and *Stuart Little* is an entertaining book, whether for children or their parents. If I also found it a little disappointing, perhaps that is because I had been expecting that E.B. White would write nothing less than a children's classic. He has all the required talents, including a gift for making himself understood. He never condescends to his readers: if they happen to be younger than the audience he reaches through *The New Yorker*, he merely takes more pains to explain his story. Style is even more important in children's books than in those for adults because one often reads aloud to children, and a bad style wearies the reader, not to mention what it does to the listeners. Within his own range of effects, Mr. White has the best style of any American author: clear, unhackneyed and never tying the tongue into knots.

He has, moreover, a talent for making big things small and homely, as if he saw the world distinctly through the wrong end of a telescope. . . . But the garden that Mr. White describes in his essays is the world as a whole, and the effect of smallness is deceptive—just as the effect of bigness is deceptive in the authors who imitate Walt Whitman; they describe a world that is really bare and simple, whereas Mr. White's world merely gives, through art, the effect of simplicity.

Malcolm Cowley. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 28, 1945. p. 7

White's prose nears the ideal style defined by Hazlitt, except that White makes freer use of words which have not taken out their final papers with the lexicographer. His colloquialism, an aspect of his independence and informality, can give students of English a model, too, in that it is always a precise diction, and never trite. Actually he is a purist in the best sense, and not least in that he is helping to fix meanings of words that will appear in future editions of dictionaries. Moreover, it is all done without flourish or groaning; White has the true artisan's unaffected dexterity. . . .

Out of his work emerges a spare but striking profile. It is that of the ironic spectator, the minority report personified, the man with eyebrows raised but never harshly supercilious, the uncompromising individualist who would as lief split a hair with himself as with anybody else, and a still, small, humane voice through two troublesome decades, when to be at the same time a sensitive, serene, incorruptible, polite, rugged, and charitable person has been the rarest of achievements. White's geniality and fancy, detectable in his briefest jottings, are more generally recognized than his penetration and virility.

Warren Beck. *College English*. April, 1946. pp. 368–9

He has done much toward preserving the essay from death. The essay, the genial, reflective, personal essay of Addison and Steele, Montaigne, Lamb, so much honored in English courses, has almost disappeared in America. Perhaps our civilization is too hard on the individual; perhaps few individuals are interesting enough to hold readers with their small doings and large thoughts. But E.B. White, almost alone in our time, has captured and held his readers. He has done so, I think, chiefly because he has brought the poetic spirit as well as verbal felicity into popular journalism. Or, to say the same thing over (always good pedagogical practice), he has made of the editorial an art form. . . .

He has made bourgeois idealism reputable. In the twenties and thirties of this century most young writing men were rebels against their time, their civilization. E.B. White did not rebel. He liked his time; he enjoyed living and watching life; he respected his fellow men, whether New York intellectuals or Maine farmers and fishermen. While certainly he finds many aspects of our civilization ridiculous or repellent, he does not reject it. He sees that it breeds the fundamental virtues: honesty, courage, fidelity, sympathy. He is in favor of these virtues. He accepts life, whereas many of the superior young men seem to hate and fear life.

Morris Bishop. Introduction to *One Man's Meat* by E.B. White (Harper). 1950. p. x

He is not one of those peripatetic philosopher-essayists who plod about, armed with walking-stick, pipe and rucksack, forever seeking new bistros or bazaars about which to write whimsical ''papers'': he has found his best in the doorways and the pastures and range shelters (for chickens) that he knows so well and he doesn't need to look elsewhere, except in the daily papers, for all the material he'll ever need. . . .

The sense of melancholy which has always been evident in his writings, even the funniest ones, increases as the world in which he lives becomes more and more exasperating (as he says, he cultivates ''a disconsolate attitude which has some slight literary value''). But there is nothing passive about his melancholy, as has been the case with other gentle writers who have been content to take it lying down. The answer to E.B. White's occasional tendencies toward despair is E.B. White's persistent and zestful capacity for indignation. Is there a phony in the house, or a demagogue or a dogmatic pedant or an officious bureaucrat? White will handle him. The best thing about E.B. White is that he is alive—very much so—alive and kicking, and (I confess I know him only through his work) he never seems to grow a day older, or less in love.

Robert E. Sherwood. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Jan. 17, 1954. p. 1

In 1957 Mr. White wrote a piece for *The New Yorker* about Professor Strunk, who was a teacher of his at Cornell forty years ago, and about the manual Strunk had prepared for the use of his classes in writing. White brought this manual up to date and wrote an essay for it on some of the larger problems of style. The result is not a substitute for such a work as H.W. Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, but its seventy-one pages are full of good sense. . . .

Even without the assistance of those who have their own reasons for greasing the skids, the language is always slipping into imprecision, and most of us, no doubt, are guilty of at least

contributory negligence. We need to be reminded from time to time that we too have a responsibility for resisting the process of attrition and decay, and *The Elements of Style* is a worthy and practical sort of reminder. As White says, ''Clarity, clarity, clarity.''

Granville Hicks. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 1, 1959. p. 13

E.B. White has tried to live in society. He has had, and still has, a wife; one can almost say that he has also had a magazine, *The New Yorker*, much of whose best prose is either his or reflects his own wryly committed spirit. But the burden of grafting a Thoreauvian blend of stoical abstention and poetic concern onto *The New Yorker*'s peculiarly discreet diction has weighed heavily on White. *The New Yorker* dislikes strong emotion strongly expressed, sustained argument argumentatively put forward. It is as if emotion and argument might keep the commuters reading past their stops on the train. White has been one of the architects of *The New Yorker*'s style, and also one of its victims. Nevertheless, his real quality as a man and a writer has managed to survive. He has felt strongly about various matters, from the atomic bomb to urban noise. Wit and understatement and a contained rage result in a considerable achievement in this new collection, *The Points of My Compass*, which is brilliant sentence by sentence, convincing paragraph by paragraph, but occasionally fades out into whimsy over the long stretch of an essay.

Herbert Gold. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 24, 1962. p. 30

Throughout *One Man's Meat* White was trying to stimulate the ordinary man's awareness of world-wide social problems (as the Progressives had tried to do) and to reawaken his sense of relationship with the earth as part of the cosmos. White was also trying to make him feel the inter-relatedness of the social and natural realms and the significance of that relatedness for the average man's fate: ''. . . a man's free condition is of two parts: the instinctive freedoms he experiences as an animal dweller on a planet, and the practical liberties he enjoys as a privileged member of human society . . .'' Without either, true freedom is impossible. The need for stressing freedom through harmony with nature at a time when the admittedly important struggle for political freedom was getting all the headlines was the justification White offered for writing mostly about farm and household chores while ''Countries are ransacked, valleys drenched with blood.''

Norris W. Yates. *The American Humorist* (Iowa State). 1964. p. 312

Though White is the co-author of a celebrated guide to style, he is too humble before the elusive miracle of the written word to pose as a solemn expert on it. He is a professional writer, not a rhetorician; his voice is authoritative, not authoritarian.

William W. Watt and Robert W. Bradford in *An E.B. White Reader* (Harper). 1966. p. 4

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WHITTEMORE, Reed (1919–)

Skeptical of Providence and man alike, Mr. Whittemore depicts a melancholy world. In a world without established values, he asks indirectly, What is law? What is order? But fickle values do not keep him from pondering the problem of evil. Dogged by a compassionate interest in society, he looks at cruelty and evil in its other forms. . . .

Heroes and Heroines, however, is far from being a melancholy book. Despite their seriousness, many of the poems are in the tradition of light verse, a light verse that owes something to Auden. A man of tough, observant mind and mocking merriment looks at pomposity, love of power, stupidity, avarice, ruthlessness, etc.; records what he sees; and refuses to be undone by it. His buoyancy is manifested primarily in his vigorous, flexible, subtle cadences, his use of irony and paradox, and his remarkable virtuosity in language.

R.L. Lowe. *Poetry*. Nov., 1947. p. 99

The poems in Reed Whittemore's second collection, *An American Takes a Walk*, have the reliable but sometimes unresilient honesty of a street corner seen in the Midwestern summer sun. They are revealing in the way a man might unconsciously reveal himself in his talk while standing on that corner. They are bookish poems, some of them, but without caring. Many are slangy. They are necessary in the way that only the poems of poets are necessary. They have their work to do and they know, though they might wish it were not so, that that work is of the mind and the guts. Thus they flow from a sense which is not especially Midwestern. Or contemporary.

The poems never risk ecstasy, fearing perhaps that vulgar monster the dishonest bliss. In fact they seldom risk music in the more ambitious pieces, though there is plenty of it in some of the very beautiful short poems such as ''Naples'' and ''Capri.''

John Logan. *Saturday Review*. July 28, 1956. p. 10

As a poet with certain very obvious and amusing gifts, Reed Whittemore is almost everyone's favorite. Certainly he is one of mine. Yet there are dangerous favorites and inconsequential favorites, and favorites like pleasant diseases. What of Whittemore? He is as wittily cultural as they come, he has read more than any young man anybody knows, has been all kinds of places, yet shuffles along in an old pair of tennis shoes and khaki pants, with his hands

in his pockets, saying to every head-down, hustling graduate student he meets, ''Shucks, fellow, don't take all this so seriously. Learn, as I was born to know, that all literature, all life, is secretly funny.''. . . Whittemore is wickedly delightful, deft as Willie Hoppe, as good in spots as Auden himself, and a great deal more fun. Yet, as I have been suggesting, something else keeps grazing these poems, and the mind that reads them: something more valuable, more difficult than the poems themselves would have you believe anything is.

James Dickey. *Poetry*. Nov., 1956. pp. 115–16

The poetry of Reed Whittemore has not, so far as I know, had the attention it deserves at the hands of serious readers. It is occasionally, in reviews, acknowledged to be good work, and otherwise is rather neglected than objected against; its rare candor and integrity of purpose have not been valued as they ought to be.

For this neglect I think there are two reasons: that he is often funny, and that he is often literary. People who either have no faculty of independent judgment or perhaps rightly distrust what they do have, are suspicious and even resentful of new poetry which is funny (the word ''wit'' has been made safe for democracy, but does not include the idea of actually laughing), because they are afraid of being caught admiring something which will turn out to be light verse. . . .

I said before that the impulse to poetry is regarded as immediate and given in Whittemore's work, where many of the poems begin simply with that situation, the poet's impulse to write; what stands in the way becomes, often, the subject of the poem. I say further that this impulse, with Whittemore, is to a heroic, representative poetry, a poetry synoptic of history, of culture, making the same claims as the major poems of the past; the evidence for this is his persistent preoccupation with heroism in action, matched, on the technical side, by a preoccupation with epical devices, which he employs, however, chiefly in a mocking or critical sense.

Howard Nemerov. *Kenyon Review*. Spring, 1959. pp. 260, 267

Mr. Whittemore is invincibly and delightedly a Professor of English; but the gown is worn with an exuberant grace, the allusive wit is as light as it is sharp. There is no intensity here [*The Boy from Iowa*], and the satiric intelligence is less somber and considerably less shaking than Mr. [John] Hollander's; but the loose, sprawling cantos of the two ''Writer's Epics'' (a new kind of Browning) hit hard in spite of their dead-pan slap-dash, their deceptively innocent air. The more conventional poems are less effective, not because they are more serious—a useless distinction: Mr. Whittemore's giddiest comedy is caustically, even therapeutically, serious—but because the power of the prevailing tone distorts them in this context. They would be better printed apart. Here it is the satire that matters, the gay and definitive assault.

Dudley Fitts. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 4, 1962. p. 23

Now Mr. Whittemore is at his best a good poet. He is at his best a rare poet as much of his fine work manifests such a gayety, such a vivacity, such a real charm—I do not mean ''cuteness''—and an intelligence and precision of wit that I am inclined not to complain. I do complain because Mr. Whittemore must know that poetry is not judged on a basis of bulk. He must know that every poet should publish only those poems which seem to him his very best work. Then, too, the more poems anyone writes in a fixed manner, the more likely it is that the style will limit the scope until, alas, the poet has little more to offer than a style the years of practice and habit have polished to a blank perfection.

Roger Hecht. *Sewanee Review*. Winter, 1963. p. 106

When a man is represented by a piece of fiction or a small selection of poems in a magazine, he puts himself forth as a story writer or a poet and he is judged as such. Attention is drawn to and captured by the writing itself, and without conflict. But when he shows all his wares, the reader is tempted, as I was, to use, say, the essays to judge the verse, the personal recollections to gain insights into the fiction, and all of it together to discover what the man himself is like. This can be an interesting game, as it was in reading *The Fascination of the Abomination*, but it can prejudice one against the writer's accomplishments in the separate fields. . . .

This is not the whole story. Whittemore's long, ambitious essay on Browning's poems made me search out and dust off my own Modern Library edition. ''A Letter to Karl Shapiro,'' which appeared originally as a review of Shapiro's terrible-tempered *In Defense of Ignorance*, is an eloquent message to a fellow-writer that he had inadvertently given aid and comfort to the enemy—to his own enemy, to Whittemore's enemy, to the real yahoo, the real square, the guy who ends his review with ''Nonetheless, many will find. . . .''

Charles Simmons. *Saturday Review*. June 8, 1963. p. 28

In any reading of Reed Whittemore's essays and poems two qualities stand out: clarity and engagement. The man is urbane yet committed, ironic yet *present*. The voice in Whittemore's poems, maundering and casual as it may seem, constantly surprises with what it yields: the faintly, even deliberately, tired comic self-indictment of a man of that generation that now finds itself approaching middle age. And this coupled with an accurate and beautifully playful vision of literary America, 1940–1960.

Robert Sward. *Poetry*. Sept., 1964. p. 380

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WIDEMAN, John Edgar (1941–)

[In *Damballah* and *Hiding Place*] the high regard for language and craft demonstrated in [Wideman's] previous books is again evident. While *Hiding Place* is a novel set in present-day Pittsburgh, *Damballah* is a collection of interrelated stories that begins in Africa and traces the fortunes of one black family in the United States through slavery, escape and settlement in the North. . . . To invoke [the African deity Damballah], according to Maya Daren's *Divine Horsemen: The Voodoo Gods of Haiti*, is to ''stretch one's hand back . . . to gather up all history into a solid, contemporary ground beneath one's feet''—to ''gather up the family.'' And that is precisely the intent of Mr. Wideman in this collection of stories. This is something of a departure for him, and in freeing his voice from the confines of the novel form, he has written what is possibly his most impressive work.

The central character in the introductory story [of *Damballah*], which is set mainly in the antebellum South, is Ryan, a slave who is labeled a ''crazy nigger'' because of his refusal to abandon the customs of his African ancestors. His intransigence leads to his torture-murder at the hands of his master. From this point the book jumps in time to the late 1800's where in ''Daddy Garbage''—the story of two men who find a dead baby in a garbage heap—we are in Homewood, the black section of Pittsburgh that is the setting for the remaining stories. . . .

In ''Lizabeth: The Caterpillar Story,'' Lizabeth muses about the time her father, John French . . . , finds that she had eaten part of a caterpillar and eats the rest himself: ''I got the most of it then,'' he says. ''And if I don't die, she ain't gonna die neither.'' ''The Songs of Reba Love Jackson'' achieves a satiric edge through the confrontation between Reba, a devote, God-fearing gospel singer and the glib, irreverent radio announcer who interviews her. The last of these stories introduces the characters who are central to the plot of the simultaneously published novel *Hiding Place*.

But each story moves far beyond the primary event on which it is focused. The prose is labyrinthine—events and details merge and overlap. . . .

It is not mere coincidence that in one story Mr. Wideman quotes Jean Tommer's description of white faces as ''petals of dusk.'' *Damballah*, with its loosely connected sketches and stories, is indebted structurally to Toomer's *Cane* (1923), and in turn to Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. But the kinship with Cane is much more direct. Like Toomer, Mr. Wideman has used a narrative laced with myth, superstition and dream sequences to create an elaborate poetic portrait of the lives of ordinary black people. And also like Toomer, he has written tales that can stand on their own, but that assume much greater impact collectively. The individual ''parts'' or stories, as disparate as they may initially seem, work together as a remarkably vivid and coherent montage of black life over a period of five generations.

Mr. Wideman employs the same narrative technique in *Hiding Place*, but not nearly so effectively. The novel depicts the events of a few days during which Tommy, grandson of John French, hides in the squalid shack in which his great-grandmother's sister Bess has isolated herself. Essentially this is a tale of two lost souls. ''Crazy, evil'' Bess, who, because of the death of her husband and son, has severed all family ties to live a reclusive life in a ramshackle house atop a hill overlooking Pittsburgh; and Tommy, who is on the run after a scheme to rob a ghetto hoodlum ends in murder. Through extended interior monologue we learn of the events that precipitated both characters' estrangement and led them to their rendezvous. But despite some arresting passages in which Mr. Wideman displays his command of the language and of the voices of his characters, this is a static novel.

After the evocative richness of *Damballah*, *Hiding Place* is something of a disappointment; the novel's minutely focused view of the relationship between Bess and Tommy simply does not mesh well with its ornate style. Still, taken together, these books once again demonstrate that John Wideman is one of America's premier writers of fiction. That they were published originally in paperback perhaps suggests that he is also one of our most underrated writers. . . .

Mel Watkins. *The New York Times Book Review*. April 11, 1982, pp. 6, 21.

In this hypnotic and deeply lyrical novel [*Sent for You Yesterday*], Mr. Wideman again returns to the ghetto where he was raised and transforms it into a magical location infused with poetry and pathos.

The book's title announces both the tone and the action. ''Sent for you yesterday, and here you come today.'' The elegiac outcry of this old Jimmy Rushing blues suggests the urgent need, apparent loss and ironic recovery that characterizes the novel's beautiful first-person narrative. The narrator, his speech laden with news and the blues, is a character who has appeared in Mr. Wideman's fiction before. His is the voice in ''Across the Wide Missouri'', one of the stories in *Damballah*. Like Mr. Wideman, he is a young black writer who has moved to Wyoming and spends only vacation time in his native Pittsburgh; but he has returned to Homewood to take on the roles of both son and father in mind and feelings. The narration here makes it clear that both as a molder of language and a builder of plots, Mr. Wideman has come into his full powers. He is a literary artist with whom any reader who admires ambitious fiction must sooner or later reckon.

As his last two books demonstrated, he has the gift of making ''ordinary'' folks memorable. And many of the engaging characters from *Damballah* and *Hiding Place* tumble onstage to assist in the recreation of Homewood's communal life from the wild and vital 1920's through the drugged and debilitated 70's.

The man who affects the destinies of [the book's many characters],. . . . the daring, dangerous but gifted Albert Wilkes, arrives early in a swirl of piano blues and departs early in a storm of police bullets. His music evokes ''a moody correspondence between what his fingers shape and what happens to the sky, the stars, the moon.'' Through Wilkes's presence, Mr. Wideman establishes a mythological and symbolic link between character and landscape, language and plot, that in the hands of a less visionary writer might be little more than stale sociology. At one point in the novel, Albert Wilkes's ghost apparently inspires Brother Tate's otherwise unsupple hands to play at the Homewood Elks hall. The narrator, although he has a great deal of talent to begin with, appears to be equally inspired throughout the book.

Doot Brother Tate dubs him when he is only a boy, employing one of the sounds of scat singing—the only sounds that Brother makes after his son's death. The nickname seems appropriate, since Doot continually turns the barest descriptive passages into his own form of verbal music.

He can take what the normal eye might perceive as an ordinary scene . . . and spin out images over a page or more as part of a

moving evocation of ghetto dreaming. He can show us rows of ''wooden shanties built to hold the flood of black immigrants up from the South'' and transmute them into ''islands, arks, life teeming but enclosed or surrounded or exiled to arbitrary boundaries.'' And he can reveal the city beyond these bounded streets as he has his grandfather, John French, perceive it, with its steel mills along the river belching clouds of smoke. ''If you didn't know the smoke could kill you, if you didn't think of it as an iron cloud pressing the breath out your body, the dirt and the soot and gas coloring the sky made a beautiful sight.''

That is the view from Homewood—a place that, thanks to John Edgar Wideman, we have now lived and died in.

> Alan Cheuse. *New York Times Book Review*. May 15, 1983, pp. 13, 41.

''Do not look for straightforward, linear steps from book to book,'' wrote John Edgar Wideman in the 1985 preface to his *Homewood Trilogy*. ''Think rather of circles within circles within circles, a stone dropped into a still pool, ripples and wavemotions.'' In *Fever*, Wideman has troubled the water again, refining his already elliptical and dense prose; in the process he has reinvented black English and (re)made it, elegant, suave, as elastic as ever: ''Ball be swishing with that good backspin, that good arch bringing it back, blip, blip, blip, three bounces and it's coming right back to Doc's hands like he got a string on the pill,'' he writes in ''Doc's Story,'' a story about stories, a nigh-fantastical tale of a blind man and the man who inexplicably watches him and ponders over lost love.

Wideman began evolving the style evidenced in these stories in his *Homewood Trilogy*, most markedly in the 1983 PEN/Faulkner award-winning *Sent for You Yesterday* and further still in 1987's *Reuben*. It is his own patented stream of consciousness, sliding easily through tense and point of view; and, when it works, its power has the force of the most righteous prayer. It is as if he wrote his stories and then compressed them to a third of their original size. Eschewing quotation marks, Wideman has his speakers shift and shift and at times meld—as if into one mind, one voice.

The word haunting best describes the result. In each story some dim memory, some deep urge, some knowledge, some inescapable prophecy reaches through time or space. Voices whisper across voids; calls float over oceans.

> Randall Kenan. *The Nation*, New York. January 1, 1990, pp. 25–7.

John Edgar Wideman is one of the few novelists who emerged in the Black Power era without sacrificing the demands of art to the persuasions of radical militancy. Possibly as a result of his commitment to craft, his sizeable fictional production has attracted increasing attention and he is now considered as one of the best American writers of the younger generation.

A Glance Away retraces one day in the life of an ex-drug addict. As Eddie Lawson comes back home on Easter Sunday to be reunited with his mother, sister, and girlfriend, he realizes that his possible rebirth is hampered by confrontation with other people's expectations of him: his paralyzed mother, who crushes her daughter under her demanding will, wants Eddie to act as the responsible ''man in the family''; and Alice, his lover, refuses to forgive him for his affair with a white girl. In this conflict-ridden and cruel world, Eddie's only stable friendship turns out to be with Brother Small, an albino who is having a homosexual relationship with Robert Thurley, a professor. Eddie discusses his problems with Thurley, who also suffers from a broken marriage and a castrating mother. Both men try to find their own identity and preserve their dignity in an absurd social environment. Thurley's friendship finally persuades Eddie not to cop out and, at least for the present, not to return to drugs.

Hurry Home has a similar structure, in a narrative that focuses on the consciousness of Cecil Braithwaite, a black law student who works as a janitor. Out of a sense of duty and guilt, he has married the girl who supported him but he has left her on their wedding night. He is befriended and taken to Europe by an artist, Webb, who wants to assuage his own conscience for failing to acknowledge his son by his black mistress. Observing the museums and monuments of Spain and Italy, Cecil admires Western civilization, but he remains torn between two worlds; just as Webb cannot accept his past, Cecil finds it difficult to come to terms with his history and he ends up in Africa, on the threshold of a new discovery. ''Home'' stands for that yet undefined cultural spring which will welcome him as he comes out of a spiritual no-man's-land. The form of the narrative is appropriately fragmented: memories, relived scenes, diary-like jottings, Esther's letters to Cecil, her attempts to write her autobiography from A to Z with the help of a dictionary make the novel a crisscrossing of events and relationships. The style is one of remarkable sophistication, a poetic texture of echoes, repetitions, and prolonged metaphors.

The Lynchers, unlike *Hurry Home,* is not a reverie. A novel in four voices, it unites a quartet of utterly dissimilar blacks who conspire in a violent attempt to attack the racial oppression in Philadelphia. ''Littleman,'' the crippled activist, sets out, with the help of Saunder Rice and Orin Wilkerson, to murder a white policeman and his black concubine. The plot fails when, angry at being manipulated (or so he feels), Rick kills Wilkerson who had begun to crack. Although the novel is not a work of social realism, the world of the ghetto plays an important role; the street corner solidarity of the males is exemplified by the love which Sweetman feels for Orin, his son. Black history looms large in the background: there is a long account of the practice of lynching in America. But individual destinies are more important, although presented fragmentarily, as the novel forcefully explores the feeling of remorse and guilt in characters who bear similarities to those in Dostoevsky's *The Possessed.*

Damballah is a collection of stories set in the working-class black community of Homewood, in Pittsburgh. The stories focus on Lizabeth, whose faith vacillates as she pays regular visits to her son in jail, on her dignified, affectionate father in ''Across the Wide Missouri,'' and on other descendants of the nearly mythical Sybela Owens (the family genealogy is worked out in ''The Beginning of Homewood'' and by means of ''Begat charts''). From the 1840s to the 1960s, a long line of women carry the tradition. The title of the volume derives from the name of the good serpent through voodoo and at the notion of gathering up the family.

Hiding Place tells the story of Tommy who, having bungled an attempt to hold up a local shopkeeper, is wrongly charged with the murder of his accomplice and flees to Brunston Hill where his grandmother, Bess, lives as a recluse. Their initial diffidence becomes mutual trust and love; authentic dialogue reveals the deep bond established between them, but Tommy is caught and shot by

the police before he can return to this haven. Again the theme is the necessity to achieve one's identity by coming to terms with one's heritage, represented by family and community. Unlike Wideman's earlier male characters, all split and lost, Tommy achieves wholeness at the last moment. The form here is again experimental, but less explicitly so, as the stream-of-consciousness of the ''Clement'' section is outweighed by the voice of Mother Bess, the repository of oral tradition.

Sent for You Yesterday goes on exploring the Homewood circle and the weight of the past: ''Past lives in us, through us. Each of us harbors the spirit of people who walked the earth before we did, and those spirits depend on us for continuing existence just as we depend on their presence to live our lives to the fullest.'' Black musician Albert Wilkes, back in Homewood after seven years, realizes that the community he once entertained is now fast disappearing. After he is shot by the police, Lucy and Carl, lovers at 13, preserve his stories, rituals and magic, and the community legends, with the help of Brother Tate, a mysterious albino character who plays the dead man's songs on the piano. The main narrative is framed by a ''Prologue in heaven'' with Brother Tate. Wideman makes more extensive use than ever of the speech cadences, the rhythms and the songs, the idiom and customs of the black community. All his books are steeped in the folk tradition, but *Sent for You Yesterday* is in that respect a major achievement. The narrative is handled perfectly, whether in dream or memory. Voices, tones, inflections are attuned to the nuances of feeling; Afro-American life is celebrated in a sustained, convincing way without any obtrusive message.

A novelist potentially of the same stature as Ernest Gaines, Ishmael Reed, and Toni Morrison, Wideman is also a perceptive literary and social critic. *Brothers and Keepers* is a moving account of the social pressures and individual reactions that have led John Edgar Wideman to the path of success and his brother Robert to jail for murder. The two men appear as the two sides of a coin, the former more restrained and capable of playing the game and using standard English, the latter street-wise and fully absorbed in the vivid parlance and mores of the ghetto. The book reveals also the world of prisons, of brutal, underpaid guards suspicious of any black person, of their utter lack of concern for human qualities in the convicts. Finally, it is a soul-searching reflection on the writer's own distance from the black community and his debt towards it. A mixture of fact and fiction, biography and memoir, it blends social history and the confessional mode. This plea for Robert's parole does not try, says Ishmael Reed, ''to reach the nation's conscience but to reach out to his brother to salvage him from grief and waste.''

Michel Fabre. In *Contemporary Novelists,* 6th edition, ed. Susan Windisch Brown (St. James Press, 1996).

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WILBUR, Richard (1921–)

Wit of the kind he is aiming at—the Swiftian or Eliotesque kind—demands more intellectual incisiveness and emotional ''blackness'' than Mr. Wilbur is at present able to muster. His true domain is the borderland between natural and moral perception, his special gift for the genteel, non-metaphysical conceit which illuminates the hidden correspondences between natural and moral phenomena. Characteristically, two of Mr. Wilbur's favorite devices stem from Marianne Moore: the lingering over minute particulars and the sudden introduction of anecdotal units into straight narrative or meditative sequences . . . where the ''anecdote,'' so far from merely winding up the poem, both climaxes and clinches it.

F.C. Golffing. *Poetry*. Jan., 1948. pp. 221–2

Mr. Wilbur always keeps firm control over the shape of his poems, and it is a shape determined jointly by the ear and by the mind, so that the poems resolve themselves to a conclusion both musically and intellectually. He is at his best with the longer line and the slower cadence, in subjects which take their origin in scenes observed or remembered. Occasionally observation gives way too readily to exclamation. . . . But this is not a common fault, and for the most part he moves from description to comment so subtly yet naturally that the texture of the poem remains even and a descriptive poem has become a meditative or even a philosophic one before the reader is aware.

David Daiches. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Feb. 18, 1951. p. 4

The precise quality of the poems is a delicate suspension. He performs an extraordinary feat of balance. His poems are strong and yet are sensitively wrought so that in general the reader gets a fine, real sense of the world.

There is a sense of mastery but of struggle, of order claimed from chaotic forces never allowed to assume disproportion, yet valued as formative. . . . One returns to the idea of balance, of orderliness, of excellence, of elegance, of a good centrality, nothing excessive, nothing divisive, which is to say that Wilbur has achieved a natural and full harmony in his poetry.

Richard Eberhart. *New York Times Book Section*. June 24, 1956. p. 5

Now with *Things of This World*, his enormous gifts grown into their mature assurance, Wilbur certainly emerges as our serenest, urbanest, and most melodic poet. To say Wilbur has matured is not to imply that he will not accomplish finer things yet, and I would suggest for instance that in his search for a serene diction he might place less reliance on such adjectives as ''clear,'' ''pure,'' ''calm,'' and ''graceful.'' It is exactly the qualities described by these adjectives that best describe the best Wilbur poems, but it is very much to the point, I believe, that in those best poems the clarity, purity, calm, and grace emerge thing-wise and self-living, not by adjectival assertion.

John Ciardi. *Saturday Review*. Aug. 18, 1956. p. 18

Mr. Wilbur used to be a kind of backward-looking, forward-aspiring fellow. If it were a spring day, he perversely wanted it to be an autumn one. . . . But all is changed now. In his newest work he stands squarely in the midst of the things of this world and likes all of what he sees, smells, hears, touches, and tastes. . . . *If Things of This World* is marked by Wilbur's new-found sense of reality, it still exhibits what have come to be the trademarks of his work—formal elegance, unusual although never grotesque imagery, control, quiet gaiety, and an agile imagination. Now that Wallace Stevens is dead. Williams seems headed toward being the dandy of American verse.

Leah Bodine Drake. *Atlantic Monthly*. June, 1957. p. 78

As Ortega y Gasset says. . . . ''Everything in the world is strange and marvellous to well-open eyes.'' Unquestionably, Wilbur would meet with the Spanish philosopher's approval. For he discovers the strange and the marvellous in the commonest objects. Like the painter, Pieter de Hooch, whom he admires (''Objects'' and ''A Dutch Courtyard''), he is entranced by the way in which a courtyard seems to burn in the sun, finds pleasure in ''true textures.'' ''true integuments.'' magic in ''the weave of a sleeve.'' Even the lowly potato inspires a lyric (''Potato'') ten stanzas long.

Yet he is aware, as Wordsworth earlier was aware, that when he invests the commonplace with magic, he half perceives and half creates the objects of his vision.

Frederic E. Faverty in *Poets in Progress*, ed. Edward B. Hungerford (Northwestern). 1962. p. 70

. . .Richard Wilbur's *The Beautiful Changes* . . . was the peak of skilful elegance. Here was the ability to shape an analogy, to perceive and develop comparisons, to display etymological wit, and to pun six ways at once. It appealed to the mind because it was intelligent, and to the sense of form because it was intelligent, and to the sense of form because it was intricate and shapely. It did not appeal to the passions and it did not pretend to. . . . Many poets after Wilbur resembled him, and some of them were good at it, but the typical *ghastly* poem of the fifties was a Wilbur poem not written by Wilbur, a poem with tired wit and obvious comparisons and nothing to keep the mind or the ear occupied. (It wasn't Wilbur's fault, though I expect he will be asked to suffer for it.)

Donald Hall. Introduction to *Contemporary American Poetry* (Penguin). 1962. p. 20

. . .Even in this book [*Advice to a Prophet*], which is not Wilbur's best, there is, underlying the grace and negligent mastery, the thing that should eventually make him the truly important poet that he deserves to be: the thing which his superlative manipulation of verse forms, his continuous and unobtrusive skills never fully state but never lose sight of. This is the quietly joyful sense of celebration and praise out of which Wilbur writes: the kind of celebration that is done, usually, without anyone's being told, and of the things that cause joy to rise unexpectedly, excessively and almost always voicelessly in the human breast. This sense underlies Wilbur's work as the sea underlies a ship, or rather a garlanded Shelleyan boat which we admire so much that we forget that the sea makes its movement possible. Wilbur's celebration is sweet-natured, grave, gentle, and as personal to him as his own breath, a praise of small moments in which there is profound and intense life, and in his best poems (such as the one a few years back about burying the pet dog) it rises as it deserves to rise.

James Dickey. *Sewanee Review*. Summer, 1962. p. 490

Though there is little of the ascetic mystic in Wilbur's temperament, he is—at least some of the time—a religious poet. But he is not religious in any strict or doctrinal sense of the word; rather, he is deeply concerned with an experience of life and of the universe as sacramental—as possessing a spiritual worth that shines on surfaces but also hides in recesses.

Ralph J. Mills. *Contemporary American Poetry* (Random). 1965. p. 167

Wilbur does not suppose, as Poe does, that the intellect and the moral sense are inimical to the apprehension of beauty. Quite the contrary. In Wilbur's poetry beauty is realized only upon the exercise of man's intellectual and moral faculties. This condition has much to do with Wilbur's style and tone. The poems have, characteristically, a moral design, and this design is, if anything, emphasized rather than merely insinuated. Similarly, the poems are deliberate meditations. They rely heavily on argument and debate and they use much intellectual irony, paradox, and ambiguity. These techniques are not employed in slavish imitation of what was, in Wilbur's formative years, a fashion in poetry. They reflect, rather, the value he places on the life of the mind.

In general, Wilbur's poems envision two kinds of change, disintegrative and metamorphic. Wilbur suggests that a genuine reverence for life can be attained if one has the capacity to see beyond disintegrative change, into the metamorphic and regenerative life of the universe. Metamorphic change is not without its own tragic consequences, but the tragedy is always redeemed by the fulness of being which metamorphosis effects. Insight into this redemptive process is possible only when both the intellect and the moral sense are intact. Wilbur's poetry is therefore much concerned with a certain quality of vision, a certain way of seeing into things. The presence of this vision is registered by perception of what he calls the beautiful changes.

John P. Farrell. *Contemporary Literature*. Winter, 1967. p. 76

The title of Wilbur's second book was *Ceremony*, and that word still expresses, I think, much of his most central approach to the poem. To Wilbur . . . it seems to me that form is a means of understanding, the shape of the poem one of the most serious comments on the meaning of the poem. And it seems also that form functions as a kind of charm: ceremony is the way in which the tissue of events is not only understood, but made moral and substantial. . . .

An intelligent affection, and an intelligent remorse; a sense of event in a long and various context: these are the qualities that seem most central here. They will not allow a poetry of extremes: the howl of absolute emotion or the arid geometries of absolute

intellection. Aware both of people and their contexts, they celebrate that difficult thing: the simultaneous tenuousness and necessity of civilization.

William Dickey. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1969. p. 364

Although he is recognized as a major American poet, Wilbur is not prolific. *Walking to Sleep* comes eight years after *Advice to a Prophet* (1961) and consists of only twenty-four poems and eleven translations. Wilbur admirers, however, will be gratified by the usual Wilbur virtues and, perhaps, by suggestions of some new directions.

Elegance, wit, a quiet yet sensuous tone, and careful craftsmanship are as evident as ever. Wilbur's characteristic concern with form is also evident. Eighteen of his twenty-four poems rhyme and many of his earlier forms recur. . . . Previously the major criticism of Wilbur has been that his poetry, while superb technically, has been too restrained, too indirect; he has, his critics argue, too fully accepted Eliot's doctrine of the extinction of personality. These critics may find *Walking to Sleep* mildly encouraging in that Wilbur does present several first person poems in which the first person is clearly Wilbur himself. . . .

Walking to Sleep also offers more of Wilbur's nature poetry, a poetry which seems a dynamic life force in the universe and perceives analogues between the operation of this life force in nature and in man.

Paul Cummins. *Concerning Poetry*. Spring, 1970. pp. 72–5

Those privileged to see the Phoenix Theatre production of *The School for Wives* in Richard Wilbur's translation know how beautifully it played and how merrily it was received by the audience. How does it read? I wondered *that* when I saw it. Now I know. It reads beautifully too, and is a total delight. Wilbur has *re-created* the French original with all the wit, polish, grace, pace, and clarity of a master translator. In the natural contexts of the play, nature wins out. The *young* lady gets the *young* man, and that lunatic ass of an Arnolphe is spared what would have been a disastrous marriage—all in the salutary confines of rhymed couplets. It is like eating one's cake and having it too. Ultimately, *The School for Wives* is an artistic triumph both for Molière and for Wilbur.

George Meredith complained in his essay *The Idea of Comedy*: ''Translating Molière is like humming an air one has heard performed by an accomplished violinist of the pure tone without flourish.'' Richard Wilbur has changed all that, permanently.

Philip Murray. *Poetry*. July, 1972. p. 231

Let me try to list some of the virtues that distinguish the poetry of Richard Wilbur. First of all, a superb ear (unequalled, I think, in the work of any poet now writing in English) for stately measure, cadences of a slow, processional grandeur, and rich, ceremonial orchestration. A philosophic bent and a religious temper, which are by no means the same thing, but which here consort comfortably together. Wit, polish, a formal elegance that is never haughty or condescending, though certain freewheeling poets take it for a chilling frigidity. And an unfeigned gusto, a naturally happy and grateful response to the physical beauty of life, of women, of works of art, landscapes, weather, and the perceiving, constructing mind that tries to know them. But in a way I think most characteristic of all, his is the most kinetic poetry I know: verbs are among his conspicuously important tools, and his poetry is everywhere a vision of *action*, of motion and performance. . . .

Wilbur has been from the first a poet with a gymnastic sense of bodily agility and control, a delight in the fluencies we all admire in a trained athlete, in the vitality and importance of stamina and focused energy. . . .

This delight in nimbleness, this lively sense of coordinated and practised skill is, first of all, a clear extension of the dexterity the verse itself performs. If it were no more than this it might be suspected for an exercise in that self-approval which, like one of the poet's fountains, patters ''its own applause.'' But it is more. For again and again in Wilbur's poems this admirable grace or strength of body is a sign of or symbol for the inward motions of the mind or condition of the soul. . . .

It is, I think, remarkable that this double fluency, of style and of subject, should be so singularly Wilbur's own, and that his poetry should exhibit so often the most important and best aspects of cinematic film: the observation of things in motion from a viewpoint that can, if it cares to, move with an equal and astonishing grace. But what these poems can do so magnificently that is probably beyond the range of motion pictures is, specifically, a transition, or, rather, a translation, of outward physical action (the heave of a weight, the bounce of a ball, the spirit of a runner) into a condition of the imagination; a dissolving of one realm of reality into another, for which the poem ''Merlin Enthralled'' might serve as an example.

Anthony Hecht. *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*. May 20, 1977, p. 602

There are poets . . . whose every major work is attended by a sense of stylistic experiment—Eliot and, more recently, Lowell come to mind. But there are poets as well who, having mastered their idiom, are content to spend a lifetime in its continued refinement, and in applying it to a handful of themes whose fascination never wanes for them. Poets as seemingly diverse as Emily Dickinson and Edwin Muir supply instances of such deliberately confined intensity. Wilbur is a poet of this, rather than of the former sort. His attention to his chosen subjects deepens without yielding often to passing distractions. This continuous deepening is more deservedly termed development, one might feel, than is a series of stylistic departures whose genealogical relations to one another are not easily to be traced.

Wilbur's chief recurrent theme is implicit in his approach to style. His intricately patterned poems reflect the discovery of patterns of natural beauty; and the poet's art thus strives to be an adequate analogy to the surrounding creation. The art of man mirrors the art of God. Creative energy finding its expression in natural and esthetic form is what Wilbur continually contemplates, praises, and seeks to realize in his own writing. . . .

His essays are meditative ventures, more inviting of the reader's participation than most criticism. Reading them does not merely augment our knowledge; it re-directs our attention, and cleanses our minds of much that is trivial and stale. Wilbur's prose, like his poetry, engages with an able lucidity ''the whole of the world that is real to him,'' and does so with such persuasive eloquence that we

see his world as one we would like to share. Such mutuality happily maintained between poet and reader has a simple name: civilization. One wishes there were more of it around.

Robert B. Shaw. *Parnassus*. Spring/Summer, 1977, pp. 177, 185

Our strengths betray us. Nowhere in modern poetry is that axiom demonstrated more convincingly than in the case of Richard Wilbur. Elegance, sophistication, wit, learning, technical skill of a high order—these are the qualities that define the poet's current reputation. . . .

Wilbur is, in fact, aware of the darker elements of human experience, and he is in every way a more complete and a more significant poet than his detractors suggest. At the heart of his achievement is a willingness to face the full implications of our humanness, to confront not merely that paradoxical creature, man, but to encounter as well those structures—both physical and intellectual—that man has created for himself. Again and again, this requires that the poet respond to contradictions of the most disturbing sort. At the one extreme he discovers an immense, nearly heart-rending potential for beauty and love; at the other, mindless violence and inexplicable evil. In facing this paradox Wilbur explores its tensions and ambiguities with the careful attention only a poet can summon to such a task. If the result of such exploration seems controlled and poetically sure, that is, after all, what we have a right to expect from our artists. Wilbur's poems create beautiful shapes for the experiences they record; but often the very beauty of the designs may conceal from us the struggle and anguish of the experiences themselves.

Ejner J. Jensen. *New England Review*. 2, 4, 1980, pp. 594–95

When [Richard] Wilbur first came on the poetry scene at age twenty-six, critics such as Louise Bogan marveled at his ''remarkable variety of interest and mood,'' his ''seemingly effortless advance to a resolute conclusion,'' his ''gift of fitting the poetic pattern to the material.'' Exploring and affirming a ''mystical'' experience of everyday life and everyday objects using these talents has always been a concern to which Wilbur returns. As he notes in an essay on Emily Dickinson, ''the subjects to which a poet returns are those which vex him.'' What ''vexes'' Wilbur, in the sense that he feels compelled to strive for it again and again, seems to be the relation between the things of this world and the things of another, spiritual world, capturing the ''difficult balance'' that is the topic of his ''chestnut'' poem ''Love Calls Us to the Things of This World.'' As he tells one interviewer, ''I can believe in angels by way of and in the laundry. . . . I don't really want to have much truck with angels who aren't in the laundry, who aren't in the everyday world.'' Fellow poet Thom Gunn, reviewing Wilbur's *Advice to a Prophet*, remarks on the danger of this course: ''The public prefers a wild and changeable poet to one who has pursued a single end consistently and quietly,'' especially an end that continues to vex. The extent to which Wilbur has succeeded in consciously striving for this ''single end'' through the decades may be measured by the extent to which his interviewers keep returning to those same concerns—and by the fresh insights that inform his responses to such questions as: What can rhymed verse offer that free verse cannot? Why the almost obsessive search for the spiritual in the physical in your poetry? How does the form of your poetry relate to its function? What effect does translating drama have on your poetry?. . .

Thus Wilbur's defense of formal poetry begins not by excoriating free verse but by admiring free verse's successes and demonstrating the deceptive difficulty in writing it. Again and again he shows the versatility and virtuosity that has distinguished his poetry as he argues that rhyme, meter, and grace have as much a place in today's poetry as ever, that poetry cannot be reduced to the equation that free verse equals daring and formal poetry equals timidity.

William Butts, ed. *Conversations with Richard Wilbur* (Jackson: Univ. Pr. of Mississippi, 1990), pp. x, xii

While in college, Richard Wilbur once spent part of an afternoon composing with his roommate ''A Complete List of Everything.'' In dadaist fashion the students typed a deliberately absurd and unrelated list of nouns such as ''beauty, carburetor, sheepshank, pagoda, absence, chalk, vector, Amarillo, garters, dromedary, Tartarus, tupelo, omelet, caboose, ferro-cyanide,'' and so on. Although the pair eventually grew tired of this impromptu summa, Wilbur recognizes in his play with language ''a primitive desire that is radical to poetry—the desire to lay claim to as much of the world as possible through uttering the names of things'' (*Responses 92*). The undergraduate spoke out of the verbal passion that would animate all of his future poetry. From *The Beautiful Changes* (1947) to his *New and Collected Poems* forty years later, Wilbur has explored the extent to which words can encompass the world. Although continually beguiled by Poe's linguistic negations, Wilbur writes out of a basic faith in language as a means to come to terms with the rest of reality and to reveal its transcendent significance.

Unlike Poe who would unspeak the earth, Wilbur reenacts its genesis. He once again delivers the world from undesignated formlessness and repeats its original affirmation by language. As he brings poetic order out of the chaos before words, Wilbur finds again, deeper in creation, signs of that presence which first named all things into being.

Gary M. Ciuba. ''Richard Wilbur: The Poetry of Real Presences.'' *Renascence*. Fall 1992–Winter 1993, pp. 49, 62

Robert Boyers has complained that ''Wilbur does not really care for things. What his verse celebrates is not the hard things of this world, but the imagination that makes possible delight, its own and others' in appropriating things for a variety of spiritual and psychological purposes'' (''On Richard Wilbur,'' p. 77). We have seen, on the other hand, that Wilbur very deeply cares for things, cares for them so deeply that he rescues them from the inertia of mere existence. Things are there in all their palpability, but he clothes them with a nimbus of spirit. This is not appropriation; it is revelation. Again and again Wilbur's poems fall back on the Berkeleyan idea of a deific consciousness that reifies the world *in spirit*: the world is there before us and survives in the mind of God after we have gone.

Conscious as he is of the inexhaustible variety of creation and aware that no single mind can encompass it, Wilbur is led to document what he knows. It is from this narrowing of attention that his regionalism derives, though, as we have seen, it is not a regionalism that closes itself to the resources of cosmopolitan culture. Anyone who has read the *New and Collected Poems* will

have made the acquaintance of New England's birds and trees and flowers, will have experienced every nuance of its seasonal change, and yet will also have encountered Baroque fountains, French painters, and troubadour verse forms. Wilbur's secret lies in his attentiveness. He counts the streaks of the tulip as painstakingly as [Gerard Manley] Hopkins, and having counted them (knowing they will never again be replicated) is led to contemplate the infinite imagination that gave them form. Attention, to paraphrase one of his lines, is the genetrix of infinity.

Rodney Stenning Edgecombe. *A Reader's Guide to the Poetry of Richard Wilbur* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Pr., 1995), p. 158

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WILDER, Thornton (1897–1975)

Before we read him, we are likely to think that he is one of those contemporary writers who seem still to date from the nineties—that he is simply another ''stylist,'' another devotee of ''beauty''—that we shall, in fact. find him merely a pretty or a precious writer; but Wilder, when we come to read him, turns out to be something quite different. He certainly possesses that quality of ''delightfulness'' of which Saintsbury has said that Balzac didn't have it, but that Gérard de Nerval did. But he has a hardness, a sharpness, a precision, quite unlike our Cabells, our Dunsanys, our Van Vechtens and our George Moores. He has an edge which is peculiar to himself and which is never incompatible with a consummate felicity.

Edmund Wilson. *New Republic*. Aug. 8, 1928. p. 304

The Bridge of San Luis Rey can be sacrificed without loss. . . . Its fatalism seems specious, trivial, and even dishonest, as though consistency in the Maker's ways were trumped up to serve the ends of plot. *The Cabala* is much better, though questionable in that general air of selectness which it has in common with the society novels of writers like Marcel Prévost . . . and Paul Bourget. . . . And the work is vitiated at the close by that superficial coquetting with the mystic which mars *The Bridge* as a whole.

Kenneth Burke. *Bookman*. Aug., 1929. p. 562

Wilder has concocted a synthesis of all the chambermaid literature, Sunday school tracts and boulevard piety there ever were. He has added a dash of the prep-school teacher's erudition, then embalmed all this in the speciously glamorous style of the late Anatole France. He talks much of art, of himself as Artist, of style. He is a very conscientious craftsman. But his is the most irritating and pretentious style pattern I have read in years. It has the slick, smug finality of the lesser Latins; that shallow clarity and tight little good taste that remind one of nothing so much as the conversation and practice of a veteran cocotte.

Michael Gold. *New Republic*. Oct. 22, 1930. p. 267

He was a dramatist before he became a novelist, and his prose has always shown the discipline of the theater. His novels were never completely satisfactory in form: they were panel novels—long, vivid character sketches linking dramatic scenes. The quality of his imagination and his interest in character portrayal were both dramatic in spirit.

Dayton Kohler. *English Journal*. Jan., 1939. p. 4

Thornton Wilder possesses several distinctive virtues as a creative literary artist, but unfortunately none of them has much to do with his actual skill as a writer. He has an adventurous mind, which makes him try new and interesting fields without resting comfortable on already won laurels. He is of an independent nature, which leads him to write as he pleases without being intimidated by critics or public. He is ambitious, which makes him do difficult and arresting things, even if not always seeming too well equipped for them. He has versatility, which results in his knowing his way about in both the novel and the drama. And he knows the advantage of leisure, which enables him to take his time about polishing his work, even to the extent of allowing fourteen years to elapse between novels.

Richard Watts, Jr. *New Republic*. March 1, 1948. p. 22

Mr. Wilder has been unfairly ignored by serious literary critics. . . . He is a humorist who knows the underlying seriousness of comic events, a satirist who loves the human race. True, his style has sometimes been pretentious, and his stories slow-paced; but he deserves our respect as an artist. The bold attempt of his whole career has been nothing less than the re-establishment of human values in a world which, he believes, desperately needs them. Consistently he has attempted to write literature which, having a value of its own, would still not be an end in itself. He deserves our admiration for accepting as his task the difficult artistic problem of suiting fable to idea and sound to sense, producing thus an integrated whole.

Joseph J. Firebaugh. *Pacific Spectator*. Autumn, 1950. p. 438

Though Wilder, when we look closely, has a mark of his own, his work strikes one as that of an ''arranger'' rather than a creator. His arrangements are artful, attractive, scrupulously calculated, and unmistakably gifted. They are delightfully decorative patterns created from the raw material dug up by other men. To put it

another way, he arranges ''flowers'' beautifully, but he does not grow them. In this sense, he resembles certain modern Frenchmen rather than one of our own playwrights.

What is American in Wilder's plays are their benign humor, their old-fashioned optimism, their use of the charmingly homely detail, the sophisticated employment of the commonplace, their avuncular celebration of the humdrum, their common sense, popular moralism, and the simplicity—one might almost say simple-mindedness—behind a shrewdly captivating manipulation of a large selection of classic elements.

Harold Clurman. *The Nation*. Sept. 3, 1955. p. 210

Mr. Wilder's play is, in a sense, a refutation of its thesis. *Our Town* is purely and simply an act of awareness, a demonstration of the fact that in a work of art, at least, experience *can* be arrested, imprisoned, and preserved. The perspective of death, which Mr. Wilder has chosen, gives an extra poignancy and intensity to the small-town life whose essence he is trying so urgently to communicate. . . . The perspective is, to be sure, hazardous; it invites bathos and sententiousness. Yet, Mr. Wilder has used it honorably. He forbids the spectator to dote on that town of the past. He is concerned only with saying: this is how it was, though then we did not know it.

Mary McCarthy. *Sights and Spectacles* (Farrar). 1956. p. 28

I think that if the play (*Our Town*) tested its own theme more remorselessly, the world it creates of a timeless family and a rhythm of existence beyond the disturbance of social wracks would not remain unshaken. . . . I think, further, that the close contact which the play established with its audience was the result of its coincidence with the deep longing of the audience for such stability, a stability which in daylight out on the streets does not truly exist. . . . To me, therefore, the play falls short of a form that will press into reality to the limits of reality, if only because it could not plumb the psychological interior lives of its characters and still keep its present form.

Arthur Miller. *Atlantic Monthly*. April, 1956. p. 39

He is our great unsocial and antihistorical novelist, the artist of the anachronism. . . . Wilder does not think of history as an irreversible process of a river in flood; he thinks of it as a series of recurrent patterns, almost like checkerboards set side by side. . . . Wilder has written a dozen books, each strikingly different from all the others in place and time, in mood, and even more in method, yet all the books embody or suggest the same feeling of universal experience and eternal return. *Everything that happened might happen anywhere, and will happen again*. That principle explains why he is able to adopt different perspectives in different books, as if he were looking sometimes through one end of a telescope and sometimes through the other.

Malcolm Cowley. *Saturday Review*. Oct. 6, 1956. pp. 50–1

Although Wilder has been hysterically popular in Germany since the end of the war, when the State Department sent *Our Town* on tour as a ''representative example'' of ''modern American theatre'' . . . , his star has risen even higher since he received the Peace Prize at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 1957. . . . The vitalistic cosmic optimism of *The Skin of Our Teeth* provides the contemporary German with the psychological reassurance he demands. Shocked and terrified by the situation in which he finds himself as the primary European target of bombs dispatched from opposite directions, the middle-class German reader flees to the lap of Wilder.

Paul Fussell, Jr., *The Nation*. May 3, 1958. pp. 394–5

When we examine the nature of Wilder's humanistic affirmation, what do we discover? His plays celebrate human love, the worth and dignity of man, the values of the ordinary, and the eternity of human values. From the little boy in Wilder's first play who says: ''I am not afraid of life. I will astonish it!'' to Dolly Levi and her cohorts in adventure in *The Matchmaker*, Wilder has always been on the side of life and life is seen to be most directly affirmed through love. Love, then, is his most persistent theme and it has been for him an inexhaustible subject. Of its worth he is convinced, but it is interesting to note that Wilder has never been able to make any commitments as to the reasons for its worth. Wilder can deal with life and love directly and concretely; but when he moves to the edges of life, the focus becomes less sharp.

Robert W. Corrigan. *Educational Theatre Journal*. Oct., 1961. p. 168

He is a man of singular temperament, often delighting in paradox, willing and able to challenge us and disturb us. But he likes things to seem traditional, that is, to be stated within the traditional frame of reference, though they may be somewhat new or idiosyncratic. He likes every present expression to hark back to the entirety of beloved accumulated literature, and constantly shows or suggests that every current thought is based on someone else's thinking, every day of our lives is rooted in olden time.

The moderation and correctness of Wilder's way of writing are so reposeful that at times one can imagine them lulling us too much, but they never do. His definiteness and dispatch and his natural popular touch, and the bravery of his sudden little assertions every so often—as though for percussiveness, for punctuation—animate his every page and every scene. Verily, as he himself tells us, what he offers a good deal of the time is only fantasy and spirituality, illusion and hypnosophy. But we dance in his dream, throughout; it is active and bright. It is an art on the side of Apollo, though ever respectful of Dionysus.

Glenway Wescott. *Images of Truth* (Harper). 1962. p. 308

Thornton Wilder's plays have an inverse-Antaean quality: the closer down to earth they get, the weaker they are. Whenever Wilder attempts to achieve imaginative reality and tell us ''truths'' about human beings, we get a sentimentalization of the little guy that is as unbelievable as it is indigestible. . . . [O]f *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, D.H. Lawrence noted, ''I found [it] a dull dough-nut with artificial jam in it.'' But let the subject-matter get away from reality—let it be, for example, what goes on in the rarefied minds of

babies, as in *Infancy*, the best of the three new *Plays for Bleecker Street*—and Wilder can be enormously convincing.

John Simon. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1962. pp. 268–9

The eyes behind the horn-rimmed spectacles have probed into the values of life, and under the colloquial language which he has employed for its appeal to the minds of Americans can be heard an urgent call to reason. The small number of carefully made works which he has issued over four decades have made their point, and it is doubtful that any of them save *The Cabala* and *The Woman of Andros* will drop into oblivion. *Our Town*, in all likelihood the most widely produced play in the entire history of American drama, and *The Skin of Our Teeth* have deserved the prizes bestowed on them by the Pulitzer committee as surely as any of the other plays granted the same award; and if *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* is not the best novel to have won the Pulitzer Prize, Wilder's five novels as a group have justly earned the Gold Medal for fiction given to him by the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1952.

Being a conscientious craftsman, Wilder has grown steadily in strength and taste.

Malcolm Goldstein. *The Art of Thornton Wilder* (Nebraska). 1965. p. 165

Wilder's efforts since *Heaven's My Destination* have all been directed toward expressing ''the sublime in the pedestrian.'' Alcestis is the knight of faith, but who can understand her? The audience can only watch her and do their best with their own lives. *The Alcestiad* is unqualifiedly and unwaveringly, with no ''concession to a contemporary standard of good manners,'' a religious play. The meaning of life that Wilder has cherished so carefully throughout all his work finally found its clearest expression through the philosophy of Kierkegaard. . . . Although *The Alcestiad* is clearly religious, it provides no answers; it does not seek to comfort the audience with soothing reports of rewards waiting for the good or anyone else. It is religious in the sense of Gertrude Stein's cooking pots, of Goethe's reading of the *Iliad*, or Kierkegaard's understanding of the stories of Job and Abraham and Isaac. Existence is difficult, painfully so; but it is available and better than anyone can realize.

Donald Haberman. *The Plays of Thornton Wilder* (Wesleyan). 1967. pp. 51–2

Today, though the novelist-playwright is stouter and has lost some of the bristling bounce of his middle years, he retains the restless vitality that helps explain his infinite curiosity, his capacity for endless renewal. His voice has lost none of the earnest courtesy and considerateness so vividly recalled by those who have known him. And though he has long since forgone the company of other writers, having become more solitary, more *private* a person, Wilder retains his interest in experimentation, best exemplified in his celebrated explications of James Joyce and Gertrude Stein. . . .

What one recognizes beneath Wilder's genial exterior, within the essential being of the man and his work is the impulse, the peculiarly American capacity, to evoke and celebrate the meditative, the serene, the reverential sense of life. Never fully expressed in our national literature, it has been manifested in the achievements of social philosopher Bronson Alcott, painter Thomas Eakins, composer Charles Ives. It is that ultimately Vergilian pathos concerning itself with the tears of things that provides the thrust from which Wilder's latest work emerges.

Richard H. Goldstone. *Saturday Review*. April 1, 1967. p. 28

Thornton Wilder has been, in his day, a daring gamester. In every aspect of literary form: a very playboy of point-of-view (see *The Ides of March*), an inventor—with others—of the fluid, unboxed stage that was to become the International Theater. . . . But in matters of ethical and even epistemological substance, Wilder is highly traditional—not precisely a new humanist in the Babbitt-More model, but far closer to these daylight types than to any known underground man. . . . Everywhere in Wilder's books . . . , the Author appears as an admirer of decorum, self-restraint, disciplined goodness—and as an enemy of misrule, comic reversal, indulgence of personal (i.e., selfish) feeling. . . .

And, as should quickly be added, the values in question have become more visible, not less, as Wilder's career has progressed. *The Eighth Day*—the new book at hand—is a family novel, expansive, meditative, and surprisingly conventional in method and structure. . . . From *The Cabala* (1926), Wilder's first novel, a tale of an aristocratic order fallen into decline, to *The Eighth Day*, a steady ho-hum of condescension—curious suggestions of a faint personal disdain even for those whom the author is, on the face of it, celebrating—meets the reader's ear. The overview in this artist is, in short, not only cosmological, it is somehow social as well; the sense of time inhibits the imagination, but so too does a sense that The Others are inferior, not clubbable, not finally chic enough. People are held off without ill will, yet also without the remotest thought that a surrender of one's own ego to the other person could ever in this world occur. Self-regard, self-respect, self-absorption obliterate the possibility.

Benjamin DeMott. *New York Times Book Section*. April 2, 1967. pp. 1, 53

Mr. Wilder is so devoted to the ordinary universe that he is content to be its witness. In his own behalf he claims so little that it does not count as a claim. He assumes that life is a carpet with a figure in it. The figure begins in the past, as far back as lore and memory can reach. We are the sum of many generations. As a chronicler, the novelist is thrilled by the grandeur of the carpet, after all, and by the dramatic power of its figure. Lest this power be slighted, he allows the Deacon, in *The Eighth Day*, to recite a heavy sermon upon its text, for the benefit of young Roger.

This is to say that *The Eighth Day* is one of those old-fashioned things called novels, stories with truth in them. The trouble with books of this kind is that they claim to tell All, and the claim is difficult to sustain. As Mr. Wilder's book proceeds, his narrative voice becomes more obtrusive, insisting, as if this were out last chance to study the carpet. At the same time the reader has the impression that the Stage-Manager sees more in his drama than anyone else can see. . . .

A big novel, then, impressive in its scale, *The Eighth Day* is touching in its regard for truth, that great lost cause. It is grand to know that there are still writers who believe that the world is a real

garden with real toads in it. If the novel does not quite, as we rudely say, ''come off,'' the reason is that it lacks variety.

Denis Donoghue. *New York Review of Books*. Aug. 24, 1967. p. 12

Is it [Wilder's] fault he has had the dramatic sense to anticipate his audience's objections? The answer is that more than in any other art first-rate drama demands first-rate audiences. Perhaps Wilder has been overly conscious of his role as mediator between highbrow sensibility and middlebrow taste, perhaps he has too strenuously adapted his intellectual proclivities to the demand of the bourgeois theatre's ''group mind.'' . . . The greatest of modern dramatists enlarged audience taste precisely by not conceding to it. But Wilder in play after play feels compelled to underline the obvious or provide a graspable theme ''nugget.''. . .

Wilder's almost maddening tendency to aphorize contradicts his avowed aim, articulated in the Introduction to *Three Plays*, to disturb middleclass complacency: the theatre he rejected was ''not only inadequate, it was evasive . . . it aimed to be soothing.'' He is enmeshed rather in the snares of what Dwight MacDonald has termed ''midcult,'' the submerging of complexities in the tepid ooze of a cozy universality and folksiness. . . . One notes these tendencies with regret, for Wilder's dramatic instinct and theatrical inventiveness are undeniable. Most of his plays, particularly *The Skin of Our Teeth*, hold the stage despite their defects. One keeps wishing that he hadn't played it so safe and that along with Joyce's ideas he had been more influenced by the Irishman's artistic intransigence.

Gerald Rabkin in *The Forties*, ed. Warren French (Everett/Edwards). 1969. p. 120

Between the affirmation of earthly life and the difficulty or impossibility of ever fully understanding it there is a wide gap that perhaps reaches its extreme in the ''Alcestiad.'' Alcestis wishes to serve her god in order to live in ''reality''—she wishes to merge with the divine. She disavows earthly life, but later, through great happiness and intense suffering, the god whom she wishes to serve shows her that even love is not the meaning of life. Thus she spans the widest arc of all the Wilder figures.

In all these works of Wilder, the religious question How does one live? is never formulated as a theory. If there is something absolute by which human beings can orient their lives, it is neither the state nor society nor the rationale of technology. All these authorities have their limits beyond which questions such as the relation of the individual to the universal become crucial.

We cannot ignore the theme of the future. Thornton Wilder's work, in an immaterial sense, contains the man of the twentieth century who, in the maelstrom of toppling orders, has frighteningly lost his orientation. Faced with the question of how to live, what is left for him but to trust, like Caesar, the promise that grows out of the unknowable?

Hermann Stresau. *Thornton Wilder* (Ungar). 1971. p. 103

This wonderfully entertaining novel [*Theophilus North*] is really several novels. . . . The writing, most of it in dialogue, is supple, civilized, radiant with wisdom. It is an irresistible book.

Its sunny disposition at the close of a long and distinguished career can only be matched, of late, by Thomas Mann's *Felix Krull*. There is the same delight in deception in both. . . . Granville Hicks has suggested that Theophilus is really Christ. This seems to me a vulgarization stemming from that kind of symbol-hunting criticism in which everything is invariably what it was *not* for the author. Wilder is simply not writing this kind of fiction. Theophilus is what he is, a very real person mounted on a bicycle in a real city, both a sinner and a saint of sorts. The whole point of one section at the end, in which he is taken as some sort of faithhealer, is to show that only God can perform miracles, not man. In any event, to be able to write a book as genial as this, and one as wholly unassuming, at close on eighty years of age is itself a testimony to the human race. I was extremely sorry to put it down.

Geoffrey Wagner. *National Review*. Dec. 7, 1973. p. 1368

In a sense, [*Theophilus North*] puts the reader in touch with two grand old men, Wilder himself and Theophilus, who tells the story of his 30th summer from the vantage point of his old age. It is a lively story, a series of picaresque incidents now tender, now hilarious, now satiric, always absorbing. But it is also a comment from a seasoned writer on the relationship between life and literature. . . .

Both Theophilus and Wilder bring to mind a third old man, Prospero. We *are* such stuff as dreams are made on, they all remind us; and perhaps nothing is more real than the ''insubstantial pageant'' that a gifted memory and imagination can create through the ordered beauty of language. The reminder is timely.

Elizabeth M. Woods. *America*. Dec. 15, 1973. p. 472

The task Thornton Wilder sets himself in his novels is to find . . . a unity within the diversity of all life. Such a search necessitates a confrontation with the phenomenal world of apparent time. The resolution to the confrontation is for Wilder—inevitably perhaps—a mystical one. He affirms through characterization, through structure, through thematic development that there exist certain eternal verities which are unaffected by and which give meaning to the phenomenal world in which man exists. He repeatedly demonstrates that the concept of time and history usually accepted by man—that time can be divided into distinct periods and that events gain much of their significance because of their occurrence within certain distinct time periods—is illusory.

The novels deny by their circular structures the validity of the idea of time as absolute progression from one never-recurring moment to another never-recurring moment. Although within a circular structure there may indeed be progression, the fact that the end of the progression within the structure occurs at a point which has also been the beginning of the progression belies the concept of absolute linearity. Wilder has consistently employed this method. . . .

The themes which predominate in Wilder's novels arise from his overwhelming concern with the placement of man in universal time. His preoccupation with the theme of destiny versus chance—which receives major treatment in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, *The Ides of March*, and *The Eighth Day*—arises from his awe at the ultimate mystery of man's temporal existence. His attempts to resolve this problem lead him to a mystical acceptance of an unknowable but eternal ordering principle. The most frequently intuited evidence of a supraphenomenal reality in the novels is

love, and love in its various guises is one of Wilder's major themes. That Wilder considers all kinds of love—the perverse and perverted forms, as well as the highest, selfless form—as reflections of a pure eternal love which gives meaning and direction to experience is evident.

Mary Ellen Williams. *A Vast Landscape: Time in the Novels of Thornton Wilder* (Idaho State Univ. Pr., 1979), pp. 103, 105

Like all Thornton's work, *The Eighth Day* narrates the journey of pilgrims through adversities. Awkwardly, comically, naively, painfully, heroically, they ''seek the light.'' The narrator in *The Cabala*, George Brush in *Heaven's My Destination*, the Abbess in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Chrysis in *The Woman of Andros*, Caesar in *The Ides of March*, Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, the Ashley family in *The Eighth Day*—all endure the unalterable so that the unalterable becomes a source of strength. Each adapts to necessity as though it were a choice. This, Thornton believed, was the motif of Beethoven's last quartets: ''esmüss sein.'' He saw it in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*: ''To transform the leap of life into a walk, absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian—that only the Knight of Faith can do.'' . . .

Ought we then to classify Wilder as a religious writer? He did not claim that distinction. Moreover, it is a mistake to equate an artist's convictions with those of his fictional characters. In *Our Town*, he had written that there is ''something in all of us that is eternal,'' but that was far from an avowal of personal immortality. . . .

Yet in his preoccupation with the preciousness of ordinary daily life, in his figurations of faith, love and hope—especially hope—Thornton was not outside the mainstream of Christian teaching. The Crucifixion seemed to him the most magnificent metaphor ever found for mankind's imperfection. On the other hand, he thought that Christianity's involvement in blood and murder ''reawakens the latent anguish of the infantile life and fills the inner mind with such vibrating nerves and such despairing self-abasement that the spiritual values can barely make themselves heard.''

This can be said: Whatever the well-springs of his outlook, and they were many; whatever his personal doubts, shortcomings, anguish, or those of the world, he resisted the temptation to believe that the human race is going to hell. Mankind is like the planet Earth in *Our Town*, ''straining away, straining away all the time to make something of itself.'' A melancholy Christmas greeting provoked an exasperated response: ''The first Christmas also came into a world of anxiety and distress, hence the summons to be joyful—'rejoice, I say, rejoice!''' There were always sufficient pretexts in life for melancholy. ''No, no—refuse that indulgence. Love life and be loved.'' The knowledge of imperfection was not to be carried on one's back like a load of stones.

Gilbert A. Harrison. *The Enthusiast: A Life of Thornton Wilder* (Ticknor & Fields, 1983), pp. 358–60

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WILLIAMS, C. K. (1936–)

[C. K. Williams's] first two books, *Lies* and *I America the Bitter Name*, were vitiated by a shrill vehemence and sentimentality. The absence of capitals or punctuation made the poems blur and sprawl. Their dominant note was of agony; there were welts of inchoate feeling. His new book, *With Ignorance*, is likewise flawed, but his poetry has come to possess an eerie incantatory power that salvages it from confession. . . . Williams is writing parables, plain tales about men and women in extreme situations: a laborer at home with his family, and the inarticulate tensions that tear him apart; a friend who went mad; a Vietnam veteran in a bar, tormented by the murders he committed, both in the war and as a small-time mobster later on; and in other poems, ''my wife, my child . . . my home, my work, my sorrow.'' . . . [He] borrows the cadences of ordinary speech, vigorous and utterly without refinement, depending on a litany of charged rhetoric to transform prose into poetry.

Some of his poems *are* prose. . . . The lines are so long that the book had to be published in a wide-page format, like an art catalogue. The limitations of such a style are self-evident; Williams is writing in haphazard strokes, and with such apparent haste—or perhaps deliberate casualness—that he even disposes of grammar on occasion. . . . Eager to blurt out his feelings, he rushes from one sad incident to another, pouring forth woe in a hectic, rude, indignant voice; what comes to mind is the Italian gesture of slapping one's forehead with an open palm.

Still, in other poems his lines are Biblical in their sonority, and resonate with a dire prophecy reminiscent of ''Howl.'' . . . Williams achieves a memorable intensity in the title poem, where the longing to survive, to transcend the dross of experience and to discover its essence culminates in a stunning evocation of ''history, power, grief and remorse''—sensations that converge on the speaker and threaten to annihilate his imaginative life, the only life that promises to survive.

James Atlas. *The Nation*. June 18, 1977, pp. 763–66.

With his penchant for tucking a credo into a wisecrack, Ezra Pound once insisted that poetry should be at least as well written as prose. Throughout the history of English poetry, revolutions have been made by poets who envied the suppleness, fluency and vigor of good prose. Chaucer, Dryden, Wordsworth, Eliot and Pound were all reacting in one way or another to the florid, gorgeous poeticism of a previous generation. . . .

Even a cursory glance at C. K. Williams's third book of poems, *With Ignorance*, shows us how firmly it belongs to this anti-poetic tradition of poetry. The first thing that's distinctive about the book is its physical shape, tall and wide, very wide, almost square. This is surely meant to accommodate a long and lanky verse line, the

longest I've seen in recent poetry, yet the lines repeatedly elude the design and run on, run over. The poems themselves are equally outsized, stretching from two to seven pages. In his first two books, *Lies* (1969) and *I America the Bitter Name* (1972), Williams was a poet of trim anecdotes, fragmentary phrases and brutal metaphors; here he's traded in a staccato lyrical rhythm for the cadences of a storyteller. The excitement is tremendous, as it always is when we see a pungent talent emerging to find its own form and voice.

In its way Williams's last book, *I America the Bitter Name*, was a characteristic document of the early Nixon years. Its largely unpunctuated language was violent, fragmentary, forced by rude enjambment, torn by rage and frustration. The Vietnam war was very much on Williams's mind then, and it released shadowy springs of private desperation to create a surge of anger and horror. The wistfulness, nostalgia and boyish passion of *Lies* had narrowed to a savage irony; a deeply playful poet had turned bitter and sardonic. . . .

The new voice we hear in *With Ignorance* strikes us not for this sort of raw sarcasm, this stupefied amazement at human foibles, but for its colloquial intimacy. . . .

[Williams] is like a more self-conscious but still affable barroom companion, always about to sail off into another monologue, another tiff with the everyday world. Yet the stories usually go off the rails—suddenly he's gazing inward; they lose their anecdotal shape and turn ruminative, self-lacerating, revelatory. The poet becomes a drinker of ecstacies, and he hunts for secrets that promise him salvation.

Like A. R. Ammons, Williams is intrigued by the ordinary world but always in quest of a ''radiance'' that will transfigure it, an intuition that might irradiate his life. In one poem, ''The Cave,'' he remembers his belief that the mad had access to such secrets. He recalls his fantasies about a man and woman he had visited in a madhouse. . . .

With its dovetailing of Plato's cave, that great metaphor for the elusiveness of knowledge, and the tortured life in the mental hospital, shot through with illusions of vision and wisdom, ''The Cave'' is a masterful poem, leavened by the comedy of the poet's eager, acquisitive innocence. Williams finally lets go of his romantic image of madness; he discovers that the secret, the mystery, ''isn't lost in the frenzy of one soul or another, but next to us, in the touch, between,'' in the intimate and trivial encounters of daily life.

As testimony to this recognition the book contains something rare in contemporary poetry, a bustling number of other people: a blue-collar worker and his family, the author's children, a lonely old grocer, wives, lovers, the friend who goes mad, the famous writer drinking himself to death, and so on. Williams approaches these people with a mixture of tenderness and curiosity that usually outflanks his powerful reserves of desperation. Only in the long unsatisfying title poem, ''With Ignorance,'' is he overcome by a vague ruminative bleakness, a feverish disgust, which looks morosely inward and puts the actualities of life in limbo.

Elsewhere, the solid realism, the clash of contending feelings and human interchange, give the book its most signal quality, its emotional range and intensity. . . .

By bringing poetry closer to prose Williams has also brought it closer to the dramatic complexity and personal directness of fiction—the book has its crackerbarrel side. His main aim is not storytelling, but stories happen along the way, and his sinuous lines have the breathless rush, the rapid shifts of nuance and inflection, that characterize good talk. Williams's poems sacrifice eloquence for energy, epigram for affect, song for speech. I find them deeply inspiriting.

Morris Dickstein. *The New York Times Book Review*. July 10, 1977, pp. 14, 30–1.

In C.K. Williams's best poems, the words hold together line by line and sustain the emotion of what is being said; furthermore, it becomes clear that it is insight, or vision, which is central, and feeling (like the almost ceaseless questioning that takes place in Williams's poems) is a means by which he opens up a space for vision. There is a metaphysical, even spiritual, dimension to Williams's work, in the way his poems address themselves to ultimate questions, extreme situations, and moments of vision; and indeed they address themselves to divinity itself, in a manner that could be characterized equally as ambivalent and probing. The poems also show an interest in personal being in all its aspects and possibilities, physical, psychological, spiritual, and an ethical, humane concern for the vulnerability of human life, especially in relation to the machinations of political power. The vigor, vividness, idiosyncratic detail, and strong emotional content are partial aspects of a writing that needs to be seen in terms of questioning, questing, probing, and seeing (in the sense of *seeing with insight*). In the long, achieved poem ''With Ignorance'' (from the book of the same title), he writes:

> What would release be? Being forgiven? No, never forgiven,
> never only forgiven.
> To be touched, somehow, with presence, so that the only sign
> is a step, towards or away?
> Or not even a step, because the walls, of self, of dread, can
> never release,
> can never forgive stepping away, out of the willed or refused,
> out of the lie or the fear
> of the self that still holds back and refuses, resists, and turns
> back again and again into the willed.
> What could it be, though? The first, hectic rush past guilt and
> remorse?
> What if we could find a way through the fires that aren't with
> us and the terrors that are?
> What would be there? Would we be thrown back into perhaps
> or not yet or not needed or done?

The poem finds a temporary, or partial, resolution in the notion of ''blessing'':

> Willed or unwilled, word or sign, the word suddenly filled with
> its own breath.
> Self and other the self within other and the self still moved
> through its word,
> consuming itself, still, and consuming, still being rage, war,
> the fear, the aghast,
> but bless, bless still, even the fear, the loss, the gutting
> of word,
> the gutting even of hunger,
> but still to bless and bless, even the turn back, the refusal, to
> bless and to bless.

This prepares a space for the final, epiphanic movement of the poem:

There was a light in a room. You came to it, leaned to it,
reaching, touching,
and watching you, I saw you give back to the light a light more
than light
and to the silence you gave more than silence, and, in the silence, l heard it.

Williams's long lines can sometimes be relaxed in pace and rhythm, conversational in tone, but mostly there is a rushed, breathless immediacy to his words, the sentences continuing on and on, at times as if there were always *more* to say, *now,* at other times as if the poet wished to keep deferring any kind of an ending. (The sense of urgency of Williams's poems is thematized, in a fictionalized form, in ''Yours,'' from the collection *I America the Bitter Name.*) When these poems fail, it is usually because the words are carried along by the emotion, in such a way that there are whole passages loosely strung together and unable to embody any effective force. It must also be said that the short poems in his collection *Flesh and Blood* often seem to end before the anecdotal impulse—present in much of Williams's other work, too—has pushed, or been pushed, through to something beyond anecdote; and the language is too often without the pressure, the intensity, of his best work. A comparison with Charles Reznikoff's personal or observational poems would be instructive, because Reznikoff's precise, economical use of language makes Williams's less successful poems look verbose, and his eye for telling or charged details is surer than Williams's. These criticisms cannot be made, however, of the long elegiac piece ''Le Petit Salvié,'' which concludes *Flesh and Blood*; this must be included among Williams's finest poems, together with such pieces as ''One of the Muses'' (from *Tar*), ''With Ignorance,'' and the beautiful poems adapted from Issa, *The Lark, The Thrush, The Starling.*

David Miller. In *Contemporary Poets,* 6th edition, ed. Thomas Riggs (St. James Press, 1996).

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WILLIAMS, John A. (1925–)

[John A.] Williams is a young Northern urban Negro whose characters [in *Night Song*] speak the jive talk of the big city, and his material generally has the desolate emptiness of warehouses and tenements seen at dead of night in east Greenwich Village, where much of the novel's action takes place.

Night Song deals with the life and death of a Negro jazz musician, Richie Stokes, who seems to be modeled after the late Charlie Parker (in the novel, Stokes is called ''Eagle''; Parker was ''the Bird''). But the human elements of the novel are two young people—Keel, a Negro, and his white girl, Della, who are in love with each other but caught in the paralyzing stalemate of the impossibility of their relationship. What comes across in the relationship of this pair is neither warmth nor love but an agonizing void.

Because the Negro writer can hardly escape being possessed by one theme, the problem of his own place in American life, he is always in danger of becoming abstract. This abstractness resembles, though it is far more humanly authentic, that of the proletarian novels in the thirties. Mr. Williams, for example, has the inevitable scene of the policeman, with no cause but his own insecurity, beating Stokes over the head with his club. It is not that such things do not happen; the trouble is that they have happened so often that they have become a cliché that must overpower a talented young writer like Mr. Williams, limit the possibilities of his imagination, and not permit him a place in the artistic sun, which his talent demands.

William Barrett. *Atlantic Monthly*. Jan., 1962. p. 98

John A. Williams is the author of the earlier *Night Song*, a novel about jazz. In his new work, *Sissie*, he draws in part on his authoritative knowledge of that world, but this novel is far richer and cuts deeper than most books about jazz. For *Sissie* is a chronicle of Negro life in transition, and it unites, as few novels do, the experience of the brutalized older generation of Negroes with that of the sophisticated young, who, one way or another, have made it in American life. As such, it is full of vivid contrasts, and it conveys memorably an image of the double war that Negroes wage—against their white oppressors on the one hand, and generation against generation on the other. In its portrayal of the conflict of generations, *Sissie* suggests the American-Jewish novel of a few decades ago in which the younger generation rebels against, but is emotionally wedded to, the experience of its parents.

Sissie is a proud, indomitable matriarch with two surviving children, Ralph and Iris. On one level the story is almost a sentimental saga of a Negro family that struggles against poverty and demoralization and finally achieves a tenuous respectability. Here the book is akin to the traditional American ''immigrant'' novel. But *Sissie* is steadily redeemed from sentimentality by the hard grain of its sensibility and by its implacable anger. There is none of the congratulatory tone of the usual up-from-the-slums story. The author is far too keenly attuned to the monstrous price of the victory. . . .

Inevitably, this novel invites comparison with James Baldwin's *Another Country*. Sissie is by far the better work. For all his platform polemics, Baldwin does not seem to possess the grasp of the Negro *milieu* that Williams displays. And where *Another Country* is shrill and noisy, *Sissie* is permeated by a quiet anger that builds and builds inexorably. John A. Williams may well be a front-runner in a new surge of Negro creativity.

David Boroff. *Saturday Review*. March 30, 1963, p. 49

John A. Williams' *The Man Who Cried I America* . . . has attracted considerable attention among the general public not so much for its literary excellence but because in the last pages of the novel its protagonist, Max Reddick, discovers a monstrous plot—code named ''King Alfred''—to eradicate the black population of the United States. The plot, similar in many ways to Nazi Germany's

''final solution,'' employs enough facts from everyday life to give the reader an uneasy feeling that perhaps this section of the book is not pure fiction: only slightly disguised, James Meredith, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin all appear in the novel; so do numerous black organizations ranging from the Urban League to the Black Muslims. . . .

What has Williams accomplished by his use of bizarre and horrible metaphors for racial conflict and the plight of the black American? Perhaps his most important achievement is his escape from the protest novel tradition that has threatened to confine black writers within one narrow school. Since the publication of *Native Son* . . . , black novelists have either written naturalistic protest novels only to be compared unfavorably with Wright or have attempted to find a new form which would bring a freshness to their work but would still express their powerful moral indignation. Among the novelists of the fifties, only Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin stand out as achieving the latter goal. More recently, an impressive number of black writers have forsaken the old protest formula in favor of different subjects, structures, styles, or techniques. . . . Williams has demonstrated his ability to work with a type of horror tale which transcends mere documentation of ghetto conditions yet still carries the message he feels he must convey to his readers. The nightmarish scenes which emerge from his otherwise realistic novel startle the reader into attention and leave him with memories that he will not forget as soon as he may wish. Williams' success with this shock technique suggests one of the new directions that may be taken by the black novelist.

Robert E. Fleming. *Contemporary Literature*. Spring, 1973, pp. 186, 195–96

His subject is race, and his themes reflect the most advertised concerns of the revolution: the economic and psychological emasculation of the black man by the white, the struggle of the black man to preserve his manhood, the black will to survive and the enduring strength that brings victory. . . . He seeks to convince the reader that his picture of society, with its black ideological tilt, is accurate, bringing home to white Americans the extent of their crime and demonstrating to blacks the means by which they might triumph over white discrimination. . . .

Williams's novels are consistent in reflecting his ideological bias, but artistically they are quite uneven. *The Angry Ones*, dealing with discrimination against blacks who try to get specialized employment, and *Night Song* . . . , an excursion into the world of black jazz, indicate that from the beginning Williams knew how to put a novel together, but that he had not developed the emotional restraint or insight to put a good novel together. *Sissie* . . . , about the changing black family and the emergence of a new generation, is a great improvement. Williams, having learned much about himself and his subject, found a way to capture the complexities of both. *The Man Who Cried I America* . . . rises to art, as if the three earlier novels were exercises of preparation. Its story of two black novelists makes one of the best novels of the 1960's. But *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* . . . and *Captain Blackman* . . . show a sharp falling off. The former, about the use of Mafia techniques in a ''possible'' future, and the latter, about the role of the black soldier in America's military history, are both thin and theme-ridden.

That he has not been more frequently successful is largely explained by the fact that he has expended his talents more on politics than on art. Perhaps more important, the course upon which his political and racial loyalties have guided him is not completely the course of his natural bent. The arena in which he is most comfortable is the world of the black intellectual. His prototypical character is the man of thought whose creativity is sapped by racism. The strength of the character and his interest for the reader lie in his powers of self-analysis and understanding. . . .

Though Williams resolves the paradox of ''fortunate oppression'' in *The Man Who Cried I America*, he has perhaps gone too far on the road to polemics to turn back. He has chosen, more often than not, to use his art for the narrow rather than the larger political purpose, and it has led him into implausible exaggeration and offensive sentimentality. Unless a change in the times frees him of his deep sense of obligation to the narrower purpose, he will probably never write another novel as good as Sissie or *The Man Who Cried I America*.

Jerry H. Bryant. *Critique*. 16, 3, 1975, pp. 81–82, 100

The corporate hero and the ''cadences'' are indeed appealing devices for rendering Black history in fiction, but my argument is that the point of the Afro-American novelists' theoretical project is not so much to be historically more accurate, though that is desirable, as it is to embody within the genre an exemplary self-determination. John A. Williams contributes to this project by boldly altering the conclusion of *Captain Blackman* into utopian fantasy, projected thirty years into the future. By that time 30 million light-skinned Afro-Americans playing the part of Trojan horses within the American establishment are able to short-circuit the Pentagon's nuclear attack system. Supported by African states American Blacks assume control over the military force, announcing that they have won the real war underlying American history, the war for racial supremacy instigated by white power that for hundreds of years has refused equality.

If genres were fixed, authoritative types, Williams's excursion into fantasy-utopia would be inconsistent with his otherwise realistic novel. . . . It is precisely the ending of *Captain Blackman* that completes its logic. Presenting the outcome of history in a version of fantasy, Williams jettisons the premise of realism—the assumption that a verbal text reflects an objective reality. Instead, he presents his novel as a creation frankly governed by the artist's imagination, replacing the domination of an old genre with the new control of the Black writer's consciousness. . . . The manner of writing in *Captain Blackman* constitutes the theme of entry into conscious shaping of narrative history.

John M. Reilly. *Black American Literature Forum*. Spring, 1979, pp. 5–6

In the 20-odd years that he has been writing seriously, John A. Williams has not had the satisfaction of being ranked among our first-rate novelists. Whatever the reasons for this, a lack of industry on his part cannot be one of them. Since 1960, when his first novel, *The Angry Ones*, appeared, he has stuck commendably to his task, publishing such notable novels as *Sissie* and *The Man Who Cried I America* and a few volumes of nonfiction as well. *! Click Song* is his eighth novel. If that is not the largest output of any serious writer during the past two decades or so, it is impressive nonetheless—especially for a writer who, by his own account, has not always been encouraged by the treatment his books have received

from publishers and critics. He is known to be a very proud man, with considerable confidence in his talent and beliefs, and the unfavorable treatment his work has received may simply have increased his determination to keep following the music he hears.

Much of the music that Williams hears springs from his abhorrence of racism and his devotion to the black struggle against it. He is surely not the only novelist who has made racism a matter of deep concern, but one can think of few others who have taken on the subject as regularly as Williams has, or with such directness of language and feeling. Williams, it can be said, pulls no punches. Still, whatever the necessities of his style and manner of attack—considering the urgency of the subject that occupies him—there are problems with his approach. He often throws more rhetorical punches than a general reader finds persuasive in fiction; and, related to that, he tends sometimes to lecture us bluntly about what troubles his characters, when we wish that he would—by an artful manipulation of his material—try to make us see it.

In *! Click Song*—which reflects some of the customary aggressions of his method—Williams returns to this attack on racism, extending it this time to the world of publishing and its satellites of literary evaluation.

Jervis Anderson. *New York Times Book Section*. April 4, 1982, p. 12

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WILLIAMS, Tennessee (1911–1983)

No play can be truly flawless and certainly *The Glass Menagerie* is not so. Mr. Williams has replaced action in his script with the constant flow of human attitudes, relations and ideas across the stage; there are bound to be a few slow moments in the parade. There is one particular instance of too-obvious symbolism. . . . For every flaw, however, there are twenty brilliancies, even in the matter of symbolism.

Otis L. Guernsey, Jr. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Apr. 8, 1945. p. 1

A Streetcar Named Desire emerges as the most creative American play of the past dozen years. . . . What *A Streetcar Named Desire* has is the abundance of a good novel. . . . Life has density in this drama of a woman's tragic effort to clothe her nakedness. . . . The author's viewpoint combines a sharp sense of reality, a naturalistic fearlessness in the face of what is gross in individual life and society, and a just compassion. The handling of the dramatic elements is remarkably astute, since the author keeps wave after wave of revelation hurtling through the play. . . . But what stands out as most contributory to the making of a memorable play is the over-all effect of humanity seen in the round.

John Gassner. *Forum*. Feb., 1948. pp. 86–7

Although Tennessee Williams writes a gentle style, he has a piercing eye. . . . The insight into character is almost unbearably lucid. Although it derives from compassion, it is cruel in its insistence on the truth. . . . He is a writer of superb grace and allusiveness, always catching the shape and sound of ideas rather than their literal meaning. As its title suggests, *Summer and Smoke* deals in truths that are unsubstantial. But as Mr. Williams sees it, these are the truths that are most profound and most painful, for they separate people who logically should be together and give life its savage whims and its wanton destructiveness.

Brooks Atkinson. *New York Times Book Section*. Oct. 7, 1948. p. 33

Williams is, of course, one of two or three good playwrights writing today. . . . But why does he arrange his dramas like inquisitions, with torture preceding the confession and death following? Why is his world recognizable only fitfully, and why does he flagellate his heroines so? Does Mr. Williams mean that the original sin they have committed is that they are women?. . . One understands and is moved by his tragedies and his luckless people, and is sympathetic to his sense of the disaster that lies at the heart of our world; one understands and even partially accepts—but why does it seem all wrong?

Alfred Hayes. *New York Herald Tribune Book Section*. Oct. 22, 1950. p. 14

Tennessee Williams, to come right out with it, seems to me not only the finest playwright now working in the American theatre but in one very strict sense the *only* playwright now working in the American theatre. Alone among his contemporaries he works as an artist and a poet: he makes plays out of images, catching a turn of life while it is still fluid, still immediate, and before it has been sterilized by reflection. Arthur Miller, for instance, builds a better play, but he builds it out of bricks; Williams is all flesh and blood. He writes with his eyes and his ears where other men are content to pick their brains—poetry with them is an overlay of thought, not a direct experience—and his plays emerge in the theatre, full-bodied, undissected, so kinetic you can touch them.

Walter Kerr. *Commonweal*. Feb. 23, 1951. p. 492

With a pen that smokes and burns, Mr. Williams has created some horribly memorable chapters in the history of what one of his

characters calls the ''mad pilgrimage of the flesh.'' . . . He began as a poet, and perhaps it is as the poet of the blasted, the doomed, and the defeated that he will be remembered. . . . At his best . . . Tennessee Williams is in a class by himself. Even at his worst he creates magical, terrifying, and unforgettable effects; his only limitations appear to be self-imposed.

William Peden. *Saturday Review*. Jan. 8, 1955. p. 11

Living vitally in illusion is the substance of nearly all the important people in nearly all of Williams's work. . . . Williams explores in fiction and the theatre the *true* world behind the apparent one. . . . He pushed aside the great iron door and discovered there, behind the pulsating machine of modern technology, the throbbing human heart. It is this care for the individual man and woman and child and cornered cat which warms the lines of his plays and stories, which makes each example of his writing useful and moving. . . . The more he illuminates that inner and contrived world, however, the more he actually reveals of the brutal daylight outside.

Paul Engle. *New Republic*. Jan. 24, 1955. p. 27

He has said that he only feels and does not think; but the reader's or spectator's impression is too often that he only thinks he feels, that he is an acute case of what D. H. Lawrence called ''sex in the head.'' And not only sex. Sincerity and Truth, of which he often *speaks* and *thinks*, tend to remain in the head too—abstractions with initial capitals. His problem is not lack of talent. It is, perhaps, an ambiguity of aim: he seems to want to kick the world in the pants and yet be the world's sweet-heart, to combine the glories of martyrdom with the comforts of success. If I say that his problem is to take the initial capitals off Sincerity and Truth, I do not infer that this is easy, only that it is essential, if ever Mr. Williams's great talent is to find a full and pure expression.

Eric Bentley. *New Republic*. Apr. 11, 1955. p. 29

It occurs to me that we might well now regard Tennessee Williams as perhaps our great expert today in *Realpsychologie*. For, in such theatricals as *The Rose Tattoo* and *Baby Doll*, what he has undertaken is to strip the human animal of all moral refinements and to present the ''true'' animal, the ''fine, wild'' animal at whom we laugh, however, because for all the wildness the animal functions like a kind of clock, automatically, that is, giving heed to the promptings of natural impulse. But the major point to be made, it seems to me, is that the ribaldry, unsalacious as it really is, is utilized for the sake of what it is often Williams's major purpose to do; namely, to laugh at the very notion that human life might have a dimension of tragic significance.

Nathan A. Scott, Jr. *Christian Century*. Jan. 23, 1957. p. 112

In his continued self-analysis Williams makes use of standard dream symbols—largely sexual. Added to these are personal symbols. The playwright is at his best when he is creating symbols out of situations rather than superimposing them or hauling in irrelevant or traditional ones. One of Tennessee Williams's outstanding talents is his ability to see his life and his world metaphorically. The most exciting Williams symbols are those fashioned from his own experience.

The author's enthusiasm for metaphor and symbolism comes partially from modern psychology and partially from an enduring regard for the French symbolist poets. . . . The use of symbolist atmosphere and musical accompaniment provides stimulating contrasts to the realism of his characterization and dialogue. Because his sense of theatre restricts him to a basic realism, he seldom allows the atmosphere of his plays to thin out into a symbolist fog. It has been hard for Williams to use other influences effectively, but in his use of symbolism his talent and his literary tastes are happily united.

Nancy M. Tischler. *Tennessee Williams: Rebellious Puritan* (Citadel). 1961. pp. 294–5

The universe is the great antagonist in Tennessee Williams. It is as malignant as it is implacable. It has, through time, destroyed a way of life and a tradition that once meant civilization and has evolved a society that is grasping, repressive and destructive. Anything that was honorable is gone and the codes of the past have become anachronistic and ridiculous in the present. The standard bearers of this tradition are hopelessly inadequate in a world which calls for Jim O'Connor's ''zzzzzzzzzp!'' and yet if there is to be any meaning in life it will have to come, Williams is saying, from the codes and traditions which his ragged cavaliers and tattered ladies are waving in the face of impending darkness.

This is the credo of the romantic, the cry of Don Quixote charging the windmills and Lord Byron making his final stand for Greek independence. But if Williams devoutly believes in the romantic revolt against the Philistines, he has no illusions about the triumph of this insurrection. While sympathizing with his romantics he is at the same time able to see and understand the futility of their quest. Williams is the romantic and the realist, and his best work is marked by this important juxtaposition of beliefs.

Benjamin Nelson. *Tennessee Williams: The Man and His Work* (Ivan Obolensky). 1961. pp. 288–9

It is from [the] conflict between the need to condemn and the desire to pardon that the weakness of Williams's work stems, for it is ironically the strength of his moral temper that forces him to censure what he wishes to exalt. Williams is passionately committed to the great Romantic dictum inherent in his neo-Lawrentian point of view, that the natural equals the good, that the great natural instincts that well up out of the subconscious depths of men—and particularly the sexual instinct, whatever form it may take—are to be trusted absolutely. But Williams is too strong a moralist, far too permeated with a sense of sin, to be able to accept such an idea with equanimity. However pathetic he may make the martyred homosexual, however seemingly innocent the wandering love-giver, the moral strength that led Williams to punish the guilty Blanche impels him to condemn Brick and Chance. But because he is condemning what he most desires to pardon, he must sometimes in order to condemn at all, do so with ferocious violence.

Arthur Ganz. *American Scholar*. Spring, 1962. p. 294

Though Williams has not, so far as I know, delivered himself of a single pronouncement on the question of integration, though his signature is never to be found on a petition or a full-page ad in the New York *Times*, he seems to have located the trouble spots more precisely than Arthur Miller, for instance, who deals so conscientiously with social questions. Williams is American in his passion for absolutes, in his longing for purity, in his absence of ideas, in the extreme discomfort with which he inhabits his own body and soul, in his apocalyptic vision of sex, which like all apocalyptic visions sacrifices mere accuracy for the sake of intensity. Intensity is the crucial quality of Williams's art, and he is perhaps most an American artist in his reliance upon and mastery of surface techniques for achieving this effect.

Marion Magid. *Commentary*. Jan., 1963. p. 35

The cannibalism in *Suddenly Last Summer*, I conclude, is not merely sensational. It is symbolic of man's place in the ''ravening maw'' of nature. Williams is saying that men are no exception to the rule of life; they, like plants and animals, eat one another. It is no accident that Williams refuses to condemn Sebastian for Sebastian is his hero. He is the poet, in whom the way of the world is transformed, misunderstood, and destroyed. Even Mrs. Venable is in a sense justified; bizarre as she is, she is nevertheless on the side of the saints in a world of merely wolfish mediocrity.

William E. Taylor in *Essays in Modern American Literature*, ed. Richard E. Langford (Stetson). 1963. p. 96

A study of the whole range of Williams' drama shows the gradual development of a comprehensive moral structure. If his early works are concerned primarily with ethical implications within art—with the need for the integrity of self-expression—this playwright's later works have been increasingly concerned with the exploration of moral problems which are more comprehensive in nature. Williams' development as a moralist seems to have experienced three main phases of growth. His early plays are concerned with the struggle of the individual for self-realization. In the middle period of his development the playwright begins to equate his accounts of individual crisis with more universal phenomena, especially to trace their effect on society at large. In his later works Williams seems to relate these personal crises to the timeless progress of mankind in the moral universe.

It is significant to note that Williams' later works have taken on more and more of the apparatus of the orthodox Christian search for God. Gradually Williams' anti-hero—his symbol for modern man—has begun to assume the visage of the ''negative saint,'' the great sinner, toiling up the steep ascent to God.

Esther M. Jackson. *The Broken World of Tennessee Williams* (Wisconsin). 1965. p. 154

In general, we might reasonably think of Williams as experiencing a tension between fantasies of catastrophe and fantasies of salvation. Fantasies of catastrophe produce dramas of disaster; those of salvation may lead him to the basic structure of melodrama—twice, we note, with a *dea ex machina*. In *Milk Train*, of course, Williams works in another manner, that of the allegory; here his interest is not in catastrophe or in the success or failure of the savior type, but in the complex attitudes of the affluent society toward the equivocal figure who is both pensioner and alleviator. If the dramatic focus is on the sick or disintegrating character who simply follows his sad downward course, or whose strongest act is to be the beneficiary of someone else's supporting clasp or cool hand on fevered brow, then the direction is not a tragic one. Nevertheless Williams shows himself also able to imagine the relatively well or strong person or that in between figure who has had to struggle for wellness or strength. The last of these, Hannah Jelkes in *The Night of the Iguana*, is moving toward dramatic centrality. If such a character gains the center of the stage, it will be a move away from dramas of disaster (without drifting into drama of easy triumph). So far, the occasional moves have been toward comedy. They could also be toward tragedy.

Robert Heilman. *Southern Review*. Autumn, 1965. p. 790

Williams reveals, for better and sometimes worse, areas of thought, feeling, and imagination that extend above, below and frequently beyond the literal details of any man's daily life. He is not always strictly modern in his technique, though with *Camino Real*, he tried to build—not always successfully—a romantic abstraction into a sustained drama; and in his latest work, *Slapstick Tragedy* (two short plays), he aims for what he calls ''vaudeville, burlesque and slapstick, with a dash of pop art thrown in.'' But whether he is ''current'' with any given play, whether he succeeds or fails with technical experiment, he is surely modern in temperament, though never making a sound quite like anyone else's.

Gordon Rogoff. *Drama Review*. Summer, 1966. p. 85

His stories still emit the troubling poetic atmosphere of his plays, but in this latest collection [*The Knightly Quest*] Williams has exorcised the most destructive of his devils. Cannibalism, cancer and castration give way to concerns equally horrible but more objective and general—the shadow of nuclear annihilation, the rape of already shabby Southern charm by drive-ins and motels, and the planing down of personality by the machines of a mass-production age. . . . Williams is less concerned with ethics than with the survival of the poetic and romantic in a monstrous society.

Paul D. Zimmerman. *Newsweek*. Feb. 27, 1967. p. 92

Perhaps Williams' quest in his journey of violence is to destroy the myth of art because it demonstrates yet another spiritual aspiration of man. If this is his goal, bred out of the extreme disillusionment of his romanticism, he has succeeded but too well in his last plays. For it is increasingly apparent upon a closer inspection of these plays that the host of idealist-heroes who are bent upon satisfying their sexual urges through the dramatist's superimposed veil of sexual-spiritual sublimation are in reality, *poseurs*. The world of these plays is one in which the pretense to spiritual need is arbitrarily welded to physical cravings. Punishment is subsequently meted out through violence. Thus the irreconcilable fact always emerges: spirituality and moral truth are given the lie; they are sheer deceits,

unattainable because men and life are irredeemably corrupt and without purpose. . . .

It is not a violence that grows from within the life condition of the plays, but a violence superimposed upon the characters by the playwright as a means of punishment.

James Hashim. *Players*. Feb./March, 1970. p. 127

Williams gave Southern grotesques dignity on the Broadway stage. Even the farcical *Rose Tattoo* is peopled with giants by comparison with [Caldwell's] *Tobacco Road*. Though shocking sexuality rather than human warmth may account for his Broadway success, Williams has managed to combine shocking sexuality with human warmth, sometimes in the same play. . . . Like O'Neill and Miller, Williams wrote few organically flawless dramas. He does not often hammer like O'Neill, he does not often preach like Miller, but he too often indulges in gratuitous violence and irrelevant symbol. At his best, however—*The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, first version of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *The Night of the Iguana*, and even *Camino Real*—Williams expands American stage dialogue in vocabulary, image, rhythm, and range.

Ruby Cohn. *Dialogue in American Drama* (Indiana). 1971. p. 129

Though Tennessee Williams *Out Cry* is a two-character play it is essentially a soliloquy. . . . The two characters are brother and sister: each is part of the other and both are one person—the author.

The theme is fear. A moral impasse is at its root. It is nearly impossible to go on living when one feels oneself cut off from the surrounding world. Retreating into oneself from dread produces an isolation wherein there is no sound connection with either the self or other selves. This induces something akin to incest or schizophrenia; insanity is close by. . . .

I have too much respect for Williams to say that this has become his permanent state of mind. Even in *Out Cry* there is much of his theatrical ingenuity and power of statement—it is by no means as unintelligible as some assert—but it is too limited in its symbolic imagery and construction (its import is sentimentally existential) to hold us for two hours. It was probably indispensable for Williams to write this confessional piece; until he had done so he might have found it unthinkable to proceed further in his career. But now that he has written it and seen it produced, we can only hope that he will turn his gaze outward again. No matter how far he ranges, his presence will still be palpable.

Harold Clurman. *The Nation*. March 19, 1973. p. 380

In *A Streetcar Named Desire* Williams found images and rhythms that are still part of the way we think and feel and move. Stanley Kowalski and Blanche Du Bois belong in the general company of Hemingway's Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley or Fitzgerald's Gatsby and Daisy as archetypal figures, as real as our dreams, nightmares and desires—in other words, realer than most of us. In this play as in no other. Williams was able to do his particular thing, to take the fragments of his divided self and turn them into the dramatis personae of an ideal conflict. . . .

In Williams a profound puritanism warred with a fierce sensuality, the feminine warred with the masculine, poetic idealism warred with what Yeats called ''the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.'' In Blanche and Stanley he found the perfect objective correlatives for these opposites and he created one of the few authentic protagonist-antagonist relationships in contemporary theater.

Jack Kroll. *Newsweek*. May 7, 1973. pp. 109–10

The Two-Character Play is not a good play, but it is an important one. In this play, as in *The Gnädiges Fräulein, The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore, In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*, and *Small Craft Warnings*, all recent works, Williams has used the theater to work out his personal and artistic problems. These plays are not intended to tell a story or to present a slice of life but to communicate—through a series of images, symbols, and clever language—his uniquely changing conception of reality. The effort, while admirable, has failed to produce good theater because the scope of his art, as the various versions of *The Two-Character Play* demonstrate, has become so narrow and so uniquely subjective that Williams is unable to communicate to his audience the significance of his vision.

Williams' recent plays, as illustrated by much of the opaqueness in *The Two-Character Play*, have become exercises in which he uses the actors as projections of his own mental anguish, with his personal psychosis serving as his thematic basis. Such a conception of drama, as in the case of Strindberg of Maeterlinck, can lead to powerful theater because the play provides a model by which the audience can come to recognize, through an examination of the dramatist's psychic state, its own or its culture's psychosis. Theater of this type returns drama to its origins and becomes a public ritual that is therapeutic for both the author and his audience. To succeed, as this form of drama does for the plays of O'Neill and for the earlier works of Williams, the psychosis must be so widespread with roots so deep in the psychocultural history of the audience that the malady is immediately recognized. Failing that, the work is nothing more than an exercise in ego.

Rexford Stamper. In *Tennessee Williams: A Tribute*, ed. Jac Tharpe (Univ. Pr. of Mississippi, 1977), pp. 360–61

Williams has his shortcomings. There is much lyrical excess in the earlier long plays, accompanied by occasional sentimental lapses and unresolved ambiguities of characterization. These faults stem from his unfortunate compulsion to invest a play with more ''meaning'' than its plot and characters can support—to strive pretentiously for deep significance through the complex use of myth and private symbol. But his virtues and strengths have also begun to stand out. He has a genius for portraiture, particularly of women, a sensitive ear for dialogue and the rhythms of natural speech, a comic talent often manifesting itself in ''black comedy,'' and a genuine theatrical flair exhibited in telling stage effects attained through lighting, costume, music, and movement. More than many writers, he seems to have been obsessed by a need to write for his own survival, and he has continued through the years (except for a brief period in the late sixties when he suffered a mental breakdown) to complete or revise on the average a play a

year. This too, however, has its price: recent plays like *Out Cry* (1973)—called in earlier and later versions *The Two-Character Play*—and some of the pieces in his *Dragon Country* collection of 1970 are deeply marred by his personal involvement in the desperate situations of his characters. This involvement may reflect his own growing despair during the late sixties, but if it is to become drama, it must be better distanced and universalized.

Stephen S. Stanton. In *Tennessee Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Stephen S. Stanton (Prentice-Hall, 1977), p. 2

''Moralist'' may seem a perverse appellation for a playwright whose works concern rape, castration, cannibalism, and other bizarre activities, but in examining the plays of Tennessee Williams it is exactly this point—that he is a moralist, not a psychologist—that should be borne in mind. Williams' powers of characterization are real, but they are not his central gifts: witness *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* which contains Big Daddy, one of Williams' most striking characterizations, but which fails nonetheless because in this play Williams' moral vision becomes blurred, and it is the strength of that moral vision that his power as a playwright lies.

Admittedly, Williams' morality is a special one, but it is a consistent ethic, giving him a point of view from which he can judge the actions of people. Yet to say that Williams rewards those who, by his standards, are virtuous and punishes those who are evil is to oversimplify, for in the world of Williams' plays, good often has a curious affinity with evil. Beneath the skin of the Christlike martyr destroyed by the cruel forces of death and sterility lies the disease, the transgression that had made the author destroy him, while the character most fiercely condemned may at the same time be the one for whom pardon is most passionately demanded. From the self-lacerating desire simultaneously to praise and to punish stems the violence that agitates so many of Williams' plays. . . .

But Williams' best work derived its force from the strength of his moral temper, which led him to censure even what he most wished to exalt. Williams remains committed to the Romantic dictum inherent in his neo-Lawrencian point of view, that the natural equals the good, that the natural instincts welling up out of the subconscious depths—and particularly the sexual instinct, whatever form it may take—are to be trusted absolutely. But Williams was far too strong a moralist, far too permeated with a sense of sin, to accept such an idea with equanimity. However pathetic he made the martyred homosexual, however seemingly innocent the wandering love-giver, the moral strength that made him punish the guilty Blanche also impelled him to condemn Brick and Chance. Because he was condemning what he most desired to pardon, in order to condemn at all he sometimes had to do so with ferocious violence.

This violence, however grotesque, was never in itself the real problem in Williams' work. Nor were the disguises, transpositions, even evasions in his handling of the theme of homosexuality. They were, in fact, arguably a source of his strength, for they protected him from oversimplifications and encouraged the genuine ambiguity and complexity of his attitude to take symbolic form in his plays. Williams' problem is not that he dealt obliquely with homosexuality (the oblique view, after all, often reveals things that are invisible when the object is contemplated directly) but that he has expressed all too openly, especially of late but to some degree from the first, the impulse to sentimentalize. One of the central dangers confronting a Romantic writer is that his commitment to the idea of natural innocence will lead him not only to see this quality as inherent in the child or man in a state of nature (Kowalski is a curious late variant on the Noble Savage), but to affirm its existence in characters who have lived all too fully in the fallen world of mortal corruption. When this easy sympathy is extended without qualification, Williams' work slips over the edge of control into the maudlin just as it slips over the opposite edge into hysteria when the opposing impulse to punish—the self or others—is dominant. When these conflicting impulses are held in some degree of balance and Williams can judge his characters with perception, he is a moralist of some force, a playwright of some distinction.

Arthur Ganz. In *Tennessee Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Stephen S. Stanton (Prentice-Hall, 1977), pp. 123, 136–37

The underlying motive of many of his dramas is a search for purity. Whether Williams is primarily a sensation-seeker as some critics insist, or whether, as Williams says, his intention is ''to illuminate the mainstream of life'' with shocking material serving only to heighten the dramatic effect, he does tend to dwell on the sordid and the perverse. Yet no other American playwright has analyzed women with such subtlety and compassion. No other has come as close to creating a poetry of the theater embodied in dialogue, scenic environment, and in such theatrical devices as music, symbolic props, sound and lighting effects—all combining to create a seamless lyric impression. Despite the fact that he was written some of the most poetic lines spoken on the American stage, however, his poetry as such (two collections of poems: *In the Winter of Cities* and *Androgyne, Mon Amour*) is extremely uneven. . . .

Any thorough reader of Williams's work will note the constant reappearance of favorite images such as birds, cats, foxes, fox-teeth in the heart and in the gut, Don Quixote, a lamp or a candle at night, ice and snow, gauzy summer gowns, Arthur Rimbaud and his drunken boat, stairways and narrow passages, partitions and doors between people, ceremonial tea drinking, scavenging for food, and devices marking the passage of time. His themes . . . include: fear (of loneliness, of loss, of death), search for a lost ideal (youth, purity, involvement), honesty vs. mendacity, the need for compassion and tenderness among all people isolated in their separate skins. His compassion focuses most frequently on the elderly and the lonely, on women, artists, blacks, and helpless sensualists, and on any derelict whose luck has run out but who attempts to salvage a bit of dignity.

Felicia Hardison Londré. *Tennessee Williams* (Ungar, 1979), pp. 23, 32–33

Passion is . . . the heart's blood of the theater, and Williams is to the stage what a lion is to the jungle. At its best, his dialogue sings with a tone-poem eloquence far from the drab disjunctive patterns of everyday talk. He is an electrifying scenewright simply because his people are the sort who are born to make scenes, explosively and woundingly. . . . Williams was also a moral symbolist. His earthy

characters journey over a landscape that pulses with the strife-torn dualities of human nature. The duel is between God and the Devil, love and death, the flesh and the spirit, innocence and corruption, light and darkness, the eternal Cain and the eternal Abel. In the American tradition, this links Williams to three 19th-century moral symbolists: Hawthorne, Poe and Melville.

As a playwright, Williams had the minor defects of his major virtues. He sometimes ran a purple ribbon through his typewriter and gushed where he should have dammed. Occasionally, his characters were too busy striking attitudes to hit honest veins of emotion. His symbols sometimes multiplied like fruit flies and almost as mindlessly. His chief danger was the unhealthy narcissism of most modern art, whose tendency has been to gaze inward and contemplate the artist's ego, as well as his navel, to the point of myopia and hallucination. Almost inevitably, he suffered the attrition of dramatic power that afflicts most playwrights after the age of 50.

In the greatest drama, Greek and Shakespearean, there is a final reconciliatory acceptance of man's fate. Williams could not achieve that exalting serenity of vision. ''Hell is yourself,'' he said more than once, and the only redemption he knew of was ''when a person puts himself aside to feel deeply for another person.'' In the finest moments of his finest plays, Williams achieves the lesser, but genuine, catharsis of self-transcendence. In breaking out of the imprisoning cycle of self-concern, the playwright and his characters evoke a line from *Ecclesiastes*: ''To him that is joined to all the living there is hope . . .''

Tennessee Williams is no longer joined to the living. At one point in *Streetcar*, Blanche pleads with her sister not to ''hang back with the brutes,'' saying, ''Such kinds of new light have come into the world since then!'' Williams was one of the bearers of that light.

T.E. Kalem. *Time*. March 7, 1983, p. 88

The first major conference devoted to [Tennessee Williams] and his work, organized by project director Lynn Kaufelt and Friends of the Monroe County Library, was held January 9–12, 1986. . . .

The issues that surfaced at [this] Florida meeting were those that surely will generate the major questions with which Williams criticism will be involved in the future. Can the best of the plays be considered as poetry or only as dramatic literature, and which aspect is more important? What is the true quality of the plays of the last two decades; do they represent a decline in the powers of their creator, or are they good works waiting for significant productions to reveal their power? Of what value are the other writings of Tennessee Williams—novels, short stories, poems—which have been for the most part overshadowed by the dramas?

The very existence of the question of Williams as dramatist or poet or poetic dramatist does much to explain the dissension that occurred in the planning stages of the conference. The work of this author straddles two disparate disciplines, theater, and literature, which are often not especially compatible in the academic world and are much less likely to be so in a major conference devoted to an author each would like to claim. Examination of the two book-length bibliographies (John S. McCann's *The Critical Reputation of Tennessee Williams* and D. W. *Gunn's Tennessee Williams: A Bibliography*) reveals that, unfortunately, literary scholars have to a surprising extent ignored the writings of Williams. The reason for such neglect, other than the fact of his central works' overlapping of the two disciplines, is not clear. Critics in the field of drama, on the other hand, have concentrated on mechanical aspects of production and technical elements of the plays rather than on plot, character, and the component parts of Williams's often very poetic language. One scholar in Key West complained privately of having trouble placing essays on the dramatist; theater journals, she said, wanted technical analyses, and editors of some literary journals seemed unwilling to acknowledge his work as appropriate for their consideration. . . .

Whatever unpublished scripts, poems, or stories may yet be discovered and printed; whatever dramatic productions of the plays, those already acclaimed and those as yet unacknowledged, may lie ahead, one can say, without much fear of being proved wrong, that Tennessee Williams's reputation as one of the two major American dramatists is firmly established and will survive.

W. Kenneth Holditch. ''Surviving with Grace: Tennessee Williams Today.'' *Southern Review*. October, 1986, pp. 902–3

The structural pattern of Williams's plays—based on a remembered event and its subsequent reenactment—is as old as myth itself and its reenactment in ritual. Its literary antecedents include the analogical interpretations of Old Testament events as prefigurations of the New; and it reaches back in classical literature at least as far as *The Odyssey*, in which mortals reenact (and sometime transcend) the amoral antics of the Homeric gods. Williams's plays do not simply recall old myths and rituals, however; they transform them in their reenactment. Many of these plays are based on myths of dying gods; but unlike the original myths, they culminate most often in neither rebirth nor resurrection. Similarly, these plays are structured as ritual; but theirs is a ritual of divestment, the divestment of old myths and old gods. Their archetypal pattern is an ironic version of the romance quest, whose destination in an age of disbelief is what Northrop Frye calls the ''demonic epiphany'' of the *tour abolie*, ''the goal of the quest that isn't there.'' The genre of these plays, then, may be defined as that of ironic myth, described by Frye as ''a parody of romance; the application of romantic mythical forms to a more realistic content which fits them in unexpected ways.'' At the same time, Williams's plays attempt to invest new, human, and sometimes shocking meaning into those *rites de passage* which have become conventional and lost their mythic resonance: the rites of initiation, marriage, and sacrificial atonement.

Thus, Williams constructs from the old myths and rituals new meanings relevant to an age and culture bereft of a commonly shared *mythos*. Seeking to restore symbolic meaning to the modern existential condition, Williams offers a dramatic experience in these plays that encourages our granting religious significance and value to merely human relationships, however limited and compensatory they may seem. Williams's drama offers no solution for metaphysical loneliness other than the rare and transient embrace with one's fellow ''isolato,'' but in this embrace resides a redemptive humanism: a belief in the inherent potential of human communion, to achieve not epiphany but empathy through mutual compassion and understanding. In its sympathetic portrayal of his characters' romantic yearnings for transcendence, its ritualistic

depiction of their inevitable confrontation with existential limitations, and its endowing with religious value transient acts of human kindness, Williams's drama imparts a mythic significance to modern secular experience.

> Judith J. Thompson. *Tennessee Williams' Plays: Memory, Myth, and Symbol* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), pp. 7–8, 203–4

Williams is frequently acclaimed as America's greatest playwright; he is universally acclaimed as being among the top two or three. But Williams began writing and publishing short fiction before he began writing plays, and he continued to publish interesting short stories long past the time when his plays had degenerated to, at their worst, the virtually unperformable. A few, at least, of his stories seem destined to survive the test of time, and a score of them are highly imaginative, entertaining, moving works. Williams deserves to be recognized as a fine short story writer as well as a great playwright; at the very least, his stories deserve to be read.

One other reason for reading and discussing Williams's short stories should be mentioned here. Along with the growth and visibility of gay activist groups in the sixties and seventies came the charge that Williams failed to deal honestly and directly in his plays with the issue of homosexuality—although he certainly discussed his homosexuality openly and, one might almost say, gleefully in interviews and especially in his *Memoirs* (1975). From as early as 1941 (the writing of ''The Mysteries of the Joy Rio''), however, Williams was writing sensitive and interesting short fiction in which homosexuality is an issue; and the subject becomes more frequently and directly dramatized over the remainder of his short-fiction career. If we wish, then, to see how a great writer dealt artistically with this very personal, often painful, part of his life, we must turn to his short fiction. . . .

> Dennis F. Vannatta. *Tennessee Williams: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Boston: Twayne, 1988), p. x

Williams's achievement is one of the most notoriously uneven in western drama. But. . . his method of writing women has advantages over both traditional and feminist methods. Writers who fear or hate women cannot allow the object of hatred or fear to be ambiguous; it must be idealized, stylized, trivialized. The written women must be made consumable, located on a pedestal, immobilized. Advocacy poses other obstacles. Women that undergo a programmatic fate cannot be tragic because their tragedy is largely external to the women themselves—theirs is supposed to be every woman's tragedy, being the inevitable effect of the male quest for dominance. The advocate writer thus will be ill-equipped to portray the truly ambiguous female because a clear brief must be carried for the plaintiff. (Advocacy has made it difficult to make one's women culpable.). . .

So we are driven to other possibilities, most of which carry us beyond standard questions of gender expectation. One early criticism was that Williams's women actually lost ''universality'' because their stories were too unique, not applicable to all humanity because they were individual case histories. But Williams's treatment of women does not admit of anything else. Of course one's women will refer to other women and other men, just as women do in the world outside the theater. But questions of ''gender expectations'' verge on the specious and banal because individual women differ so widely in their behaviors. . . . Thus, rereading Williams exposes the current hunt for such expectations as a reverse form of prejudice, a project of construction doomed by its own assumptions. Construction of the female must be largely idiographic—that is, the individual character must be built up on her own, out of continuities and disruptions specific to her. It is of women as Williams writes of drama: ''By a sort of legerdemain, events are made to remain events, rather than being reduced so quickly to being mere occurrences.'' Women should be represented as events, as special, unrepeatable happenings in time; they are not replicas or occurrences of any other events. Otherwise, the woman we write will be the woman we wish to write, and worse, the woman that everyone else has always written.

> John Timpane. '''Weak and Divided People': Tennessee Williams and the Written Woman.'' In June Schlueter, ed. *Feminist Rereadings of Modern American Drama* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Pr., 1989), pp. 178–79

They never met, and though contemporaries (they died a year apart), there is no indication that either was aware of the other's work, but reading Michel Foucault and Tennessee Williams at the same time, one is struck again and again by a remarkable thematic and methodological kinship. If *Histoire de la folie*, *Discipline and Punish*, and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* had preceded Williams's great period (1943–61), instead of immediately following it, a case for influence as powerful as those linking Williams to [Hart] Crane, [D.H.] Lawrence, and [Friedrich] Nietzsche might even be made. Reading the other way around—looking at Williams's work as a kind of imaginative prefiguration of Foucault's theory—an exploration of the common points of perception between the two can still be illuminating and rewarding. Like those of [Jean] Genet, Williams's plays construct and animate the same shifting ontological landscape mapped out by Foucault; situated at the margin where death, madness, and sexuality intersect and interact, they focus, as does Foucault in his most important texts, on the struggle to control (through the power of knowledge and the manipulation of ''truth'') a definition of the Same and the Other. The correspondence between Williams and Foucault is pervasive, but nowhere is it clearer or more useful from a critical point of view that in Williams's masterpiece *A Streetcar Named Desire*. . . .

A central thesis runs in varying ways through much of Foucault's work: the individualizing mechanisms of modern civilization are focused on figures situated at the margins of society. Thus, he writers in *Discipline and Punish*, ''When one wishes to individualize the same, normal, and law-abiding adult, it is always by questioning how much of the child he has within him, by what secret madness he is inhabited, what fundamental crime he has wished to commit.'' This describes the central thematic strategy of Williams's play (indeed of his entire work). Williams opens *Streetcar* with a vision of Utopia, brings, Blanche/Unreason into it, and then moves her, literally, to the center of the home. At first. . . . the audience perceives Blanche as an outsider, but when Blanche

begins to inspect Stella's kitchen, she gathers our gaze and we begin to see the world through her eyes. From then on, no matter how her difference is defined and displayed, something of this point of view remains. As each of Williams's ''normal'' characters responds to Blanche's presence, she individualizes him or her in terms of what she represents, aspects of her condition and character. Her perceptions uncover and reveal the ''secret'' elements within: Who each truly is (or might become). At the heart of Stella's love (her loyalty and devotion), Blanche locates sexual addiction and infantilism. In Mitch's natural gentility, she reveals a mother fixation, moral cowardice, and the potential for sexual assault. Finally, she reconstitutes Stanley's paternalism as a kind of domestic tyranny where rape and adultery are male prerogatives. . . .

In *Histoire de la folie*, Foucault defines the modern asylum as an analytical space in which the judges of normalcy consider the question of the marginal figure—examine and evaluate behavior considered antisocial if not illegal. In a way Williams's theater does the same, inviting a psychoanalytic response. Although Stanley and Stella subjectify Blanche as a manageable sign linking sexual abnormalcy and mental disorder, the audience, relieved, can now focus simply and safely on the psychosexual pathology of Blanche DuBois—and her creator. The theater itself becomes the asylum to which Blanche, and Williams, are condemned.

> William Kleb. ''Marginalia: *Streetcar*, Williams, and Foucault.'' In Philip C. Kolin, ed. *Confronting Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Pr., 1993), pp. 27, 40–41

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WILLIAMS, William Carlos (1883–1963)

For the most part, so completely in fact that one must search out the rare exceptions, Williams's verse has been unrhymed; in temper it has been at the furthest remove from ''professional'' verse; it has been protestant, yet formal, and the virtues of even his slightest pieces have been those of presenting definite objects and scenes before the eye of the reader. . . . Williams's search for ''an honest man.'' as well as an instruction to others ''to stand out of my sunlight,'' are the kinds of truth that Williams sought in verse. The search may at times seem wantonly naive, and at times it has resulted in incomplete and ''experimental'' poems, but we may be certain that Williams has never falsified his language; and he has made an ethical distinction between the uses of artifice and art. Craftsmanship, not artifice, has been his concern, and perhaps no writer of the twentieth century has yielded so little to the temptations that mere artifice places within his path.

> Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska. *History of American Poetry* (Harcourt). 1947. pp. 208–12

Although his lines rarely descend to slang, they are full of the conversational speech of the country; they express the brusque nervous tension, the vigor and rhetoric of American life. Even when they are purposely unadorned and non-melodic they intensify some common object with pointed detail and confident, if clipped, emotion.

> Louis Untermeyer. *Modern American Poetry* (Harcourt). 1950. p. 275

Life is more than art for Dr. Williams, as the object is prior to the word. He is no goldsmith making timeless birds. Part of the exhilaration in reading his poetry comes of its formal and logical incompleteness (this is at the same time its greatest drawback). Many of his poems seem notes to a text—to the dense and fluid text of reality; they seem gestures and exclamations in appreciation of something beyond the poem, insistences that we use our senses, that we be alive to things.

> Richard Wilbur. *Sewanee Review*. Winter, 1950. p. 139

Examined from the perspective of an ideal academic poet like say, Bridges, Dr. Williams appears to be groping about under a very low ceiling indeed. . . . Truthfully pleading his inability to handle traditional coin traditionally, Williams improvises, issues a fluid

currency of his own. . . . Incoherence, then, is the principal ''cost,'' to use a favorite word with Williams, incoherence raised to a level where it corresponds to Eliot's diffidence or Pound's tactlessness, a quirk which can sometimes reveal the poetry, sometimes conceal it, sometimes ruin it altogether, but which is also absorbed into the success of passage after passage, poem after poem.

R.W. Flint in *Kenyon Critics*, ed. John Crowe Ransom (World). 1951. pp. 335–40

It is necessary to love this man because he teaches life the richness of its own combinations. The world is his mistress, made beautiful by his love. The fact of her is his passion. No poet since Donne has banged so avidly at Things, at the hammer and take of the world upon the senses. Everything, even his own aesthetic, has been shattered in the name of Things.

John Ciardi. *The Nation*. April 24, 1954. p. 368

The organization of ''Paterson'' is musical to an almost unprecedented degree: Dr. Williams introduces a theme that stands for an idea, repeats it over and over in varied forms, develops it side by side with two or three more themes that are being developed, recurs to it time and time again throughout the poem, and echoes it for ironic or grotesque effects in thoroughly incongruous contexts. . . . Everything in the poem is interwoven with everything else, just as the stands of the Falls interlace: how wonderful and unlikely that this extraordinary mixture of the most delicate lyricism of perception and feeling with the hardest and homeliest actuality should ever have come into being!. . .

[Williams] is one of the most tensile, dynamic, and kinaesthetically engaging of poets; his quick transparent lines have a nervous and contracted strength. Often they move as jerkily and intently as a bird, though they can sleep as calmly as a bird, too; they do not have the flowing and easy strength, the rhythmic powers in reserve, the envelopment and embodiment of some of the verse of old poets. But sometimes they have a marvelous delicacy and gentleness, a tact of pure showing; how well he calls into existence our precarious, confused, partial looking out at the world—our being-here looking, just looking! And if he is often pure presentation, he is often pure exclamation, and delights in yanking something into life with a galvanic imperative or interjection. . . . He loves to tell the disgraceful of absurd or obscene or piercing or exhilarating or animally delightful truth. He is neither wise nor intellectual, but is full of homely shrewdness and common sense, of sharply intelligent comments dancing cheek-to-cheek with prejudice and random eccentricities; he is somebody who, sometimes, does see what things are like, and he is able to say what he sees more often than most poets.

Randall Jarrell. *Poetry and the Age* (Knopf). 1955. pp. 203–9, 236–7

After more than thirty books and at his present age Williams exercises his whole personality to unlock a remarkable lyrical lore of love. His love is inclusive of many things, attitudes, and feelings. It has the qualities of sincerity, knowledge, and acute perception. It is mature man speaking direct truth. Yet I do not mean that there is not a great deal of strategy in the way he makes his verses.

Richard Eberhart. *Saturday Review*. Feb. 18, 1956. p. 49

I have emphasized William's simplicity and nakedness and have no doubt been misleading. His idiom comes from many sources, from speech and reading, both of various kinds; the blend which in his own invention is generous and even exotic. Few poets can come near to his wide clarity and dashing rightness with words, his dignity and almost Alexandrian modulations of voice. His short lines often speed up and simplify hugely drawn out and ornate sentence structures. I once typed out his direct but densely observed poem, ''The Semblables,'' in a single prose paragraph. Not a word or its placing had been changed, but the poem had changed into a piece of smothering, magnificent rhetoric, much more like Faulkner than the original Williams.

Robert Lowell. *Hudson Review*. Winter, 1961–2. p. 534

It is Dr. William's distinction that he is willing to incur time and again the enormous risk of dispensing with the protections poetry has traditionally devised for itself. Eschewal of safety, in fact, has come to seem to him a matter of honour. He will have no special vocabulary, around which common speech has learned to tiptoe; he will not suffer attention to be lulled by a metric of recurrences; there are not even privileged subjects to which the poem addresses itself, or approved planes of consciousness on which it functions. The Williams poem at the first word takes its life in its hands and launches itself from a precipice, submitting itself to accelerations it does not seek to control, and trusting its own capacity for intimate torsions to guide it into the water unharmed. It is not surprising that so many of his poems get shattered; the miracle is that he succeeds with half his attempts, that indeed he ever succeeds. For the gravitational field to which he entrusts his poems is the enveloping tug of impassioned daily speech, which precipitates into a void whatever it gets hold of.

Hugh Kenner. *Massachusetts Review*. Winter, 1962. p. 328

William Carlos Williams may well turn out to be one of the most significant writers of our time. . . . It would be easy to say, as some have already said, that Williams, like Walt Whitman, loves life—sees all that his eyes will let him see and shrinks from none of it, lovingly presenting the whole in inconspicuous language. But this would be to talk sentimentally about a writer who is almost never guilty of sentimentality. . . . Williams simply has no sense of a capacity for contamination. He treats the flesh with respect because he seems to believe that flesh, even at its worst, has a capacity for dignity; and under the term *flesh* he would include not only people but dogs, chickens, rocks, pine trees, and wet ferns.

Yet if this were all Williams had, he would be neither a good writer nor a good physician. He would merely be avoiding the other kind of sentimentality that those writers are guilty of who speak glibly of the autonomy of the word. In fact, one gets the impression from reading these stories that one liberates the other: the word becomes respectable for serving as the matrix by which the object

is made knowable, and the marriage of the two means a generation of love for both.

J.A. Bryant, Jr. *Sewanee Review*. Winter, 1963. p. 121

William Carlos Williams, poet and physician. Trained to crises of sickness and parturition that often came at odd hours. An ebullient man, sorely vexed in his last years, and now at rest. But he had this exceptional good luck: that his appeal as a person survives in his work. To read his books is to find him warmly there, everywhere you turn.

In some respects, the physician and the poet might be viewed as opposites, as they certainly were at least in the sense that time spent on his patients was necessarily time denied to the writing of poetry. But that's a superficial view. . . . The point is this: For Williams any natural or poetic concern with the body as a sexual object was reinforced and notably modified by a professional concern with the body as a suffering or diseased object. . . . The same relation to the human animal in terms of bodily disabilities led him to a kind of democracy quite unlike Whitman's, despite the obvious influence of Whitman upon him.

Kenneth Burke. *New York Review of Books*. Spring, 1963. p. 45

From the mid-twenties until very recently, American poetry has functioned as a part of the English tradition. The colloquial side of American literature—the side which valued 'experience' more than 'civilization'—was neglected by the younger poets. . . .

The only contrary direction which endured throughout the orthodoxy was the direction I will inadequately call the colloquial, or the line of William Carlos Williams. Williams himself has been admired by most new American poets, of whatever school, but the poets of the orthodoxy have admired him for his descriptive powers; they learned from him a conscience of the eye rather than a conscience of the ear; for Williams the problem of native speech rhythm was of first importance.

This poetry is no mere restriction of one's vocabulary. It wants to use the language with the intimacy acquired in unrehearsed unliterary speech. But it has other characteristics which are not linguistic. It is a poetry of experiences more than of ideas. The experience is presented often without comment, and the words of the description must supply the emotion which the experience generates, without generalization or summary. Often too this poetry finds great pleasure in the world outside. It is the poetry of a man in the world, responding to what he sees: with disgust, with pleasure, in rant and in meditation. Naturally, this colloquial direction makes much of accuracy, of honest speech. 'Getting the tone right' is the poet's endeavour, not 'turning that metaphor neatly,' or 'inventing a new stanza.' Conversely, when it fails most commonly it fails because the emotion does not sound true.

Donald Hall. Introduction to *Contemporary American Poetry* (Penguin). 1963. pp. 19, 21–2

Through his half century of writing, Dr. Williams believed firmly in ''the local.'' The poem was to re-create significant elements of contemporary life as found in the poet's immediate surroundings—his local. This was his concept, far removed from that of the ''local colorists'' with whom critics regularly associated him. What Williams championed was the use of familiar materials as the means of general truths, not an emphasis on local culture for its own sake. The relevance of scenes like the small child trying to escape her parents' surveillance or the dog lying injured in a street is broader than the poet's New Jersey ''local.'' . . . Although his roots are in his local, however, man need not exist in a vacuum. The local itself has history, literature, art, and science; all are legitimate subjects for the contemporary poem. The only thing twentieth-century artists must remember, according to Dr. Williams, is to use traditional subjects not for effect or pretension, but for their elements still meaningful to man.

Linda Welshimer Wagner. *College English*. March, 1964. pp. 427–8

The first remarkable feature of the poetry of William Carlos Williams is the sheer clarity of his images of parts of the world. He respects these images too much to blur their edges for the sake of the grand poetic gesture. To a great degree he continuously invents and renews his world in the poetry; and he does so, to a great degree, in order to create himself within it and to wonder at the product. This, I think, is the major fact about his poetry, and it cannot be better summarized than in Roy Harvey Pearce's phrase: ''Brave new world . . . that has me in it!'' And yet at the same time, beyond the real world into which he has created himself there is another one, no less real, which remains virginal to his approaches. . . . Within the invention, the reverence for particularity is clear enough; but our sense of it is doubled by the presence in the poems also of raw materials that the poetry cannot, or cannot yet, or will not, encompass. I wish to show in this essay how Williams' work, especially that of his last years, both invents the world and also looks outward beyond what it has invented and is thus romantic, incomplete, and heuristic.

A. Kingsley Weatherhead. *English Literary History*. March, 1965. p. 126

Ultimately, of course, in *Paterson*, the poem in which he has attempted to unite and articulate fully all his beliefs about both the actual world and art, Williams presents the dissociation of things as the primary evil in the world. Here, where a man is a city and the city paired with, but separated from, the fecundating giant female counterpart, the mountain and her natural world, the divorce is stated: men from nature, from what they have made, and from each other. Not only are the three classes of existence broken apart, but even within them things are separated. And the language that might save men, might make them (and the world) whole again, is divorced from the things it represents, just as it is gone from men's mouths. . . .

. . .for Williams the poem must stand in a direct, easily discernible relationship to the language of common speech, it must partake of that language and not stray too far from it. At the same time, however, the poem must make something uncommon of the common, it must formalize that inherently amorphous mass, must

purify it by measuring it, must impose upon the freedom—even irresponsibility—of speech a structure that will reproduce the poet's understanding of the rhythm, the measured pattern, of the life of his world. This is, for Williams, the poem's prime need.

Alan Ostrom. *The Poetic World of William Carlos Williams* (Southern Illinois). 1966. pp. 46, 105

The first principle of objectivism—that ''associational or sentimental value is false''—and the second—that the objectivist poet must have ''earthy tastes'' (''God, if I could fathom / the guts of shadows!'')—have profoundly influenced Williams' portrayal of human subjects no less than they have his treatment of objects in nature. The poems in this manner are offered without comment and usually without implication. . . . When the response is not wholly aesthetic, it is generally ironic—the irony, with exceptions, not being blatant.

L.S. Dembo. *Conceptions of Reality in Modern American Poetry* (California). 1966. pp. 57–8

By contradicting Whitman's myth of plenitude with the myth of sterility, Eliot prompted Williams to identify his own informing myth—the discovery of plenty lodged, as it must be in the modern world, in barrenness. In the first few years of the twenties Williams' work grew out of his own experience of postwar disillusionment. . . . The feeling in Williams' work of the period is not quite one of despair, but of life buried, maintaining itself underground, in a kind of hell, but powerless to assert itself. In *Sour Grapes* (1921), Williams constantly gives us images of life buried but persisting in winter or old age. . . . The constant subject of the poems in *Spring and All* is the emergence of life out of death, ecstasy out of despair, poetry unexpectedly blossoming in a parched industrial landscape. The shift in the outer world, as Williams' identification with the spring suggests, corresponds to an inner change—and so the real subject of these poems is the recreation of the self.

James E. Breslin in *Literary Criticism and Historical Understanding*, ed. Phillip Damon (Columbia). 1967. pp. 161–3

It does not particularly matter how we approach [Williams's] poems; provided we approach them. It is good to meet them with a sense of their historical pressure, the sense of the weight of feeling behind them. Some readers are first attracted by Williams's personality, the impression of being at ease, informal, taking high risks: there are no Sabbaths in his week. Others simply listen to the words as they come. The ''propriety of cadence'' which Charles Tomlinson admired in Williams is a constant delight. Reading him is like going through a diary, skipping here and there when the voltage of the writing is low, but marking the passages which are wonderfully charged with feeling.

Denis Donoghue. *The Ordinary Universe* (Macmillan—N.Y.). 1968. p. 188

Not free, like Pound and Eliot, to study and by temperament restless, Williams naturally turned against ''literature'' and sought a way counter to theirs with the bare hands and the naked mind, sought heroically to make a virtue of his necessity, out of the here and now, the local and the immense moment. Harried by his doctoring (''He saw by his own account a million and a half patients and delivered 2,000 babies.'') and by his doubts and despair, he found his therapy in writing. . . .

There is a critical undertow pulling against Williams. He has not yet been given his seat in the same pantheon with Yeats and Eliot, Pound and Stevens. And if this current of opinion has shown signs of radically shifting in the very recent past among critics and scholars (working poets have known better), there are still those who see Williams as an interesting metrical experimenter and even an increasingly popular poet, but certainly not truly a major figure to contend with. But they are wrong. The truth is that Williams is major; not only does he have the quantity—nearly fifty books and some six hundred magazine publications and book introductions—but he is, with Pound and Yeats, one of a handful of real innovators in prosody, and perhaps the supreme master of the oblique design (meriting comparison with Joyce and Cézanne in this) in modern poetry.

Paul Mariani. *Massachusetts Review*. Autumn, 1972. p. 663

Despite moments of success, the prevailing mood of *Paterson* is one of defeat and failure, through which the hero doggedly continues his search, examining all things, endlessly attempting to achieve marriage, always rebounding from defeat to seek out the beautiful thing. The hero's determination is, of course, a major attribute of his intensity; and it is again useful to compare the heroic vision of *In the American Grain*, for most of the heroes discussed favorably there are admired largely for their endurance and perseverance in the face of failure and adversity.

Todd M. Lieber. *Endless Experiments* (Ohio State). 1973. p. 214

Williams was probably the last important American poet to insist on seriously playing out the drama of cultural allegiance that had so much concerned the writers and artists of the nineteenth century. This issue, at least in its old terms, is no longer of moment, and we are now likely to consider it, as Randall Jarrell did in a review of *Paterson*, a ''dreary imaginary war in which America and the Present are fighting against Europe and the Past.'' It was never that simple, though in depicting it even Williams followed the old melodrama by casting himself as an American village innocent and T. S. Eliot as a cosmopolitan sophisticate. His allegiance, however, was a matter neither of patriotic nationalism nor of sentimental infatuation, and it is not adequately accounted for by Pound's explanations: the poet's resentment of his father's English nationality, and the special advantage of his diverse immigrant background (he did not have ''in his ancestral endocrines the arid curse of our nation'').

Williams' allegiance is better assessed if one remembers that his own emergence as a poet was part of the American literary renaissance of the years of renewed cultural aspiration just before and after the First World War. He was one of the group of cosmopolitan cultural nationalists who recognized in the revolutionary crisis of society and sensibility called ''modernism'' a challenge to seek again on native grounds the promise of American life. America and modernism, he believed, were equatable, issuing

in the new, and in a liberating conception of culture—that ''culture of immediate references'' of which he wrote so brilliantly in the essay ''The American Background.'' For him the stake was freedom of self-origination: the recognition and sovereignty of the organic impulse that moves all living things. . . .

The necessity of a culture of contact is what Williams' life and work confront and exemplify. The conception of a dynamic, vital, relative (relative to us: related) culture underlies his art, which may be considered a flowering in imaginative forms of his perception of the particular and the local—a flowering of universal significance, he claimed, just because of this. This conception of culture required that he stay put (the practice of medicine helped), that he enter into immediate life (again by way of his ''medicine'' and the ''*tactus eruditis*'' of a physician), and that he discover the ground under his feet (historical America in *In the American Grain*, the recent past in the novels *White Mule* and *In The Money*, the present American scene in *The Great American Novel* and *Life along the Passaic River*—ranges of history that *Paterson* brings together). And it forced him to reconsider his art, its materials and formal means, the agency of imagination in its making, its personal and social ends.

> Sherman Paul. *Repossessing and Renewing: Essays in the Green American Tradition* (Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1976), pp. 183–85

As we have seen, the impulse of the long, meditative poem among these American poets is to find what will suffice in old age, or, as in the case of Eliot, what can be projected for an old age. And as a form it is impressive, primarily because its successes are hard won over a long period of poetic practice, but also because the emphasis is on process and becoming. Process: this by now has become a commonplace of criticism, but we must not let familiarity harden us to what should remain fresh. The meditative poem has a hidden dramatic form, and for this reason, insights can be revealed which are persuasive, moments can ''occur'' which are similar to Joycean epiphanies.

In *Paterson V* this is missing. For if Williams intended to adopt the meditative mode of the Stevens of *The Rock* and the Eliot of the *Four Quarters*, as indeed his allusions suggest and his age required, it is clear that he either did not understand it or his long life in poetry had not prepared him for an entirely new way of writing. Certainly the meditative mode was new to him. Earlier he had most often structured his poems in simple terms of anecdote (''This Is Just to Say,'' for example), portraiture (''Sympathetic Portrait of a Child''), the image (''Spouts'') and/or combinations of the three, which tended to result in a fleshing out of the narrative line, upon which *Paterson I-IV*, however much it may look on the page like a modern collage, is bedrock built. Nor did ''Asphodel, That Greeny Flower'' provide him with experience in the strategy of the meditative poem (no matter how much we wish to be genuinely, not sentimentally, moved by it), being as it is a rather flaccid amble down an associational memory lane. . . . But *Paterson V* falls into none of these categories. Williams drops the structural methods of the narrative and association and substitutes—what? What is the process by which he would win the discovery of the uroboros, symbol of integrations, wholeness? Although the reader can point to an Eliotic question in section one of *Paterson V* and an Eliotic assertion in section three, it is much more difficult to locate an underlying dramatic or rhetorical logic which allows Williams to make this affirmation. The truth is this—that Williams does not so much experience as assert. His purpose was dramatic, but he could not escape the tyranny of the object. In *Paterson V* he continued his old habit of description: he chose a brilliantly defined object—the tapestry which weaves the narrative of the unicorn—for his symbol, not something ineffable, irreducible to an object, such as Eliot's notion of the still point. . . .

Williams, cut off from his lifelong concept of himself, divorced from the ground (the sexual) and thus divorced from his native culture (the American grain), sought himself outside himself, never reaching a still point from which he could include the universe. This was his failure, but his courage was also in this: the infirmities of age demanded that he do what he had not done before, and confronting those weaknesses, he invented something new.

> Kathleen Woodward. ''*Atlantic Monthly Last, the Real Distinguished Thing'': The Late Poems of Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Williams* (Ohio State Univ. Pr., 1980), pp. 161–63

As an innovator, Williams shared many of his positions with Pound, but he may in the long run prove to be more influential. Pound to a much greater degree applied himself to, and found his material in, art and literature. Williams, likewise interested in simultaneity and interaction rather than casuality, suggests his own far different sense of experience in chapter 54 of the *Autobiography*. He refers to the exciting secrets of the ''underground stream'' of human experience itself, unselected. Attending closely to it, ''there is no better way to get an intimation of what is going on in the world'' (*Autob.*, 360). His whole objective, as it ultimately became clear to him, is to lift the ''inarticulate'' up to imagination. A sense of the common people as prime source of life, shared in the early years with Eliot, seems never to have left Williams, despite a discouragement made plain at least as late as *Paterson II*.

A ''lifetime of careful listening'' to the speech arising from his daily tasks and contacts, convinced him that poem and life, also, are one—and that each person is trying to communicate to the world the poem of himself. In many works, but particularly in *Kora in Hell, In the American Grain, Collected Earlier Poems, Paterson* and the late poems, he demonstrated the informing need for imagination, having realized early that ''The imagination transcends the thing itself.'' An explorer and discoverer, always conscious of the handful of men who had contributed positively to the shaping of the American spirit, he takes his place alongside them.

> Charles Doyle. *William Carlos Williams and the American Dream* (St. Martin's, 1982), p. 178

The world [William Carlos Williams's] poems create is both diverse and monotonous, both broad and flat. His denial of transcendence is not only cutting off of alternative to presence; it is a limit upon presence itself, confining it to the poet's own presence within it. At the same time, spread across the two volumes of collected poems, the collected *Imaginations, Paterson*, and *Pictures from Breughel* is a variety of feeling and reaction to presence that, along with much overlapping, brings into existence a poetic personage. This poet finds eye, voice, and feeling that is unique to himself and, particularly, is at the business of leading existence, of being at home among the piece of a world that is his, and that he perceives and shapes to form a range of experience horizontally available so to speak, and available to poetic definition.

It is not hard to detect a progression of mood across his poems. A certain brashness, or ardor, or impatient raggedness of expression is common in his writing of the 1920s and earlier. The more frequent evenness and control in his poetry of the next two decades manifested Zukofsky's influence. The whole is then completed by the retrospective coloration of the 1950s. Out of the midst of the more finished expression, however, erupt *Paterson* and ''The Desert Music,'' marking between them William's most central writing as they come to grips with what most obsessed him, a ''striving / to re-establish the image'' (*Pictures from Breughel*, 70). The striving was for ''re-establishment,'' which I have argued implies both preservation and alteration of what is considered. The strife is not against the world, which he accepts as his own, but rather in conjunction with it toward enhanced realization. It is in this sense that Williams makes a unique place for himself among his contemporaries. Largely turning his back on the anxieties of descent and incompleteness, major themes in Eliot, Pound, and Stevens, he replaces them in *Paterson* and ''The Desert Music'' with an anxiety of aspiration that finds a degree of ease in the coexistence of poet and subject, which early and late assumed shape for Williams as ''the dance.'' Williams doubtless retained a large measure of romantic impulse toward transformation in his poetry. If we are to speak of accomplishment in this regard, however, it might best be figured as transformation coexisting with fact. The world is present not to be remade or shrunk from as neutered or hostile; it is present to be reimaged in terms it itself yields.

> Bernard Duffey. *A Poetry of Presence: The Writing of William Carlos Williams* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1988), pp. 215–16

There is a ''theme'' in ''Asphodel, That Greeny Flower.'' Over and against this theme are ''facts to be resolved.'' Both, in their ways, are ''difficult,'' for the facts, in the largest sense, are death, and the theme is love. There is movement toward a goal: not straightforward movement, like an arrow's, but, as these lines suggest, fugal and incremental, flowing, shifting, swooping, circling movement. And there is the goal itself: a state of feeling, or colloquy, in which ''thought is dissolved / in tears.'' When thought dissolves in tears, the soul, as Shakespeare says, ''delivers weeping.'' The facts which in one sense can never be resolved are by this means resolved, for pain brings forth joy, blindness brings forth vision, and the knowledge of loss and death brings forth an unshakable sense of possession in the renewal of love. Such is the burden of ''Asphodel,'' William's greatest poem, and his fullest, deepest, most beautiful autobiography. . . .

With ''Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,'' Williams comes closest—perhaps as close as the post-Augustinian autobiographer can—to bridging the gap between private and public autobiography. He does this, however, by changing the terms of the quest. Rather than enact a search for his inner standing, as the private autobiographer traditionally does and as Williams himself does in *A Dream of Love*, he gives himself over to the process of creation and enacts the self in its fluidity. Rather than offer a life history fit for imitation, as the public autobiographer traditionally does (and as Williams himself does in his *Autobiography*), he finds a way of speaking so that, though he has no programmatic answers, he can address his public with authority. Here, too, the emphasis shifts from product to process; he gives us not a pattern, but a voice. The voice we hear in ''Asphodel'' is intensely personal and individual, yet it is also the voice of a wisdom figure. It is hesistant and troubled, yet it is also clear, calm, and profoundly reassuring. It is so deeply private that it becomes universal. It is much more honest than the voice of the *Autobiography*, much more willing to admit doubt, weakness, guilt, confusion, and even occasional meanness; for this reason, its confessions and discoveries seem more inclusive. So fully is Williams present in his poem, and with such natural dignity, that he leaps the barriers of the self. One thinks while reading ''Asphodel,'' this describes the circle of experience. This is what it feels like to be human.

> Ann W. Fisher-Wirth. *William Carlos Williams and Autobiography: The Woods of His Own Nature* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 115–16, 119

Williams's magnificent achievement is to see in the indeterminate qualities of a complex figure ''I'' the means to explore a range of experiences from the lyric to the epic, through prose, drama, and poetry. To do this, he needed to renew his imagination and did so by a faith in the activity of relating, a faith in the power of the music of ''Ol' Bunk's Band'' to eat ''through/transcendent'' (*Collected Poems*, vol. 2, 149). The poet does not merely give each object its place but rather engages it in conversation. It is irrelevant whether the object is the Unicorn Tapestries or a red wheelbarrow, for success lies with the marriage achieved. Seeing Williams in this framework allows him the liberty of variety coupled with a structural predisposition, and avoids the image of the mutilated crab which so offended him: ''I was early in life sick to my very pit with order that cuts off the crab's feelers to make them fit into the box'' (*Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams*). Again and again he rejects an imposing order, and yet consistently acclaims the value of form, the need for order.

> Ron Callan. *William Carlos Williams and Transcendentalism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. xiv

Williams was a child of the modern period and one of its most eloquent spokesmen, but a close look at his texts reveals not only his attempt to create a fresh American aesthetic but also his own private battle with the changes he was witnessing. . . . Williams developed his own form of modernism not so much from his contact with other important early modern figures (Ezra Pound, Wallace, Stevens, Marianne Moore) as from his medical and scientific studies. Those studies were not only sources for Williams's literary ideals but also strategies used to claim authority to speak at a time when widely divergent voices competed for attention in the literary marketplace. As modernism became institutionalized, however, Williams began to question both its authority and the cultural power of technoscientific discourse in general—a questioning that led him toward a form of postmodernism.

> T. Hugh Crawford. *Modernism, Medicine, and William Carlos Williams*. (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1993), p. 4

Williams, working with, and not against, the sequential nature of language, extended the iconic dimension into the temporal level: in the arrangement of words and lines on the page his poems reflect

how the self—step by step, moment by moment—explores the environment. Williams, in other words, embodies on the iconic level not only the objects themselves but also the processes by which these objects are perceived. But on this level, too, his poems are once again imitative and, at the same time, part of an autonomous linguistic structure, since both the tension between lineation and syntax, and the distribution of words on the page, also highlight the nature of poem as artifact.

Peter Halter. *The Revolution in the Visual Arts and the Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Cambridge: Univ. of Cambridge Press, 1994), p. 6

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WILSON, August (1945–)

In all of [August] Wilson's dramas, the conflict between African and European plays itself out not simply on the level of character and theme, but formally as well, in a tension between the strictures of the well-made play and an impulse toward jazz-inspired improvisation and poetic form. Consistently, Wilson fractures the narrative line with ingenious theatrical devices: in *Ma Rainey*, the songs; in *Fences*, Gabriel's extraordinary ritual dance; in *Joe Turner*, the Juba dancing and exorcism. Each play mixes European and African elements, keeping them intact, to create not a homogeneous synthesis but a complex and plural whole. It is as if each play, both formally and thematically, reflects Wilson's vision of a more equitable and respectful society, one that will not simply integrate African-Americans by forcing them to renounce their cultural heritage and their history, but will encourage them to build upon and celebrate their past.

David Savran. *In Their Own Words* (New York: Theatre Communications, 1988), pp. 288–90

DIGAETANI: You have said elsewhere that you started as a poet and consider yourself essentially a poet. I've found a wonderful poetical quality in the language of your plays, particularly in *The Piano Lesson*.

WILSON: Writing poetry is very hard at times, but it's also joyful. Being a poet helps me to think a certain way. The idea of metaphor, for example, is an idea that I find missing in most contemporary plays. As a person who has written poetry for over fifteen years, I find metaphor very natural to me.

DIGAETANI: Why is metaphor important to you and your plays?

WILSON: Metaphor is important because it's a device, a storytelling device, and it's a way of asking people to see things in a fresh way. If I can get you to look at a cup of coffee in a way that you've never looked at it before, then I'm a successful poet. Metaphors are a way for seeing common, ordinary things in a new way.

DIGAETANI: How do you work on your plays?

WILSON: Sporadically. Very sporadically. I generally start with a line of dialogue, someone says something, and then someone responds. Someone says something else, and another responds. I don't start at the beginning, and I have no idea what I'm doing or where I'm going. . . .

DIGAETANI: Something else I'm fond of about your work is your sense of humor. One of the delights of *The Piano Lesson* is certainly its comedy. Do you think your sense of humor is uniquely black?

WILSON: I think so. It's part of my black culture. There's a lot of humor in life.

DIGAETANI: Not everybody finds that to be the case.

WILSON: I find a lot of humor in life, though there's also a lot of pain. As one of my characters says, ''Life's hard, but it's not impossible.''

DIGAETANI: Would you call yourself essentially a comic playwright?

WILSON: No. Actually, I aspire to write great tragedy.

DIGAETANI: But your sense of humor gets the better of you?

WILSON: Because a play is serious does not mean it has to be dry and boring. I think *The Piano Lesson* is as serious as a play can get, but there are also a lot of funny things in it. The characters are often very funny. But I did not write gag lines. In the context of a play, some of the lines may be funny, but the characters themselves don't

mean them to be funny. It's generally the situation rather than the line that's funny in my plays.

John L. DiGaetani. *A Search for a Postmodern Theatre: Interviews with Contemporary Playwrights* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Pr., 1991), pp. 281, 282–83

August Wilson has become celebrated for a cycle of plays about the black experience in twentieth-century America, each set in a different decade. The sixties is the backdrop of his latest, *Two Trains Running*. We know the time because fliers advertise a rally for Malcolm X. Otherwise, the action might take place in the twenties, thirties, or forties, as it does in Wilson's previous works, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Fences*, and *The Piano Lesson*. No mention is made of Vietnam, the youthquake, Martin Luther King, Jr., the Kennedys, or any other global personalities or events. Despite its printed locale—''Memphis Lee's restaurant in the Hill District of Pittsburgh''—*Two Trains Running* is fatally sealed from the actual world. . . .

The wrecking ball [in the narrative of the play] is set for this part of the Hill [in Wilson's familiar locale, Pittsburgh], and Memphis demands $25,000 in compensation. The white folks at City Hall offer less than half that amount. Lee dilates on the problem before his small clientele and staff. They hardly hear him; each is absorbed in his or her own problem. . . .

Despite his flawless ear for the cadence of African-American dialogue, Wilson has produced an airless, plotless work, full of follow-the-dots sociology and entry-level symbolism.

Stefan Kanfer. *New Leader*. May 4, 1992, p. 21

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WILSON, Edmund (1895–1972)

The distinction of Edmund Wilson's critical writing, at a period of low pressure in this field, resides in his skepticism, his candor, and his boldness. Where most other professional critics, in America, are content to remain journalists, timid or compromised through intangible connections with the literature-business. Wilson is a widely read, laborious, and willing adventurer into the forest of modern art. Here, amid these shadows, the others may remain ignorant or bewildered, conceiving or relating nothing to any recognizable suite of ideas—or simply grow humoristic, like Mencken; Wilson attacks his chosen material with intelligence and with high energy, scrutinizing the product, demanding of it insistently, almost clamorously. what is its meaning and what is its intention.

Matthew Josephson. *Saturday Review*. March 7, 1931. p. 642

The ability to tell what a book is about remains Mr. Wilson's greatest distinction, his almost unrivaled skill, among living students of literature. His explorations have steadily widened; he has risked the formulations but surmounted the limitations of historical, sociological, and psychiatric method; he has brought the rich sympathies and recognitions of his earlier investigations to a steadily sounder and more penetrating use. . . . He writes criticism of one kind and one of the best kinds, but it continually requires supplementing and extension by specifically aesthetic analysis and normative evaluation. But there are only two or three other contemporaries who have been as scrupulous in making the matter of modern literature available, in defining historical and categorical relationships, and in arriving at the sense of the elements and complexities of creative genius which must be realized before the full scope and richness of books can be determined by whatever keener instruments or methods of dissection.

Morton Dauwen Zabel. *The Nation*. Oct. 11, 1941. p. 350

Honesty is perhaps the most admirable of all Edmund Wilson's gifts. He is as sympathetic and just as he can be: where his sympathy fails him, as it does when he approaches Paul Elmer More in a tone of continued flippant severity, and where his justice fails him, as it does in his estimate of the narrow scholarship of Housman, it is because, like every man he is held within the bonds of his temperament, and within those of the social pressures about him. The reader is sure that the critic has done his utmost to release himself from such bonds, that he has never wantonly tightened them, as almost all of his contemporaries have done. He has never asked himself what the party-line would be—Marxist, or Freudian, or bohemian—and he has never allowed a scruple for abstract logic (if one said such and such about Henry James in 1938, must one say this and that about Edith Wharton in 1941?) to come between him and his material.

E.K. Brown. *University of Toronto Quarterly*. Oct., 1941. pp. 110–1

Sometimes Wilson is guilty of gratuitous waspishness and sometimes he is glaringly condescending. Occasionally he employs a tank attack against a molehill (the syntax of *Mission to Moscow*), and once or twice, notably in Maugham's case, he carries depreciation to very questionable lengths (granted Maugham's lifelong love affair with the cliché, some of his work is surely not *completely* second-rate). But by and large, Wilson tellingly points up the failings and limitations in the work of well-known writers—O'Hara, Saroyan, and Steinbeck, for instance—without losing sight of their qualities. His loathing of commercialism and championship of the nonpopular; his respect for writers who toil for the *mot juste*; the slightly romantic feeling he projects of the glamour and dignity in the calling of letters—all this I find admirable and it outweighs Wilson's crotchets.

Charles J. Rolo. *Atlantic Monthly*. Nov., 1950. p. 98

Wilson was always bringing fascinating and profitable writers to our attention, and he never made us feel that he was displaying his own subtlety and wit and invention at their expense. In these later days a good many critics seem to be yielding to the vice of

ostentation; criticism has exfoliated until the work of art is sometimes smothered beneath it, like a tree covered with fox grapes and Virginia creeper. Wilson kept trying to strip off the critical misconceptions and reveal the tree in its proper form. He kept inviting his readers to join him in a search for intellectual heroes, since—as he told us time after time—the existence of such men gives meaning and value to our lives.

Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*. Nov. 10, 1952. pp. 17–8

I suppose literary history will class Wilson as a social critic, and recently there has been a tendency, mostly on the part of the younger formalist critics, to brush him aside as an extra-literary critic, who has not done enough to illuminate immediate literary texts and problems. . . . I think the criticism of him on this score has been very unfair and represents a sectarian judgment. For, if Wilson, like Parrington and other social critics, has taken literature as a part of history, unlike most of them he has not dissolved literature into history. . . . Actually his method has been to find the basic mood and intention of a literary work, and then to connect it with the pattern of the author's life, and literary tradition and social history. . . . On purely literary grounds, it is amazing to see how many of Wilson's judgments have stood up, which is, I am sure, the final test of a critic's accomplishment.

William Phillips. *American Mercury*. Nov., 1952. pp. 106–7

I cannot think of any other critic who would be capable of writing intelligently about Faulkner, Sartre, Tolstoy, and Shakespeare, about such eccentricities as manuals of conjuring and the biography of Houdini, about both burlesque shows and Emily Post, about both best sellers and obscure difficult authors, and—here is a peculiar and rather touching speciality of Wilson's—about interesting near-failures like John Jay Chapman. . . . He writes about so many things because he has a multitude of active and growing ideas, and because he chooses the new intellectual experiences that will feed them. . . . He believes in the mind, and the taste, and the fancy. He dislikes the tyrants who try to throttle them or starve them or exploit them, and he enjoys every activity which sends blood through them, lets them expand, gives them hope and laughter, precision and purpose.

Gilbert Highet. *People, Places, and Books* (Oxford). 1953. pp. 33–5

The high place of Edmund Wilson in modern American literary criticism has been slow of recognition because he has always seemed to play the role of counselor, interpreter and friend to his fellow writers and readers rather than that of lawgiver or of chronicler. . . . Yet he has been from the twenties down to the present, a leading voice among those critics who cling to the conception of art as an expression of its own creator and of the culture which produces him. An historical critic rather than a literary historian, he has done more than anyone else in his time to make the master works of his contemporaries intelligible to their own readers and to assign to them the values which posterity in many cases must accept.

Robert E. Spiller. *The Nation*. Feb. 22, 1958. p. 159

His extraordinary gift for turning every assignment into a superb literary article is a symbol of his inability to lose himself, as so many writers did, in a purely human situation. The reins are always tight, and the horses always go the same way. On the other hand, Wilson's detachment certainly never made him incurious. The secret of his durability as a writer is his patient, arduous effort to assimilate, to clarify for himself and others, subjects from which he feels excluded by temperament. . . . Amid the laziest minds in the world he is the most Puritanical of intellectual students, the most exacting in the correctness of his language and his learning.

Alfred Kazin. *The Reporter*. March 20, 1958. p. 44

At its heart then *Patriotic Gore*. . . is an act of patriotism, a historical reminder not only of the great hopes of the original Republic but of the great men who lived its ideals. If these men are draped with robes that glow with a kind of supernal light, that is all right too because this is what an epic is supposed to do: to present the national life and purposes at their highest pitch and enveloped in poetry. Further, as *Patriotic Gore* demonstrates, the traditions *were* real too; Sherman himself said that the Southern ''knight'' was not a myth: ''they are the most dangerous set of men that this war has turned loose upon the world. They are splendid riders, first-rate shots, and utterly reckless.''

So far as I know, there is nothing else in American literature quite like *Patriotic Gore*. Whatever its inconsistencies or irrascibilities or impossibilities, it stands, in all its fine prose and wide range, as an eloquent rebuke to the poor writing and the narrow specialization of so much current literary and historical studies. . . . What a relief to read a book that is beautifully written, that you can argue with all the way through, and that poses some national ideals.

John Henry Raleigh. *Partisan Review*. Summer, 1962. pp. 435–6

Emotionally Mr. Wilson seems to see the war of the North against the South in somewhat the same way that he saw the war of the Power Authority of New York against the Tuscarora nation. Mr. Wilson hates the modern state with its arbitrary exercise of power and its denial of the individual's limited responsibility for the direction of events. He hates bureaucracy, governmental anonymity, the absorbent power of the Federal authority. He hates these things because they produce Power Authorities and arrogant public servants that think God created man for them. It is difficult not to hate with him. But despite the brilliance of *Patriotic Gore*, it seems doubtful if the Civil War can really be judged in a frame this narrow.

As I have already said, this book is not conventionally pro-South in the way some have suggested. In dividing the honours between the two sides Mr. Wilson is remarkably bipartisan, and those chapters are best in which he deals with persons, whether of the North or of the South, whose understanding of issues is comprehensive enough to confer a dialectical centrality on their thought. . . . Taking the book as a whole, Mr. Wilson is not *for* the South as much as he is *against* the whole disastrous fact of the Civil War. In dealing with the men and women who were the leaders of thought and action, he measures out honours and demerits with a superbly bipartisan hand, while he sees both the North and the South falsifying equally the image of itself under which each fought the war. . . . The picture of the Civil War world [*Patriotic*

Gore] gives is so vivid, its rendering of personality so dramatic, that it is easily his most entertaining work.

Marius Bewley. *Hudson Review*. Autumn, 1962. pp. 432, 435, 439

Edmund Wilson's *Protest* is a document of no mean interest. The author has one of the best literary minds of our generation. He has developed a limpid and casual prose in the great tradition of essay writing in English. His criticism exhibits a rare combination of qualities. He has humor and a very personal sensitivity to whimsical human nuances. Besides being a historical critic and an able journalist of literature he is a scholar; as John Adams said of Jefferson: ''a great rubber-off of dust.''

There can hardly be a subject more appealing and timely than the misadventure of a man of talent caught in the bureaucratic web of the Internal Revenue Service. It is one of those situations that Kafka prophetically foresaw. Vivian Kellems told the story from the point of view of small business. Now we have it from the point of view of the absent-minded professor who is also one of our ranking men of letters.

He tells the sad tale of *lèse-majesté* towards the bureaucratic state and of the retribution that followed. The recital is clear and brief, uncloyed by self pity. . . . The final note is of a despair that seems unnecessarily helpless. One is reminded of the black nihilism of some of Mark Twain's last writings.

John Dos Passos. *National Review*. Jan. 28, 1964. pp. 71, 73

An even more interesting aspect of the organization of the book [*Patriotic Gore*] is the clue it provides to Wilson's present assessment of his role as man of letters. The two parts of the book are joined in a way that has the deepest meaning for him, and the impression that the movement of the book makes is related to this. The Civil War, in its scale, technique, brutality, is ''modern''; the Southerners remind us of war's time-honored but forsaken rules. But in spite of the parallels this permits Wilson to draw to more recent enormities, and in spite of the verbal equivalents that call to mind his favorite Callot's *The Miseries of War*, we are struck by his vicarious excitement over its action and, especially in the portraits of Grant, Sherman, and Mosby, by the extent to which he identifies with the men of action who are making history. He remarks of Henry James that he liked to read military memoirs and books about Napoleon, envied the qualities of ''the brilliant man of action,'' and planned his literary career as if it were a military campaign; and we feel that he, too, would like to experience, as he says of Sherman, ''the real exaltation of leadership.'' Still unsatisfied with the role of sayer, he would be a doer—and it is not fortuitous that one remembers in reading *Patriotic Gore* how he had dramatized once before in *To the Finland Station* a glorious imperative to action.

Sherman Paul. *Edmund Wilson: A Study of Literary Vocation in Our Time* (Illinois). 1965. p. 205

The example of Wilson—discipline, persistence, self-involvement, a willingness to acquire the means with which to practise an effective criticism—has been followed, but not adequately acknowledged, by younger Americans. To make possible an American criticism that would be strong enough for its job, to provide for it the strength, range and subtlety of the French, was the vast undertaking. Wilson himself saw that it meant good reviewing in the periodicals. The job begins there. . . . And so the task of providing America with a criticism was difficult even on the mundane level of simply finding time to do it. You had to review a lot but your reviewing would be useless unless you did other things on another level. Sometimes it wasn't possible to do both; during the years when he was reading for *To the Finland Station* Wilson, as he says, lost touch with what was going on. But by working enormously and being provident in the choice of subjects he succeeded remarkably in his attempt to do everything at once. Because he did so there is in America literate unacademic criticism.

Frank Kermode. *Encounter*. May, 1966. pp. 65–6

This row on the Edmund Wilson shelf, sturdy as bricks, now numbers nearly two dozen: fiction, poetry, drama, scholarship, memoirs, travel, anthropology, history, reporting, political pamphleteering; but it would scarcely do to arrange the books in this way. They are all Wilson, and all probably at last criticism. Even though many of them are not examinations of texts, but firsthand reports or original creations, they are all formed by the way the critical mind works. They note the provenance and the surface manner of whatever is being examined, person, place, or thing, and then rapidly, clearly, without any sparring or hesitation or qualification, the underlying structure is exposed and articulated, and its significance stated. This is as true of the slightest book review as of major works of literary history like *Axel's Castle*, in which the ''Modern Literature'' of our century and its roots in Symbolism were first and probably best expounded.

John Thompson. *New York Review of Books*. Sept. 28, 1967. p. 8

The manner of Wilson's casual book reviewing in the forties and fifties was, if anything, more assured than ever. It remained one of the pleasures of his critical style that he had nothing at all of the pontifical solemnness then flourishing in the Eliot-infected literary quarterlies. Yet if any American reviewer seemed to speak *ex cathedra*, it was he. The price of this authority, however, was for the first time a certain remoteness from current developments. He continued to write on new books and authors as well as established names. But his work was less and less an inclusive record of the literary temper and achievement of the present moment. (The new era, it must be said, was a less distinguished one than the twenties and much less in need of critical translation.). . .

In [his] most recent phase we still find Edmund Wilson, as in 1919 and 1932, affirming his disaffection from modern society as he regularly encounters it and as he understands its historical formation. He has done this in so many words and also, increasingly, through choice of subject. His last large-scale undertaking, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (1962), is an examination of that time in earlier history when the American nation came closest to dissolution and of the effects of this ordeal on battle-shocked survivors; one may feel that nothing has yet been written of greater relevance to the civil-rights ordeal of

the 1960's, and hardly anything that is more despairing in its implications.

Warner Berthoff. *Edmund Wilson* (Minnesota). 1968. pp. 12–3

Although it has not always loomed as one of the major themes of his work, there is a deep and abiding strain of family piety in the writings of Edmund Wilson. It makes itself felt with particular force in those autobiographical evocations of the world of his youth—the world of his parents and his teachers—which recur throughout his books and constitute some of his very best writing. It gives to his sense of history, especially American history, both its special tone of elegiac regret and its sharp feeling of personal involvement. It forms, moreover, the essential background to the recital of exasperations and distaste which has come in recent years to dominate Wilson's accounts of his forays into contemporary life.

Whatever judgment posterity may render on his achievements as a literary critic and historian—I myself happily concur in the current view that he is our greatest living man of letters—Edmund Wilson will always have a place in our literature as a chronicler and memorialist of American life. Without making a romance out of what was, in fact, a painful family history, without falsifying the often grim fate of his own contemporaries, he has somehow made of his deepest filial attachments and his gift for friendship a vivid instrument for understanding the historical current of his own time.

Hilton Kramer. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 29, 1971. p. 1

During the 1920s Edmund Wilson created for himself a special position in the republic or anarchy of American letters: he became the Sainte-Beuve of a new literature. From his editorial desk first at *Vanity Fair*—where he shared it with John Peale Bishop, a gifted friend from Princeton—then after 1926 at *The New Republic*, he scanned the horizon for new talents and wrote perceptive comments on each of them. Sometimes his comments were the first, as in the case of Hemingway. He took a special interest at the time in writers of his own generation, the ones that served briefly in the Great War, and he did a great deal to shape the public images of Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Wilder, Cummings and the *Fugitive* group.

Writers listened to Wilson as they did not often listen to other critics, and many of them tried to meet his difficult standards. At Princeton (class of '16) Dean Gauss had inspired him with the ambition to create ''something in which,'' as he says in his tribute to Gauss, ''every word, every cadence, every detail, should perform a definite function in producing an intense effect.'' The effect was what he hoped to find in new writers, and he scolded them, if in reasonable terms, when they fell short of producing it.

Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*. July 1, 1972. p. 25

For all of Wilson's alert modernity, *Patriotic Gore* has . . . a curiously old-fashioned flavor reminiscent of that of the nineteenth-century bibliophile who wrote about ignored books that intrigued him from the assumption that his task was not so much to call the attention of scholars to them as to attach them once again to the consciousness of a reading public. In providing this flavor Wilson is implicitly correcting the widening battalions of professors of American literature who in unearthing minor authors and exposing them in monographs written in a quasi-scientific academic code are, in effect, moving those authors from a simple earthen tomb to a hideous plastic crypt. Wilson's voice is for the ears of the general reader, in whose existence he believed because his career had been devoted to creating him, and it says to him, here in my pages that which flowered so briefly may still be recaptured, but, despite my efforts, the fading is inevitable; my final justification is that it has accounted to me for some part of myself and may so serve you.

Only American writing seems to have tempted Wilson to so personal an approach, to have brought him so close to the authorial glance from the library window or the undramatic melancholy of a cleric of the past century contemplating the paling rhetoric of a once consequential synod of yet an earlier century. He unhesitatingly used the pronoun ''our'' when talking of that writing; he was an American addressing Americans about a wider reality they could share if they would but take care. Although *The Shock of Recognition* and *Patriotic Gore* have informed readers beyond America, and, it can confidently be assumed, will continue to do so, unlike Edmund Wilson's work in other areas these books have a further meaning for Americans. They are the literary equivalent of a message to the faithful which the ecclesiastical outsider understands and may even admire but which assumes for its fullest effect a common cultural experience as much as an intelligent mind. . . .

Leon Edel reminds us of Wilson's impatience, tempered with sadness, at being praised as an expositor at the expense of his novels. The elegiac note in his writings on Americans whose names have faded may have been struck from him by this: that he as well as Fitzgerald was a novelist of the twenties; that he as well as Lawrence pushed back the fences that cramped the representation of sexual love in literature. His undoubted sovereignty as a critic and historian may not have sufficed to balance the neglect of his fictions, and in his criticism, therefore, he developed a corresponding sensitivity to the neglected.

Perhaps Wilson in his image of himself as the man by the fire was unfair to the animals that crouched outside the circle of light and so unfair to himself. He may have underestimated their desire to perpetuate him. We thank him for the minor men he has restored to us but we lack reason to number him among them.

Larzer Ziff. In *Edmund Wilson: The Man and the Work*, ed. John Wain (New York Univ. Pr., 1978), pp. 51–52, 58–59

Edmund Wilson's view of American society—of any human society, perhaps—was ultimately a tragic one. While some of the more glaringly obvious outrages might be put right, social reform could go no further without running into insoluble problems. In America the conflict between North and South, between industrial and pre-industrial, had ended by stamping out the Southern way of life, which included getting rid of the degrading institution of slavery; but, after all, the forces that had triumphed were not much better. . . .

This being the pattern of his thinking, it was inevitable that sooner or later his purview of American history should come to include the lonely figure of the Red Indian. The nudge that actually started his active interest in Amerindian history appears to be described in the opening paragraph of *Apologies to the Iroquois* (1960). . . .

As a critic, as a man of letters generally—and, quite simply, as a man—Edmund Wilson was at bottom a historian. The imagination

that guided him was the historical imagination. In his relationship with the world, he was aware that countries, institutions, languages, ideas, people, and he himself, were ceaselessly changing and that to comprehend anything is to comprehend the ways in which it is being altered. Hence his relationship with all the major elements in his world—America, Europe, large political ideas, forms of art, the notion of literature itself—was a continuing drama, always unfolding, towards a dénouement that could come only with his own death. Everything he wrote was, in a sense, a progress report; or, as in the case of the brilliant short essay ''A Preface to Persius,'' a kaleidoscope. He recognized this himself as he got into middle age.

John Wain. In *Edmund Wilson: The Man and the Work*, ed. John Wain (New York Univ. Pr., 1978), pp. 143–45

I have tried to show that Wilson cannot be simply dismissed as lacking a coherent point of view. He early adopted a version of Taine's determinism and when he was converted to Marxism assimilated the Marxist approach, deprived of its dialectic, to a general historical view of literature and literary study. Marxism became a variety of genetic explanation alongside psychoanalysis. Judicial criticism, the decision of what is good and what is bad in art, remained reserved to a judgment of taste independent of history.

I am aware that Wilson cannot be judged merely a theorist. On many questions he has nothing to say, for he has not thought them worthy of his attention. He is, and never claimed otherwise, a practical critic who has fulfilled his aims in reporting and judging books and authors from many countries on an enormous variety of subjects. He has opened windows, and not only to Russia. His human sympathy is almost unlimited. It extends, as he justly remarked, ''even to those [manifestations of the American literary movement] of which, artistically, he disapproves,'' because he wanted to assert the dignity of the literary vocation in America. . . .

Still, there are definite limits to the reach of his mind. I am not thinking only of his obvious lack of technical skill in analyzing narrative modes or poetic structures. More disturbing is the coarseness and even sentimental vulgarity of his dominant interest in sex, displayed in some of the fiction and, obsessively, in the early notebooks. He shows hardly any interest in the fine arts or music. He lacks understanding not only for religion, which he treats as a ''delusion,'' but also for philosophy. The early enthusiasm for [Alfred North] Whitehead, his ''crystalline abstract thought,'' seems to be based on a misunderstanding. It supported Wilson in his limited sympathies for symbolism and made him discount the ''two divisions of mind and matter, body and soul,'' also in his polemics against the Neohumanists. But he could not share Whitehead's neoplatonic idealism or his concept of God and soon abandoned him for Marxism. But as Wilson's Marxism discarded the dialectics, it meant rather a return to a basic positivism and pragmatism, a commonsense attitude to reality. One sees this also in the comment on existentialism, which Wilson ridiculed for its assumption that ''the predicament of the patriotic Frenchmen oppressed by the German occupation represents the condition of all mankind.'' Wilson seems not to know that *L'Être et le néant* was published in 1936 and that existentialism goes back to Heidegger and ultimately to Kierkegaard. Wilson thus could not escape from the limitations of a world view fundamentally akin to his early masters, Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells, however much he transcended their provincialism. In spite of his cosmopolitism, the wide range of his interests, there is a closeness and even crudity about his self-assurance and air of authority. But as public critic he dominates the early twentieth century with a resonance unmatched by any of the New Critics.

René Wellek. *Comparative Literature Studies*. March, 1978, pp. 118–19

Wilson continues to be difficult to place intellectually. Some pointed out that he had forsaken his great promise as a literary critic, had traveled too far afield to contribute to any narrowly specialized field of scholarship. Some found Wilson lacking in aesthetic depth and sensitivity. . . . Still others have been turned off by the later Wilson who seemingly became remote from American life, responding to it with peevish and atrabilious disdain.

Such criticisms, however, missed the most important truth about Wilson, namely, that he never abandoned his own fiercely individualistic reading of literature, his idiosyncratic vision of things, which had always been the source of his powers. Throughout his life Wilson refused to respond to a publicly circumscribed body of problems, to an intellectual framework dictated by an impersonal community of scholars. He did not want to attack the problems that were expected of him, only those he agonized over himself. His lifelong desire was to learn all he could about what interested him, to dig deeply into those things, always putting every scrap of new information through the alchemy of his own sensibility, giving all the stamp of his own authority. If Wilson is one of America's great men of letters, it is because from his earliest years he insisted on seeing the world from a kind of introspective and self-willed patrician detachment. He was an intellectual who had to feel the world for himself, and an often frenzied introversion, a loneliness, a personal honesty, is what he offered to the world outside. . . .

If we Americans have something to be grateful for in the achievement of Edmund Wilson it is undoubtedly his steadfast devotion to the literature, history, and culture of the United States. There are, of course, those who said that Wilson went sour on the United States, that with the passage of time he became more remote from things American. Wilson often seemed to do little to dissipate this wrongful notion, as when he remarked, in *The Cold War and the Income Tax*, that ''this country, whether or not I continue to live in it, is no longer a place for me.'' But such assertions, found in many letters and utterances of Wilson's later years, are the products of mood and moral outrage, rather than substance and conviction. Wilson had always been out of phase with the America of the twentieth century. He took his strength from being solidly rooted in the early republican America of his forebears. But he was at one and the same time the most assiduous and contemporaneous of Americanists. He never had a desire to live abroad. When he learned foreign languages and read foreign literatures it was always as grist for the mill of American experience. He traveled through America first; he read American books first and devoted most of his energies to these books. His very individualism and elaborate irritability hints at why he was first and foremost an Americanist. He wrote of and for his own needs and ours; he addressed mainly his fellow countrymen experiencing similar pains and joys of living in America in the middle of the twentieth century.

If Wilson is remembered several generations from now, it will certainly be as one of the most enlightening and original critics of American life. Already there is good reason to suspect that his work stands favorably in comparison with other critical historians of the American experience—men like Tocqueville and Henry Adams.

Sometimes opinionated, sometimes even wrongheaded and perverse, often cantankerous in expressing his dislikes; nonetheless his views of the American scene remain clear, powerful, and penetrating. Wilson's writings are historical syntheses on the highest plane, and over the years they will continue to reveal to Americans more and more truths about themselves.

George H. Douglas. *Edmund Wilson's America* (Univ. Pr. of Kentucky, 1983), pp. 221–24

Edmund Wilson's work provides an exception to Alexis de Tocqueville's prophetic remarks about the direction of literature in a democracy. In the 1840s the French sociologist predicted that American writers would be ''fantastic, incorrect, overburdened, and loose'' in style; that they would aim at imaginative effects rather than profundity of thought and erudition. The solidity and classicism of Wilson's style, his balance and clarity, and his earnest dialogue with his time and with other cultures set him apart from the wild and often provincial strain in American literature. He is our enlightenment figure, a *philosophe* in an age of world wars, depressions and class conflicts, rising taxes, lowering standards, intellectual bewilderment, bombs, revolutions, and bureaucracies. While our greatest writers from Poe to Faulkner and Mailer have immersed themselves in the destructive element—and have created bizarre styles to represent the fragmented and convulsed America they gave themselves to—Wilson cultivated the aesthetics of plain communication: in the manner of an eighteenth-century man of letters, he believed that words could right wrongs, unconfuse issues, and unclog the minds of his fellow citizens. He lived and worked to further the cause of rational inquiry and scorned mystics, doomsayers, and others who claimed to commune with darkness and light. He took possibility, not ecstatic transcendence, as his territory. His characteristic literary form, the extended essay, reflects his rationalist commitment to limited exploration and personal judgment; it also reveals a kind of artistic bravery and individuality in a country gone mad in pursuit of the Great American Novel and other spectacular performances.

For the better part of our century Wilson practiced the writer's profession with an astonishing steadiness of purpose and diversity of activity. He wanted his readers to understand modern art, politics, and culture, and he assumed various roles to show them what he had discovered about the texture of life and the tendencies of ideas and books since the French Revolution. Basically a journalist, he took the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as his beat. But in order to do his reporting fully and accurately, he became a social critic, literary critic, observer of pop culture and the lively arts, historian, travel writer, linguist, poet, playwright, and novelist. He managed to fall in love with each role without losing his sense of unity. His way of being a professional seems diffuse and difficult in our age of specialization. Without establishing a resting place for his talents—without committing himself to a fixed professional function—he became a figure whose authority and insight are national resources. A professor without a university, a critic without a ''field,'' a historian without a ''period,'' he became the exemplary intellectual of his generation. He left a wheelbarrow full of books on subjects diverse enough to challenge the ambitions of a Renaissance humanist, and he supplied American literature with a talent unique in range, intelligence, and lucidity.

David Castronovo. *Edmund Wilson* (Ungar, 1984), pp. 1–2

The last installment of Edmund's Wilson's journals, *The Sixties* . . . at over nine-hundred pages . . . comprises seven chunky volumes if one adds *A Prelude* and *Upstate*, which Wilson himself annotated and expanded, to the five chronological volumes, beginning with *The Twenties*, that have been posthumously published. Leon Edel, who edited the journals of the previous four decades, has yielded the editorship to Lewis M. Dabney; Mr. Dabney, the editor of *The Portable Edmund Wilson* and Wilson's authorized biographer, has topped up this terminal tome with two appendixes, more than thirty pages of biographical sketches of persons mentioned by Wilson, a foreword, an excellent introduction, and a fuller and jollier set of chapter heads than Mr. Edel ever saw fit to provide. The journal entries extend into the seventies, up to those of June 11, 1972, the day before Wilson died, at the age of seventy-seven. Dying and decay are the overall themes. . . .

The force of his character, as much as his erudition and taste, enabled him to dominate American criticism. . . .

John Updike. ''The Critic in Winter.'' *New Yorker*. Nov. 29, 1993, p. 159

Reading . . . [Wilson's criticism] lets us understand what Wilson meant when he called himself a ''literary worker.'' He approached his art as a steady series of reactions and made them into small artifacts that would serve the needs of his public. That public—which originally consisted of *New Republic* readers, cultivated 1920s and 30s professionals, and intellectually curious people of various sorts—was for the most part different from an audience of academics: throughout his career Wilson has never quite satisfied the demands of university critics and scholars. Stanley Edgar Hyman disliked his work; Werner Berthoff at Harvard found him—of all things—airless. Today he is less popular with feminists, deconstructionists, and multiculturalists than he is with fiction writers and essayists like John Updike and Gore Vidal, critics like Daniel Aaron and George Steiner, and young people caught up in his exhilarating and untheoretical blend of elegant craftsmanship and straightforward reporting and judgment. Whatever theories he employed, he employed with a view to tastes and tolerance levels of intelligent men and women who wanted to read, not decipher. . . .

[E]ven in the homeliest little review, Wilson's blend of qualities comes through: graceful analysis, informal erudition, shining clarity, memorable phrasing. . . . [T]hey point to his ultimate goals as a writer—the appreciation of classics as well as ''commercials,'' the elucidation of new art forms and ideas, and the judgment of their position and value in world culture. . . .

While his initial literary impulse may have been descriptive and may have caused him to bring a work into focus for his audience by analyzing basic plots and arguments, this impulse was always subordinated to the humanistic idea of discovering the inner coherence in literature, the beauty and order of a creative work that made life better for those who read it.

That same humanistic impulse led him to bring, in spite of the occasional lapses into reductive dismissal, a greater generosity of spirit to his regular reviewing than is today very much in evidence. Though not above correcting a rival in the field when his own reading has given him better information (see his correction of Orwell on the matter of Dickens's attitudes toward the servant class) he is completely without proprietary jealousy when a worthy competitor enters the lists. . . . And Wilson's large-mindedness as a

critic was extended not only to writers working in his areas and on his favorite subjects; he felt a camaraderie with writers of his generation who had very different sensibilities and talents. This identification included sympathy, the opening out of his own tastes—and, as always, the obligation to be true to his craft.

Janet Groth and David Castronovo. In *From the Uncollected Edmund Wilson* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Pr., 1995), pp. xvi–xvii, xx–xxi

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WILSON, Lanford (1937–)

A number of talented young playwrights either worked or started at La Mama, among them Lanford Wilson, whose *This Is the Rill Speaking* used sound patterns, movement, intertwining time and song to paint a picture of a hillbilly town, its people and its rhythm. A sugar-free *Our Town*, it found loved life in a dramatic collage of back porches, cars—everywhere.

Moreover, it was an early example of a movement away from the intelligibility of dialogue. This sounds silly, but if you listen carefully there is an overlap to daily conversation that turns meaningful words into the beat and music of existence itself. Wilson grasped the feel and rhythm of human conversation. But while the technique was exciting, it was also unresolved. Yet that's all right; that's exactly what La Mama and the far left wing are for—the new, the ambitious, the still-being-born and experimental. And a year after *Rill*, Wilson had developed the style for viable, full-length drama—*The Rimers of Eldritch*.

Martin Gottfried. *A Theater Divided: The Postwar American Stage* (Little, Brown, 1967), pp. 300–301

With his new play *The Hot l Baltimore*, Lanford Wilson's message to the American theater is: look, theater is *plays*—remember them? And so he goes back and writes a play so old-fashioned in its humanity that it's the freshest play—the best American play—I've seen this season. Wilson is a good young playwright who's been around a long time, he's never had a Broadway smash, but he hasn't gone sour or frantic or corrupt or paranoid. He just keeps writing, and a lot of his writing is for the Circle Theatre Company, the absolute epitome of the tiny, dedicated, poverty-stricken, repertory group, with real playwrights who write new plays for its permanent acting company.

The Hot l Baltimore is a daring play. In it Wilson dares to remind us of what writers once were in this country. His play is not an imitation of, say, the young Saroyan of *The LaSalle Hotel in Chicago*; it is an authentic rebirth of that kind of writer's spirit—open, compassionate, loving, hard-boiled, soft-boiled, scrambled—all the kinds of egg a writer could be in those days. Wilson's characters are the beautiful losers—the deadbeats, walking wounded, crippled up-the-creekers, along with their inevitable muse, the golden whore. They're living in a decayed Baltimore hotel, once grand but now slated for demolition. In their interweaving end games we meet them—the old lobby-haunters; the young brother and sister, health food freaks who are trying to get to the mail-order land they've bought in Utah; not one but three whores, one golden and two gilded; the young hotel clerk who glumly and ineffectually loves the golden whore.

Wilson not only loves these characters—creatures of his brain who represent what moves him about human beings—but he loves the play itself, and so he treats it the way you're supposed to treat something you love, building, developing, cultivating, being honest with it until he and the play are speaking to each other in a warm transfer of energy and good faith.

Jack Kroll. *Newsweek*. Feb. 26, 1973, p. 91

[*Talley's Folly*] is a duologue between Matt and Sally, from sundown through moonrise and thence to the start of three decades of married happiness. In the distance there is occasional band music holding out promises, but also the barking of threatening dogs of the kind that tear Tennessee Williams heroes into Orpheus-like pieces. Nearer by is the croaking of frogs, a discreet natural obbligato against which Matt and Sally can play out their duet of pursuit and evasion, hopefulness and disillusion, until revelations of their pasts to each other bring better understanding, absolution through mutual compassion, and final tremulous affirmation of love. It is a curious love that slowly emerges from a protective husk of banter, teasing, even pugnacity. Once out, however, it can match the moon in its zenith—hold its own even under the coming scrutiny of long sunlight.

Gradually, with the double assurance of a master of psychology and dramaturgy, Wilson unfolds not so much a series of events as a conversation that will last two joint lifetimes. . . .

Wilson has written some of the most tender, wisely funny, chargedly understated dialogue I have heard from a stage in many a moon, dialogue fraught with the essence of the greatest drama on earth: that of two pitiful yet glorious human beings clumsily and splendidly staggering toward each other.

It is dialogue that, like most exalted stage dialogue, skirts the ridiculous only to stumble triumphantly onto the sublime. . . .

Wilson is the only American playwright I can think of who is steadily growing, improving, paring himself down to essentials. *Talley's Folly* is—in range, mood, scope—a minor work, although a broad social background is suggestively sketched in; but the fineness of its details makes up in penetrancy and pervasiveness for what it may lack in weight and impact. Its small, insistent truths, like sand in a beach house, seep into every cranny of our awareness.

John Simon. *New York Magazine*. May 21, 1979, pp. 76–77

The wounded and the wistful, those who cling to their illusions as if they are identity cards, who never stop searching for solutions, are the people who inhabit the landscape of Lanford Wilson. Undiscouraged by disappointment, they continue to nurture private dreams. Often these people are misfits—the girl in *The Hot l Baltimore*, Matt in *Talley's Folly*—but they are not necessarily outcasts. They project such a purity of spirit—idealism honed to perfection—that in comparison, conformists seem like aliens.

Wilson is sometimes labeled a traditionalist—and certainly he is more readily accessible to an audience than his contemporary, Sam Shepard—but one might say that he is as old fashioned as Chekhov. It is character, not action, that dominates his plays. Events may seem small, but they are consequential, and they can be filled with portent. . . .

In his nine full-length plays and some thirty one-acts, this major American playwright has created a unified body of work that speaks with eloquence about individualism and the importance of personal history: we are what we have been. His characters reach back to the past not for nostalgia but for anchors, for a lineage with those who have preceded them, for sustaining values. In his art, there is a quest for durability, for attachment. Personal relationships are his religion—if only people would make contact. Even when his characters are immersed in an urban environment, they retain an incorruptible pioneer spirit. In thinking about his American artistic forebears, one looks less to playwrights than to novelists such as Willa Cather, William Faulkner, and Eudora Welty. Wilson begins as a regionalist but becomes national. He is definably an American playwright, rooted in the farms and hills of his Ozark birth-place and also in the streets and cafés of his adopted city, New York. Though he might conceivably choose to write about a foreign culture, he has given no indication of leaving native soil. It seems to offer him constant replenishment. In his plays, he does go home again.

Mel Gussow. *Horizon*. May, 1980, p. 32

Lanford Wilson marries the playwriting strategies of a George S. Kaufman to the sensibilities of a Tennessee Williams, and the consequences are by turns hilarious and heartbreaking, which is to say intensely Wilsonian. Kaufman used to like nothing better than to fling together on a stage half a dozen disparate individuals, each of them possessing an attribute that could be emphasized with an increasing assurance of recognition, and therefore with increasing comic effect, throughout the evening; Williams, though he has a gift for ingenious plotting (think of the opening passages of *Sweet Bird of Youth*!), tends to lose interest in inventing actions, preoccupying himself instead with nuances of character. The latest of Wilson's plays to reach Broadway is *Fifth of July*, and in the course of it Wilson proves to be as busy a plotmaker as Kaufman and as sedulous a prober of the Southern psyche as Williams. His setting is a small town in Missouri, and his hero is Ken Talley, Jr., a young man who, having lost both legs in Vietnam, has come home to make a new life for himself as a teacher in one of the local schools. Ken owns and occupies the ramshackle old Talley homestead, in the company of a devoted male lover, a sister, and the sister's thirteen-year-old daughter. . . .

Because he started at the Caffe Cino and was part of off-off-Broadway's heroic era, because he wrote about homosexuals before it became commonplace to do so, and because he has steadfastly based himself at the Circle Rep off-Broadway, Mr. Wilson has won and kept the respect of people who would not give Lillian Hellman or William Inge the time of day as playwrights, but he is nevertheless a writer very much in their tradition. *A Tale Told*, the third play in Mr. Wilson's cycle about the Talley family of Lebanon, Missouri, has a great deal in common with *The Little Foxes*—even beyond a shared tendency toward melodramatic confrontations and climaxes.

Both plays generate a rich sense of individuals in a family in a community in the United States at a particular time in its history. Mr. Wilson has spoken of his concern with the economic context of his story; Miss Hellman—never the mere melodramatist she has been made out to be—put her economic concerns at the center of her play. And both writers are keenly aware of the connection between economics and morality. Mr. Wilson's Talleys exploit the poor people of their little Missouri town much as Miss Hellman's Hubbards ''grind the bones'' of their little Alabama town. In both plays a lonely middle-aged woman and a strong-minded young one are aware of the family crassness and venality; in both plays the older woman is trapped, but the escape of the younger one provides hope for the future. . . .

Mr. Wilson is not a formal innovator or a deep thinker; his images of America, though evocative and cogent, are not startlingly original. He doesn't see to the heart of things, as O'Neill, Williams and Miller have sometimes done. But the people of his trilogy go on living when they are offstage. The Talleys have begun to take on the solidity of characters in a good old-fashioned novel. We have gone fulfilling journeys with them. We sense that there are more to come.

Julius Novick. *The Village Voice*. June 17–23, 1981, p. 77

In the background of Wilson's plays is an ''Our Town'' where sex drives are repressed, strangers are viewed with suspicion, and no one is allowed to ruffle surfaces. *The Rimers of Eldritch* (1966) dramatizes the evil in the town of Eldritch, with a suspense that is rare for Wilson. Not until a late scene is it clear that a frustrated spinster has shot the town derelict in the act of rescuing a crippled young woman from a sexual assault she provoked. On the false testimony of the crippled woman and her attacker, the murderess is

acquitted. The respectable members of Eldritch town, the rimers of Eldritch, close ranks to defend their frozen surface—frozen, too, in a conventional theatre mould. . . .

With *The Fifth of July* (1978), Wilson embarked on what promises to be a series of plays about the Talley family of Lebanon, Missouri—respectable, intolerant, but sprinkled with Wilson's beloved deviants. The first Talley play opens not on the fifth but the fourth of July, 1977, a symbolic year after the United States Bicentennial. The family members are Aunt Sally, her nephew Ken, whose legs were shot off in Vietnam, his sister June, and her illegitimate daughter Shirley. Visiting the Talleys is not only Ken's lover Jed but also a childhood friend, John Landis, his rock-singer wife Gwen, and her composer. The frail plot hangs on Ken's ambivalence about selling the family estate, and Gwen Landis's intermittent desire to buy it. John Landis wants to ''adopt'' Shirley, whose father he may be. Indignantly repulsed by June Talley, he leaves and fourteen-year-old Shirley realizes: ''I am the last of the Talleys. And the whole family has just come to nothing at all so far.'' But Wilson hints that this family in America's heartland may be pregnant with change; they will keep their land which Ken's lover will teach them to cultivate and which will be nourished by the symbolic ashes of Aunt Sally's Jewish husband Matt.

Talley's Folly (1979) backtracks to Matt on 4 July 1944. The play recounts rather than dramatises the courtship of Sally Talley by Matt Friedman. Like earlier Wilson characters, Matt functions both as narrator and protagonist. Aging misfits, thirty-year-old Missouri Wasp Sally strains against the family code, and forty-two-year-old Jewish Matt has no family or allegiances. Loners, they are attracted to one another, but Wilson delays their union for some hundred minutes of playing time. Talley's Folly puns on the Victorian boathouse setting and Sally's commitment to leave her family so as to share Matt's life. Wilson's forthcoming plays about the Talleys may move forward or backward in a tepid glow of traditional family drama comfortably ensconced—where else?—on Broadway.

Having begun Off-Off-Broadway, Lanford Wilson has steadily increased his characters' charm, making them acceptable in spite of their quirks. Both on and Off-Off-Broadway, he has been the consistent depicter of apolitical, uncommitted deviants. Unlike the stage people of his predecessor Tennessee Williams, Wilson's misfits rarely resort to violence, and they carry no mythic burden.

Ruby Cohn. *New American Dramatists: 1960–1980* (Grove, 1982), pp. 23–26

Lanford Wilson's *Angels Fall* . . . seems to touch on an important subject, but that's only a mirage created by the hot shimmering desert climate in which the action unfolds. The setting is a mission in northwest New Mexico; there has been a potential nuclear accident in a nearby government uranium mine that provides the occasion for five travelers, stranded by a roadblock, to unburden themselves to each other and to the resident priest. The least of their problems seems to be their impending annihilation which, although it inspires jocular comments, functions mostly as a way of collecting unrelated people on the stage to do their hip contemporary numbers. Why should I be so annoyed by a mere dramatic device? Wilson's weakness for authorial manipulation, usually a harmless quality of his plays, gets downright intolerable when serious issues and genuine fears are used primarily for theatrical exploitation.

Anyway, the real purpose of the play is to introduce us to colorful characters plagued with psychological problems. . . .

There is a sense of artificiality and contrivance about the evening that is only underscored by its realistic pretensions. One waits in vain for just one unusual perception, just one unique moment, just one unexpected gesture; even a mistake. But the smooth humming of unruffled professionalism buzzes in our ears throughout the whole evening without a single hint of risk or danger. One hesitates to criticize competence in an art form so often characterized by carelessness and blunder, but if this well-organized and empty exercise represents the current aspirations of our off-Broadway companies then the theater is in a depressed state indeed.

Robert Brustein. *New Republic*. Year-End Issue, 1982, pp. 26–27

In *Talley's Folly* the St. Louis Jew, Matt, mocks the locals' speech pattern: ''(*Ozark accent*) Well, now, listen here, Matthew, what ort to happen is you ort to head on down into them hills an—'' to which Sally responds, ''Please don't do that. Don't make fun of the way we talk'' (*TF* 12–13). [Tennessee] Williams similarly points out distinctive speech patterns in *Creve Coeur*. The articulate snob Helena ridicules the German-American Bodey's diction: ''Miss Bodenheifer, you certainly have a gift for the felicitous phrase such as 'out you hoofed it to Liggett's,' sorry, sorry, but it does evoke an image'' (35). And she laughs off a piece of Bodey's criticism with a teacher's putdown reminiscent of Ken's: ''The syntax of that sentence was rather confusing. You know, I suspect that English is not your native language but one that you've not quite adequately adopted'' (47). Both playwrights understand that facility with language can either empower or weaken, and they place their Missouri characters across the spectrum of verbal power. . . .

The past plays an important role in the plays of both men. On reviewing the themes of his plays, Lanford Wilson discovered, ''They're all the same! They all deal with someone preserving something from the past, . . .'' whether it be the farmhouse (*The Fifth of July*), the boathouse (*Talley's Folly*), or the family business (*Talley & Son*). [Mel] Gussow expands on that idea by noting that Wilson's characters ''reach back to the past not for nostalgia but for anchors, for a lineage with those who have preceded them, for sustaining values.'' In other words, Wilson's Missouri stands for traditional morals that should not be plowed under or passed over.

Gary Konas. *Studies in American Drama*. 1990, pp. 31, 38

Burn This by Lanford Wilson . . . is a sentimental play very reminiscent of Tennessee Williams. Pale, a working-class Italian with more sexual energy than he can handle, bursts into a strenuous artistic menage in Lower Manhattan after his homosexual brother has died in a boating accident. He transfixes the dancer Anna, driving away the fogs of despair created by a routine New York scene in which vast sums of money for commercial work and a desire for respect from artistic friends are producing frantic activity of conflicting kinds. The trouble is that Pale is little more than a sexual fantasy. In Tennessee Williams he would be tainted by the corruption of his world, a self-loathing victim of the desire for love in a fallen world. Wilson is too self-protective to pursue this kind of

investigation. He can never quite make up his mind to fling himself into the gutter, and always walks away smelling of violets instead.

Logan Speirs. *English Studies*. February, 1990, p. 54

Many of Wilson's plays involve conflicting demands of the academic profession, among them *Angels Fall* and *The Fifth of July*. His newest work, *Redwood Curtain*, utilizes a teen-age heroine's disguise as a college student as the opening gambit in her path to identity; one of his best-known works, *The Mound Builders*, pits a college professor-archaeologist against an embittered farmer out to avenge himself against educated exploiters of the land. Although both these works are examinations of the ''tearing'' of the American fabric, it is significant that Wilson suggests American collegiality as a real possibility of social redemption. . . .

Both *The Mound Builders* and *Redwood Curtain* required more than casual research. Wilson spent a year on *The Mound Builders* before he discovered his foils had to be, for the inevitability of plausibility, archaeologists and farmers, and then he spent another year researching the field of archaeology, in order to discover its vocabulary and jargon. . . .

Teaching has had its rewards for Wilson in graphic terms as well. Twice, a teaching stint has illuminated a play idea for him, enabling him to summon the artistic energy necessary to complete his work. The central situation of *The Fifth of July*, a part of Wilson's *Talley* family sequence of plays, has its roots in Wilson's abiding theme of faith and loss of that faith in a changing and increasingly rootless America. The image that Wilson needed to cohere the play so that he could write it came from a classroom event at Southampton College [of Long Island University]. There, one day, a handsome, legless Vietnam vet ''came thumping down the aisle on his crutches, thump-thumping an assertively noisy transit to his classroom seat. He wanted attention; he demanded to be heard. That's how *Fifth of July* began, I mean that's how I first got the picture of it in my mind. I had the idea before, and I knew in a sense what I was after, but I didn't know how to say it.''. . .

Redwood Curtain also has its genesis, or initiatory coherence, in a teaching experience. The alchemy that forms a creative outpouring is, of course, a mixed bag, but Wilson made it clear that the consciousness of *Redwood Curtain* evolved from a teaching semester at Humboldt State College, located on the fringes of the Redwood Forest in Arcata, California. Part of the play deals with the familiar (and familial) Wilsonian theme of isolation, a theme Wilson explores with his customary pathos and wit. Invidious to the theme is another, and complementary, sense of displacement—Americans who no longer fit into traditions they either have known and lost or else have never possessed, but whose awareness of their absence is just as great as those who remember them distinctly. All three characters in *Redwood Curtain* are searching for a base to replace the one that has slipped from them. The male protagonist harkens back to the hero in *The Fifth of July*, a wounded Vietnam veteran, but in this instance one afflicted with psychological malaise rather than a physical disability. . . . His counterpoint is an eighteen-year-old Asian-American girl determined to find her father; she knows his name, and that he was an American soldier in Vietnam when he and her Vietnamese mother conceived her. Brought to the States by her mother when she was an infant—or so Geri, the girl, has been told—she was adopted by a very wealthy California couple: she has been reared in high style and material comfort, and has become an accomplished pianist while still a teenager. . . . As in Wilson's early and autobiographical play, *Lemon Sky*, this newest work explores the loss of family separation and the attempt to bridge it. . . .

Wilson's motif of journey is familiar but ever-changing and ever-provocative and affecting. In his earlier plays his protagonists evade the closure of the search they initiate; in this newest play, his characters are more courageous in facing the inevitable threnody of human and natural loss. They are able to shed skin without shredding themselves.

Martin Tucker. ''Confronting Lanford Wilson.'' *Confrontation*. Spring–Summer, 1992, pp. 246, 247, 255

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WINTERS, Yvor (1900–1968)

His poetry is gaunt, gray and harsh. It is also cold, with that burning cold that belongs to ice. . . . There is an integrity about it which derives from the poet's metaphysical passion—a passion colored by his sharp apprehension of physical things, and having its issue in a profound disenchantment with the world. He conveys it by means of a few spare, precise images. In some thirty words he will give you the essence of a moment. But these moments are an effectual screen for eternity. Time, Space, and the mind that spins them are Mr. Winters's ultimate concern.

Babette Deutsch. *Bookman*. June, 1928. p. 441

Mr. Winters remains one of the best of the imagist school, but limited by that school. He is afraid to trust himself in any extension of language beyond absolute clarity and precision, and he therefore loses much in power. He remains one of the most interesting and contemporary of our poets, despite the fact that his critical mind does his poetic mind some injury. He states more clearly than any other poet the modern dilemma: the gradual loss of feeling through too much of ''print.''

Eda Lou Walton. *The Nation*. Dec. 17, 1930. p. 680

Mr. Winters started with a basis of ideas which he has never found reason to abandon, either creatively or critically. His is a centrifugal progress. He has had the courage to work outward from hard

absolutes of meaning and intuition toward the surfaces of sense, and thus toward the periphery of a complete and comprehending sensibility. To express this sensibility perfectly is to achieve style. Mr. Winters's difficulties have been chiefly of two kinds: in communication because the initial meaning or intuition has not always found a genuine sensible embodiment; and in persuasion, because, even when it has, the requisite passion and conviction of style have too often been lacking.

Morton Dauwen Zabel. *Poetry*. Jan., 1931. p. 226

Yvor Winters, writing like a combination of a medieval scholastic and a New England divine, is a critic of a type that one has become accustomed to regard as practically extinct. . . . Evidently Mr. Winters began with a temperamental distaste for the general atmosphere of distress, the hectic experimentation with forms and with style, that has characterized so much contemporary verse. But to this situation he responded with that mechanism of the mind which consists in reacting to any phenomenon by celebrating its opposite. . . . Mr. Winters is narrow, dogmatic, parochial; and these are all the defects of his method. But it would be unjust not to mention the virtues of these defects: the sharpening of focus on important problems, the formulation of useful distinctions, and the construction of definitions that at least provide a springboard for discussion.

William Troy. *The Nation*. Feb. 20, 1937. p. 216

To watch him taking a critical misjudgment apart gives the same kind of pleasure that we get from seeing a first-rate woodman split a log—the great secrets being merely to start the opening wedge in the right place and then to hit it hard enough. Mr. Winters has no lack of sharp, smooth wedges to start where they will do the most good, and his style can be on occasion a two-handed sledge to sink them home. . . . Those who perceive how much Mr. Winters has as a critic cannot well help wishing that he had everything. What he does not at present seem to have in normal measure is the rounded man's appreciation of writing that is consummate in a small way. His canons are serious to severity and he is little tolerant of the playful, the trifling, the frankly artificial, the droll, the merely mellifluous.

Wilson Follett. *New York Times Book Section*. Dec. 4, 1938. p. 36

Mr. Winters's work is precise, scrupulous and taut; no syllable is wasted: the intellectual element does not exclude emotion, though it controls it. The metrics are formal, the rhymes strict; seldom does a word seem rhyme-fetched, rather than intended. The poet's ear is good. If his poems seem cold—or, anyway, cool—it is worth remembering that it can be with poems as with women: some like them so, at least sometimes.

Rolfe Humphries. *New York Times Book Section*. April 23, 1944. p. 24

Winters [as a critic] is what Kierkegaard said *he* was—a corrective; and Winters's case for the rational, extensive, prosaic virtues that the age disliked, his case against the modernist, intensive, essentially romantic vices that it swallowed whole, have in his late criticism become a case against any complicated dramatic virtues. Winters's tone has long ago become that of the leader of a small religious cult, that of the one sane man in a universe of lunatics; his habitual driven-to-distraction rages against the reprobates who have evidenced their lunacy by disagreeing with him go side by side with a startled, giant admiration for the elect who in a rational; moment have become his followers.

Randall Jarrell. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 24. 1947. p. 14

In his own generation he has the eminence of isolation; among American poets who appeared soon after the first world war he is, Crane being dead, the master. If he has been neglected—when he has not been ignored—the reasons are not hard to find. He has conducted a poetic revolution all his own that owes little or nothing to the earlier revolution of Pound and Eliot, or that goes back to certain great, likewise neglected Tudor poets for metrical and stylistic models. . . . He is a Renaissance humanist of the pre-Spenserian school of metaphysical rhetoricians, the school of Greville and Raleigh: a poet whose moral imagination takes, without didacticism, the didactic mode, striving for precision in language and, in verse, for formal elegance.

Allen Tate. *The Nation*. March 2, 1953. pp. 17–8

When I was the poetry consultant at the Library of Congress in 1947 and '48, I had the luck to listen frequently to records of Winters reading a dozen or more of his best poems: ''Time and the Garden,'' ''John Sutter,'' ''The Marriage,'' ''Heracles,'' and others. His voice and measures still ring in my ears. They pass Housman's test for true poetry—if I remembered them while shaving, I would cut myself.

Winters likes to declare himself a classicist. Dim-wits have called him a conservative. He was the kind of conservative who was so original and radical that his poems were never reprinted in the anthologies for almost twenty years. Neither the *avant-garde* nor the vulgar had an eye for him. He was a poet so solitary that he was praised adequately only by his pupils and by Allen Tate. Yet Winters is a writer of great passion, one of the most steady rhetoricians in the language, and a stylist whose diction and metric exemplify two hundred years of American culture.

Robert Lowell. *Poetry*. April, 1961. pp. 40–1

Reading through the *Collected Poems*, you sense that Winters shares none of the wishy-washy reverence for the artistic or the ecstatic experience that has destroyed the later work of so many of his contemporaries; his manner is gruff, his language direct; he resists prettyness and he has been known to express his disgust for the involuted literary world about him in a blunt, irascible way.

But when these same elements of temperament and conviction are turned loose in a shorter lyric poem of unadorned language, the result is a strong, masculine poetic statement. This is a traditional poetry that is not anachronistic; it seems as engaged with human experience as the most robust spiritual noise making of his contemporaries; and it is much less arbitrary in its devices. Potent with meanings yet impeccable in its diction as his verse is, Winters does his poetry a disservice when he calls it ''the definition of a style,''

for it is also the record of particular experiences and the expression of a particular personality that is uniquely suited to the timbres and movements of that plain speech style.

Richard M. Elman. *Commonweal*. July 14, 1961. pp. 401–2

In Winters' critical system everything fits together. It is a many-armed body with one head, and that head is the concept of a poem as an evaluation of experience and therefore a moral judgment. It is a pervasive concept, running through every part of the poem, determining the efficacy of every device and the acceptability of every phrase.

This objection to poems whose viewpoint is disapproved of is an objection made from the moralist position—Winters says ''theoretic moralists,'' but I do not know what that means, so I will not try to use it. The point is that if anything will clarify for us what Winters is talking about whenever he talks about poetry, it is an understanding of this concept of poetry as moral judgment.

In my opinion Winters sees two ways in which a poem can fail on moral grounds. These are: by a false wedding of emotion and the object or idea which is supposed to evoke that emotion; and by expressing a theme or general philosophical viewpoint which is morally or rationally unacceptable.

Miller Williams in *Nine Essays in Modern American Literature*, ed. Donald E. Stanford (Louisiana State). 1965. pp. 163–4

Winters prefers books of poems in which moral theme predominates. It is extremely curious that he prefers *Macbeth* to either *King Lear* or *Hamlet*, and the reason is not far to seek: the morality of *Macbeth* can be more simply abstracted from the play.

If Winters' theory is true, then literature can offer us no more nor other kind of human and moral understanding than ethical generalization. What literature does, according to his theory, is to convey the feelings appropriate to the understanding which is itself totally paraphrasable and essentially abstract. But to use one of Winters' favorite sorts of arguments, this is false because it is contrary to all our experience. Literature has the full resources of the meaning of ordinary and extraordinary language, a language from which concept and feeling do not neatly sift out. The experience is not opposed to, but it is more than reasoning.

That is as true of Winters' poems as of others. His poems are strengthened by his theory and limited by it; in good ways they go beyond it.

Paul Ramsey. *Sewanee Review*. Summer, 1965. pp. 456–7

The state of poetry, as it seems to me, is in dire need of a truly conservative critic who would have authority: conservative but not reactionary, hard but not rigid, traditional but not hidebound. Such a critic might do something at least to query the current fashions, something to suggest that neither frenzied notations of one's symptoms to and from the psychiatrist's office nor pseudo-Oriental bardic rhapsodies constitute the whole art of poetry. Winters had the gifts to be such a critic. But somehow, he was shunted, or shunted, himself, into a siding. His gifts remained, and so did his utter devotion to literature and poetry; but more and more they operated in an ever-narrowing circle of rejection and prejudice. His authority diminished proportionately: to his loss, no doubt, but also to poetry's.

Patrick Cruttwell. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1968. p. 416

Winters' post-Symbolist poems are the most characteristic and important of his mature work. They belie the common view of Winters as primarily a poet of abstractions; and if he is didactic and moralistic, these qualities inhere in poems displaying a surface texture of intense sensuousness. In discussing these poems I have concentrated on their abstract significance, in order to show something of the way his method works. This sort of analysis is one-sided, and it makes the poems sound mechanical. The poems I have discussed are extraordinarily perceptive in respect to the external world they describe and in respect to language; the precise yet evocative language is, in his own phrase, a form of discovery. The lines are living lines.

Winters is, I think, a major poet, a poet of no less stature than Williams, Pound, Eliot, Crane, or Frost. If this is true, then the low state of his reputation may seem to require some explanation. One problem is that to many readers his poems have seemed old-fashioned, having nothing to say to them, not ''modern.'' His restrained tone, his emphasis on rationality and control of the emotions, his sometimes explicit moralism, are partly the basis of this feeling, along with the regularity of his metrical and stanzaic forms. . . . There is also a tendency to regard his poems as versified footnotes to his criticism, which has attacked virtually every well-known literary figure since the eighteenth century and earned Winters the reputation of a crank. Winters' best post-Symbolist poems, though their paraphrasable content is consistent with his critical essays, are less assertive and dogmatic. His ideas, in the adventure with form that produces poetry, are complicated and qualified; but critics have used his more immediately accessible poems in the abstract style to attack his ''banality and oversimplification.''

Howard Kaye. *Southern Review*. Winter, 1971. pp. 193–5

I think it is time for the dismissals [of Winters] to cease. I speak as one who rejects a number of Winters's judgments and will continue to do so. About his importance in forming the taste of the age, and his true sensibility for poetry, and his grandeur as a writer of prose, it would be merely dishonest to give credit in a qualified way. He is a central figure in the history of modern poetry, and a critic to return to for the reviving charge of disagreement or assent: one of the very few teachers of any kind from whom it is always possible to learn.

Approximately two-thirds of the present collection [*Uncollected Essays and Reviews*] is a verse chronicle. Much of it appeared in *Poetry* magazine directly after the reign of Ezra Pound and had, one may assume, a small but most attentive audience. Some of the discoveries are William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, Theodore Roethke and J. V. Cunningham. The animadversions include Jeffers, Aiken, Zukofsky, Jarrell, Berryman and a myriad of worthies heard from neither before nor since. As a record of individual good taste vigorously defended, it has only Jarrell's *Poetry and the Age* for a peer.

David Bromwich. *New York Times Book Section*. May 19, 1974. p. 36

Yvor Winters surrendered in a most extreme way to romantic ideas and subsequently tried to cure himself of the romantic malady. I suspect that, the testimony of his criticism notwithstanding, he did not succeed. In his late twenties, he was still writing poems premised on a romantic view of experience. He was able to *think* his way out of the romantic position and, with the help of a poetic discipline, was able to reform his sensibility. But the change came late. A man of twenty-seven is pretty much what he is going to be. He can study himself, discover his weaknesses and strengths so as to realize his potentialities, but he is not likely to change in any fundamental way. John Stuart Mill said that Wordsworth's poetry provided him with a ''culture of the feelings.'' For Winters, the function of poetry is that of recultivating the feelings. In either case, it is the feelings that count. And a new—or postromantic—kind of poetry must have as its function leading the feelings away from the romantic abyss.

Winters was concerned with realized fullness of potential being, and he saw poetry as the most civilized and effective technique for realizing such being. But he also felt that there are limits on what we can know and judge: transcendence is a regress and leads to no wisdom. Winters was a theist, but he was not a Christian. He tells us that he arrived at his theistic position through studying poetry, that he did not begin with it but came to it as an inevitable conclusion—almost an unacceptable one. He felt, however, that man cannot make any inferences with reference to the existence or nature of immortality or as to the nature of the Divine plan, if any, for man.

Although Winters believed in a unified universe, he also held a Manichaean position with regard to the influence of the supernatural on human experience. He felt that we are beleaguered in some undefined way by evil. He could not determine whether this evil is merely a product of our minds or whether it is, in some sense, demonic. It is largely because the supernatural and the nonhuman otherness of nature seemed dangerous to Winters that he calls his own theoretical position a moral one, and it is the reason why he is distrustful of any mystical position. Although his preoccupation was with man's relationship to a supernatural that he could not define, he was more concerned with protecting man from it than in merging with it.

Grosvenor Powell. *Language as Being in the Poetry of Yvor Winters* (Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1980), pp. 165–67

The most naïve critic feels urged to identify, analyze, and assess—even with Mr. Winters' help—the very special addition that he has made to contemporary poetry within this cryptic quantitative and qualitative self-judgment. His poetic practices and his theories coincided; his style and his techniques of verse were—for the most part—meticulously ''moral'' for both his early experimental and his later traditional poetry; above all, he took his responsibility for being this ''moral'' aesthetician with total seriousness. His unique contribution to twentieth century American poetry was his insistence on the artist's particular ''morality.'' He expected it of all good poets; he demanded it of himself. It is the basis of his poetic and critical career—a philosophical *raison d'être*. For him, the word ''moral'' had a very special meaning in its artistic context, and it stemmed from his basic humanistic faith. He believed that within quite large limits man is the unique being with choice; therefore the poet will feel himself obligated to make those ''moral'' choices which are aesthetically proper for the complete artistic synthesis of the poem at hand. He saw no reason why poetry in a directionless period must be formless. The good poet's faculties will govern his choices within his range in accordance with his beliefs, emotional controls, intelligence, and perceptions. He will control the various technical aspects of poetry by his ''moral'' judgment, and thus create order out of chaos. It was a stringent judgment that he made for himself as an intelligent and ''moral'' human artist. He applied it to his own poetry and to that of others whom he criticized. In one passage in *Maule's Curse*, he used the term ''human'' as a parenthetical expression for ''moral.'' For him it was a total, complete position involving every faculty of the dedicated poet-teacher-critic. It provided him in all of these capacities with an intelligent way of thinking about poetry, and it contained important directives for its creation and criticism.

As such, his small, carefully selected body of poetry represents a certain tragic force in the dissection of this age. He had faced the ''brink of darkness'' in his personal contemporary chaos, had known the menace of unreason as an invader to be confronted and subdued. In his one short story, the sane narrator remembered with bitter precision every stage of his delusion as he had suffered it, and he had come back to record it with the cool voice of restored reason. So in Winters' life and his poetry he records and accounts for each quiet terror that he faced in the development of his art, his teaching, and his criticism. He strove for clarity and form against critical tides of unreason recognized and conquered. His personal life and public career ended after he was quite capable of definition and of measuring what had happened to him. His later poetry and his last book of criticism make that quite clear with their self-revelations. He was confident that his Post-Symbolist school would vindicate him in the future. Perhaps it is the case that his erudite efforts as critic somewhat limited his public production as poet, and that his *Collected Poems* provides an overselective handbook for his students. But he would have it no other way. . . .

Yvor Winters cannot—indeed, need not—be ''placed'' in the history of poetry. Granted that he was an enigma in his era, he represents the totality of the classical tradition set down in modern times. He has remained above the storms of contemporary ''schools'' in his calm, if somewhat haughty tradition of dignified reason and resultant form. His iconoclastic critical views have often seemed prejudiced and at times even savage; his stance, patronizing and pedagogical. But his poetry remains clearly serene, refined, and reflective.

Elizabeth Isaacs. *An Introduction to the Poetry of Yvor Winters* (Swallow/Ohio Univ. Pr., 1981), pp. 195–97, 202

Though Winters's version of the poet (after 1929) was always of a man embattled with reality, the metaphysical battles of the criticism of his thirties—with time, death and the ''invasion of the impersonal''—were often replaced, as he became more concerned with ethical and social issues, by battles with the ''dead living.'' Yet his achievement remains, when all is said and done, major. The best of his early verse has a freshness and limpidity, and a sensitivity to rhythm, unequaled save in the best work of William Carlos Williams. What he considered to be his major important poetry—that written after 1929—has been unjustly neglected, largely I suspect because of his reputation as a pugnaciously antimodernist critic, rather than for reasons intrinsic to the verse itself. To live with these poems is to be aware of a mind intensely sensitive to the reality of both the life of the intellect, and the nature

of the physical world in which that intellect must live. The consciousness that informs the poetry is perpetually attuned to the claims of both spirit and world; it works toward balance, toward a just vision, toward a true and clear understanding of the nature of our life. The ''massive calm'' of these poems is intensely moving to one who has experienced the reality of their premises and who can sympathize with Winters's temperamental need to define the limits of our understanding with lapidary certainty. His best poems, ''Apollo and Daphne,'' ''The Slow Pacific Swell,'' ''The Marriage,'' ''On a View of Pasadena from the Hills,'' ''John Sutter,'' ''The California Oaks,'' ''Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight,'' present us with sensory experience—a sense of the mind drenched in the physical reality of the world—and, simultaneously, an intellectual passion for understanding rarely equaled in the poetry of this century. . . .

In fact, Winters's concern with individual ethical responsibility, with his view of poetry as a process of moral evaluation whose chief end is the modification of the reader's sensibility so that he understands more clearly and fully the nature of human existence in the world, both point to a moral sensitivity hardly compatible with either the glorification of violence or the demand that the individual merge his being in that of a greater whole, be it state or race, endemic in fascism. Further, as we have seen from his own poetry, his ideals of human existence in the world were deeply imbued with notions of self-restraint, dignity and moral decorum. He viewed all suggestions of violation, spoliation, and trespass beyond natural and abiding limits with horror. The whole tenor of his writings indicates that the individual is responsible for his own spiritual state—his ideal is the rational man who understands and chooses, and he frequently seems impatient with determinist psychological models of human behavior which concentrate on the neurotic and the child, both categories in which the role of reason is diminished.

My chief concern in mentioning this aspect of Winters's work is not to refute the absurd charge of his potential fascism—a charge which his own actions and writings amply refute without outside help—but to draw attention to the fact that Winters's classicism and concern for reason and ethical probity were of a piece and prevented his being deluded, either in part or wholly (as so many of the major literary figures of this century have been deluded) by any of the versions of totalitarianism and moral and political nihilism peddled in his lifetime. This in itself should give significant pause to those readers who would dismiss his message and preoccupations as outmoded or trivial. His concern was with the centrally and perennially human, with the individual's apprehension of the nature of his life, here, in time and in the flesh. The focus of his vision was unwaveringly clear, undisturbed by notions, whether political or literary or both, of what Borges has called ''energetic barbarism.''

Dick Davis. *Wisdom and Wilderness: The Achievement of Yvor Winters* (Univ. of Georgia Pr., 1983), pp. 233–36

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WOLFE, Thomas (1900–1938)

Some of Mr. Wolfe's material is not subordinated to the intention of the book. What is his intention? On what is the mass of material focussed? What is to give it form? His novels are obviously autobiographical. This means that the binding factor should be, at least in part, the personality of the narrator, or since Mr. Wolfe adopts a disguise, of the hero, Eugene Gant. . . . The hero is really that nameless fury that drives Eugene. The book is an effort to name that fury and perhaps by naming it to tame it. But the fury goes unnamed and untamed. Since the book is formless otherwise, only a proper emotional reference to such a centre could give it form. Instead, at the centre there is this chaos that steams and bubbles in rhetoric and apocalyptic apostrophe, sometimes grand and sometimes febrile and empty; the centre is a maelstrom, perhaps artificially generated at times; and the other tangible items are the flotsam and jetsam and dead wood spewed up, iridescent and soggy as the case may be.

Robert Penn Warren. *Antioch Review*. May, 1935. pp. 199–202

His imagination has provided him with a great theme and his accurate memory flashes infinite exact detail of the life which he intends to make his book. But he cannot control the theme or reduce his substance to a medium. He will write neither poetry nor prose, but both. He will not be content with the literal autobiographic description of men and events which his journalistic sense supplies so readily but must intersperse with passages of sheer fantasy or poetical uplift. He will stick neither to fiction nor to fact. Hence the reader never enters into that created world of the real novelist which has its own laws, its own atmosphere, its own people, but goes from here to there in Mr. Wolfe's own life, seeing real people as he saw them, and often recognizing them . . . not as created characters but as literal transcripts from the life. So that the effect is always of being in two worlds at one time, fiction and fact, until curiosity takes the place of that ready acceptance of a homogenous life in the imagination which a fine novel invariably permits.

Henry Seidel Canby. *Seven Years' Harvest* (Rinehart), 1936. p. 168

Wolfe wrote *great* American novels, he wrote great *American* novels, and, loosely speaking, he wrote great American *novels*. But he fails to measure up in the fourth respect: he did not write *the*

great American novel. . . . Wolfe was not of the artistic temperament to write such a work. The author of The Great American Novel must be dramatic and omnipresent; Thomas Wolfe was lyrical and uni-present. For him there was only one world and he was at the center of it. . . . But his . . . gravest limitation was his genius. . . . The genius of Thomas Wolfe was too much. He was driven by a restlessness which kept him from achieving that cool perfection which often comes easy to lesser men.

Thomas Lyle Collins. *Sewanee Review*. Fall, 1942. p. 504

The career of Thomas Wolfe is the spectacle of a novelist who began with the sole concern to transfer to others his fascination with his own family as material for fiction, who turned thereafter in the same simplicity of intention to his own relationships with person outside his family, but who poured into these relationships all the disorders of the contemporary world until he was forced at the end to attempt their solution in a letter to his editor on social views, in which his work as a writer culminated and, it may be said, his life concluded.

Edwin Berry Burgum. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Summer, 1946. p. 421

Wolfe's poetry is not calmly and quietly intense; his main theme is the theme of being lost in America, and it is treated by a poet who is still lost. His perspective of America itself is out of joint: distances and spaces are magnified, a trip from New York to North Carolina becomes a journey ''down the continent''; much of his America is an abstraction. He has some of the naturalistic pantheism, the feeling that man and soil are intensely bound together in essence which marks so much Western literature since Zola and which makes him sound occasionally like Jean Giono, just as he shows at times some of the enthusiasm for being American, if not the faith democratic, of Walt Whitman. Now and again he reveals a feeling for, though not much knowledge of, the history of our people—the feeling that this land is something apart because the dust of his ancestors is mixed with its dust. But mostly his complaint is that these things do not mean more to him than they do, that he really has no place and ''no door where he can enter.'' and that meanwhile he is being swept along by the stream of life. The answer to his eternal question is not the answer of Whitman and Crane and Paul Engle. The one thing that he can be sure of, the one door that must open for him, is death.

W. M. Frohock. *Southwest Review*. Autumn, 1948. p. 357

Disillusionment, the hindsight of the self-deluded and the half-blind, was not one of Thomas Wolfe's qualities. No one ever accused him of being blind in any degree. His fault, if fault it was, was that he saw too much. Till the day he died he retained that luminous gift which all bright children seem to possess up to a certain age: the ability to look at life and see it as it really is, with all its many and ever-changing faces, its mystery and wonder, its exhilaration and stark terror, its endless contrasts of beauty and ugliness, its haunting interplay of good and evil, its flashing colors and subtly shifting shadows.

Edward C. Aswell. *Saturday Review*. Nov. 27, 1948. p. 34

It is largely through his effort to find permanence in flux that the novels of Thomas Wolfe may be considered ''modern'' in their treatment of time. In Wolfe's novels time becomes a rushing all-erosive river, which, nevertheless, may be arrested or turned back by the memory. Like Proust, Wolfe seeks to recapture the past through memory, including unconscious memory, and to show the sensations and moods that recollections of the past evoke in the present. Or again, like Joyce in *Finnegan's Wake*, he opposes a linear conception of time with a cyclical one, wherein the eternal is repeated through apparent change.

W. P. Albrecht. *New Mexico Quarterly*. Autumn, 1949. p. 320

His aim was to set down America as far as it can belong to the experience of one man. Wolfe came early on what was for him the one available truth about this continent—that it was contained in himself. . . . He could—and it is the source of what is most authentic in his talents—displace the present so completely by the past that its sights and sounds all but destroyed surrounding circumstances. He then lost the sense of time. For Wolfe, sitting at a table on a terrace in Paris, contained within himself not only the America he had known; he also held, within his body, both his parents. They were there, not only in his memory, but more portentously in the make-up of his mind. They loomed so enormous to him that their shadows fell across the Atlantic, their shade was on the cafe table under which he stretched his long American legs.

John Peale Bishop in *Kenyon Critics*, ed. John Crowe Ransom (World). 1951. pp. 3–4

These antagonisms of Wolfe's, which have been dubbed ''provincial,'' are in actuality national and American—historically, traditionally so. In his aversion from either extreme—great wealth or deep poverty—Wolfe is at one with the cosmopolitan William Dean Howells;and, as with Howells, his at-homeness, his central core of concern, is with the people of the middle-income groups. His middle-class characterizations, however, far exceed those of Howells in vividness of realization, in adventurousness, and above all in variety.

Walter Fuller Taylor. *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Oct., 1953. p. 547

Thus when we examine the plots of the four novels, we see that to varying degrees they mark stages along the way toward responsibility. *Look Homeward, Angel*, the most compact of the four, represents the artist's birth into a particular home and community and the successive stages of his alienation from it. At the end the young Eugene leaves the town for the city. In *Of Time and the River* he tangles with the world of art, then flees his country to go abroad, and there discovers his unescapable ties with his country. In *The Web and the Rock* he has his romance with the city and a love affair, and then he flees both—the woman's love and the city's ways. In *You Can't Go Home Again* he realizes that neither town nor city, woman or fame, but only his mind can give him peace, and that the direction of flight must not be away from reality but toward the creation of his artistic reality—and that this artistic reality is not one of proud romantic isolation and the storming of heaven by

frontal assault, but a reality grounded in morality and personal human responsibility.

> Louis D. Rubin. *Thomas Wolfe: The Weather of His Youth* (Louisiana State). 1955. p. 24–5

Wolfe's error in creation was the failure to associate the type and the individual. When, for example, he created a character and fitted his personality into the pattern and framework of one of his books, he did so because in life he had known such a real person. Seldom, indeed, did he weave a figure mainly from the fabric of his imagination and use threads from the lives of many people. Frequently, and especially in the later books, he created a character on the basis of one prototype but selected additional traits from other people. His memory for the specific enabled him to portray characters that are supremely vivid, yet the same quality also perhaps caused his failure to select details he wanted from many sources. To generalize and combine, he seems to have thought, would be to lose particularity.

> Floyd C. Watkins. *Thomas Wolfe's Characters: Portraits from Life* (Oklahoma). 1957. p. 181

He was completely ignorant of how to shape a piece of writing and make it publishable, but he had a deep instinctive feeling for his work which rarely played him false. He was fascinated by the concept of time in all its aspects, but he always was an hour or more late to his appointments. . . . He had what he called ''a mountaineer's suspicion of people from outside,'' which sometimes made him accuse even his best friends of ''betraying'' him, but he was the most naïve and trusting man on earth and wanted everyone to be his friend. He had ''black moods'' so deep that he sometimes was afraid of going crazy, but he also had periods of the greatest hope and joy. He had a humorless self-pity, but a sense of humor that was superb. He had the greatest difficulty in making decisions, but when he made one, he did it utterly, irrevocably, and with a bang. He had a ruthlessness in breaking free from too smothering relationships, but he had depths of loyalty which never changed. He was driven wild with exasperation at his family, but he worried endlessly about them and gave them hundreds of his own much-needed dollars during hard times. He was in many ways an adolescent body, but he had the philosophy, the hope, the resignation of a great man.

> Elizabeth Nowell. *Thomas Wolfe: A Biography* (Doubleday). 1960. pp. 12–13

In the final analysis, . . . Wolfe's success or failure rests on his adventure with the American Dream, as his Dream was developed from the time of Jefferson on through Emerson and Whitman up to the first quarter of the twentieth century. The Dream encompassed the hopes of young men everywhere for democracy and liberty and equality and individuality. It was an ideal and a promise. Wolfe was an American writer, not only because his problems were those of an American within America, but because his youth demanded fulfillment in a land where individual fulfillment was possible. In this Dream, it was Whitman who was his nearest spirit. Each of them spoke poetically out of his loneliness for all the young artists—and every young man is an artist to himself—across the sweep and breadth of the great land.

Before he completed his investigation into the nature of permanent acceptance in America, Wolfe had won within himself the struggle which is the essence of all human drama. With courage and honor, he had discovered through experience that his lot was common to that of all men. Out of his life and out of this discovery came the books.

> Richard Walser. *Thomas Wolfe: An Introduction and Interpretation* (Barnes and Noble). 1961. p. 143

To Wolfe, the notion that you can't go home again applies specifically to *art* in two principal ways: in its essentially moral statement that you can't use art itself as an escape from reality; and, more important for its complete reversal of Wolfe's former views, in its essentially aesthetic statement that you can't create worthwhile art through the particular escapes of Time and Memory. . . . Wolfe's statements are not specific enough for us to be able to tell the extent to which he consciously intended his new position as a criticism of all that he himself had so fare written, but it is natural that his readers look at it in terms of the light it sheds upon Wolfe's accomplishments. One's attitude toward it necessarily involves an evaluation of Wolfe's entire career; in so far as one regards the view taken at the end of *You Can't Go Home Again* as valid, then so much lower must his estimate be of all of Wolfe's novels, for that view rejects their very basis: the assumption that you can return to the past. But it is not a perfectly simply matter to judge the validity of Wolfe's notion that he had been wrong to try to go home again, for though his memory produced some of the most glaring of his artistic defects, it often contributed much of the value and uniqueness his novels do have. It was at times his strength and at times his weakness.

> Morris Beja. *Modern Fiction Studies*. Autumn, 1965. pp. 312–13

His works are encyclopedic because he sought to embrace the diversity of American life. But to recognize diversity is not to integrate all the diverse elements, and Wolfe was able only occasionally to achieve the integrity that we think of as artistic wholeness. His best work is his first novel. In later work his plans were so complex and his scope so broad that he did not accomplish what he wished before he died. Perhaps too, his difficulty in accepting the diversity of human life in America contributed to his artistic uncertainties. Whether he ever would have brought his mammoth work about George Webber under control or not we will never know. But we certainly must respect his aim and ambition to create an American prose epic. We should also feel some admiration for a writer who, beset with neurotic difficulties, was still able to marshal his energies sufficiently well to achieve a partial success in his epic attempt.

> Richard S. Kennedy. *Modern Fiction Studies*. Autumn, 1965. pp. 232–3

In many respects the most massive and impressive of the efforts to fashion an American epic was that of Thomas Wolfe. The vast,

incomplete, and imperfect work on which he labored and which he persisted in calling simply ''the book,'' was an effort at the ''Great American Novel'' that surpasses even Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* in scope, ambition, and intensity, although it is badly flawed in parts. At the time of his death in 1938, just before his thirty-eighth birthday, Wolfe had published two long novels, a collection of short stories and short novels, and an essay on literary method. He left behind an enormous mass of manuscript out of which his editor quarried two more novels and another collection of short pieces. All these works have a common subject and one almost universally recognized as Wolfe's own experience in his world presented under the transparent disguises of two protagonists, Eugene Gant and George Webber. Although this subject is treated in a variety of literary modes, forming a potpourri of dramatic scenes, narrative passages, lyrical descriptions, tone-poems, rhetorical incantations, and satirical social sketches, the works are all portions of one vast effort much like Whitman's attempt, as he expressed it, ''to put a *Person*, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, in America,) freely, fully, and truly on record.''

To look at Wolfe's ''book'' as an attempt at an American epic helps us see what he is about and appreciate at least some of the cause for his successes and his failures. He felt a compulsive need to ''sing America.''. . .

In addition to this epic urge, the nature and content of his work was shaped by the quality of his personal experience, by the influence of John Livingston Lowes's theory of the imagination, and by the special way in which he wrote. Out of the interactions of these things with his powerful rhetoric and his dramatic talent came a body of writing which corresponds with remarkable accuracy to the special shapes and tensions of the American epic. . . .

However flawed as novels and imperfect as art his books may be, Thomas Wolfe's works constitute a major and remarkably successful effort to write his autobiography as that of a representative American and to embody in the record of his time and deeds on this earth a vision of the nature and the hope of his democratic land.

C. Hugh Holman. *The Loneliness at the Core: Studies in Thomas Wolfe* (Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1975), pp. 161–62, 167

Thomas Wolfe was born *in*, yet was not *of* the South. More than any other major Southern writer, his reputation has gone into decline. In his lifetime critical opinion was divided over his achievement, though rarely over his genius. The criticisms of Wolfe—a woeful inconsistency, the lack of differentiation between authorial voice and protagonist's sensibility, the unwillingness to discriminate between the essential and the trivial, the failure to tell the reader very much about his protagonist, Eugene Gant—George Webber, and the shallow emotional and narrow intellectual reach of his fiction—all seem to me essentially just. Sympathetic observers would have it that Wolfe achieved a new maturity and stability near the end of his life . . . and Wolfe himself promoted this notion quite avidly. But like the legendary Southern Bourbons, with whom he otherwise shared so little, Wolfe never really learned or forgot anything. He was always starting over again. Even his moments of isolation were noisy; and he was never able to halt that inexorable march through his own experience or to control his desire not just to experience everything, but to devour it. . . .

It is perhaps this overpowering orality which marks Wolfe's essential narcissism, his swings between a desire for union and oneness and a deep suspicion of others, his inability to maintain stable ties, his lack of interest finally in the autonomy of the people and objects in the world that fascinated him, the shallowness of his sensibility. It was all for *him* and not for itself. One searches his fiction for the measured and calm discourse with friends or acquaintances from whom nothing is demanded. His fictional world fails to remain in our memory as does Faulkner's; rather what we remember is a central figure moving through a world which exists only insofar as it has to do with him. Unlike Faulkner's characters who are plagued by too much, Wolfe's never get enough. Recollection leads only to repetition. . . .

His tragedy was that he lived beyond any cultural tradition except that which he could piece together on his own. It was not a matter of believing or not believing in a religious faith or sharing certain ideas and ideals or manners. Wolfe was no different from many others there. The problem rather was that he had little sense of what had been lost and what might have once provided coherence. Like Jay Gatsby, Wolfe could finally only believe in the ''green light,'' the world of infinite possibility. As a result he was continually re-creating his innocence. The protagonist of his later work could not have been ''Eugene Gant,'' since the late fiction was less an elaboration than a repetition of the early novels. To be sure, emphasis was shifted and new episodes introduced, but nothing much developed. It was a replay. Had Wolfe actually gone back home earlier, he might have realized that he could not ''go home again,'' could not retrieve it all in memory and relive it. This might have given him the necessary distance to let the present and past world be, and to let others come alive.

Richard H. King. *A Southern Renaissance* (Oxford Univ. Pr., 1980), pp. 198–99, 202–4

Perhaps one of the reasons for the personal appeal of [Thomas] Wolfe, and of *Look Homeward*, *Angel* especially, is that Wolfe is more than simply a lyrical writer, and *Look Homeward*, *Angel* is more than merely a romantic novel. A closer look reveals that it abounds in archetypal Gothic images that appeal to readers subliminally; it shares with other Southern Gothic works the significant elements of both Southern and Gothic setting (bells, darkness, wind, a decaying mansion, labyrinths, an abyss, and eerie music), a quest, imprisonment, a ghost, and themes of isolation and fear of annihilation. . . .

It is significant that after *Look Homeward*, *Angel*, when Wolfe was finished with his theme of initiation, when his autobiographical hero Eugene Gant had found his ghost within at the same time that he repudiated the materialism of his society, Wolfe turned naturally away from the Gothic; in subsequent novels he embraced a wider romantic mode as his hero confronted a larger social perspective than that of Altamont, a perspective that focused on a landscape more eternal than the dreamlit Gothic region of the soul.

Darlene H. Unrue. ''The Gothic Matrix of *Look Homeward, Angel*.'' In John S. Phillipson, ed. *Critical Essays on Thomas Wolfe* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1985), pp. 48–49, 54–55

Even if Wolfe's fiction had no other merit, it ought to be read because it offers a remarkably full social history of the United States during the first four decades of the twentieth century. Wolfe's careful dissection of Asheville, as ''Altamont'' (or ''Libya

Hill'' in the posthumous novels), is a masterful picture of small-town life in America. No other novelist has written so knowledgeably about American higher education—at the University of North Carolina, Harvard University, and New York University. Hating urban life, Wolfe was fascinated by New York City and in hundreds of pages he tried to capture it on paper. Only occasionally did he record the greatness and the excitement of the big city, but no one has better described the harsh impersonality of New York's ''manswarm'' or chronicled the city's ''infinite repetitions of lust, cruelty, and sterility, of hatred, defeat, and dishonor, of gouging and killing.''

I found that Wolfe's novels are also a barometer of American culture Absorbed with the artist and his need for self-expression, *Look Homeward, Angel* accurately reflected the temper of the 1920s. *Of Time and the River*, published after the onset of the Great Depression, showed some awareness that the problems of society might be more important than the frustrations of the individual. But Wolfe's last novel, which described the consequences of the stock market crash, demonstrated that he was, as Alfred Kazin has said, ''the most alert and brilliant novelist of depression America and an extraordinarily imaginative analyst of . . . the social disorganization of the thirties.''. . .

Though Wolfe's novels lack form, episodes in them are strong and crisply defined. From his years of training as a playwright Wolfe learned how to make individual scenes vibrant and memorable. . . .

But what is even more memorable about Wolfe's novels is the author's unique literary voice. There is hardly a page in any of his books that could have been written by anybody else.

David Herbert Donald. *Look Homeward: A Life of Thomas Wolfe* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987), pp. xiii–xv

Described by its publisher as a ''newly discovered'' and ''previously unpublished novel'' by Thomas Wolfe, *The Good Child's River* more accurately may be called an editorial assembling by Suzanne Stutman of what Wolfe perhaps intended to be a novel. After several years of examining three of Wolfe's handwritten ledgers in Harvard University's Houghton Library, along with other manuscript material housed there, Stutman has assembled the fragments of what appear to be a novel Wolfe had tentatively titled ''The Good Child's River.''

In her introduction, Stutman states her intention ''to present a definitive text of *The Good Child's River*, that is, the text as Thomas Wolfe wrote it, without exclusion and with a minimum of editorial intrusions.'' Wolfe, she says, ''intended that *The Good Child's River* would present together in novel form his ''Esther stories'' told, for the most part, from Esther's point of view'' (xiv).

Stutman argues that the character of Esther Jack (based largely on Aline Bernstein, whom Wolfe met when he was twenty-four and she was forty-four, and with whom he carried on a long, complicated, and tempestuous relationship), ''served not only as a lens to the present but also as a conduit into the past, as this 'good child' entered into the river of time to re-create for him, almost like a series of Currier and Ives photographs, life in New York from the 1880s through the turn of the century'' (3–4). . . .

The Good Child's River, as organized by Stutman, is not a chronological tale of Esther's life. Portions of the novel deal with Esther's childhood, the early lives of her parents, and her father's career in the theater. Throughout, Wolfe contraposes the Jewish background of Esther's mother's family with the Gentile background of her father's. . . .

The Good Child's River as Stutman has assembled it is an uneven work. The richness and exhilaration of the Central Park scenes are countered often by sentimentality and banality in other sections. This unevenness of course is not unlike other Wolfe works—*Look Homeward, Angel*, for example. Stutman's work is a positive contribution to Wolfe scholarship in that she has made available to readers a sizable portion of the author's work presented in a readable manner. Although one may question some of the arrangements, or, more importantly, still have questions as to whether Wolfe would have finally fashioned the work in such a way, there is no question that *The Good Child's River* provides another angle of looking at Wolfe's writing. It also raises intriguing questions about what new directions Wolfe would have taken in his work had he lived long enough to do so.

Anne Rowe. *Southern Literary Journal*. Fall, 1993, pp. 113–15

Thomas Wolfe's reputation as the most excessively autobiographical modern American writer always threatens to divert our attention from his writing theory, which reflects his educational background in English Romanticism and suggests his anticipation of contemporary theories of autobiography, especially their emphasis on the dissonance between the life lived and the life reported and on the artificial, textual construction of a self and a life based on received literary conventions. Traditional Wolfe criticism tends to over-dramatize the parallels between his life and work, to underestimate the artistic complexities of autobiography, and to overcritique his supposed lack of authorial control and distance, thus narrowing our possible readings of his ''auto-fiction'' and limiting our appreciation of his art. This criticism depends mostly on native assumptions about the mimetic power of narrative to comprehend and articulate ''reality'' which, until replaced by current theories of narratology, circumscribe a definition of the formalist ''well-wrought'' novel that condemns Wolfe's expansive roman à clef novels by comparison. These current theories, by contrast, help us recover Wolfe's writing in a contemporary theoretical context by providing other entrances into it, entrances which lay bare the device of Wolfe's literary constructions to reveal an unnatural, rather than a natural, origin and structure in his writing.

For example, Wolfe's two main protagonists, Eugene Gant and George Webber, define and develop themselves fundamentally as figures of language created from the literary codes of the Romantic artist-hero as generically described within the Bildungs-Künstlerroman convention. In addition, Wolfe's description of America reflects a hypersensitivity to natural and cosmic forces as articulated by nineteenth-century writers such as Walt Whitman and a stylistic approach reminiscent of modernists such as James Joyce. Wolfe's writing may depend more on what he read than on what he lived, for one's life, according to Wolfe and contemporary theorists, consists essentially of how one's self decides to articulate it; similarly, one's self consists substantially of that very articulation, ordered according to preexistent cultural patterns. As Paul de Man argues, the ''technical demands of self-portraiture'' determine the life as much as the life determines the self-portraiture. In short, we enter into systems of language; language systems do not enter into

us. By examining *Look Homeward, Angel* in terms of contemporary theory we may find some interesting views of the sign systems on which its construction depends, particularly regarding Wolfe's theory of autobiography and his generic appropriation of the Künstlerroman, views with the potential to innovate our readings of Wolfe and to move us from the traditional into the contemporary.

Philip A. Snyder. *Thomas Wolfe Review*. Spring, 1995, pp. 44–45

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WOUK, Herman (1915–)

Behind the rosy anachronisms of *Aurora Dawn* there would seem to be a nice talent for light fiction; and a talent for light fiction is no drug on our market. Of course, the reason we have no decent light fiction in this country is because we respect no literary work that is not heavy with portent or pretension. Mr. Wouk gives us plenty of evidence that he could write simple colloquial English if he thought it desirable. He is naturally witty. He is well educated. It is the sad mark of our times that he should nevertheless find it necessary or favorable to roll in the full periods of a bygone prose and display his book learning like a sophomore.

Diana Trilling. *The Nation*. May 24, 1947. p. 636

There are three themes which the novelist has woven together for his story [*The Caine Mutiny*]. First, the life aboard ship with the community frictions and loyalty, with its pecking order as the strong men assert themselves, and with its instinctive reaction to the skipper. . . . The second theme is an ironic scrutiny of the whole Naval system as it is mocked, hated, but obeyed by the civilian officers who did not graduate from the Academy. . . . And the third theme, and the most personal, is the development of men at sea, particularly the character of Willie Keith. Willie at first is so casual that for three days he forgets to decode an action dispatch which he thrust into a hind pocket in a moment of excitement. But it is a different Willie who emerges from the long ordeal under Queeg. In the process of his self-possession Willie frees himself from his mother's domination and comes to value his affection for May Wynn, an Italian night club singer, but these are minor incidents in a story of men, one of the best designed and best developed novels of the war yet published by an American.

Edward Weeks. *Atlantic Monthly*. Aug., 1951. p. 79

What the new middle class wanted—and found in *The Caine Mutiny*—was an assurance that its years of discomfort and hardship in the Second World War were not in vain, and that its sacrifices in a permanent war economy and its gradual accommodation to the emergence of the military as a dominant element in civil life have been not only necessary but praiseworthy. More than this, it requires such assurance in a sophisticated form, allowing it to feel that alternatives have been thoughtfully considered before being rejected: in *The Caine Mutiny* ample space is given over to consideration of ''psychoanalytic'' motivations in Queeg and in Keefer too, and even in Cain-Abel analogy is mentioned as evidence that the title is not an unmotivated slip of the pen.

Harvey Swados. *Partisan Review*. March–April, 1953. p. 256

One might view this straightforward portrait of a young girl [*Marjorie Morningstar*] as the counterpart of the wry and oblique *Adventures of Augie March*, for while in Augie we see the formation of a man through his series of occupations, in Marjorie we see the formation of a woman through her series of courtships. But Saul Bellow retained a bitterness toward his background, satirizing the vulgarity of Augie's well-to-do connections. Wouk writes with the warmth he displayed in *The City Boy*. He has respect for his people, but he is hardly uncritical. His folkloristic scenes have more tenderness than ire. His satire is directed against those who have lost the traditional values, like the young parents who nearly wreck a Passover seder with their psychoanalytic jargon and their permissive pampering of a spoiled brat. Within this irony is a grotesque hilarity stemming from Wouk's early days as a radio gag man, for the brat has to have a satchelful of toy airplanes brought along wherever he goes—even to a seder. What happens is sheer Milton Berle.

Meyer Levin. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 3, 1955. p. 9

The moral is: if one's destiny is suburbia, there is no point in seeking to ''be an actress'' rather than ''a fat dull housewife with a big engagement ring.'' The moral is also that a man who has written an interesting book from a masculine point of view (*The Caine Mutiny*) shouldn't push his luck too far by trying to reverse the procedure. At one point in her life, Marjorie Morgenstern finds that she is ''very bored with the problems of being a girl.'' Herman Wouk's problem is plainly that he has never been one, and he cannot quite manage to tell a girl's story from a girl's point of view. *Marjorie Morningstar* is soap opera with psychological and sociological props. . . .

The environment Wouk creates is vivid and enormously complex. It touches on economic mobility—the moves from the Bronx to the Upper West Side to the suburbs, the compromises at Hunter between the Jewish and the Christian sororities for political control, and the relationship of City College to Ivy League students; the conflicts between the older, immigrant generation—sweet, squashed, and loving—and the younger, growing up in a world that includes Freud and pork and the Unitarian Church; the flight from and to Jewishness.

The fascinating cultural scene is, however, backdrop to the banal love story.

Nora Magid. *New Republic*. Sept. 5, 1955. p. 20

In the Age of Wouk, the new writing will certainly have the impulse of revolt, but not the act; just as Marjorie Morgenstern—the ''American Everygirl,'' as we are told—must first rebel against her environment in order properly to conform to it. There will be a little, or quite a lot of sex, so long as it is never fulfilled and has no meaning. There will be the usual periods of doubt, heart-searching, and despair in the lives of these new folk-figures of the American Way—in order to have a happy ending. Marjorie will always marry the man in the gray flannel suit in the typical configuration of the classless—and mindless—society. Well, what does it all really mean? I suspect that the final impact of the atomic age has had the effect of a lobotomy upon the national spirit. Don't look now, but we're all dead.

Maxwell Geismar. *The Nation*. Nov. 5, 1955. p. 400

Herman Wouk stands at the very crossroads of modern literature. As the old American dream of perfect freedom faded, mature disillusion replaced it. ''The lost generation'' became ''The Disenchanted'' until the wisdom of disillusion produced ''The Mature Mind.'' The dim light of Marjorie Morningstar faded, and the dream died: came the Aurora Dawn and Herman Wouk. Even the author's name seems allegorical.

Much of the interest of these novels comes from their treatment of basic American problems. Much of their excellence comes from the vivid characters they create to explore these problems. But much of their weakness comes from the black and white answers which they suggest. For, although Wouk protests that he takes no sides and plays no favorites, all his readers have disagreed. Tom Keefer is a heel and Noel Airman is a heel; but Barney Greenwald is a hero and Mike Eden is a hero. Always romantic rebellion is bad, but clear-eyed disillusion is good, and salvation is achieved by renouncing the foolish dreams of youth.

Frederic I. Carpenter. *College English*. Jan., 1956. p. 215

I was fascinated by *The Caine Mutiny* in all three forms, and unlike the jaundiced critic of *The New Yorker* I did not find *Marjorie Morningstar* ''a damp and endless tale.'' The hunt for the missing strawberries is, I believe, a permanent addition to the literature of the sea, the account of more serious hostilities is lucid and exciting, and the breakdown of Commander Queeg under court-martial examination is a genuinely dramatic moment. In the later novel, the scenes of Jewish life seem to me authentic and good-natured. The description of the Bar-Mitzvah, the religious and social celebration of Seth Morgenstern's thirteenth birthday, is a skillful blend of solemnity and comedy. Marjorie's stage-struck progress through her late teens and early twenties can be shrugged off as uninteresting, I believe, only by those who have really lost interest in youth. . . .

Yet there is a common weakness in these two successful novels which bodes ill for the future. I refer to the sudden reversal near the end, the injection of conservative values in a manner which is structurally weak and at odds with the character values established in the first nine-tenths of each novel.

B.R. McElderry. *Arizona Quarterly*. Summer, 1959. p. 128

We do not share the indignation of some of the theologically sophisticated neo-ascetics of our day who have criticized *This Is My God* because Judaism appears in it as a pleasurable experience. It is well to remember that in spite of the manifold hazards and disabilities from which the Jew was never free, he always found his tradition a source of light and joy. . . . One misses not only the perspective of the historian, but the forward thrust of the prophet. One listens in vain for the passionate cry for justice, the revolt against the tyranny, want and cruelty of the world. One does not sense the unshakable faith in the advent of the Messianic age in which the Jew must be not only witness, but participant. We do not hear the yearning of the individual soul for God of which the Psalmist sings; the doubts and fears, the hopes and passions of the human situation are all lacking. Instead, this attractive book gives us a still-life portrait of Judaism—it is Judaism in one tense; only the comfortable present is here; the past and the future are absent.

Robert Gordis. *Midstream*. Winter, 1960. pp. 83, 89

Herman Wouk is the only living nineteenth century novelist. He glories in the fact and so do his ten million readers, including me. It is strange, as a matter of fact, that Dickens, our greatest English novelist, has been so little emulated. His genius may indeed have been inimitable but certainly his techniques were simplicity itself. And yet he has had no lineal descendants. Wouk is a late-rising avatar, not up to the original, but a contender. One way he falls short is in the matter of conviction. Dickens was sublimely self-confident. All his melodrama, all his wild coincidences, the sentimentality, the simplistic morality gave off a sense of absolute conviction. Wouk, on the other hand, is defensive, he invites patronizing and he gets it. He is continually looking over his shoulder, saying, ''Can I get away with this?''

And he plods. Sometimes he plods so doggedly that you begin to admire him more for his stamina than his story-telling. Again he is defensive. ''I may not be a poet,'' he says, ''and I may not get very far off the ground, but I go slugging along with my story.'' This is true, and more power to him for it. Dickens did get off the ground, to be sure, but then he did a bit of plodding too.

William James Smith. *Commonweal*. June 29, 1962. p. 355

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WRIGHT, James (1927–1980)

Even more striking than its attitude toward nature and time is the kind of person whom modern poetry chooses to speak of. Aside from love poems and poems addressed to relatives, the persons who have stimulated Mr. Wright's imagination include a lunatic, a man who has failed to rescue a boy from drowning, a murderer, a lesbian, a prostitute, a police informer, and some children, one of them deaf. Common to them all is the characteristic of being social outsiders. They play no part in ruling the City nor is its history made by them, nor, even, are they romantic rebels against its injustices; either, like the children (and the ghosts), they are not citizens or they are the City's passive victims.

His one poem to a successful citizen is, significantly, to a singer, that is to say, to someone whose social function is concerned with the play of the City, not with its work.

W. H. Auden. Foreword to *The Green Wall* by James Wright (Oxford). 1957. p. xiii

James Wright has reported that he has taken Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robert Frost for his masters, and has attempted as a working principle to ''say something humanly important instead of just showing off with language.'' With such a choice of masters one could hardly quarrel, and he has followed them wisely—he approaches the human scene with something of Robinson's warmth and charity, and has something of Robinson's gift of narrative economy, with little of his embarrassing reluctance to turn loose of an effect before he has worked it to exhaustion. With Frost he finds some of his most fruitful occasions in the natural scene, which he can regard like Frost with accuracy and sympathy and without too much in the way of sentimentality—and also without so for very much of that archness which Frost can affect in his playful moods. These qualities of course are not peculiar to Robinson and Frost, and I am not sure that if Mr. Wright had not acknowledged their influence I would have thought it sufficiently pronounced to bring them into the discussion. Here they are, however, and in my opinion Mr. Wright need not feel too unworthy to share their company.

J.E. Palmer. *Sewanee Review*. Autumn, 1957. p. 693

The condemned, the lost, the disfigured, the loved, the guilty Americans in James Wright's poems move through his stanzas as presences who make the poet speak and in speaking define himself by his reactions to them. The questions which summoned them to him, he tells us, are moral ones. . . . Mr. Wright calls up his hapless ghosts in order that he may find words to describe them, pity them, love them. Many of his poems succeed because in them these separable actions are in fact made so interdependent as to seem inseparable; insofar as his moral questions are answered in those poems the answers are discovered, rather than proclaimed.

Daniel G. Hoffman. *Sewanee Review*. Autumn, 1960. pp. 674–5

James Wright's new book [*The Branch Will Not Break*] has moved away from a poetry of explanation to a poetry of suggestion; image rather than comment is intended to do the work. . . . The book depresses me, because of its sense of failure and loss, of a defeated life in which, if happiness is to exist, it will do so only briefly. The world of man shown here seems largely horrible, and only the uncomplicated world of animals, of physical nature, offers relief. . . . From his first book, Wright's poetry struck me as extraordinary and beautiful, as containing the sudden moments of pure excitement that I spoke of at the beginning of this review. The moments are still there, but now they are muted by the sadness, diminished, brought down. Wright has the clear vision, the exactness, the pure language of poetry; I would give him happiness, if I could.

William Dickey. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1963. p. 315

As soon as we put Wright's poetry in the company of the nostalgic Pastoral, difficulties of judgment begin. There is, in this collection, nothing to compare with Keats's ''Ode to Autumn,'' Heine's ''Aus alten Märchen winktes'' (which the poet quotes on the title page), or even with Thoreau's prose. As a new note (in concert with Robert Bly) in contemporary American poetry, it is certainly healthy and purgative: we have had too many of what Salinger's Franny calls ''syntaxy droppings.'' *The Branch Will Not Break* is at most, however, a sketch-book of verses, a new beginning which wants to be criticized, rather than a consummation.

Geoffrey H. Hartman. *Kenyon Review*. Autumn, 1963. pp. 751–2

In telling us how poems of inwardness voice their opposition to the status quo, [Robert] Bly implies, among other things, a love for the rural mode of existence which both he and James Wright juxtapose with the urban environment augmented by our contemporary technological and industrial gains. The two settings are plain in the city images and in the pastoral qualities and meditative lyricism of *The Branch Will Not Break*. Moral passion, which generated an ample part of Wright's earlier writing, has been assimilated by the new poetic method. His criticisms now submit themselves to the ruling influence of the imagery rather than depend upon any declared moral purpose. The total effect of this imagery is slow and cumulative; it is in accord with the actual movement of the poems, with their free but apt rhythms, their shifting but calculated emphases.

Ralph J. Mills. *Contemporary American Poetry* (Random). 1965. p. 214

At first a typically edgy poet of the age, disturbed by the terror in the air and finding a half-masochistic release in projecting it, he has turned the unease into several channels. The first is political—for

instance, ''Eisenhower's Visit to Franco'' or ''Two Poems about President Harding.'' The irony and bitterness of these pieces and others like them do take to a certain degree, though there is a facile, unearned quality to the emotion. The second is quietistic, the speaker deriving strength by ''turning to nature'' in the good old-fashioned way. . . . A third channel is the continuation of his earlier mode of thought, but in a simplified style that stresses the naked pain and fear of natural existence and brings social criticism into the poem almost incidentally. This is Wright's most sympathetic vein, because closest to the state of his own sensibility.

M. L. Rosenthal. *The New Poets* (Oxford). 1967. pp. 324–5

Irresistibly drawn to the souls of beings who have wasted their lives—or who have been devastated *by* life—Wright's soul becomes, at last, hopelessly and lovingly entangled with theirs. He has the largeness of heart of the great empathizers, and worse, a mind suicidally honest, a mind hellishly bent on stripping away all self-protective devices. His best poems enact the drama of a mind struggling, usually with punishing success, to resist the temptation to take solace from its own compassionating ardor. The pain he feels for another never becomes a disguised way of cheering himself up. It is a tougher thing. The poems in this book [*Shall We Gather at the River*] are nearly identical to those of Wright's last book in form, but they have advanced to an altogether new spiritual magnitude. Perhaps the most serious obstacle to the new life of spirit is brevity of form. I feel that this tendency has become a handicap which impedes a full blossoming into the massive raw-boned jaggedness of form which, as in the superb ''Minneapolis Poem,'' can provide the structural leverage needed to render the fuller sense of life newly available, but somehow left unbodied, in many of the short poems. The best work in this volume demonstrates clearly that Wright has the skill and fortitude needed to rid his art of the leaning to premature closure that often stifles his ablest, most incandescent, vision.

Laurence Lieberman. *Poetry*. April, 1969. p. 41

I have dwelt on James Wright's linguistic boldness; but he is equally unusual for his human intensity and scope. His themes are almost obsessively constant, from his earliest work: his is a ''profound poetry of the poor and of the dead,'' to quote Stevens; a strength of misery in love, and an equally strong desire to transcend the bodily self into a delicacy intuited from animals, stones, dreams. James Wright is a mythopoeic poet, the sole owner and proprietor of names and, especially, places: the Northern Great Plains where he thinks of ''the sea, that once solved the whole loneliness/Of the Midwest''; and his native southeastern Ohio, with its towns named for super-corporations, its fated, exhausted Eastern Europeans, its river which is at once sacred place and ''Tar and chemical strangled tomb.'' As one reads through the book, Wright's places come to seem, like Winesburg or Yoknapatawpha, less the accidents of one life than the necessary epiphanies of the whole American experience. For all these reasons, he remains, for me, with the exception of Gary Snyder, the most interesting, and still promising, of his contemporaries.

Alan Williamson. *Poetry*. Feb., 1972. p. 298

Wright's poems are deeply personal. In his politically oriented works he lacks the sense of objective event we find in a Lowell; his poem is dependent on a private relationship to history and—even in his latest poems—to the poem as process for the speaker and reader. In this sense he is like Pound, though Wright's ordering is tonal, not structural. Whether this personalism is a limitation to his vision later poems will show. For the present, *Collected Poems* reminds us that one of our major poets is still growing.

Peter Cooley. *Concerning Poetry*. Spring, 1972. p. 79

James Wright started out in the fifties with a great bolt of visionary silk, which he cut, in the fashion of the day, to symmetrical patterns. His poems won prizes, but were so hard to believe, so safely and slickly ''art,'' that they seemed only a vast closet of ceremonial robes to be taken out, worn as one bowed before the formal dignity of poetry, and returned, spotless.

It was toward the end of *Saint Judas*, his second volume, that, with a slam, Wright walked out on high art. His voice suddenly sharpened. . . . In *The Branch Will Not Break* (1963), his best volume, and *Shall We Gather at the River* (1968), his poems became so wincingly resentful and chagrined that their wires seemed disengaged. Wright lost the heart for wholeness. . . .

Wright's unusual tenderness for animal and beaten human life, his suffering over the inability to wing upward, to embrace creation (''what are you going to do?''), makes his a moving, enlarging sensibility, but his relation to the poetic medium has always been misjudged. If his early poems carried a formal will like a knife between the teeth, the recent work is either too bitter or too painfully happy for its own self-possession: all wound.

Calvin Bedient. *New York Times Book Section*. Aug. 11, 1974. p. 6

Certainly the subject of death—except for *The Branch Will Not Break* (1963), Wright's most important volume—has been a constant one for Wright; in fact, one is correct in saying that of all American poets (Edgar Lee Masters excepted), past or present, there is no one obsessed with death to the degree evident in the poetry of Wright. . . .

''A Blessing'' is Wright's finest poem, not only in the manner of the Emotive Imagination, but in the canon of his poems to date. This judgment is not an isolated one, for the poem, since its 1963 appearance, has won the admiration of critics of every stance, anthologizers, teachers, students, and other poets. It is a poem very simply posited until the concluding three lines when the metaphoric leap approximates the condition of absolute joy. ''A Blessing,'' as its title implies, is one of the most positive of Wright's poems, demonstrating the long distance from darkness he is capable of moving. . . .

The speakers of a number of Wright's poems in *The Branch Will Not Break* seem to want to transcend the human into the purely natural, as indeed, James Dickey's speakers do, the difference being that Wright always recognizes that it is finally impossible to do this; Dickey merely does it. Wright acknowledges his limits as a human; Dickey refuses to recognize that distinctions between the human, natural, and other animal states exist. Theodore Roethke,

under whom Wright studied at the University of Washington, has, like Dickey, found it easier than has Wright to achieve this transcendence. . . .

Apparently the James Wright of *Two Citizens* accepts into his poetry any strongly felt emotions, so long as they serve to illuminate his transformation. We believe Wright could have profited by exercising his editorial prerogative; many of these poems demonstrate emotion sentimentally and thus are ineffectual. For the personal poem to succeed as more than merely a recording of emotion, it needs to engage the reader's sensibilities. It is not enough just to tell, as Wright has elected to do in too many of these poems, what he feels and has experienced. One of the lasting values of the Emotive Imagination, when it is effectively used, is the ability to make the reader respond to the sensations and thoughts the poet is attempting to convey through images. . . .

Wright is not a poet whose subject interests can yet be called heterogeneous, yet the changed perceptions of self, the past, and America augur well for the prospect of Wright's challenging new concerns.

George S. Lensing and Ronald Moran. *Four Poets and the Emotive Imagination* (Louisiana State Univ. Pr., 1976), pp. 88, 111–13, 129–30

I said earlier that James Wright was not death-haunted. Still, Death is the main character in our fictions. Wright was like most of us God-haunted and self-isolated. This risked the refusal of life and the debasement of creation which he had described. Wright allows us to see that if we choose not to undertake our destiny and choose not to front life, which the choice to employ habitual language and gesture means, we effectively ignore communal responsibility. This is the responsibility each bears to all. It is the responsibility of courage. Wright's courage consists in his willingness to communicate the truth of his feelings at the risk not only of public failure but of failure before his masters, Dickens and Horace. Wright continuously praised writers for telling the truth boldly and powerfully but shied away from such claims for himself. The irony, though it is not very ironic, is that the more he brought his life into his poems, his emotional and ethical and biographical and mythical life, the more truth he made us feel in ourselves, the more courage he gave us. The one story he tells proceeds from the conviction to which he was always faithful, that however tragic life may be there is the beauty of joy within it and we must seek tirelessly for it.

Dave Smith. Introduction to *The Pure Clear Word: Essays on the Poetry of James Wright*, ed. Dave Smith (Univ. of Illinois Pr., 1982), p. xxvi

James Wright, who died in 1980 at the age of 52, was a poet of enormous verbal resources and skills engaged in a complex and deeply human quest to write—in his own terms—''the poetry of a grown man'' in the style of ''the pure clear word.'' He was one of our great poets of the lost and desolate, feeling his way emotionally into the lives of the cheated, the drunk, the lunatic. He was also a Horatian craftsman for whom craftsmanship was never itself enough, continually struggling for clarity and against glibness in his work, and somehow capable of revealing what Robert Hass calls ''the aboriginal loneliness of being.'' But if Wright was an explorer of our specifically human social darkness, he was also a poet of lyric ecstasy and radiant natural light. Over the years his work increasingly evoked the external natural light. Over the years his work increasingly evoked the external natural world. Now in his last, posthumous collection [*This Journey*]—virtually completed before his death—Wright returns to his primary concerns, particularly exploring the terrible harshness and beauty of nature, but with a luminous depth and intensity. . . .

The transforming moments in Wright's work are characteristically either moments of human exchange or moments of the isolated self's ecstatic communion with nature.

Edward Hirsch. *New York Times Book Section*. April 18, 1982. p. 15

The dream the collection [*Collected Poems*] retells is Orpheus's dream of rescuing Eurydice from Hades. A modern variation of the ancient myth, the poem dramatizes the poet's continual attempt to persuade his muse, Jenny, to come back to him from the depths of the black water in which she committed suicide. Resonating backward through the preceding pages, this very moving expression of grief and desire illuminates many passages which may have puzzled readers unfamiliar with [James] Wright's development.

Michael Graves. *Hollins Critic*. December, 1985, p. 2

In *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* (1977) and *This Journey* (1982), James Wright, much like his former teacher Theodore Roethke, moves from despair to joy, from an anguished vulnerability to the patient acceptance of a Nietzschean ''yea-sayer.'' Such a move is representative of Wright's mature work, in which the nagging doubt and depression that characterize his early writing disappear in a poetry of affirmation and integration. Wright comes to know the loveliness and wonder of a spiritual light—a personal and wholly revivifying acceptance of the dual realities of human possibility and human limitation. Although already conversant with the enticing beauty of an earthly darkness, he learns to appreciate its dialectic opposite, the light of the sun. . . .

But more importantly, this ''delight'' does not issue merely from his being at home within his own body but from his feeling equally at home within the natural world and with the complement of beings that compose the physical universe. Wright, the homeless traveler, the quester for a more perfect place, discovers that the world which surrounds him is itself ''abounding'' with a spiritual presence, which, on occasion, he can see and feel as tangibly as he can those creatures that embody it. He comes to resolve the most pressing and continual of his thematic (and religious) concerns: the separation of human beings from one another, from the natural world and its inhabitants, and from the spiritual or godlike presence of the universe.

Kevin Stein. *James Wright: The Poetry of a Grown Man: Constancy and Transition in the Work of James Wright* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Pr., 1989), pp. 141–42

To read through and annotate almost four hundred pages of James Wright's poetry in *Above the River: The Complete Poems* is to

come away with mixed feelings of the most profound and turbulent sort. In several senses there is a great deal of the world in this book. Ranging from Martin's Ferry, Ohio, to various cities in Italy, one travels with a kind of half-inspired tourist and is glad to be along. . . . He is still the outsider, preoccupied with the innocence that must fail, and above all must be betrayed, beyond anyone's help, even that of God. But not beyond notice, or futile appeal. The poems are always affecting, at least to some extent, but they are rarely powerful, rarely unforgettable.

James Dickey. *Southern Review*. Spring, 1991, p. 436

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WRIGHT, Richard (1908–1960)

Story Magazine offered $500 for the best book-length manuscript submitted by anyone connected with the Federal Writers' Project. The prize was awarded to Richard Wright, a young, serious, quiet-spoken Negro born in Natchez and haphazardly educated in Chicago. His book (*Uncle Tom's Children*) published last week, consists of four long stories. . . . I found them both heartening as evidence of a vigorous new talent, and terrifying as the expression of a racial hatred that has never ceased to grow and gets no chance to die.

Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*. April 6, 1938. p. 280

Mr. Wright has laid bare, with a ruthlessness that spares neither race, the lower depths of the human and social relationships of blacks and whites; and his ruthlessness so clearly springs not from a vindictive desire to shock but from a passionate—and compassionate—concern with a problem obviously lying at the core of his own personal reality that while the reader may recoil he cannot escape from the conviction that this problem is part of his reality as well.

Margaret Marshall. *The Nation*. March 16, 1940. p. 367

Its swift rise to murder, its ruthless staging of a scene where race prejudice and palpable injustice capture the reader's sympathy, and the refusal of its author to make his chief character anything but a criminal, dangerous to society, all reveal a creative mind of unusual power, discipline, and grasp of large ideas. The question, which first concerns vice and viciousness and crime, slowly becomes ethical, political, and psychological without once separating itself from an intensely human content.

Henry Seidel Canby. *Saturday Review*. March 23, 1940. p. 8

Native Son, the most perdurable and influential novel yet written by an American Negro, is at the same time one of the masterpieces of modern proletarian fiction. Taking as its leading character a traditional ''badnigger'' stereotype usually accepted as a representative Negro by misinformed whites and frequently viewed with nausea by supercilious blacks, the book seeks to show that the individual's delinquency is produced by a distorting environment rather than by innate criminality. Having this purpose, *Native Son* may rightly be regarded as the most significant probing of the plight of the lower-class Northern urban Negro in contemporary American literature.

Hugh M. Gloster. *Negro Voices in American Fiction* (North Carolina). 1948. p. 233

Elements of heredity, of social environment both black and white, of blind chance and misdirected attempts on the part of the whites to break down the colour bar, are brought together to drive the coloured hero of *Native Son* to the murder of a white girl and of his own sweetheart until he is caught, brought to trial, and sentenced to death. The dramatic development and straightforward characterization, as well as the absence of any false sentiment or propagandistic tone, make the novel more effective than most writing in this field. The book gives one of the rare examples of what can be achieved by the technique of pure reporting applied with a consistent attitude and an adequate subject matter.

Heinrich Straumann. *American Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Hutchinson). 1951. p. 50

All through *The Outsider*, Mr. Wright keeps telling us that the least important thing about his hero is that he is a Negro. . . . He is trying to portray modern man in his existential loneliness . . . but in fact, instead of ''universalizing'' the Negro, he simply denies the Negro's experience and reality. . . . Mr. Wright, it turns out, is unable to say anything at all about being a Negro except that to be a Negro is to be incoherent, and to do violence and murder. . . . Emptying his hero's life of all content except that existentialist content which evades reality through the pretence of trying to grapple with it on its ''deepest'' level—he has left us with only the familiar old black chasm.

Steven Marcus. *Commentary*. Nov., 1953. pp. 457–8

(Gertrude Stein) had never heard of Wright until her return to Paris after its liberation from the Nazis. Her book *Wars I Have Seen* was published soon after that, and among the reviews she saw was a laudatory one by Wright in *PM*. Asking a G.I. friend who this admirer of hers was, she was given a copy of *Black Boy* from the army library.

''I was very excited and wrote for the rest of his stuff,'' she told me. ''I found Wright was the best American writer today. Only one

or two creative writers like him come along in a generation. Every time he says something it is a distinct revelation.''

Ben Burns. *The Reporter*. March 8, 1956. p. 23

The most impressive feature of *Native Son* is its narrative drive. From the outset the novel assumes a fierce pace which carries the reader breathlessly through Bigger's criminal career. Wright allows as little interruption of the action as possible, with no chapter divisions as such and only an occasional break to mark a swift transition or change of scene. At the same time, he writes with great economy, breaking with the comprehensive and discursive tradition of the naturalistic novel. He provides only three brief glimpses of Bigger's life prior to the main action of the novel: his relationship with his family, with his gang, and with his girl, Bessie. The reader must supply the rest, for Wright's presentation is not direct but metaphorical.

On a literal level *Native Son* consists of three Books, dealing with a murder, a flight and capture, and a trial. But the murder and the circumstances which surround it are in reality an extended metaphor, like the whale hunt in *Moby Dick*. The novel is not to be read merely as the story of a gruesome crime, though it is that. It is the hidden meaning of Bigger's life, as revealed by the murder, which is the real subject of *Native Son*. The novel is a modern epic, consisting of action on the grand scale. As such, it functions as a commentary on the more prosaic plane of daily living.

Robert A. Bone. *The Negro Novel in America* (Yale). 1958. pp. 144–5

Many literary men have fought crusades; Wright is a crusader who fights with words. It makes a difference and it accounts for the special quality of his fiction. *The Long Dream* is not a badly-made book, as you will discover if you try to pull it to pieces. It is very strong, but its workmanship is careful only where care is needed for Wright's purposes. Elsewhere the book is boldly hammered together—not as a work of art but as the scaffolding for an idea. . . . He writes now with much more control than he once showed; his ear is wonderfully acute and his judgment of emotional degree and balance is subtle, varied, and exciting.

Robert Hatch. *The Nation*. Oct. 25, 1958. p. 297

But now that the storm of Wright's life is over, and politics is ended forever for him, along with the Negro problem and the fearful conundrum of Africa, it seems to have been the tough and intuitive, the genuine Richard Wright, who was being recorded all along. It now begins to seem, for example, that Wright's unrelentingly bleak landscape was not merely that of the Deep South, or of Chicago, but that of the world, of the human heart. . . .

This violence, as in so much of Wright's work, is gratuitous and compulsive. It is one of the severest criticisms that can be leveled against his work. The violence is gratuitous and compulsive because the root of the violence is never examined. The root is rage. It is the rage, almost literally the howl, of a man who is being castrated. I do not think that I am the first person to notice this, but there is probably no greater (or more misleading) body of sexual myths in the world today than those which have proliferated around the figure of the American Negro. This means that he is penalized for the guilty imagination of the white people who invest him with their hates and longings, and is the principal target of their sexual paranoia. Thus, when in Wright's pages a Negro male is found hacking a white woman to death, the very gusto with which this is done, and the great attention paid to the details of physical destruction, reveal a terrible attempt to break out of the cage in which the American imagination has imprisoned him for so long.

In the meantime, the man I fought so hard and who meant so much to me is gone. First America, then Europe, then Africa failed him.

James Baldwin. *The Reporter*. March 16, 1961. pp. 53–5

. . . for all of the bland notations of achieved progress that may be offered by the social scientist, there is still an *agonia* here whose gall partakes of the ''extreme situation''—and this was the perspective by which Richard Wright was consistently guided in all his efforts to shape the story of the American Negro into something whose tragic sorrow might quicken the conscience of our time.

Though he had numerous minor predecessors, Mr. Wright was the first American Negro writer of large ambitions to win a major reputation in our literary life. *Uncle Tom's Children*, his first collection of stories, achieved a limited currency in the late '30s among readers of leftist social sympathies, but it was not until *Native Son* burst upon the scene in 1940 that he won access to the kind of forum that Sunday supplement reviewers and a national book club could give. And the publication in 1945 of his autobiography, *Black Boy*—which is, I believe, his finest book—brought him to the zenith of his success. Thereafter his fiction and his political criticism, though no different in tone and emphasis from his earlier work, seemed to be nettling in their effect, and the reputation of the early '40s—if these things are susceptible of measurement by an impressionistic mathematic—has today, one feels, shrunk to a quarter of its original size. This is in part, I suspect, but a particular case of the more general demise of the naturalism of the American 1930s.

Nathan A. Scott. *Kenyon Review*. Spring, 1961. pp. 338–9

Then he read James, and James was later supported by the professional social psychologists. It is revealing to quote the passage that Wright quotes: ''No more fiendish punishment could be devised . . . than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by the members thereof. . . .'' . . . It is scarcely to be doubted that from the moment he read it, groping through it toward the knowledge of its empirical truth and listening to its mournful echoes in the still locked chambers of his soul, Wright became a man with a message and a mission. Long before he wrote *White Man, Listen!* the message was addressed to a white audience, and the mission was to bring awareness to that audience and perhaps thereby to save the world.

Both the message and the mission were particularized by Richard Wright's conception of a world where men ''still cling to the emotional basis of life that the [old] feudal order gave them,'' and by his supra-consciousness of being Negro in that world.

Translated into creative terms, this necessitated the rendering of Negro life with greater circumstantiality than had ever before been attempted. Oh, what psychological detail, what analysis of external influences, what precise attention to physical minutiae! He was in the naturalistic tradition, but without the naturalistic writer's aesthetic theories, abstract knowledge, and controls. Wright put everything in to arouse an audience which he hoped would be white, as principally it was.

Saunders Redding in *Soon, One Morning*, ed. Herbert Hill (Knopf). 1963. pp. 56–7

The mood of the emergent Negro radicalism is akin to the mood of the 1930's, and many a young seeker is going beyond Martin King only to go back to Richard Wright. The transition is not so abrupt as one might think. In theory, no two ideologies could be more different than King's Christian non-violence and Wright's angry, poverty-centered atheism. But King in action, as we observed, accepts and uses coercion, and the Wright of *Lawd Today*, written before *Native Son*, had not yet identified the cross of Jesus with the fiery cross of the Klan. Above all, King and Wright are at one in their consciousness of suffering.

Staughton Lynd. *Commentary*. Sept., 1963. p. 255

As a writer, Richard Wright has outlined for himself a dual role: To discover and depict the meaning of Negro experience; and to reveal to both Negroes and whites those problems of a psychological and emotional nature which arise between them when they strive for mutual understanding.

Now in *Black Boy*, he has used his own life to probe what qualities of will, imagination, and intellect are required of a Southern Negro in order to possess the meaning of his life in the United States. Wright is an important writer, perhaps the most articulate Negro American, and what he has to say is highly perceptive. Imagine Bigger Thomas projecting his own life in lucid prose, guided, say, by the insights of Marx and Freud, and you have an idea of this autobiography. . . .

. . . along with the themes, equivalent descriptions of milieu and the perspectives to be found in Joyce, Nehru, Dostoievski, George Moore and Rousseau. *Black Boy* is filled with blues-tempered echoes of railroad trains, the names of Southern towns and cities, estrangements, fights and flights, deaths and disappointments, charged with physical and spiritual hungers and pain. And like a blues sung by such an artist as Bessie Smith, its lyrical prose evokes the paradoxical, almost surreal image of a black boy singing lustily as he probes his own grievous wound.

Ralph Ellison. *Shadow and Act* (Random). 1964. pp. 77–9

Essentially, of course, Wright was and remained not only an American but a Southerner. Negroes have a special fondness for that old saw, ''You can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy.'' The saying could be paraphrased and pointed up in Dick's case. His deepest roots were in the folk culture of the bottom—not *deep* but *bottom*—South. The lore of that milieu was such an intimate part of his background he sometimes treated it as if it had all originated in his own family. . . .

In the sense of his being a product of the Southern environment and of the Negro's situation. Dick's case is . . . clear. He was untouched by the redeeming influences sometimes present on campuses of colleges for Negroes in the region or even in the high schools. His was a total exposure to the callousness and cruelty of the closed society. Despite these odds, however, a delicate sensitivity survived. A major talent began to grow. There is a rumor that he wrote and published a story in a local Negro newspaper before he left Mississippi. He had completed no more than eight grades—such as they were down there at that time. He was so much an American with very deep roots in Southern Negro life that the effort of the Sartre crowd to take Dick over was bound to fail. Although he was definitely influenced by them over a period of two or three years it was not lasting, it really didn't take.

Arna Bontemps in *Anger and Beyond*, ed. Herbert Hill (Harper). 1966. pp. 207–9

Wright said that he felt identified with the migrant Negro worker, and his typical protagonist comes from that group. The Wright hero continually endeavors to define his existence and to achieve his identity. The struggle for a ''human life'' and a genuine identity is particularly sharp for Wright's characters since the cultural and social definition of the American Negro has a built-in tension which demands resolution. In the Christian and democratic traditions, the sources of Wright's values, the individual is regarded as having inherent worth, and yet for the American Negro this worth is everywhere denied by racial discrimination. For most of Wright's characters, like Bigger Thomas, the two worlds of ''thought and feeling, will and mind, aspiration and satisfaction'' are never united, or are united only briefly through violence.

Clifford Hand in *The Thirties*, ed. Warren French (Everett Edwards). 1967. p. 83

Perhaps it is Bigger's Satanic election of violence, rather than his continued undying hatred of whites, that so terrifies Max at the close of the novel [*Native Son*]. Max senses that as a Communist he too has dispensed with the old social order—but the metaphysical vacuum that has been created does not necessarily lead men like Bigger to communism; it may just as easily lead to the most murderous kind of nihilism. Max's horror was to become Wright's own dilemma two years after the publication of *Native Son*, when he himself left the Party. He could no longer accept the assumptions of communism, yet the prospects of a new world of positive meaning and value seemed very distant indeed. It is, then, in the roles of a Negro nationalist revolutionary and a metaphysical rebel that Wright most successfully portrays Bigger. And it is from these aspects of Bigger's character rather than from any Marxist interpretation that Wright's sociology really emerges.

Edward Margolies. *Native Sons* (Lippincott). 1968. p. 83

Wright was a man of great passion but of few ideas; throughout his life he responded intellectually to current movements—to whatever was culturally *de rigueur*—and just as he had begun his career by subscribing to communism and by creating fiction similar to that of

Theodore Dreiser—the influence of *The American Tragedy on Native Son* is too obvious to pursue—he was soon greatly affected by the existentialist movement that was developing in Europe in the 1940's. . . . As an outsider—religiously, politically, artistically, and racially—to America, Wright embraced existentialist thought and used it as the philosophical framework of his next novel, *The Outsider* (1953), in which he creates an ambiguous man, Cross Damon, who attempts to achieve noble ends through brutal deeds, who is a cross between Christ and the Devil, and who seeks, at all costs, absolute personal freedom. Although Cross Damon is responsible for four deaths, the deaths have been the consequence of his rebellion against a hostile society, and he dies in innocence, his purpose accomplished. . . .

Without the ideological support of communism and existentialism, Wright's work lost its pseudo-intellectualism, the possibility for any kind of idealism, and became what it really always was—a raging indictment of America. His last three works of fiction are nightmare visions of his rejected country.

Theodore L. Gross. *The Heroic Ideal in American Literature* (Free). 1971. pp. 155–6

Wright's humanism . . . constitutes one of the most cogent reasons to consider him a prophetic writer. Instead of hailing him as a pioneer of Black Power, it would perhaps be better to regard him as precursor of what Black Power could lead to, and as an accurate, observant and involved critic of his times. . . . Wright claimed this right to coexistence for each one of us when he claimed the black American's right to express himself without a label, without being limited to a role as representative of a race, nation, class or religion. For the sake of all Americans, he wanted, as an American, to be allowed to criticize America. He dared, as a Black, to criticize the nascent state of Ghana; he made it his duty, as a Westerner, to denounce the West. After having asserted, in both his fiction and his political writing, the individual's right to survive against any system, Wright attempted to act as a critical conscience of our world. If he was never wholly successful, the partial replies to his questions and his incompleted projects still represent a greater gain for mankind than a more perfect success as a traditional writer would have brought. For this reason, Wright must not be judged on his writing alone; his career as a militant intellectual must also be put on the scale. He can then be evaluated as one of Ralph Waldo Emerson's living pillars of an era, a ''representative man.''

Michel Fabre. *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (Morrow). 1973. p. xx

Wright's harsh experiences with cruelty—dreamlike in quality, unreal and ambiguous—had made his life seem nightmarish. The infusion of this perception of reality into his writing gave his work its strength and its goals. Both strength and weaknesses came from an intense desire to detail and underscore the hell—the shadow world—a black man had to endure. At times he gave in to the temptation to editorialize, to polemicize, to arrest his narrative with abstract psychological or sociological comment; at other times he was able to combine a poetic lyricism with the harsh, brilliantly evocative prose of cruelty that made black readers say he was honest and accurate. That same prose made some white readers say Wright exaggerated; it was prose from which no white reader could receive cathartic release.

David Bakish. *Richard Wright* (Ungar). 1973. pp. 98–9

The relation of Bigger Thomas [in *Native Son*] to America is complex, but any understanding of it must begin with the assumption that he is a native son, a true American. Wright transforms the bad nigger stereo-type into a vital character by treating the basic stereotype as an inherently American character. Like Captain Ahab, Huck Finn, or Jay Gatsby, Bigger Thomas is an American individualist seeking to create himself and his world in defiance of all. Wright exploits actions conventionally assumed to demonstrate the innate evil or bestiality of the bad nigger to express Bigger's desire for self-realization.

Like most American novelists, Wright sees the individual as the creative force in human life, and he presents Bigger Thomas as a creative individual. That does not mean, however, that he sanctions Bigger's career. On the contrary, Bigger functions as a vivid metaphor for the failure of American life. *Native Son* is a criticism of America, but it is not ''social'' criticism; it attacks poverty and slums and rats, of course, but its fundamental concern lies with the quality of human relations fostered by our culture.

Richard E. Baldwin. *Massachusetts Review*. Spring, 1973. pp. 378–9

The big question of Book III [of *Native Son*] is whether Bigger will find himself. It is not answered until the very end of the novel, the farewell scene with Max. ''At the end,'' says [Irving] Howe, ''Bigger remains at the mercy of his hatred and fear.'' It is hard to make men hear who will not listen. Seven times in the last page and a half of the novel Bigger cries out to Max, ''I'm all right,'' the last time adding, ''For real, I am.'' The repeated assurance ''I'm all right'' obviously means that Bigger is not at the mercy of fear, that he is sure that he will not, as he had dreaded, have to be dragged to the electric chair, kicking and screaming, filled with animal terror because he had not been able to find human dignity. He has found what he had sought, an understanding of himself that ''could lift him up and make him live so intensely that the dread of being black and unequal would be forgotten; that even death would not matter, that it would be a victory.'' The meaning for his life, which Max had thought to gain him the opportunity to build during life imprisonment, he had grasped from his recent experience under the duress of death.

Paul N. Siegel. *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*. May, 1974. p. 521

It is evident . . . that one of the outstanding characteristics of Wright's fiction is the ease with which the reader can identify with his anti-heroes. Wright has been able to establish this relationship primarily through a controlled point of view whereby the reader is privy only to the thoughts and experiences of his narrator. As a consequence, although many secondary characters are developed incompletely, each major hero emerges as a fully conceived

personality: each man's motivations are explored and his background sketched in. . . .

But having looked in detail at the heroes in Wright's major fiction, it is also clear from such a study that a heroic model emerges—that, although the books can unquestionably be read as separate entities, they can also be read as parts of a whole. Therefore, instead of narrowing in on a particular book's individual hero, we can, by reversing the process, expand our perspective and discover a sort of mega-hero, a paradigm of all Wright's heroes. This archetypal figure is best described as [the critic Ihab] Hassan's rebel-victim, the innocent whose radical vision forces him to reject his slavery. Marked from birth as an outcast, this anti-hero continues to be alienated from society until he dies; if he is stubborn he can create his own identity by refusing first of all to accept the one society brands him with, and then by actively seeking experiences that will help form his character. In his stories, Wright chose the Negro not only to be emblematic of all oppressed peoples but also to be the metaphor for modern man. Isolated, alienated, and haunted by a sense of dread, modern man and the black man have much in common. . . .

All his life, in and outside of his fiction, Richard Wright struggled to improve the black man's condition by protesting against the dreadful injustices he witnessed and experienced. For he felt that the community of man could only be strengthened by admitting all men as equals into it. Moreover, because he was attempting to present a realistic picture of the depths of despair and degeneracy so prevalent in black lives, he was forced to attribute certain undesirable characteristics to his heroes. Therefore, although he could not help but disapprove of their violent crimes, he recognized the need to have his heroes reveal their desperation through asocial means in order to shock society into an awareness of what it had done. His autobiography and last novel present the disgraceful initiation of black youth, his other fiction reveals the extremes to which the disinherited can go to claim their rights as men. Wright was too aware of how close he had come to being a Bigger Thomas to ever let society forget it. The final impression of his hero that one takes from reading his fiction, therefore, is that of a man beaten to the ground but determined to rise from his subjugation to join his fellow men in perhaps a godless world, but one where mutual respect gives life some dignity.

Katherine Fishburn. *Richard Wright's Hero: The Faces of a Rebel-Victim* (Scarecrow, 1977), pp. 192–95

Even if one discounts the positive, at times heroic, quality of characters ranging from Tyree Tucker in *The Long Dream* to Aunt Sue in ''Black and Morning Star,'' the most cursory appreciation of *Lawd Today*, not to mention later humorous stories like ''Man of All Works'' and ''Big Black Good Man,'' reveals that Wright's preference for realism did not prevent him from creating funny and congenial figures and situations. Nor indeed from incorporating into his writing many elements characteristic of black folk culture. Although in *Lawd Today* Wright does not turn to Southern pastoralism but to what rural folkways have become after a generation in Northern ghettos, he recreates in passing the whole context of verbal creativity which explodes in songs, jokes, the dozens, toasts and bombast. When contrasted with the uptight utterances of the whites, this makes for a warm image of black life even if it is also pathetic in the light of the facts of economic oppression. As he expressed it at the time, Wright's interest lay in exposing the system which imposed a ''cheap'' quality of life upon lower-class blacks, but his desire for authenticity made him emphasize those cultural rituals and interchanges that ensured cohesion and solidarity in the day-to-day struggle of ghetto existence.

Wright's style appears at times as visceral, inspired and naturalistic as it is supposed to be, yet he is by no means the innocent and interesting neo-Dreiserian primitive some critics have contrasted with Ralph Ellison's virtuosity and technical flexibility. The unequalled emotional power Wright attains in his best stories stems just as much from an extremely skilled *poetic* realism, in which intense suffering is achieved through symbolic connotation, as from the climaxing of comparatively short and self-contained dramatic episodes. This poetic, even prophetic, dimension should not be overlooked. In many ways, Wright's art was vision just as his writing was force, meaning and direction. His quest was largely and ultimately an attempt to establish a political and cultural context for the birth of the (black) man in world-wide terms. His vision rested both upon his confidence in the individual self and upon his belief in the power of writing.

Michel Fabre. In *Richard Wright Reader,* ed. Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre (Harper & Row, 1978), pp. xxiii–xxiv

Richard Wright found that the meaning of life was in meaningless suffering. The reasons behind his suffering were racial, familial, educational, economic, and philosophical; no other highly regarded writer has ever had to break through so many restrictions. What Wright accomplished is a monument to the vitality and toughness of his ego; for, in conditions that would suppress or destroy other men, he made himself into one of the most important American writers of the century. While much of his work is undeniably weak and unsuccessful, three of his books, *Uncle Tom's Children, Native Son*, and *Black Boy*, will always be read. How he managed to write three such books, given his background, is hardly imaginable; because, though the Deep South should have destroyed him and was designed to do so, it created instead an author with a unique mastery of the subject of humanity's attempts, so often successful, to shatter its own.

Wright's great theme, which he expresses in varying levels of abstraction, is that the oppression of mankind causes the moral, psychological, and physical degradation of the tyrannical as well as that of the tyrannized. This thesis, admittedly not a pretty one, is resisted even today by white and nonwhite readers alike, because of its very correctness—its implications are too painful. How then was Wright, whose life was ever afflicted by the societal hatred of his race, his atheism, and his Marxist idealism, able to bore away to the philosophical essence of oppression and then present it with such urgent immediacy? It was his immense resilience, his will, his imaginative powers, and his ability to use literature as a bulwark against insupportable reality that permitted his insights and his artistry.

The species of oppression that Wright is unsurpassed at limning is, of course, racism, because it was that particular demon that so nearly annihilated him. His exorcism of the blight of racial prejudice was two-fold: he described the horrors that devolve upon blacks and whites alike from a warped description of his race; and

he further militated against America's scorn of blackness by celebrating the beauty and strength of that spurned culture in his writings and, indeed, in his very existence—his success is eloquent testimony to the extreme toughness and endurance of the Afro-American tradition.

Wright is not only the virtual father of the post-World War II black novel, he is also the dominant precursor of the Black Renaissance of the 1960s: by rejecting the exotic Bohemianism of the Harlem Renaissance in favor of a literature gorged with authentic black experience, Wright gave to his recent literary descendants the legacy of a body of writing important not so much for technical innovation as for the presentation of themes now joyous, now gut-wrenching, but always genuinely, proudly black. And he bequeathed to all his readers a crudely powerful exhortation to look unflinchingly at his themes—and then beyond them, into the heart. Though he is perhaps not an author who appeals to the weak-spirited, it is undeniable that artistic greatness is the lot of this man who never wavered from his vision of the truth or compromised his integrity. Because of what he accomplished, to name a twentieth-century American writer of more urgency and moral power is difficult.

Robert Felgar. *Richard Wright* (Twayne, 1980), pp. 174–75

The paradox in [Richard] Wright's assessment is that traditional evaluative accounts bracket the author of *Black Boy* as an artisan of social protest, charging that he failed to transcend the *social* in order to arrive at *art*. . . . From the perspective of the black hole as trope, however, one recognizes what paradoxes can arise from an inadequate theory. For Wright incontestably drew all of *art* into his own singularity and employed it to fuel his project of articulating a black blues life's pressing desire. He thus became an irreducibly dark, powerful, and invisible core at the very center of the Afro-American expressive (''artistic''?) universe. The manifest ''unevenness'' of his prose, its pastiche, shards of theological, philosophical, and sociological discourse, sparse (sometimes mechanical) stichomythia are fragments of a ''literature'' that *was*—a discursive order reduced to zero in the interest of the black (w)hole's blues desire.

Invisible, massive in its energies, erasing old law, nullifying time and space in its singularity, the black hole metaphorically suggests the proportions of Wright's achievement—his space, as it were, in the tradition of Afro-American expressive culture. The implications of the trope's suggestiveness for practical criticism and evaluative reassessment are not far to seek. To derive the metaphor's productiveness, one need only play on rich imagistic possibilities that it reveals.

Transliterated in letters of Afro-America, the *black hole* assumes the subsurface force of the black underground. It graphs, that is to say, the subterranean *hole* where the trickster has his ludic, deconstructive being. Further, in the script of Afro-America, the hole is the domain of *Wholeness*, an achieved relationality of black community in which desire recollects experience and sends it forth as blues.

Richard Wright's translation of the desire of a black blues life into an irresistible *difference* makes him undisputed master of Black Wholeness. If a tradition of modern Afro-American narrative exists, it is only possible because Wright achieved the concentrated power of a Black Whole that attracts all nearby stars and gives birth to the quasi-stellar brightness of successors. Wright is the Black Symbolist par excellence. His ''entrance onto the stage of language'' marked a daring conversion of a uniquely black blues desire into Afro-American fictions—into expressive (w)holes—that present a culture's social being for itself.

Houston A. Baker, Jr. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1984), pp. 151, 172

The violent, stunted life of Jake Jackson in *Lawd Today* is an early reflection of Wright's experiment with point of view and his belief in the ineffectuality of the Southern black migrant's values and traditions in the big city. Unlike Bigger, Jake, a caricature of the black urban worker, embraces the rituals and values of the black world. But, as in *Native Son*, Wright again treats all black folklore as derivative of the lust for trash of the larger society or as irrational, backward encumbrances that restrict human freedom and distort personality development. . . .Thus, whereas Wright morally and intellectually distances himself from his protagonist, one of the most pathetic antiheroes in Afro-American fiction, he emotionally sympathizes with him. The ironic tone of scene after scene emphasizes Wright's profound rejection of the traditions of black culture, his Afro-American heritage, as useless baggage from the rural Southern past. As ''The Ethics of Living Jim Crow,'' *Black Boy*, and *American Hunger* reveal, the psychological and emotional scars inflicted on Wright during his childhood in the South prevented him as a writer from affirming those qualities of Afro-American religion, language, music, and humor that have proved their vitality and viability in a modern, industrialized urban society.

The major achievement of *Native Son*, then, is its stark, naturalistic vision of the social paradoxes that bind white and black Americans. As the product of dual cultural tensions of the pre-World War II era, Bigger Thomas was and is a symbol of American's failure to provide the freedom and security necessary for all individuals, regardless of race, creed, or sex, to fulfill their basic psychological and physical needs, their potential for growth, while in pursuit of the promise of a better and fuller life. In this sense, Bigger may also be viewed as modern man struggling in the most instinctive manner for a sense of identity and community in an urban society whose impersonalization and disorganization destroys his humanity.

Bernard W. Bell. *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Pr., 1987), p. 166

In his autobiographies and novels, Wright evolved a curious and complex myth of origins of self and race. Whereas a large part of the black autobiographical tradition, as exemplified by Frederick Douglass's three autobiographies, generally depicts a resplendent self as representative of possibilities denied systematically to one's voiceless fellow blacks, Wright's class of ideal individual black selves seems to have included only Wright. *Black Boy*, for example, charts how the boy, Dick, through the key texts of naturalism, gave a shape and a purpose to an exceptional inherent nobility of spirit which emerges from within the chaotic depths of the black

cultural maelstrom. Wright's humanity is achieved only at the expense of his fellow blacks, pitiable victims of the pathology of slavery and racial segregation who surround and suffocate him. Indeed, Wright wills this especial self into being through the agency of contrast: the sensitive, healthy part is foregrounded against a determined, defeated black whole. He is a noble black savage, in the ironic tradition of Oroonoko and film characters played by Sidney Poitier—the exception, not the rule.

For Ralph Ellison, Wright's notion of the self and its relation to black culture seemed unduly costly. Indeed, it is this dark and brooding fiction of black culture against which both Ellison and James Baldwin railed, drawing upon a rich body of tropes and rhetorical strategies prefigured, among other places, in [Zora Neale] Hurston's fictions and critical writings. It is this fiction of obliteration that created the great divide in black literature, a fissure first rendered apparent in the late thirties in an extended debate between Hurston and Wright.

The Hurston-Wright debate, staged not only in the lyrical shape of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) against the naturalism of *Native Son* (1940) but also in reviews of each other's books, turns between two poles of a problematic of representation—between what is represented and what represents, between the signifier and the signified. Theirs are diametrically opposed notions of the internal structure of the sign, the very sign of blackness.

> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1988), p. 182

It is with Wright that something of a watershed is reached in black fiction. Nearly fifty years after its publication, *Native Son* still remains one of the most phenomenologically successful novels, a nightmare as frightening in its own way, as George Orwell's *1984*. I am at a loss to number all the black authors who were inspired by this work: James Baldwin, Chester Himes, John A. Williams—a full generation of writers, we are forced to say. . . . Like any fully orchestrated, over-rich work of art, *Native Son* resists easy description. It is multileveled, exhaustive in detail, layered with existentialist, Marxist, and even religious themes; it echoes Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, conjures the image of Nat Turner and anticipates the thesis of Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) as Bigger Thomas finds release from fear and self-hatred through murder. It achieves, in the end, a dimension bordering on racial mythology . . . yet *Native Son* remains more than anything else a phenomenological description of the black urban experience. . . .

What Wright achieved in *Native Son*, and what no American writer has done quite so well since (including Wright), was the construction of a consistent, coherent, and complete racial universe—Southside Chicago—that is fully shaped by a sensitive if seared black subjectivity.

> Charles Johnson. *Being and Race: Black Writing since 1970* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Pr., 1990), pp. 13–14

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WYLIE, Elinor (1885–1928)

A lyric voice slight, but clear and fine, may be heard in this book [*Nets to Catch the Wind*], the voice of a free and lightly ranging spirit. The sound of it is now gay, now grave, but always it holds a little aloof—one detects that something ''austere, immaculate'' for which the poet herself holds her Puritan ancestry responsible. . . . But always the emotion is shy and delicate, as of a cool small wildflower growing, by some whim of Nature, not in the woods, but in the protected area of a garden. The flower is very simple and of quiet color, but it has an individual vitality nevertheless.

> Harriet Monroe. *Poetry*. Jan. 1922. pp. 220–1

The apparent coldness in Elinor Wylie's work has been misunderstood by readers who were looking for the ruddy stupefactions of sentimentalism. Here is neither a case of cold nor warmth, but rather one of rhythms, and by rhythms I mean the curious capacity of thought for circumscribing static points of passion with melodic and luminous nuances. This is partially an *amor intellectualis*, but because it burns with a steady lambency and a concentrated fierceness, instead of flaring into ragged flames, there is no reason to doubt its intensity. Mrs. Wylie's best poems are jeweled instances in the fluctuating toils of Time. They are abstractions given a body and a shape and accoutred in armour. . . . I should say that she is cerebral in the sense that Dr. John Donne was cerebral. More than any woman of this generation she may claim to be a spiritual daughter of Donne. Through an intellectual chemical process, she crystallizes her emotions and yet retains their vitality.

> Herbert S. Gorman. *North American Review*. May, 1924. pp. 680–1

The despair and disillusionment setting in after the World War found its most tragic voice abroad in T. S. Eliot. On this side the Atlantic, it found a feminine counterpart in the marvelous brain of Elinor Wylie. Her work was not a direct reaction to the aftermath, but was raised on the private life of an aristocratic nature in no wise akin with the mob or democracy. Among the new aristocracy of intellects rearing ivory towers out of independent domiciles, Eliot was the prince, Elinor Wylie the princess. Each has had a long line of retainers and imitators. The despair of the woman was a positive thing; it was composed, not of self-pity, but of heroic acceptance.

> Alfred Kreymborg. *Our Singing Strength* (Coward-McCann). 1929. p. 459

An agile wit was the factor which propelled her from charm to charm in her choice of materials: from historic themes of the most ingenious fragility and inaccessibility, to familiar encounters rendered desirable by the humor and elegance of imagination she brought to them. Thus seventeenth-century Venice had no riches to strike envy in the heart of a pioneer farmer on the Chesapeake: for each of them she conjured an experience of equal splendor. There was a prodigality in her verbal invention which certainly stemmed from something deeper than museum catalogues or encyclopedias; if we are to praise phonetic dexterity in Byron and Browning, we must praise it in her. The pictorial and impressionistic efforts of the 'nineties wilt feebly in comparison with the brittle imagery of her designs. In the tradition of *Émaux et Camées* she is, on first acquaintance at least, an austere and distinguished disciple.

Morton Dauwen Zabel. *Poetry*. Aug., 1932. pp. 276–7

. . . She was born to welcome the most intensely arduous mental labour in passionate exploration of the utmost resources of the English language in order to express every finest shade of thought and feeling that she experienced. She was abnormally sensitive to the powers latent in language. She had an altogether unusual intuition for the exact word, and had assimilated a large vocabulary. She was unusually erudite, and had her life led her in another direction, might have been a great scholar. . . .

Elinor Wylie wrote with extraordinary precision; but it was a precision that never for a moment sacrificed the incalculable turn of phrase, the spontaneously felicitous expression, that intuitive visitation of words that seems to us who have it not as a gift from the gods. Her subconsciousness was constantly preoccupied with the shape, look, colour, and sound of words; just as the rhythms of poetry were matters to her of second nature, and her sometimes intricate interior rhyming, art concealed by art, in the same kind.

William Rose Benét. *The Prose and Poetry of Elinor Wylie* (Wheaton College). 1934. pp. 12–13

She could not bear being less than first in any company. Nothing on earth would do but that a few of her close friends should join her in another room and hear her read some poems—say some poems, as she always put it. Her friends humored her in such tantrums of vanity and went to all lengths in flattering her. She liked flattery as a lizard likes the sun. . . .

. . . I remember her best for these perfect sonnets [''One Person''] and her broken commentary. What she and the sonnets together said was that this final love had come to her like first love, and had dissolved her to her youngest elements, but that she was no less a poet than before, and she could instinctively find ripe, skilful words for emotions which ordinarily go no farther than sighs and tears, timid raptures and pitiful despairs. For once in the world, youth knew and age could. The heart of sixteen spoke with the tongue of forty.

Carl Van Doren. *Harper's Magazine*. Sept., 1936. pp. 365–6

The sonnets to ''One Person'' are generally accepted as the consummation of Elinor Wylie's poetry. There certainly is no other group among her poems that leaves so much satisfaction on so many counts. There is a warmth of feeling and directness of thought that is not usual in her work and the circle of experience that is touched upon has a much more general appeal than formerly. Technically the sonnets show a complete mastery of the form. Her experience in handling words in fanciful moods and in light, quick cadences stands her in good stead and she moves perfectly at her ease within the narrow limits of the sonnet structure. But she does not allow it to dissolve in the easy flow of the lines.

H. Lüdeke. *English Studies*. Dec., 1938. p. 248

Elinor Wylie's closest literary kinship, which began in early childhood and lasted throughout her lifetime, developing as an obsession in her life and work, was Percy Bysshe Shelley. The best and the greater part of her prose and poetry reflect his subtle influence. Seven of her eleven essays and sketches in *Fugitive Prose* are a key to her sources and methods in regard to Shelley. In her four novels there is a progression of interest in the same poet: *Jennifer Lorn* contains a background resembling that of the Shelley family: *The Venetian Glass Nephew* stems from some of Shelley's thought and the philosophy of his age; *The Orphan Angel* brings Shelley to life again; and *Mr. Hodge and Mr. Hazard* is a composite picture of Shelley and Elinor Wylie. Of her four volumes of verse, the last two books *Trivial Breath and Angels and Earthly Creatures*, which contain her finest poetry, also show an increasing preoccupation with Shelley himself and with his thought.

Julia Cluck. *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*. Sept., 1941. p. 841

Once devoted to the rococo, the artist can break its spell only by shattering himself: what is required is a clean break, a fresh start, a new confronting, however painful and terrified, yet humble and thankful, of reality. The risk of this necessity Miss Wylie's integrity could not have long postponed. She might have shirked it for a while, because, like everybody else, she had her peculiar foolishness; and rather more than most, she might have been spoiled by adulation. Against these risks her besetting sin was her saving virtue, that fierce fine pride. . . .

It is good to hear this voice again, not only because it is familiar, but because even when it is being fantastical or fancy, it is always firm and fine. Apprehensive, yes, but gloomy never; amused, amusing, ironical, exquisite, precise, and proud.

Rolfe Humphries. *The Nation*. April 3, 1943. p. 494

If Elinor Wylie's self-absorption may be defined in terms of what the eighteenth century called a ''ruling passion,'' like all overwhelming and consuming emotions it carried with it the conviction of having an importance beyond the mere reflection in a glass; and she conveyed her ''passion'' with all the art her skill could master. To this day we have unconsciously amusing parodies of her style, poems that speak of proud boys running in the wind, poems of equally proud, fastidious, well-dressed, good-looking women who yearn to possess the ''hard heart of a child,'' to own things that contain the qualities of quicksilver and of crystal—but it is the attitude and not the essence that her imitators have caught—and

she, like many a good artist before her, cannot be held responsible for all the inept vanities and empty gestures of the school which followed her.

Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenskà. *A History of American Poetry* (Harcourt). 1946. pp. 284–5

The gifts of Elinor Wylie . . . brought to the feminine lyric a mature emotional richness, as well as an added brilliance of craftsmanship. Mrs. Wylie early caught the note of Eliot's shorter poems. *Nets to Catch the Wind* (1921) revealed, as well, a first-hand apprenticeship to Donne, Herbert, and Marvell. For a time she seemed overwhelmed by her own virtuosity; but she became more tellingly controlled as time went on, and in her last volume achieved a power that was directly structural. Although an undertone of rather inflated romanticism was constantly in evidence, her work as a whole was far more complex than that of any feminine predecessor.

Louise Bogan. *Achievement in American Poetry*, 1900–1950 (Henry Regnery). 1951. p. 80

It is in *Angels* . . . that Mrs. Wylie comes into full richness of statement, which ranges from the opening sequence of unusual sonnets entitled ''One Person'' to the touchingly simple and lovely conclusion of ''Little Elegy.'' This sequence, in which she protests most humbly her love and her sense of her lover's superiority (an idea in a sense foreshadowed in the ''Little Sonnet'' of *Black Armour* and recurrent in her later work), consolidates her distinction in a form in which she was from the beginning capable. . . . Succeeding poems . . . proceed to broaden her claim to a warmer humanity, a clearer logic, and a greater naturalness than previously evident; even mere technique invites increasing admiration. . . .

Actually, Mrs. Wylie flaunted an individual gift from the first mature volume onward. Initially, she seemed in some respects like a supersophisticated Blake, though she opened no doors on the chaos he exposed. Unfortunately, manner largely degenerated into mannerism in *Black Armour* and *Trivial Breath*, with intelligence resolving itself into superficial cleverness time and again, so that much of this material suggests unconscious parody of earlier self. Like much shortly succeeding verse which it foreshadows, a great deal of the work has an air of significance which close examination does not justify.

George Brandon Saul. *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*. Nov., 1965. pp. 619–20

Judging from one of her poems, she longed to be freed from hardness, liberated from marble: ''Sleeping Beauty,'' published after her death, shows a strong man carving the ''living rock'' and releasing, not the angel that Michelangelo is said to have set free, but ''a lady like a lioness.'' This is Elinor Wylie, for her friends compared her bronze hair to a lion's mane, and she identifies herself with lions in several poems—''Pity me,'' ''Unfinished Ballad,'' and ''A Proud Lady.'' The image of herself as sculptor's work recalls her way of comparing her characters to dolls. She admired the miniature in art: at the British Museum her principal reading matter was the labels on the Tanagra figurines (or so she assures the readers of her essay ''The Pearl Diver'').

Celeste Turner Wright. *Twentieth Century Literature*. April, 1966. pp. 22–3

[Wylie] is not, after all, inconsistent in her attitude toward the disparity between the desires or aspirations of the individual and the satisfactions and fulfillments that earthly existence offers him; in her deeply romantic view, the world is an inadequate environment for the individual self. The ''self'' desires rarity, variety, fineness, beauty, delicacy; the world offers commonness, sameness, coarseness, ugliness, and grossness. Under the ordinary conditions of human life, exquisite esthetic distinctions are an impertinence and fine moral distinctions are futile.

Elinor Wylie's poetry at its best recognizes a dimension of the human spirit least accommodated in existence; her art affirms the validity of the desire for quality in human life—fineness, rarity, delicacy, beauty, and variety.

Thomas Alexander Gray. *Elinor Wylie* (Twayne). 1969. p. 156

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YOUNG, Stark (1881–1963)

Nature is one source of Mr. Young's inspiration [in his poems]; man is another. He is not content to seclude himself as a worshiper of nature, a devoted high priest of ''these beauteous forms,'' and allow them to lead him to ''the still, sad music of humanity'' and to the ''something far more deeply interfused.'' He loves the society and fellowship of man and courts the discipline which comes from the struggle for survival. He loves his solemn, melancholy nature musings, and, like Wordsworth, he often goes apart to sit ''the length of half a day'' upon some ''old gray stone,'' or lie for hours upon some stubble hill with his face upturned to heaven. But he loves the strife and strain of real life as well. He is so young in years and buoyant in spirit, that he thinks never to grow old. He seeks to sound the joys of enthusiastic youthful friendships, of love, of society, of life in all its relations, even unto death. The ''Ode in Mississippi's Troubled Hour,'' read before the Alumni Society of the University of Mississippi, June, 1904, amply illustrates his interest in questions of the times.

L.W. Payne. *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Oct., 1909. p. 319

Something is going on in all of the creative arts in America, and the dawn of creative flowering is always preceded by statement of art principles and close questioning of art technic. Stark Young's *The Flower in Drama* is marked by calmness of judgment, which suggests to me that he has come to the theater as critic after his aesthetic philosophy has been shaken and enriched by the theories of design and form and color introduced into the realm of modern painting by Cézanne, Matisse, and others. In other words, he gives us creative criticism, and, as his book is composed of thoughts that are worth while, yet hung on the very casual moment of the current theater in New York—however high the spots may be according to the general average of our American production—meeting with such lucid understanding of what art comprises, makes us welcome Young in the theater as one of the few who will help the new movement immeasurably by interesting his readers simply, and with no propaganda motive, in reaching a deeper appreciation of the finest things in art.

Montrose J. Moses. *Outlook*. May 9, 1923. p. 853

Acting is of all the arts of the theatre the most difficult to catch and recreate in writing. Generally it eludes the phrase as music escapes it. In the essays brought together in *Glamour*, however, Mr. Young seizes upon its essentials with such an uncanny comprehension of the actor's problems and the actor's art, and writes of them in a style at once so glamorous, revealing and precise, that the volume is lifted to that lean shelf reserved for the few permanently contributive books on the theatre. Behind the strong coloring and ''resistant flexibility'' of his prose there is a poet's vision and a philosopher's insight. At times he is tempted by his own rhythms, and succumbs to a Southern gift for sound. But more often, and especially in the essay on Duse, and the ''Letters from Dead Actors,'' he writes with a beauty and a penetration unrivaled in the host of books treating the actor's art. At his best, and he is at his best in almost all of *Glamour*, Mr. Young surpasses all contemporary critics when he writes of acting.

John Mason Brown. *Theatre Arts*. June, 1925. p. 417

The perception of the characteristic qualities underlying an art is, as Stark Young says, the most useful and constructive aspect of criticism. Especially is this true when such perception is joined to a gift of lucid and stimulating expression. It is this double endowment that makes Stark Young's writings on the theatre not merely important but absorbingly interesting. Not only does he see the point, but he makes it luminously clear and inevitable. His discussions of acting, directing, the wearing of costume, and other aspects of theatre practice are ''useful and constructive'' and at the same time they fall within Plato's definition of art as the discussion of one thing in terms of another out of which ''something appears which was not there before.'' The something in this case is a sort of celestial text book [*Theatre Practice*] which actually succeeds in the main function of education, that of spurring the mind of the reader into at least a mild activity, in arousing in him a sense of the possibilities of theatric art and in elucidating some of those fundamental points of technique and craftsmanship so generally ignored or forgotten.

Rosamond Gilder. *Theatre Arts*. Sept., 1926. p. 647

In *River House* Mr. Stark Young makes a very penetrating study of the Southern tradition. John Dandridge, educated at Princeton and trained for business in St. Louis, marries an ultramodern girl after his mother's death and returns to his ancestral estate, there to live with his father and his aunts. He is well aware of the common tendency to abuse the Southern tradition, to show the only defects of its qualities. But John Dandridge desires a better understanding of the fine old tradition that he and his generation are losing, and this really explains the purpose of Mr. Young's book.

Mr. Young is aware that the ideals and tendencies of our time seem to move in opposition to certain instincts or principles that are deeply rooted in the Southern character. A man's instincts and principles can be changed only slowly, ''and as they change they must find some way of harmonizing themselves with the new belief and direction.''

Abbott Martin. *Sewanee Review*. Jan.-March, 1930. pp. 114–15

Stark Young's *River House* and Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* are both novels about the South written by Southerners. But a foreigner would not readily discover in the two books reflections of the same civilization. *River House* is a backward glance at a dying culture submerged and overwhelmed not merely by America but by its own Americanized youth. *Look Homeward, Angel* is the saga of

a human soul, the soul of a boy who happened to grow up in North Carolina.

Many of Mr. Young's most ardent admirers have doubted whether the novel was his true métier: it has been in his dramatic criticism, his ''encaustics,'' his vignettes that they felt most the force of his personality, a personality rich in artistic sincerity, in restraint, in spiritual discretions. But I think that in *River House* Mr. Young has done a valuable piece of work and one that could have been done in no other form. Who else in America is so well fitted to portray the conflict between the older South and its Americanized offspring? And how surely he has placed his finger on the real tragedy of that conflict: not that—as Major Dandridge of River House would have put it—the South was defeated but not beaten, but that Major Dandridge's daughter-in-law did not know how many years it took to get from Fort Sumter to Appomattox.

Stringfellow Barr. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. April, 1930. p. 310

In much modern prose, even the finest, there is a suggestion of those Japanese flowers that are rooted in no element more stable than water; but in the writing of Stark Young I never lose the feeling of solid substance, of clinging tendrils and rich, dark soil, beneath. I am brought back again and again to the truth that life as a sum and a whole reaches far below the fragmentary surface we call human experience. . . . In these latest stories [*The Street of the Islands*], which are scarcely stories so much as transmitted impressions, the scene is not confined to the old South of the earlier novels. One is tempted to say that the spirit of place has become, for the moment, a rover. Yet underneath all the changing images of the visible world, the antiphonal life is reflected in a multitude of inarticulate lives. The recurring *motif* winds like a strain of music through almost every tale. Life at its best and its worst is more than mere living.

Ellen Glasgow. *Saturday Review*. Sept. 7, 1930. p. 157

Stark Young's *So Red the Rose* is a study of the effects of the Civil War on a small civilian segment of the old South. Mr. Young tells of the planter society of Mississippi, a comfortable, highly developed, eccentric lot of people, and his account of them is one long, slow caress. He perhaps imagines that he has written a dispassionate account of the ways and feelings of these cultivated individuals; he does, in fact, make every attempt to be fair, to see all sides of the case. Nevertheless, his story of the McGehees of Montrose and the Bedfords of Portobello is not truly a history or a novel, but a poem of glorification. He presents us with a group of highly varied individuals, full of quirks, and full of character. If Mr. Young were to be believed, it would appear that even the bores of old Mississippi were amusing. . . . The first glimpse one has of these people is tremendously exciting. For a moment, one thinks that Stark Young has been given miraculous penetration, that he will recreate a dead world in true and living terms. But it is soon evident that he is not interested in truth, but in romance. He quickly gives up the fascinating business of creating people for the more routine job of pleading their cause. After a magnificent two hundred pages, there is no development of character.

Mary McCarthy. *The Nation*. Aug. 8, 1934. p. 167

Stark Young transports us again into the recreated charms of his beloved Southern parishes in most of the short stories that make up his new book, *Feliciana*. The more captious critics try to tell us that the grace of the Feliciana parishes was probably never quite as Mr. Young sees it. They say, more or less boldly, that he is romanticizing the persons and places his ancestors loved. . . . Yet if no such civilization ever graced the earth as that which Mr. Young describes, for example, in ''Shadows on Terrebonne,'' it is a comfort to feel that it could exist even in the mind of an artist of today. That, I think, is of the essence of Stark Young's literary contribution. When the realists are busily examining their internal anatomy or the intricate convolutions of their brains, there is small chance for beauty to emerge in literature unless someone like Mr. Young appoints himself its guardian.

Richard Dana Skinner. *Commonweal*. Oct. 25, 1935. pp. 645–6

The utmost reach of theatrical experience, the absolute in Mr. Young's critical ''system,'' was suggested in the title of two of his early collections of criticism: *Glamour* and *The Flower in Drama*. *Glamour* is a quality strongly felt, indubitably *there*, which one would find it hard to derive from the mere facts of the situation, just as, by looking at a root and a stalk one would scarcely derive from them, by logical extension, all the glory of a *flower*. What mystics say of their supposed communing with the divine, what we all know of ecstasy in love, seems similar. It is experience that any of the arts might convey, but which Mr. Young has encountered—a few times—in the theatre and in peculiar ways. . . .

A moment of greatness—and greatness comes to us in moments—is a moment when we are brought into a feeling of harmony with all things. Such being Mr. Young's highest expectation it is natural that he praises works and performances in the degree to which they approach such moments. Hence his emphasis upon emotional quality. He speaks of being ''stirred and swept and shaken.'' He uses expressions like ''the beat of instincts,'' ''lustre and relief,'' ''the quiver and pulse, the rush and pause,'' ''glow and shimmer and lyric brightness.'' Such phrases are not scientific terminology. They are based, I should think, on a feeling that in this field supposedly scientific terminology would turn out to be pseudo-scientific jargon. Call Stark Young's writing impressionistic or mannered, if you will. It is an attempt to come closer than criticism usually does to the definition of our responses to works of art.

Eric Bentley. *Kenyon Review*. Winter, 1950. pp. 140–1

These reminiscences [*The Pavilion*] by the drama and art critic and author of *So Red the Rose* might be read as a new landscape of the Faulkner country, painted with a more romantic brush. Stark Young's memory has reached back to a childhood spent at Como and Oxford, Mississippi, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and he has put his emphasis upon white columns rather than upon white tragedies. His book, which carries on a running, interlinear debate with what might be called Manhattan values, is really a defense of the intangibles that departed with the Old South, the tacit agreed-upons that made for gentle living in the distinguished family to which he was born. . . . *The Pavilion* suffers from concretism, an almost adolescent incapacity to abstract realistically

from experience, and it also suffers from self-congratulation, but it invokes traditional graces and hard-headed classical insights that no one with culture or imagination would wish to see vanish from the world.

Gerald Sykes. *New Republic*. Oct. 22, 1951. p. 19

The death of Stark Young at the age of 81 is an occasion which we have special cause to mourn. As a writer on *The New Republic* for more than 25 years, he initiated, almost singlehandedly, a tradition of serious American theater journalism which set the highest standards of style, sensibility and judgment for contemporaries and for those who were to follow. Young's writings were animated by a fierce, uncompromising love of art. Confronting a fundamentally impure medium still in its puling infancy in America, he continually elbowed aside the artless and the false, to seek the shimmering and the true, emerging like a diver from a sea of meritriciousness, with a pearl in his hand, and proceeding to describe it in delicate, gracious, emotionally eloquent prose.

New Republic. Jan. 26, 1963. p. 6

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YOUNG BEAR, Ray (1950–)

Ray Young Bear's volume of poetry, *Winter of the Salamander*, is the tenth in Harper and Row's Native American Publishing Program. The themes are those of much contemporary Native American literature: confusion, violence and death, despair and loss, anger. However, Young Bear exhibits a beautiful command of the language and an ability to elicit strong emotional responses. At times the impact of the imagery is itself like a blast from a shotgun. His landscape is filled with charred trees, half-dead animals, peeling faces, violated humans.

Much of the horror in these poems is a result of the inability of the white and Indian cultures to achieve any understanding at all. Young Bear's handling of the conflict of views ranges from the ironic to the bitter. In ''the character of our addiction'' he wryly notes that white culture has separated itself from the natural cycles and needs a machine to dictate the changing of the seasons:

> . . .the lawn mower speaks for everyone. to the majority of whites on this block it represents the spring.

In a number of other poems he depicts a white culture which has lost itself and its gods and seems bent on the destruction of life on this planet.

At the same time that he berates the whites, Young Bear shows his understanding of some of the contradictions of modern Indian culture. In ''i can still picture the caribou'' he reflects upon a tribal gathering:

> Seventy-five years ago, our places were probably filled with dance and constant prayer. breath made of the day's offering instead of alcohol.

The poetry reveals a painful awareness that for some individuals the festivals and dances have become empty forms which have lost their significance. In the Indian as well as the white world there are those who have forgotten their origins.

Despite the eschatological mood of many of the poems there is still a sense of reverence for the ancient traditions and for the land which sustains them. ''Four songs of life'' celebrates the continuance of life and the power of the ancient songs to create a sense of beauty, comfort and meaning. The first two songs are a contrast between a young man who is unsure of things and an old man who understands ''the old hard tests of living.'' The last two songs are reflections on the strength of traditions to guide one through life.

While much of the poetry is concerned with the values of the Indian and white cultures there are also those which are considerations of the contemporary situation in general. There are poems on Vietnam, love, nature and dreams. Some are surrealistic visions loaded with startling metaphors and bizarre scenes. Others seem to be stretchings of the language in an attempt to see what new effects might be achieved. Young Bear prepares the reader for all this from the very beginning. On the opening page of the book he states, ''There are no elucidations or foresights merely experiments with words.''

Winter of the Salamander is certainly not an easy night's reading of lyrical reflections on the romantic ways of native America. It is both an unsettling commentary on the problems of modern America and a vivid demonstration of Ray Young Bear's poetic talent.

Paul N. Pavich. *Western American Literature*. February, 1982, pp. 330–31.

Albert E. Stone, in his foreword to *[Black Eagle Child: The Facepaint Narratives]*, calls this book an experimental autobiography. But the reader quickly discovers two things: This tale is not factual—it is full of composite characters and fictionalized events—and it is only tangentially about its author, the Mesquakie Indian poet Ray A. Young Bear, who eventually disappears behind a series of changed names, false leads, alter egos, digressions, epistories and myths.

Young Bear is a poet who makes his aesthetic home between two worlds, the native and the non-native. He is a dancer at the world's rim—a fan dancer, for he conceals as much as he reveals of himself and his people. Concealment is a key aesthetic principle, for as Young Bear constantly reiterates, there is a price to be paid for telling tribal secrets to outsiders. In his afterword to *Black Eagle Child*, he recollects how his grandmother taught him that ''there were things I could not write about.''

As an Indian who sets himself up as an author in the white sense, Young Bear is freighted with a terrible dual responsibility: to

satisfy his readers that he is being truthful and informative, and to satisfy his personal and tribal need for secrecy. He must invent a new form, the nature of which is duality, a form that is never straightforward, yet full of implication. It will be poetic, but it will not fulfill every demand of traditional poetic genre. It will always be surprising; it may not end. A code, in other words, that only the right people can break.

In his first book of poems, *Winter of the Salamander* (1980), a much younger Ray Young Bear gave a hint of forms to come:

> What do you do when
> there is a man
> who represents your dreams
> who goes talking and appraising
> his deeds
> and for no reason he stops
> and says something new
> there is a chance
> for those who want to learn
> but not for those who feel it
> hard and difficult

For ''those who want to learn,'' *Black Eagle Child* is a kind of non-autobiographical Zen treasure trove of non-information about Mesquakie Indians and Young Bear. It is ostensibly a poetic *Bildungsroman* centered around Edgar Bearchild, a Mesquakie boy from the Black Eagle Child Settlement in central Iowa (Young Bear is from the Mesquakie settlement near Tama, Iowa). It begins with Edgar in grade eight in 1965 and follows him through his career as the community's youngest treatable alcoholic. There's a brief stint at a prestigious liberal-arts college in California, then back to Iowa, where he becomes a successful poet haunted by UFOs. He lives off grants from the fictional Maecenas Foundation (Young Bear received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts in the 1970s).

This process of becoming a writer fascinates Edgar, who sees himself wrapped in a paper cocoon, changing, altering, saving himself from the usual fates of a reservation Indian. Learning to translate between worlds redeems him, though with redemption comes alienation and survivor's guilt, since he must separate himself from the normal communal life of his people.

Twinned with Edgar (like the twin boys of Indian legend) is the more adventurous and traditional Ted Facepaint, who follows the tenets of the Well-Off Man Church, a fictional Mesquakie affiliate of the mushroom-eating, pan-Indian Native American Church. (This, by the way, is Young Bear being highly elusive. Rather than reveal traditional Mesquakie rites and legends, he describes a modern cultural intrusion in which he has no stake. Here he seems to reveal without revealing anything.)

Like Edgar, Facepaint also heads west to college. He drops out and hitchhikes across America, trying to reach some romanticized accommodation with this alien white country, only to be beaten and robbed along the way. Back in Iowa, he continues his frenetic drinking and eventually dies—metaphorically, at least—stabbed repeatedly with a screwdriver by rogue Mesquakies nicknamed the Hyenas. He is then mystically transported to Orion, the sacred constellation of the Well-Off Man Church. *Black Eagle Child* closes, however, with Facepaint's resurrection at the hands of Rosie Grassleggings, an immensely obese native healer.

Young Bear knits together these two narrative lines with a complex pattern of imagery. Red-haired and red-hatted people relate to the red-capped hallucinogenic mushrooms, and also to the red-haired man of some native legends. White rabbits recall the Great Hare, Nanebojo, an Algonquin culture hero, who is often paired with Jesus Christ in modern native myth.

This is the bare skeleton of Young Bear's code, the vastly complex and engaging system the reader has to learn to read. Only superficially chaotic, his narrative bears all the indications of a sophisticated and cunning literary intelligence. Young Bear has a novelist's eye for precise social and atmospheric detail.

In his afterword, the author himself calls his book a collage, but whatever you call it, *Black Eagle Child* is an example of the new blood flowing back into the hardened arteries of Anglo-American literature from the margins—from the formerly colonized, enslaved and defeated peoples who must, inevitably, change us as we have changed them.

> Douglas Glover. *Los Angeles Times Book Review*. April 12, 1992, p. 10.

With this experimental autobiography, [*Black Eagle Child: The Facepaint Narratives*] Ray Young Bear steps confidently into an area of literary endeavor new to him, yet with some familiar touches. The free verse (almost blank verse) format is periodically juxtaposed to prose sections, verse with differing typefaces, and a variety of speaking voices. Through these competing elements emerge narratives from the lives of Edgar Bearchild and Ted Facepaint that poetically suggest the process of becoming a writer and finding a place in the world. While the author does allow other voices to speak, the text is not intended to be a portrait of a community; indeed, looked at from one angle, the book is not even a portrait of Young Bear, for much of its concern is to explore the mix of experience, perception, identity, background, social responsibility, and accident that produces an individual who can find self-definition and even salvation in writing. I get the feeling at times that Young Bear even wants to point out how odd that compilation is. There is no great cracking open of the intimate heart here; rather, there are some stories about Edgar Bearchild, his friend Ted Facepaint, and a few others, told with humor, great dramatic sense, a skeptical, even critical outlook, and surreal imagery all working to create the text and the writer of the text.

The writer's identity is never a simple matter. We often spend great energy trying to explain what we do and why to those around us. Young Bear tries to explore this self-explanation in one individual with one unique background. Rather than psychological analysis, we read the narratives of people striving toward self-definition and direction. The reader will not find paragraphs of abstract vague generalizations about inspiration and process. This is not a craft talk, or if it is, it starts with the craft of living in a difficult situation. Young Bear observes, ''From any perspective it was complicated to be anybody here.'' Yet writing as revelation is the hidden force behind all the stories. The reader catches glimpses of some of the sources of the literary impulse in a note-writing girlfriend who inspires Bearchild. We also learn of an uncle who clears the girlfriend's notes out of a dresser to make room for his *Mad* magazine collection. In its place, the uncle inspires Bearchild when he lets him read passages from a powerful diary. However, the strongest influence is the storytelling of Bearchild's grandmother, ''During the winters whenever my grandmother would lean over the table and delicately cup her hand over the lamp to blow out the flame, I knew beforehand I would be taken in mind

and spirit to another world.'' During that childhood, though constrained by family limitations and poverty, the young Bearchild is not mauled by experience into questioning his essence. ''I never questioned who I was or where I came from. That issue didn't become important until later.'' That ontological probing is taken up in some of Young Bear's poetry and now implicitly addressed in *Black Eagle Child,* where writing becomes a salvation, but also separates Bearchild. In the words of Ted Facepaint, Edgar's Journey of Words becomes ''a paper wall from tribal responsibilities—and our friendship.'' Thus a tension evolves, a distance grows.

The question of distance is always present in Young Bear's work. As a poet noted for his dense imagery and intricate poetic structures, Young Bear seems to invite the reader into his vision and yet hold him off in the same motion. Personal images and transforming actions strive to resonate from myth and dream to deep common experience and yet maintain mystery. In *Black Eagle Child,* the writing is remarkably narrative, though that is not to say rigidly chronological. The distance at first appears to close, but the communication of symbols overpowers the plots. To accomplish this, Young Bear feels free to juxtapose memories, speculations, history, myth, social comment, and the images of popular culture when it suits his purpose. While most of the shifts from poetry to prose are clear in their intention, there are a few switches that are not. And some of the later sections develop the narratives of characters like Rose, the healer acquainted with the terrible costs of her power; Junior, the outsider who turns disaster into inspiration; Claude Youthman, the cantaloupe terrorist who went to prison because he did not understand English well enough. These narratives may imply something about the pain and power of a writer or of the particular forms of creative transformation that take place on the Black Eagle Child settlement, but they push artistic detachment to its autobiographical limits. If ''circumspection is the paradigm of harmony'' for close-knit societies, then *Black Eagle Child* is an engagingly harmonious book that mostly walks the stage performing what Vizenor calls the ''cultural striptease.'' Only infrequently does it end up in the orchestra pit. Mostly the events in the narratives are drawn from specific events in Bearchild's life during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Some of the incidents Young Bear chooses are ones that have appeared in his poems, like his experience of an earthquake in California. Presented in a narrative form here, they help the reader of his poems tease out more of their implications. Other experiences, like his introduction into a peyote meeting, may not be too familiar to some readers, but still other events, like the night of riding, drinking, and snagging referred to as ''going out,'' will strike many familiar chords. To this mix of the common and the exotic, add a car that becomes animate, a young girl with male sex organs, a medicine man's curse that influences the lives of some of Edgar's friends, and a scene where the comatose Facepaint becomes a bird and takes to flight and the text becomes something like ''imminent celestial revelation'' ready to awaken the reader into the tumultuous perception of both Bearchild and the Black Eagle Child settlement.

In an afterword addressing the book and his writing, Young Bear expressed the fear that sometimes the mix ''turns out to be a minute and insignificant fraction of one's perpetual metamorphosis.'' While one could point to previously published poems where the charge is justified, *Black Eagle Child* never slips into the insignificant. One central concern in Young Bear's work has been an ''artistic interlacing of ethereality, past and present'' that blurs the distinction between myth and dream, and what we might call objective reality. What *Black Eagle Child* gives the reader is a way to see how that effort grows out of personal metamorphosis and how it informs the making of one specific writer. Ideally, one should read this book while looking at Young Bear's two published books of poems, *The Winter of the Salamander* and *The Invisible Musician.*

In all his work, Young Bear allows the events he presents to retain their own mystery. He is not quick to limit their meanings, though he is always ready with a comment on how they contribute to the geometry of pain and despair of some contemporary Native American experience. The Black Eagle Child Settlement serves as the backdrop for Bearchild and Facepaint's coming of age. The community emerges as a place where the old formulas of names and ceremonies have only a circumscribed power to guide the youth to find their places. The realities of poverty and despair abound, and in this turmoil, Young Bear clearly sees the flaws of human actors on all sides. In one section that changes typeface and explores the local atrocities, he writes

> . . .''What's next?'' said the people. There was a firm belief in tribalhood, equality and fairness, but in truth we were such a burden to each other, an encumbrance, that our chances of advancing into a reasonable state of cultural acquiescence diminished with each novel prejudice acquired. There were instances of how we went to extraordinary measures to impede understanding, humanity, and the over-whelming future.

There is much internalized agony in the stories, but there is also much externalized surreal expression of individual perception in a world gone astray. Peyote visions vie with a medicine man's curse to produce a climate where events are never simple, never without cognitive and mythic resonance. This connection closes the distance between the individual and his world and provides a silent central source of identity and, in this case, writing. All the actors in this book seem to feel by cultural instinct that ''an invisible, life-affecting element hovering around us, instilled respect and understanding of our tenuous existence.'' Is this the shadow of destiny?

While there is a *Love Medicine* quality to some of the bizarre, symbolic occurrences, Young Bear is much keener, much more postmodern in his ability to let events remain contradictory, perpetually in resolution. Bearchild ''discovers concrete answers, like windfish, are elusive'' and so does the reader. Ted Facepaint, speaking with the insight of the author, sees self-deception on the part of the Settlement and stereotyping on the part of white society. He penetratingly speculates on the psychological causes in both realms. His classifications and analysis of residents of the settlements and of the nearby white towns are ''a reality check for reservation dwellers,'' a native writer friend of mine says.

But ultimately the book acquaints us with the faces of transformation, with the unseen powers and their interface with our perceptions. Youthman realizes that few of those around him possessed the voracity to follow through with their own ideas but Young Bear has. In doing so he has enriched contemporary literature immensely. This book is not the last word on becoming a writer and an individual; the reality of both is constant evolution. It is a visitation by mysterious lights that illuminate and frighten us. We are left with the haunting image of the writer as human parchment:

> The long arduous task of pasting paper to every inch of my body had already begun, and all that remained was the wait for it to set like a cocoon. I figured a metamorphosis was my

only salvation. Once sunlight entered the bedroom, Selene had agreed to spin me as I hung from the ceiling like a giant pinata. Otherwise, in her own words, I'd be another ''preserved face on the shelf of depression, on permanent exhibit at some carnival sideshow, a wrinkled face with blue lips for all the world to see.''

James Ruppert. *The American Book Review*. December, 1992–January, 1993, p. 9.

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YURICK, Sol (1925–)

The steady soldier [in *The Warriors*], the dreamer sick with intimations of cowardice, the violent giant, half shield, half menace; the young recruit, to be blooded and sheltered—these are living anachronisms: bronze-age infantry tossed by some grotesque time trick into a twentieth century metropolis. Their native land is a half dozen square blocks, their known world fifty or so square miles, the race to which they belong a few thousand boys and girls who live the gang life. They are ignorant, superstitious, lecherous, cruel and treacherous—by society's standards. Yurick has set up the prisms that allow one to judge them by their own. It is only fair, and carries the bonus of a story that blazes through the hot city night.

Robert Hatch. *The Nation*. Nov. 22, 1965. p. 395

What we have in *Fertig* is not a sort of study in the psychology of murder in the manner of, say, Simenon, nor much less is it an impassioned and protracted dialogue between the criminal and his hunted after *Crime and Punishment*. . . .

This novel is quite different. Sol Yurick has invited us to consider the big, front-page murder as an elaborate public ritual, a sort of sacred drama which is played out to provide society with entertainment and emotional catharsis. This seems quite genuine. I found Yurick's insight—which in these terms at least is quite fresh—to be simply and unarguably true.

Bruce Cook. *Commonweal*. Oct. 14, 1966. p. 60

The early parts of [*The Bag*] contain some of the most powerful descriptions of where it's really at—in welfare centers and on the streets—that I've come across in recent literature. . . .

This is a work of great energy and passion, an accurate depiction of the sociology of the contemporary despair, that suffers from its reductionism of all to one particularity, one obsession, one ideology, and one issue. It's potpourri of failures posing as a novel of ideas. Its faults are the faults of one who has blown his mind over his own enthusiasms. But that is preferable by far, to those tiny dry exercises in symbolic form from which the novel's protagonist is in such flight that he can only end up with the mob at the bottom.

Richard M. Ellmann. *New York Times Book Section*. May 19, 1968. p. 38

The fastidious may quibble over Yurick's rawness. The Despair Incorporated Boys may long for the concrete gardens of the French anti-novels. The Mainliners-on-the-Absurd may opt for the aspirin of Black Humor. But Sol Yurick is no such cop-out. With rare responsibility he has brilliantly conceived and powerfully executed a portrait of the sight, sound, smell and taste of Urban Now, beneath the plastic; and he has renewed the novel as a social transaction. Either we respond, or the credit card will be our guillotine.

John Leonard. *Life*. May 24, 1968. p. 8

A work of fiction has appeared that augurs the shape of the new novel about the Negro. Sol Yurick is a white, Jewish, possibly lapsed bourgeois writer, whose talent and beauty of compassion are magnificent. In *The Bag*, his third novel, he writes about many people all caught up in the blackness of New York City and its sick welfare system. Only some of his characters are Negro, but the ambience of the Negro *scene* colors every page and is indivisibly tied to Yurick's conception of New York. No longer is the violence abortive or repressed; it is *there*, and it seems the only way out, a cleansing away by blood bath. In this use of the riot scene, Yurick's novel seems like so many African novels of the past decade. The moderates, the ones willing to see both sides of a neighborhood, are crushed, while the extremes—corrupted and expedient—survive to fight their coming battles.

Martin Tucker. *The Nation*. July 8, 1968. p. 28

For his third novel, Sol Yurick, who launched himself well with *The Warriors* and *Fertig*, has taken what may well be all of New York City and sliced it like a many-layered cake to expose every level. The only thing small about *The Bag* is the title. . . .

Black nationalists, hippies, the greedy and the grimy surge through the Yurick panorama grasping for millions or just their semi-monthly relief check. Because the novel is a kaleidoscope of *now* it is as difficult to synopsize as to describe inch by inch a painting by Pollock.

The Bag is at its best in the action scenes; in the introspective passages a character mentally turned on is sometimes a character turned too loose, forcing the reader to hang on and plod through pages of mental rambling where often the words seem more important to the author than the thoughts they combine to form. . . .

But nitpicking aside—and I admit that I am—*The Bag* is a novel of merit. It dares to move in close to where the action is.

Haskel Frankel. *Saturday Review*. July 20, 1968. p. 26

Imagine, if you can, a superb writing team composed of Hugh Selby, Jr. for violence and slum realism, Terry Southern for *Magic Christian*-vintage nasty humor, the *Armies of the Night* Mailer for impressionistic comment on the New Left, Tom Wolfe, when he was new and we loved him, for frenetic, driving style, and I-don't-know-who for political sensibility. Then give the result to Mark

Rudd for copy-editing. Or, substitute your own modern culture heroes, if you want, just so long as they are smart, aggressive, and mean. If you are really lucky, the upshot of the team effort will be something as good as Sol Yurick's *The Bag*.

Thomas Miller. *Commonweal*. Oct. 4, 1968. p. 30

There's a brief vignette of Sol Yurick's contemporary Mailer in *The Bag*. Unlike Mailer, Yurick has no boy-wonder reputation to build on: his three novels all date from the later 1960s. And in life he's remained a shy figure untouched by power, uncompromisingly to the left of all respectable politics. But power, its interlocking constellations, conspiracies and charismatic leaders, is what preoccupies him, with its obverse a passionate concern for the individuals at the base of the power pyramid.

The Warriors dealt with the private power structure of the juvenile gangs, *Fertig* with politicians manipulating a murder trial to their own advantage. Broader and longer, *The Bag*, in the same Manhattan setting and with some of the earlier characters, is sprawling, uneven and brilliant. Its ethos is that of countless interminable late-night conversations, particularly with the militant young. It mirrors, better than any other fiction that I know, the mounting frenzy for radical change in a New York as revolutionary, as schismatic, as stifled as 19th-century St. Petersburg.

Clive Jordan. *New Statesman*. Jan. 9, 1970. p. 55

Because Yurick's material is so solid, even excursions into the fanciful and the ''surreal'' seem, in his hands, somehow realistic. . . .

As if he had become impatient with the limitations of realism, he attempts several abstract, rather musical and formless stories [in *Someone Just Like You*] in which many people participate in rituals meant to free them from individuality, self-consciously celebrating births and deaths. . . . If these stories seem to me less successful [than the realistic ones], it is not because there is anything wrong with Yurick's experimental vision, but only because he has not yet found an artistically or dramatically compelling structure for this vision; and I admit to being prejudiced in favor of the kind of writing he can do so well, with his formidable knowledge of reality, his ability to synthesize facts into esthetic experiences. Any modestly gifted writer can venture into ''surrealism.'' Few indeed can handle the densities and outrageous paradoxes of ''real'' life. The straightforward sections of *The Bag* and *Fertig* and the un-fantasized horrors of [*Someone Just Like You*'s] realistic stories, have a power to move us, urgently and deeply, that cannot be matched by any of the author's superficially sophisticated contemporaries. And one might argue, ultimately, that ordinary life in our great modern cities is already fantastic enough.

Joyce Carol Oates. *New York Times Book Section*. Sept. 3, 1972. p. 7

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Z

ZUKOFSKY, Louis (1904–1978)

Of all the birthday presents of the quatercentenary [of Shakespeare], none has come close to the poet Louis Zukofsky's offering, a discursive book of 470 pages called *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, boxed with a second volume by his wife, the composer Celia Zukofsky, a musical setting for *Pericles*.

The body of Zukofsky's book is a cycle of essays, or ''an alphabet of subjects,'' from A to Z. The momentum that carries the reader fascinated through this poet's notebook of perceptions is generated in the introduction, 90 pages ostensibly about eyes (''let the audience look to their eyes,'' cries Bottom). What emerges is a kind of dance of imagery and words which Zukofsky, with pure delight, has set in motion. It is Shakespeare's peace of mind that intrigues him, the balance of the poet's argument within itself. An elaborately cultivated imagination has limits and contours—one begins to wonder if Shakespeare's have ever been found—but there are interior harmonies that act like music in their repetitions and contrasts and which visually are inexhaustible of interest. Zukofsky reports from a lifetime's study of these harmonies, and before we are well into the book we meet a Shakespeare classrooms and theatres have never heard of. . . .

For Zukofsky Shakespeare is an elaborate argument that flows, a voice all its own, in and out of characters, from play to play. It is an argument about love, about understanding, about truth. ''It argues with no one,'' he says, ''only in itself.'' With the humblest touchstone—Bottom's wildly innocent fantasia on Shakespeare's great theme that love is to reason as eyes are to mind—here is the greatest meditation, certainly the most intricately lucid and beautiful, ever built around the thousand forms of a single thought.

Guy Davenport. *National Review*. Oct. 6, 1964. pp. 874–6

Louis Zukofsky's book [*All: The Collected Short Poems, 1956–1964*] is a companion volume to his *All: The Collected Short Poems, 1923–1958*. There is some overlap because the earlier volume did not include some poems which now find a place in the second book. Zukofsky is an American who has been writing for forty-five years. There are so many American poets now on the scene that it is difficult for many English readers to decide for themselves which are important and which are less so. Zukofsky is important. He represents, for all his modernistic technical experiments, the middle way of American poetry during the past thirty or so years. His poetic godfather is William Carlos Williams, but his vision is entirely his own. He is really an impressionist who is able to capture an atmosphere or seal an idea within remarkably small compass. He possesses a sensitive eye and an individual way of communicating thoughts and feelings. Nothing seems to escape him. He is as much at home with natural phenomena as with everything else in the contemporary American scene, though he does not dwell for long on fashionable politics. In his way he is a satirist not unlike our own Stevie Smith. But although his bite is sharp, he does not leave behind lasting wounds. He may, perhaps, have written too much about the same things and in the same way, but he is a satisfying writer whose poems on the page give as much pleasure to the eye as they do to the ear.

Leonard Clark. *Poetry Review*. Summer, 1968. p. 109

A lifetime's work, as ambitious as *Paterson* or the *Cantos*, Mr. Zukofsky's long poem [*''A'' 1–12*] cannot be criticized here but merely hailed with the respect it deserves. The constructive idea is a free, expansive form which can bring in the most remote and intellectual ideas, if they are creative ideas, and the most personal anecdotes of a lifetime: prose, documents, antipoetic detail can also be fitted in somehow.

Robert Creeley, in his useful introduction, speaks of this mode as the poem as autobiography. . . . One should merely note that this new form is not free form: in *Paterson*, in the *Cantos*, and here, there are three fairly rigorous technical rules of abruptness, disjunction and elimination of prosy explanatory context (so that each of these poems sends the reader out on a research job about the life and reading of the poet). Such poems are also open-ended in two senses; there is no formal reason for their not being added to indefinitely, so long as the poet remains alive and interested. More subtly, they are open-ended at the beginning as well as the end: *Paterson* and the *Cantos* make fullest sense if read as expansive continuations of what the author was doing in his earlier, shorter poems. . . .

Yet it would be wrong to think of Pound, Williams or Zukofsky as simply packing a number of perfect small imagist poems in a kind of loose conglomerate of assertion and anecdote. A certain sense of trembling and dangerous continuity, like soft stuff catching on to the next rock and becoming a thread or a nerve, makes the reading of such long poems, in this new style, peculiarly exciting, the reader himself becoming the constructor. Zukofsky's own essays [*Prepositions*] will be an indispensable text for whoever does undertake the really hard thinking that will be necessary to see how imagism, a cult partly of the very short, the very depersonalized or objective poem, could result in the end in extremely long, personal and subjective poems of a quite new kind.

G.S. Fraser. *Partisan Review*. Summer, 1968. pp. 471, 473

Short of silence, no one could be less loquacious than Louis Zukofsky. *Ferdinand*, a long short story completed in 1942 (why not published in England before?), is a masterpiece of brevity and precision. Each word, every image, seem perfectly selected and exactly placed. The whole, a history of a young man abandoned by his parents and brought up by an aunt and uncle, gives the impression of a much longer work. Deprived of parental affection, Ferdinand becomes ''practical in risking little . . . he took care of his own constraints, emphasizing his emptiness and affecting to be quiet.'' Yet, for all his quietness, he is haunted by yearnings and fears. He grows, takes a job; war breaks out, and on a car trip through America he faces and dreams through ''a latent fear that some day would find him in a collision.''

On the surface this is a simple story, which reminded me of Nabokov. With the same cunning he veils complexity in simplicity.

He has the same powers of obsessive observation, similar imagery and cadences, and a love for words that never gets out of hand. Perfection of form and expression does not—as can happen—preclude humanity. Ferdinand is a complete and moving character, as are the aunt and uncle. Zukofsky is best known as a poet. I wish he would write a novel.

Janice Elliott. *New Statesman*. Nov. 29, 1968. p. 762

All: The Collected Short Poems, 1923–1958, by Louis Zukofsky, traces the development of a writer who has taken the examples and injunctions of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams more seriously and devotedly than perhaps any other contemporary poet, and who has become something of a tradition all by himself. His has been an underground reputation, until recently; but his admirers and devotees have been absolute in their respect for him, from the days of *An ''Objectivists'' Anthology* published thirty-five years ago. Like Pound and Williams, he has been concerned to discover what is really viable for *him* in all poetry, and so viable for his own work; but he has also encouraged, if unwillingly, a kind of dogmatic eclecticism that has done some of his disciples more harm than good, and that has put an enormous burden on some of his own engaging, brief, and unpretentious pieces, which make *All* the book that it is. More often than not, however, Zukofsky imposes on the reader a burden of seriousness (in Auden's sense of the word) that is difficult to justify. . . . He implies that his reader must be willing to go the whole way with him, even holding in his mind the private knowledge to which he sometimes alludes in his notes. To put it another way, his poetry sometimes seems to have been composed to illustrate a preconceived theory; its limitations are those of the pioneer—say, Schoenberg. Impressive as his work sometimes is, one is seldom sure that one has ''got'' it as Zukofsky intends one to get it.

Samuel French Morse. *Contemporary Literature*. Winter, 1968. pp. 116–7

It Was . . . deals with a writer's long effort, conscious and unconscious, to write a perfect simple sentence that will put the only possible words in the only possible order; suddenly the sentence comes to him, and Zukofsky ends the story with it. Since the story is only four pages long, it should have been and doubtless was intended to be a little miracle of enclosure, a work of art whose subject is itself; but Zukofsky's prose, though better here than in *Ferdinand*, is far from miraculous: his narrator's sentence, for example, in the absence of its imaginary context is not impressive. And even so, this story comes through as most of Zukofsky's poetry comes through, largely on the strength of its good intentions.

J. Mitchell Morse. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1969. pp. 319–20

Little is not a difficult book—or, rather, only as difficult as the reader will force it to be. It is an autobiographical novel, or poem, but whatever it is, it is a pleasure to read because of its story and because of Zukofsky's range of language and wit. The three main characters (Dala, Verchadet, and Little) are Zukofsky, his wife, and his son Paul. Little, as was Paul, is a violin prodigy, and *Little*, in which Zukofsky's main source of imagery, as in his poetry, is music, portrays the artist from childhood to young manhood. . . .

Even on a surface level, *Little*'s plot is intriguing, its details consistently enjoyable. Its puns, puzzles, and word games are genuinely funny and, since they usually occur within the minds and during the conversations of characters of heightened consciousness and sophistication, they do not seem artificially imposed. Because Dala, Little, and Verchadet are so ultra-intelligent I sometimes find myself lamenting my own dullness as I feel points and jokes going over my head—what, for example, does the ''for careenagers'' of the title mean?—but I always enjoy the book's sounds and its rhythms, and am anxious to proceed.

William Heyen. *Saturday Review*. Dec. 5, 1970. p. 31

Admired by Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, and a generation of avant-garde writers who esteem Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky remains an enigmatic and generally misunderstood figure. Even the members of the so-called Objectivist group that gathered around him in the thirties often found his work impenetrable and today the situation has been compounded by the appearance of his five-hundred page ''metaphysics of cognition,'' *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, and his still unfinished masterpiece, *''A,''* a quasi-autobiographical poem written over a lifetime. Just as the theories he presented as guest editor of the Objectivist issue of *Poetry* in 1931 were met with silence or confusion, so he has rarely been discussed outside the little magazines. But Zukofsky is more than a coterie poet or a man who owes his place in literary history chiefly to his association with Ezra Pound. To the contrary, he is, for all his eccentricity, both a germinal part of the whole nominalist trend of twentieth-century poetry and a craftsman of extreme subtlety.

L.S. Dembo. *American Literature*. March, 1972. p. 74

Just as the *Catullus* is, in large part, a denial of the referential value of language and an assertion, instead, that ''aurality is meaning,'' the *Autobiography* belies conventional expectation by being not a reference book about the poet's life (Zukofsky is, in a sense, our only anti-confessional poet), but by being a blue print for the musical production of some of his poems (what a poet's life is, after all, *about*). Except for occasional short statements about his ''life'' (concessions to the genre), the *Autobiography* consists of twenty-two musical forms which, Zukofsky writes, were ''final intentions of the words.'' The work must be performed, heard, to be understood. Beyond the pleasure of its *meaning*, beyond, too, the pure charm of the work's conception, the *Autobiography* is instance of that stage in the writer's formal dynamic in which words, no longer reaching toward music's measure, have, through projection of their own implications, been assimilated into it. The measure of Zukofsky's life is in that union.

Whether the current accessibility of Zukofsky's work will provide him with the critical recognition he deserves (he has been publishing, without great notice, since 1921), his ''vogue'' is at any rate a suggestion that American poetry may be seeking what it never really has had—a workable classicism of its own. What *''A''* offers to that possibility is a circumstance in which technique mediates between the large American voice, on the one hand, with its ''statements,'' its social concern, and the intimate lyric voice, on the other, with its privacy, its feelings. Zukofsky's classicism is not

aestheticism, not art compromising reality, but art dealing from ''the structure of its own house.'' It is all very much like music.

Thomas A. Duddy. *Modern Poetry Studies*. 3, 6, 1973. pp. 255–6

His criticism is of the highest order; indeed, it may well be the subtlest and most profound criticism of poetry to have been written in this century.

I have been reading Zukofsky for 20 years and flatter myself that I have begun to understand how to read him; his work, as [William Carlos] Williams has said, cannot be thought of as ''a simple song,'' rather, his song is more like Mozart's. There is no way of making him simple. As does all great art, his work resists cheapening, and it must be experienced in the full range of its intellect, craft, and music in order to be understood, even a little bit. The dedication is to art as a kind of supreme search for the clarity of the understanding. As with so much art that is not for sale, the drive toward clarity often makes for a difficult end result. We are left, as it were, with no help except from the poet's other poems, the tradition of the art of poetry, and our own intelligence. The handles are missing. . . .

Zukofsky, with his wife, Celia, a musician and composer, completed and published some few years ago a translation of Catullus that must stand as the most remarkable execution of that poet's verse into English that has ever been attempted. Not only do the translations succeed in carrying over the content of the poems and their music, they render into our tongue the actual sound of the Latin. It is a strange Catullus, granted; yet it also is, in a way that is hard to define, truer to him than all the modern attempts at translating his colloquial yet elegant lines—most of the contemporary tries at him have rendered his work into limp slang, a fearful butchery. . . .

Zukofsky is 72 now. It is clear to anyone who is seriously engaged with poetry that his work stands alongside that of Pound, Williams, and Stevens, as among the most authentic body of poetry to have been written by an American poet in this century. Those of his generation who may be considered his peers are [Charles] Olson and [George] Oppen. He has proffered us an enormous gift; somehow, we have refused to accept it, blundering after false gods and prophets. It is his own gift, pure and intense, his entire life, the rhythm and meaning of it, that is available to us in his books. To ''place'' him succinctly, then: He always was the real thing and always will be.

Gilbert Sorrentino. *The Village Voice*. June 7, 1976, pp. 77–78

I think that what makes good poetry is always the same, the use of words in such a way that ''the thing is in the word.'' Empty words are empty, whether they are arranged according to modernist or traditional tenets. The defence of modernist technique is the vitality of the work it produces. In the work of Louis Zukofsky there is considerable vitality. The publication of Zukofsky's *''A''* is completed with these two new sections [*''A'' 22 & 23*] (the musical conclusion, *''A'' 24*, was published three years ago). The poem that began with ''A Round of fiddles playing Bach . . .'' reaches here a kind of musical speaking in which sound verges on a total displacement of meaning. But it is not that simple. A language reduced to sound would be no language at all. Zukofsky does something else; he uses words in ways that make their meaning appear tenuous, a momentary crystallizing of the flow of sound. The effect is one of discovery and surprise, of *initial speaking*. And that seems to be the burden of the opening, stanzaic section of *''A'' 22*: ''sweet treble hold lovely—initial.'' The middle section is an undivided passage (it runs for twenty-two small pages) constructed on a principle stated this way at the start: ''word time a voice bridled/as order, what is eternal/is living. . . .'' It is a history of a sort, but Zukofsky says, ''History's best emptied of names'/impertinence. . . .'' It is geological history, or a history embedded in geology. The asides that point to that understanding are only asides; the main thing is in the words moving in rhythm that represent historical growth-as-presence. Part of that process is the growth of language, and the rising of thought out of language, through methods of recording, like knots in the rope that the Incas used for communication: ''new knots renewed ink anew.'' Midway through, Zukofsky begins to give his Book of Proverbs—lines and fragments from the Presocratic philosophers, the Hellenistic commentators, Epicurus, the Buddha, some of them charmingly translated: ''Man featherless two-legs.'' Charm must be the frailest of poetic qualities. Much of the poetry here, and all through *''A''*, depends on it: ''little horse can you speak/won't know till it speaks.'' But it holds its place in the poem, as its signum. Interspersed with fragments from the philosophers are passages that mouth the original words, the way his *Catullus* mouths the Latin, and, in keeping with his principle, none of them is named in other than punning ways: ''Pith or gore has 4/ seasons. . . .'' What his thinkers thought is not important to the poem; that is, it is not *thought* in the poem. What was once recorded is unearthed here, caught still in the substance of human speech. Language is to thought as the earth is to history: the ''anachronous stone'' is there in your hand. That is the nature of Zukofsky's historical materialism, which he sets in opposition to the historicism of the ''scribes'' who ''conceive history as tho/sky, sun, men never were.'' . . .

The charm of his writing imparts a human warmth, a lived-in quality to the whole of *''A''*, which, for all its length, remains a small poem, enclosed, a household. To place it alongside the *Cantos*, as some readers have done (speaking rather indiscriminately of ''the long poem''), is to realize that the two are opposites, that *''A''* is the anti-epic *par excellence*, that the epic is the poem of unhoused mankind but that this poem has always been what it becomes here: a spiritual canticle of human habitation, ''beginning ardent; to end blest.''

Richard Pevear. *Hudson Review*. Summer, 1976, pp. 315–16

Louis Zukofsky was a total poet: during a long life he practiced the craft of poetry with a single-minded passion. In his first maturity, he took the ideas of Pound about phanopoeia, melopoeia, and logopoeia as a point of departure for his own art. He also took Pound's ideas of composing in the musical phrase and the rhythms of great bass and such larger musical structures as the fugue. But Zukofsky extended Pound's range to include other musical patterns such as the sonata, the quartet, and the ballade and developed them in practice for over fifty years until he became not only the inventor but also the master of a new tradition.

He was and is a poet's poet. Although his work circulated in mimeographed sheets and little magazines, it was published in book form so rarely and in such limited editions that the public at large as well as academia could not hear of it through traditional

channels. But practicing poets knew about it and found both Zukofsky and his work. Many of his followers and devotees, more widely known and anthologized than he, owe much of their music and polish to hard study of his premises and practices.

Thus as with the work of Pound and many innovators before him, we have with Zukofsky a tragic rehearsal of an old story: their inventions put them beyond the reach of most critics and readers who are trained to respond only to more traditional forms. With the mature work of Pound, almost all critics now find what they call ''lyric passages'' to praise, but the music and harmonies of much of *The Cantos* still remain much too subtle to reach the ears of many. Since Zukofsky went far beyond Pound in refining his lines until often only the harmonies are left, an even greater barrier exists which will take even more time for the poetry-reading public to cross. But since we have in Zukofsky the work of the greatest poet born in this century, cross it they will in time. Like Dante, Pushkin, Whitman and many another inventor/master before him, Zukofsky will inevitably have his day.

Carroll F. Terrell. In *Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet*, ed. Carroll F. Terrell (National Poetry Foundation, 1979), p. 15

''Poem Beginning 'The''' carries itself with perfect assurance, as if this were the logical mode of expression for a young New York Jew. It is a triumph, and not just technically so. The author's passions come through strongly. His anger and frustration over displacement, poverty, injustice, intellectual corrosion, and so forth tally exactly with the broken, spotlit, warped contortions of the verse. His emotions *are* the lines of ''The'': intense, self-centered, ardent, and swift in their alternation.

The poem's obvious predecessor is ''The Waste Land.'' In an attempt to surpass Eliot, Zukofsky pushes formal details to an excessive, but liberating, limit. Eliot numbered every tenth line, Zukofsky numbers all of them; Eliot appended witty notes, Zukofsky confounds us at the start with his daunting dedication; Eliot divided his poem into five parts; Zukofsky has six movements. Zukofsky stretches and pummels the modern idiom until he can call it his own. This seizure and recalibration of ''The Waste Land'' is consistent with ''The'''s feverish engorgement. Zukofsky seems to want his poem to devour everything within range.

But ''The'' could also be described as an introspective's house of mirrors—potentially a deceptive, dangerous locale. Someone less intelligent and less ambitious might have spent years pursuing the same vein before discovering that investigations of the self require constant invention. But Zukofsky had found a voice something like his own, and he wasted no time in expanding his range. As soon as he had finished with ''The,'' he started planning a more comprehensive work.

Barry Ahearn. *Zukofsky's ''A'': An Introduction* (Univ. of California Pr., 1983), pp. 36–37

Formally, *80 Flowers* is the tour de force of [Louis] Zukofsky's late style of condensed lyricism in which words freed from conventional syntax invite or demand that an audience make what aural or semantic connections it can. Each word has a certain historical weight that contributes to the poem; but it is also a unit in the syntax Zukofsky forges by balancing these histories (the noise they make) and the actual noise of words against tympanum. When the poet reads his *Flowers*, we hear him making definite syntactical choices; indeed, he will start again when he feels he is losing the sense of lines that to a casual reader may look like random aggregates. The point is that by reading aloud, Zukofsky is mapping one semantic option among the several that this poetry habitually offers. As an audience, listening, we can perhaps make out the play of backward- and forward-looking words (the ear remembers their sounds, registers their associations). When, as readers, we come to the texts of these poems, Zukofsky's visual strategies come into play: almost purely visual devices like ''th[e] nine'' written across the break of #51 Snowdrop's last two words, or the italic that foregrounds *thyme, rose*, and *thyme* as the scope of #75 Thyme. Then there are the strategies inhabiting a region between ear and eye, speaking to one and then the other, one impossible to perform without the other: for example, the ''lunary era'' to be heard (but also almost spelled) in ''lunar year annual,'' the first line of #3 Honesty. What starts out as a largely aural transformation then turns into ''lunary era a new all anew,'' and the double use of the initial ''a'' of ''annual'' (''era a new all'') is the result of the eye casting back even as the voice reads forward.

Compounding such intricacies in the endlessly kinetic lines of *80 Flowers* is the lack of punctuation. Conventions of punctuation are present even as late as ''A'' 22 & 23; but in the *Flowers* they are missing (except for a few apostrophes and the occasional inflection mark) because Zukofsky apparently wants to push us, readers, back to the sound of these words, wants us to sound them in the effort to establish the sense (or multiplicity of sense) our ears, hearing melody (an order), insist is there. It is perhaps significant that the *80 Flowers* poems reached their audience first as a taped recording; there was no text until 1978, and Celia's advertisement for the book is quick to point out that none of it had been printed (or read in public)—usual, because Zukofsky normally allowed magazine publication of work as it reached final form, and the *80 Flowers* Spiral was receiving each poem as authoritative text from December 1974 on.

As listeners and readers, then, we derive delight from the complicated verse of the *Flowers*. Think what Zukofsky, reading out loud or to himself, must have got from them as condensation touched off wealths of associative detail. The investigations made here touch only a fraction of that richness; everywhere, though, they open up possibilities for taking a poem one way or another—and that, the increment, is pure Zukofsky.

Michele J. Leggott, *Reading Zukofsky's 80 Flowers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Pr., 1989), pp. 357–58

To say that music is the single most important thematic and formal organizational source of Louis Zukofsky's monumental poem *A*.(1928–1974) is merely to acknowledge what numerous critics have already recognized but which none to date have explicated in detail given the intricate allusive labyrinth of the poem, its hermeneutic complexities, and the sheer dimensions of the task. Hugh Kenner has said of *A* that we will be elucidating it well into the 22nd century. What I am going to do here is enumerate the specific musical qualities and uses of musical forms in *A*, to make surmises concerning Zukofsky's motivation in giving such an extensive musical undergirding to his poem, and to suggest possible models that influenced Zukofsky in the creation of *A*. . . .

The ''musicalization'' of both the content and form of *A* is due, in large part, to Zukofsky's adherence to the modernist aesthetic as

put forward by Ezra Pound and his followers. Indeed, the musicoliterary aesthetic as expressed by Zukofsky in his 1950 essay ''A Statement for Poetry,''

> Thus poetry may be defined as an order of words that as movement and tone (rhythm and pitch) approaches in varying degrees the wordless art of music as a kind of mathematical limit.

is very similar to ideas expressed by Pound in his essay ''Vers libre and Arnold Dolmetsch,'' T.S. Eliot in ''The Music of Poetry,'' and Basil Bunting in his essay ''A Statement.'' What makes Zukofsky's poetic use of musical forms and thematics of particular interest is that—unlike Pound, Eliot, and Bunting—Zukofsky understood music qua music and not merely as an adjunct to poetic expression. . . . When Pound wrote about harmony he was actually discussing rhythm; Eliot's ''music of poetry'' is more a state of transcendence than an occurrence of *ekphrasis*; and Bunting, even though he called his long poems ''Sonatas,'' never seems to have understood the difference between sonata and sonata form. This is not to disparage the poetic accomplishments of Pound, Eliot, and Bunting nor to question their intuitive grasp of the affective qualities of music, but rather this points out the fact that Zukofsky's musical knowledge was of a much different nature from that of his three modernist colleagues, and that his utilization of musical forms and motifs needs to be taken very seriously.

The creation of the twenty-four movements of *A* was designed by Zukofsky to occupy a lifetime of work and to be a commentary on that lifetime that was being occupied by the process of creating the poem. Memory, the human capacity for the self-understanding of recurring patterns of existence, needed a poetic analogue. This was accomplished by means of repetition, not merely the casual repetition of the poetic refrain, but the more organic type of repetition (such as the leitmotif) utilized in a multimovement musical composition in which widely separated moments are linked by the recall of the matic ideas and aural gestures. *A-9* makes use of many of the basic leitmotifs of the poem (e.g., light, love, labor, and music), but the repetition does not end here. *A-9* is a double canzone, two sets of five sonnets, in which the last word of each line of the first set is used as the last word of each corresponding line of the second set. But this repetition is not for purposes of sonority alone. What occurs in *A-9* is a process by which Zukofsky equates music with the human (and humane) capacity for remembrance.

William E. Grim. ''Form and the Long Poem: The Music of Zukofsky's *A*.'' *Pembroke Magazine*. 24, 1992, pp. 141–43

Louis Zukofsky's writings, like the poems of his older and more canonically ''respectable'' contemporary Wallace Stevens, are continuously invested in the problems of human knowledge and perception: What can the subject know about the world, and how far can one trust one's perceptions? How much of our picture of the world is the creation of our own perceptual structures, and how much is an accurate reflection of a perhaps ultimately unknowable *Ding an sich?* Such issues of epistemology are of course central to the Romantic poets, and to the whole post-Romantic tradition within which Stevens is so often located. While Zukofsky, in contrast to Stevens, often dismisses epistemological issues in quite peremptory terms, they receive extended (if sometimes oblique) exploration in *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, Zukofsky's enormous commentary on the works of the poet he most admires. In *Bottom*, Zukofsky claims to isolate and examine a particular strain in Shakespeare's thinking, and therein to find support for his own attacks on the theory of knowledge; but even as *Bottom* proposes itself as a work *on* Shakespeare, addressing Shakespeare's works, that text reveals itself to be a transparently modernist document, reiterating an antiabstractionism that is the common property of a large number of American modernist writers. *Bottom*, as well, to the extent to which it swerves from its ostensibly primary genre of ''criticism'' or ''interpretation,'' enacts the paradoxes so central to the body of Zukofsky's own work. There is a tension in Zukofsky's writing between his rejection of skepticism or solipsism (skepticism's extremist moment) and his simultaneous embracing of a theory of knowledge based solely on the individual's perceptions. This tension is played out in *Bottom* more clearly than in any of his other works, and finds a paradoxical resolution not in *Bottom*'s manifest argument, but in the formal structure of the book, in which a collage of voices implicitly asserts that knowledge is founded in an intersubjective dialogue.

Bottom was first published in 1963 at the University of Texas; since its 1987 reprinting by the University of California Press, one is most likely to find it in the ''Shakespeare criticism'' section of the bookstore, a category to which the Library of Congress has as well assigned it. It is not surprising, however, that (as Guy Davenport notes) ''Shakespeare scholars have yet to discover'' this text (106–7), for *Bottom* represents a radical alternative to the traditionally conceived work of criticism or interpretation. It is not merely eccentric or iconoclastic, even taking into account its complete disdain for the conventions of critical prose and its apparent obliviousness to the traditions of Shakespeare scholarship: it is a generically indeterminate text, and the difficulty its reader faces in deciding whether to consider it a work of criticism, imaginative prose, or poetry—in short, whether to take it as self-consciously ''primary'' text or self-conscious ''commentary''—is mirrored in the position it assumes within Zukofsky's corpus of works. In formal terms, *Bottom* is an extended exploration of the poetics of collage that Zukofsky shares with Pound and [Marianne] Moore, poetics that as well condition *A* and much of Zukofsky's shorter poetry. Its overt argument, however, constitutes the most extended statement of Zukofsky's rejection of Western epistemology, an emphasis on the soundness of physical perception that he shares with other modernists such as Pound, [William Carlos] Williams, and Hemingway.

Mark Scroggins. ''Zukofsky's *Bottom: On Shakespeare*—Objectivist Poetics and Critical Prosody.'' *West Coast Line*. Winter, 1993–94, pp. 17–18

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CRITIC INDEX

Aaron, Daniel
Bierce, I, 109; Cowley, I, 243; DeLillo, I, 268; Dell, I, 270; Dos Passos, I, 292; Frederic, I, 391; Howells, II, 62; Matthiessen, F. O., II, 246; More, II, 331; Rahv, III, 61; Reed, J., III, 77; Twain, III, 298; Vidal, III, 326; West, III, 365

Aarons, Victoria
Malamud, II, 229

Abbott, Herbert Vaughan
Hearn, II, 19

Abrahams, William
Oates, II, 379

Acker, Kathy
Wasserstein, III, 355

Ackroyd, Peter
McGuane, II, 264

Acocella, Joan
Cather, I, 200

Adams, Franklin P.
Lardner, II, 153; Parker, III, 2

Adams, Hazard
Stafford, W., III, 217

Adams, J. Donald
Morley, II, 333; Roberts, E., III, 91

Adams, Laura
Mailer, II, 216

Adams, Leonie
Bogan, I, 124

Adams, Phoebe
Bourjaily, I, 128

Adams, R. P.
Cozzens, I, 246

Adams, Robert M.
Baldwin, I, 54; Barthelme, I, 76; Burke, I, 165; Eliot, I, 322; Salinger, III, 130; Stone, III, 246

Adams, Robert Martin
Howe, II, 59; Nabokov, II, 352; Nemerov, II, 362

Adams, Stephen D.
Purdy, III, 50

Adler, Jacob H.
Hellman, II, 24

Ahearn, Barry
Zukofsky, III, 454

Aiken, Conrad
Bodenheim, I, 122; DeVoto, I, 271; Eberhart, I, 312; Fletcher, I, 375; Gregory, I, 454; Lowell, A., II, 190; MacLeish, II, 208; Santayana, III, 141; Shapiro, III, 170

Aiken, William
Ginsberg, I, 429

Albee, Edward
Miller, A., II, 299

Albrecht, W. P.
Wolfe, III, 424

Albright, H.D.
Belasco, I, 88

Aldington, Richard
Pound, III, 31

Aldridge, John W.
Bellow, I, 93; Bourjaily, I, 128; Buechner, I, 158; Burns, I, 167; Cowley, I, 244; Gaddis, I, 410; Heller, II, 22; Lurie, II, 199; Miller, H., II, 303; Morris, II, 336; Shaw, III, 173; Styron, III, 249; Vidal, III, 321

Alexander, Michael
Pound, III, 36

Alexander, Sidney
Kantor, II, 118

Algren, Nelson
Donleavy, I, 287; Friedman, I, 392; Heller, II, 20; Hemingway, II, 30

Allen, Bruce
Morris, II, 337; Reed, I., III, 74

Allen, Charles
Porter, III, 27

Allen, Eliot D.
Kerouac, II, 125

Allen, Gay Wilson
James, W., II, 92; Rourke, III, 120; Sandburg, III, 137; Steele, III, 220; Wescott, III, 363

Allen, Walter
Sheed, III, 174

Allen, William Rodney
Vonnegut, III, 335

Alpert, Hollis
Fuchs, I, 403

Alter, Robert
Gass, I, 422; Malamud, II, 227

Alterman, Peter S.
Delany, I, 265

Altieri, Charles
Duncan, I, 309; O'Hara, F., II, 395

Alvarez, A.
Auden, I, 44; Berryman, I, 104; Hansberry, II, 9; Lawson, II, 160; Plath, III, 21; Pound, III, 32

Ames, Van Meter
Santayana, III, 141

Ammons, A.R.
Duncan, I, 307; Ginsberg, I, 427; Strand, III, 247

Ammons, Elizabeth
Wharton, III, 371, 373

Amster, Leonard
Bowles, P., I, 133

Anaya, Rudolfo A.
Chavez, I, 205

Andersen, Richard
Coover, I, 241

Andersen, Sally
Oates, II, 379

Anderson, Addell Austin
Childress, I, 217

Anderson, Charles R.
Warren, III, 347

Anderson, Chris
Capote, I, 192; Mailer, II, 218

Anderson, Gary
Milner, II, 313

Anderson, Isaac
Chandler, I, 202

Anderson, Jervis
Williams, J., III, 396

Anderson, John
Fitch, I, 366; Thomas, III, 279

Anderson, Maxwell
Sherwood, III, 183

Anderson, Quentin
Brooks, V., I, 153; Cather, I, 198; James, H., II, 86; Trilling, III, 291

Anderson, Sherwood
Lewis, II, 175; Maltz, II, 229; Sandburg, III, 136

Andrews, Wayne
Wharton, III, 368

Angier, Carole
Tan, III, 262

Angoff, Charles
Brooks, V., I, 153; Hersey, II, 38; Mencken, II, 274

Anthony, Edward
Marquis, II, 239

Appel, Alfred
Welty, III, 358

Appelfeld, Aharon
Roth, P., III, 118

Archer, William
Santayana, III, 140

Arlen, M.J.
Schisgal, III, 155

Arms, George
Brooks, V., I, 152

Arnett, Ethel Stephens
O. Henry, II, 38

Arnett, Willard E.
Santayana, III, 142

Arnow, Harriette
Richter, III, 90

Arpin, Gary Q.
Berryman, I, 105

Arrowsmith, William
Bishop, J., I, 115; Fitts, I, 368; Hersey, II, 38

Arvin, Newton
Benét, I, 98; DeVoto, I, 270; Howells, II, 60; Rourke, III, 119; Santayana, III, 142; Steffens, III, 221; Van Doren, III, 312

Asahina, Robert
Rabe, III, 59

Asbury, Herbert
Hammett, II, 6

Ascherson, Neal
Connell, I, 233

Ashbery, John
Ammons, I, 22; Bowles, J., I, 132; O'Hara, F., II, 394; Stein, III, 226

Asher, Kenneth
Eliot, I, 324

Aswell, Edward C.
Wolfe, III, 424

Atkins, Elizabeth
Millay, II, 293

Atkinson, Brooks
Rice, III, 83; Williams, T., III, 396

Atlas, James
Schwartz, III, 160; Williams, C. K., III, 392

Atwood, Margaret
Beattie, I, 85; Jong, II, 112; Piercy, III, 12

Auchincloss, Eve
Calisher, I, 187

Auchincloss, Louis
Adams, H., I, 5; Glasgow, I, 434; McCarthy, M., II, 253; McCullers, II, 258; Porter, III, 27; Stafford, J., III, 215; Wharton, III, 369

Auden, W.H.
Ashbery, I, 32; Brooks, C., I, 146; Chandler, I, 202; McGinley, II, 262; Roethke, III, 97; West, III, 365; Wright, J., III, 430

Auerbach, Nina
Codrescu, I, 231

Augustine, Jane
Hacker, II, 4; Van Duyn, III, 317

Auster, Paul
Boyle, T., I, 138

Austin, James C.
Lewis, II, 176

Avant, John Alfred
Oates, II, 378

Avery, Evelyn Gross
Malamud, II, 226

Axelrod, Steven Gould
Lowell, R., II, 197

Bérubé, Michael
Tolson, III, 283

Bacon, Leonard
Howard, S., II, 57

Bacon, Martha
Sarton, III, 149

Bagby, George F.
Frost, I, 401

Bahlke, George W.
Auden, I, 45

Bailey, Peter J.
Elkin, I, 328

Bailey, Robeson
Benét, I, 99

Bain, Dena C.
Le Guin, II, 166

Baird, James
Merrill, II, 283

Bak, Hans
Cowley, I, 244

Baker, Carlos
Capote, I, 189; Cheever, I, 207; Hemingway, II, 30

Baker, David
Bell, I, 90

Baker, Donald W.
Dahlberg, I, 264; Lattimore, II, 157

Baker, Houston A.
Ellison, I, 334; Johnson, J., II, 106; Sanchez, III, 135; Toomer, III, 286; Wright, R., III, 438

Baker, Howard
Gordon, C., I, 446; Porter, III, 28

Bakerman, Jane S.
Hillerman, II, 44; Morrison, II, 339

Bakish, David
Wright, R., III, 436

Balakian, Anna
Nin, II, 370

Balakian, Nona
Saroyan, III, 146

Balakian, Peter
Roethke, III, 104

Baldanza, Frank
Frederic, I, 391; Nin, II, 369

Baldwin, James
Hansberry, II, 11; Himes, II, 46; Wright, R., III, 434

Baldwin, Richard E.
Wright, R., III, 436

Ball, Robert H.
Belasco, I, 88

Balliett, Whitney
Updike, III, 303

Ballowe, James C.
Santayana, III, 144

Banks, Nancy Huston
Chesnutt, I, 211

Banning, Margaret Culkin
Ferber, I, 355

Barbato, Joseph
Dixon, I, 284

Barbera, Jack V.
Mamet, II, 232

Barker, Jonathan
Justice, II, 115

Barkham, John
Ferber, I, 356

Barksdale, Richard K.
Hughes, II, 66; Walker, M., III, 344

Barlow, Judith E.
O'Neill, II, 415

Barnard, Ellsworth
Robinson, III, 94

Barnes, Clive
Albee, I, 13, 14; Horovitz, II, 53; Rabe, III, 59; Shepard, III, 177

Barnes, Paula C.
McMillan, II, 267

Baro, Gene
Berger, I, 100; Bishop, E., I, 111; Stafford, J., III, 215

Barone, Dennis
Auster, I, 49

Barr, Donald
Jackson, II, 83; Salinger, III, 129

Barr, Stringfellow
Young, III, 444

Barrett, Gerald
Kosinski, II, 143

Barrett, William
Buechner, I, 158; De Vries, I, 273; Miller, H., II, 301; Price, III, 41; Schwartz, III, 161; Williams, J., III, 394

Barrows, Herbert
Nemerov, II, 361

Barry, Elaine
Frost, I, 397

Barry, Iris
March, II, 234

Bartelme, Elizabeth
Grau, I, 451

Bartlett, Andrew
Mccarthy, C., II, 250

Bartlett, Lee
Rexroth, III, 81

Barton, Rebecca Chalmers
Hurston, II, 69

Barzun, Jacques
Chandler, I, 204; James, H., II, 85; James, W., II, 92

Baskett, Sam S.
London, II, 186; Salinger, III, 130

Basso, Hamilton
Green, I, 453

Bateson, F. W.
Gardner, J., I, 414

Baughman, Ronald
Dickey, I, 279

Baumbach, Jonathan
Morris, II, 335; Salinger, III, 131; Sontag, III, 210; Wallant, III, 346

Baumgaertner, Jill P.
O'Connor, F., II, 388

Baxter, Andrea-Bess
Ortiz, II, 418

Baym, Max I.
Adams, H., I, 3

Baym, Nina
Frost, I, 396

Beach, Joseph Warren
Auden, I, 44; Caldwell, I, 183; Himes, II, 46; Stegner, III, 223

Beachy, Stephen
McInerney, II, 265

Beard, Charles A.
Parrington, III, 3

Beatty, Jack
Irving, II, 80; Theroux, III, 275

Beaver, Harold
Olds, II, 401

Beck, Warren
White, III, 379

Becker, Carl
Adams, H., I, 3

Becker, George J.
Dos Passos, I, 293; Howells, II, 60

Becket, Roger
Jackson, II, 84

Bedient, Calvin
Ammons, I, 22; Barthelme, I, 76; Hawkes, II, 14; Howe, II, 59; Jarrell, II, 96; Merwin, II, 287; Oates, II, 378; Plath, III, 23; West, III, 366; Wright, J., III, 431

Beekman, E.M.
Chandler, I, 204; Hammett, II, 7; Himes, II, 47

Begiebing, Robert J.
Mailer, II, 217

Behar, Jack
Sontag, III, 210

Beja, Morris
Wolfe, III, 425

Bell, Bernard W.
Baldwin, I, 58; Morrison, II, 340; Wright, R., III, 438

Bell, Lisle
Runyon, III, 126

Bell, Madison Smartt
Taylor, III, 274

Bell, Millicent
Tyler, III, 299

Bell, Pearl K.
Irving, II, 78; Millhauser, II, 307; Piercy, III, 11; Stone, III, 246

Bellamy, Joe David
Vonnegut, III, 332

Bellman, Samuel I.
Elkin, I, 325

Bellow, Saul
Behrman, I, 86; Berryman, I, 105; Roth, P., III, 111

Benchley, Nathaniel
Benchley, I, 98

Benchley, Robert C.
Dell, I, 269

Bender, Eileen Teper
Oates, II, 381

Bender, R.J.
Fisher, V., I, 365

Bendiner, Robert
Macdonald, D., II, 203; Van Druten, III, 314

Benedict, Ruth
Hersey, II, 38

Benedikt, Michael
Drexler, I, 299

Benét, Rosemary
Marquand, II, 236; Thurber, III, 279

Benét, Stephen Vincent
Heyward, II, 41; Mitchell, II, 314; Thurber, III, 279; Walker, M., III, 342

Benét, William Rose
Benchley, I, 97; Cain, I, 180; Fitts, I, 367; Hayes, II, 17; Kantor, II, 117; Kreymborg, II, 147; Lewis, II, 175; Masters, II, 244; McGinley, II, 261; Moody, II, 319; O'Hara, J., II, 397; Patchen, III, 6; White, III, 378; Wylie, III, 440

Benfey, Christopher
Koch, II, 139

Bennett, George N.
Howells, II, 61

Bennett, John C.
Niebuhr, II, 367

Bennett, Joseph
Aiken, I, 10; Merwin, II, 286; Sarton, III, 150

Bennett, Paula
Sarton, III, 153

Benson, Arthur Christopher
James, H., II, 85

Benson, Jackson J.
Hemingway, II, 34; Malamud, II, 226; Steinbeck, III, 234

Benstock, Bernard
Gaddis, I, 409

Benston, Kimberly W.
Baraka, I, 67

Bentley, Eric
Anderson, R., I, 26; MacKaye, II, 207; O'Neill, II, 411; Warren, III, 347; Williams, T., III, 397; Young, III, 444

Bentley, Phyllis
Buck, I, 156

Berger, Charles
Ashbery, I, 34,

Berger, Peter L.
Rand, III, 62

Bergmann, Linda Shell
Reed, I., III, 73

Bergonzi, Bernard
Gold, I, 441; Warren, III, 350

Beringause, A.F.
Bourne, I, 131

Berlin, Normand
O'Neill, II, 416

Berman, Paul
Singer, III, 197

Bermel, Albert
Bullins, I, 162

Bernard, Kenneth
Wharton, III, 369

Berner, Robert L.
Ortiz, II, 420

Bernstein, Michael André
Pound, III, 37

Bernstein, Samuel J.
Albee, I, 15; Rabe, III, 60

Berry, Wendell
Ammons, I, 20; Dickey, I, 277

Berryman, John
Brooks, C., I, 146; Crane, S., I, 253, 255; Fitzgerald, F., I, 369; Lardner, II, 154

Bersani, Leo
Mailer, II, 214

Berthoff, Warner
Chopin, I, 218; Crane, H., I, 252; Frederic, I, 390; Jewett, II, 103; Mailer, II, 215; Nabokov, II, 353; Wilson, E., III, 413

Bettinger, B.E.
Roberts, K., III, 92

Betts, Doris
Caldwell, I, 183

Bevis, William W.
Stevens, III, 242

Bewley, Marius
Ammons, I, 20; James, H., II, 86; Lewis, II, 176; Nemerov, II, 362; Wilson, E., III, 412

Bigham, Julia Scribner
Rawlings, III, 68

Bigsby, C.W.E.
Hansberry, II, 10

Bigsby, Christopher
Miller, A., II, 299

Bingham, June
Niebuhr, II, 368

Bingham, Sallie
Walker, A., III, 340

Birch, Helen
Jong, II, 113

Birkerts, Sven
Beattie, I, 85; Gaddis, I, 411

Birnbaum, Martin
Fitch, I, 365

Bisbee, Thayer Donovan
Marquand, II, 236

Bischoff, Joan
Morrison, II, 338

Bishop, Elizabeth
Jarrell, II, 95

Bishop, John Peale
Cummings, I, 259; Fearing, I, 353; Fisher, V., I, 364; Hemingway, II, 29; Mitchell, II, 314; Patchen, III, 6; Tate, III, 266; Van Doren, III, 311; Wolfe, III, 424

Bishop, Morris
White, III, 379

Bittner, James W.
Le Guin, II, 165

Bittner, William
Frank, I, 389

Black, David
Auchincloss, I, 42

Black, Stephen A.
Thurber, III, 281

Blackall, Jean Frantz
Frederic, I, 391; James, H., II, 87

Blackburn, Sara
Brautigan, I, 145; Drexler, I, 299; Piercy, III, 11; Reed, I., III, 71

Blackmur, R.P.
Adams, H., I, 4; Aiken, I, 10; Brooks, C., I, 146; Crane, H., I, 248; Cummings, I, 259; Doolittle, I, 288; Eliot, I, 319; Fletcher, I, 376; James, H., II, 86; Matthiessen, F. O., II, 245, 247; Moody, II, 319; Pound, III, 31; Stickney, III, 245

Blair, John G.
Auden, I, 45

Blair, Walter
DeVoto, I, 271; Twain, III, 295

Blaisdell, Gus
Connell, I, 234

Blake, Peter
Auster, I, 49; Fuller, R. B., I, 406

Blankenship, Russell
Lindsay, II, 180; Lowell, A., II, 190

Bleikasten, Andre
Faulkner, I, 348

Blessing, Richard Allen
Plath, III, 24; Roethke, III, 101

Block, Haskell M.
Stevens, III, 240; Tate, III, 268

Bloom, Alice
Gordon, M., I, 447

Bloom, Harold
Ammons, I, 21; Ashbery, I, 33; Bellow, I, 95; Hollander, II, 52; Malamud, II, 227; Singer, III, 198; Stevens, III, 239

Bloom, Lynn Z.
Didion, I, 281

Blum, John Morton
MacLeish, II, 210

Blum, Morgan
Taylor, III, 272

Blumenthal, Eileen
Mamet, II, 231

Bly, Robert
Merwin, II, 285

Boardman, Arthur
Howells, II, 61

Boatright, Talliaferro
Condon, I, 232

Boatwright, James
Warren, III, 351

Bodenheim, Maxwell
Pound, III, 31

Bogan, Louise
Lowell, R., II, 192; Porter, III, 26; Stickney, III, 245; Swenson, III, 256; Viereck, III, 327; Wharton, III, 368; Wylie, III, 441

Bogen, Don
Roethke, III, 104

Bolz, Barbara
Lorde, II, 189

Bone, Robert A.
Baraka, I, 65; Bontemps, I, 127; Chesnutt, I, 213; Ellison, I, 332; Fauset, I, 351; Hurston, II, 69; Johnson, J., II, 105; Toomer, III, 285; Wright, R., III, 434

Bontemps, Arna
Cullen, I, 258; Hughes, II, 63; Wrigh, R., III, 435

Booth, Philip
Rukeyser, III, 122

Booth, Wayne C.
Elliott, I, 329; Morris, II, 335

Bornhauser, Fred
Meredith, II, 279

Bornstein, George
Eliot, I, 322; Stevens, III, 240

Boroff, David
Gold, I, 440; Malamud, II, 224; Wallant, III, 346; Williams, J., III, 394

Borroff, Marie
Frost, I, 398; Meredith, II, 280; Stevens, III, 241

Boruch, Marianne
Miller, A., II, 298

Bosworth, David
Vonnegut, III, 333

Boucher, Anthony
Chandler, I, 202; Himes, II, 46; Macdonald, R., II, 205,

Bourjaily, Vance
Roth, P., III, 115

Bourne, Randolph
More, II, 329

Boutelle, Ann Edwards
Hemingway, II, 33

Bowen, Elizabeth
Saroyan, III, 146; Welty, III, 358

Bowers, Neal
Dickey, I, 279; O'Hara, F., II, 397; Roethke, III, 103

Bowles, Gloria
Bogan, I, 126

Bowra, C.M.
Lattimore, II, 156

Bowron, Bernard
Matthiessen, F. O., II, 246

Boxer, David
Carver, I, 194

Boyd, Brian
Nabokov, II, 356

Boyd, Robert
Purdy, III, 49

Boyers, Robert
Blackmur, I, 118; Dugan, I, 303; Gass, I, 421; Jeffers, II, 99; Plath, III, 20; Sexton, III, 165; Trilling, III, 292; Vidal, III, 324

Boyle, Kay
Baldwin, I, 54; Nabokov, II, 351

Boynton, Percy H.
Cabell, I, 177; Hearn, II, 19; Masters, II, 243; Rölvaag, III, 105; Robinson, III, 94

Bozorth, Richard
Auden, I, 48

Brace, Marjorie
Taylor, III, 270

Bracker, Jon
Morley, II, 333

Bradbury, John M.
Gordon, C., I, 445; Warren, III, 348

Bradbury, Malcolm
Frost, I, 399; O'Hara, J., II, 399; Purdy, III, 47

Bradbury, Richard
Barth, I, 75

Bradford, M.E.
Baldwin, I, 55

Bradford, Robert W.
White, III, 380

Bradley, Sam
Shapiro, III, 170

Bradley, Sculley
Fitch, I, 367; Moody, II, 320

Brady, Charles A.
Thurber, III, 280

Braithwaite, William Stanley
Locke, II, 183; McKay, II, 266

Branch, Edgar M.
Farrell, I, 340

Braudy, Leo
Berger, I, 101; Condon, I, 233; Sontag, III, 212

Bravard, Robert S.
Reed, I., III, 72

Breit, Harvey
Agee, I, 7; Capote, I, 190; Jackson, II, 83; Patchen, III, 6; Schulberg, III, 156

Brenman-Gibson, Margaret
Odets, II, 394

Brennan, John P.
Le Guin, II, 165

Brenner, Conrad
Nabokov, II, 351

Bresler, Riva T.
Levin, II, 173

Breslin, James E.
Williams, W., III, 406

Breslin, Paul
Meredith, II, 281; Schuyler, III, 157

Brett, G. S.
More, II, 330

Brichford, Charles H.
Kennedy, W., II, 123

Brickell, Herschel
Fisher, V., I, 364; Green, I, 452; Welty, III, 357

Bridges, Horace James
Lewisohn, II, 179

Bridgman, Richard
Hemingway, II, 32; James, H., II, 88; Lardner, II, 155; Stein, III, 227; Twain, III, 296

Brien, Alan
Vonnegut, III, 328

Briggs, Austin, Jr.
Frederic, I, 391

Brinkmeyer, Robert H., Jr.
O'Connor, F., II, 389; Porter, III, 30

Brinnin, John Malcolm
Fitzgerald, R., I, 375; Lattimore, II, 157; MacLeish, II, 209; Plath, III, 20; Stein, III, 227; Wheelock, III, 376

Brock, James
Baxter, I, 80

Brodbeck, May
Veblen, III, 319

Brodsky, Joseph
Kunitz, II, 148

Broe, Mary Lynn
Plath, III, 25

Broer, Lawrence R.
Vonnegut, III, 334

Brogan, Jacqueline Vaught
Stevens, III, 244

Bromfield, Louis
Rawlings, III, 68; Richter, III, 89

Bromwich, David
Sexton, III, 167; Winters, III, 421

Bronson, John
Fisher, V., I, 364

Brooke, Jocelyn
Purdy, III, 48

Brooks, Cleanth
Auden, I, 44; Bishop, J., I, 115; Faulkner, I, 345; Hemingway, II, 31; Percy, III, 8; Tate, III, 268; Warren, III, 348

Brooks, John
Auchincloss, I, 39

Brooks, Peter
James, H., II, 89; Sontag, III, 211

Brooks, Van Wyck
Bierce, I, 107; Bourne, I, 129; Chopin, I, 218; Dreiser, I, 296; Howells, II, 60; James, H., II, 85; James, W., II, 91; Jewett, II, 102; Lowell, A., II, 191; Mencken, II, 274; Millay, II, 293; Mumford, II, 348; Robinson, III, 94; Stickney, III, 245; Twain, III, 294; Wharton, III, 368

Brophy, Brigid
Calisher, I, 186

Brossard, Chandler
McCarthy, M., II, 252

Broun, Heywood
Connelly, I, 236; Ferber, I, 354; Tarkington, III, 264

Browder, Sally
Norman, II, 373

Brower, Reuben
Frost, I, 396

Brown, Ashley
Gordon, C., I, 446

Brown, Calvin S.
Aiken, I, 9

Brown, Charles Stafford
Niebuhr, II, 365

Brown, E.K.
Wilson, E., III, 410

Brown, Edward K.
Shange, III, 169

Brown, J.D.
Miller, H., II, 304

Brown, John Mason
Anderson, R., I, 26; Barry, I, 71; Connelly, I, 236; Howard, S., II, 57; Kingsley, II, 133; Odets, II, 390; O'Neill, II, 410; Sherwood, III, 183; Van Druten, III, 314; Young, III, 443

Brown, Lloyd W.
Hughes, II, 65

Brown, Maurice F.
Hellman, II, 25; Santayana, III, 143

Brown, Merle E.
Burke, I, 166; Stevens, III, 239

Brown, Rosellen
Ozick, II, 420; Sarton, III, 150

Brown, Ruth L.
Sarton, III, 150

Brownjohn, Alan
Kinnell, II, 135

Broyard, Anatole
Conroy, I, 237; Helprin, II, 27; Miller, H., II, 303

Bruccoli, Matthew J.
Cozzens, I, 247; O'Hara, J., II, 398

Bruce-Novoa
Rechy, III, 70; Soto, III, 213

Brunner, Edward
Crane, H., I, 252

Brustein, Robert
Albee, I, 13; Alfred, I, 16; Baraka, I, 65; Gelber, I, 424; Gibson, I, 425; Guare, I, 457; Heller, II, 20; Kopit, II, 140; Lowell, R., II, 193; Mamet, II, 232; Miller, A., II, 300; Shepard, III, 178; Wilson, L., III, 418

Bryan, Mary
Sarton, III, 152

Bryant, Arthur
Lindsay, II, 181

Bryant, J. A., Jr.
Jarrell, II, 96; Williams, W., III, 405

Bryant, J. O., Jr.
Tate, III, 269

Bryant, Jerry H.
Baldwin, I, 57; Bullins, I, 163; Gaines, I, 411; Reed, I., III, 72; Styron, III, 250; Vonnegut, III, 330; Williams, J., III, 395

Bryant, Joseph G.
Dunbar, I, 304

Bryer, Jackson R.
Hwang, II, 73; Shange, III, 169

Buchan, Alexander M.
Wharton, III, 369

Buchanan, Scott
Mumford, II, 347

Buchen, Irving
Singer, III, 194

Buchler, Justus
Santayana, III, 141

Buck, Richard M.
Horovitz, II, 54

Buckley, C.A.
Merrill, II, 283

Buckley, Christopher
Friedman, I, 393

Bucknall, Barbara J.
Le Guin, II, 167

Bucknell, Katherine
Auden, I, 48

Budick, E. Miller
Miller, A., II, 298

Bufithis, Philip H.
Mailer, II, 216

Buitenhuis, Peter
Updike, III, 303

Burbank, Rex
Anderson, S., I, 28

Burch, Esther E.
Parrington, III, 3

Burdick, Eugene
Buck, I, 157

Burger, Nash K.
Agee, I, 8

Burgess, Anthony
Calisher, I, 187; Doctorow, I, 286; Eastlake, I, 312; Jong, II, 113; Miller, H., II, 302; Updike, III, 304

Burgin, Richard
Singer, III, 198

Burgum, Edwin Berry
Wolfe, III, 424

Burke, Joan A.
Sexton, III, 168

Burke, Kenneth
Caldwell, I, 182; Cowley, I, 242; Dahlberg, I, 263; Frank, I, 388; Gregory, I, 454; Roethke, III, 98; Stein, III, 225; Wescott, III, 361; Wilder, III, 388; Williams, W., III, 405

Burkman, Katherine H.
Norman, II, 373

Burks, Ruth Elizabeth
Bambara, I, 60

Burn, Gordon
Ford, I, 384

Burns, Ben
Wright, R., III, 434

Burns, Gerald
Snyder, III, 206; Wakoski, III, 338

Burns, Richard K.
Behrman, I, 87

Burnshaw, Stanley
Frost, I, 399

Burr, Suzanne
O'Neill, II, 416

Burrows, Miles
Coover, I, 239

Burt, Struthers
Sinclair, III, 191

Bush, Geoffrey
Sontag, III, 209

Butler-Evans, Elliot
Bambara, I, 63

Butscher, Edward
Hugo, II, 68; McGrath, II, 262

Buttel, Robert
Stevens, III, 241

Butterfield, L.H.
DeVoto, I, 272

Butts, William
Wilbur, III, 387

Byerman, Keith
Jones, G., II, 108

Cabell, James Branch
Glasgow, I, 433; Mencken, II, 274

Cady, Edwin H.
Crane, S., I, 254; Howells, II, 60

Cahill, Daniel J.
Kosinski, II, 142

Cain, Edward
Viereck, III, 328

Cain, William E.
Du Bois, I, 301

Cairns, John C.
Adams, H., I, 5

Calder-Marshall, Arthur
London, II, 187

Caldwell, James R.
Rukeyser, III, 122

Caldwell, Mark
Sontag, III, 212

Callan, Ron
Williams, W., III, 408

Calmer, Ned
Jones, J., II, 109

Calverton, V.F.
Dell, I, 269; Sinclair, III, 190

Cambon, Glauco
Kinnell, II, 135

Campbell, Ewing
Carver, I, 196

Campbell, Harry Modean
Roberts, E., III, 91

Campbell, James
Baldwin, I, 58; Bukowski, I, 161

Canby, Henry Seidel
Benét, I, 99; Buck, I, 156; Cather, I, 197; James, H., II, 86; Lindsay, II, 181; Lowell, A., II, 191; Morley, II, 333; O'Hara, J., II, 397; Parker, III, 1; Saroyan, III, 145; Twain, III, 294; Wolfe, III, 423; Wright, R., III, 433

Canby, Vincent
Friedman, I, 393

Candelaria, Cordelia
Baca, I, 52

Cantwell, Robert
Boyle, K., I, 136; Rawlings, III, 67; Sinclair, III, 191

Capel, Patti
McKay, II, 267

Caplan, Lincoln
Buechner, I, 159

Capote, Truman
Bowles, J., I, 132

Capouya, Emile
Elliott, I, 330; Fuller, R. B., I, 406

Cargill, Oscar
Frank, I, 389; James, H., II, 87

Carlson, Ron
Price, III, 44

Carlson, Susan L.
Wasserstein, III, 355

Carmer, Carl
Barry, I, 71; Green, I, 452; Kelly, II, 118

Carpenter, Frederic I.
Jeffers, II, 98, 99; Saroyan, III, 146; Wouk, III, 429

Carpenter, John R.
Codrescu, I, 226; Snyder, III, 207; Wakoski, III, 338

Carpenter, Richard C.
Boyle, K., I, 137

Carr, C.
McCarthy, C., II, 251

Carr, Irene Campos
Chavez, I, 206

Carroll, Dennis
Mamet, II, 233

Carroll, Paul
Ashbery, I, 32; O'Hara, F., II, 394

Carruth, Hayden
Aiken, I, 11; Berryman, I, 104; Blackmur, I, 116; Bogan, I, 124; Doolittle, I, 289; Duncan, I, 308; Eberhart, I, 313; Garrigue, I, 419; Hall, II, 5; Lattimore, II, 157; Levertov, II, 168; Lowell, R., II, 193; MacLeish, II, 208; Merwin, II, 286; More, II, 332; Pound, III, 34; Powers, III, 40; Rich, III, 85; Schwartz, III, 159; Scott, III, 162; Sexton, III, 165; Stevens, III, 237; Van Doren, III, 313; Wakoski, III, 337

Carson, Barbara Harrell
Tyler, III, 301

Carson, Tom
Algren, I, 19

Carson, Warren J.
Hurston, II, 71

Carter, Everett
Frederic, I, 390; Garland, I, 418

Carter, John
Rice, III, 83

Cary, Richard
Jewett, II, 103

Casey, Jane Barnes
Taylor, III, 273

Casillo, Robert
Pound, III, 38

Casper, Leonard
O'Connor, F., II, 387

Cassill, R. V.
Berger, I, 100; Hersey, II, 39; Oates, II, 377

Castronovo, David
Wilson, E., III, 415, 416

Cather, Willa
Crane, S., I, 253; Jewett, II, 102

Catinella, Joseph
Malamud, II, 225

Caveney, Graham
Chabon, I, 201; McInerney, II, 265

Cavitch, David
Bly, I, 119

Century, Douglas
Malamud, II, 228

Cestre, C.
Babbitt, I, 52

Chabrowe, Leonard
Gelber, I, 424; O'Neill, II, 414

Chace, William M.
Trilling, III, 293

Chalmers, David Mark
Steffens, III, 223

Chalmers, Martin
Banks, I, 63

Chamberlain, John
Heyward, II, 41; Rourke, III, 120

Chambers, John B.
Fitzgerald, F., I, 372

Chambers, Whittaker
Niebuhr, II, 366

Chandler, Raymond
Hammett, II, 6

Chapin, Katherine G.
Schwartz, III, 158

Chapman, Abraham
Walker, M., III, 343

Chapman, Edward M.
Jewett, II, 101

Charyn, Jerome
Purdy, III, 50

Chase, Cleveland B.
Anderson, S., I, 27

Chase, Richard
Dahlberg, I, 263; Dos Passos, I, 292; Eliot, I, 318; Mailer, II, 213; Rahv, III, 60

Chatfield-Taylor, Otis
Van Druten, III, 314

Chatterton, Wayne
Algren, I, 19

Cheever, Benjamin
Cheever, I, 210

Cheever, Susan
Cheever, I, 209

Cheney, Brainard
O'Connor, F., II, 386; Percy, III, 7; Warren, III, 349

Cheney, Sheldon
Belasco, I, 87

Chester, Alfred
Albee, I, 12; Burroughs, I, 168; Salinger, III, 130

Cheuse, Alan
Mccarthy, C., II, 249; Wideman, III, 383

Chiaromonte, Nicola
Miller, H., II, 300

Childress, Mark
Hoffman, II, 50; Taylor, III, 274

Childs, Herbert Ellsworth
Masters, II, 244

Chothia, Jean
O'Neill, II, 415

Christensen, Paul
Olson, II, 409,

Christian, Barbara
Brooks, G., I, 150; Fauset, I, 352; Lorde, II, 189; Marshall, II, 240; Morrison, II, 339; Naylor, II, 360; Walker, A., III, 339

Christowe, Stoyan
Himes, II, 46

Chua, C.L.
Mukherjee, II, 346

Chupack, Henry
Purdy, III, 50

Ciardi, John
Adams, L., I, 7; Aiken, I, 9; Auden, I, 44; Bogan, I, 124; Burke, I, 164; Burroughs, I, 167; Elkin, I, 325; Fitts, I, 368; Frost, I, 395; Millay, II, 293; O'Hara, J., II, 398; Pound, III, 32; Roethke, III, 98; Wilbur, III, 384; Williams, W., III, 404

Ciuba, Gary M.
Price, III, 43; Wilbur, III, 387

Claire, William F.
Van Doren, III, 313

Clancey, William P.
McCullers, II, 257

Clark, Barrett H.
Belasco, I, 88; Green, I, 452; Howard, S., II, 57; Kelly, II, 118; MacKaye, II, 207; Thomas, III, 278

Clark, Harry Hayden
Fisher, D., I, 363; Parrington, III, 3

Clark, Leonard
Zukofsky, III, 451

Clark, Michele
Mason, II, 243

Clark, Miriam Marty
Nemerov, II, 365

Clark, Tom
Olson, II, 410

Clark, Walter Van Tilburg
Guthrie, I, 458; Richter, III, 90

Clark, William Bedford
Warren, III, 353

Clarke, Gerald
Vidal, III, 322

Clayton, John
Brautigan, I, 144

Cleghorn, Sarah N.
Fisher, D., I, 363

Clemons, Walter
Berger, I, 101; Lowell, R., II, 195; Lurie, II, 201; Pynchon, III, 53

Clines, Francis X.
Codrescu, I, 230

Cluck, Julia
Wylie, III, 440

Clurman, Harold
Albee, I, 12; Alfred, I, 16; Anderson, R., I, 26; Axelrod, I, 50; Baraka, I, 64, 67; Behrman, I, 86; Bowles, J., I, 131; Bullins, I, 162; Connelly, I, 236; Elder, I, 317; Gelber, I, 424; Gibson, I, 425; Hansberry, II, 11; Hellman, II, 23; Horovitz, II, 53; Inge, II, 77; Kingsley, II, 133; Lawson, II, 159; Miller, A., II, 294; Nathan, II, 359; Odets, II, 390; O'Neill, II, 411; Rabe, III, 57; Saroyan, III, 147; Schisgal, III, 154; Shepard, III, 178; Simon, III, 188; Wilder, III, 389; Williams, T., III, 399

Coale, Samuel
Cheever, I, 209; Gardner, J., I, 417; Theroux, III, 276

Coe, Robert
Shepard, III, 179

Coffey, Warren
Sheed, III, 174; Vonnegut, III, 329

Coffin, Arthur B.
Jeffers, II, 99

Coffin, Robert P. Tristram
Wheelock, III, 375

Cohen, Debra Rae
Purdy, III, 50

Cohen, Morris
Lewisohn, II, 179

Cohen, Morris Raphael
Parrington, III, 3

Cohen, Sarah Blacher
Ozick, II, 422

Cohn, Robert
Roth, H., III, 110

Cohn, Ruby
Albee, I, 14, 15; Guare, I, 457; Miller, A., II, 297; Shepard, III, 178; Williams, T., III, 399; Wilson, L., III, 418

Colbron, Grace Isabel
London, II, 185

Colcord, Lincoln
Rölvaag, III, 105

Cole, Myra
McMillan, II, 268

Coleman, Elliott
Warren, III, 350

Coles, Robert
Baldwin, I, 55; Baraka, I, 64; Grau, I, 451; Percy, III, 8; Rukeyser, III, 124; Salinger, III, 132

Collier, Eugenia W.
Johnson, J., II, 105

Collins, Joseph
Lowell, A., II, 190; Wharton, III, 367

Collins, Thomas Lyle
Wolfe, III, 424

Colum, Mary M.
Boyle, K., I, 136; Brooks, V., I, 151; March, II, 234; Millay, II, 293; Santayana, III, 142

Colum, Padraic
Adams, L., I, 6

Colvert, James B.
Crane, S., I, 253

Comay, Joan
Michener, II, 290

Combs, Robert
Crane, H., I, 251

Comerchero, Victor
West, III, 365

Commager, Henry Steele
Kantor, II, 117; Parrington, III, 5; Rourke, III, 120; Tate, III, 266; Veblen, III, 319

Connaroe, Joel
Berryman, I, 105; Levine, II, 174

Connelly, Marc
Benchley, I, 98

Conner, Frederick W.
Santayana, III, 143

Conner, Frederick William
Moody, II, 320

Connolly, Francis X.
Merton, II, 284

Conover, C. Eugene
Merton, II, 284

Conquest, Robert
Nabokov, II, 352

Conrad, Joseph
Crane, S., I, 252

Conrad, Sherman
Sarton, III, 148

Conroy, Jack
Bukowski, I, 160

Cook, Bruce
Algren, I, 18; Brautigan, I, 144; Connell, I, 235; Kesey, II, 129; Olson, II, 407; Sheed, III, 176; Snyder, III, 207; Yurick, III, 448

Cook, Martha
Giovanni, I, 432

Cook, Richard M.
McCullers, II, 259

Cook, Sylvia Jenkins
Caldwell, I, 184, 185

Cooke, Alistair
March, II, 235; Mencken, II, 277

Cooke, Delmar Gross
Howells, II, 60

Cooley, Peter
Plath, III, 22; Wright, J., III, 431

Cooper, Frederic Taber
Bierce, I, 107; Ferber, I, 354

Corke, Hilary
Stein, III, 227

Corngold, Stanley
Kosinski, II, 143

Corradino, Dolph
Kizer, II, 139

Corrigan, Matthew
Olson, II, 408

Corrigan, Robert W.
Wilder, III, 389

Corrington, John William
Bukowski, I, 160

Cosgrave, Mary Silva
Bontemps, I, 128

Costello, Bonnie
Moore, Marianne, II, 325

Cott, Jonathan
Purdy, III, 48

Cotter, James Finn
Merwin, II, 288; Shapiro, III, 172

Couch, W.T.
Caldwell, I, 182

Covi, Giovanni
Kincaid, II, 132

Covici, Pascal, Jr.
Steinbeck, III, 234

Cowart, David
Pynchon, III, 54; Vonnegut, III, 335

Cowley, Malcolm
Aiken, I, 9; Algren, I, 17; Anderson, S., I, 28; Auden, I, 43; Bodenheim, I, 122; Bogan, I, 123; Brooks, V., I, 152, 153; Buck, I, 156; Burke, I, 164; Caldwell, I, 183; Cozzens, I, 245; Crane, H., I, 248; Cummings, I, 261; Dell, I, 269; DeVoto, I, 272; Dos Passos, I, 291; Fast, I, 341; Faulkner, I, 344; Fiedler, I, 359; Fitzgerald, F., I, 369; Frost, I, 394; Hayes, II, 17; Hearn, II, 19; Howe, II, 58; Kreymborg, II, 146; Mailer, II, 213; McCarthy, M., II, 251; Mitchell, II, 314; Norris, II, 375; Sandburg, III, 137; Sinclair, III, 191; Styron, III, 249; Tate, III, 266; Thurber, III, 280; West, III, 364; White, III, 379; Wilder, III, 389; Wilson, E., III, 411, 413; Wright, R./, III, 433

Cox, James M.
Lardner, II, 155; Twain, III, 298

Cox, Martha Heasley
Algren, I, 19

Coxe, Louis
Cozzens, I, 245; Garrigue, I, 420; Van Duyn, III, 315

Craig, Patricia
Glasgow, I, 434

Crane, Hart
Frank, I, 387

Crane, R.S.
Brooks, C., I, 147

Craven, Thomas
Mumford, II, 347

Crawford, John W.
Heyward, II, 41

Crawford, T. Hugh
Williams, W., III, 408

Creekmore, Hubert
Brooks, G., I, 148; Taylor, III, 270

Creeley, Robert
Olson, II, 406

Crews, Frederick C.
Elliott, I, 329; Stafford, J., III, 215

Crews, Harry
Conroy, I, 238

Crichton, J. Michael
Vonnegut, III, 329

Cromie, Robert
Sheed, III, 175

Cross, Richard K.
Eberhart, I, 314

Crowder, Richard
Sandburg, III, 138

Crowell, Chester T.
Marquis, II, 238

Crump, G.B.
Morris, II, 337

Cruttwell, Patrick
Auchincloss, I, 40; Winters, III, 421

Cubeta, Paul H.
Fitts, I, 368

Cudjoe, Selwyn R.
Angelou, I, 31

Cummings, E.E.
Eliot, I, 317

Cummings, Scott T.
Fornés, I, 385

Cummins, Paul
Wilbur, III, 386

Cunningham, William H.
Steffens, III, 222

Cuppy, Will
Thurber, III, 279

Curb, Rosemary
Childress, I, 215

Curley, Thomas E.
Roberts, K., III, 93

Curley, Thomas F.
Eastlake, I, 311

Current, Richard N.
Foote, I, 377

Current-Garcia, Eugene
O. Henry, II, 38

Curtis, Bruce
Kopit, II, 140

Curtiss, Thomas Quinn
Nathan, II, 359; Saroyan, III, 146

Cutler, Bruce
Brooks, G., I, 149; Dugan, I, 303; Simpson, III, 189

Dabney, Lewis
Howe, II, 58

Dahl, Christopher C.
Auchincloss, I, 42

Daiches, David
Buechner, I, 158; Cather, I, 197; Ciardi, I, 219; Donleavy, I, 286; Eberhart, I, 313; Eliot, I, 319; James, H., II, 85; Shapiro, III, 169; Tate, III, 266; Trilling, III, 290; Van Doren, III, 312; Wilbur, III, 384

Dakin, Arthur H.
More, II, 331

Dalton, Elizabeth
Nabokov, II, 353

Damon, S. Foster
Lowell, A., II, 190

Dangerfield, George
McCullers, II, 257

Daniel, Janice
Hurston, II, 72

Daniels, Jonathan
Rawlings, III, 67

Daniels, Winthrop More
Veblen, III, 318

Davenport, Guy
Barthelme, I, 78; Didion, I, 280; Gardner, J., I, 414; Olson, II, 408; Zukofsky, III, 451

Davidson, Donald
Fletcher, I, 376

Davidson, Eugene
Fearing, I, 353; Patchen, III, 6; Viereck, III, 327

Davie, Donald
Hall, II, 5; Lowell, R., II, 196; Olson, II, 406; Pound, III, 33, 35

Davies, Carole Boyce
Kincaid, II, 131; Marshall, II, 242

Davies, Robert M.
More, II, 331

Davies, Russell
Roth, P., III, 114

Davis, Arthur P.
Bontemps, I, 127; Brooks, G., I, 149; Cullen, I, 258; Johnson, J., II, 106; Walker, M., III, 343

Davis, Charles T.
Robinson, III, 97

Davis, Cheri
Merwin, II, 287

Davis, Cynthia
Barth, I, 75

Davis, Cynthia A.
Morrison, II, 340

Davis, Dick
Winters, III, 423

Davis, Elmer
Sherwood, III, 183

Davis, Elrick B.
Guthrie, I, 458

Davis, Robert Gorham
Bellow, I, 91; Burroughs, I, 168; Dos Passos, I, 293; Farrell, I, 339; Fiedler, I, 359; Fuchs, I, 403; Guthrie, I, 458; Malamud, II, 225; Nin, II, 368; Rahv, III, 60; Schulberg, III, 156; Stegner, III, 224; Wescott, III, 362

Davis, Robert H.
O. Henry, II, 37

Davis, William V.
Bly, I, 121

Davison, Peter
Brooks, G., I, 148; Dugan, I, 302; Hass, II, 12; Hollander, II, 51; Kinnell, II, 137; Kunitz, II, 150; Merwin, II, 288; Simpson, III, 188; Swenson, III, 257; Van Doren, III, 312

Day, A. Grove
Michener, II, 290

Dearborn, Mary V.
Miller, H., II, 305

De Casseres, Benjamin
Markham, II, 235

De Feo, Ronald
Pynchon, III, 53

de Jonge, Alex
Nobokov, II, 354

DeLancey, Frenzella Elaine
Sanchez, III, 136

Delbanco, Nicholas
Tyler, III, 299

Dell, Floyd
Anderson, S., I, 27; Barnes, I, 69; Dreiser, I, 296; Millay, II, 292; Reed, J., III, 76; Sinclair, III, 190

DeMaria, Robert
Wakoski, III, 338

Dembo, L.S.
Crane, H., I, 249; Cummings, I, 260; Olson, II, 406; Williams, W., III, 406; Zukofsky, III, 452

Demetrakopoulos, Stephanie A.
Nin, II, 371

DeMott, Benjamin
Auchincloss, I, 41; Cheever, I, 208; Helprin, II, 28; Macdonald, D., II, 204; Mailer, II, 218; Morris, II, 334;

Price, III, 43; Salinger, III, 130; Sontag, III, 210; Tyler, III, 300; Wilder, III, 390

DeMott, Robert
Duncan, I, 309

Dempsey, David
Michener, II, 289; Richter, III, 89

Dennis, Patrick
Inge, II, 77

DeSantis, Christopher C.
Hughes, II, 67

Desmond, John F.
Bausch, I, 79; Erdrich, I, 337; O'Connor, F., II, 388

Des Pres, Terrence
Elkin, I, 327; Rich, III, 87

Deutsch, Babette
Bogan, I, 123; Doolittle, I, 288; Eliot, I, 318; Fowlie, I, 386; Jarrell, II, 93; Lowell, R., II, 191; Moody, II, 319; Pound, III, 32; Roethke, III, 98; Stevens, III, 237; Wheelock, III, 375; Winters, III, 419

Deutsch, R. H.
Schwartz, III, 159

DeVane, William C.
White, III, 379

Dever, Joe
O'Connor, E., II, 384

Devlin, Albert J.
Welty, III, 360

DeVoto, Bernard
Frost, I, 394; Marquis, II, 239; Roberts, K., III, 92

Dewey, John
James, W., II, 91

Dhawar, R.K.
Mukherjee, II, 345

Dick, Bernard F.
Vidal, III, 322

Dickey, James
Ashbery, I, 33; Gregory, I, 455; Kinnell, II, 136; Lattimore, II, 156; Meredith, II, 279; Merrill, II, 282; Miles, II, 292; Moore, Marianne, II, 323; Olson, II, 407; Roethke, III, 99; Stafford, W., III, 216; Viereck, III, 327; Warren, III, 351; Whittemore, III, 381; Wilbur, III, 385; Wright, J., III, 433

Dickey, William
Baraka, I, 65; Creeley, I, 256; Roethke, III, 99; Wilbur, III, 386; Wright, J., III, 430

Dickinson, Thomas H.
Lawson, II, 158; MacKaye, II, 207; Sherwood, III, 181; Thomas, III, 278

Dickinson-Br own, Roger
Momaday, II, 316

Dickstein, Lore
Sarton, III, 151

Dickstein, Morris
Fuchs, I, 403; Gardner, J., I, 415; Heller, II, 22; Roth, P., III, 114; Schwartz, III, 160; Williams, C. K., III, 393

Diehl, Joanne Feit
Bishop, E., I, 113

Dienstfrey, Harris
Bourjaily, I, 129

Di Filippo, Paul
Helprin, II, 29

DiGaetani, John L.
Guare, I, 458; Wilson, A., III, 410

Diggory, Terence
Kunitz, II, 149

Dillard, Annie
Connell, I, 235

Dillard, R.H.W.
Coover, I, 240

Dillon, George
Van Doren, III, 312

Dillon, Millicent
Bowles, J., I, 133

DiRenzo, Anthony
O'Connor, F., II, 389

Disch, Thomas M.
Fierstein, I, 362

Dischell, Stuart
Warren, III, 353

Ditsky, John
Elkin, I, 327

Dixon, Melvin
Jones, G., II, 109; Toomer, III, 286

Doane, Janice L.
Stein, III, 230

Dobrée, Bonamy
Eliot, I, 319; Saroyan, III, 145

Doggett, Frank
Stevens, III, 240, 241

Dolan, Frederick M.
Burroughs, I, 172

Dolin, Arnold
Roth, P., III, 111

Donadio, Stephen
Porter, III, 28; Pynchon, III, 52; Trilling, III, 291

Donald, David Herbert
Wolfe, III, 427

Donaldson, Scott
Hemingway, II, 33; Robinson, III, 96

Donlon, Jocelyn Hazelwood
Naylor, II, 361

Donoghue, Denis
Ashbery, I, 32; Blackmur, I, 116; Burke, I, 165; Eliot, I, 321; Fitzgerald, F., I, 371; Frost, I, 395; James, H., II, 89; Jarrell, II, 95; Mailer, II, 215; Moore, Marianne, II, 323; O'Neill, II, 413; Porter, III, 28; Pound, III, 34; Roethke, III, 99; Snodgrass, III, 204; Stevens, III, 238; Trilling, III, 292; Wilder, III, 391; Williams, W., III, 406

Doreski, C.K.
Bishop, E., I, 113

Dorfman, Joseph
Veblen, III, 318

Dorn, Edward
Merwin, II, 286

Dorris, Michael
Matthiessen, P., II, 248

Dos Passos, John
Wilson, E., III, 412

Doubiago, Sharon
Forché, I, 383

Dougherty, Jay
Ginsberg, I, 429

Doughty, H.N., Jr.
Shaw, III, 173

Douglas, Ann
Farrell, I, 340

Douglas, George H.
Lewis, II, 176; Mencken, II, 276; Wilson, E., III, 415

Downer, Alan S.
Fitch, I, 367; Kelly, II, 119; Lawson, II, 159; MacKaye, II, 207

Downing, Francis
McCullers, II, 257; Thurber, III, 280

Downs, Michael C.
Le Guin, II, 165

Doyle, Charles
Williams, W., III, 407

Doyle, Paul A.
Buck, I, 157

Drake, Leah Bodine
Wilbur, III, 385

Drake, Robert
Price, III, 42

Drake, William
Sarton, III, 153

Draper, Theodore
Reed, J., III, 77

Dreiser, Theodore
Twain, III, 294

Drew, Bettina
Algren, I, 20

Drew, Elizabeth
Moore, Marianne, II, 321; Ransom, III, 64

Driver, Tom F.
Albee, I, 13; Inge, II, 77; O'Neill, II, 411

Drutman, Irving
Kelly, II, 120

Duberman, Martin
Bullins, I, 162; Hansberry, II, 10; Miller, A., II, 296

Du Bois, W. E. B.
Bontemps, I, 126; Fauset, I, 350; Locke, II, 182; Toomer, III, 284

Du Bois, William
Maltz, II, 230

Duddy, Thomas A.
Zukofsky, III, 453

Duerden, Richard
Ferlinghetti, I, 357

Duff, Edward
Mumford, II, 348

Duffey, Bernard
Anderson, S., I, 28; Dell, I, 270; Masters, II, 244; Sandburg, III, 139; Williams, W., III, 408

Duffus, Robert L.
Edmonds, I, 315; Veblen, III, 319

Dugan, Alan
Ferlinghetti, I, 357

Duggan, Francis X.
More, II, 332

Duncan, J. L.
West, III, 367

Duncan, Robert
Dickey, I, 277; Doolittle, I, 288

Duncan, Todd
Gaines, I, 412

Dunham, Barrows
Steffens, III, 223

Dunn, Robert
Millhauser, II, 309

Dupee, F.W.
Agee, I, 7; Lowell, R., II, 192; Mailer, II, 214; Nabokov, II, 353; Powers, III, 41; Stein, III, 227; Swados, III, 255; Tate, III, 266; Wescott, III, 362

DuPlessis, Rachel Blau
Rich, III, 86

Dupree, Robert S.
Tate, III, 270

Duprey, Richard A.
O'Connor, E., II, 385

Durham, Philip
Chandler, I, 203

Dusenbury, Winifred I.
Inge, II, 77

Dutton, Wendy
Kincaid, II, 131

Duvall, John N.
Faulkner, I, 349

Dydo, Ulla E.
Stein, III, 231

Eakin, Paul John
Jewett, II, 103

Earley, Michael
Shepard, III, 180

Early, Gerald
Gates, I, 423

Eastman, Max
Benét, I, 98; Cummings, I, 259; Reed, J., III, 77; Santayana, III, 142

Eaton, Walter Prichard
Behrman, I, 85; Green, I, 452; Kingsley, II, 133; Sherwood, III, 182

Eberhart, Richard
Connell, I, 233; Rexroth, III, 78; Rukeyser, III, 123; Schwartz, III, 158; Scott, III, 163; Wilbur, III, 384; Williams, W., III, 404

Eble, Kenneth
Fitzgerald, F., I, 370

Eckman, Frederick
Ginsberg, I, 426

Edel, Leon
Adams, H., I, 4; Aiken, I, 10; Blackmur, I, 116; Brooks, V., I, 152; Cather, I, 198; James, H., II, 86; Nin, II, 369; Trilling, III, 291

Edenbaum, Robert I.
Hammett, II, 7

Edens, Michael
Dillard, I, 283

Eder, Richard
Butler, I, 173; Mamet, II, 231

Edgecombe, Rodney Stenning
Wilbur, III, 388

Edman, Irwin
Lewisohn, II, 179; Nathan, II, 359; Parker, III, 2; Thurber, III, 280; White, III, 378

Edwards, Thomas P.
Fiedler, I, 360

Edwards, Thomas R.
Baldwin, I, 56; Bukowski, I, 161; Gardner, J., I, 414; Reed, I., III, 72; Sheed, III, 175

Ehrenpreis, Irvin
Justice, II, 115; Updike, III, 305; Wharton, III, 370

Eiland, Howard
Roth, P., III, 116

Eimerl, Sarel
Chandler, I, 202; Rexroth, III, 79

Eiseley, Loren
London, II, 187

Eisen, Kurt
O'Neill, II, 417

Eisinger, Chester E.
Gordon, C., I, 445; Saroyan, III, 147; Stegner, III, 224

Elder, Donald
Lardner, II, 154

Elias, Robert H.
Thurber, III, 280

Eliot, T.S.
Babbitt, I, 52; James, H., II, 84; Pound, III, 32

Elledge, Jim
O'Hara, F., II, 396

Elliott, Emory
Stone, III, 246

Elliott, G. R.
Babbitt, I, 52; Frost, I, 394

Elliott, George P.
Berryman, I, 103; Chandler, I, 203; Eberhart, I, 313; Ellison, I, 332; Levertov, II, 168; Moore, Marianne, II, 323; Scott, III, 162; Selby, III, 163; Shapiro, III, 170

Elliott, Janice
Zukofsky, III, 452

Ellis, Harry B.
Carson, I, 193

Ellison, Ralph
Baraka, I, 64; Wright, R., III, 435

Ellmann, Richard
Cozzens, I, 246

Elman, Richard M.
Olsen, II, 403; Singer, III, 192; Winters, III, 421; Yurick, III, 448

Elser, Frank B.
Steele, III, 219

Eng, David L.
Hwang, II, 73

Engel, Bernard F.
Moore, Marianne, II, 322

Engle, Paul
Benét, I, 99; Williams, T., III, 397

Eppard, Philip B.
O'Hara, J., II, 400

Epstein, Joseph
Elliott, I, 330; Mencken, II, 278; Sandburg, III, 140

Esslin, Martin
Albee, I, 12; Gelber, I, 424

Estess, Sybil P.
Bishop, E., I, 111

Esty, William
Baldwin, I, 54

Eubanks, Cecil L.
Percy, III, 9

Evans, Bergen
Shaw, III, 173

Evans, Elizabeth
Tyler, III, 301

Evans, Oliver
Bowles, P., I, 133; McCullers, II, 257, 258

Evans, T. Jeff
De Vries, I, 275

Everett, Nicholas
Ginsberg, I, 430

Everson, William
Jeffers, II, 100

Fabre, Michel
Wideman, III, 384; Wright, R., III, 436, 437

Fadiman, Clifton
Bierce, I, 108; Cather, I, 196; Lardner, II, 153; Marquand, II, 237; Steele, III, 219; Wescott, III, 362

Fairchild, Hoxie Neale
Lindsay, II, 182; Robinson, III, 95; Sandburg, III, 138

Falk, Doris V.
Hellman, II, 25; O'Neill, II, 412

Fanning, Charles
Kennedy, W., II, 124

Farr, Finis
Mitchell, II, 315

Farrar, John
March, II, 234

Farrell, James T.
Dos Passos, I, 291; Fuchs, I, 402; Hemingway, II, 29; Lardner, II, 153; Levin, II, 171; Mumford, II, 348; Swados, III, 255

Farrell, John P.
Wilbur, III, 385

Farrell, Paul V.
Schulberg, III, 156

Farrelly, John
Burns, I, 166; Rahv, III, 60; Schwartz, III, 158

Farrison, W. Edward
Hansberry, II, 11; Toomer, III, 286

Faulkner, Mara
Olsen, II, 405

Faulkner, William
Anderson, S., I, 28

Faverty, Frederic E.
Wilbur, III, 385

Fay, Bernard
Stein, III, 225

Featherstone, Joseph
Baldwin, I, 55

Fecher, Charles A.
Mencken, II, 277

Feder, Lillian
Aiken, I, 11; Eliot, I, 321; Lowell, R., II, 194; Merwin, II, 287; Ransom, III, 66

Feibleman, James K.
Steffens, III, 222

Feied, Frederick
London, II, 187

Feikema, Feike
Stegner, III, 224

Fein, Richard
Lowell, R., II, 192

Feingold, Michael
Guare, I, 456; Mamet, II, 232; Rabe, III, 58

Feld, Rose
Fast, I, 341; Levin, II, 172

Feld, Rose C.
Barnes, I, 69

Feldman, Alan
O'Hara, F., II, 396

Feldman, Irving
Pynchon, III, 51

Feldman, Morton
O'Hara, F., II, 395

Felgar, Robert
Wright, R., III, 438

Felheim, Marvin
McCullers, II, 258

Felman, Jyl Lynn
Kushner, II, 151

Ferguson, Otis
Odets, II, 390

Ferguson, Otis C.
Edmonds, I, 315

Ferguson, Suzanne C.
Barnes, I, 70

Ferguson, William
Baxter, I, 81

Fergusson, Francis
Cozzens, I, 245; Green, I, 452; Lowell, R., II, 193

Ferry, David
Tate, III, 267

Fichtelberg, Joseph
Dos Passos, I, 294

Fiedler, Leslie
Algren, I, 17; Berger, I, 100; Capote, I, 190; Ginsberg, I, 427; Hawkes, II, 13; Hemingway, II, 30; Kesey, II, 128; Pound, III, 38; Rexroth, III, 79; Roth, H., III, 109; Salinger, III, 130; Shaw, III, 174; Twain, III, 294; West, III, 364

Field, Andrew
Kosinski, II, 141; Nabokov, II, 353

Field, Edward
Chester, I, 214

Field, Louise Maunsell
Maltz, II, 229; Van Druten, III, 314

Fifer, Elizabeth
Stein, III, 229

Filler, Louis
Bourne, I, 130; Steffens, III, 221

Fine, David M.
Cain, I, 182

Finger, Charles J.
Richter, III, 88

Finklestein, Norman
Duncan, I, 310

Finn, James
Baldwin, I, 54

Firebaugh, Joseph J.
Wilder, III, 388

Fischer, John
Cozzens, I, 246

Fischer, William C.
Baraka, I, 67

Fischer, William J.
Saroyan, III, 146

Fishburn, Katherine
Wright, R., III, 437

Fisher, Dorothy Canfield
Guthrie, I, 458

Fisher-Wirth, Ann W.
Williams, W., III, 408

Fiske, A. Longfellow
Lindsay, II, 181

Fitch, Robert E.
Niebuhr, II, 367

Fitts, Dudley
Aiken, I, 10; Barnes, I, 69; Blackmur, I, 116; Fearing, I, 353; Garrigue, I, 419; Hughes, II, 63; Jeffers, II, 97; Moore, Merrill, II, 328; Rexroth, III, 78; Schwartz, III, 158; Wheelock, III, 375; Whittemore, III, 381

Fitzgerald, F. Scott
Lardner, II, 153; Mencken, II, 273

Fitzgerald, Robert
Frost, I, 395; Lattimore, II, 156; O'Connor, F., II, 386; Patchen, III, 5; Pound, III, 32; Tate, III, 266

Fitzgerald, Stephen E.
Mencken, II, 274

Fitzpatrick, Vincent
Mencken, II, 278

Fixler, Michael
Singer, III, 195

Flanagan, James K.
Miller, A., II, 299

Flanagan, John T.
Masters, II, 244; Richter, III, 89

Flanagan, Mary
Gordon, M., I, 447

Flanders, Jane
Styron, III, 252

Fleischer, Leonore
Reed, I., III, 71

Fleming, Ian
Chandler, I, 202

Fleming, Robert E.
Hemingway, II, 35; Johnson, J., II, 105; Williams, J., III, 395

Fletcher, John Gould
Aiken, I, 9; Auden, I, 43; Bodenheim, I, 122; Gregory, I, 455; Kreymborg, II, 147; Lowell, A., II, 191

Flexner, Eleanor
Anderson, M., I, 25; Barry, I, 71; Howard, S., II, 57; Kelly, II, 118; Lawson, II, 159

Flint, R.W.
Aiken, I, 11; Buechner, I, 158; Crane, H., I, 250; Rexroth, III, 78; Sontag, III, 209; Stickney, III, 245; Wheelwright, III, 378; Williams, W., III, 404

Floan, Howard R.
Saroyan, III, 147

Flower, B. O.
Markham, II, 235

Flynn, Gale
Rich, III, 86

Foerster, Norman
Mumford, II, 347

Foley, Barbara
Toomer, III, 287

Foley, Martha
Steele, III, 220

Follett, Wilson
Winters, III, 420

Folsom, L. Edwin
Snyder, III, 208

Foner, Philip S.
London, II, 185

Fontenrose, John
Steinbeck, III, 233

Ford, Arthur
Creeley, I, 257

Ford, Ford Madox
Bogan, I, 123; Crane, S., I, 253, 254; Gordon, C., I, 444

Ford, Karen Jackson
Hughes, II, 67

Ford, Nick Aaron
Connelly, I, 237

Ford, Richard
Carver, I, 196

Foreman, Gabrielle
Dove, I, 295

Forgotson, E.S.
Patchen, III, 6; Wheelwright, III, 377

Forman, Henry James
O. Henry, II, 36

Forte, Jeanie
Norman, II, 373

Foster, Ann T.
Roethke, III, 103

Foster, Edward
Anderson, M., I, 25

Foster, Richard
Blackmur, I, 117; Brooks, C., I, 147; Fitzgerald, F., I, 371; Gold, I, 440; Ransom, III, 65; Rexroth, III, 79

Fowles, John
Capote, I, 192

Fowlie, Wallace
Adams, L., I, 7; Bishop, E., I, 110; Gregory, I, 455; Sarton, III, 149; Stein, III, 226

Fox, Hugh
Bukowski, I, 160

Fox, Terry Curtis
Guare, I, 456

Fraiberg, Louis
Brooks, V., I, 152; Burke, I, 164

Frakes, James R.
Friedman, I, 393

Frank, Elizabeth
Bogan, I, 125; Van Duyn, III, 316

Frank, Joseph
Barnes, I, 69; Bishop, J., I, 115; Burke, I, 165

Frank, Waldo
Bourne, I, 130; Kreymborg, II, 146; Mumford, II, 348; Toomer, III, 284

Frankel, Charles
Niebuhr, II, 366; Santayana, III, 142

Frankel, Haskel
Yurick, III, 448

Frankenberg, Lloyd
Goodman, I, 441; Moore, Marianne, II, 321

Franklin, Benjamin
Nin, II, 371

Franzen, Jonathan
Banks, I, 64

Fraser, G.S.
Zukofsky, III, 451

Fredriksson, Karl G.
Hillerman, II, 45

Fredriksson, Lilian
Hillerman, II, 45

Free, William J.
Robinson, III, 97

Freedman, Diane P.
Piercy, III, 13

Freedman, Morris
Schulberg, III, 156

Freedman, Richard
Sheed, III, 175

Freedman, William
Roth, H., III, 110

Freeman, Anne Hobson
Price, III, 43

Fremantle, Anne
McGinley, II, 261

Fremont-Smith, Eliot
Irving, II, 79; Roth, P., III, 115; Selby, III, 163

French, Marilyn
Hacker, II, 3

French, Warren
Purdy, III, 47; Salinger, III, 131; Steinbeck, III, 234

Frenz, Horst
O'Neill, II, 412, 414

Fried, Lewis F.
Farrell, I, 341

Friedman, Alan J.
Pynchon, III, 53; Reed, I., III, 71

Friedman, Ellen G.
Acker, I, 3

Friedman, Jack
Bullins, I, 163

Friedman, John
Heller, II, 23

Friedman, John S.
Selby, III, 164

Friedman, Melvin J.
O'Connor, F., II, 386

Friedman, Susan
Doolittle, I, 289

Frohock, W.M.
Cain, I, 181; Hemingway, II, 30; Steinbeck, III, 232; Trilling, III, 290; Wolfe, III, 424

Frutkin, Renascence
Shepard, III, 177

Frye, Northrop
Stevens, III, 238

Fuchs, Miriam
Barnes, I, 70

Fulkerson, Baucum
Fletcher, I, 376

Fuller, Edmund
Clark, I, 226; De Vries, I, 273; Rice, III, 83

Fuller, H.B.
Morley, II, 332

Fuller, R.C.
Price, III, 44

Fuller, Roy
Moore, Marianne, II, 324; Stevens, III, 240

Fullinwider, S.P.
Toomer, III, 285

Fussell, Edwin S.
Anderson, S., I, 28; Robinson, III, 94

Fussell, Paul, Jr.
Wilder, III, 389

Gabbin, Joanne Veal
Sanchez, III, 135

Gabriel, Ralph H.
James, W., II, 92

Gadinier, Suzanne
Rukeyser, III, 126

Gaffney, Elizabeth
Olds, II, 401

Gagnier, Regenia
Cisneros, I, 224

Galantiere, Lewis
MacLeish, II, 208

Galassi, Jonathan
Nemerov, II, 364

Galbraith, John Kenneth
Capote, I, 191

Gale, Zona
Garland, I, 418

Galler, David
Creeley, I, 256; Merwin, II, 286; Nemerov, II, 363; Wheelock, III, 376

Galloway, David D.
Updike, III, 304

Ganz, Arthur
Miller, A., II, 296; Williams, T., III, 397, 400

Ganzel, Dewey
Hemingway, II, 32

Garber, Frederick
Stafford, W., III, 218

Gardner, Erle Stanley
Hammett, II, 6

Gardner, John
Cheever, I, 208; Oates, II, 381; Styron, III, 253; Updike, III, 306

Gargano, James W.
Wharton, III, 370

Garis, Robert
Barth, I, 73; Roth, P., III, 113

Garland, Hamlin
Norris, II, 374; Twain, III, 294

Garner, Stanton
Frederic, I, 391

Garnett, Edward
Crane, S., I, 252, 254,

Garrett, George
Connell, I, 234; Hersey, II, 40

Garrigue, Jean
Gregory, I, 456; Moore, Marianne, II, 322; Nin, II, 369

Garrison, W. E.
Markham, II, 236

Garson, Helen S.
Capote, I, 192

Gartner, Carol B.
Carson, I, 194

Gaskill, Gayle
Sarton, III, 152

Gass, William H.
Faulkner, I, 345; James, H., II, 86; Miller, H., II, 302; Powers, III, 41

Gassner, John
Barry, I, 72; Behrman, I, 86; Green, I, 453; Hellman, II, 23; Howard, S., II, 57; Inge, II, 77; Miller, A., II, 294; Nathan, II, 359; Odets, II, 390, 391; O'Neill, II, 412; Saroyan, III, 147; Sherwood, III, 182; Williams, T., III, 396

Gaston, Edwin W.
Richter, III, 90

Gaston, Paul L.
Snodgrass, III, 205

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr.
Brown, S., I, 155; Ellison, I, 335; Morrison, II, 342; Wright, R., III, 439

Gay, Robert M.
Edmonds, I, 315

Gayle, Addison, Jr.
Styron, III, 251

Geherin, David J.
Didion, I, 280

Gehman, Richard B.
West, III, 364

Geis, Deborah R.
Fornés, I, 386; Mamet, II, 233; Shange, III, 168; Shepard, III, 181

Geismar, Anne
Algren, I, 20

Geismar, Maxwell
Algren, I, 17; Boyle, K., I, 137; Brooks, V., I, 152; Burns, I, 167; Cather, I, 197; Cheever, I, 207; Cozzens, I, 246; Dos Passos, I, 291; Dreiser, I, 296; Fitzgerald, F., I, 369; Glasgow, I, 433; Hemingway, II, 30; Hersey, II, 39; James, H., II, 87; Jones, J., II, 110; Lardner, II, 153; Lewis, II, 175; London, II, 186; March, II, 235; Mencken, II, 274; Michener, II, 290; Nin, II, 369; Norris, II, 375; Sinclair, III, 191; Steinbeck, III, 232; Styron, III, 249; Wouk, III, 429

Gelfant, Blanche
Kerouac, II, 126

Geok-Leong, Liew
Mukherjee, II, 345

George, Diana Hume
Sexton, III, 167

Gerber, Philip L.
Dreiser, I, 296; Frost, I, 396

Getlein, Frank
Sarton, III, 149

Ghent, Dorothy Van
Gold, I, 439

Gibbons, Reginald
Goyen, I, 450

Gibbs, Barbara
Miles, II, 291

Gibbs, Wolcott
O'Hara, J., II, 398

Gibney, Frank
Michener, II, 289

Gibson, Donald B.
Baldwin, I, 56; Ellison, I, 333; Hughes, II, 64; Tolson, III, 284

Gibson, Morgan
Rexroth, III, 80

Giddings, Paula
Giovanni, I, 431

Gies, Judith
Godwin, I, 439

Giese, William F.
Babbitt, I, 51

Gifford, Henry
Moore, Marianne, II, 324

Gilbert, Sandra M.
Sexton, III, 166; Wharton, III, 373

Gilder, Rosamond
Rice, III, 83; Sherwood, III, 182; Van Druten, III, 314; Young, III, 443

Giles, James R.
Bullins, I, 163

Giles, Molly
McMillan, II, 268

Gillen, Francis
Barthelme, I, 77

Gillespie, Elgy
Shepard, III, 180

Gilliatt, Penelope
De Vries, I, 274

Gilman, Lawrence
Masters, II, 243

Gilman, Richard
Baraka, I, 65; Barthelme, I, 76; Cheever, I, 207; Drexler, I, 299; Friedman, I, 392; Goodman, I, 441; Malamud, II, 227; Oates, II, 377; Sontag, III, 211

Gilroy, Harry
McGinley, II, 261

Ginsberg, Allen
Corso, I, 242

Gioia, Dana
Justice, II, 114

Giovanni, Nikki
Dunbar, I, 307

Gladstein, Mimi Reisel
Faulkner, I, 347; Steinbeck, III, 235

Glasgow, Ellen
Young, III, 444

Glasheen, Adaline
Moody, II, 320

Glasheen, Francis J.
Moody, II, 320

Glasser, Perry
Baxter, I, 82

Glassman, Peter
Beattie, I, 84

Glazer, Nathan
Cahan, I, 180

Gleason, Judith
Forché, I, 382

Gleason, Ralph
Kerouac, II, 125

Glenn, Eunice
Welty, III, 357

Glicksberg, Charles I.
Ellison, I, 332; Frank, I, 388; Jones, J., II, 110; Lewisohn, II, 180; Miller, H., II, 300; Mumford, II, 347; Rourke, III, 121; Tate, III, 266

Gloag, Julian
Tyler, III, 299

Gloster, Hugh M.
Bontemps, I, 127; Johnson, J., II, 105; Wright, R., III, 433

Glover, Douglas
Young Bear, III, 446

Godsey, Edwin S.
Wheelock, III, 376

Godwin, Gail
Beattie, I, 84; Conroy, I, 239

Going, William T.
Lee, II, 163

Gold, Arthur
Brautigan, I, 143; Pynchon, III, 51

Gold, Herbert
Algren, I, 18; Bourjaily, I, 128; Burroughs, I, 169; Eastlake, I, 311; Elliott, I, 329; Kerouac, II, 125; White, III, 380

Gold, Michael
Wilder, III, 388

Golden, Harry
Sandburg, III, 138

Goldensohn, Barry
Pinsky, III, 19

Goldensohn, Lorrie
Bishop, E., I, 112

Goldhurst, William
Fitzgerald, F., I, 370

Goldman, Albert
Gold, I, 440

Goldsmith, David H.
Vonnegut, III, 331

Goldstein, Bernice
Salinger, III, 131

Goldstein, Lawrence
MacLeish, II, 211

Goldstein, Malcolm
Odets, II, 392; Wilder, III, 390

Goldstein, Sanford
Salinger, III, 131

Goldstone, Richard H.
Wilder, III, 390

Golffing, Francis C.
Burke, I, 164; Nemerov, II, 361; Wilbur, III, 384

Gollomb, Joseph
Roth, H., III, 109

Gomme, Andor
Ransom, III, 66

Gonzales-Berry, Erlinda
Chavez, I, 206

Gonzalez, Ray
Anaya, I, 24

Goodman, Paul
Roberts, E., III, 91

Goodwin, Richard
McCarthy, M., II, 254

Gordis, Robert
Wouk, III, 429

Gordon, Ambrose Jr.,
Berryman, I, 103

Gordon, Andrew
Reed, I., III, 72

Gordon, Caroline
O'Connor, F., II, 387

Gordon, David J.
Elliott, I, 331; Gardner, J., I, 414

Gordon, Jan B.
Frost, I, 397

Gordon, Lois
Barthelme, I, 78

Gordon, Lyndall
Eliot, I, 323

Gordon, Mary
McCarthy, M., II, 255

Goreau, Angeline
Sarton, III, 154

Gorelik, Mordecai
Belasco, I, 87

Gorman, Herbert S.
Bodenheim, I, 123; Hearn, II, 19; Wylie, III, 439

Gorra, Michael
Calisher, I, 188

Gosse, Edmund
James, H., II, 85

Gottfried, Martin
Wilson, L., III, 416

Gottlieb, Annie
Brown, R., I, 154

Gould, George M.
Hearn, II, 19

Gould, Janice
Ortiz, II, 419

Gould, Jean
Odets, II, 392

Gould, Karen J.
Rand, III, 63

Gould, Lois
Smiley, III, 201

Gower, Herschel
Taylor, III, 273

Goyen, William
O'Connor, F., II, 385; Sarton, III, 149

Graham, Aelred
Merton, II, 284

Graham, Don
Porter, III, 30

Graham, Kenneth
Berger, I, 100

Graham, Maryemma
Walker, M., III, 345

Grammer, John W.
Mccarthy, C., II, 250

Grant, Damian
Plath, III, 22

Grant, Mary Kathryn
Oates, II, 380

Grattan, C. Hartley
Bierce, I, 108; Farrell, I, 339; Lewis, II, 175; Norris, II, 374; Sinclair, III, 190

Grau, Shirley Ann
Goyen, I, 449

Grauer, Neil A.
Thurber, III, 282

Graver, Lawrence
McCullers, II, 258; Theroux, III, 275

Graves, Michael
Wright, J., III, 432

Graves, Robert
Ransom, III, 64

Gray, Francine du Plessix
Bowles, J., I, 132

Gray, James
Auchincloss, I, 40; Stegner, III, 224; Veblen, III, 319

Gray, Paul Edward
Dickey, I, 278

Gray, Richard
Bukowski, I, 161; Creeley, I, 257; Koch, II, 139; McCullers, II, 259; Rukeyser, III, 125; Styron, III, 252

Gray, Thomas Alexander
Wylie, III, 441

Grebstein, Sheldon Norman
Lewis, II, 176; MacLeish, II, 209

Green, Elizabeth
Stevens, III, 238

Green, Howard
Buechner, I, 158

Green, Martin
Kerouac, II, 128

Green, Michelle
Bowles, P., I, 135

Greenberg, Clement
Eliot, I, 319; Wheelwright, III, 377

Greenberg, Joanne
Vonnegut, III, 329

Greenfield, Stanley B.
Crane, S., I, 255

Greenslet, Ferris
Hearn, II, 19

Greer, Michael
Forché, I, 384

Gregerson, Linda
Olds, II, 402

Gregory, Horace
Adams, L., I, 6; Aiken, I, 10; Anderson, S., I, 27; Bishop, J., I, 114; Bodenheim, I, 123; Cummings, I, 259; Doolittle, I, 288; Fitts, I, 367, 368; Fitzgerald, R., I, 374; Fletcher, I, 376; More, II, 331; Robinson, III, 94; Roth, H., III, 109; Wheelwright, III, 377; Williams, W., III, 403; Wylie, III, 441

Greiner, Donald J.
Frost, I, 399

Grene, David
Lattimore, II, 156

Griffin, Bryan
Irving, II, 79

Griffith, Hubert
Rice, III, 83

Grigsby, Gordon K.
Crane, H., I, 249

Grim, William E.
Zukofsky, III, 455

Gross, Beverly
Eastlake, I, 312; Gass, I, 420

Gross, John
Roth, P., III, 112

Gross, Robert A.
Angelou, I, 29; Reed, I., III, 71

Gross, Theodore L.
Ellison, I, 333; Mailer, II, 215; Salinger, III, 131; Wright, R., III, 436

Grossman, Allen
Ginsberg, I, 427

Groth, Janet
Wilson, E., III, 416

Grover, Jan Zita
Didion, I, 281

Grudin, Louis
Bodenheim, I, 122

Grumbach, Doris
Lurie, II, 198; McCarthy, M., II, 253; Rossner, III, 108; Sarton, III, 151

Guare, John
Miller, A., II, 299

Gubar, Susan
Wharton, III, 373

Guerard, Albert
Burke, I, 164

Guernsey, Otis L., Jr.
Williams, T., III, 396

Gunderson, Elizabeth
Espada, I, 337

Gunn, Thom
Creeley, I, 256; Levertov, II, 167

Gurian, Jay
Berger, I, 101

Gurko, Leo
Caldwell, I, 183; Marquand, II, 237

Gurko, Miriam
Millay, II, 294

Gussow, Mel
Anderson, R., I, 26; Fierstein, I, 361; Fuller, C., I, 404; Sarton, III, 153; Wilson, L., III, 417

Guthrie, A. B.
Stegner, III, 225

Guthrie, W.N.
Torrence, III, 287

Guttenberg, Barnett
Warren, III, 351

Gutwillig, Robert
Connell, I, 233

Hénault, Marie
Kunitz, II, 149

Haas, Robert Bartlett
Stein, III, 225

Haberman, Donald
Wilder, III, 390

Hackett, Francis
Lindsay, II, 180; Millay, II, 293; Sandburg, III, 136; Torrence, III, 288

Hadas, Moses
Fitts, I, 368; Lattimore, II, 157

Hadas, Pamela White
Moore, Marianne, II, 325

Haffenden, John
Berryman, I, 106

Hagedorn, Herman
Torrence, III, 288

Hagen, W. M.
Johnson, C., II, 104

Hagenbüchle, Helen
Jarrell, II, 96

Haines, George
Stein, III, 226

Halio, Jay L.
Hawkes, II, 13; Roth, P., III, 113; Schwartz, III, 159; Taylor, III, 272

Hall, Caroline King Barnard
Sexton, III, 167

Hall, Cheryl
Morrison, II, 342

Hall, Donald
Eberhart, I, 313; Jarrell, II, 94; Lowell, R., II, 191; Rexroth, III, 81; Rich, III, 84; Roethke, III, 98; Wilbur, III, 385; Williams, W., III, 405

Hall, James
Gibson, I, 425

Hallberg, Robertson
Snodgrass, III, 205

Halliday, Mark
Stevens, III, 243

Halline, Allan H.
Anderson, M., I, 25

Halper, Albert
Fuchs, I, 402

Halpern, Martin
Moody, II, 321

Halsband, Robert
Jackson, II, 83; McCarthy, M., II, 251

Halsey, Margaret
Hersey, II, 39

Halstead, William P.
Belasco, I, 88

Halter, Peter
Williams, W., III, 409

Hamalian, Linda
Rexroth, III, 81

Hamilton, Alice
McCullers, II, 259

Hamilton, Clayton
Fitch, I, 366; MacKaye, II, 206; Thomas, III, 278

Hamilton, Ian
Bishop, E., I, 114; Howard, R., II, 56

Hampl, Patricia
Kizer, II, 138

Hampshire, Stuart
James, W., II, 93

Hand, Clifford
Wright, R., III, 435

Hannah, Barry
Eastlake, I, 312

Hansell, William H.
Hayden, II, 17

Hansen, Harry
Anderson, S., I, 26

Hapgood, Hutchins
Cahan, I, 179; Dell, I, 269; Steffens, III, 222

Harap, Louis
Malamud, II, 228; Roth, P., III, 117; Singer, III, 199

Harding, Jeremy
Burroughs, I, 172

Hardwick, Elizabeth
Ford, I, 385; Hellman, II, 24; Plath, III, 21, 25; Rahv, III, 61; Shepard, III, 177

Hardy, Barbara
Plath, III, 20

Hardy, John Edward
Brooks, C., I, 147; Porter, III, 29

Hardy, Willene
McCarthy, M., II, 255

Harland, Gordon
Niebuhr, II, 368

Harmon, William
Ammons, I, 23; Pynchon, III, 52

Harper, George M.
More, II, 329

Harper, Howard M.
Salinger, III, 131; Updike, III, 304

Harrigan, Anthony
Merrill, II, 281

Harrington, Alan
Gold, I, 439

Harris, Charles B.
Barth, I, 73; Barthelme, I, 76; Heller, II, 21; Vonnegut, III, 330

Harris, Mark
Lindsay, II, 182

Harris, Norman
Reed, I., III, 74

Harris, Robert R.
Ozick, II, 421

Harris, Sydney J.
Thurber, III, 280

Harris, Trudier
Walker, A., III, 339

Harris, William J.
Giovanni, I, 432

Harrison, Charles T.
Santayana, III, 142, 143

Harrison, Gilbert A.
Wilder, III, 392

Harrison, Victoria
Bishop, E., I, 113

Hart, Elizabeth
March, II, 234

Hartman, Geoffrey H.
Ammons, I, 22; Macdonald, R., II, 206; Sexton, III, 164; Wright, J., III, 430

Hartung, Philip
Rawlings, III, 67

Harvey, Valerie
Silko, III, 184

Hashim, James
Williams, T., III, 399

Haskins, Jim
Conroy, I, 237

Haslam, Gerald W.
Eastlake, I, 312; Kingston, II, 134

Hassan, Ihab
Abish, I, 2; Berger, I, 100; Brautigan, I, 145; Capote, I, 190; Elliott, I, 330; Ellison, I, 332; Jackson, II, 84;

Macdonald, D., II, 204; McCullers, II, 257; Morris, II, 336; Pynchon, III, 51; Reed, I., III, 72; Roethke, III, 101; Snodgrass, III, 204; Styron, III, 251; Vonnegut, III, 330

Hatch, Robert
Burroughs, I, 169; Hersey, II, 38; Inge, II, 76; Wright, R., III, 434; Yurick, III, 448

Hatcher, Harlan
Cather, I, 197; Dell, I, 269; Marquand, II, 236; Morley, II, 333

Hausdorff, Don
Pynchon, III, 52

Havighurst, Walter
Ferber, I, 356; Richter, III, 89; Stafford, J., III, 214

Hawkes, John
O'Connor, F., II, 386

Hawkins, Sherman
Kinnell, II, 135

Hawthorne, Evelyn J.
Kincaid, II, 133

Hay, John
Schwartz, III, 158

Hay, Sara Henderson
Garrigue, I, 419; Millay, II, 293

Hayakawa, S.I.
Cummings, I, 259

Hayes, Alfred
Williams, T., III, 396

Hayes, Brian P.
Oates, II, 378

Hayes, Richard
Inge, II, 76; Kingsley, II, 133; Miller, A., II, 295; Stafford, J., III, 214; Taylor, III, 271

Hayles, N.B.
Le Guin, II, 166

Hayman, Ronald
Albee, I, 14; Bishop, E., I, 111; Miller, A., II, 297; Olson, II, 407; Plath, III, 26; Roethke, III, 100; Snyder, III, 206

Hays, Peter L.
Hemingway, II, 35

Hazlitt, Henry
Dos Passos, I, 290; Nathan, II, 359; Santayana, III, 141

Hazo, Samuel
Nemerov, II, 363

Healey, Robert C.
Sherwood, III, 182

Heaney, Seamus
Frost, I, 399, 401

Heard, Martha E.
Chavez, I, 205

Hecht, Anthony
Dugan, I, 303; Merrill, II, 282; Nemerov, II, 363; Wilbur, III, 386

Hecht, Roger
Whittemore, III, 381

Heilbrun, Carolyn G.
McCarthy, M., II, 256; Sarton, III, 150

Heilman, Robert
Williams, T., III, 398

Hellman, Lillian
Hammett, II, 7

Helms, Alan
Ashbery, I, 33; Meredith, II, 280

Hemley, Cecil
Sexton, III, 165

Henderson, Archibald
O. Henry, II, 36

Henderson, David W.
Chabon, I, 201

Hendin, Josephine
Brautigan, I, 145; Gardner, J., I, 416; Selby, III, 164

Hendrick, George
Porter, III, 28

Henrick, George
Jones, J., II, 111

Henry, David D.
Moody, II, 319

Hentoff, Nat
Himes, II, 47

Hepburn, James G.
Robinson, III, 95

Herbst, Josephine
Dahlberg, I, 264; Lardner, II, 155

Herman, David J.
Hammett, II, 9

Herman, William
Mamet, II, 233

Hernton, Calvin C.
Baldwin, I, 56; Baraka, I, 66; Reed, I., III, 71

Herr, Paul
Purdy, III, 47

Herrera-Sobek, María
Cisneros, I, 222

Herrick, Robert
Sinclair, III, 190

Hershinow, Sheldon J.
Malamud, II, 227

Hertz, Robert N.
Masters, II, 245; Robinson, III, 95

Hertzel, Lee J.
Coover, I, 239

Heung, Marina
Tan, III, 263

Hewes, Henry
Anderson, R., I, 26; Axelrod, I, 50; Elder, I, 316; Gibson, I, 425; Inge, II, 76; Miller, A., II, 296; Rabe, III, 57; Saroyan, III, 147; Schisgal, III, 154; Shepard, III, 177; Simon, III, 187,

Heyen, William
Levertov, II, 169; Snodgrass, III, 204; Zukofsky, III, 452

Heyward, DuBose
Hughes, II, 63

Heywood, Robert
Fowlie, I, 387

Hicks, Granville
Aiken, I, 10; Auchincloss, I, 39; Baldwin, I, 54; Bellow, I, 91; Bourjaily, I,

129; Cabell, I, 177; Calisher, I, 186; Cheever, I, 207; Cowley, I, 243; Cozzens, I, 245; Cummings, I, 260; Donleavy, I, 286; Dos Passos, I, 291; Dreiser, I, 296; Elliott, I, 329; Faulkner, I, 343; Garland, I, 418; Gold, I, 440; Grau, I, 451; Heller, II, 20; Jewett, II, 102; Jones, J., II, 110; Kesey, II, 128; Lee, II, 161; Lindsay, II, 181; Malamud, II, 224; Marquand, II, 236; Morris, II, 336; O'Hara, J., II, 398; Powers, III, 40; Reed, J., III, 76; Roth, P., III, 112; Salinger, III, 129; Selby, III, 163; Sinclair, III, 191; Stegner, III, 224; Swados, III, 255; Updike, III, 303; Warren, III, 348; White, III, 380

Hicks, Jack
Gaines, I, 412

Hicks, John
Warren, III, 349

Highet, Gilbert
Miller, H., II, 301; Wilson, E., III, 411

Hill, Hamlin
McMurtry, II, 272

Hill, William B.
Levin, II, 173

Hillyer, Robert
Scott, III, 162; Van Doren, III, 312

Hilton, James
Hayes, II, 18; Jackson, II, 83; Lockridge, II, 184; Morton, II, 342

Hinds, Elizabeth Jane Wall
Pynchon, III, 56

Hindus, Milton
Singer, III, 193

Hines, Samuel J., Jr.
Vidal, III, 324

Hipkiss, Robert A.
Kerouac, II, 127

Hirsch, Edward
Wright, J., III, 432

Hirsch, Marianne
Morrison, II, 341

Hix, H.L.
Ashbery, I, 35

Hjortsberg, William
Drexler, I, 299; Millhauser, II, 306

Hlavsa, Virginia V. James
Faulkner, I, 349

Hoag, Ronald Wesley
Caldwell, I, 185

Hobsbaum, Philip
Lowell, R., II, 197

Hobson, Fred C.
Mencken, II, 278

Hobson, J.A.
Veblen, III, 318

Hochfield, George
Adams, H., I, 5

Hochman, Baruch
Singer, III, 194

Hodder, Alfred
Steffens, III, 220

Hoey, Allen
Bly, I, 121

Hoffa, William
James, H., II, 89

Hoffman, Charles G.
Norris, II, 375

Hoffman, Daniel
Crane, S., I, 255; Frost, I, 401; Sandburg, III, 139

Hoffman, Daniel G.
Miles, II, 291; Simpson, III, 188; Snodgrass, III, 203; Twain, III, 295; Wright, J., III, 430

Hoffman, Frederick J.
Faulkner, I, 343; Frank, I, 389; Rahv, III, 61

Hoffman, Michael J.
Stein, III, 229

Hoffman, Nancy Yanes
Sarton, III, 151

Hofman, Hans
Niebuhr, II, 367

Hofmannsthal, Hugo von
O'Neill, II, 410

Hofstadter, Richard
DeVoto, I, 271

Hogan, Robert
Rice, III, 84

Hoge, James O.
Kesey, II, 129

Hoggart, Richard
Auden, I, 43

Holden, Jonathan
Stafford, W., III, 217

Holden, Raymond
Sarton, III, 149; Shapiro, III, 170

Holditch, W. Kenneth
Williams, T., III, 401

Hollahan, Eugene
Nemerov, II, 365

Holland, Laurence
James, H., II, 87

Holland, Norman
Doolittle, I, 288

Holland, Robert B.
Welty, III, 358

Hollander, John
Snodgrass, III, 203; Stickney, III, 245

Holley, Margaret
Moore, Marianne, II, 327

Holm, Janis Butler
Jones, G., II, 109

Holman, C. Hugh
Glasgow, I, 434; Lardner, II, 155; Steinbeck, III, 232; Wolfe, III, 426

Holmes, Charles S.
Thurber, III, 281

Holmes, Eugene C.
Locke, II, 184

Holmes, John
Scott, III, 162

Holsaert, Eunice S.
Powers, III, 40

Honig, Edwin
Moore, Merrill, II, 329

Hook, Sidney
Santayana, III, 142

Horn, John
Schulberg, III, 155

Hornblow, Arthur
Belasco, I, 87

Horton, Philip
Crane, H., I, 248; Rukeyser, III, 122

Horton, Walter M.
Niebuhr, II, 366

Hough, Robert L.
Howells, II, 61

House, Elizabeth
Morrison, II, 341

Howard, Leon
Morris, II, 336

Howard, Lillie P.
Hurston, II, 70

Howard, Maureen
Barthelme, I, 78; Bowles, P., I, 134; Morrison, II, 339

Howard, Richard
Ammons, I, 21; Auden, I, 45; Baraka, I, 65; Boyle, K., I, 136; Dahlberg, I, 264; Dickey, I, 278; Goodman, I, 442; Meredith, II, 280; Rich, III, 85; Shapiro, III, 171; Strand, III, 248

Howarth, Herbert
Eliot, I, 320

Howe, Irving
Adams, H., I, 4; Anderson, S., I, 27; Bourjaily, I, 129; Carver, I, 195; Elliott, I, 329; Ellison, I, 331; Faulkner, I, 344; Fiedler, I, 359; Fuchs, I, 403; Howells, II, 60; Kosinski, II, 142; Mailer, II, 214; Mencken, II, 274; O'Hara, J., II, 398; Olsen, II, 403; Plath, III, 22; Roth, P., III, 111, 113; Schwartz, III, 159; Singer, III, 193; Stevens, III, 238; Swados, III, 256; Wharton, III, 369

Howe, M.A. DeWolfe
Jewett, II, 101

Howells, William Dean
Cahan, I, 178; Chesnutt, I, 213; Crane, S., I, 252; Dunbar, I, 304; Garland, I, 417; Norris, II, 374; Twain, III, 294

Howes, Victor
Fuller, R. B., I, 406; Snyder, III, 205; Stafford, W., III, 217

Howgate, George W.
Santayana, III, 141

Hoyt, Charles Alva
Capote, I, 191

Hoyt, Edwin P.
Runyon, III, 127

Hubbard, Stacy Carson
Brooks, G., I, 151

Hudson, Theodore R.
Madhubuti, II, 213

Huebel, Harry Russell
Kerouac, II, 127

Huff, Robert
Stafford, W., III, 216

Huftel, Sheila
Miller, A., II, 296

Huggins, Nathan Irvin
Cullen, I, 259; Hughes, II, 64; O'Neill, II, 413

Hughes, Catharine
McCullers, II, 258

Hughes, D. J.
Bly, I, 118

Hughes, Glenn
Belasco, I, 88

Hughes, Kathryn
Tan, III, 262

Hughes, Langston
Baldwin, I, 53; Hurston, II, 69

Hughes, Riley
Connell, I, 233; Richter, III, 89

Hughes, Serge
Fowlie, I, 386

Hughes, Ted
Plath, III, 20

Hulbert, Ann
Rossner, III, 108

Hulbert, Debra
Wakoski, III, 338

Hull, Gloria
Bambara, I, 62; Sanchez, III, 134; Walker, M., III, 343

Hume, Kathryn
Reed, I., III, 74

Hume, Robert A.
Adams, H., I, 4

Hume, Samuel J.
Nathan, II, 358

Hummer, T.R.
Warren, III, 353

Humphries, Rolfe
Fearing, I, 353; Fitzgerald, R., I, 374; Frost, I, 394; Millay, II, 293; Rexroth, III, 78; Roethke, III, 98; Torrence, III, 288; Winters, III, 420; Wylie, III, 440

Huneker, James Gibbons
James, H., II, 84

Hunt, George W.
Cheever, I, 210

Hunter, J. P.
Steinbeck, III, 233

Hutchens, John K.
Cain, I, 181; Fast, I, 341; March, II, 235; Rice, III, 84

Hutcheon, Pat Duffy
Asimov, I, 36

Hutchison, Percy
Sarton, III, 148

Hyams, Barry
Odets, II, 391

Hyman, Stanley Edgar
Blackmur, I, 116; Brooks, V., I, 151; Cain, I, 180; Cozzens, I, 245; Jackson, II, 84; March, II, 234; Matthiessen, F. O., II, 246; Parrington, III, 4; Percy, III, 7; Purdy, III, 48; Ransom, III, 65; Rourke, III, 121; Singer, III, 193; West, III, 365; White, III, 378

Hynes, Joseph A.
Miller, A., II, 295

Ingals, Jeremy
Fowlie, I, 386

Irish, Marian D.
Adams, H., I, 3

Isaac, Dan
Singer, III, 196

Isaacs, Edith J.R.
Behrman, I, 86; Lawson, II, 159; Odets, II, 390; Sherwood, III, 182; Torrence, III, 288

Isaacs, Elizabeth
Winters, III, 422

Isherwood, Christopher
Porter, III, 26

Ismond, Patricia
Kincaid, II, 131

Jack, Peter Monro
Bishop, J., I, 115; Bodenheim, I, 123; Kantor, II, 117; Wheelwright, III, 377

Jack, W. T.
McMurtry, II, 268

Jackson, Esther M.
O'Neill, II, 415; Williams, T., III, 398

Jackson, Joseph Henry
Steinbeck, III, 232

Jackson, Richard
Strand, III, 249

Jackson, Thomas H.
Pound, III, 34

Jacobs, Robert D.
Faulkner, I, 344; Tate, III, 267

Jacobsen, Josephine
Ammons, I, 22; Levertov, II, 169; Viereck, III, 328

Jacobson, Dan
Kerouac, II, 125; Singer, III, 193

Jacobus, Lee A.
Baraka, I, 66

Jaffe, Dan
Brooks, G., I, 149

Jaffe, Harold
Ortiz, II, 418

Jain, Jasbir
Mukherjee, II, 344

James, Caryn
Elkin, I, 328

James, Clive
Auden, I, 46

James, Henry
Wharton, III, 367

Jameson, Fredric
Chandler, I, 203

Janeway, Elizabeth
Cozzens, I, 246; Sarton, III, 149

Janssen, Marian
Gardner, I., I, 413

Janssen, Ronald R.
Levertov, II, 171

Janssens, G.A.M.
Bly, I, 119

Jarrell, Randall
Aiken, I, 10; Auden, I, 43; Berryman, I, 103; Blackmur, I, 116; Ciardi, I, 220; Frost, I, 395; Gregory, I, 455; Lowell, R., II, 191; Marquand, II, 237; Moore, Marianne, II, 321; Ransom, III, 64; Rich, III, 84; Rukeyser, III, 122; Williams, W., III, 404; Winters, III, 420

Jeffers, Lance
Bullins, I, 163; Elder, I, 317

Jemie, Onwuchekwa
Hughes, II, 65

Jennings, Regina B.
Sanchez, III, 135

Jensen, Ejner J.
Wilbur, III, 387

Jerome, Judson
Rich, III, 85

Jessup, Josephine Lurie
Glasgow, I, 433; Wharton, III, 368

Jocelyn, John
Frank, I, 388

Johnson, Charles
Naylor, II, 360; Wright, R., III, 439

Johnson, David R.
Boyle, T., I, 138

Johnson, Diane
Abish, I, 1; Vidal, III, 326

Johnson, George W.
Norris, II, 375

Johnson, Gerald W.
Lewis, II, 175

Johnson, Greg
Boyle, T., I, 138

Johnson, James Weldon
Dunbar, I, 305

Johnson, James William
Porter, III, 27

Johnson, Manly
Berryman, I, 106

Johnson, Mark
Duncan, I, 309

Johnson, Rosemary
Swenson, III, 258

Johnson, Tom
MacLeish, II, 210

Johnson, Wendell
Fisher, V., I, 365

Johnson, Wendell Stacy
Auden, I, 46

Johnston, Denis
Rukeyser, III, 123

Jones, D.A.N.
Bullins, I, 162

Jones, Frank
Benét, I, 99

Jones, Gayl
Morrison, II, 341

Jones, Howard Mumford
Adams, H., I, 4; Cather, I, 197; DeVoto, I, 272; Glasgow, I, 432; Lockridge, II, 184; Moody, II, 320; Mumford, II, 347; Parrington, III, 4; Porter, III, 27; Sandburg, III, 137; Sinclair, III, 191; Stegner, III, 223; Styron, III, 249; Van Doren, III, 312

Jones, Llewellyn
Lindsay, II, 181

Jones, Madison
Warren, III, 349

Jones, William M.
Welty, III, 358

Jong, Erica
Miller, H., II, 305

Jordan, Clive
Yurick, III, 449

Josephson, Matthew
Wilson, E., III, 410

Joye, Barbara
Reed, I., III, 71

Juhasz, Suzanne
Giovanni, I, 431; Levertov, II, 170; Plath, III, 23; Sexton, III, 166

Junker, Howard
Gold, I, 440

Justus, James H.
Saroyan, III, 147; Warren, III, 352

Kael, Pauline
Mailer, II, 216

Kahn, Lothar
Singer, III, 197

Kahn, Sy
Crane, S., I, 254, 255; Fearing, I, 354

Kakutani, Michiko
Baxter, I, 81; McCarthy, M., II, 256; Updike, III, 307

Kalaidjian, Walter
Rich, III, 87

Kalem, T.E.
Williams, T., III, 401

Kallen, Horace M.
Santayana, III, 143

Kalstone, David
Bishop, E., I, 111; Howard, R., II, 55; Merrill, II, 282, 283; Rich, III, 86

Kampf, Louis
Gelber, I, 424

Kane, Patricia
Wescott, III, 363

Kanfer, Stefan
Vidal, III, 323; Wasserstein, III, 356; Wilson, A., III, 410

Kang, Younghill
Buck, I, 156

Kann, Jean Marie
O'Connor, F., II, 386

Kannenstine, Louis F.
Barnes, I, 70

Kaplan, Amy
Wharton, III, 372

Kaplan, Charles
Odets, II, 391

Kaplan, Johanna
Ozick, II, 420

Kaplan, Justin
Twain, III, 296

Kaplan, Steven
O'Brien, II, 383

Kapp, Isa
Berger, I, 102

Karl, Frederick R.
Singer, III, 195

Katz, Bill
Bukowski, I, 160

Katz, Leon
Stein, III, 228

Kauffman, George B.
Asimov, I, 36

Kauffmann, Stanley
Agee, I, 8; Capote, I, 190; Chopin, I, 218; Doctorow, I, 284; Friedman, I, 392; Hawkes, II, 13; Hemingway, II, 32; Levin, II, 173; Mailer, II, 215; Mumford, II, 349; O'Hara, J., II, 399; Rabe, III, 58; Saroyan, III, 148

Kaufman, Lenard
Hayes, II, 18

Kaveney, Roz
Proulx, III, 46

Kaye, Howard
Winters, III, 421

Kazin, Alfred
Agee, I, 7; Anderson, S., I, 27; Baldwin, I, 54; Barnes, I, 69; Bourne, I, 130; Burroughs, I, 169; Cabell, I, 178; Capote, I, 191; Cather, I, 197; Crane, S., I, 253, 254; Dos Passos, I, 290; Dreiser, I, 296; Farrell, I, 339; Fast, I, 341; Faulkner, I, 342; Fiedler, I, 358; Frederic, I, 390; Fuchs, I, 402; James, H., II, 85; James, W., II, 92; Jones, J., II, 111; Levin, II, 172; Lewisohn, II, 179; Lowell, R., II, 192; Macdonald, D., II, 204; Mailer, II, 214; Malamud, II, 224; Maltz, II, 230; Matthiessen, F. O., II, 246; Mitchell, II, 314; Oates, II, 378; Odets, II, 392; O'Hara, J., II, 398; Parrington, III, 4; Powers, III, 40; Ransom, III, 64; Roth, P., III, 111, 113; Salinger, III, 132; Shaw, III, 173; Singer, III, 192; Stafford, J., III, 214; Styron, III, 250; Van Doren, III, 311; Vonnegut, III, 331; Warren, III, 348; West, III, 366; Wilson, E., III, 411

Kee, Robert
Capote, I, 189; Taylor, III, 271

Keene, Frances
Sarton, III, 149

Keene, John
Baca, I, 53

Kees, Weldon
Cheever, I, 207; Fearing, I, 353

Kelleher, John V.
O'Connor, E., II, 384

Kellman, Anthony
Baraka, I, 68

Kellogg, Grace
Wharton, III, 369

Kelly, James
Burns, I, 167; Gold, I, 439; O'Hara, J., II, 398; Schulberg, III, 156

Kelsey, Vera
Rourke, III, 119

Kemp, John C.
Frost, I, 398

Kemp, Yakini
Walker, A., III, 341

Kempf, James Michael
Cowley, I, 244

Kenan, Randall
Baldwin, I, 59; Wideman, III, 383

Kennard, Nina H.
Hearn, II, 19

Kennebeck, Edwin
Buechner, I, 158

Kennedy, Liam
Sontag, III, 212

Kennedy, Richard S.
Cummings, I, 261; Wolfe, III, 425

Kennedy, Thomas
Coover, I, 241

Kennedy, William
Gardner, J., I, 415

Kennedy, X.J.
Duncan, I, 308; Merrill, II, 282; Merwin, II, 285; Moore, Marianne, II, 322

Kenner, Hugh
Brooks, C., I, 147; Doolittle, I, 289; Eliot, I, 319; Ferlinghetti, I, 357; Fuller, R. B., I, 407; Moore, Marianne, II, 323; Pound, III, 35; Williams, W., III, 404

Kent, George E.
Angelou, I, 30; Brooks, G., I, 150

Kermode, Frank
Auden, I, 46; Eliot, I, 321; Pound, III, 33; Tate, III, 268; Wilson, E., III, 412

Kerr, Baine
Momaday, II, 317

Kerr, Walter
Barry, I, 71; Fierstein, I, 361; Horovitz, II, 53; Milner, II, 312, 313; Odets, II, 391; Sherwood, III, 183; Williams, T., III, 396

Kertesz, Louise
Rukeyser, III, 124

Kessler, Edward
Stevens, III, 240

Kessler, Stephen
Codrescu, I, 227

Keyser, Elizabeth Lennox
Oates, II, 382

Kibel, Alvin C.
Burke, I, 165

Kiely, Robert
Calisher, I, 187; McCarthy, M., II, 252; Sheed, III, 174

Kiernan, Robert F.
Bellow, I, 96; Vidal, III, 323

Kilgore, Kathleen
Butler, I, 175

Killens, John O.
Childress, I, 216

Kimmelman, Michael
Mailer, II, 219

King, Richard H.
Wolfe, III, 426

Kingsolver, Barbara
Boyle, T., I, 139

Kinnaird, Clark
Runyon, III, 126

Kinnery, Katherine
O'Brien, II, 383

Kinney, Arthur F.
Faulkner, I, 344

Kirchwey, Freda
Fisher, D., I, 362; Miller, A., II, 295

Kirk, Russell
Bradbury, I, 139

Kirstein, Lincoln
Michener, II, 290

Kitchen, Judith
Gluck, I, 436

Kizer, Helen Buller
Lowell, A., II, 189

Klawans, Stuart
Major, II, 221

Kleb, William
Shepard, III, 178; Williams, T., III, 403

Klein, Marcus
Morris, II, 335; Swados, III, 256

Klinkenborg, Verlyn
McMurtry, II, 272; O'Brien, II, 383; Smiley, III, 202

Klinkowitz, Jerome
Dixon, I, 284; Kosinski, II, 144; Major, II, 223; Vonnegut, III, 331

Klotman, Phyllis R.
Attaway, I, 38

Kluger, Richard
Updike, III, 303

Knight, Grant C.
London, II, 186; Moody, II, 320

Knopf, Alfred A.
Mencken, II, 274

Knopf, Paul
Fast, I, 342

Knowles, John
Oates, II, 377

Knowles, Sidney A.
Roth, H., III, 110

Koch, Kenneth
O'Hara, F., II, 394

Koch, Vivienne
Gordon, C., I, 444

Koenig, Peter William
Gaddis, I, 410

Koenig, Rhoda
Sontag, III, 212; Tan, III, 261

Kohler, Dayton
Edmonds, I, 315; MacLeish, II, 208; Richter, III, 89; Wescott, III, 362; Wilder, III, 388

Kolmar, Wendy K.
Cisneros, I, 224

Konas, Gary
Wilson, L., III, 418

Kopper, Philip
Theroux, III, 275

Korelitz, Jean Hanff
Clampitt, I, 225; Hoffman, II, 50

Korges, James
Caldwell, I, 183

Korn, Eric
De Vries, I, 275

Kort, Wesley A.
De Vries, I, 274; Updike, III, 305

Kostelanetz, Richard
Burroughs, I, 168; Stein, III, 228

Kozinski, Alex
Codrescu, I, 229

Kramer, Dale
Dell, I, 270; Masters, II, 245

Kramer, Hilton
Algren, I, 18; Barnes, I, 69; Howard, R., II, 54; Howe, II, 58; MacLeish, II, 210; Wilson, E., III, 413

Kramer, Maurice
Blackmur, I, 117; Crane, H., I, 249; Lewis, II, 176

Kraus, M.
Parrington, III, 5

Kreuter, Gretchen
Fitzgerald, F., I, 369

Kreuter, Kent
Fitzgerald, F., I, 369

Kreyling, Michael
Price, III, 43; Welty, III, 360

Kreymborg, Alfred
Adams, L., I, 6; Hayes, II, 18; Reed, J., III, 76; Rich, III, 84; Stevens, III, 236; Torrence, III, 288; Van Doren, III, 311; Wylie, III, 439

Krich, John
Codrescu, I, 229

Kriegel, Leonard
Elliott, I, 330

Krim, Seymour
Baldwin, I, 55; Kerouac, II, 126; Salinger, III, 129; Vonnegut, III, 333

Kroll, Jack
Drexler, I, 299; Gass, I, 420; Rabe, III, 57; Williams, T., III, 399; Wilson, L., III, 416

Kroll, Judith
Plath, III, 23

Kronenberger, Louis
Adams, H., I, 3; Eliot, I, 318; Ferber, I, 355; Mencken, II, 274; Parker, III, 2; Ransom, III, 64; Van Doren, III, 311

Krupat, Arnold
Momaday, II, 317

Krutch, Joseph Wood
Anderson, M., I, 25; Barry, I, 71; Behrman, I, 86; Caldwell, I, 182; Connelly, I, 236; Green, I, 451; Hellman, II, 23; Howard, S., II, 57, 58; Kelly, II, 119, 120; Kingsley, II, 133; Lawson, II, 158, 159; Lewis, II, 175; Lewisohn, II, 179; McCarthy, M., II, 252; Nathan, II, 359; Odets, II, 389; O'Neill, II, 411; Rice, III, 82; Roberts, E., III, 91; Sherwood, III, 182; Van Druten, III, 314

Kubitschek, Missy Dehn
Marshall, II, 241

Kucich, John
DeLillo, I, 268

Kumin, Maxine
Sexton, III, 167

Kundera, Milan
Roth, P., III, 118

Kunitz, Joshua
Singer, III, 192

Kunitz, Stanley
Aiken, I, 9; Brooks, G., I, 148; Fearing, I, 354; Forché, I, 380; Gregory, I, 454; Jarrell, II, 95; Lowell, R., II, 193; Miles, II, 291; Nemerov, II, 362; Ransom, III, 65; Roethke, III, 97, 99

Kupat, Arnold
Silko, III, 183

Kutner, Nanette
Lockridge, II, 184

La Belle, Jenijoy
Roethke, III, 102

Labor, Earle
London, II, 187

Labrie, Ross
Nemerov, II, 364

Lacey, Henry C.
Baraka, I, 67

LaFarge, John
Merton, II, 284

La Farge, Oliver
Capote, I, 190; Eastlake, I, 311

LaHood, Marvin J.
Richter, III, 90

Lahr, John
Albee, I, 15; Didion, I, 280; Kushner, II, 151; Shepard, III, 180

Laing, Dilys
Ciardi, I, 220

Lale, Meta
Kosinski, II, 142

Lambert, Deborah G.
Cather, I, 199

Lamming, George
Reed, I., III, 72

Lamott, Kenneth
Rukeyser, III, 123

Landess, Thomas H.
Gordon, C., I, 446; McMurtry, II, 269; Meredith, II, 280; Welty, III, 358

Landis, Joseph C.
Roth, P., III, 112

Landry, Hilton
Crane, H., I, 250

Langbaum, Robert
MacLeish, II, 208

Langdale, E.G.
Jackson, II, 83

Lange, Victor
McCarthy, M., II, 252

Langford, Gerald
O. Henry, II, 38

Langford, Richard E.
O'Neill, II, 412

Langner, Lawrence
Belasco, I, 88

Larner, Jeremy
Friedman, I, 392; Salinger, III, 130

Larsen, Erling
Agee, I, 8

Larson, Charles R.
Momaday, II, 316

Larson, Thomas
Roth, P., III, 119

Lasch, Christopher
Bourne, I, 131; Mailer, II, 214; Steffens, III, 223

Lask, Thomas
Fast, I, 342; Hughes, II, 64; London, II, 185; Rossner, III, 107

Laski, Marghanita
Levin, II, 172

Lasswell, Harold D.
Howe, II, 59

Lattimore, Richmond
Hollander, II, 52; Simpson, III, 190

Lawrence, D.H.
Lowell, A., II, 190

Lawson, Lewis A.
Faulkner, I, 344

Lazarus, L. P.
Schulberg, III, 155

Lazier, Gil
Rabe, III, 58

Leacock, Stephen
Benchley, I, 97; O. Henry, II, 37

Leader, Zachary
Roth, H., III, 111

Leary, Daniel
Ferlinghetti, I, 357

Leary, Lewis
Taylor, III, 272; Twain, III, 297

Leavis, F.R.
Twain, III, 295

Leavis, Q.D.
Santayana, III, 141

Leavitt, Harvey
Brautigan, I, 145

LeBlanc, Diane C.
Levertov, II, 171

Lechlitner, Ruth
McGinley, II, 261; Meredith, II, 279; Rukeyser, III, 122

LeClair, Thomas
Barth, I, 74; DeLillo, I, 267; Elkin, I, 326; Gaddis, I, 410; Gardner, J., I, 416; Gass, I, 421

Lee, A. Robert
Himes, II, 48

Lee, C.P.
Lindsay, II, 181

Lee, Charles
Gibson, I, 425

Lee, Grace Farrell
Singer, III, 197

Lee, Hermione
Cather, I, 199

Lee, Robert
Auchincloss, I, 42

Lee, Robert C.
O'Neill, II, 413

Lee, Robert Edson
DeVoto, I, 272

Lee, Ulysses
Walker, M., III, 342

Leeming, David
Baldwin, I, 59

Leer, Norman
Roth, P., III, 112

Lefevre, Edwin
Cahan, I, 178

Leggott, Michele J.
Zukofsky, III, 454

Legler, Philip
Sexton, III, 165

Lehan, Richard
Fitzgerald, F., I, 371; Sheed, III, 174

Lehman, Milton G.
Stegner, III, 223

Lehmann, Rosamond
Richter, III, 88

Lehmann-Haupt, Christopher
Lurie, II, 200; Stone, III, 247

Leibowitz, Herbert
Crane, H., I, 250; Garrigue, I, 419; Ginsberg, I, 427; Howells, II, 62; Roethke, III, 100; Schwartz, III, 159; Snodgrass, III, 204; Stein, III, 228

Le Lance, Frenzella E.
Walker, A., III, 341

LeMay, Harding
Lee, II, 161

Lemon, Lee T.
Brooks, C., I, 148; Ransom, III, 65

Lenhart, Gary
Chester, I, 215

Lensing, George S.
Bly, I, 120; Lowell, R., II, 194; Stafford, W., III, 218; Wright, J., III, 432

Lentricchia, Frank
Eliot, I, 324; Frost, I, 397; Stevens, III, 239

Leonard, Chilson H.
Roberts, K., III, 92

Leonard, John
Lurie, II, 198; Sheed, III, 175; Yurick, III, 448

Leonard, Jonathan N.
Carson, I, 193,

Lerner, Max
Bourne, I, 130; Frank, I, 388; Levin, II, 172

Leseur, Geta J.
Marshall, II, 241

Leslie, Shane
Adams, I, 3

Lesser, Rika
Olds, II, 402

Lesser, Wendy
Abish, I, 1; Leavitt, II, 161; Maxwell, II, 248

Lester, Julius
Hansberry, II, 11

Levenson, J.C.
Adams, H., I, 5; Robinson, III, 96

Levertov, Denise
Goodman, I, 442

Levin, Harry
Trilling, III, 290

Levin, Martin
Wallant, III, 346

Levin, Meyer
Malamud, II, 223; Rice, III, 82; Wouk, III, 428

Levin, Peter R.
Levin, II, 172

Levine, Paul
Capote, I, 190; Gelber, I, 424; Gold, I, 440; Jones, J., II, 110; Morris, II, 335; Pynchon, III, 51; Swados, III, 256; Trilling, III, 291

Levine, Philip
Merwin, II, 286

Levinson, Michael
Sontag, III, 213

Levis, Larry
Forché, I, 383

Levy, Alan
Pound, III, 35; Simon, III, 187

Levy, Babette May
Jewett, II, 102

Levy, Jacques
Shepard, III, 176

Lewis, Charlton M.
Moody, II, 319

Lewis, David Levering
Angelou, I, 30

Lewis, Leon
Miller, H., II, 304

Lewis, Nathaniel
McGuane, II, 264

Lewis, R.W.B.
Auchincloss, I, 41; Crane, H., I, 250; Fiedler, I, 359; James, H., II, 88; Steinbeck, III, 233

Lewis, Robert W.
Hemingway, II, 31

Lewis, Sinclair
DeVoto, I, 271; Dos Passos, I, 290; Welty, III, 357

Lewis, Wyndham
Faulkner, I, 342

Lewisohn, Ludwig
Anderson, S., I, 27; Cabell, I, 177; Connelly, I, 235; O'Neill, II, 410; Rice, III, 82; Wharton, III, 367

Lhamon, W. T., Jr.
Pynchon, III, 53

Libby, Anthony
Bly, I, 120; Kizer, II, 138; Pinsky, III, 15

Lich, Lera Patrick Tyler
McMurtry, II, 271

Lieber, Todd M.
Williams, W., III, 406

Lieberman, Laurence
Dickey, I, 278; Duncan, I, 308; Garrigue, I, 419; Howard, R., II, 55; Hughes, II, 64; Kinnell, II, 135; Kunitz, II, 148; Rexroth, III, 80; Rukeyser, III, 123; Shapiro, III, 171; Stafford, W., III, 217; Viereck, III, 328; Wright, J., III, 431

Light, James F.
West, III, 365

Light, Martin
Lewis, II, 176, 177, 178

Lilly, Mark
Baldwin, I, 58

Lilly, Paul R., Jr.
Kosinski, II, 144, 145

Lindop, Grevel
Simpson, III, 189

Lindsay, Vachel
O. Henry, II, 37

Lingeman, Richard
Dreiser, I, 298

Linscott, R. N.
Sinclair, III, 190

Lippmann, Walter
Mencken, II, 273; Reed, J., III, 75; Sinclair, III, 190

Lipson, Eden Ross
McMurtry, II, 270

Lipton, Lawrence
Algren, I, 18; Rexroth, III, 78

Lisca, Peter
Steinbeck, III, 234

Lister, Richard
Marquand, II, 237

Littell, Robert
Edmonds, I, 315; Kantor, II, 117; Rice, III, 82; Toomer, III, 284

Little, Jonathan
Johnson, C., II, 104

Littlejohn, David
Hayden, II, 16; Jeffers, II, 98; Miller, H., II, 302

Litz, A. Walton
Eliot, I, 322

Litzinger, Boyd
Lockridge, II, 185

Lloyd, Dennis
Giovanni, I, 432

Locke, Alain
Hughes, II, 63; Johnson, J., II, 105

Locke, Richard
Beattie, I, 85; Updike, III, 304

Lodge, David
Auster, I, 49; Salinger, III, 133

Logan, John
Cummings, I, 260; Kinnell, II, 135; Merwin, II, 285; Whittemore, III, 380

Logan, William
Hayden, II, 16; Merwin, II, 289

Loggins, Vernon
Cabell, I, 177; Crane, S., I, 252, 254; Green, I, 453; Tarkington, III, 264

Lombardi, Marilyn May
Bishop, E., I, 112

London, Joan
London, II, 185

Londré, Felicia Hardison
Williams, T., III, 400

Long, E. Hudson
O. Henry, II, 37

Long, Robert Emmet
O'Hara, J., II, 400; Thurber, III, 281

Longley, John Lewis
Warren, III, 349

Lorsch, Susan E.
Godwin, I, 438

Lovejoy, Arthur O.
James, W., II, 90

Lovett, Robert Morse
Moody, II, 319; Niebuhr, II, 365; Tarkington, III, 264

Lowe, R.L.
Whittemore, III, 380

Lowell, Amy
Fletcher, I, 375; Robinson, III, 93

Lowell, Robert
Jarrell, II, 93, 94; Kunitz, II, 148; Plath, III, 19; Ransom, III, 64; Rich, III, 85; Tate, III, 267; Williams, W., III, 404; Winters, III, 420

Lowenthal, Marvin
Morton, II, 343

Lowes, John Livingston
Lowell, A., II, 190

Lowney, John
O'Hara, F., II, 397

Lubbock, Percy
James, H., II, 84; Wharton, III, 368

Luccock, Halford E.
Dos Passos, I, 290

Lucy, Sean
Eliot, I, 320

Lüdeke, H.
Wylie, III, 440

Ludington, Townsend
Dos Passos, I, 293

Ludwig, Jack
Singer, III, 192

Luhrs, Marie
Parker, III, 1

Lukens, Margaret A.
Dexter, I, 276

Lundquist, James
Himes, II, 47; Lewis, II, 177; Vonnegut, III, 333

Lunquist, Sara L.
Ashbery, I, 34

Lupack, Barbara Tepa
Kosinski, II, 145

Lupton, Mary Jane
Fauset, I, 352

Lutwack, Leonard
Bellow, I, 93; Hemingway, II, 32

Lyde, Marilyn J.
Wharton, III, 368

Lyell, Frank H.
Taylor, III, 271

Lynd, Robert
Lindsay, II, 180

Lynd, Staughton
Wright, R., III, 435

Lynes, Russell
De Vries, I, 273

Lynn, Kenneth S.
Dos Passos, I, 292; Norris, II, 375; Twain, III, 295

Lyon, Melvin
Dahlberg, I, 265

Lyon, Thomas J.
Snyder, III, 206

Lyons, Hilary H.
Clark, I, 225

Lyons, Joseph
Wallant, III, 347

Lytle, Andrew
Gordon, C., I, 444; Nemerov, II, 362

MacBride, James
Ferber, I, 356

Macdonald, Andrew
McMurtry, II, 270

Macdonald, Dwight
Agee, I, 8

Macdonald, Gina
McMurtry, II, 270

Macdonald, Ross
Algren, I, 19

MacDonald, Scott
Caldwell, I, 184

MacLeish, Archibald
Benét, I, 99; Lowell, A., II, 190; Santayana, III, 141

MacShane, Frank
Jones, J., II, 111; O'Hara, J., II, 400

Macy, John
Cahan, I, 179

Madden, David
Cain, I, 181; Gaddis, I, 409; Morris, II, 338; Oates, II, 377

Maddocks, Melvin
Gardner, J., I, 415

Madhubuti, Haki
Sanchez, III, 134

Madison, Charles
Bourne, I, 131; Reed, J., III, 77

Madison, Charles A.
Steffens, III, 222

Magid, Marion
Williams, T., III, 398

Magid, Nora
Wouk, III, 429

Magny, Claude-Edmonde
Steinbeck, III, 233

Maguire, James H.
McMurtry, II, 272

Mahon, John W.
Gordon, M., I, 447

Maisel, Edward
Kelly, II, 119

Malamut, Andrea Cohen
Bellow, I, 94

Malin, Irving
Calisher, I, 187; Hawkes, II, 14; Kesey, II, 128; Singer, III, 196

Malkoff, Karl
Rexroth, III, 80; Roethke, III, 100

Maloff, Saul
Algren, I, 18; Baldwin, I, 54; Malamud, II, 224; Plath, III, 21

Malone, Michael
Smiley, III, 200

Maloney, Russell
Nash, II, 357

Mandel, Ruth B.
Malamud, II, 224

Mandel, Siegfried
Hayes, II, 18

Mangione, Jerre
Fuchs, I, 402

Mann, Dorothea Lawrence
Fisher, D., I, 363

Mann, John
Forché, I, 383

Mannes, Marya
Gibson, I, 425; Stafford, J., III, 215

Manning, Carol S.
Welty, III, 360

Mano, D. Keith
Horovitz, II, 53

Mansfield, Margery Swett
Kreymborg, II, 147

Marchand, Ernest
Norris, II, 374

Marcus, Steven
Ellison, I, 331; Hammett, II, 8; Macdonald, D., II, 204; Trilling, III, 291; Viereck, III, 327; Wright, R., III, 433

Margolies, Edward
Baldwin, I, 56; Ellison, I, 332; Himes, II, 47; Hughes, II, 64; Wright, R., III, 435

Mariani, Paul
Williams, W., III, 406

Markham, Edwin
Garland, I, 417

Markle, Joyce B.
Updike, III, 305

Marks, Robert W.
Fuller, R. B., I, 406

Marowitz, Charles
Bullins, I, 162; Shepard, III, 177

Marquand, J.P.
Morley, II, 333

Marsh, Edward Clark
Tarkington, III, 263

Marsh, F. T.
Dahlberg, I, 263

Marsh, Fred T.
Bishop, J., I, 115; Fisher, V., I, 364; Guthrie, I, 458; March, II, 234

Marshal, Alexander
Faulkner, I, 348

Marshall, Lenore G.
Heyward, II, 41

Marshall, Margaret
Axelrod, I, 50; Guthrie, I, 458; Rourke, III, 120; Wright, R., III, 433

Martien, Norman
Warren, III, 350

Martin, Abbott
Young, III, 443

Martin, E. A.
Mencken, II, 275

Martin, Jay
Aiken, I, 10; Bierce, I, 109; James, H., II, 89; Lowell, R., II, 194; Norris, II, 376; Robinson, III, 96; West, III, 365; Wharton, III, 370

Martin, Taffy
Moore, Marianne, II, 326

Martin-Ogunso la, Dellita L.
Hughes, II, 66

Martz, Louis L.
Adams, L., I, 7; Ammons, I, 21; Hollander, II, 51; Pound, III, 35; Stevens, III, 237; Wakoski, III, 337; Warren, III, 350

Martz, William J.
Berryman, I, 104

Marx, Leo
Matthiessen, F. O., II, 246; Styron, III, 250

Mason, Deborah
Dexter, I, 276

Mason, Michael
Burroughs, I, 171

Masters, Edgar Lee
Lindsay, II, 181

Match, Richard
Stegner, III, 224

Materer, Timothy
Plath, III, 25

Mathes, William
Coover, I, 239

Matthews, Brander
Twain, III, 293

Matthews, T.S.
Cain, I, 180; Ferber, I, 355; Hammett, II, 6; Saroyan, III, 145

Matthiessen, F.O.
Bishop, J., I, 114; DeVoto, I, 271; Eliot, I, 319; James, H., II, 86; James, W., II, 92; Jewett, II, 102; Rourke, III, 121

Maurice, Arthur B.
O. Henry, II, 37

Maxwell, William
Clark, I, 225

May, John R.
Chopin, I, 219

Mazzaro, Jerome
Lowell, R., II, 193

Mazzocco, Robert
Berryman, I, 103; Dugan, I, 303; Goodman, I, 442

McCaffery, Larry
Elkin, I, 326

McCall, Raymond G.
Mencken, II, 275

McCarthy, Kevin
Hurston, II, 72

McCarthy, Mary
Burroughs, I, 168; Kelly, II, 119; Nabokov, II, 352; Rahv, III, 61; Wilder, III, 389; Young, III, 444

McCarthy, Paul
Steinbeck, III, 235

McClatchy, J. D.
Pinsky, III, 16

McConnell, Frank D.
Barth, I, 74; Pynchon, III, 54

McCord, David
Benchley, I, 97; McGinley, II, 261, 262; Nash, II, 357, 358

McCorkle, James
Pinsky, III, 17

McCormick, John
Anderson, S., I, 29

McCown, Robert
O'Connor, F., II, 386

McCracken, Ellen
Cisneros, I, 223

McCue, Jim
Mamet, II, 233

McDonnell, Thomas P.
Hersey, II, 39

McDougal, Stuart Y.
Pound, III, 35

McDowell, Deborah E.
Fauset, I, 352

McDowell, Frederick P. W.
Gordon, C., I, 446

McDowell, Margaret B.
Wharton, III, 371

McElderry, B.R.
Wouk, III, 429

McFarland, Dorothy Tuck
Cather, I, 198; O'Connor, F., II, 387

McFee, William
Ferber, I, 355

McGann, Jerome
Creeley, I, 256

McGinley, Phyllis
Nash, II, 357

McGovern, Hugh
Patchen, III, 7

McGowan, Martha J.
Walker, A., III, 339

McGuane, Thomas
Hawkes, II, 14

McHale, John
Fuller, R. B., I, 406

McInerney, Jay
Carver, I, 196

McKay, Kim
Irving, II, 80

McKay, Nellie Y.
Steinbeck, III, 236

McKenzie, Barbara
McCarthy, M., II, 253

McLaughlin, Richard
Purdy, III, 47; Vidal, III, 320; Wescott, III, 363

McLuhan, Marshall
Burroughs, I, 168

McMurray, George R.
Hijuelos, II, 42

McMurry, Myra K.
Angelou, I, 30

McMurtry, Larry
Gaines, I, 412

McNeil, Helen
Olsen, II, 404

McNelly, Willis E.
Bradbury, I, 140

McPherson, Dolly A.
Angelou, I, 31

McQuade, Molly
Simic, III, 185

McWilliams, Carey
Bierce, I, 108,

Meeker, Richard K.
Glasgow, I, 433

Meiners, R.K.
Tate, III, 267

Meisenhelder, Susan
Naylor, II, 360

Melhem, D.H.
Baraka, I, 68; Brooks, G., I, 149

Mellard, James M.
Heller, II, 22

Mencken, H.L.
Bierce, I, 107; Dreiser, I, 296; Garland, I, 418; Lardner, II, 153; More, II, 330; Nathan, II, 359; Veblen, III, 318

Mendelsohn, Michael J.
Odets, II, 392, 393

Mendelson, Edward
Auden, I, 47; Pynchon, III, 54

Mercier, Louis J.A.
Babbitt, I, 51

Mercier, Vivian
Donleavy, I, 286; Kunitz, II, 148; Rahv, III, 60; Sheed, III, 176

Meredith, William
Auden, I, 45

Merkin, Daphne
Bowles, J., I, 132; Updike, III, 306

Merrill, Robert
Mailer, II, 219

Merrill, Ronald E.
Rand, III, 63

Meserve, Walter J.
Howells, II, 61

Metress, Christopher
Hammett, II, 9

Metzger, Walter
Veblen, III, 319

Meyer, Ellen Hope
Oates, II, 378

Meyer, Gerard Previn
Bishop, J., I, 115; Ciardi, I, 219; McGinley, II, 261; Scott, III, 162

Meyerhoff, Hans
Macdonald, D., II, 203

Meyers, Jeffrey
Fitzgerald, F., I, 373; Frost, I, 402; Hemingway, II, 34; Lowell, R., II, 197

Mhatre, Lee
Calisher, I, 188; Hoffman, II, 50; Irving, II, 81

Michael, Robert
Pound, III, 39

Michaels, Leonard
Berger, I, 101

Michaud, Régis
Cabell, I, 177

Michelson, Bruce
Fitzgerald, F., I, 372

Mickelson, Anne Z.
Godwin, I, 438; Jong, II, 112

Middlebrook, Diane
Ginsberg, I, 428

Middlebrook, Diane Wood
Sexton, III, 168

Miklitsch, Robert
Gluck, I, 436; Strand, III, 248

Milbauer, Asher Z.
Singer, III, 198

Milbauer, Barbara
Ethan Canin, I, 189

Miles, Barry
Ginsberg, I, 430

Milford, Nancy
Bogan, I, 124

Milicia, Joseph
Boyle, T., I, 137

Millard, Bailey
Markham, II, 235

Miller, Arthur
Wilder, III, 389

Miller, Dan B.
Caldwell, I, 186

Miller, David
Williams, C. K., III, 394

Miller, Henry
Fowlie, I, 386

Miller, J. Hillis
Eliot, I, 320

Miller, James A.
Reed, I., III, 75

Miller, James E.
Fitzgerald, F., I, 370; Salinger, III, 131

Miller, James E., Jr.
Eliot, I, 322

Miller, Jordan Y.
Hansberry, II, 10; O'Neill, II, 412

Miller, Merle
Bourjaily, I, 128

Miller, Perry
Trilling, III, 290; Veblen, III, 319

Miller, R. Baxter
Toomer, III, 287; Walker, M., III, 344

Miller, Thomas
Yurick, III, 449

Miller, William Lee
Niebuhr, II, 366

Millett, Fred B.
Fletcher, I, 376

Millichap, Joseph R.
McCullers, II, 260

Milliken, Stephen F.
Himes, II, 48

Mills, C. Wright
Veblen, III, 320

Mills, Nicolaus
Kesey, II, 129

Mills, Ralph J., Jr.
Eberhart, I, 313, 314; Kinnell, II, 135; Levertov, II, 169; Lowell, R., II, 193; MacLeish, II, 209; Sexton, III, 165; Snodgrass, III, 204; Wilbur, III, 385; Wright, J., III, 430

Millspaugh, C.A.
Fitzgerald, R., I, 374

Milne, W. Gordon
Auchincloss, I, 40; Dos Passos, I, 293; O'Connor, E., II, 385; Trilling, III, 291

Milton, Edith
Godwin, I, 438

Miner, Valerie
Smiley, III, 201; Tan, III, 261

Miner, Ward L.
Faulkner, I, 343

Minter, David L.
Faulkner, I, 349

Mitchell, Julian
Heller, II, 20

Mitchell, Lee
Belasco, I, 88

Mitchell, Wesley C.
Veblen, III, 318

Mitgang, Herbert
Hillerman, II, 45

Mizener, Arthur
Auchincloss, I, 40; Cheever, I, 207; Cowley, I, 242; Cozzens, I, 247; Dos Passos, I, 291; Eberhart, I, 313; Fitzgerald, F., I, 369; Jarrell, II, 94; MacLeish, II, 208; Marquand, II, 237; Roth, P., III, 112; Salinger, III, 129; Swados, III, 255; Tate, III, 267; Warren, III, 348

Moers, Ellen
Auchincloss, I, 40; Dreiser, I, 297; McCarthy, M., II, 253

Moffett, Judith
Merrill, II, 283

Molesworth, Charles
Ashbery, I, 34; Bly, I, 120; Ginsberg, I, 428; Kinnell, II, 136; Pinsky, III, 14

Monroe, Harriet
Benét, I, 98; Bodenheim, I, 122; Fletcher, I, 375; Frost, I, 394; Heyward, II, 40; Kreymborg, II, 146; MacLeish, II, 208; Masters, II, 243; Millay, II, 292; Moore, Marianne, II, 321; Pound, III, 31; Reed, J., III, 76; Robinson, III, 94; Wylie, III, 439

Montefiore, Jan
Rich, III, 88

Moody, A. D.
Eliot, I, 323

Moody, Minnie Hite
Lewisohn, II, 179

Moody, William Vaughn
Torrence, III, 287

Moon, Samuel
Creeley, I, 256; Jarrell, II, 94

Mooney, Harry John
Cozzens, I, 246

Moore, Geoffrey
Lewis, II, 175

Moore, Harry T.
Fisher, V., I, 364; Gold, I, 440; Levin, II, 172

Moore, John Rees
Warren, III, 350

Moore, Lorrie
Baxter, I, 83

Moore, Marianne
Bishop, E., I, 110; Bogan, I, 124; Pound, III, 31

Moore, Patrick
Bogan, I, 125

Moore, Steven
Gaddis, I, 411

Moore, Thomas
Pynchon, III, 55

Moramarco, Fred
O'Hara, F., II, 395

Moran, Ronald
Bly, I, 120; Stafford, W., III, 218; Wright, J., III, 432

Moravia, Alberto
Miller, H., II, 301

More, Paul Elmer
Babbitt, I, 51; Eliot, I, 317; Hearn, II, 18

Morgan, Dale L.
Steele, III, 220

Morgan, Edwin
McGuane, II, 263

Morgan, Florence A.H.
Chesnutt, I, 211

Morgan, Lucy Ingram
Fisher, V., I, 364

Morgan, Robin
Rich, III, 88

Morison, Elting E.
Fuller, R. B., I, 407

Morley, Christopher
Marquis, II, 238; Nash, II, 357

Morris, Alice S.
Jackson, II, 83

Morris, Lloyd
Capote, I, 189; Fisher, D., I, 363; Fitch, I, 366; Kelly, II, 119; Lewis, II, 175; Morley, II, 333; Rawlings, III, 68

Morris, Lloyd R.
James, W., II, 92

Morris, Mack
Taylor, III, 271

Morris, Robert K.
Purdy, III, 48

Morris, Willie
Capote, I, 191

Morris, Wright
Ellison, I, 331

Morrison, Theodore
Wheelock, III, 375

Morrissey, Daniel
Updike, III, 305

Morse, Carl
Brooks, G., I, 149

Morse, J. Mitchell
Zukofsky, III, 452

Morse, Samuel French
Frost, I, 396; Jeffers, II, 98; Stevens, III, 237; Zukofsky, III, 452

Mort, John
Barth, I, 75

Morton, Charles
Nash, II, 358

Morton, Donald E.
Nabokov, II, 354

Morton, Frederic
Condon, I, 232; Farrell, I, 339; Gass, I, 420; Himes, II, 46

Moses, Montrose J.
Fitch, I, 366; Kelly, II, 119; Thomas, III, 278; Young, III, 443

Moss, Howard
Bishop, E., I, 111; Welty, III, 359

Moss, Leonard
Miller, A., II, 296

Motoyama, Sono
Dixon, I, 284

Mottram, Eric
Levertov, II, 169

Moynahan, Julian
Nabokov, II, 353; O'Connor, E., II, 385; Ozick, II, 420

Mudrick, Marvin
Hemingway, II, 31; Rahv, III, 61; Roth, P., III, 113; Styron, III, 250; Swados, III, 255

Mueller, Lisel
Bishop, E., I, 110; Bly, I, 119

Mueller, Martin
O'Neill, II, 412

Muggeridge, Malcolm
Brautigan, I, 144

Muir, Edwin
Miller, H., II, 300

Muller, Gilbert H.
Himes, II, 49

Muller, Herbert J.
Matthiessen, F. O., II, 247; Mencken, II, 276; Mumford, II, 348

Mumford, Lewis
Adams, H., I, 5; Bourne, I, 130; Brooks, V., I, 151; Rourke, III, 120

Munn, Paul
Ashbery, I, 35

Munro, Carroll
Rawlings, III, 68

Munson, Gorham B.
Babbitt, I, 51; Brooks, V., I, 151; Frank, I, 388; Toomer, III, 284

Murdoch, H. Adlai
Kincaid, II, 132

Murdock, Kenneth B.
Parrington, III, 3

Murphy, Patrick D.
Snyder, III, 209

Murphy, Richard W.
Updike, III, 303

Murray, Edward
Odets, II, 393

Murray, Philip
Wilbur, III, 386

Murray, Timothy
Norman, II, 371

Murry, J. Middleton
More, II, 329

Murtaugh, Daniel M.
Sheed, III, 175

Mustazza, Leonard
Vonnegut, III, 335

Myers, Neil
Sexton, III, 164

Nabokov, Dmitri
Nabokov, II, 356

Nakadate, Neil
Warren, III, 352

Nash, Ogden
Parker, III, 2

Nassar, Eugene Paul
Stevens, III, 239

Nathan, George Jean
Anderson, M., I, 24; Belasco, I, 88; Kelly, II, 118; O'Neill, II, 411; Thomas, III, 278; Van Druten, III, 314

Nathan, Leonard
Fearing, I, 354

Natt, Rochelle
Swenson, III, 260

Nazareth, Peter
Mukherjee, II, 344

Neale, Walter
Bierce, I, 108

Neary, John M.
Gordon, M., I, 448

Neff, Emery
Robinson, III, 94

Neider, Charles
Twain, III, 297

Nelson, Benjamin
Miller, A., II, 297; Williams, T., III, 397

Nelson, Gerald
Auden, I, 45

Nelson, Jill
Gates, I, 423

Nelson, Starr
Brooks, G., I, 148

Nemerov, Alexander
Nemerov, II, 365

Nemerov, Howard
Aiken, I, 11; Bishop, E., I, 110; Burke, I, 166; Cozzens, I, 246; Garrigue, I, 419; Nabokov, II, 351; Ransom, III, 64; Whittemore, III, 381

Nemiroff, Robert
Hansberry, II, 11

Nesanovich, Stella
Tyler, III, 300

Nevins, Allan
Edmonds, I, 315; Fast, I, 341; Guthrie, I, 458; Roberts, K., III, 92

Nevius, Blake
Steinbeck, III, 232

Newman, Judie
Updike, III, 307

Newman, Robert D.
Pynchon, III, 55

Nicholas, Charles A.
Momaday, II, 315

Nichols, Elizabeth P.
Nin, II, 368

Nichols, Lewis
Sherwood, III, 182

Nickerson, Hoffman
Babbitt, I, 51

Nims, John Frederick
Merton, II, 283

Nitchie, George W.
Lowell, R., II, 195; Moore, Marianne, II, 323

Noble, D.W.
Parrington, III, 5

Nolte, William H.
Jeffers, II, 100; Mencken, II, 275

Norman, Howard
Proulx, III, 45

Norton, Dan S.
Thurber, III, 279

Norton, Jody
Snyder, III, 209

Notley, Alice
Schuyler, III, 157

Novick, Julius
Albee, I, 14; Rabe, III, 58; Wilson, L., III, 417

Nowell, Elizabeth
Wolfe, III, 425

Nuhn, Ferner
Garland, I, 418

Nyren, Dorothy
Connell, I, 234; Kerouac, II, 125

Oates, Joyce Carol
Baldwin, I, 56; McGuane, II, 263; Olsen, II, 404; Plath, III, 22; Roth, P., III, 114; Taylor, III, 272; Updike, III, 305; Yurick, III, 449

Oberbeck, S. K.
Oates, II, 379

Oberg, Arthur
Bell, I, 89

O'Brien, Edward J.
Steele, III, 219,

O'Brien, Justin
Fowlie, I, 387

O'Brien, Sean
Bausch, I, 80

O'Brien, Sharon
Cather, I, 199

O'Connell, Shaun
Coover, I, 240; Vonnegut, III, 330

O'Connor, Frank
Howe, II, 58; Powers, III, 40

O'Connor, Richard
Bierce, I, 109; London, II, 187

O'Connor, William Van
Fiedler, I, 359; Gordon, C., I, 445; Updike, III, 304; Warren, III, 347

O'Conor, Norreys Jephson
Fletcher, I, 376

O'Dea, Richard J.
Tate, III, 268

O'Donnell, Patrick
Elkin, I, 328

O'Hara, J. D.
Millhauser, II, 307

O'Hara, J.D.
Brautigan, I, 144; Oates, II, 380; Rossner, III, 107

Olcksy, Elzbieta H.
Percy, III, 10

Olderman, Raymond M.
Kesey, II, 129; Vonnegut, III, 332

Oles, Carole S.
Hacker, II, 2

Oliva, Judy Lee
Wasserstein, III, 357

Olivares, Julián
Cisneros, I, 221

Oliver, Edith
Bullins, I, 162; Elder, I, 316; Horovitz, II, 53; Kopit, II, 140; Mamet, II, 230; Vonnegut, III, 330

Olson, Walter
Kushner, II, 151

Olster, Stacey
Mailer, II, 219; Updike, III, 308; West, III, 367

O'Meally, Robert G.
Brown, S., I, 155; Ellison, I, 334; Hayden, II, 16

O'Neill, Michael C.
Kopit, II, 141

Opdahl, Keith
Bellow, I, 94

Oppen, George
Ginsberg, I, 426

Orr, Elaine
Piercy, III, 13

Orr, Elaine Neil
Olsen, II, 405

Orr, Gregory
Kunitz, II, 149

Orwell, George
Miller, H., II, 301

Osborn, Neal J.
Burke, I, 166

O'Sheel, Shaemas
Markham, II, 235

Oster, Judith
Frost, I, 400

Ostriker, Alicia
Dugan, I, 303; Hollander, II, 52; Moore, Marianne, II, 327; Swenson, III, 258

Ostriker, Alicia Suskin
Jong, II, 113; Rukeyser, III, 125; Shange, III, 168

Ostrom, Alan
Williams, W., III, 406

Ostwalt, Conrad Eugene
Cather, I, 200

Ottenhoff, John
Gates, I, 423

Owens, Louis
Erdrich, I, 337; Momaday, II, 318; Steinbeck, III, 235

Ozick, Cynthia
Bellow, I, 96; Buechner, I, 159; Calisher, I, 187; Cheever, I, 208

Pacheco, Patrick
Albee, I, 16

Pachter, Henry
Goodman, I, 443

Pack, Robert
Stevens, III, 238; Strand, III, 247

Packer, George
Butler, I, 174

Packman, David
Nabokov, II, 355

Palmer, J.E.
Wright, J., III, 430

Palmer, R. Roderick
Madhubuti, II, 212

Palmieri, Frank
Pynchon, III, 56

Palumbo, Donald
Burroughs, I, 170

Pannick, Gerald J.
Blackmur, I, 118

Paquet, Basil T.
McCarthy, M., II, 254

Parini, Jay
Eberhart, I, 314; Rich, III, 87; Roethke, III, 103; Steinbeck, III, 236; Vidal, III, 325

Park, Charles E.
Lewisohn, II, 179

Parke, Andrea
Morton, II, 342

Parker, Stephen Jay
Nabokov, II, 356

Parkinson, Thomas
Ginsberg, I, 427; Snyder, III, 205

Parrington, Vernon L.
Rölvaag, III, 105

Parsons, Alice Beal
Heyward, II, 41; Rölvaag, III, 105

Parsons, Thornton H.
Ransom, III, 66

Partridge, A.C.
Eliot, I, 318

Partridge, Eric
Bierce, I, 107

Patke, Rajeev S.
Stevens, III, 242

Pattee, Fred Lewis
O. Henry, II, 37; Wharton, III, 367

Paul, Jay S.
Goyen, I, 449

Paul, Sherman
Brooks, V., I, 153; Williams, W., III, 407; Wilson, E., III, 412

Paulding, Gouverneur
O'Connor, E., II, 384

Paulin, Tom
Bishop, E., I, 114

Pavich, Paul N.
Young Bear, III, 445

Payne, L.W.
Young, III, 443

Payne, Ladell
Ellison, I, 334

Payne, William M.
Stickney, III, 244

Payne, William Morton
Moody, II, 318

Pearce, Roy Harvey
Frost, I, 395; Pound, III, 33; Robinson, III, 95; Roethke, III, 99; Stevens, III, 238

Pearson, Edmund Lester
Morley, II, 332

Pease, Donald E.
Purdy, III, 49; Vidal, III, 325

Peavy, Charles D.
McMurtry, II, 270; Selby, III, 164

Pebworth, Ted-Larry
Howard, R., II, 56

Peck, H.T.
O. Henry, II, 36

Peden, William
Cheever, I, 208; Ferber, I, 356; Goyen, I, 448; Grau, I, 450; Jackson, II, 83; Salinger, III, 129; Shaw, III, 173; Stafford, J., III, 215; Stegner, III, 224; Taylor, III, 271; Welty, III, 357; Williams, T., III, 397

Peffer, Nathaniel
Buck, I, 156

Pendleton, Thomas A.
Fitzgerald, F., I, 373

Perelman, S.J.
Benchley, I, 97

Perez-Stable, Marifeli
Hijuelos, II, 42

Perez-Torres, Rafael
Baca, I, 53; Rechy, III, 70; Soto, III, 214

Perlès, Alfred
Miller, H., II, 301

Perloff, Marjorie G.
Kinnell, II, 136; Lowell, R., II, 195; O'Hara, F., II, 396; Stein, III, 230

Perrin, Noel
Cozzens, I, 247

Perry, Bliss
Robinson, III, 93

Perry, Margaret
Cullen, I, 258

Perry, Ralph Barton
James, W., II, 91

Perry, Richard
Major, II, 220

Peters, Robert
Kinnell, II, 137

Peterson, Virgilia
Buck, I, 157; Morton, II, 343; Sarton, III, 149

Petroski, Catherine
Dillard, I, 283

Petry, Alice Hall
Tyler, III, 301

Pettingell, Phoebe
Clampitt, I, 224; Nemerov, II, 365

Pevear, Richard
Zukofsky, III, 453

Peyre, Henri
Fowlie, I, 386

Pfaff, William
Hawkes, II, 12

Phelan, Kappo
Rice, III, 83

Phelps, Robert
Goodman, I, 441; Stafford, J., III, 215; Stein, III, 226

Phelps, William Lyon
Fisher, D., I, 363; Fitch, I, 366; Masters, II, 243

Philips, Robert
Plath, III, 21

Phillips, Cassandra
Carver, I, 194

Phillips, Robert
Goyen, I, 450; Howard, R., II, 55

Phillips, Robert L., Jr.
Welty, III, 359

Phillips, Robert S.
McCullers, II, 258

Phillips, William
Reed, J., III, 77; Wilson, E., III, 411

Pickrel, Paul
Agee, I, 7; Auchincloss, I, 40; Clark, I, 226; Lardner, II, 154; Marquand, II, 237; Nemerov, II, 362

Pifer, Ellen
Bellow, I, 96; Nabokov, II, 355

Pilkington, John
Faulkner, I, 346

Pilkington, Tom
Mccarthy, C., II, 250

Pine, John C.
Ciardi, I, 220

Pinsker, Sanford
Millhauser, II, 311; Oates, II, 382; Ozick, II, 421; Proulx, III, 46; Roth, P., III, 114; Smiley, III, 203

Pinsky, Robert
Strand, III, 248

Piper, Henry Dan
Fitzgerald, F., I, 370

Pizer, Donald
Dos Passos, I, 294; Dreiser, I, 297; Norris, II, 376

Pladott, Dinah
Stein, III, 230

Plimpton, George
Ozick, II, 421

Plomer, William
Parker, III, 2

Plotinsky, Melvin L.
Albee, I, 13

Podhoretz, Norman
Bellow, I, 91; Donleavy, I, 287; Elliott, I, 329; Ginsberg, I, 426; Goodman, I, 442; Mailer, II, 213; Malamud, II, 223; McCarthy, M., II, 252

Poirier, Richard
Bellow, I, 92; Eliot, I, 321; Fiedler, I, 360; Frost, I, 397; James, H., II, 87; Mailer, II, 216; Nabokov, II, 354; Pynchon, III, 51; Twain, III, 296; Vidal, III, 322

Pollitt, Katha
Forché, I, 381; Roth, P., III, 116; Tyler, III, 299

Pommer, Henry F.
O'Neill, II, 413

Pondrom, Cyrena N.
Singer, III, 195

Poore, C.G.
Thurber, III, 279

Poore, Charles
Marquis, II, 238

Popkin, Henry
Miller, A., II, 295; Schwartz, III, 158

Porte, Joel
Santayana, III, 143

Porter, Katherine Anne
Boyle, K., I, 136; Cather, I, 197; Goyen, I, 448; Pound, III, 32; Stein, III, 226; Welty, III, 357

Porter, Peter
Auden, I, 47

Porter, Thomas E.
Albee, I, 14

Poster, William
Maltz, II, 230

Postlethw aite, Diana
Millhauser, II, 310

Potter, Vilma Raskin
Hayden, II, 17

Poulin, A., Jr.
Howard, R., II, 55

Pound, Ezra
Frost, I, 394; James, H., II, 84

Powell, Grosvenor
Winters, III, 422

Powell, Lawrence Clark
Jeffers, II, 97

Powers, J.F.
Taylor, III, 270

Powys, John Cowper
Masters, II, 243

Powys, Llewelyn
Millay, II, 292

Prager, Charles M.
Howard, S., II, 57

Pratt, Julius W.
Masters, II, 243

Prendowska, Krystyna
Kosinski, II, 144

Prescott, Orville
Hayes, II, 17; Michener, II, 289; Roberts, K., III, 93; Schulberg, III, 156

Prescott, Peter S.
Barth, I, 74; Brautigan, I, 145; Coover, I, 240; Le Guin, II, 164; Macdonald, R., II, 206; Roth, P., III, 117; Walker, A., III, 340

Presley, James
Hughes, II, 63

Preston, John Hyde
Millay, II, 292; Stein, III, 225

Price, Martin
Howe, II, 59

Price, Reynolds
Welty, III, 359

Priestley, Michael
Irving, II, 79

Prince, Valerie Sweeney
Childress, I, 218

Pritchard, John Paul
More, II, 331

Pritchard, William H.
Ginsberg, I, 428; Hollander, II, 51; Jarrell, II, 95; Levertov, II, 168; Lowell, R., II, 195; McCarthy, M., II, 254; Theroux, III, 275; Updike, III, 304; Wheelock, III, 376

Pritchett, V.S.
Bowles, P., I, 133; Singer, III, 196

Prose, Francine
Elkin, I, 328

Pryce-Jones, Alan
Behrman, I, 87; Nabokov, II, 352

Puetz, Manfred
Pynchon, III, 53

Purdy, Theodore M.
Richter, III, 89

Putt, S. Gorley
James, H., II, 88

Quebe, Ruth
Bishop, E., I, 112

Queen, Ellery
Hammett, II, 7

Quinn, Anthony
Matthiessen, P., II, 248

Quinn, Arthur Hobson
Fisher, D., I, 363; Fitch, I, 366; Frederic, I, 390; Jewett, II, 102; MacKaye, II, 207; Thomas, III, 278

Quinn, Bernetta
Jarrell, II, 96

Quinn, Kerker
Fitzgerald, R., I, 374

Quinn, Patrick F.
Swados, III, 254

Quinn, Vincent
Crane, H., I, 249

Raban, Jonathan
Theroux, III, 277

Rabinowitz, Peter J.
Himes, II, 49

Rabkin, Gerald
Odets, II, 392; Wilder, III, 391

Rader, Dotson
Selby, III, 164

Rago, Henry
Alfred, I, 16; Brooks, V., I, 152; Powers, III, 40; Stafford, J., III, 214; Trilling, III, 289

Rahv, Philip
Algren, I, 17; Bellow, I, 91; Boyle, K., I, 136; Levin, II, 172; Miller, H., II, 300

Raine, Kathleen
Barnes, I, 69

Rainwater, Catherine
Erdrich, I, 336

Raleigh, John Henry
Wilson, E., III, 411

Ramazini, Jahan
Plath, III, 26

Rambeau, James
Hurston, II, 70

Rampersad, Arnold
Du Bois, I, 301

Ramsey, Paul
Nemerov, II, 364; Niebuhr, II, 367; Winters, III, 421

Randall, John H.
Cather, I, 198

Rankin, Daniel
Chopin, I, 218

Ransom, John Crowe
Brooks, C., I, 146; Burke, I, 164; Eliot, I, 318; Santayana, III, 141

Rascoe, Burton
Babbitt, I, 51; McKay, II, 267; Mencken, II, 273; Roberts, K., III, 92; Saroyan, III, 145; Steinbeck, III, 231; Wescott, III, 362

Raven, Simon
Selby, III, 163

Raw, Ruth M.
Garland, I, 418

Ray, David
Bly, I, 118; Scott, III, 162

Read, Forrest
Pound, III, 37

Rector, Liam
Hall, II, 6

Redding, J. Saunders
Baldwin, I, 53; Braithwaite, I, 143; Dunbar, I, 306; Wright, R., III, 435

Redman, Ben Ray
Dell, I, 269; Hawkes, II, 12; McCullers, II, 256; Trilling, III, 289

Redmond, James
Norman, II, 373

Regan, Robert
Wakoski, III, 337

Reid, Alfred S.
Shapiro, III, 171

Reid, B.L.
Stein, III, 226

Reilly, Edward C.
Kennedy, W., II, 123

Reilly, Evelyn
Ashbery, I, 35

Reilly, John M.
Du Bois, I, 302; Major, II, 223; Toomer, III, 285; Williams, J., III, 395

Reilly, Robert J.
James, H., II, 88

Reinhold, H. A.
Merton, II, 284

Reino, Joseph
Shapiro, III, 172

Remnick, David
Ellison, I, 335

Render, Sylvia Lyons
Chesnutt, I, 214

Rennert, Maggie
Drexler, I, 299

Rennie, Doug
Auster, I, 49; Cheever, I, 210

Resnik, Henry S.
Irving, II, 78

Revell, Donald
Levertov, II, 170

Rexroth, Kenneth
Bukowski, I, 160; Ciardi, I, 220; Duncan, I, 308; Ferlinghetti, I, 357; Ginsberg, I, 428; Goodman, I, 443; Levertov, II, 167, 169; Miller, H., II, 301; Moore, Marianne, II, 324; O'Hara, F., II, 394; Olson, II, 407; Sandburg, III, 137; Singer, III, 196; Snyder, III, 206; Wheelwright, III, 378

Reynolds, R. C.
McMurtry, II, 269

Rhodes, Harrison
Hearn, II, 19

Rhodes, Richard
Eastlake, I, 312

Ribalow, Harold U.
Roth, H., III, 109; Wallant, III, 346

Rice, Jennings
Edmonds, I, 315

Rice, Philip Blair
Benét, I, 99; Cullen, I, 258; Fitzgerald, R., I, 374; Masters, II, 244; Millay, II, 292; Porter, III, 26; Rukeyser, III, 121; Van Doren, III, 311

Rich, Adrienne
Goodman, I, 443; Jarrell, II, 95

Rich, Frank
Fierstein, I, 362; Fuller, C., I, 404

Rich, J.C.
Cahan, I, 179

Richards, Edmund C.
Steinbeck, III, 231

Richards, I.A.
Eliot, I, 320

Richards, Sandra L.
Fuller, C., I, 405

Richardson, Jack
Kerouac, II, 126; O'Neill, II, 414

Richart, Bette
McGinley, II, 262; Millay, II, 294

Richler, Mordecai
Barth, I, 75; Condon, I, 232; Kesey, II, 130

Richmond, Jane
McGuane, II, 263

Ricks, Christopher
Coover, I, 240

Ricks, H. C.
Bowles, P., I, 134

Riddel, Joseph N.
Fitzgerald, F., I, 370; Stevens, III, 239

Rideout, Walter
Dell, I, 270; Jarrell, II, 94; Roth, H., III, 109

Ridgeway, Jacqueline
Bogan, I, 124

Riggs, Thomas
Moody, II, 320

Rinzler, Carol Eisen
Rossner, III, 107

Rischin, Moses
Cahan, I, 180

Ritter, Jess
Heller, II, 21

Robbins, Frances Lamont
Lewisohn, II, 179; Steele, III, 219

Roberts, Garyn G.
Bradbury, I, 141

Robins, Corinne
Horovitz, II, 54

Robins, J.D.
Roberts, E., III, 91

Robinson, Forrest G.
Warren, III, 354

Robinson, James I., Jr.
Foote, I, 380

Robinson, Janice S.
Doolittle, I, 290

Rocks, James E.
Gordon, C., I, 446; Kennedy, W., II, 124

Rodell, Fred
Macdonald, D., II, 203

Rodgers, Audrey
Levertov, II, 171

Roditi, Edouard
Dahlberg, I, 263

Rodman, Selden
Fearing, I, 353; Hayes, II, 18; Jeffers, II, 98; Rexroth, III, 78; Shapiro, III, 169

Rodriguez, Linda
Stafford, W., III, 218

Rodriquez, Manuel M. Martiín
Cisneros, I, 223

Roelofs, Gerrit H.
Adams, H., I, 4

Roethke, Theodore
Van Doren, III, 311

Rogers, Franklin R.
Twain, III, 295

Rogers, Jane
Anaya, I, 23

Rogers, Thomas
McCarthy, M., II, 253

Rogers, W.G.
Buck, I, 157; Stein, III, 226

Rogoff, Gordon
Kushner, II, 150; Williams, T., III, 398

Rollins, Hyder E.
O. Henry, II, 36

Rollyson, Carl E., Jr.
Hellman, II, 26; Mailer, II, 217

Rolo, Charles J.
Dos Passos, I, 291; Grau, I, 451; Jones, J., II, 110; Macdonald, D., II, 203; McCarthy, M., II, 252; Michener, II, 289; Nin, II, 368; Trilling, III, 290; Wilson, E., III, 410

Romano, John
Berger, I, 102; Hawkes, II, 14

Rose, G.B.
Moody, II, 318

Rosenbaum, Jean
Piercy, III, 11

Rosenberg, Harold
Anderson, M., I, 25; Bierce, I, 108; Goodman, I, 442; Rukeyser, III, 121

Rosenberger, Coleman
Ciardi, I, 219; Grau, I, 451

Rosenblatt, Jon
Plath, III, 24

Rosenblatt, Roger
Ginsberg, I, 429; Hughes, II, 64

Rosenfeld, Alvin
Ammons, I, 23

Rosenfeld, Isaac
Cahan, I, 180; Himes, II, 46; Howe, II, 58; McCarthy, M., II, 252; Nin, II, 368; O'Connor, F., II, 385; Patchen, III, 6; Saroyan, III, 146

Rosenfeld, Paul
Bourne, I, 129; Fitzgerald, F., I, 368; Frank, I, 387; Porter, III, 26; Sandburg, III, 136; Stevens, III, 236; Wheelwright, III, 376

Rosenfelt, Deborah
Olsen, II, 405

Rosenthal, Lucy
Calisher, I, 187; Plath, III, 21

Rosenthal, M.L.
Ammons, I, 22; Baraka, I, 64; Berryman, I, 103; Ciardi, I, 220; Creeley, I, 257; Dickey, I, 278; Duncan, I, 308; Eberhart, I, 313; Fearing, I, 353; Ginsberg, I, 426, 427; Gregory, I, 455; Ignatow, II, 75; Jarrell, II, 94; Jeffers, II, 98; Kinnell, II, 136; Kunitz, II, 148; Levertov, II, 168; Lowell, R., II, 192; Miller, H., II, 301; Merwin, II, 285; Nemerov, II, 362; Olson, II, 407; Pound, III, 36; Rexroth, III, 78; Roethke, III, 100; Sexton, III, 165; Shapiro, III, 170; Wright, J., III, 431

Roskolenko, Harry
Kreymborg, II, 147; Masters, II, 244; Wheelwright, III, 377

Rosmond, Babette
Lardner, II, 154

Ross, Alan
Plath, III, 19

Ross, Daniel
Styron, III, 254

Ross, J. D.
Burns, I, 166

Ross, Lillian
Hemingway, II, 30

Ross, Mary
Richter, III, 90

Ross, Mitchell S.
Vidal, III, 323

Ross, Nancy Wilson
Kerouac, II, 125

Ross, Woodburn O.
Steinbeck, III, 232

Roszak, Theodore
Goodman, I, 443

Rotella, Guy L.
Frost, I, 400

Roth, Philip
Malamud, II, 225

Roth, Samuel
Robinson, III, 93

Rothberg, Abraham
Snyder, III, 208

Rothman, Nathan L.
Fisher, V., I, 365

Roudane, Matthew C.
Miller, A., II, 298

Rourke, Constance
DeVoto, I, 270; Lindsay, II, 180; Mumford, II, 347

Rouse, Blair
Glasgow, I, 433

Rovere, Richard H.
Miller, A., II, 295

Rovit, Earl
Bellow, I, 92; Hawkes, II, 13; Hemingway, II, 31

Rowe, Anne
Wolfe, III, 427

Rowe, W.W.
Nabokov, II, 355

Royce, Josiah
James, W., II, 90

Rubenstein, Richard L.
Styron, III, 252

Rubin, Louis D., Jr.
Ferlinghetti, I, 357; Glasgow, I, 433, 434; McCullers, II, 260; Mencken, II, 275, 276; O'Connor, F., II, 385; Ransom, III, 67; Sandburg, III, 139; Styron, III, 250; Tate, III, 267, 269; Wolfe, III, 425

Ruderman, Judith
Heller, II, 23; Styron, III, 254

Rudikoff, Sonya
McCarthy, M., II, 255

Rueckert, William H.
Burke, I, 165; Wescott, III, 363

Ruggles, Eleanor
Lindsay, II, 181

Rugoff, Milton
Algren, I, 17; Cowley, I, 243; Gaddis, I, 409; Roth, P., III, 111

Ruhl, Arthur
March, II, 234

Ruhm, Herbert
Chandler, I, 203

Rukeyser, Muriel
Rexroth, III, 79; Sexton, III, 166

Ruland, Richard
Frost, I, 399

Rule, Jane
Brown, R., I, 154

Runyon, Damon
Runyon, III, 126

Rupp, Richard H.
Agee, I, 8; Ellison, I, 332

Ruppert, James
Young Bear, III, 448

Rushdy, Ashrel H. A.
Johnson, C., II, 104

Russ, Biff
Rich, III, 88

Russell, Charles
Burroughs, I, 170

Russell, Mariann B.
Brooks, G., I, 150; Tolson, III, 283

Russell, Sue
Swenson, III, 259

Rustomji-K erns, Roshni
Mukherjee, II, 345

Ryan, Marjorie
Porter, III, 27

Ryan, Maureen
Stafford, J., III, 216

Saari, Jon
Styron, III, 254

Safer, Elaine B.
Malamud, II, 228

Saffioti, Carol Lee
Brown, S., I, 156

St. Andrews, B.A.
Mukherjee, II, 346

St. John, David
Levine, II, 174

Salamon, Lynda B.
Plath, III, 21

Sale, Roger
Adams, H., I, 5; Bellow, I, 92; Blackmur, I, 117; Doctorow, I, 285; Duncan, I, 308; Elliott, I, 330; Ellison, I, 332; Fiedler, I, 360; Friedman, I, 392; Fuller, R. B., I, 407; Macdonald, R., II, 205; Morton, II, 343; Mumford, II, 349; Taylor, III, 272

Salomon, I.L.
Ciardi, I, 220; Nemerov, II, 361; Torrence, III, 289

Salomon, Louis B.
Rawlings, III, 68

Salomon, Roger B.
Twain, III, 296

Salter, D.P.M.
Bellow, I, 93

Salter, Mary Jo
Clampitt, I, 225

Salzman, Jack
Olsen, II, 404

Samstag, Nicholas A.
Didion, I, 280

Samuels, Charles Thomas
Barthelme, I, 77; Bowles, J., I, 131; Connell, I, 234; Vonnegut, III, 331

Samuels, Ernest
Adams, H., I, 5

Sanborn, Sara
Drexler, I, 300

Sandberg, Peter L.
Connell, I, 234

Sandburg, Carl
Steffens, III, 221

Sandeen, Ernest
Blackmur, I, 117; Ciardi, I, 220

Sanders, David
Hersey, II, 40

Sanders, Marion K.
McGinley, II, 262

Sanford, Charles L.
Steffens, III, 222

Santayana, George
James, W., II, 91

Saraley, Herman
Ray, III, 69

Saroyan, Aram
Creeley, I, 256

Saroyan, William
Mencken, II, 273

Sartre, Jean-Paul
Dos Passos, I, 291

Saul, George Brandon
Wylie, III, 441

Saunders, James Robert
Sanchez, III, 134

Savage, George
Belasco, I, 88

Savran, David
Fornés, I, 385; Guare, I, 457; Wilson, A., III, 409

Sayre, Robert F.
Baldwin, I, 55

Scarbrough, George
Simpson, III, 189

Schacht, Marshall
Scott, III, 161

Schaeffer, Susan Fromberg
Heller, II, 21

Schaffner, Halle
Wescott, III, 362

Schaub, Thomas H.
Pynchon, III, 55

Schechner, Mark
Roth, P., III, 118; Singer, III, 199

Schecter, Ellen
Tan, III, 263

Scheer-Schäzler, Brigitte
Bellow, I, 93

Schevill, James
Ammons, I, 20; Anderson, S., I, 28

Schickel, Richard
Berger, I, 101; Doctorow, I, 285; Nabokov, II, 351

Schine, Cathleen
Tyler, III, 301

Schlesinger, Arthur, Jr.
DeVoto, I, 272; Macdonald, D., II, 203; McCarthy, M., II, 255

Schlissel, Lillian
Bourne, I, 131

Schlueter, June
Albee, I, 15; Miller, A., II, 299

Schlueter, Paul
McCarthy, M., II, 253

Schmitz, Neil
Reed, I., III, 73

Schneidau, Herbert
Pound, III, 34

Schneider, Daniel E.
Miller, A., II, 295

Schneider, Duane
Nin, II, 369, 371

Schneider, Robert W.
Norris, II, 375

Scholes, Robert
Barth, I, 72; Godwin, I, 437; Hawkes, II, 15; Le Guin, II, 164; Vonnegut, III, 329

Schorer, C.E.
Wescott, III, 363

Schorer, Mark
Aiken, I, 9; Capote, I, 190; Clark, I, 226; Didion, I, 280; Fitzgerald, F., I, 369; Hellman, II, 24; Lewis, II, 175; Morris, II, 334; Trilling, III, 289

Schott, Webster
Barthelme, I, 77; Connell, I, 233; Hawkes, II, 13; Morrison, II, 340; Selby, III, 163

Schroeder, Eric James
Stone, III, 246

Schubnell, Matthias
Momaday, II, 317

Schulberg, Budd
Fitzgerald, F., I, 369

Schulman, Grace
Moore, Marianne, II, 326

Schulz, Max F.
Barth, I, 73; Friedman, I, 393; Pynchon, III, 52; Singer, III, 194

Schumach, Murray
Runyon, III, 126

Schwartz, Delmore
Aiken, I, 9; Bellow, I, 91; Blackmur, I, 116; Dos Passos, I, 290; Eliot, I, 319; Jarrell, II, 93; Lardner, II, 154; Pound, III, 31; Roethke, III, 98; Shapiro, III, 169; Stevens, III, 237

Schwartz, Edward G.
West, III, 364

Schwartz, Lawrence H.
Faulkner, I, 348

Schwarzschild, Bettina
Purdy, III, 48

Scott, Evelyn
Mitchell, II, 314; Wheelock, III, 375

Scott, James B.
Barnes, I, 70

Scott, Nathan A.
Brooks, C., I, 147; Wright, R., III, 434

Scott, Nathan A., Jr.
Ellison, I, 336; Williams, T., III, 397

Scott, Winfield Townley
Aiken, I, 9; Fitzgerald, R., I, 374; Gregory, I, 455; Rexroth, III, 78; Tarkington, III, 265; Wallant, III, 346; Wheelock, III, 376; Wheelwright, III, 377

Scouffas, George
Powers, III, 40

Scroggins, Mark
Zukofsky, III, 455

Scruggs, Charles
Mencken, II, 277

Searles, George J.
Kesey, II, 130; Updike, III, 308

Sedgwick, Henry Dwight
Twain, III, 293

Seed, David
Heller, II, 23; Salinger, III, 133

Seelye, John
Barthelme, I, 77; Piercy, III, 10

Seelye, John D.
Tarkington, III, 265

Seib, Kenneth
Brautigan, I, 144

Seiden, Melvin
Gold, I, 439

Seiff, Morton
Schwartz, III, 158

Seiffert, Majorie Allen
Kreymborg, II, 146

Seldes, Gilbert
Benchley, I, 97; Lardner, II, 153; Thurber, III, 279

Sergeant, Elizabeth Shepley
Lowell, A., II, 190

Sewell, Ernestine P.
McMurtry, II, 271

Sexton, Anne
Plath, III, 20

Shackford, Martha Hale
Jewett, II, 101; Moody, II, 319

Shafer, Robert
More, II, 330

Shapiro, Charles
Levin, II, 172; Oates, II, 379; Swados, III, 256

Shapiro, David
Ashbery, I, 34

Shapiro, Harvey
Ferlinghetti, I, 356

Shapiro, Karl
Jarrell, II, 94; MacLeish, II, 209; Viereck, III, 328

Shapiro, Paula Meinetz
Walker, A., III, 338

Shattuck, Roger
Barthelme, I, 77

Shaw, Irwin
Van Druten, III, 315

Shaw, Robert B.
Meredith, II, 280; Tate, III, 269; Wilbur, III, 387

Shea, Albert A.
Miller, A., II, 294

Sheaffer, Louis
O'Neill, II, 413

Sheed, Wilfred
Albee, I, 13; Coover, I, 239; De Vries, I, 273; Styron, III, 251

Sheehan, Donald
Howard, R., II, 54

Shelden, Pamela
James, H., II, 89

Shelton, Frank W.
Gaines, I, 413; West, III, 366

Shepard, Irving
London, II, 186

Shepherd, Allen
Mccarthy, C., II, 251; Price, III, 42; Warren, III, 353

Sheppard, R. Z.
Auchincloss, I, 41; Elkin, I, 326

Sherman, Stuart P.
Marquis, II, 238; More, II, 329; Twain, III, 293

Sherry, Laura
Kreymborg, II, 146

Sherry, Vincent
Pound, III, 39

Sherwood, Robert E.
White, III, 379

Sherwood, Terry G.
Kesey, II, 128

Shetley, Vernon
Kinnell, II, 137

Shirley, Carl R.
Anaya, I, 24; Soto, III, 213

Shirley, Paula W.
Anaya, I, 24; Soto, III, 213

Shlain, Bruce
Codrescu, I, 228

Shloss, Carol
O'Connor, F., II, 388

Shoben, Edward Joseph, Jr.
Trilling, III, 293

Shorris, Earl
Gass, I, 420

Shourie, Usha
Himes, II, 48

Showers, Paul
De Vries, I, 274

Shucard, Alan R.
Dunbar, I, 307

Shuker, Nancy
Angelou, I, 32

Shuman, R. Baird
Inge, II, 78; Odets, II, 391

Sicari, Stephen
Pound, III, 38

Sickels, Eleanor M.
MacLeish, II, 208

Siegel, Ben
Singer, III, 196

Siegel, Paul N.
Wright, R., III, 436

Siegle, Robert
Abish, I, 1

Sievers, W. David
Barry, I, 72; Inge, II, 76

Sigal, Clancy
Updike, III, 307

Simmons, Charles
Lattimore, II, 157; Whittemore, III, 381

Simms, L. Moody
Attaway, I, 39

Simon, John
Albee, I, 13; Alfred, I, 17; Baldwin, I, 55; Baraka, I, 65; Behrman, I, 87; Bellow, I, 92; Jarrell, II, 97; Kopit, II, 141; McCarthy, M., II, 256; Miller, A., II, 296; O'Neill, II, 412, 414; Rabe, III, 58; Schisgal, III, 154, 155; Simon, III, 188; Wilder, III, 390; Wilson, L., III, 417

Simon, Kate
O'Connor, E., II, 384

Simpson, Lewis P.
Cowley, I, 243; Faulkner, I, 346; Howells, II, 62; Welty, III, 358

Simpson, Louis
Ciardi, I, 220; Snyder, III, 206; Stafford, W., III, 216; Wheelock, III, 376

Sinclair, Karen
Le Guin, II, 165

Sinclair, May
Doolittle, I, 287; Moody, II, 319

Sinclair, Upton
Mencken, II, 273

Sirlin, Rhoda
Styron, III, 254

Sisk, John P.
Powers, III, 41

Sissman, L. E.
McGuane, II, 263; Pynchon, III, 53

Sitwell, Edith
Purdy, III, 47

Sitwell, Sacheverell
Frank, I, 388

Sjoberg, Leif
Ignatow, II, 75

Skau, Michael
Ferlinghetti, I, 358

Skinner, Richard Dana
Howard, S., II, 57; Lawson, II, 158; Rice, III, 82; Van Druten, III, 314; Young, III, 444

Skinner, Robert E.
Himes, II, 50

Sklar, Robert
Fitzgerald, F., I, 371

Slethaug, Gordon E.
Barth, I, 73

Sloss, Henry
Howard, R., II, 56

Slote, Bernice
Crane, H., I, 249

Slotkin, Richard
Shapiro, III, 171

Slusser, George
Delany, I, 267

Smalley, Webster
Hughes, II, 63

Smidt, Kristian
Eliot, I, 320

Smith, A.J.M.
Kunitz, II, 147

Smith, Barbara
Reed, I., III, 73; Walker, A., III, 339

Smith, Bernard
Brooks, V., I, 151; Parrington, III, 4

Smith, C. Alphonso
O. Henry, II, 36

Smith, Carol H.
Eliot, I, 320

Smith, Chard Powers
Robinson, III, 95

Smith, Dave
Levine, II, 174; Swenson, III, 259; Warren, III, 352; Wright, J., III, 432

Smith, Eleanor M.
Jewett, II, 103

Smith, Eric Todd
Momaday, II, 318

Smith, Ernest J.
Berryman, I, 107

Smith, Frederick M.
Thomas, III, 277

Smith, Harrison
Burns, I, 167; Mailer, II, 213; Saroyan, III, 146; Sherwood, III, 183

Smith, Henry Nash
DeVoto, I, 271; Matthiessen, F. O., II, 247; Twain, III, 295

Smith, Larry
Ferlinghetti, I, 358

Smith, Michael
Drexler, I, 299; Shepard, III, 176

Smith, Roger H.
West, III, 364

Smith, Sidonie A.
Angelou, I, 30

Smith, Wendy
Taylor, III, 274

Smith, William James
Burroughs, I, 169; Wouk, III, 429

Smith, William Jay
Hersey, II, 39

Snead, James A.
Faulkner, I, 347

Snell, George
Bierce, I, 108; Fisher, V., I, 365

Snodgrass, Kathleen
Calisher, I, 188

Snow, Edgar
Buck, I, 157

Snyder, Philip A.
Wolfe, III, 428

Sokolov, Raymond A.
Jones, J., II, 111; Morrison, II, 338

Solotaroff, Robert
Stone, III, 247

Solotaroff, Theodore
Bellow, I, 91; Bly, I, 121; Bowles, P., I, 134; Howe, II, 59; Malamud, II, 224; Porter, III, 27; Purdy, III, 48; Wallant, III, 346

Somer, John
Vonnegut, III, 332

Sontag, Susan
Goodman, I, 443

Sorrentino, Gilbert
Bowles, P., I, 135; Ferlinghetti, I, 357; Zukofsky, III, 453

Southern, Terry
Barth, I, 72; Burroughs, I, 168; Miller, H., II, 302; Vonnegut, III, 328

Southron, Jane Spence
Sarton, III, 148

Southworth, James G.
Bishop, E., I, 110; Roethke, III, 98; Shapiro, III, 170; Warren, III, 348

Spacks, Patricia Meyer
Hellman, II, 24; Nin, II, 370; Welty, III, 359, 361

Spafford, Roz
Paley, III, 1

Spannier, Sandra Whipple
Boyle, K., I, 137

Spears, Monroe K.
Auden, I, 44; Berryman, I, 104; Ransom, III, 66; Roethke, III, 100; Tate, III, 268

Spector, R. D.
Oates, II, 377

Spectorsky, A.C.
Buechner, I, 158; Updike, III, 303

Speir, Jerry
Chandler, I, 204

Speirs, Logan
Wilson, L., III, 419

Spencer, Benjamin T.
Pound, III, 33

Spencer, Jenny S.
Norman, II, 372

Spencer, Norman
Gates, I, 422

Spencer, Sharon
Nin, II, 370

Spencer, Theodore
Matthiessen, F. O., II, 245

Spender, Stephen
Ammons, I, 21; Auden, I, 43; Eliot, I, 318; Lowell, R., II, 192; Merrill, II, 283; Merwin, II, 287; Roethke, III, 99

Spiegelman, Willard
Merwin, II, 288

Spilka, Mark
Hemingway, II, 35

Spiller, Robert E.
Matthiessen, F. O., II, 246; Wilson, E., III, 411

Spillers, Hortense J.
Marshall, II, 240; Walker, M., III, 345

Spivack, Kathleen
Levertov, II, 169

Spivey, Ted R.
Percy, III, 8

Sprague, Marshall
Momaday, II, 315

Squires, Radcliffe
Frost, I, 396

Stade, George
Doctorow, I, 285; Millhauser, II, 308; Sheed, III, 176

Stafford, Jean
Chopin, I, 219

Stafford, William
Brooks, G., I, 149; Olson, II, 406; Simpson, III, 189; Swenson, III, 257

Stallings, Sylvia
Goyen, I, 448; O'Connor, F., II, 385

Stallman, Robert W.
Crane, S., I, 253, 255

Stamper, Rexford
Williams, T., III, 399

Stanford, Ann
Swenson, III, 257

Stanford, Donald E.
Porter, III, 29

Stanton, David
Maxwell, II, 249

Stanton, Michael N.
Bradbury, I, 141

Stanton, Stephen S.
Williams, T., III, 400

Stapleton, Laurence
Moore, Marianne, II, 322, 325

Stark, John O.
Pynchon, III, 55

Starkey, David
Simic, III, 185

Stasio, Marilyn
Brown, R., I, 154; Rabe, III, 58

Stearns, Harold
Reed, J., III, 76

Steensma, Robert C.
Rölvaag, III, 106,

Steffens, Lincoln
Reed, J., III, 76,

Stegner, Wallace
DeVoto, I, 272; Saroyan, III, 145

Stein, Gertrude
Anderson, S., I, 27; James, W., II, 91

Stein, Kevin
Wright, J., III, 432

Steinbeck, John
Steffens, III, 221

Steinbrink, Jeffrey
Ellison, I, 333

Steinem, Gloria
Walker, A., III, 340

Steiner, George
Plath, III, 19; Swados, III, 255

Steiner, Wendy
Morrison, II, 341

Stenerson, Douglas C.
Mencken, II, 276

Stengel, Wayne B.
Barthelme, I, 78

Stepanchev, Stephen
Ashbery, I, 32; Bly, I, 119; Merwin, II, 286; Olson, II, 406; Simpson, III, 189; Stafford, W., III, 217; Wakoski, III, 337

Stephan, Ruth
Fearing, I, 353

Stephenson, Gregory
Corso, I, 242

Stern, Daniel
Farrell, I, 340; Morton, II, 343; Singer, III, 195

Stern, Milton R.
Fitzgerald, F., I, 373

Stern, Richard
Updike, III, 308

Stetco, Dayana
Brown, S., I, 156

Stetler, Charles
Purdy, III, 49

Steuding, Bob
Snyder, III, 207

Stevens, Wallace
Ransom, III, 64

Stevenson, Anne
Bishop, E., I, 110; Piercy, III, 12; Rukeyser, III, 124

Stevenson, David L.
Agee, I, 7; Jones, J., II, 110; Kerouac, II, 125; Salinger, III, 129

Stevenson, Elizabeth
Adams, H., I, 4

Stevick, Philip
Burroughs, I, 170; Kosinski, II, 143; Vonnegut, III, 332

Stewart, Donald Ogden
Benchley, I, 97

Stewart, John L.
Ransom, III, 65; Tate, III, 268; Warren, III, 349

Stiffler, Randall
Roethke, III, 104

Stilwell, Robert
Ammons, I, 21

Stimpson, Catharine R.
Vidal, III, 326

Stitt, Peter
Berryman, I, 107

Stock, Irvin
McCarthy, M., II, 254

Stock, Robert
Nemerov, II, 363

Stocks, Anthony G.
Simic, III, 187

Stockton, Frank R.
Twain, III, 293

Stokes, Geoffrey
Theroux, III, 277

Stone, Jerome
Goyen, I, 448; Hawkes, II, 12

Stone, Laurie
Rossner, III, 108

Stong, Phil
Stegner, III, 223

Stonier, G.W.
Thurber, III, 279

Strachey, Julia
McCarthy, M., II, 251

Strandberg, Victor H.
Oates, II, 382; Warren, III, 349, 351

Straumann, Heinrich
Hemingway, II, 32; Roberts, K., III, 93; Warren, III, 347; Wharton, III, 368; Wright, R., III, 433

Strauss, Harold
Cain, I, 180; Levin, II, 172; Maltz, II, 230

Strehle, Susan
Gardner, J., I, 415

Stresau, Hermann
Wilder, III, 391

Strobel, Marion
Van Doren, III, 311

Stuart, Dabney
Ferlinghetti, I, 357

Stubbs, John C.
Barth, I, 72

Stuckey, William
Boyle, K., I, 136; Taylor, III, 271

Sturgeon, Theodore
Vonnegut, III, 328

Styron, William
Cowley, I, 243

Sugg, Richard P.
Crane, H., I, 251

Sugrue, Thomas
Fisher, V., I, 365; Tarkington, III, 265

Suleiman, Susan Rubin
Gordon, M., I, 447

Sullivan, A. M.
Lewisohn, II, 179; Markham, II, 236

Sullivan, Anita T.
Bradbury, I, 140

Sullivan, Dan
Fuller, C., I, 404

Sullivan, Frank
Marquis, II, 238

Sullivan, J. P.
Pound, III, 33

Sullivan, John F.
Blackmur, I, 116

Sullivan, Richard
Burns, I, 166; Kantor, II, 117; Sheed, III, 174

Sullivan, Rosemary
Roethke, III, 102

Sulzberger, Cyrus L.
Moore, Merrill, II, 328

Summers, Claude J.
Howard, R., II, 56

Sutcliffe, Denham
Barth, I, 72

Sutherland, Donald
Stein, III, 228

Sutherland, Stuart
De Vries, I, 274

Sutton, Walter
Pound, III, 33, 35; Snyder, III, 207

Swados, Harvey
Clark, I, 225; Gold, I, 439; Mailer, II, 213; Michener, II, 289; Wouk, III, 428

Swan, Maurice
Scott, III, 161

Sward, Robert
Whittemore, III, 381

Sweeney, John L.
Gregory, I, 454

Swenson, May
Masters, II, 245; Moore, Marianne, II, 322; Rukeyser, III, 123

Sykes, Gerald
Boyle, K., I, 136; Fauset, I, 351; Rölvaag, III, 106; Young, III, 445

Sylvander, Carolyn Wedin
Baldwin, I, 58

Sylvester, Harry
London, II, 186; Malamud, II, 223; Stegner, III, 223

Symons, Julian
Chandler, I, 203; Hammett, II, 7; Macdonald, R., II, 206; Rexroth, III, 80

Sypher, Wylie
Sontag, III, 210

Syrkin, Marie
Levin, II, 172

Tabbi, Joseph
DeLillo, I, 268

Taggard, Genevieve
Parker, III, 1

Tait, M.D.C.
More, II, 331

Tallant, Robert
March, II, 235

Tandon, Bharat
Chabon, I, 202

Tanner, Tony
Barth, I, 73; Burroughs, I, 169; Fitzgerald, F., I, 370; Gardner, J., I, 414; Purdy, III, 49; Stein, III, 227; Trilling, III, 291; Twain, III, 296; Vonnegut, III, 329

Tassin, Algernon
Nathan, II, 358

Tate, Allen
Benét, I, 98; Berryman, I, 102; Bishop, J., I, 114; Cowley, I, 242; Crane, H., I, 248; Dahlberg, I, 264; Faulkner, I, 343; Kantor, II, 117; Kreymborg, II, 146; Millay, II, 292; More, II, 330; Porter, III, 26; Pound, III, 31; Ransom, III, 66; Van Doren, III, 313; Winters, III, 420

Taubman, Howard
Hansberry, II, 10

Taylor, Benjamin
Sontag, III, 212

Taylor, Carole Anne
Walker, A., III, 342

Taylor, Clyde
Baraka, I, 66

Taylor, F.H. Griffin
Lowell, R., II, 194

Taylor, Frajam
Patchen, III, 6

Taylor, Harold
Fuller, R. B., I, 406

Taylor, Henry
Bell, I, 89; Hughes, II, 67; Meredith, II, 281; Sarton, III, 150; Stafford, W., III, 218

Taylor, Jacqueline
Paley, III, 1

Taylor, Walter
Faulkner, I, 344

Taylor, Walter Fuller
Wolfe, III, 424

Taylor, William E.
Williams, T., III, 398

Teachout, Terry
Salinger, III, 132

Tebbel, John
Morton, II, 343

Teggart, Richard Victor
Veblen, III, 318

Teicholz, Tom
Kosinski, II, 146

Temple, Jean
Hearn, II, 19

Tener, Robert
Kennedy, A., II, 122

Terrell, Carroll F.
Zukofsky, III, 454

Terris, Virginia R.
Ignatow, II, 75; Rukeyser, III, 124

Thompson, Charles Miner
Jewett, II, 101

Thompson, James J., Jr.
Caldwell, I, 183

Thompson, John
Connell, I, 234; Heller, II, 21; Jones, J., II, 111; Lowell, R., II, 192; Mailer, II, 214; Merrill, II, 282; Rahv, III, 61; Roth, P., III, 112; Snodgrass, III, 203; Wilson, E., III, 412

Thompson, Judith J.
Williams, T., III, 402

Thompson, Larry E.
Toomer, III, 285

Thompson, Lawrance
Frost, I, 396

Thomson, Virgil
Stein, III, 228

Thorburn, David
Beattie, I, 84

Thornbury, Charles
Berryman, I, 106

Thorp, Willard
Gordon, C., I, 445

Thorstein, David Riesman
Veblen, III, 319

Timpane, John
Williams, T., III, 402

Tindall, William York
Auden, I, 43

Tischler, Nancy M.
Williams, T., III, 397

Tölölyan, Khachig
Vonnegut, III, 334

Tomlinson, Charles
Moore, II, 321; Moore, Marianne, II, 324

Tonks, Rosemary
Garrigue, I, 420

Torchiana, Donald T.
Snodgrass, III, 203

Towers, Robert
Dexter, I, 277; Hellman, II, 25

Towne, Charles Hanson
Markham, II, 236

Toynbee, Philip
Gold, I, 441

Trachtenberg, Alan
Twain, III, 297

Trachtenberg, Stanley
Barthelme, I, 79; Bellow, I, 95

Tracy, Honor
Condon, I, 231

Traylor, Eleanor W.
Bambara, I, 61; Walker, M., III, 344

Triggs, Jeffrey Alan
Berryman, I, 106; Bly, I, 121

Trilling, Diana
Bellow, I, 90; Capote, I, 189; Fast, I, 342; Goodman, I, 441; Nabokov, II, 351; Shaw, III, 173; Stafford, J., III, 214; Welty, III, 357; Wescott, III, 363; White, III, 378; Wouk, III, 428

Trilling, Lionel
Cather, I, 197; Fitzgerald, F., I, 369; Frank, I, 389; Frost, I, 395; Gibson, I, 426; Nabokov, II, 352; O'Neill, II, 410; Parrington, III, 5; Shaw, III, 173

Trombly, Albert Edmund
Lindsay, II, 182

Troy, William
Stein, III, 225; Wescott, III, 362; Winters, III, 420

True, Michael
Shapiro, III, 172

Tucker, Martin
Abish, I, 1; Barthelme, I, 79; Bowles, P., I, 135; Fiedler, I, 359; Ford, I, 384; McCarthy, M., II, 256; Roth, P., III, 118; Shepard, III, 181; Wilson, L., III, 419; Yurick, III, 448

Tucker, Robert G.
Cummings, I, 260

Tugwell, R.G.
Veblen, III, 319

Tunnell, James R.
Kesey, II, 129

Turlish, Lewis A.
Updike, III, 308

Turnbull, Andrew
Fitzgerald, F., I, 370

Turner, Arlin
Twain, III, 297

Turner, Darwin T.
Baldwin, I, 57; Cullen, I, 259; Hurston, II, 70; Toomer, III, 285

Turner, Susan J.
Anderson, S., I, 29

TuSmith, Bonnie
Kingston, II, 134; Silko, III, 184

Tuttle, Allen E.
Hearn, II, 20

Tuttleton, James W.
Wharton, III, 370, 373

Twain, Mark
Howells, II, 60

Tynan, Kenneth
Hansberry, II, 9

Unrue, Darlene H.
Wolfe, III, 426

Unterecker, John
Rexroth, III, 79

Untermeyer, Jean Starr
Patchen, III, 6

Untermeyer, Louis
Adams, L., I, 6; Auden, I, 43; Bodenheim, I, 122; Brooks, C., I, 146; Cummings, I, 260; Gregory, I, 454; Jeffers, II, 97; Lindsay, II, 180; Lowell, A., II, 191; Lowell, R., II, 191; Moore, Merrill, II, 328; Nash, II, 357; Patchen, III, 7; Reed, J., III, 77; Rukeyser, III, 122; Sandburg, III, 137; Torrence, III, 288; Van Doren, III, 313; Viereck, III, 327; Wheelock, III, 375; Williams, W., III, 403

Updike, John
Bellow, I, 95; Jong, II, 112; Wilson, E., III, 415

Uphaus, Suzanne Henning
Updike, III, 306

Valentine, Elizabeth R.
Rice, III, 83

Van de Water, Frederic F.
Fisher, D., I, 363

Van Doren, Carl
Bourne, I, 130; Cabell, I, 177; Cahan, I, 179; Caldwell, I, 182; Frank, I, 387; Garland, I, 418; Jewett, II, 102; Lindsay, II, 180; Tarkington, III, 264; Wylie, III, 440

Van Doren, Dorothy
Ferber, I, 355

Van Doren, Mark
Bogan, I, 123; Bourne, I, 130; Cullen, I, 258; Jeffers, II, 99; Merton, II, 284; Parker, III, 2; Roberts, E., III, 91; Robinson, III, 94

Van Dover, J. K.
Kennedy, W., II, 124

Van Duyn, Mona
Baraka, I, 66; Nemerov, II, 362; Rich, III, 85; Sarton, III, 150; Sexton, III, 166

Van Golden, Robert
Schulberg, III, 155

Vannatta, Dennis F.
Williams, T., III, 402

Van Vechten, Carl
Johnson, J., II, 104

Van Wert, William F.
Hawkes, II, 15

Van Wienen, Mark
Sandburg, III, 140

Vardamis, Alex A.
Jeffers, II, 101

Vaschenko, Alexandr
Welty, III, 361

Vaughn, Virginia
Burns, I, 167

Vazakis, Byron
Fitzgerald, R., I, 375

Vendler, Helen
Ammons, I, 22; Cummings, I, 261; Dove, I, 295; Gluck, I, 435, 437; Lowell, R., II, 196; Merrill, II, 282; Oates, II, 379; Rich, III, 85; Sexton, III, 167; Stevens, III, 239

Verduin, Kathleen
Updike, III, 307

Vernon, Grenville
Barry, I, 71; Green, I, 453; Maltz, II, 229; Odets, II, 390; Sherwood, III, 182; Van Druten, III, 314

Vernon, John
Barth, I, 74; Burroughs, I, 169; Pynchon, III, 52; Roethke, III, 101

Veron, Enid
Hawkes, II, 15

Vertreace, Martha M.
Bambara, I, 63

Vickery, John
Barth, I, 75

Vickery, Olga W.
Baraka, I, 66; Brooks, C., I, 147

Vidal, Gore
Lewis, II, 178; McCullers, II, 257

Viereck, Peter
Frost, I, 395; Hayes, II, 18; Lindsay, II, 181; Niebuhr, II, 366; Tate, III, 266

Villard, Oswald Garrison
Steffens, III, 221

Vincent, Stephen
Marquand, II, 236

Vine, Richard
Kunitz, II, 148

Vita-Finzi, Penelope
Wharton, III, 374

Vivas, Eliseo
Burke, I, 163; James, H., II, 85

Vogler, Thomas A.
Crane, H., I, 249

Vogt, William
Edmonds, I, 314

Volpe, Edmund L.
Faulkner, I, 343

Vonalt, Larry
Berryman, I, 104

von Hallberg, Robert
Olson, II, 408

Wade, Rosalind
Condon, I, 232

Wagenaar, Dick
Lewis, II, 178

Wagenknecht, Edward
Cather, I, 200; London, II, 186; Mitchell, II, 314; Norris, II, 374

Waggoner, Hyatt H.
Crane, H., I, 250; Roethke, III, 100; Shapiro, III, 171

Wagner, C. Roland
Stevens, III, 243

Wagner, Geoffrey
Wilder, III, 391

Wagner, Linda
Dickey, I, 278; Levertov, II, 170; Plath, III, 25

Wagner, Linda Welshimer
Williams, W., III, 405

Wagner, Maureen
Moore, Marianne, II, 327

Wagner-Mar tin, Linda
Hemingway, II, 34

Wain, John
Burroughs, I, 167; Cheever, I, 208; Dahlberg, I, 264; MacLeish, II, 209; Miller, H., II, 302; Morris, II, 335; Percy, III, 7; Plath, III, 19; Trilling, III, 290; Wilson, E., III, 414

Waith, Eugene M.
O'Neill, II, 411

Wakefield, Dan
Vonnegut, III, 332

Walcutt, Charles Child
Algren, I, 17; Frederic, I, 390; O'Hara, J., II, 399

Walden, Daniel
Miller, A., II, 298

Walker, Carolyn
Oates, II, 379

Walker, Charles R.
Rölvaag, III, 105

Walker, Franklin
London, II, 187; Norris, II, 374

Walker, Gerald
Condon, I, 231

Walker, Nancy A.
Hurston, II, 71

Wall, Cheryl A.
Fauset, I, 353

Wall, Vincent
Anderson, M., I, 25

Wallace, Margaret
Fuchs, I, 402; Styron, III, 249

Waller, G. F.
Oates, II, 380

Walser, Richard
Wolfe, III, 425

Walsh, Chad
Bly, I, 120; Morris, II, 334; Viereck, III, 327

Walton, Eda Lou
Bishop, J., I, 114; Buck, I, 156; Ciardi, I, 219; Cullen, I, 258; Fitzgerald, R., I, 374; Gregory, I, 454; Markham, II, 236; Masters, II, 243; Moore, Merrill, II, 328; Schwartz, III, 158; Winters, III, 419

Walton, Edith H.
Ferber, I, 355

Ward, John William
Cozzens, I, 248; Dos Passos, I, 292

Ward, Lester F.
Veblen, III, 317

Warfel, Harry R.
Warren, III, 347

Warner, Jon M.
Eastlake, I, 312

Warner, Rex
Lattimore, II, 157

Warren, Austin
Babbitt, I, 52; More, II, 330; Robinson, III, 96

Warren, Robert Penn
Auden, I, 43; Bellow, I, 90; Bishop, J., I, 114; Dreiser, I, 297; Faulkner, I, 343; Fletcher, I, 375; Moore, Merrill, II, 328; Patchen, III, 6; Porter, III, 28, 29; Ransom, III, 64, 67; Taylor, III, 270; Twain, III, 297; Wolfe, III, 423

Warshaw, Robert S.
Odets, II, 390

Wasserstrom, William
Burke, I, 165

Wassmer, Thomas A.
Codrescu, I, 227

Waterman, Arthur E.
Morris, II, 335

Watkins, Floyd C.
Hemingway, II, 32; Warren, III, 353; Wolfe, III, 425

Watkins, Mel
Wideman, III, 382

Watt, Donald
Bradbury, I, 141

Watt, William W.
White, III, 380

Wattenberg, Richard
Norman, II, 374

Watterson, W.C.
Ray, III, 69

Watts, Richard, Jr.
Schulberg, III, 155; Wilder, III, 388

Waugh, Auberon
Brautigan, I, 145; Gardner, J., I, 414

Waugh, Evelyn
Hemingway, II, 30

Way, Brian
Fitzgerald, F., I, 371

Weales, Gerald
Agee, I, 8; Albee, I, 14; Baraka, I, 66; Behrman, I, 86; Buechner, I, 159; Donleavy, I, 287; Hansberry, II, 10; Hellman, II, 24; Horovitz, II, 53; Inge, II, 77; Kosinski, II, 142; Lowell, R., II, 194; Macdonald, D., II, 204; Miller, A., II, 297; Morris, II, 336; Rabe, III, 57; Shepard, III, 177; Thurber, III, 280; Vonnegut, III, 329

Weatherhead, A. Kingsley
Lowell, R., II, 197; Moore, Marianne, II, 322; Olson, II, 406; Williams, W., III, 405

Webb, Howard W.
Lardner, II, 154

Weber, Brom
Berger, I, 101; Frank, I, 389

Webster, Harvey Curtis
Bellow, I, 90; Brooks, V., I, 152; Ellison, I, 331; Morris, II, 334; Powers, III, 41

Wecter, Dixon
Twain, III, 294

Wedek, Harry E.
Hearn, II, 20

Weeks, Brigitte
Godwin, I, 438

Weeks, Edward
Auchincloss, I, 40; Benchley, I, 98; Ferber, I, 355; Grau, I, 451; Kantor, II,

117; Roberts, K., III, 92; Schulberg, III, 155; Viereck, III, 327; Wouk, III, 428

Wegner, Robert E.
Cummings, I, 260

Weimer, David
Mumford, II, 348

Weinreich, Regina
Burroughs, I, 171; Kerouac, II, 127

Weinstein, Philip M.
James, H., II, 89

Weisberg, Robert
Lattimore, II, 158

Weisenburger, Steven
Pynchon, III, 56

Weiss, Theodore
Gregory, I, 455

Welch, James
Hugo, II, 68

Wellek, René
Burke, I, 164; Wilson, E., III, 414

Wells, Henry W.
Brooks, C., I, 146; Miles, II, 291; Moore, Merrill, II, 329

Welty, Eudora
Cather, I, 198; Dillard, I, 282; Macdonald, R., II, 205; Porter, III, 28; Salinger, III, 129

Wenke, Joseph
Mailer, II, 218

Werner, Craig
Rabe, III, 59

Wernick, Robert
Gardner, J., I, 413

Wershoven, Carol
Wharton, III, 372

Wescott, Glenway
Porter, III, 27; Roberts, E., III, 91; Wilder, III, 389

West, Anthony
Niebuhr, II, 367

West, Herbert Faulkner
Miller, H., II, 300

West, Paul
Gardner, J., I, 413; Santayana, III, 144; Stafford, W., III, 217

West, Ray B.
Clark, I, 225; Hawkes, II, 13; Steele, III, 220

West, Rebecca
Capote, I, 190; Fisher, D., I, 362

Westarp, Karl-Heinz
Percy, III, 9

Westling, Louise Hutchings
McCullers, II, 260

Weston, Susan B.
Stevens, III, 241

Wetzsteon, Ross
Mamet, II, 231; Shepard, III, 179; Vonnegut, III, 333

Wharton, Edith
James, H., II, 85

Wheelock, John Hall
Brooks, V., I, 153; Simpson, III, 188

Wheelwright, John Brooks
Blackmur, I, 115

Whicher, George F.
Brooks, C., I, 146; DeVoto, I, 271; Gregory, I, 454; Nash, II, 357; Trilling, III, 289; Van Doren, III, 312

Whipple, Leon
Nash, II, 357; Rourke, III, 119

Whipple, T.K.
London, II, 185; Steinbeck, III, 232

Whitaker, Thomas R.
Aiken, I, 12

Whitall, James
Doolittle, I, 287

White, Antonia
Burns, I, 167

White, Curtis
Dixon, I, 284

White, E.B.
Marquis, II, 239

White, George Leroy
Rölvaag, III, 106

White, Morton
James, W., II, 93; Santayana, III, 144

White, Newman I.
Heyward, II, 40

White, Newman Ivey
Braithwaite, I, 142

White, Ray Lewis
Vidal, III, 321

Whitehead, Robert
Odets, II, 391

Whitley, John S.
Hammett, II, 8

Whitlock, Brand
Steffens, III, 220

Whitlow, Roger
Walker, M., III, 343

Whitman, Alden
Parker, III, 2

Whitman, Robert F.
O'Neill, II, 411

Whittemore, Reed
Auden, I, 45; Bogan, I, 124; Condon, I, 232; Cummings, I, 261; Nemerov, II, 362; Wheelwright, III, 377

Wichert, Robert
O'Connor, E., II, 384

Wickenden, Dan
Jackson, II, 83; Taylor, III, 271

Wickenden, Dorothy
Lurie, II, 201

Wickes, George
Miller, H., II, 302

Widmer, Eleanor
Dos Passos, I, 293

Widmer, Kingsley
Miller, H., II, 304

Wilbur, Richard
Miles, II, 291; Williams, W., III, 403

Wilcox, Clyde
Asimov, I, 36

Wilcox, Leonard
West, III, 367

Wilcoxon, Hardy C.
Kingston, II, 134

Wilder, Amos N.
Brooks, G., I, 148

Wilentz, Gay
Gates, I, 423

Wilkinson, Marguerite
Fletcher, I, 375

Willcox, Louise Collier
MacKaye, II, 206

Williams, Ben Ames
Roberts, K., III, 92

Williams, Blanche
Cabell, I, 177

Williams, Charles
Niebuhr, II, 366

Williams, David
Sanchez, III, 134

Williams, Harry
Roethke, III, 102

Williams, John
Kosinski, II, 142

Williams, Mary Ellen
Wilder, III, 392

Williams, Miller
Ransom, III, 67; Winters, III, 421

Williams, Oscar
Hayes, II, 17

Williams, Tennessee
Bowles, P., I, 133

Williams, Wilburn, Jr.
Hayden, II, 16

Williams, William Carlos
Burke, I, 163; Doolittle, I, 288; Pound, III, 32; Rexroth, III, 78; Rukeyser, III, 121; Sandburg, III, 137; Scott, III, 162; Shapiro, III, 170; Stevens, III, 237

Williamson, Alan
Lowell, R., II, 194, 196; Wright, J., III, 431

Wills, Garry
Johnson, C., II, 103

Wiloch, Denise
Kennedy, A., II, 123

Wilson, Anna
Lorde, II, 188; Walker, A., III, 341

Wilson, Douglas L.
Santayana, III, 144

Wilson, Edmund
Anderson, M., I, 24; Chopin, I, 218; Crane, H., I, 248; Dahlberg, I, 263; Eliot, I, 317; Hemingway, II, 29; Lardner, II, 153; Mencken, II, 273; Millay, II, 293; Robinson, III, 93; Saroyan, III, 145; Steinbeck, III, 232; Stickney, III, 245; Trilling, III, 289; West, III, 364; Wilder, III, 388

Wilson, Geraldine L.
Childress, I, 216

Wilson, Rob
Stevens, III, 244

Wilson, Robert N.
Baldwin, I, 57; Hemingway, II, 33; Miller, A., II, 298

Wilson, T.C.
Fitts, I, 367; Fitzgerald, R., I, 374; West, III, 364

Wimsatt, W.K.
Miles, II, 291

Wincelberg, Shimon
Singer, III, 194

Wineapple, Brenda
Coover, I, 240

Winsten, Archer
Edmonds, I, 315; Heyward, II, 41

Winter, Ella
Steffens, III, 221

Winterich, John T.
Crane, S., I, 253

Winters, Yvor
Babbitt, I, 51; Berryman, I, 103; Eliot, I, 318; Frost, I, 394; Jeffers, II, 97; Kunitz, II, 147; Moore, Marianne, II, 321; Moore, Merrill, II, 328; Parrington, III, 4; Roberts, E., III, 91; Stevens, III, 237

Wirth-Nesher, Hana
Bellow, I, 94; Roth, P., III, 116

Wish, H.
Parrington, III, 5

Wisse, Ruth R.
Friedman, I, 393; Roth, P., III, 113, 116

Witek, Terri
Lowell, R., II, 197

Witemeyer, Hugh
Pound, III, 34

Witherspoon, Blair West
Tarkington, III, 263

Witt, Harold
Aiken, I, 11

Wojahn, David
Ignatow, II, 76

Wolcott, James
Gardner, J., I, 417; Oates, II, 381

Wolf, H.R.
Robinson, III, 97

Wolfe, Ann F.
Merton, II, 284

Wolfe, Don M.
Farrell, I, 339

Wolfe, Peter
Elliott, I, 331; Hammett, II, 8

Wolff, Cynthia Griffin
Wharton, III, 371

Wolff, Geoffrey
Carver, I, 194; Singer, III, 196

Wolkenfeld, J. S.
Singer, III, 193

Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia
Hwang, II, 72

Wood, Michael
Barth, I, 73; Carver, I, 195; Connell, I, 235; Drexler, I, 300; Gass, I, 421; McGuane, II, 264

Wood, Susan
Le Guin, II, 166; Oates, II, 381

Woodbridge, Homer E.
Anderson, M., I, 25

Woodfin, Henry A.
Macdonald, R., II, 205

Woodress, James L.
Steinbeck, III, 233; Tarkington, III, 265

Woodruff, Neal, Jr.
Warren, III, 348

Woods, Elizabeth M.
Wilder, III, 391

Woods, Samuel H.
Ransom, III, 66

Woods, Terry
Rechy, III, 70

Woodward, C. Vann
Foote, I, 378; Styron, III, 250

Woodward, Frances
Rawlings, III, 68

Woodward, Kathleen
Pound, III, 37; Sarton, III, 151; Stevens, III, 242; Williams, W., III, 407

Woolf, Virginia
Lardner, II, 154

Woollcott, Alexander
Nathan, II, 358; Parker, III, 2

Wrenn, John H.
Dos Passos, I, 292

Wright, Celeste Turner
Wylie, III, 441

Wright, Frank Lloyd
Fuller, R. B., I, 405

Wright, George T.
Eliot, I, 321

Wright, James
Duncan, I, 307; Lattimore, II, 157; Levertov, II, 167; Meredith, II, 279; Scott, III, 162

Wright, Richard
Bontemps, I, 126; Hughes, II, 63; McCullers, II, 257

Wright, William
Hellman, II, 26

Wyatt, Edith
Twain, III, 294

Wyatt, Euphemia Van Rensselaer
Inge, II, 76

Wyckoff, Elizabeth
Fisher, D., I, 363

Wylder, Delbert E.
Eastlake, I, 311

Yaffe, James
Auchincloss, I, 39

Yakimenko, Natalia
Welty, III, 361

Yarbro-Bejarano, Yvonne
Cisneros, I, 222

Yardley, Jonathan
Bellow, I, 97; Brautigan, I, 145; Faulkner, I, 345; London, II, 188; McGuane, II, 263; Sheed, III, 175

Yates, Norris W.
Benchley, I, 98; Lardner, II, 155; Marquis, II, 239; Mencken, II, 275; Parker, III, 2; Thurber, III, 281; White, III, 380

Yatron, Michael
Masters, II, 244; Sandburg, III, 137

Yellen, Samuel
Hollander, II, 51

Yenser, Stephen
Lowell, R., II, 196

Yezierska, Anzia
Lewisohn, II, 179

Young, David P.
Santayana, III, 143

Young, Elizabeth
Acker, I, 2

Young, James Dean
Bellow, I, 92

Young, Philip
Hemingway, II, 30

Young, Stanley
Green, I, 453

Young, Stark
Barry, I, 71; Behrman, I, 86; Connelly, I, 235, , 236; Green, I, 452; Kingsley, II, 133; Lawson, II, 158, 159; Miller, A., II, 294; Odets, II, 390; O'Neill, II, 410; Rice, III, 82; Van Druten, III, 313

Young, Vernon
Clark, I, 226

Yust, Walter
Sandburg, III, 136

Zabel, Morton Dauwen
Adams, L., I, 6; Benét, I, 99; Bishop, J., I, 115; Cowley, I, 242; Eliot, I, 318; Gregory, I, 454; Kunitz, II, 147; Moore, Marianne, II, 321; Robinson, III, 94; Sandburg, III, 137; Trilling, III, 289; Wescott, III, 362; Wheelock, III, 375; Wilson, E., III, 410; Winters, III, 420; Wylie, III, 440

Zahniser, Edward
Snyder, III, 206

Zaidman, Laura M.
Lee, II, 164

Zaller, Robert
Jeffers, II, 100

Zamir, Shamoon
Reed, I., III, 75

Zanine, Louis J.
Dreiser, I, 298

Zarin, Cynthia
Van Duyn, III, 317

Zatlin, Linda G.
Singer, III, 196

Zaturenska, Marya
Adams, L., I, 6; Cummings, I, 259; Fitts, I, 367; Wheelwright, III, 377; Williams, W., III, 403; Wylie, III, 441

Zeitlin, Michael
Barthelme, I, 79

Zia, Helen
Tan, III, 262

Zietlow, Paul
Robinson, III, 96

Ziff, Larzer
Bierce, I, 109; Frederic, I, 390; Howells, II, 61; James, H., II, 88; Norris, II, 376; Robinson, III, 96; Twain, III, 296; Wilson, E., III, 413

Zilversmit, Annette
Wharton, III, 374

Zimmerman, Paul D.
Miller, A., II, 296; Williams, T., III, 398

Zinnes, Harriet
Bly, I, 119; Nin, II, 369

Zins, Daniel L.
Doctorow, I, 285

Zitner, S.P.
Moore, Marianne, II, 323

Zolotow, Maurice
Inge, II, 76

Zucker, David
Schwartz, III, 160